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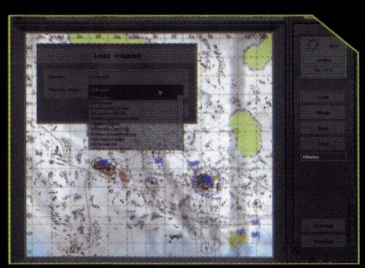


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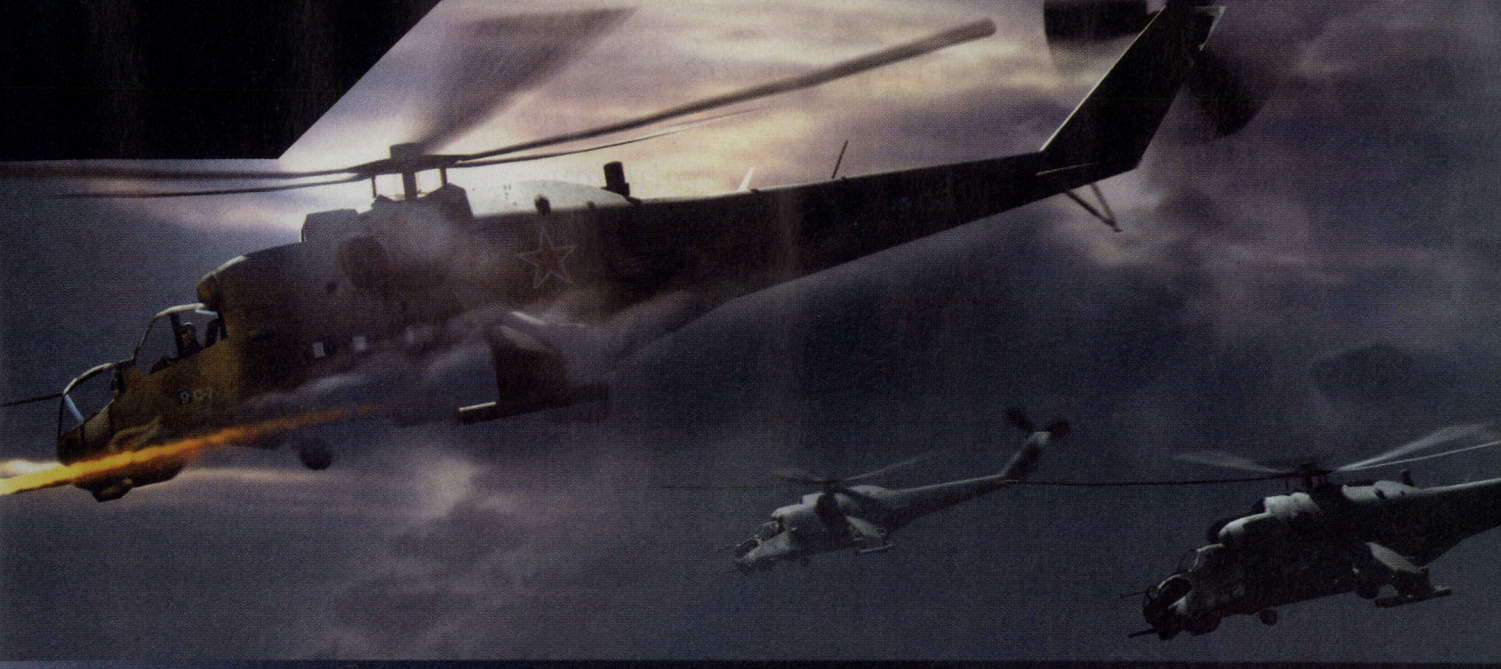


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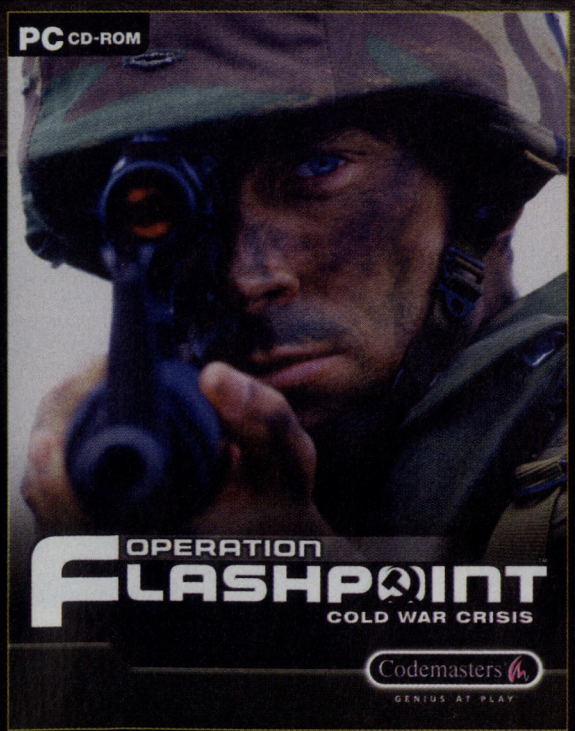












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The 10-Year Itch

Now that it's ten years old, we tend to take Sid Meier's Civilization for granted. What were our touchstones back then for epic, addictive, empire building games? In a way, we didn't have any. It created a new place for itself and the many games that would follow. Our full report, including a look at Civilization III.

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Check out the full version of the original Sid Meier's Civilization for Windows, free on this month's CGCD. It also includes demos of Aliens Versus Predator 2, MechCommander 2, Anachronox, Conquest: Frontier Wars, Independence War 2, The Corporate Machine, and lots of great Afterlife mods, maps, and add-ons.

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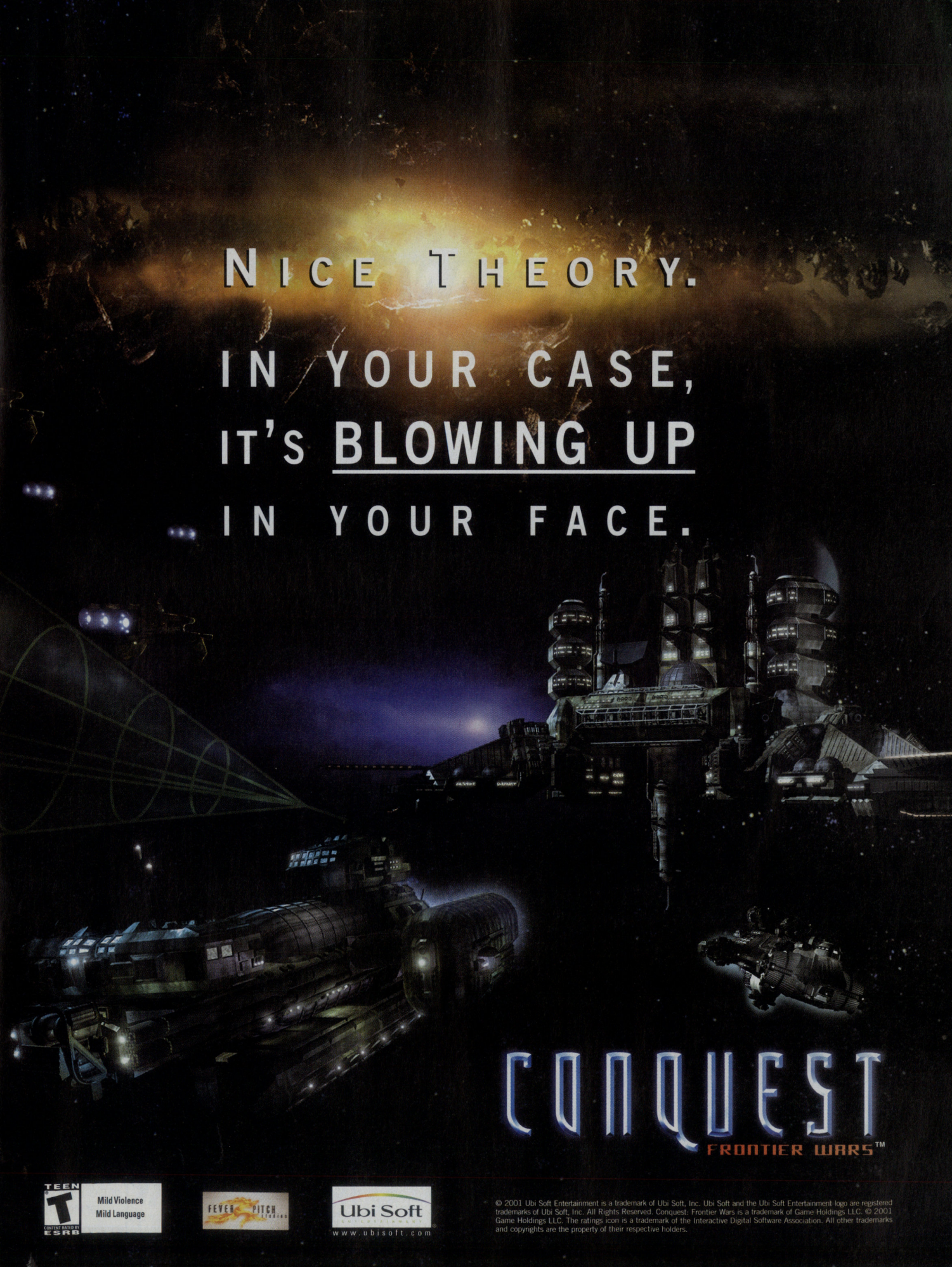


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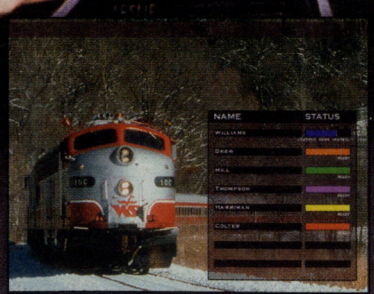
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STEVE BAUMAN

upfront

simple solutions

No more nightmare launches, ever

Despite the best efforts of its proponents to prove otherwise, there is no valid rationalization or justification for software piracy. Those inclined to trot out the tired argument of "trying before you buy" seemingly are looking for absolutes in a world where there are none (i.e. you will buy a bad game from time-to-time, and the world won't end). If you don't have the money to risk on a game, try a new hobby (sorry) or scour the bargain bin.

From time-to-time, the game industry rolls out some enormous numbers detailing the effects of piracy, and while it may be true that it's leading to higher prices and diminished profits, it's the height of hypocrisy for an industry to complain about customer theft while doing nothing to police the quality of its own products. This isn't an issue of "bad" games, as that's a matter of taste, we're talking about products with issues that transcend mere bugs and minor annoyances. If it's wrong for consumers to steal software, it's equally wrong for companies to produce broken and non-functional products.

In other words, despite the best efforts of publishers and developers to claim otherwise, there is no valid rationalization or justification for releasing games in this state. By unleashing these disasters on their most important customers, companies are asking (or forcing, take your pick) players to lower their standards, to accept substandard development, performance, and support as inevitable.

Clearly game productions are wildly ambitious undertakings; yes, they cost a fortune to develop, and yes, they're fraught with technical perils barely imaginable. [See "Launching Your Worst Nightmare," page 22, for a few examples]. All of these issues are ultimately irrelevant to the game buyer; if a company spends years/months promising the world, it damn well better deliver the world. While many gamers are justifiably angry, too many are accepting obvious flaws because the games offer tantalizing glimpses of what their creators intended. But they're teases, and at least in this context, you don't pay money to be teased, or for glimpses of what a game may or will be some day down the road. You pay for complete, fully realized games.

> "...they're teases, and at least in this context, you don't pay money to be teased for glimpses of what a game may or will be some day down the road."

There are no simple solutions to these and other issues, but I'm not supposed to have the answers; the companies investing millions of dollars in these products are in charge of that. But as a somewhat informed observer, I'll state the obvious: to the companies, finish your damn games before you sell them in stores. Don't rush them out the door to meet arbitrary deadlines. Promise only what you can deliver, not what you only hope you can deliver. If abortive launches are due to cash flow problems, consider what Microsoft has done with Windows XP, collecting a nominal charge to purchase a beta version. This should allow a company to extend its beta period while adding some needed cash to its coffers.

As the industry further dips its toes into the warm waters of the mainstream, audiences in the future won't be as understanding as those today, they won't be aware of the challenges and difficulties of game development. If upcoming higher-profile games, ones like *The Sims Online* or *Star Wars Galaxies Online*, launch with the kind of disastrous results detailed in our feature, it won't be a few thousand screaming gamers, or *Computer Games Magazine*, posting angry message board rants or asking questions. It will be millions of players. It will be *60 Minutes*, *The New York Times*, and *CNN*. It will be congressmen and senators. These people won't know of the issues involved with creating a game; they won't care. And they won't be as forgiving. ●

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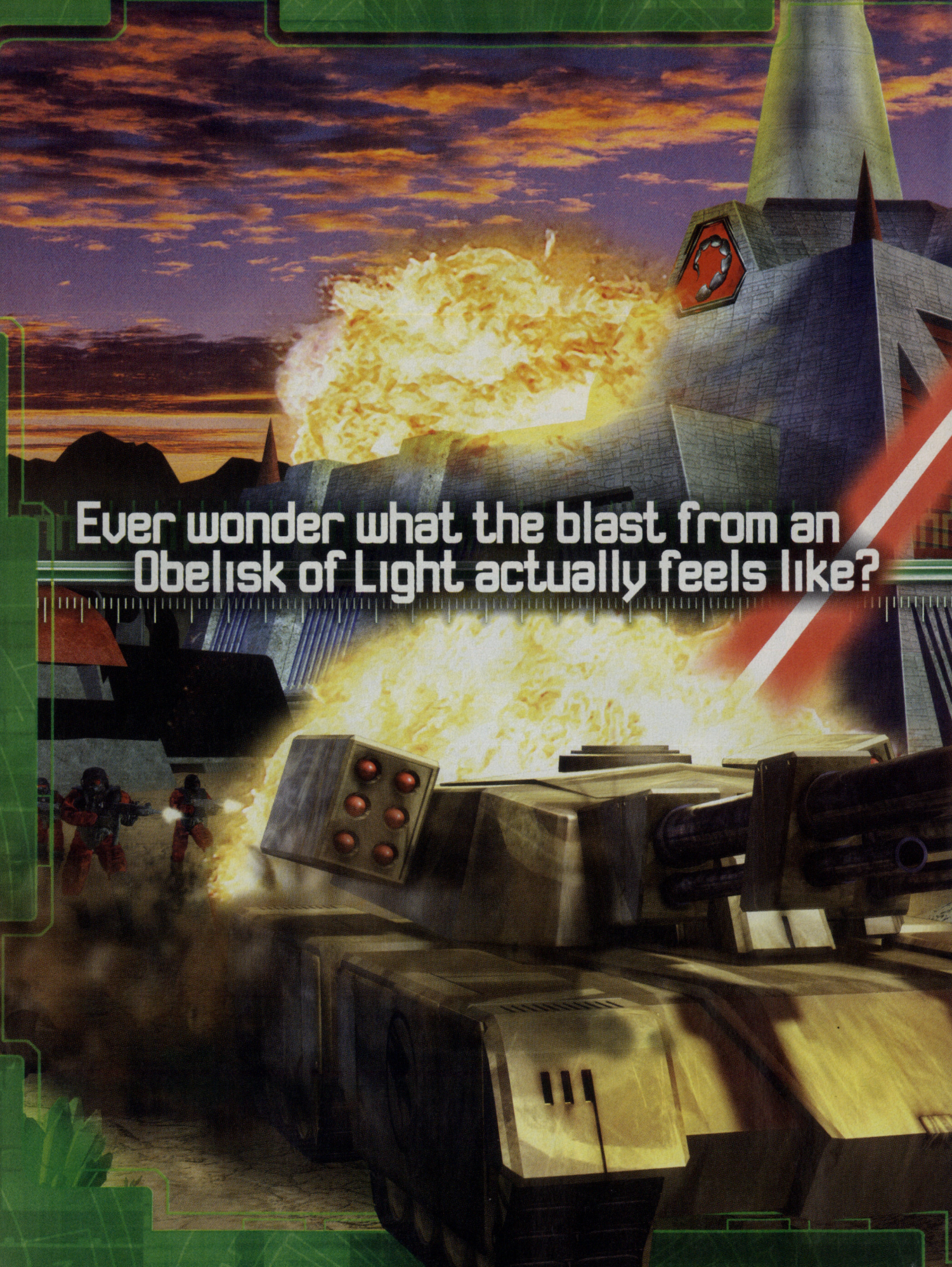
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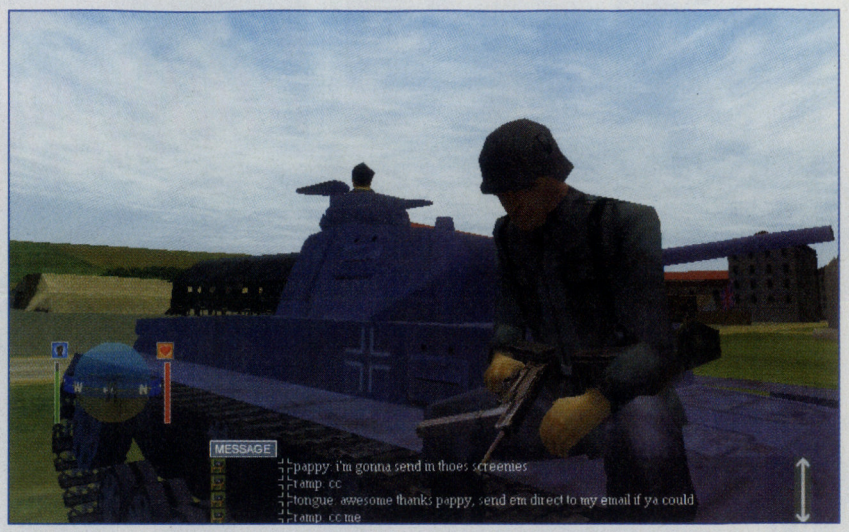

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Launching Your Worst Nightmare

What happens when (or if) the beta goes live

by John Callaham

When a developer releases a buggy PC game, it can expect to hear a lot of complaints. When a developer releases a buggy massively multiplayer PC game, it seems the complaints increase tenfold. This past June, two small developers released their entries in the massively multiplayer market. *World War II Online* and *Anarchy Online* underwent years of development and months of beta testing before release. Yet, each game still had a slew of initial problems, angering many customers and showing that even the best laid plans can sometime go awry.

Postponing the war

Cornered Rat Software's *WWII Online* (published by Strategy First and reviewed last issue) set out to be something different than the normal fantasy fare. It promised a virtual battlefield where the Allied and Axis powers would wage war across Western Europe. You would advance in rank and not only fire rifles but drive tanks and fly fighter-bombers too. It was, on the surface, a wargamer's dream come true.

Instead, it turned out to be their worst nightmare. The first sign of trouble came a month or so before the game's retail release on June 6, the anniversary of D-Day. According to company co-founder and COO John McQueen, the firm that was supposed to run the game's server farm in Dallas went bankrupt. Unfortunately, they claim it was not economically feasible to change the launch date. "If you miss it, it get can get expensive," he says. The developer was faced with having to quite literally rebuild its network infrastructure. "We basically had to take a U-Haul truck (in Dallas) and take them to somewhere else." The company reinstalled sixty servers, along with all the other networking equipment, at its headquarters.

But that's not all. High demand at the game's initial release brought the official game web site to its knees. The need to download a 70MB patch (basically equal to the size of the game itself) before playing also caused delays. These problems created resentment from gamers and a lot of overtime for the members of Cornered Rat. "It had me completely without sleep for three days," says McQueen.

Two days after the official launch of the game, the developer and Strategy First announced that they would "stop the clock" on the game. Players would not have to worry about the free month of time on the game running out before Cornered Rat brought the game up to acceptable standards. However, this did not placate many purchasers, as they'd spent money on a game that was nearly non-functional.

[above left to right] Turbine and Microsoft's Asheron's Call had a rather easy time of it when it launched.

Cornered Rat stopped the clock on its online combat game World War II Online because of the massive problems it encountered during the game's launch last June.

Online Anarchy

Funcom's *Anarchy Online* is also a departure from the typical massively multiplayer fare. The Norway-based developer created a sci-fi game set on a distant world, where players take part in a four-year long story arc. The game spent five years in development and months in beta testing. However, when it launched in late June, a few weeks after *WWII Online*, it suffered from problems of its own, including lag, server crashes, and registration problems. Funcom also suspended the first official free month of playtime, but unlike Cornered Rat, it felt the game was stable enough to start the clock two weeks later.

People who follow the entire massively multiplayer scene have been greatly concerned and vocal about both launches. "I do understand to some extent, but it is also important to see the difference between standard multiplayer games and the new massively multiplayer online games," explains Tommy Strand, lead designer of *Anarchy Online*. "We deal with revolutionary technology that requires so much more work from the development team. Not only is the game played from our servers, we also need complicated systems that make sure the in game economy is stable, and that the traffic in different areas are floating nicely." Funcom has updated its game several times since its release and has also promised an in-game surprise for everyone who registered to play the game before they started the clock.

A tale told before

The development teams for both games must had to be aware of the problems other massively multiplayer games had with their initial launches. Origin and Electronic Arts faced a lot of adversity with *Ultima Online*'s launch back in 1998. Origin seemed unprepared for the amount of people who first signed on to check out the virtual land of Britannia. "Our sales force projected that we would sell about 30,000 units total," recalled Starr Long, who was a producer at Origin when the game was first released. It sold 50,000 units in just a few weeks. Moreover, the percentages of people actually online playing the game were way above the initial estimates.

Long also says that the development team underestimated how much work a multiplayer game like this would take to support, and that the complexity of the game was also to blame for some of the launch problems. "The sheer complexity of the code made it incredibly difficult to isolate any given problem," he claims. "If we had trimmed the features it would have been far easier to find and fix issues." The problems with its launch also led to several customers filing a class action lawsuit against both Origin and EA soon after the game's release. That court case was settled inconclusively, with EA agreeing only to pay $15,000 to a charitable organization.

Eventually, the game overcame its growing pains and has not only survived but thrived. Now hundreds of thousands of gamers have bought game itself, and many still pay $9.95 a month to play online.

The perils of EverQuest

Sony's hugely successful *EverQuest* also had its share of problems when launched in 1998. Because there wasn't enough bandwidth to support the amount of traffic needed for launch, players who first tried out the game experienced a lot of packet loss and disconnects. The login server also had problems with the number of people trying to sign in to play. Both problems were quickly addressed.

Customer service during those first few weeks was also important, according to Sony's vice president of premium games, Brad McQuaid. "Right away we all started working crazy hours." McQuaid remembers. "The programmers were all scrambling to identify problems and optimize code." The problems were severe enough that Sony tried to compensate gamers. "Because of all the problems we had, we gave our customers the first subscription month free, to make up for the hassles they had to go through to play the game.

"The good news is that through all of this, the actual game (the client and the server) were pretty solid. I'm not saying there weren't bugs to be worked out, but when you were logged on, the game worked."

Microsoft's smooth move

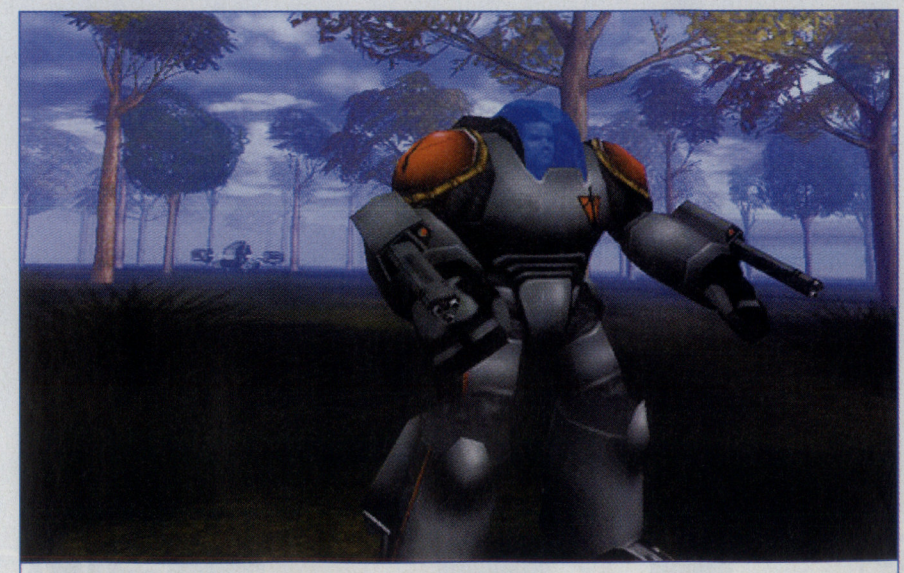
Microsoft and Turbine teamed up to release their own online game *Asheron's Call* in late 1999. In contrast to *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, its launch went relatively smoothly. Microsoft lead product manager Matthew Ford recalls that they were aware of the problems both Origin and Sony had to deal with for their games. "The whole team stayed as scared as possible about anything similar happening to us," Ford says. Turbine did not add new features that might cause bugs in the game weeks before its launch, according to Ford. "Nobody likes to ship with little weird bugs, but you always do, because fixing a tiny bug can create a huge one somewhere else. It takes discipline to decide to freeze the code and do nothing but look for "show-stopping" bugs for weeks on end." Microsoft's own experience in customer service for its non-gaming products like Windows and Internet Explorer helped as well, as well as a long beta period.

Things to come?

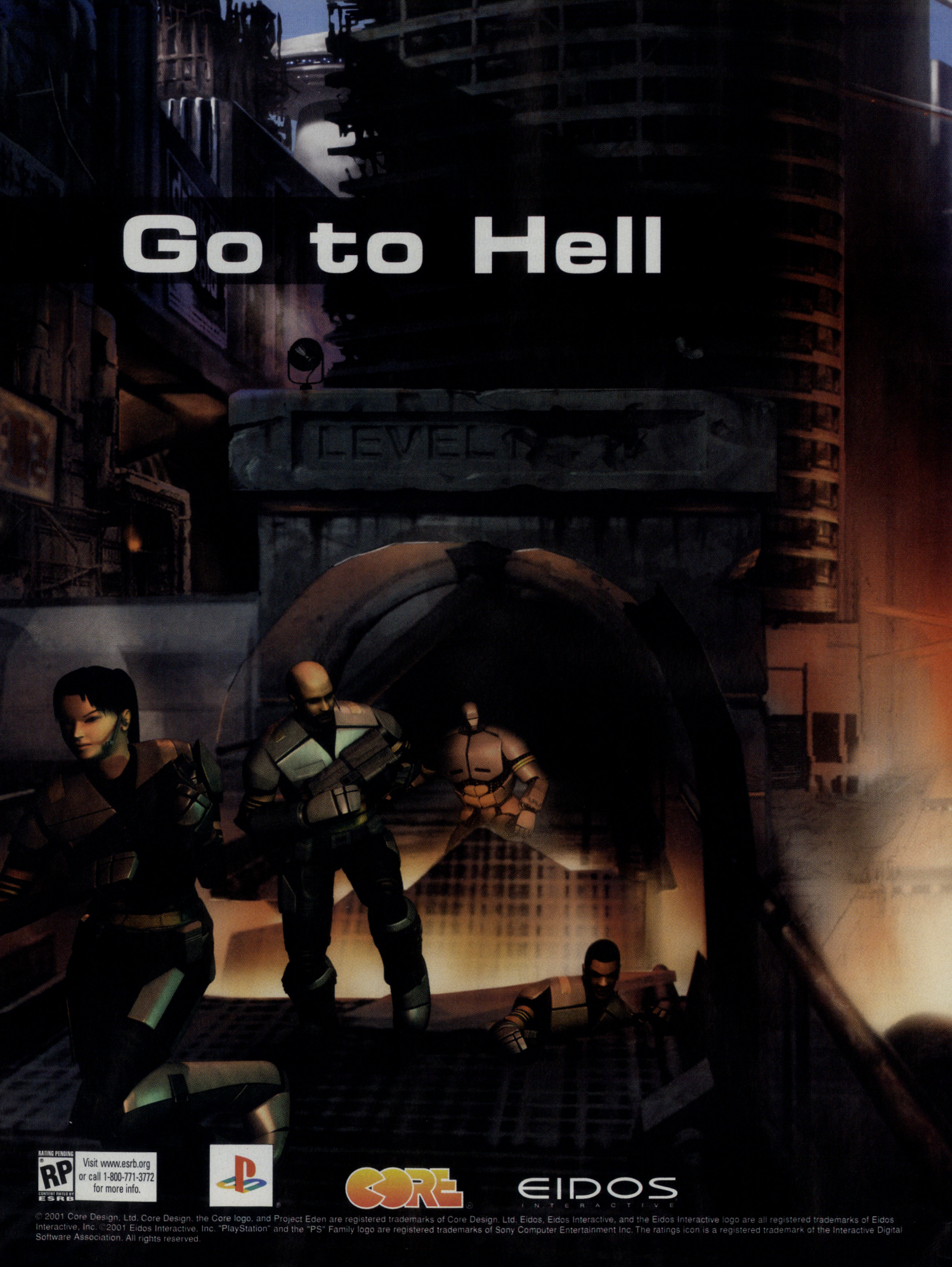
There are many other massively multiplayer games waiting in the wings (literally over a hundred). Long, who was let go from Origin after Electronic Arts cancelled *Ultima Online Worlds: Origin*, has rejoined *Ultima* creator Richard Garriott's start-up company Destination Games, which will launch a North American version of the popular Korean online game *Lineage* and develop its own top-secret project. For future games, Long says a successful launch depends on several factors, including having plenty of time to beta test, having enough servers available for launch, and licensing a proven technology on which to base the game itself. (Destination will use the Netimmerse engine for their game). "I believe very strongly that it is possible to have a stable launch and service," Long affirms. "Despite the bad examples (including my own) it has been proven possible by several products."

Sony has several massively multiplayer games in the works, including *Shadows of Luclin*, the first person shooter *PlanetSide*, the real-time strategy game *Sovereign*, and one of the most anticipated games of 2002, *Star Wars Galaxies*. Though he doesn't promise completely trouble-free launches of their upcoming titles, McQuaid seems confident that their experience with *EverQuest* will help them avoid making the same mistakes. "We've done this before and have a pretty good idea what's involved, how it scales, and already have a solid infrastructure and network topology, so our chances are pretty good."

Microsoft and Turbine have produced regular and substantial monthly updates to *Asheron's Call* since its release, adding new content in addition to bug fixes. Now they are getting ready to release the *Dark Majesty*



Verant's PlanetSide is due out in 2002.



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PC CD

PlayStation 2

expansion later this year, as well as a full-fledged sequel, *Asheron's Call 2*, at a later date. "We want the game to play in a way as smooth and spectacular as any role-playing game," Ford says, "No excuses that 'Oh, we are an online game so it's OK if we are a bit glitchy compared to a solo game.' No way. We want to be better than any RPG made, online or offline. So we don't want the game to just hold together under load, we want it to shine."

Other players are getting ready to enter the online gaming fray as well. Mythic Entertainment is getting ready to launch its fantasy online RPG *Dark Age of Camelot* later this year, and its producer, Matt Firor says that Mythic's server technology is very stable, in partly to its experience in developing other online games such as *Dragon's Gate* and *Aliens Online*.

Artifact Entertainment plans to launch its fantasy RPG *Horizons* sometime in 2002. Artifact's chief operating officer James Jones says they have hired people formerly from Turbine who have had experience in making massively multiplayer games as well as people from outside the gaming industry who have had experience in handling high-bandwidth utilities and services. The company has plans for six months of external beta tests, with a huge beta test 6-8 weeks before launch. "We would like to have all the people who are going to play the game in our final phase of beta," Jones says.

The big question, of course, is whether all these multiplayer games set to launch in the next 12 to 18 months will heed the harsh lessons that Origin, Sony, Cornered Rat and Funcom have had to learn. The final word on whether the "rush to purchase" will continue to be the norm, though, will come from gamers—who will have to choose between believing the hype or remembering the past. ●

Sirtech Troubles

Financial woes spell trouble for Wizardry and Jagged Alliance sequels

by Robert Mayer



Wizardy 8

Sirtech Canada, the development studio responsible for the *Jagged Alliance* series and the latest in the *Wizardry* line of role-playing games, is for all practical purposes no more. During the week of July 23 the company laid off most of its employees and halted work on *Jagged Alliance 3* and *Wizardry 9*.

The moves were not entirely surprising. The company has had tremendous difficulty finding a US publisher for *Wizardy 8*, which has been finished now for quite some time. "It's been so frustrating for all of us here having a complete product and not being able to have people play it," explains Director of Product Development and designer Ian Currie. He admits that one of the reasons for the delay in getting it published is that they were looking for a deal that would include funding for the next *Wizardry* game.

Sirtech couldn't find anyone interested in bankrolling another *Jagged Alliance* game either. "We had a publishing deal negotiated (complete with a full marketing plan) with a European publisher," he notes, "only to have them unexpectedly pull out in the 11th hour. Considering the success of the series in Europe, we're still scratching our heads."

There's still some hope that *Wizardry 8* will eventually find a publisher. "[It] will be simplified now that it is no longer coupled with *Wizardry 9*," Currie says, and that could be the salvation for the storied development house. He says they're very pleased with the game—"it's a great product; I think most people will agree it's the best thing we've ever produced"—and perhaps that quality will translate into sales, which will give impetus to funding for the studios' other titles.

For the moment, however, things look grim. As Larry Roachburn, one of the characters in the original *Jagged Alliance*, might say, "this is one bad trip, man." ●

NEWSBYTES

Torn is torn—The rumors and their anonymous confirmations had been floating around for a few days, but Black Isle Studios officially announced the cancellation of their homegrown role-playing game *Torn*. In addition, five of the 56 Black Isle employees have been let go; the remaining 51 have been assigned to other projects… **WarCraft is delayed**—In shocking, shocking news, Blizzard has announced that *WarCraft III: Reign of Chaos* will not be released this year. "Our development team is hard at work finalizing the product and we look forward to bringing you an outstanding, real-time strategy game in 2002 … We firmly believe that this additional development time will prove invaluable, ensuring that *WarCraft III* will expand upon the legendary gameplay experience previously found in the critically acclaimed series." In other *WarCraft* news, Blizzard announced it will ship simultaneously for the Macintosh, with native OS X support… **Publishers protest Columbine lawsuit**—The Associated Press reports that eight manufacturers of so-called violent video games have asked a federal judge to dismiss a lawsuit brought against them by relatives of the victims of the Columbine massacre. The motion recommends that the suit be dropped because it fails to allege that any particular game caused the massacre. The companies included in the motion are Acclaim Entertainment, Activision, Capcom Entertainment, Eidos Interactive, Infogrames, Interplay, Nintendo of America, and Sony Computer Entertainment America. ●

WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING?

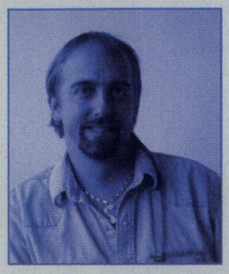
Warren Spector
Ion Storm Dallas

"Playing: Boardgames, GameBoy (*GT, Tony Hawk, Zelda Seasons*), and *Bejeweled*. "Sadly, I'm not playing much in the way of computer games these days. I'll probably fire up *Diablo II* with the new expansion soon but I don't think soon-to-be-played counts, does it?"



Richard Garriott
Destination Games

"I recently finished *Alice*. This makes it only the second non-Ultima game I've ever played to completion. The first was *Myst*. Interestingly, I admired both games from the core design principles and yet struggled through too much tedium to complete them. The concept and early phases of *Alice* were brilliant, thus the rare attraction that set me on the path of completion. I felt that the game was about two to three times too long in all of the later levels, and my girlfriend Kelly had to punch number keys for me while I tried not to get killed by the later boss-monsters, thus I found it too hard as well. (But then again, I am far from a power gamer.) The early levels were a great joint experience for the two of us together discovering the game. Still, I give the game high marks as it accomplished such a rare feat as compelling me to play it to conclusion."



Tom Hall
Designer of Anachronox

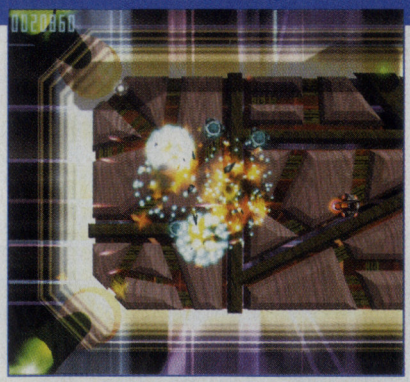


"*Zelda: Oracle of Seasons* (Game Boy Color), *Super Dodgeball* (Game Boy Advance), *SSX* (PlayStation 2), *Rocket Elite* (PocketPC), and *Chocobo Hot & Cold* in *Final Fantasy 9* (PlatyStation)."

SHAREWARE SPOTLIGHT

Space Tripper
PomPom [www.pompom.org.uk]

One of the nice things about shareware games is the typically small download size. Case in point: *Space Tripper*, a 3D space shooter with 2D gameplay that harkens back to the days of *Defender*. Your view is top-down as you speed your little fighter craft back and forth on a horizontal level, blasting enemies and grabbing the occasional powerup. For a mere 3.5 MB download, the OpenGL graphics are surprisingly sharp and the control is spot-on. It's available for PC and Mac, and registration for the full game is only $12. —*Jason Cross*



TOP SELLERS

1	DIABLO II: LORD OF DESTRUCTION Blizzard Entertainment Rating ★★★★★
2	THE SIMS Electronic Arts Rating ★★★★½
3	THE SIMS HOUSE PARTY Electronic Arts Rating ★★★½
4	MYST III EXILE Ubisoft Rating ★★★★
5	BLACK & WHITE Electronic Arts Rating ★★★
6	THE SIMS LIVIN LARGE Electronic Arts Rating ★★★
7	ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON Infogrames Rating ★★★★½
8	DIABLO II Blizzard Entertainment Rating ★★★★
9	TRAIN SIMULATOR Microsoft Rating ★★★½
10	HALF-LIFE: BLUE SHIFT Sierra Rating ★★★

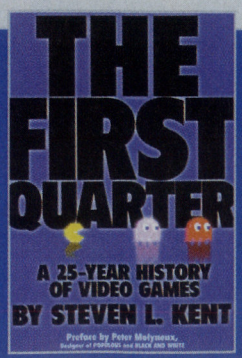
11. Age Of Empires II: Age of Kings; 12. Sim Theme Park; 13. Baldur's Gate II: Throne Of Bhaal; 14. Emperor: Battle For Dune; 15. World War II Online; 16. SimCity 3000; 17. Starcraft Battlechest ; 18. RollerCoaster Tycoon Loopy Landscapes; 19. Tropico; 20. Pearl Harbor: Zero Hour

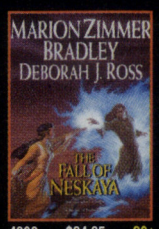
Source: NPD INTELECT® Market Tracking. List based on units sold by forty-two retail chains, representing more than 80% of the U.S. market.

DEAD TREES

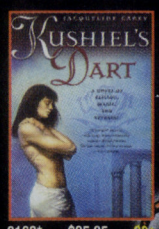
The First Quarter: A 25-Year History of Video Games
Author **Steven L. Kent**
Publisher **BWD Press**
Retail Price **$19.95**
[Exclusive to Amazon.com]

Independent games journalist Steven Kent compiled over 500 interviews – many of them several hours long – into an exhaustive history of the first quarter-century of our industry. The book starts with our electronically enhanced pinball roots and ends, 460 pages later, just before the U.S. launch of the Playstation2. Extended quotes seem to make up at least 20% of the text, and they're so entertaining it's more than forgivable. Those interested only in PC games may be disappointed that the book centers on consoles and arcades, but that jibes pretty well with the realities of the games business, and computer games aren't exactly ignored. This is an absolutely fascinating anthology of the origins of electronic gaming and shouldn't be missed. —*Jason Cross*

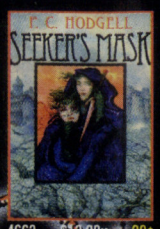




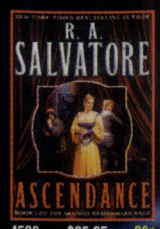
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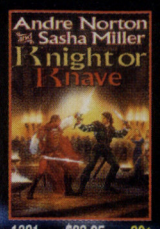
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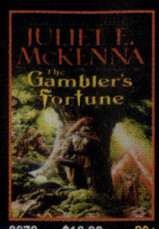
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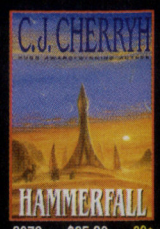
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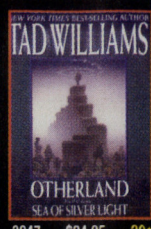
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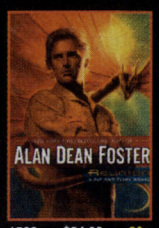
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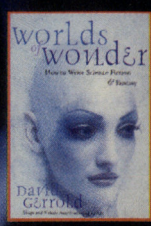
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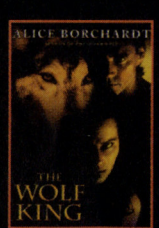


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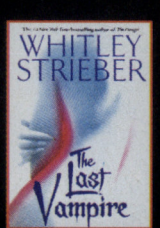
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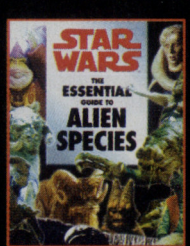
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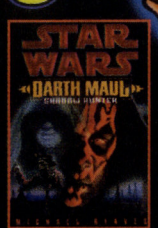
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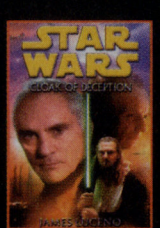
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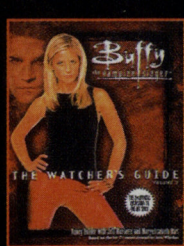
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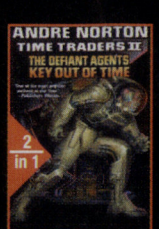
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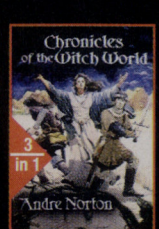
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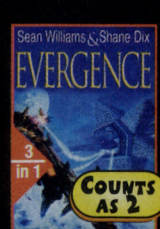
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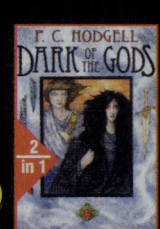
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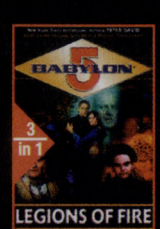
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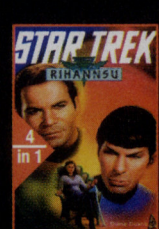
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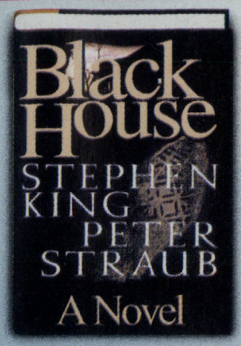


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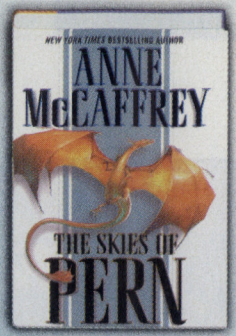


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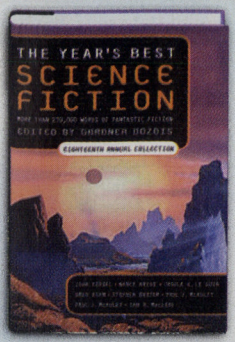
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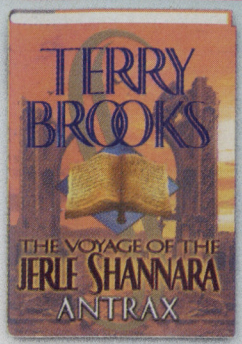
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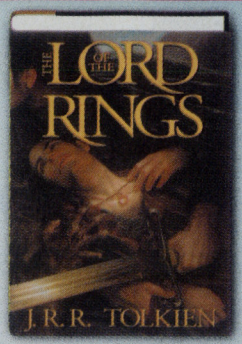
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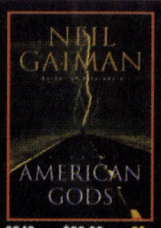
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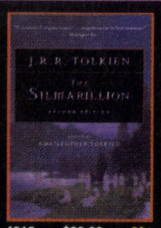
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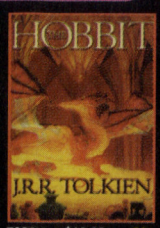
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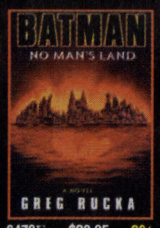
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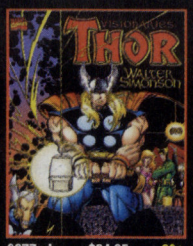
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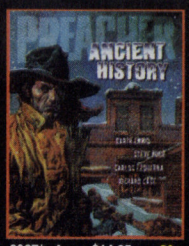
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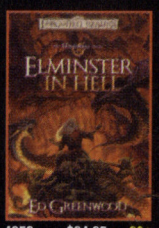
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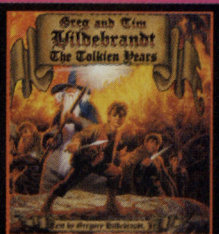
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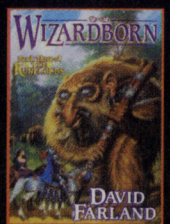
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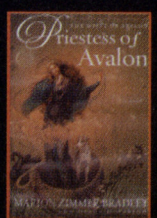
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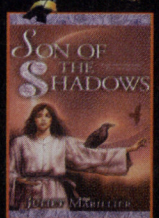
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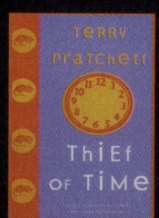
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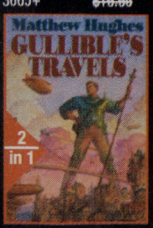
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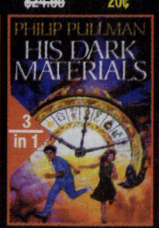
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The Horse Whistler

Pale riders gather in the Shadow of Luclin

by Robert Mayer



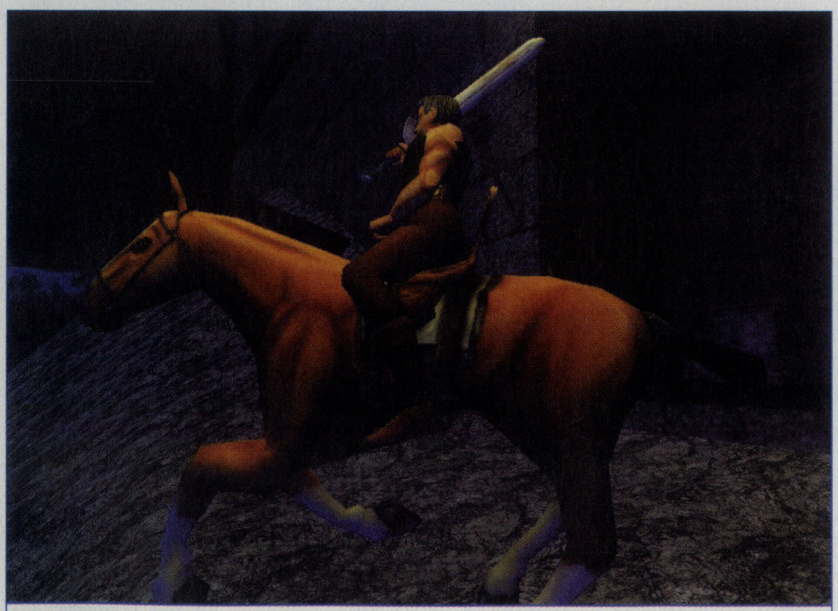
It's scenes like this that Sony wants you to envision when thinking about horses in EverQuest.

How many fantasy heroes walk into battle? Not many, but you wouldn't know that from most fantasy role-playing games on the computer. Except in a few notable exceptions like *Daggerfall* and *Ultima Online*, you'll look in vain for a virtual steed to ride to glory in your favorite RPG. So what if you're a level 50 Paladin, hero of the realm? You'd better have some good walking shoes if you want to get anywhere, or a Druid in your back pocket. Come this fall, however, that will change for anyone who decides to pick up the *Shadows of Luclin* expansion for Sony's massively multiplayer role-playing game *EverQuest*. After three years of traipsing back and forth across Norrath by shank's mare, you'll finally get the chance to...wait for it...ride a *real* horse.

Wilbuuuur!

Although the *Luclin* expansion, the third for the popular subscription game, also includes some hefty graphics, engine, and gameplay updates, it's the addition of equestrian activities that seems destined to cause the most commotion. "It's kind of a convenience factor, a cool factor, a status symbol," says Jeff Butler, the Producer for *Luclin* and the director of the ongoing *EverQuest* operation. You will be able to buy horses from horse traders, for a price—a hefty price. "The thought is that they will be symbols of status, and the desire is that more exotic appearances or higher maximum velocities will be more expensive," he says, so don't expect to give a pony to your first level Necromancer. Butler admonishes, "We probably don't want every first level player, every tenth level player, every fifteenth level player, maybe not every twentieth level player to be able to afford to ride around on a horse."

So what does having a horse do for you, other than impress your friends? Basically, you can ride it, and move faster than you'd be able to on your own two feet. According to Butler, because horses won't go any faster than skilled players can already travel, "players on foot won't be disadvantaged because all of a sudden monsters can run faster to make up for horseback riding." Still, the ability to move rapidly across the open areas of *EverQuest*'s huge game world will be a boon in and of itself, and being able to outrun most monsters without casting a spell will also come in handy, especially for players without their own magical abilities.



Charge!

Eventually, of course, you'll want to fight, and you won't have to send Mr. Ed to the stable to do so. "You will be able to fight while mounted on a horse," promises Butler. Like fighting, however, spellcasting will be a standstill proposition. "You won't be able to move on your horse and successfully cast a spell, you will have to come to a complete halt," he warns, but that's nothing new for *EverQuest*'s magic using characters. Your horse at least won't have anything to fear from either swords or spells, as neither you nor monsters can target or attack mounts. "No, it cannot be [damaged or killed]," Butler says of a horse in *EverQuest*. "That's another complication, a potential issue that we didn't feel we could go into." Visions of player versus player combat consisting of attacking horses and chasing them to zone boundaries helped convince the team to keep the equestrian elements of the *Luclin* expansion abstract.

Horse sense

In fact, the people developing this add-on had a number of qualms about adding mounts to the game. Butler admits the decision to include horses carries a lot of risk with it, but he's confident his team is up to the challenge. What sort of risks could there be in introducing horses? How about animation? Butler calls the problems associated with making sure the combat animations for fighting on horseback work out one of the more serious issues. He thinks they have licked the problem of what a mounted fight with a monster will look like—"the desire is that he won't stand in the chest of your horse and have you hacking through the horse's neck"—but it hasn't been easy. Another issue is game balance, and the need to protect players' investments in existing abilities; thus the decision to limit horseback speed to that attainable by other means.

The biggest decision the team made about horses, though, was to keep them from existing independently in the game world. "The horse will essentially



[clockwise from upper left] Damn, those dragonflies are big!—One of the Kerrans, Luclin's new catpeople race. Think he'll sing "Memories" if you ask?—Getting rid of garden pests is always difficult.—Artist's conception of what a troll on a horse will look like. Impressive.

be part of your character model, for all intents and purposes, and nothing more," asserts Butler. "He won't have his own hit points, he won't have his own fighting ability, he won't lend to or detract from your fighting ability," other than by the increase in speed a horse provides. That means you'll never come across a herd of horses, never see them tied up in front of the tavern, and you most assuredly won't run into a slew of them outside popular dungeons.

By embracing the notion that horses are merely magic items that you ride, Sony has neatly dodged a bullet, but not without some cost. As horses aren't "real," you won't be able to use them to carry more stuff than you normally could. "You can't use them as roving banks or backpacks or containers," according to Butler. "That's one of the things that would have been desirable, that we simply could not work in for a number of reasons." You also won't be able to dress them up with saddles and barding and the like, either.

A horse of a different color

It's Sony's goal to allow for different grades of horseflesh, selling at different prices, but nothing has been decided. "It's certainly a desirable feature, for you to be actually able to pay more or to go to a different place to buy a finer horse, slightly faster than another one," admits Butler. Still, even your garden-variety nag will give you a leg up on the foot-bound. Any zone that's not indoors or in a city should be accessible on horseback, and if you go somewhere you can't take your mount, it will just go away until you summon it again.

In keeping with the expansion's improvements in the game's graphics engine, however, including DirectX 8 support and more detailed character models, horses will at least appear in various sizes. The halfling will have a pony and the humans and related characters will have a normal horse, and the troll and ogre will have what would be representative of a Clydesdale, a huge war horse.

"We saw the running horse animation, and how the troll's weapon is hanging off at his side like he's ready to swing it around and clothesline someone with it...we were like, 'Wow'." He chuckles. "If you were to approach a camp of, like, three of those guys, and they were to aggro on you, and start galloping at you, you would be like, 'Oh my God!' And you would be running for the hills."

Behold a pale rider

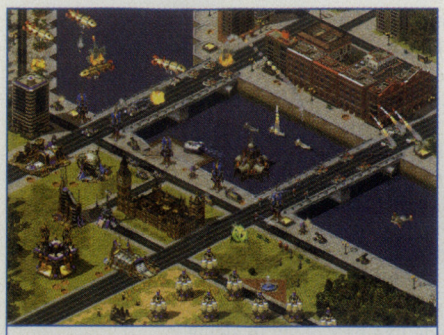
Though *Shadows of Luclin* includes a lot of new content, from the cat-like Kerran race to several dozen new zones and many new monsters for characters of all levels to fight, it's the horses that are the most captivating addition. You can get to Luclin via wizard spires scattered about Norrath, but once there, you'll want to saddle up as soon as you can pony up the cash. Having a horse, Butler is betting, is going to be very desirable.

"Your Druid isn't always online, but you can always have your horse whistle," he reminds us. As he says, "no one can take it away from you." For the super-rich, there is always the possibility of the two-horse stable, too, "so that when they die, at their bind point they run back and get their horse whistle and ride their horse out to their body...."

Either way, it looks like horses will make a big mark on *EverQuest* when they debut this fall. And Butler promises Firona Vie on a horse soon; Lady Godiva, anyone? ●



A hot time in the old town tonight.



Someone save the Queen!



I foresee a SAG strike soon.

The Red Menace

Red Alert gets Russian on gamers in Yuri's Revenge

by Tricia Gray

Did you think the battle was over when you defeated the Soviets in *Red Alert 2*? Think again—Westwood is bringing it all back with its new expansion pack, *Yuri's Revenge*. That's right, Soviet psychic Yuri isn't dead. As you will witness in the game's opening, he seizes San Francisco's Alcatraz Island, and has on his side an army of mind-controlled soldiers. The Allied Forces have new weapons and vehicles, plus they've constructed a machine that can transport them back in time. And Westwood hasn't forgotten the Soviets—they're back and want their own revenge.

The expansion offers 14 new single-player missions, split evenly between the Allies and Soviets. As the former, you go back in time to make sure Mr. Psychic Hotline goes down like his ex-Soviet leader, Romanov. As the latter, your objective is to eliminate Yuri for his betrayal, but also to obtain the time-traveling technology that the Allies are using to reverse the fate in *Red Alert 2*.

In *Red Alert 2*, the Allies have the fast units and the Soviets have the slower ones. Westwood thought it was only logical to change these characteristics for the expansion pack; the Soviets now have faster units like the Siege Chopper that can quickly take out buildings and vehicles. A new unit for The Allies is the slow Battle Fortress, which transports infantry and crushes the enemy beneath its tracks. There are thirty new unit structures in all. Battles take place in San Francisco, Hollywood, Sydney, Egypt, London, Seattle, and even on the moon.

Multiplayer will have ten cooperative missions and twenty skirmish maps that include desert, arctic, and city environments. Not only will you have the option to play for the Soviets or the Allies, but you can also choose to play with Yuri's new toys. Westwood is really giving the *Red Alert* fans more of what they know and love: over-the-top battles with a little campy action. Yes, Tonya will be back, fully loaded, with Eva, General Carville, and President Dugan.

The same team that developed the original *Red Alert 2* worked on *Yuri's Revenge*, providing reassurance that this won't be just another crappy add-on. With all the new units and locations, *Yuri's Revenge* has just about enough new units and locations to constitute a separate game, and it certainly appears promising enough to satisfy the fans of the original. ●

From Pentagon to Pentium

Real War brings military strategy to civilian gamers

by Robert Mayer



Your base, in all of its olive drab & khaki glory.

Ten years ago media pundits dubbed Operation Desert Storm a "Nintendo war," likening the deadly business of evicting the Iraqi army from Kuwait to a video game. It could seem somewhat strange then, that Simon & Schuster's upcoming real-time strategy game dubbed *Real War* is at its heart a standard real-time strategy game. Strange, because the developer, Rival Interactive, is a defense contractor and stranger still because the game itself is a reworked version of an actual training tool the company did for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The incongruity of using a military training tool as the basis for a commercial strategy game fades when you understand just what Rival did for the Joint Chiefs. It provided a very generic, accessible tool for training officers in the basic concepts of strategy and military operations, focusing on things like coordinating attacks, finding the enemy's center of gravity, and securing your flanks, not on the intimate details of air, land or sea operations.

According to Rival Interactive president Jim Omer, this focus on playability was deliberate. "I convinced our customer at the military that that's what they should do, a fun real-time strategy game."

Because the training tool is so generic, converting it to a true commercial product isn't much of a leap. Rival has added 3D units, slightly zoomed in the camera, added a resource and building level, and removed a few of the more detailed command and control functions of the government version. The result looks and feels very much like the original in style, only with better graphics and more gameplay options.

Real War is "real" mostly in its units. In the solo game, you'll fight through two campaigns. In these twelve-mission epics, you'll fight in various types of terrain, and use an entire arsenal of weaponry, right up to nuclear weapons. Skirmish mode and multiplayer battles will benefit from a very complete options list, including the ability to disable virtually any of the game's many unit types. Want a game without airplanes? You got it. No Special Forces? Done.

As you watch *Real War* in action, it looks remarkably like many other contemporary real-time strategy games. Omer is hoping that the use of realistic units, the ability to coordinate simultaneous attacks, and the game's detailed 3D units will set his game apart.

"The units and the infrastructure are generic," Omer offers, "but the strategies are dialed on right from the playbook." You'll be able to test your strategic skills this September when Simon & Schuster ships the game to stores. ●

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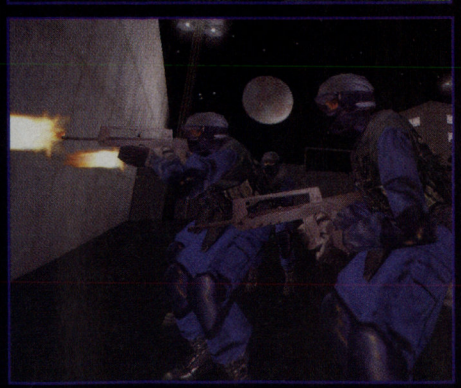
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Zoo Tycoon

If you breed it, they will come

by Rick Moscatello



The wild tiger ride is surprisingly unpopular.



You may place different animals in the same pen, at your own risk.

It is impossible to consider *Zoo Tycoon* without making comparisons to Hasbro's ultra-successful *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, as so many of the interface and game design decisions were clearly influenced by it, with some admittedly nice improvements. But the name also gives you an obvious indicator of what the game is all about: creating a successful zoo. However, it possesses one important difference from other tycoon games—you not only must provide for the needs of your customers, but also you must keep your inventory (i.e., the animals) happy.

One of your many concerns as a zoo curator is that each customer has constantly changing ratings for happiness, thirst, hunger, restroom needs, and energy, and naturally you wish to build a park filled with easily accessible amenities that keeps them all at acceptable levels. Animals likewise have a plethora of needs, and keeping them happy can be quite a challenge, far more so than satisfying the humans. You must provide the proper mix of proper terrain to achieve a good environment for your animal. There are around 100 types of tree and rock formations, and almost 20 ground varieties to work with, and you may also need to vary the elevation of a pen to keep an important animal happy. There's always a zoo expert available to clue you in on what the animals want. You'll even need to redecorate once in a while, to keep the animals from getting bored.

While amusement parks can charge people to enter the park and charge for the rides, zoos generally can't get away with charging money to see the animals. You can solve this revenue problem by building concession stands, naturally, and *Zoo Tycoon* also provides a nice array of zoo-themed attractions, such as elephant rides and petting zoos. Zoos have one nice advantage over amusement parks in that animal lovers and societies more readily donate money to them, and a number of the included scenarios force you to rely on such donations for most of your income.

Zoo Tycoon looks like a worthy addition to the "Tycoon" genre. Expect to see copies herded into stores come this fall. ●

Slaan-tastic!

TimeGate expands Kohan with Ahriman's Gift

by Jeff Vitous

As fantasy wargames go, TimeGate Studio's *Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns* has set a standard that far exceeds other similar titles. Following up on the success of its initial effort, the company is working on an expansion pack, *Ahriman's Gift*. Adding a little more of everything in addition to a new coat of polish, it *Ahriman's Gift* strives to maintain the same level of gameplay cherished by fans of the original game.

Solo players will have three new campaigns to challenge them: two six-mission mini-campaigns and the twelve-mission main campaign. While the campaign engine will still be scripted (as opposed to dynamic), players will now have some latitude as to what the next mission will be. TimeGate will offer additional campaigns in the future on its *www.kohan.net* website, but it warns that ownership of the expansion will be required to play the new campaigns. New terrain, units and heroes make backwards compatibility impossible.



New units mean more cool spell effects.



A dragon basting in his own juices.

Each faction will have a unique new unit. A dozen additional heroes, including one for the Slaan, will add new attributes and abilities to the companies they command. They will be able to cast brand new spells, complete with dazzling visual effects. The artificial intelligence is another area receiving special attention. While there will be additional AI personalities (with the AI files accessible to the user), each one will also state which race it plays best. Matching the AI personality with its proper town type should result in a better single-player game. Multiplayer will remain a strong component of the game.

Potentially one of the most important changes is the ability to upgrade outposts to forts. As in city upgrades, you will not need engineers. Aside from having more hit points, forts will also have twice the garrison of an outpost. Forts will also make defensive postures a somewhat more viable as a strategy—an issue to be addressed in play balancing.

The original *Kohan* was critically well received, and the enhancements should make for an even richer experience when the title ships this fall. ●

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The Great Escape

Prisoner of War puts the prisoner back in war, or vice versa

by Tricia Gray

"It's the latest thing: the escape adventure," quips Jim McMorrow about *Prisoner of War*, which he's producing for Codemasters. Influenced by games like *Metal Gear Solid*, *P.O.W.* puts you in control of a U.S. special ops soldier during World War II. If you've seen *The Great Escape*, just picture yourself as Steve McQueen devising a plan for escape. "We almost made the main character resemble McQueen, but thought against it due to licensing," adds McMorrow.

The mission-based game's objectives are to help prisoners escape and collect information on the Axis Powers. There are eight camps, set in places like Colditz Castle, Stalag Luft I and III, and Greece. During the course of the game, you may find yourself revisiting some of the earlier camps. The missions aren't just "wham bam let's devise an escape plan." There are plot twists you uncover while snooping around stealing information for the Allies.

Codemasters is trying to base the missions around actual events that took place during the war. "We read books, watched films, and television shows based around P.O.W. camps, plus we cross reference everything on the Internet," McMorrow explains. "We discovered ingenious plans to fool guards to escape. Most of the equipment and documents were made by hand! We even got a chance to speak directly to people that had experiences in the camps and thought, 'We have to use this in the game.'"

There are two parts to playing the game, or "phases of escape." You start with exploration and discover. You can creep around, explore the camp, and talk to others, but if you aren't there for roll call or meals, guards immediately look for you. If spotted, you are sent to isolation, but if shot, you are only sent to the infirmary. The second phase, information gathering, allows you to prepare and escape. This is the time to observe how things work and figure out who to trust and how to get out. There will be an interactive journal that you can update with important information, objects, and maps you discover. Communication is key—the prisoners have special attributes needed for escape, which you discover by interacting with them.



Damnit! I am almost there and now I have a cramp!

The Germans segregated prisoners by country, so finding a someone with linguistic skills might be your first objective. Other skills are strength and athleticism (for digging or carrying), charm, and "MacGyver-ism"—that special ability to build bombs out of tape and toothpaste. You'll need to distract and bribe guards in order to escape. The higher their rank, the smarter they'll be. When all is set—your skills, team, and plan are ready to go—you make your escape, either through running or tunneling. You'll need to break out in whatever way you can to move on to the next mission.

The game will include a few sub-games to help hone your skills. You can gamble for "prison currency," consisting of cigarettes and chocolates. You can also knock down lined cans by throwing stones; this actually helps your aim, especially when you need to distract guards or knock out lights.

According to Codemasters, players interested in a fast-paced game can plow through without exploring every nook and Axis cranny, but for the hardcore "I need to gather everything" player, it predicts over 30 hours of gameplay. Unfortunately, the game won't have any multiplayer.

Codemaster developers were working on this concept for some time when the game's developer, Wide Games, contacted them about publishing a remarkably similar project. "We were both working on a game based around the player having to outwit an intelligent AI system to escape a situation," comments McMorrow. "We [Codemasters] planned on using the World War II prisoner of war camp scenarios, which fit in very well with the technology Wide Games was developing." You can see that technology for yourself when the game sneaks on to store shelves early next year. ●



I hope they serve pudding for lunch today.











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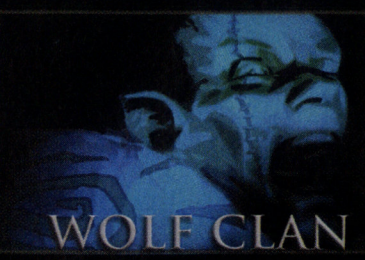
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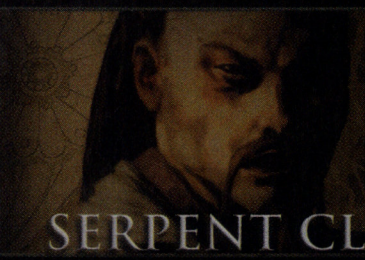
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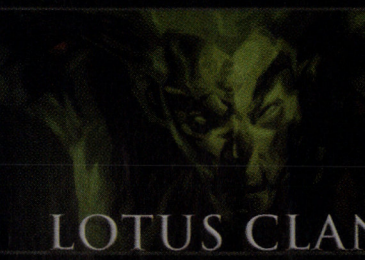
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The Ten-Year Itch

The rise and rise of Sid Meier's Civilization

by Tom Chick



Although Sid Meier may not know it, one of the earliest influences on *Civilization* is the 1969 Michael Caine movie, *Battle of Britain*. There are scenes at the British Ministry of War in which officers plan the battle by instructing clerks to push small models of airplanes across a huge tabletop with a map painted on it. A boy named Walter Bright saw the movie and decided this would make a neat game. His early attempts with plywood and blocks couldn't keep up with the level of detail he wanted, so he soon gave up, figuring he might as well just play *Risk*. It wasn't until Bright was a student at Cal Tech that he decided to use a computer to revisit his idea.

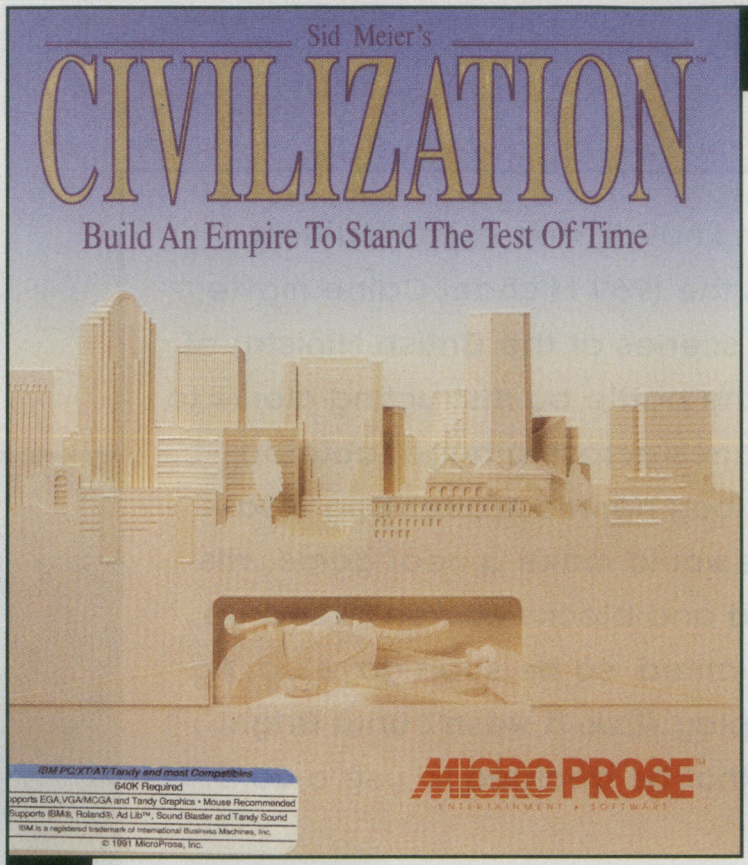
He used ASCII characters on a grid to represent a map, various units, and the cities that produced the units. It was turn-based. It had a "shrouded" map that had to be explored (a fog of war environment, in which a player can only see enemies adjacent to him). Each of the units had varying movement rates and unique abilities. Infantry had a single hit point and battleships had 12 hit points, but there might still be isolated instances of infantry sinking a battleship. Fighters had a fuel limit, so they would crash if they didn't end their turn in a city or on a carrier. There was a sentry function and a goto command to automate movement. It was insanely addictive. Bright finished it in 1978 and called it *Empire*.

He tried to interest a number of publishers throughout the 80s and finally sold it to a small company called Interstel. They added a graphical interface and released it in 1987 as *Empire: Wargame of the Century*. Among Bright's rejections was a 1985 letter from MicroProse, apologetically explaining that *Empire* did not fit its product line requirements, which were then focused on "action-oriented 'real-time' strategy simulations." Six years later, MicroProse would have a change of heart and publish *Civilization*.

Birth of a *Civilization*

Sid Meier began *Civilization* as a broader version of *SimCity*, but during a lull in development, he retooled it, basing his redesign heavily on Bright's *Empire*. There were other influences as well. Since *Civilization* used historical figures to represent each nation, you could infer a connection to Broderbund's *Ancient Art of War*, in which your opponents were renowned ancient military leaders. But the more immediate precedent was Meier's earlier *Railroad Tycoon*, in which your opponents were actual rail barons. Just as each baron had a certain style of play, each of the world leaders in *Civilization* had certain attitudes. The diplomacy also had a little bit of the feel of Chris Crawford's *Balance of Power*, in which you had to choose your responses from a dialogue tree similar to what is seen in contemporary role-playing games.

Ironically, among the other influences on *Civilization*, there isn't much that can be traced to Avalon Hill's board game of the same name. In that game, you start with a single token and expand to cover the map with cities and armies. This basic dynamic of going from a single settler to a thriving culture is part of the computer game, but the board game is heavily abstracted, much like *Risk*. However, it does use something similar to a tech tree (a branching structure describing the relationships between various technologies), in which you buy tech advances. Each advance somehow alters the basic game mechanics and also gives you discounts or unlocks certain other advances.



However, much of what made *Civilization* an enduring (and endearing) influence on computer gaming was either unprecedented or had never been done in quite the same way. Meier's design established some of the essential elements of a good computer game. First and foremost is its infamous addictive quality. *Civilization* is one of the earliest instances of the "one more turn" phenomenon, in which you just can't stop because you're constantly playing just one more turn. How this addiction lingers is no secret: give the player multiple milestones on multiple levels so there's always a new development just around the corner, a new technology, a new building, a new city, a new conquest, a new treaty. The best turn-based games use this conceit to establish pacing, but this is also an important aspect of real-time games. Consider that *Diablo II* is so addictive because you're always on the verge of earning another level, finishing another quest, or finding another magic weapon.

"So France starts getting uppity, but I'm and they've got Musketeers against my trade Republic for Gunpowder."

History doesn't repeat itself

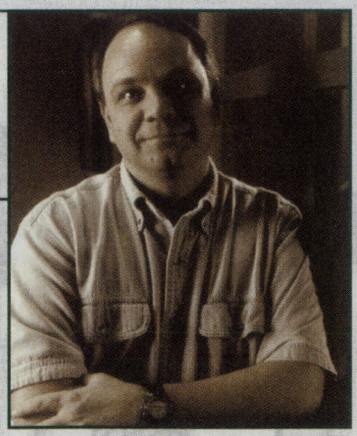
Civilization also introduced the importance of replay value. Although there had been plenty of good turn-based wargames, even some with random map generators, there were none that offered so many different ways to play. *Railroad Tycoon* allowed you to focus on rail management, economic development, or the stock market. *Civilization* took this idea and expanded on it. Your most immediate choice was either guns or butter, but there were so many nuances within and between either selection. Although there were a few inviolable real world maxims at work—population growth leads to prosperity, don't fight a war on two fronts, ignore technological progress at your own peril—there was a powerful sense that as the game went on, your choice of play styles widened. The next game you played could be different in so many ways beyond simply a new map.

Hand in hand with this variety is the importance of story-

The father of Civilization

Sid Meier on the evolution of a legendary game

by Tom Chick



Describe the team that created Civilization.

It was really small, especially at the beginning. Basically, I did the programming and the initial art just to get things going. I worked with Bruce [Shelley, the game's credited co-designer], who was kind of my sounding board. He and I were the two primary people at the beginning. A third of the way through or so, we started adding artists to it, started doing some sounds and things like that. But the team never got really large. I'd say we had maybe ten people at the end.

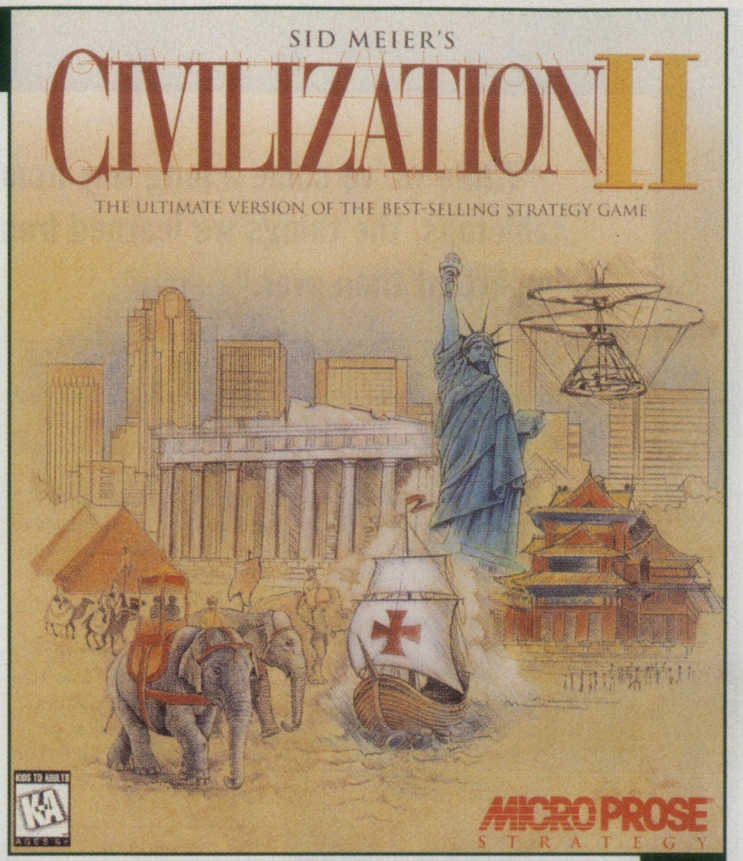
How did the game design evolve over time?

The first approach was real time, kind of a *SimCity*-oriented flavor, but ramped up to a global scale. The civilization aspect added on to that, with the larger scale, multiple cities, with history, with time passing and significant things happening as time went on. There really wasn't a game that provided that general sense of 'history is cool and interesting'. I worked on that maybe two or three months and it didn't generate enough spark. It always had a hands-off feel, "I'm trying to make something happen, sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't." You didn't really feel like "The Emperor" or "The King," making things happen. So we put it away and during that time, I spent a fair amount of time playing *Empire*, a turn-based conquer-the-world game. I said, let me try this approach with the *Civilization* idea, and we tried it and it was immediately clearly more fun and more interesting.

already fighting a war with Russia Chariots, so I pay off the French and

telling in a good game design. But because the player had so many choices for how to play, this isn't the designer's storytelling, but the player's; the best games give players their own stories to tell. Consider *X-COM*. "So my last rookie, armed with only a laser rifle, opens the door and there's a sectoid right in front of him!" Perhaps the latest best storytelling game is *The Sims*. "So I just got a promotion at work and then Bella comes over and she's hitting on my husband." So it is with *Civilization*. "So France starts getting uppity, but I'm already fighting a war with Russia and they've got Musketeers against my Chariots, so I pay off the French and trade Republic for Gunpowder."

An important difference in *Civilization's* stories, and also another one of its important contributions, is its epic and unprecedented setting: history. No game before then had tried to capture as comprehensive a sweep of time. The godhood of *Populous* is all good and well, but it doesn't have nearly as much personality and resonance as presiding over the March of Time. These are the things we learned in school, the Importance of the Past drummed into us as children, but in Meier's gameworlds, we're driving them. We are making History. And unlike the bland absolute power of a god, presiding over history requires dealing with the limitations of your power. Your triremes might sink if you set out for the New World. Hoover Dam might be taken from you if the Romans conquer your city. The Senate might override your decision to go to war. The people might revolt if you don't give them enough Elvises.



Progress marches on

Civilization also demonstrated the importance of evolving mechanics. A fundamental element of good game design is creating paradigms and then breaking them. At its most basic, in a *Mario Brothers* game for instance, you can only jump so high. But then you eat a yellow mushroom, and you can jump twice as high. Then you eat a red mushroom and you can fly. In *Civilization*, the rules are constantly

As a development process, how smoothly did Civilization go compared to the other games you've worked on?

In one sense, it did not go smoothly, since I started with one approach, pursued that for a while, then put the game on the shelf, worked on other things, and came back to it later with some new ideas. From that point on, it went quite smoothly.

Did you have any reservations about how commercially successful Civilization would be?

In those days, strategy was a dirty word. If you called your game a strategy game, it was the kiss of death. Strategy games in those days were generally hex-based, complicated games about the military. They were so hard to play, you had to be a fanatic. Also in those days, MicroProse was known for their F-15 flying game and *Silent Service* submarine game. It was a departure for me as a designer, and for the company, and from what other people were doing at the time. We had faith in our game, it was a good game and it really grabbed you in ways that other games didn't. But it was still different and that was the source of my uncertainty. We were, in our minds, breaking a fair amount of new ground, but a lot of things we tried just worked out so well. So we felt a lot of pride, a sense of accomplishment, that we had built something special.

"There really wasn't a game that provided that general sense of 'history is cool and interesting.'"

When did you realize how successful it was going to be?

It definitely went out very low key. It took at least three months for there to be some level of word-of-mouth to develop, getting a sense that people were buying the game and retailers were re-ordering it. It started off fairly slow, but it kind of grew over time as people tried it out and told their friends about it. As opposed to most games that go out strong and then kind of really taper off as time goes by, this game was selling more and people were talking about it more over time, and we were starting to get letters from people who were playing and who were totally absorbed by it. At that point, we realized that other people were getting the same feeling for the game as we had when we were developing it.

For more commentary from Sid Meier and co-designer Bruce Shelley, including how they came up with specific elements of the original Civilization *design, check out the complete interview online at www.cgonline.com*

"While we've come a long way from pushing wooden airplanes across tabletops, the things we learned from *Civilization* a decade ago are more important than ever."

breaking open as you discover new technologies, institute new forms of government, and build new structures. The only constant is change. If you don't like the rules, wait a few turns.

It also set the bar for accessibility in a complex game. Meier's interface was elegant and intuitive. It used icons to clearly show the player how much food he was harvesting, how long until his temple was completed, or how much research was being done in Vienna. Although raw numbers were certainly part of the game (your treasury, unit attack powers, the date), they never sat front and center. Like Dan Bunten's brilliant *M.U.L.E.*, there was a powerful sense of collecting little icons instead of just watching a number swell.



The evolution of Civilization

Another facet of this accessibility was *Civilization's* thorough online help component. The in-game Civilopedia had everything you needed to know to play the game, complete with historical tidbits to add flavor. Not that there wasn't a comprehensive manual; rather, *Civilization* established that a game should be well documented inside and out. But there's also a bit of irony in the fact that it gave birth to the strategy guide industry that helped kill good documentation. Johnny Wilson and Alan Emrich wrote *Rome on 640k a Day*, which was published by St. Martin's Press almost a year after the game's release. It explained all the gory details you could ever want to know about how *Civilization* worked. It was obviously written with the help of Meier himself and it was indicative of the superlative strategy guides Emrich would later write ones for *Master of Magic* and *Master of Orion*. Two years later, Sybex published a knock off called *Civilization: Strategies and Secrets*. Shortly thereafter, Prima and Brady got into the strategy guide business and it eventually became what it is today—about which, the less said, the better.

All in a decade's work

Civilization appeared on a few different platforms: PC-DOS, Amiga, Mac, and—believe it or not—the Super Nintendo in 1994. A Windows version was released in 1993 Windows [and can be found on this month's CGCD –ed] and *CivNet*, which featured rudimentary multiplayer support that posed more problems than it solved, was released in 1995. But *Civilization* as a franchise didn't really explode until after Meier protégé Brian Reynolds took his list of thirty things he thought should be fixed in *Civilization* and used it as the basis for *Civilization II*, which was released in 1996. There followed a parade of expansions and gold editions, many of which were superfluous considering its map editor, which served as a scenario editor when combined with the game's cheat menu and the easily hacked text files that housed the game's rules. All told, the *Civilization* games have sold two million copies and earned $60 million.

One of the uglier consequences of *Civilization* was the legal squabble that erupted when Activision licensed the name from Avalon Hill, the U.S. distributors of the board game. However, MicroProse outmaneuvered Activision by purchasing Hartford Trefoil, the British company that actually created the board game and published it in Europe. Lawsuits were traded in 1997 and settled in 1998, with Activision being granted the right to make a single *Civilization* game. Although the financial terms of the settlement were confidential, the conventional wisdom is that board game giant Avalon Hill incurred painful legal fees that were largely responsible for their demise and ultimate sale to, of all companies, MicroProse's parent company Hasbro.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of *Civilization* is that it paved the way for complex turn-based strategy games.

SimTex's *Master of Orion* and *Master of Magic* both drew heavily from conventions established in *Civilization*. Although Activision's single *Civilization* title, *Civilization: Call to Power*, ignored a lot of the wisdom of Sid Meier's design, it was nevertheless a commercial success that spawned a sequel (minus the *Civilization* moniker). *Civilization II* designer Brian Reynolds and Sid Meier collaborated on Firaxis' *Alpha Centauri*, the science fiction successor to *Civilization*. And although turn-based strategy has fallen out of favor these days, Meier and Jeffrey Briggs, who created the music for the original *Civilization*, are working on *Civilization III*.

While we've come a long way from pushing wooden airplanes across tabletops, the things we learned from *Civilization* a decade ago are more important than ever. Like the flight simulators and adventure games before them, turn-based strategy games are rapidly falling out of favor. If ever there was a time to take a hard look at the whys and wherefores of a successful strategy game, it's on the tenth anniversary of *Sid Meier's Civilization*, a seminal game that still has so many relevant lessons to teach us.

Class of '91 Reunion

A handful of reasons to remember the year that Civilization was born

Although our choice for valedictorian of the Class of 1991 is *Civilization*, which was hands down the most influential game to emerge that year, a number of other titles had their own impact on the gaming industry's future. In addition to many prominent sequels such as *Monkey Island II*, *John Madden Football II*, *Magic Candle II*, and *Might and Magic III*, plus some re-releases like *Leisure Suit Larry* (with new VGA graphics) and *The Lost Treasures of Infocom*, here are a few products or franchises that deserve an honorary degree for one reason or another.

The Bard's Tale Construction Set

This is the last follow-up to Interplay's popular *Bard's Tale* series that allowed you to build your own gameworld—only one of the early foreshadowers of the mod, mod world in which we live today.

Commander Keen

Apogee and id Software released episodes 4-6 of the games that put the future *DOOM* creator on the map. These side-scrolling action games featured kid genius Billy Blaze in the title role climbs as he jumped through mind-numbing episodes like *Aliens Ate my Babysitter*.

Duke Nukem

Yes, the Duke was also born in 1991, as a side-scrolling game in the mold of *Commander Keen* (which was in the mold of *Sonic*, *Mario*, etc.). The series went 3D in 1996, and at last count there were a total of 10 and ¾ *Duke Nukem* games. "Who wants some?"

Dungeons & Dragons

Officially licensed *D&D* products were out in force that year, including *Pools of Darkness* (the final game in the *Pool of Radiance* line), *Shadow Sorcerer*, *Gateway to the Savage Frontier*, *Deathknights of Krynn*, and *Eye of the Beholder II*, the second offering of SSI's trilogy.

Lemmings

As unlike *Duke Nukem* as it can be, this game almost matches the *Duke* series' number of sequels, with at least eight additional releases for the PC, not to mention its ports to Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis, and Playstation. With its addictive gameplay involving guidance of the cutest bunch of mindless miscreants ever, making countless parents weep with joy, it has a very strong fan base worldwide.

Red Baron

This is considered by most the quintessential foundation of the World War I Air Combat Sim. It still hasn't been equaled.

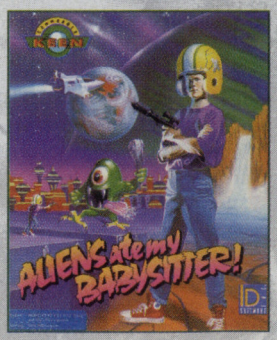
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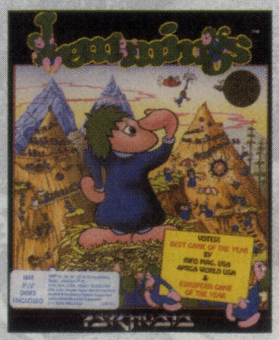
The third release in this series really pushed the envelope. It had all the features anyone could dream of at the time and was by far the most impressive advance toward the modern sims we see today.

SimAnt

Not to be outdone by Sid Meier, even at this early stage, Will Wright (Father of most things *Sim*) was on the scene with this ant colony simulation in which your goal was to conquer the other creatures—heads, thoraxes, and abdomens included—in order to invade middle American domiciles.









Box shots courtesy of Moby Games www.mobygames.com



The main map view tells you what kind of production you can expect from basic terrain squares: a green dot represents one unit of food, and the silver dots represent one unit of shields.

Rewriting History

Sid Meier's Civilization III takes a classic concept back to the drawing board

by Benjamin E. Sones

If turn-based games are dead, somebody forgot to tell Sid Meier. The legendary designer and Firaxis co-founder is currently tackling the third sequel to the mother of all turn-based games, *Civilization*. "Oh, sure," you might say. "*That's* a different story." Given the popularity of the first two games, you might think *Civilization III* would be an easy concept to sell—a "safety" game, so to speak. You might expect some updated visuals, a more polished interface, maybe a few extra units and a Wonder or two. After all, it's not as though *Civilization II* cried out for improvement.

In this instance you'd be wrong—not about *Civilization III* being an easy sell, but about the extent to which Firaxis is revising the game. "We'd kind of written it off," Meier explains, "but then the stars aligned in a specific way where it became possible for us to begin to think about doing another *Civilization*, with Hasbro buying MicroProse, and MicroProse buying Hartford Trefoil, and Avalon Hill being bought... It was a weird combination of circumstances, but it put us in a mode of thinking 'well, what *would* we do if we were able to do a third version of *Civilization*?'"

As it turns out, the answer is "quite a lot." The basic premise of the game remains the same—you start out small on a hidden map, found a city, build an empire, rule the world—but almost all the specifics of how you accomplish those tasks have been revised, often in fundamental ways. The goal for Firaxis is to make the game more approachable, to revise the game mechanics so that they function more logically and more intuitively rather than to merely add more stuff.

"We did not want to go down the path of having every succeeding version being more complex," Meier says. "I think it's been the death of flight simulators." He used to develop flight simulators when the genre was in its formative years in the late 80s, but he has no desire to revisit that particular theme. "That was not the way we wanted to go with *Civilization*. So we wanted not to make it more complex, but rather broader—a richer game."

Meier's role in the development of *Civilization III* is similar to the one he played in the development of the last game in the series. He is closely involved with the conceptualiza-



tion of the game and plays with the evolving prototypes, offering his input while passing the design mantel to another Firaxis luminary—in this case, CEO and President Jeff Briggs. If taking one of the greatest computer games of all time back to the proverbial drawing board intimidates Briggs, he doesn't show it. "We find that veteran *Civilization II* players play for about half an hour, and then say 'wait a minute, I gotta start over because I'm playing the way I used to play, and it ain't working.' I think that's good. It makes it a brand new game, but there's enough that's familiar."

Explore, expand, exploit... enlighten?

One of the simplest changes is also one of the most far-reaching. *Civilization III* takes a cue from Firaxis' last game, *Alpha Centauri*, and offers you a few new ways to win. This is one of the few instances where more *is* better, according to Meier. "People have commented 'you call your game *Civilization*, but it's really about war, isn't it?' And part of that is true. The primary way of winning was based around that, and it was good at the time—the mechanics was easy to understand." The only way to win in past games was to "beat" all the other tribes in the game, either by literally destroying them or by being the first tribe to colonize another planet. The latter goal was nominally a peaceful path, but it still put you at odds with the rest of the world as the other tribes struggled to stop you from "winning."

The two original victory conditions remain, but they are joined by four new options. The simplest is the Score victory, which allows you to set a year in which the game ends. When that year rolls around, the tribe with the highest score wins the game. The Diplomatic victory is borrowed directly from *Alpha Centauri*; you have to build the United Nations and then win a vote to become the World Leader. It's the ultimate peaceful path, because it requires that you focus on getting the other tribes to like you.

The Domination victory is similar to the basic Conquest victory, but is intended to address a problem with which many *Civilization* veterans are very familiar—the end-game drag. Often you'll reach a point at which you *know* that you've won the game—no other tribe is even close to your level of advancement—but it may take you another 100 turns to *technically* win by obliterating the competition. Domination doesn't require that you take over the entire world—just the majority of it. "Right now it's two thirds," says Briggs. "It was three quarters. We're going to try to find a 'happy place,' where the player knows he's won, and the game acknowledges it."

The Culture victory is another peaceful option, and perhaps the most intriguing. It requires that you build up a Culture rating high enough to extend your borders six tiles out from at least one of your cities, establishing your tribe as the most influential (and therefore dominant) culture in the game.

Borders? Culture rating?

Borders are another concept cribbed from *Alpha Centauri*, but Culture is a new concept entirely. As with all of the basic concepts in the *Civilization* games, it's very simple. Each city has a Culture rating based on the improvements that you choose to build. Your palace generates Culture, libraries generate Culture, Temples and Cathedrals generate Culture. The exact amount goes up with age—an old library generates more Culture than a new one—so tribes that start focusing on cultural considerations early can gain a considerable advantage.

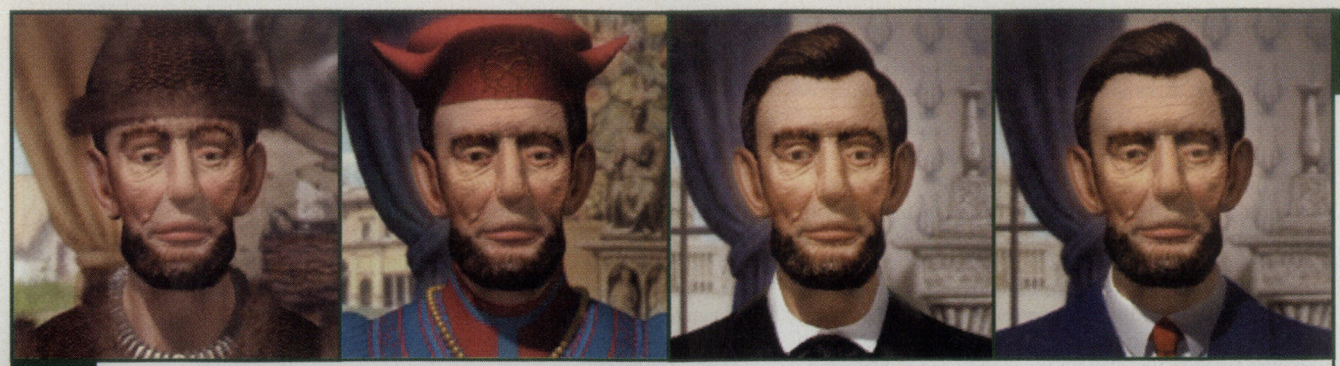
The payoff is that Culture directly determines how far your borders extend from your cities, reflecting its influence on the region. When founded (zero Culture points), a city's border will extend only one square out from the city, which means that you can't even access all the terrain that falls within the standard city radius (which, as any *Civilization* veteran will tell you, is two squares). But Culture, like food, accumulates over time, and when it reaches a certain point the radius of your borders grows by one. The first increase comes at 10 Culture points, which will probably take 10 turns at the start of the game (your palace starts generating one Culture point per turn). The amount of you need to grow your borders increases by a factor of 10 each time, so they won't expand again until you accumulate 100 Culture points, and then after that 1,000, and then 10,000, then 100,000, at which point you win the game via a Culture victory.

Borders are critically important for several reasons. They determine what terrain falls under your control—you can demand that other tribes stay out of your territory (although if you are at war with them, it's unlikely that they will listen), and they determine what resources you can exploit. If you want to build Chariots, it will help to have a Horse resource somewhere within your borders.

The Culture rating of each city also contributes to your



Much of the interface tries to keep you in the main map view; the city management screen consists of bars that pop out of the top and bottom of the screen.



Your leader's appearance changes to reflect your civilization's level of advancement.

civilization's overall Culture rating, which determines how strongly captured cities resist your control. "During that time it's harder to control that city, the city is more likely to revolt, so it's much easier for the other side to retake it," explains Briggs. If your overall Culture rating is *really* high, neighboring cities might even defect to your tribe of their own volition. "For it to happen at all, a city has to have a square inside its radius that's owned by somebody else. Once that happens there's a whole series of checks to see if it actually converts, and it has to do with type of government, the strength of your culture, military units that are close by... all sorts of stuff."

Wait; go back to the Horse thing...

Yeah, that's right—resources also work completely differently in *Civilization III*, and that's merely one of many new elements that you'll encounter while managing your cities. In *Civilization II*, resources were little icons that indicated that a given map square would offer increased production if it fell within the radius of one of your cities. Now resources provide you with actual resources that you need to build certain units, and that you can trade with other tribes. To build that Chariot (or any horse-related unit), you'll need to have access to a Horse resource. You'll also find luxury resources, such as Grapes and Ivory, which help make your populace more content.

To access a resource, it needs to fall within your territory, and you need to have a road connecting it with one of your cities. If you want other cities to be able to use it, you'll need roads connecting them to that first city (one of a given resource is enough to provide for your entire civilization). If the resource falls outside your territory, you have two options: wait for your borders to expand far enough to encompass it or send a Worker unit to build a Colony on the resource square, which annexes it to your territory (you'll still need the road, though).

The Worker unit is in many ways a replacement for the Settler from the first two games. The latter unit is still part of the game, but now it only establishes cities. The Worker handles all of the road building, irrigation, and other various city improvement tasks, including building colonies. You start the game with one Worker, in addition to your initial Settler. This is important, because you have to put one population point into building a Worker; Settlers now cost two. "There was a problem that we heard about called 'infinite city sprawl,'" explains Briggs, "where players build thousands of one population cities, and it's actually more efficient to build a bunch of one population cities than it is to build fewer cities with the same total population. So we've combated that by having Settlers take two population, which makes it harder to build new cities."

You can also automate your Workers to build improvements for a specific city, so you don't have to babysit them every turn. In fact, you can automate the whole city if you want to, via the new "Governor" feature. "You can have the Governor manage citizens, which will handle all civil disorder. That doesn't mean it won't occur, but he'll handle it when it does occur. You can also have them emphasize shields, food, or trade, so he tries to optimize for one of those three things. Or you can have them manage all your production, and maybe tell them not to build Wonders or Small Wonders."

Hey, buddy—wanna buy some horses?

Sometimes you may end up with more resources than you need, or maybe you have one of a resource that you don't want at all. Why not trade it to a neighbor?

"Gone are caravans," says Briggs with a bit of distaste. "The way you trade now is you actually have to have *things* to trade, and you get things to trade from the map itself. So I have Horses here, and I could trade those Horses for technology. But I have to have a road (or rail, or harbor) connecting my capital to their capital."

Trade is now a part of the diplomacy interface. When you contact another tribe, you get a "table" with a list of things that you can offer and a list of things that you can ask for. You can put your Horse resource on the table and offer to let a neighboring tribe use it for a set number of turns, during which time you will not be able to use it yourself (unless you have an extra Horse resource, or you later break the deal—a major diplomatic faux pas). In exchange you can ask them for nearly anything: another resource, map information, technology, gold, cities... you can even ask them what they would prefer to offer you in exchange for your Horse.

Small wonder

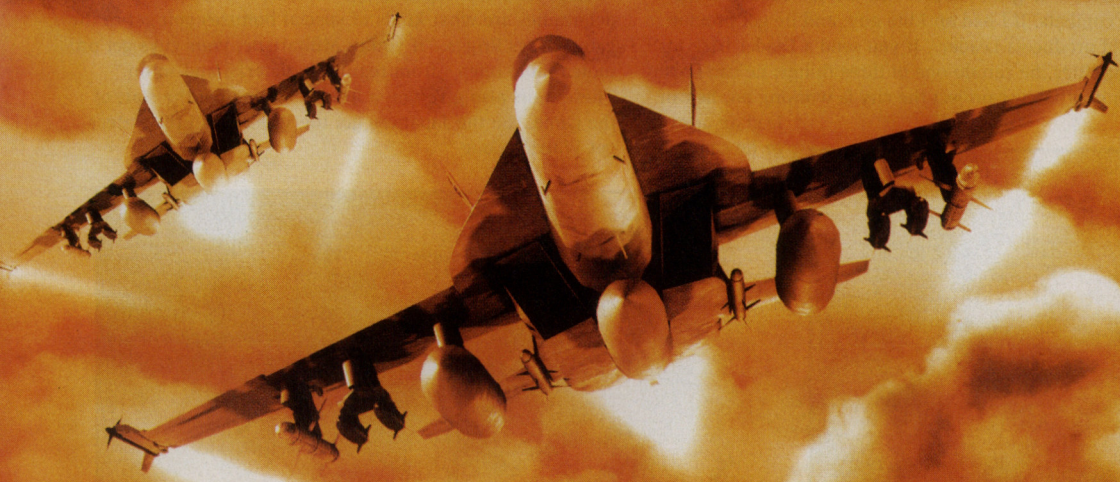
Most of the Wonders of the World remain unchanged, but Small Wonders are a completely new concept. Unlike the regular Wonders of the World, which are limited to one of each type per game, Small Wonders are only limited to one per tribe. "All the Small Wonders become available not from research, but from game states," explains Briggs. "For example, the Heroic Epic becomes available to build when you've made your first Leader. Ironworks is a Small Wonder, and you can build that in a city that has both Coal and Iron within its radius."

"The way you trade now is you actually have to have *things* to trade, and you get things to trade from the map itself."

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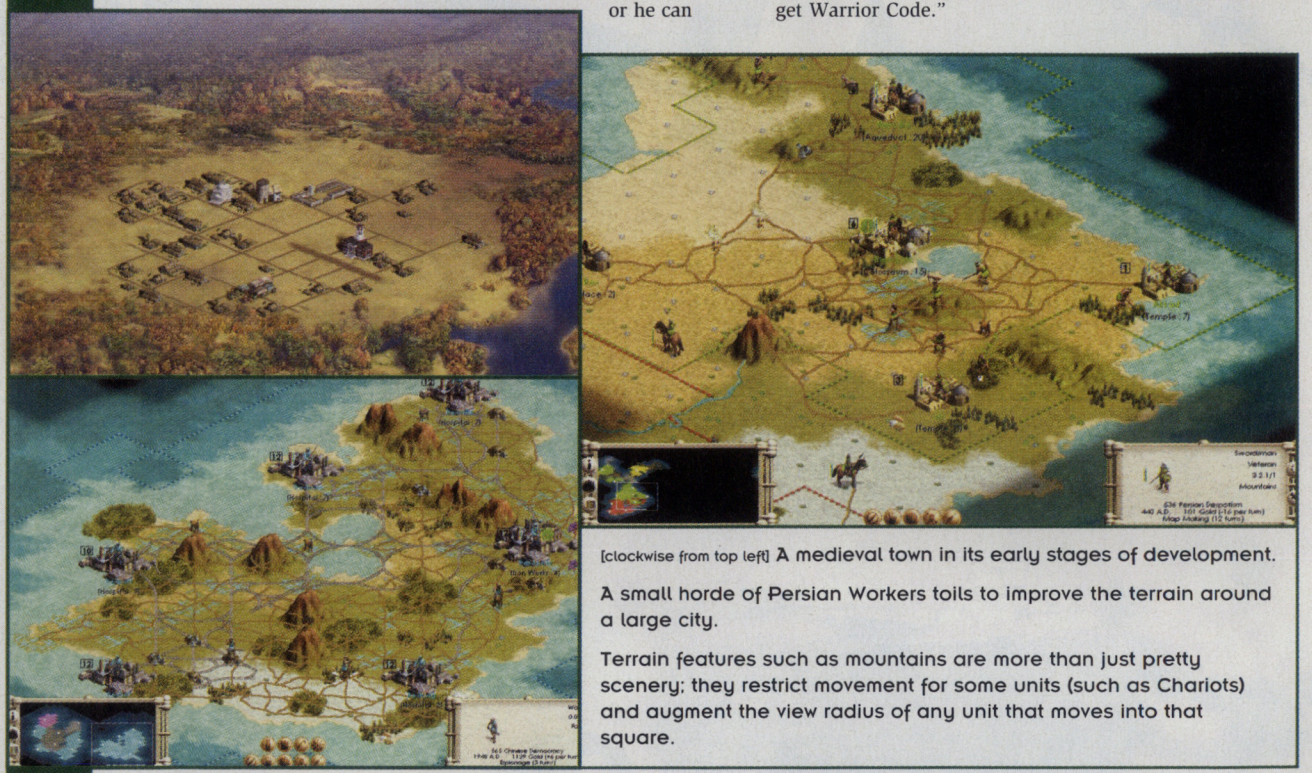
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Leaders are a new type of military unit that act as a sort of transport for other military units and make combat, well, pretty much completely unlike combat in past *Civilization* games. They have ditched concepts such as the unit zone of control in favor of different game mechanics, such as restricting enemy units from using roads and rail systems within your borders. "In *Civilization II*, if you attacked a stack and you defeated the best guy in the stack, they all died," Briggs grins. "Not any more. You have to defeat them one by one. One thing you can do is build an army. The way you build an army is you have to get a Leader, and you get Leaders from successful combats. If I had an Elite guy, and he got promoted, it would produce a Leader." If you send a Leader back to one of your cities, he can do one of three things: he can finish production of whatever project the city is working on, he can lead an army, or he can build a Military Academy that allows the city to produce armies that don't require Leaders. "It's like 'teach a man to fish…' that kind of thing," says Briggs.



[clockwise from top left] A medieval town in its early stages of development.

A small horde of Persian Workers toils to improve the terrain around a large city.

Terrain features such as mountains are more than just pretty scenery; they restrict movement for some units (such as Chariots) and augment the view radius of any unit that moves into that square.

A regular stack of units fights one unit at a time, strongest unit first. An army lets all the units jump into the fray. "When it attacks, the first guy attacks until he's about to die, then the next guy stands up and attacks until he's about to die… Armies are really powerful, because you can do a lot of damage all at once." So a stack of Musketeers facing an army of Musketeers of equal size would almost certainly lose. Not that you'd ever see two stacks of Musketeers fighting it out, since only the French can build Musketeers.

Wait a minute... why is that?

Musketeers are a special, civilization-specific unit; every tribe has one. Only the Romans can build Legions, only the Russians can build Cossacks, and only the Germans can build Panzers. The age in which you get your special unit varies depending on your tribe. Persians get their Bowmen in the classical age, whereas the Americans don't get their F-15s until the modern age. It's all part of an effort to provide a greater distinction between the game's tribes. And yes, those "ages" are hard coded into the game. The entire tech tree is broken down into four different ages, reflecting the classical, medieval, industrial, and modern eras. When researching new advances, you need to complete certain prerequisites within one age before you can research any advances in the next.

Each tribe also starts the game with two traits. "What this determines are what kinds of special bonuses you get in the game," says Briggs. "If you're Militaristic, your guys get promoted more often—from regular to veteran and so on." These traits also give you a free technology at the start of the game. "So the Japanese get the Wheel, and the Aztecs get Warrior Code."

The big picture

"It's hard, when you're in the midst of development—when you're right *in* it—to see what a cool thing you're making," Briggs admits. "A couple of days ago one of the programmers wrote an email to all of us and said 'I was in here at ten o'clock at night, and I was just going to try to track down this one bug, and I started playing the game and then it was four o'clock in the morning. I totally lost track of what I was doing. Sorry about that.'"

That is a scenario that every *Civilization* veteran is familiar with, even if many of the new game mechanics represent unexplored territory. If that's indicative of what *Civilization III* has to offer, then good things lie ahead for fans of strategy games. "Right now when I look at the game, all I see are the problems, the things that aren't done yet," says Briggs. "But I do go home at night and play it. It's a lot of fun." ●

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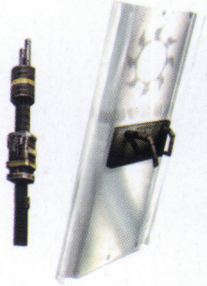
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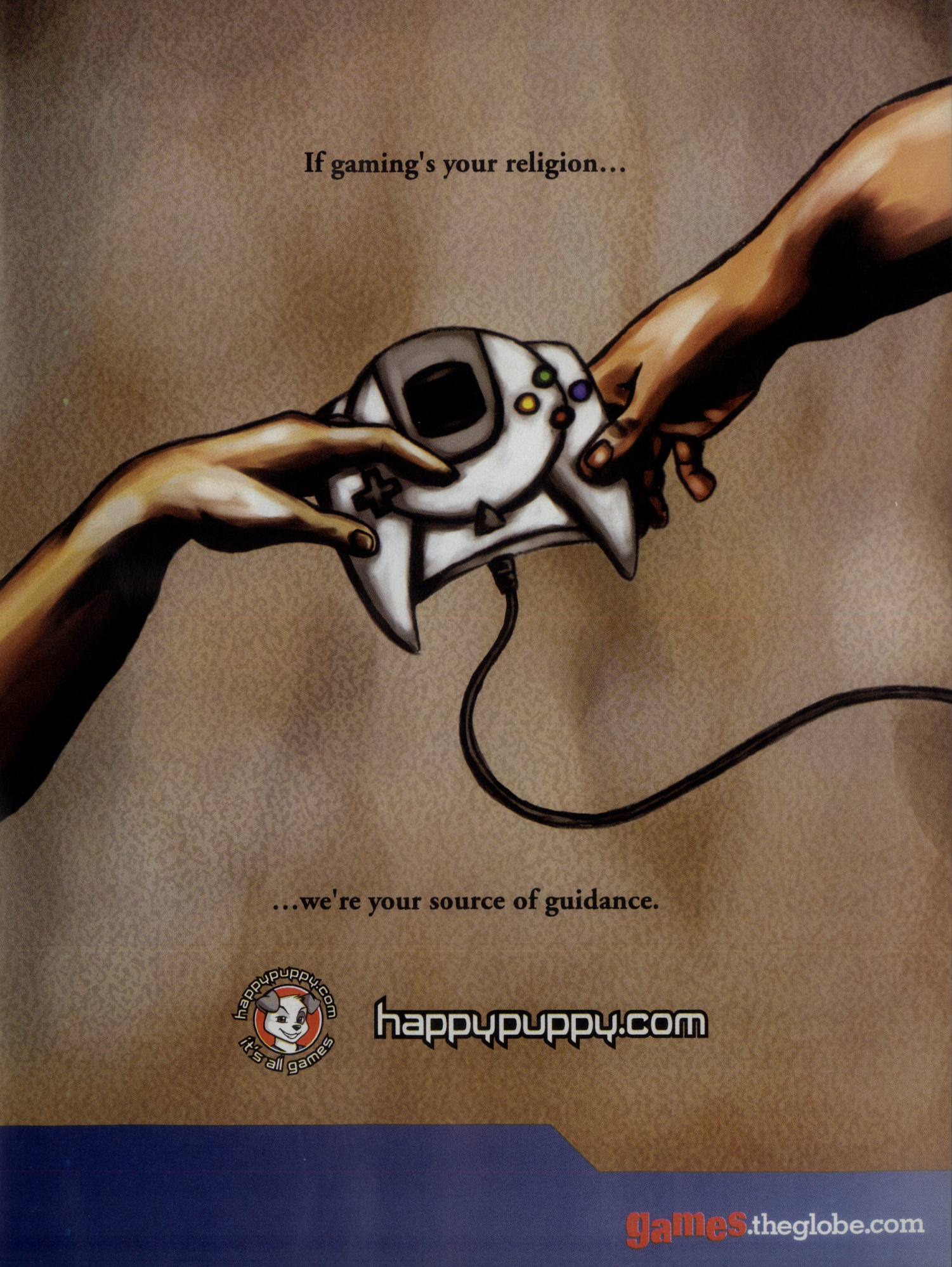
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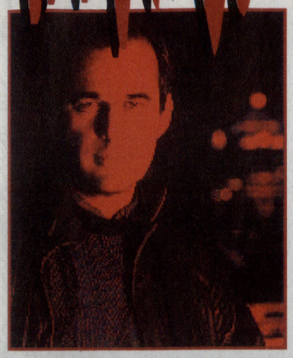

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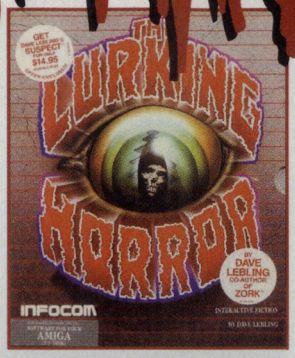
GAMES THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

John Saul and Simon Woodroffe on why games scare us

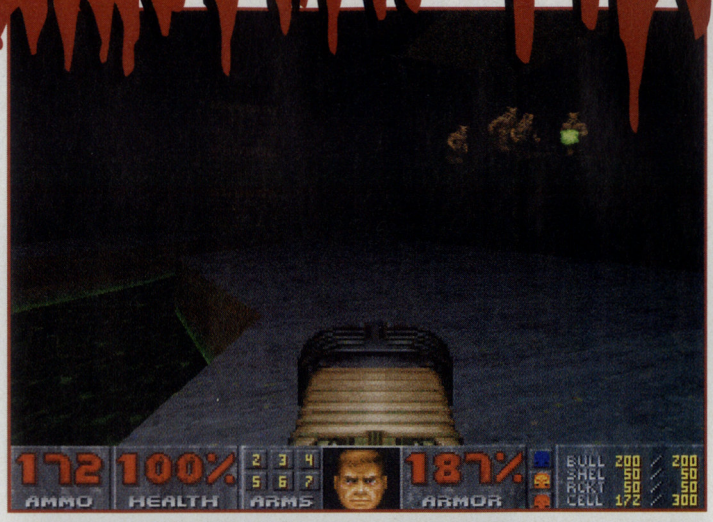
by Benjamin E. Sones

John Saul is hesitant to embrace the word horror. "I don't really consider myself a horror writer," he explains. "There's difference between tension and horror. Tension I love. I love trying to slowly ratchet up the tension so the reader can't stop reading, and when they finally get the payoff it's a good payoff." Saul also collaborated on a PC game with Legend Entertainment's Bob Bates—*The Blackstone Chronicles*—back in 1996. He's done a lot of thinking about what makes people scared, both in books and in games.





John Saul collaborated on the Legend Entertainment title The Blackstone Chronicles. His most recent book is The Manhattan Hunt Club; The Lurking Horror is a classic example of a simple principle: the things that frighten you most come from your own imagination.



Prior to Doom, no title had effectively conveyed the feeling that you were actually in the game.

Simon Woodroffe has spent a lot of time thinking about what scares us as well. He's currently working on a game of his own for Headfirst Productions, *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth*. He's less touchy than Saul on the subject of horror, though he agrees on the value of tension. "The first is kind of the shock type of horror, which is kind of cheap. If I open a cupboard and a guy jumps out of it... that will scare people. Then there's this gradual building up of tension. In Lovecraft's style he never shows you everything that's going on; you see monsters in the distance, there are vague hints that something nasty is going on." Horror games for the computer are rare, and good ones even more so. The reason is simple: good horror, like good comedy, is difficult to pull off. So why do some games scare us, while other games don't? Grab a shovel, unearth a few graves, and find out...

The Lurking Horror (1987)

This text adventure by Infocom is a classic example of a simple principle: the things that frighten you most come from your own imagination. "It's interesting to go back and talk to people about *Zork* all these many years later and hear them describe the cathedral," says Saul. "They will give incredible descriptions, and all they were doing was looking at a blank screen. They've completely forgotten that it was nothing but text, and just enough to cue you. That's one of the reasons it succeeded so wonderfully—because it all took place in your mind."

The Lurking Horror used the same trick with a different motive: to scare you. Everything in the gameworld was conveyed through text—often a very small amount of text—leaving your imagination to conjure up the specifics. Like Woodroffe's game, *The Lurking Horror* is loosely based on the works of H. P. Lovecraft. You play a student at George Underwood Edwards University, pulling an all-nighter at the campus computer center to finish a term paper. A blizzard snows you in, and you find yourself trapped in a series of buildings, alone. Well, not entirely alone.

From there the game slowly builds up the tension, giving you only glimpses of what is really going on and leaving you to imagine the rest. "If you cue someone's imagination," explains Saul, "they will always come up with something far scarier than you can, because they come up with what scares *them*."

Doom (1993)

Perhaps the most unusual example of tension in games is id's landmark shooter, *Doom*. It's unusual because it's not technically even horror, but rather a fast-paced game of frantic combat. Still, few people would argue that the game wasn't scary, and there are several good reasons why.

One is immersion—prior to *Doom*, no game had conveyed the feeling that you were actually *in* the game that effectively. The game was first person, full screen, and real-time. More so than any game in the past, *Doom* convinced you that what was happening in the game was happening to you.

Another reason is atmosphere. All good horror games get considerable mileage merely out of creating the right mood. "I think the key to it is the set," says Woodroffe. "Make the atmosphere so all-encompassing that there's no way they're going to find what you're doing funny. The immersion factor is really important."

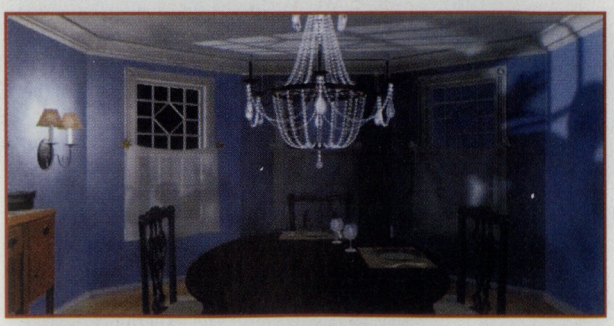
Amber: Journeys Beyond (1996)

This independently developed adventure game from Hue Forest proves that it doesn't take a big budget to scare players—it just takes skill. "I suspect there's one word that covers it all," Saul explains. "Mood. If you cast the right mood, you scare people half to death. If you put people into an environment that is foreboding, they will scare themselves to pieces wondering what's there. That's why an empty house is much scarier than a house in which there's actually something going on. In an empty house your imagination takes over."

Amber is an empty house story. Not a campy cartoon house like *Phantasmagoria* [see sidebar], but just a regular old house that manages to be all the more scary for its familiarity. Much of the gameplay early on focuses on mundane tasks, such as finding the breaker switch to turn on the power. Alone and fumbling through a dark house in the woods, your imagination starts working overtime. By the time strange things actually do start happening, you are already terrified.

Thief: The Dark Project (1998)

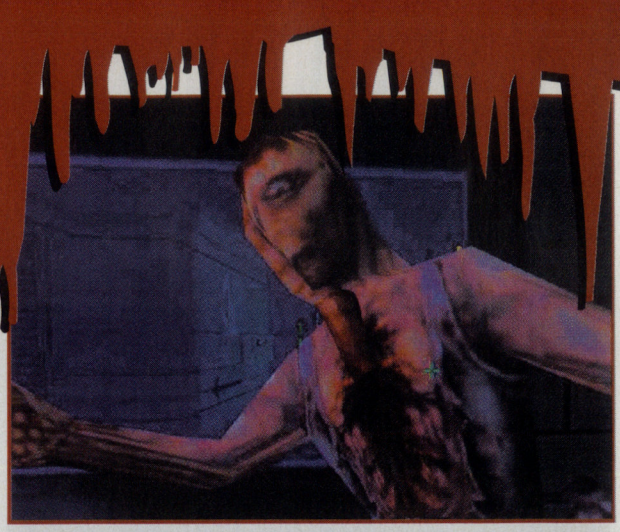
Carefully controlled pacing is difficult to do in an interactive environment. Alfred Hitchcock used to say that if you put a bomb under a table and let it explode, that's just a surprise. Show the



Amber: Journeys Beyond proves that it doesn't take a big budget to scare players—it just takes skill.



Thief: The Dark Project: "You can really ratchet up tension by not having anything around some corners."



System Shock 2: "Sound, of course, is absolutely essential to creating [a tense] atmosphere."

viewer the bomb, however, and then follow the conversation of the unsuspecting people sitting at the table, and you have created suspense. In a game, however, the player is the person at the table. How do you show them the bomb?

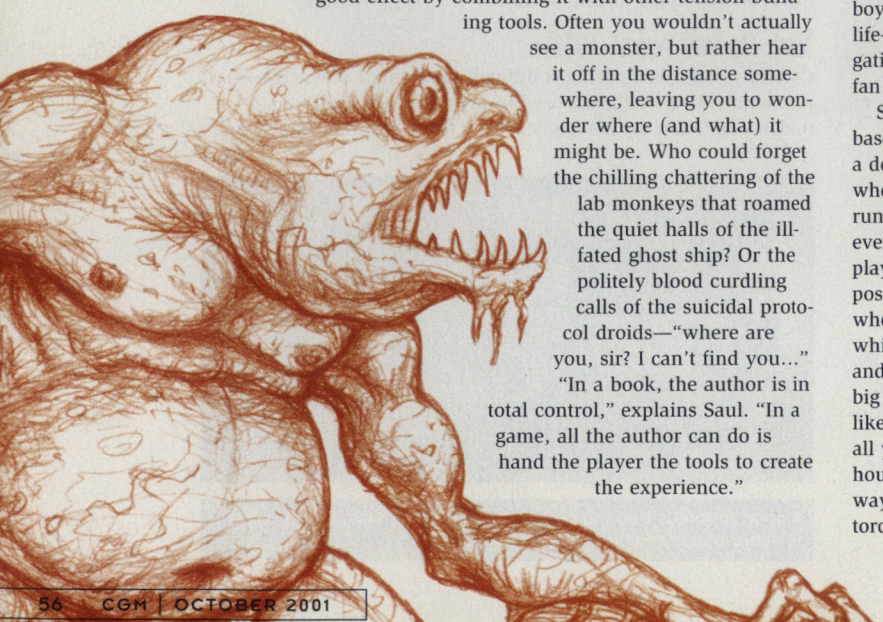
"The bomb is assumed," says Saul. Players expect a new surprise around every corner, and a clever game developer can play off those assumptions. "They say the best way to train a dog is not to reward him every time he does something right," Saul continues, "but maybe to reward him every other time, or every third time, or randomly reward him when he does something right. So you can really ratchet up tension by *not* having anything around some corners."

Looking Glass Studios' fantasy thriller *Thief: The Dark Project* is an example of how effective this style of pacing can be. Unlike most first-person games, much of the experience involves avoiding combat, rather than seeking it out. You spend so much time hiding in the shadows, close enough to a guard or a monster to reach out and touch it, wondering whether or not it's going to notice you. It's also quite possibly the most tension-filled game ever made.

System Shock 2 (1999)

"Sound, of course, is absolutely essential to creating [a tense] atmosphere," says Woodroffe. "In fact it's almost more important than graphics. In the typical horror game you spend a lot of time in the dark with a flashlight, or a lantern."

Irrational Games' *System Shock 2* used sound to enormously good effect by combining it with other tension-building tools. Often you wouldn't actually see a monster, but rather hear it off in the distance somewhere, leaving you to wonder where (and what) it might be. Who could forget the chilling chattering of the lab monkeys that roamed the quiet halls of the ill-fated ghost ship? Or the politely blood curdling calls of the suicidal protocol droids—"where are you, sir? I can't find you..." "In a book, the author is in total control," explains Saul. "In a game, all the author can do is hand the player the tools to create the experience."



Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth (2002)

Woodroffe's current project is currently scheduled for an early 2002 release. "We came up with the idea that it should be in first person," he explains, "which apparently confused a lot of people because everyone thinks it's a shoot-'em-up, which it isn't. There is action in it, and we do shoot things occasionally, but it's not primarily a shoot-'em-up, it's a survival horror game based on the Chaosium role-playing game and the works of H. P. Lovecraft."

Combat actually plays a relatively minimal role. There are a few weapons in the game, and in keeping with the Lovecraftian mythos there are more than a few monsters. But weapons aren't effective against everything in Lovecraft's world, and you won't see the monsters right away. "They won't be running down the streets in packs of ten, and you mowing them down with a howitzer," Woodroffe laughs. "It's a very subtle thing. You don't even see one of the full bad guys until maybe halfway through the game." Instead you see shadows of monsters, or what might be monsters. You see unsettling things out of the corner of your eye. Like all effective horror games in the past, it's all about creating tension though mood, rather than merely shocks and surprises. "Lovecraft was one of the first people to use this tool in his books. He never gave you all the details, because what he knew—and it's the same thing we've done—is that the scariest stuff happens in your own head."

Like most good Lovecraft stories, *Dark Corners of the Earth* plays out a bit like a mystery. Your character, Jack Walters, is a private investigator looking into the disappearance of a young boy. He also happens to be missing several years of his own life—the result of amnesia—that he wants to recover. His investigation takes him to the town of Innsmouth, and as any Lovecraft fan might guess, that's where things start to go wrong.

Some of the obstacles that you'll face will be puzzles, mostly based on the environment. "It's very trivial, for example, to open a door with a key," Woodroffe explains. "But it's not so trivial when there's a monster coming behind you." Even when you do run into mythos creatures, fighting may not be the best tactic, or even a viable one. Woodroffe contends that he wants to teach players early on that fighting is not the only answer. Stealth is a possibility, and running always has its merits. "There's a scene where you are being chased through the town of Innsmouth, which is where much of the game takes place near the beginning, and you are being chased across the rooftops of buildings by a big packs of hybrids, which are stock level one monsters, if you like. They are armed, and you aren't, so you are running—that's all you can do, really. You'll drop through a ceiling into a warehouse, and every door is locked and there doesn't seem to be a way out. Suddenly you hear a battering at the door, and these torches are shining through the window as they try to see you.



Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth: Is he friendly? Probably not.



Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth: A game model for a Deep One, complete with Big Pointy Teeth.

Your objective will be to quickly work out a good enough hiding place. When they do break in, you'll be hiding under the floor in a cavity. You'll see them walking around overhead, shining their torches through the floor trying to find you."

Insanity also plays a strong role in the game, not merely as a mechanic, but as yet another way to ratchet up the tension. The more Jack learns about the mythos, the more tenuous his grasp on reality becomes. He'll start to hear faint whispers, see things that aren't really there... the game won't tell you how far gone you really are, so eventually you won't be able to tell what's real and what isn't.

Most Lovecraft stories end badly, and *Dark Corners of the Earth* is no exception. "The intro is the ending, if you will," says Woodroffe, "so the first thing you see is your character hanging himself in an insane asylum." You will have to play the game to learn how Jack came to such a pass... but are you sure you want to know? ●

TRUE HORROR STORIES

For every horror game that got it right, there have been two or three that missed the mark entirely. And a horror game that fails to be frightening is a bit like a comedy that fails to be funny...

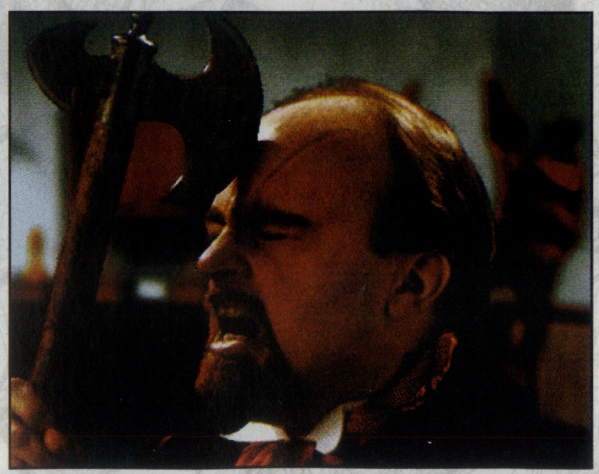
Phantasmagoria (1995)

Roberta Williams' seven-disc horror epic killed its own tension in so many ways that it's difficult to pin its failure on just one thing. The setting—a stock spooky haunted house—was so overdone it bordered on cartoonish. The story was campy, and the writing and acting was a notch below embarrassing. Perhaps the game's gravest offense, however, was in providing a weak protagonist with muddled motives and little real personality. It's tough to feel scared when you don't really care whether your in-game persona lives or dies.



Harvester (1996)

This schlock gore fest from Merit Studios is perhaps the best example of a principle that other horror developers should learn from: blood isn't scary. "I've never been one to really dwell on really bloodthirsty scenes of all kinds of gore," confides John Saul, "chopping people up in great detail; I don't like that sort of thing." Simon Woodroffe agrees that this sort of tactic is a remarkably ineffective method for producing tension. "One of the things you have to do in order to make the player more receptive to a horrible situation... you can't have a situation that's gory, for example, and it makes you laugh. Because players do tend to laugh at gore."



MARCHING THROUGH GEORGIA

Ghost Recon puts you in the middle of a new Russian revolution

by Robert Mayer

RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT'S newest tactical shooter had a brutally simple beginning. "We were," lead designer Brian Upton sighs, "sick of rescuing hostages." Despite the commercial and critical success of the *Rainbow Six* games, Upton and the other designers at the Raleigh, North Carolina-based developer wanted to try something a bit different. Something more visceral, with less detailed planning and more on-the-fly decision-making. Something that keeps the real-world grounding of *Rogue Spear* but in a setting more conducive to straightforward mayhem.

Something like *Ghost Recon*. Set in the near future, the game puts you in command of team of the US Army's best Special Forces soldiers. Your missions include destroying bridges, ambushing tanks, rescuing UN peacekeepers, and recovering downed pilots from bands of ruthless rebels—in short, shooting people and blowing things up. No worries about collateral damage, no legal wrangling, just sheer, unadulterated military power, applied in a very personal manner. According to Upton, it's about as realistic as *Rogue Spear* only without the detailed mission planning.

AN ARMY OF ONE...OR SIX

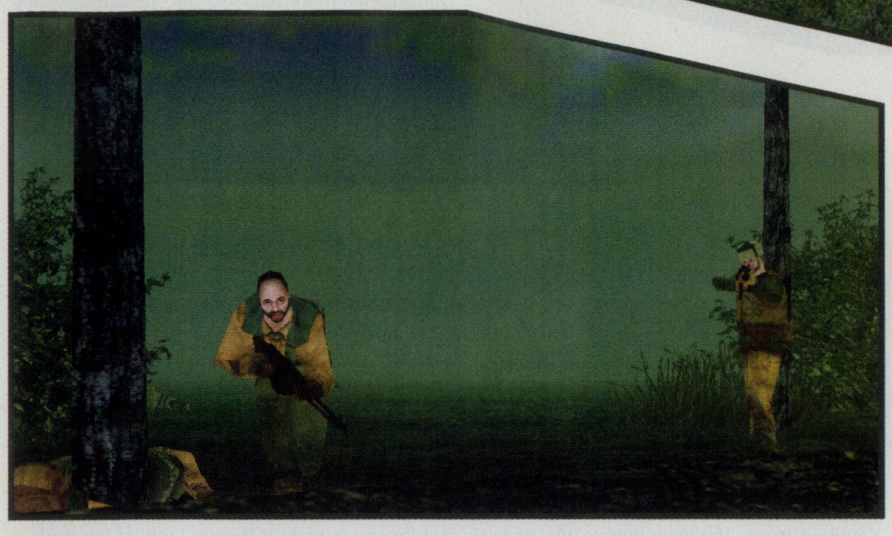
In the single-player campaign, you'll lead a team of six soldiers chosen from a pool of available troopers. Each man or woman has a set of statistics governing his or her performance in the game. The Weapon skill determines how well soldiers shoot, Stealth regulates how sneaky they are, Endurance covers the effects of wounds and damage, and Leadership affects the overall abilities of the squad. "You'll see a huge difference between a Level 8 Weapons guy and a Level 1 Weapons guy," notes Associate Producer Robbie Edwards, with the former hitting more often and at longer range than the latter. There are also Specialist soldiers, he points out, including Heavy Weapons, Demolition, and Sniper characters. These additions to your force pool are the only ones capable of using their signature weapons, and you'll be able to unlock them as you progress through the campaign.

Unlike *Rogue Spear*, *Ghost Recon* doesn't have a complex mission planning system. Instead, you choose your soldiers, divide them up into three teams, and go. During play, you simply access the command map and give each team its orders. These are streamlined into two types, movement and combat, and there are only three possible orders for each category. You can have your teams hold in place, advance, or advance at all costs, ignoring the enemy. For combat orders, you essentially set the rules of engagement. The Recon setting is best for stealth, as your forces will only fire if fired upon. An Assault order allows your team to fire at will, while Suppression directs them to pour fire on a designated area regardless of anything else. You'll be able to save at any time as well, because with each mission lasting upwards of 45 minutes



A Georgian rebel takes aim.

They're coming to take you away, ha ha, ho ho...



Paybacks are hell.



once you know the ropes, Upton doesn't think players will relish repeating the first half-hour a dozen times.

You can switch freely between team members during a mission, and you'll still be able to give orders no matter which soldier you possess. There's no way to give specific orders to individuals, except by taking full control of that person—the emphasis is on rapid battlefield decision making, not micromanagement.

HAND GRENADES AND HORSESHOES

One intended consequence of the game's appreciation of "close enough for government work" is the increased value of non-sniper weapons in the game. All too often in real-world shooters, the sniper rifle has a grossly unrealistic advantage over the more common but less optically gifted firearms that make up the bulk of any army's arsenal. Here, the sniper is a special purpose tool, vital for certain tasks but not your choice for assaulting an enemy position. Take control of the sniper and you'll get the benefit of a "super zoom" simulating the telescopic sight, but your targeting reticle will be super slow as well, and while zoomed in, your peripheral vision will be severely limited. Your rate of fire, too, will suffer. More importantly perhaps, the enemy will react to a sniper differently than to a rifleman, notes Edwards. "If a group of enemies takes sniper fire, they'll fan out and search aggressively for the sniper," he says. The very same group might go to ground if they take a burst or two of assault rifle rounds, or worse, a stream of lead from the SAW light machine gun.



On patrol in the high grass.

If you want to use the SAW, though—or the sniper rifles, the AT4 antitank rocket, or any of the other specialist weapons—you'll have to take over the soldiers using them. In a concession to gameplay, you won't be able to pick up the weapons of fallen comrades, or the enemy. According to the games Producer, Darren Chukitis, real life commandos don't dally in enemy weaponry. "Anything that isn't planned for and rehearsed, they don't do," he says, based on his meetings at Fort Bragg with real American Special Forces types. As for picking up your own gear from casualties, that would pretty much invalidate the entire Specialist system in the game. If everyone could use the AT4, for example, you would have little incentive to keep the Demolitions specialist alive. Again the desire to keep you from regarding your team as just a reservoir of extra lives comes to the fore, a theme the entire *Ghost Recon* team adheres to vigorously. Virtually all of them played the *Rainbow Six* games that way, and apparently weren't too satisfied with the results.

GRAPHIC VIOLENCE

Your team will have plenty of opportunities to display its skills in the single-player campaign. Spanning 15 missions ("and they're long missions," notes Upton) and eight or nine months, the campaign starts in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia where the Russians are putting down a rebellion. It then winds its way through the former Soviet Union to its finale in...well, let's just say the denouement takes place in a blizzard, in a major city, and around some very famous landmarks. Along the way you'll get the chance to fight in all types of weather, in daytime and at night, and in rural, village, and urban areas. The team is still adjusting how far you'll be able to see, balancing framerate against realism and the need to provide tactical options with the bur-

These guys are not auditioning for the Bolshoi.



den of filling up all that space with visible, meaningful objects. The single player maps represent about 400 by 400 meters, not large by *Delta Force* standards perhaps, but much, much more detailed.

Indeed the art effort on this project, the largest Red Storm has ever attempted, is impressive. John Sonedecker oversees the main level design effort, and the nine people under his tutelage work on an assembly line schedule. Every few weeks, the team turns out two or three completed levels, ready for testing. That effort includes texturing work by artists like Suzanne Meiler, who says she does "a little bit of everything" on the project, including converting photographs into game textures. As she sorts through a stack of pictures of Russian buildings, taken by a Red Storm staffer who's married to a Russian, she is polishing up the window moldings of an elaborate building façade for the game's final level. "We use what ever looks best," she says, and shows some of the building's she's working on.

And the buildings do look good, whether they're ruined farmhouses in Georgia or storefronts in Russia proper. All the textures look excellent, from the roadways to the telegraph poles, and even the trees, long a bane of outdoor 3D graphics in shooters, look pretty authentic. Trees offer good concealment, and even cover, as the game's penetration model doesn't allow for bullets to plow through the pines. They'll go through leaves, but not trunks," says Edwards, who also notes that canvas tents will provide no protection against bullets. Neither will people, as Ghost Recon retains Rogue Spear's ability to have bullets pierce multiple human targets. Buildings of course will offer good protection, though explosions on one side of a wall can cause injuries to people on the other side, even though you won't be able to blow holes in things.

Another area where Red Storm is going all out is in character animation. It's commonplace to use motion capture to make in-game movements more realistic, but the Ghost Recon team seems to have a more than usually firm grasp of what works in a game like this. With what motion capture artist Steve Wasoff swears is "2757 seconds of MoCap,"—a number supported by notes scribbled on the office whiteboard—the team has been able to put together some very impressive animations. Not only do the Hollywood-friendly death and wound animations work well, but the mundane walking, crawling, and slithering that characters do most of the time looks excellent, and convincingly natural. When combined with Eric Armstrong's 3D modeling skills and Chris Wells' facial textures, the results are impressive: a large group of distinct, realistic, and attractive characters, who move and act like you'd expect.

THE MORE THE MERRIER

If the AI characters don't cut it for you, there are always humans, and Ghost Recon will offer an assortment of multiplayer options, including cooperative play. You'll be able to play through the entire campaign with up to eight other players simultaneously, each of you controlling a soldier. While wounds and skill levels won't carry over, Upton figures that won't matter much—after all, with humans playing the soldiers, it's your skills that will make the difference. Beyond co-op, you'll be able to play all fifteen of the solo maps in other multiplayer modes, in addition to an as yet undetermined number of multiplayer-only levels. Under the direction of Mike Haynes, three people are working exclusively on multiplayer missions for the game, a luxury that Red Storm didn't have with its earlier titles. Using flow charts drafted by multiplayer map designer Yongha Hwang, the team figures out the basic multiplayer dynamics they're looking for, and then builds the level to reflect them.

The multiplayer maps should have a lot of variety, and gameplay should be very different from most squad-based tactical shooters, in that each player will be commanding a team, not just one warrior. The game will probably support up to nine players and four teams, and as with the single player game the goal here is to get you to use your AI controlled soldiers as something more than refills. The mechanics of the game are such that, unless you're cheating, you won't win many one-on-four match-ups, even against AI enemies, so moving with your computer-controlled teammates will be important. Balance is an issue, too. As Ray Tylak, the lead multiplayer map designer notes, sniping is an important part of the game, but one that causes design problems. "Every area where you have an advantage, you have to have a disadvantage, too," he admits, as he demonstrates some attractive but by no means impregnable sniper positions. He's trying to design the maps so that any place a sniper has a great view of the terrain, the sniper's back will be exposed—yet another reason for teamwork.

GIVING UP THE GHOST

There really isn't a US Army group called Ghost Recon, but the eponymous game may actually end up being a fairly realistic simulation of near-future infantry combat. As complex as some of its components seem, it's a very simple game at heart, something that Red Storm's Director of Game Design Kevin Perry thinks is a good thing.

"If you can't do it well, don't do it," he says. It's an infantry sim, pure and simple, and its appeal lies not in the novelty of its concept, but in the potential of its execution. All the parts are there, and Red Storm's experience with the *Rainbow Six* series bodes well for this more visceral spin-off. ●



Better muddy than dead.



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TECHNICALITIES

change is good

So why do we resist it?

Raise your hand if you're the type of gamer who goes to the "controls" menu and changes everything before you play the game. I consider myself part of that group too. Why do we do that? Why must we make the controls for every game just like all the old controls we're familiar with in other games, without even giving the designer's original scheme a chance? For some reason, many gamers just fear change. It goes far beyond controls—we're skeptical of new ideas that are contrary to what we're already familiar with. For many, the only time change is exciting is when it has nothing to do with anything we've ever seen or done before. It's easy to look at *The Sims* and find it interesting, but if somebody screws with the mid-air control in our shooters or the accuracy rating of our favorite *Counter-Strike* weapon, we throw a fit.

Perhaps discussing game controls is a bad example. After all, I'm convinced after a lifetime of playing games that maybe 1% of the game developers out there actually perform true focus group testing in the one area it matters most—the interface between player and game. Let's talk about other interfaces instead. When a new version of Windows comes out, enthusiast-gamer-types often upgrade and promptly change almost every default setting in the interface to the "old way." Hidden file extensions? Turn that off. Web view? Gone. Personalized menus? Outta here. We see these things and decide we hate them inside of five minutes. It's too bad we can't be bothered to try out interface changes—in games or anywhere else—for a good week before making any changes of our own. Sure, we'd probably alter a few things, but I bet we'd be surprised at how much of the hateful new interface was actually better.

> "To what extent should the game conform to us, and how hard should we try to conform to the game?"

I've started to look at my game-playing habits and discovered this disturbing fear of change in many other areas, too. If I'm used to the standard technology-tree building format for a real-time strategy game, am I going to be frustrated and annoyed with one that does it a bit differently? Am I going to dislike any game that does something I think is good, but doesn't do it exactly the way I'm already used to? You would think that the seasoned veterans of gaming would be most excited about developers trying something new, but instead we're often just jaded, stodgy old farts who claim to know what we'll like before we try it. It's like how my parents react to sushi—they weren't exposed to it all through their youth, so they consider raw fish disgusting. But they'll happily suck down a dozen raw oysters (I don't get it either). To what extent should the game conform to us, and how hard should we try to conform to the game?

Windows XP introduces quite a few interface changes; some subtle and some quite overt. As I start to use the new OS regularly, I'm forcing myself to use things as they are. And you know what? I like it. I used to hate how Windows considers My Documents the hub, placing everything that I make or download there. Now I'm embracing it. I've created a few subfolders there for downloads, music, videos, temporary files, and so on, but it all starts at My Documents. I only changed the name ("My Documents" is just so... Mary Poppins). It was annoying at first, but now that I stuck it out, I like the organization of it.

As I tiptoe on the submissive side of computing, I'm finding a lot of value in the meaning of the word "default." Once you become accustomed to them, it's less aggravating to use defaults than it is to circumvent them. It's kind of like Taoist computing: like a cork on the water, the harder you push your computer, the harder it pushes back. I'm also discovering the importance of choosing good default settings, because the average user doesn't know or care to change them.

Next time I hear about some developer trying to make a few changes to the established formula, I'm going to cut them some slack. I think I'll make a very belated New Year's Resolution to give interface, design, and game balance changes a truly fair chance before condemning them. I'm sure I won't like everything I come across, or even half of it. I'm also fairly certain that I'll discover a few things I could never have lived without.

Okay, you can put your hand down now— you look stupid reading a magazine with your hand in the air. ●

TIP OF THE MONTH

Print a System Inventory — Ever wanted a printout of all your devices and the DMA and IRQ settings they use? It's easy to create: just right-click My Computer, choose Properties, and select the Device Manager tab. When you click the Print button at the bottom, you'll have the option of printing a brief system summary or a more thorough list of all devices as well. It's simple, but it can come in handy next time you have to call tech support.

send questions to qa@cgonline.com

Q: In September I'm going to be heading to college, and I'm looking at new computers. Of course, I want to be able to get the schoolwork done, but I'd also like to have a system that I can play games on. What would you recommend for a system that will last me four years that I'll still be able to play games on, without having to totally overhaul my system. Being affordable would also be a plus.

A: *Four years?* You want an *affordable* system that'll be good for gaming for *four years?* Four years ago, the absolute state-of-the-art was a 300 MHz Pentium II, and if you had 32MB of RAM you were in great shape. There's no system around today that you could buy, at any price, which will even meet the minimum system requirements for games in 2005. Not even close. If you're concerned about longevity, I recommend buying the absolute fastest thing you can find with the most memory, biggest hard drive, and fastest video card. At this moment, that's a 1.7 GHz Pentium 4 or 1.4 GHz Athlon with 512 MB of RAM and at least a 60 GB hard drive with a GeForce 3 graphics card. A setup like that is going to be very pricey, but it'll last the longest before needing an upgrade.

Personally, I'd recommend committing yourself to an upgrade in a couple years and go for something a little less over-the-top right now. For $1500, you can get a very good 1 GHz or better CPU, 256 MB of RAM, a sizeable hard drive and a really nice graphics card.

Q: I have an Abit BH6 PII motherboard. I don't know if it's copper-mined (I don't know if this is the correct term, but it's something along those lines) and I can't find the technical support for it. It says that it is part No: MN-130-2A3-31. What I would like to know is can I get a faster CPU like a Pentium 4 (I currently have a 333 Celeron).

Ilija M.

A: The Pentium 4 uses a drastically different bus architecture than the Pentium 2 or Pentium 3, and there are no motherboards made that will accept both a Pentium 2/3/Celeron and a P4.

"Coppermine" was Intel's code name for the newer version of the Pentium III, the one made with a .18 micron manufacturing process. It really doesn't have all that much to do with a motherboard—at least not in the way you mean.

The Abit BH6 is a motherboard that uses Intel's old "Slot" configuration for CPUs. Starting with the later Pentium III models well over a year ago, Intel moved away from putting processors in cartridges that plug into a slot and back to plugging processors directly into a socket on the motherboard.

So there's good news and bad news. The good news is your motherboard *does* support up to a Pentium III at 700 MHz, and that should only cost a little more than $100. The bad news is you'll have to find a "slot 1" version, instead of the "FCPGA" version. FCPGA is the version that plugs directly into your motherboard, rather than the cartridge that plugs into a slot on your motherboard. Those Slot 1 Pentium 3 chips are still out there, though, and they shouldn't be too hard to find if you shop around online.

Q: What type of file is the normal music on CD called and how do you convert MP3s to that type?

Andy S.

A: Regular CD audio is commonly referred to as "Redbook audio" and it's essentially an uncompressed 16-bit, 44.1 KHz stereo digital recording. Fortunately, standard .wav files are also just raw uncompressed sound, so all you have to do to make a CD audio file out of an MP3 (or any other audio file) is convert it to a 16-bit, 44.1 KHz stereo .wav. There are many utilities that can do this, but some of the new MP3 software makes it even easier. Programs like MusicMatch Jukebox (www.musicmatch.com) let you select audio files from your hard disk and drag them straight to a CD. If you want to do it by hand, just convert any MP3 to a .wav file (the "disk output" option of popular MP3 players is the place to look) and when you have your .wav files all ready, just copy them to a blank CD in the order you choose with whatever CD burning software you've got. Make sure to close the disc, or some CD players might have trouble reading it.

TECHBYTES

Microsoft in court—The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit upheld judge Thomas Penfield Jackson's ruling that Microsoft used illegal conduct to retain its OS monopoly. U.S. Attorney John Ashcroft said, "I am pleased to say that the court unanimously found that Microsoft engaged in unlawful conduct to maintain its dominant position in computer operating systems. This is a significant victory."

It's also a significant victory for Microsoft, though, because the appeals court also said that judge Jackson "seriously tainted the proceedings," removed him from the case, and tossed out his order to break up the company. So, Microsoft was found guilty of abusing its monopoly, but the company won't be split up. It's now working to reach a settlement with the government in the face of a looming Oct. 25th release of Windows XP.

Meanwhile, the features of Windows XP find Microsoft fending off some other attackers. Kodak is upset with the digital photography features built into the OS, claiming that it limits the choices of customers. Kodak just happens to have launched a new photo service with AOL Time Warner. A privacy advocacy group is up in arms about the .net features of XP, claiming that it violates users privacy by requiring Passport accounts for certain features, like Windows Messenger. Microsoft says there are no issues with privacy of Passport accounts, and it's all optional, anyway.

In order to appease the U.S. courts, advocacy groups, and customers, the company has made the concession to allow more customization of the XP desktop and start menu, as well as allowing Internet Explorer to be uninstalled by PC manufacturers if desired... **Smaller, faster, better**— The chief means by which chips get faster and more complex is by reducing their size. Current state-of-the-art is a .13 micron manufacturing process, whereby the "wires" of a chip are hundreds of times thinner than a human hair. NEC has joined with TSMC (Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation) to deliver .10 micron chips by 2003. That's a significant reduction in size and will allow chips to run cooler, faster, and hold more complexity at a given size. TSMC will get to use the process in large-scale production for stuff like cell phone chips, but NEC will keep contracts like those for microprocessors or graphics chips to themselves.

But they're not the only ones marching toward finer chip technology. Sony and Toshiba have teamed up to deliver .10 and .07 micron technology by 2004, which will no doubt be just in time for preliminary production of PlayStation 3... **ATA-133 support split**— The technology that would replace the standard ATA-66 and ATA-100 interfaces of today is supposed to be Serial ATA, and new point-to-point transfer mechanism that uses much smaller internal cabling and enables higher speeds than the current parallel ATA interface. Unfortunately, its arrival has been delayed, and we're not likely to see Serial ATA support until Intel releases the I/O Controller Hub 5 in 2003. To fill the gap, Maxtor has released a spec for ATA-133, which increases the maximum drive throughput to 133 MB/sec, somewhat less than Serial ATA's 150.

But Intel says they won't support ATA-133 in their motherboard chipsets, and both Seagate and IBM say they won't support it in their drives. Chipset makers VIA and SIS have endorsed the standard, though.

Control Freak

Find the gamepad, joystick, or wheel that's right for you

by Kevin Rice

Anyone that can remember configuring a game controller under DOS (or even those old Apple II "joysticks") most likely has great admiration for modern PC controllers. Auto-calibration, easy configuration, and tons of programmability make this latest breed of various input devices a breeze to configure and utilize. Not all controllers live up to the hype, though. Some of them are a pain to configure while others are as comfortable as a beanbag chair full of rocks. If you're wondering which controllers are worth it and which should've stayed in the testing lab for a few more months, read on.

Note: All the controllers were tested using a USB connection and none require an additional power supply, including those with force feedback effects. If you're still without USB ports, it's in your best interest to get an add-on board before getting any new controllers. USB is easier, faster and less prone to phantom button presses than a gameport.



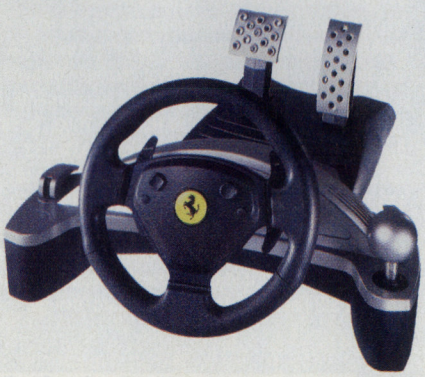
360 Modena Racing Wheel

RATING ★★★★½

MANUFACTURER Thrustmaster [www.thrustmaster.com] **COST** $49.99

Available only at their website or in Canadian stores, the first thing you'll notice when opening the box is that "new car steering wheel smell." Yes, the wheel has actual rubber on it, making it the best feeling wheel of the lot. It also includes a gear shift, one 4-way and one 8-way directional hat, two buttons, and four flippers, two which can be used for gears and the other two are analog and used for gas and brakes in lieu of pedals.

The pedals are in the right position and offer good resistance, but the base weighs about the same as a few sheets of notebook paper. Even with the included rubber feet, the pedals have a tendency to slide on occasion. That aside, this is an excellent steering wheel, with convenient button placement, plenty of programmability and a high quality all-around feel to it.



Puma GT Racing Wheel

RATING ★★½☆☆

MANUFACTURER Mad Catz [www.madcatz.com] **COST** $29.99

You can't expect too much when you're spending a mere $30 for a wheel, pedals and a stick shift, but the Puma GT does offer some unexpected niceties. The wheel itself has surprisingly good resistance, as do the pedals, although they're both at the exact same angle and height, meaning you can accidentally hit one instead of the other fairly easily. The stick shift is almost too stiff to be useful, but it does work.

Oddly, there's no desk clamp to speak of, meaning you'll have to rely on the included suction cups to hold the wheel in place. They do a surprisingly good job, although the wheel will jerk right off the desk if you suddenly and quickly switch directions. A wheel in this price range is typically aimed at the player that has only one or two racing games and cannot justify a larger purchase. For the serious racing fan, you'll want to spend more, but casual arcade racers will get their money's worth.



V3 Advanced FX Racing Wheel

RATING ★½☆☆☆

MANUFACTURER Interact Accessories [www.interact-acc.com] **COST** $39.99

The V3 Wheel comes complete with Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s endorsement and even his signature, meaning that he must drive for the local transit system when not on the racetrack. Like the Puma GT, the V3 has no clamping mechanism, requiring you to suction-cup it to the desk. The other alternative is to place the base under your legs and use the wheel's height and tilt adjustments to make it fit correctly. Whichever configuration you use, you'll end up with a wheel that's close to parallel to the ground, just like a city bus.

The rumble effects are good (although they're a little... personal, with the wheel between your legs) and it also has eight programmable buttons. The pedals have the same problem that those included with the Puma GT have. Someone is bound to find this configuration comfortable. Unfortunately, that same someone will probably demand exact change and ask if you need a transfer.

AxisPad

RATING ★★★★½

MANUFACTURER Interact Accessories [www.interact-acc.com] COST $19.99

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

While the consoles have for the most part been stuck with gamepads, finding a comparable controller for the PC has been difficult. Enter the AxisPad, complete with four shoulder buttons, an 8-way directional pad, four additional buttons and dual analog sticks. There are also two additional buttons to replace the Start and Select buttons and they're hard-wired to be Enter and Escape. That turns out to be very convenient, as most games use Escape to pause and Enter to select options.

The pad even comes in a variety of colors, showing its console roots. That's not a bad thing, though. This pad gives PC game players the console experience without having to sit in front of the TV at low resolutions. It's very programmable, it doesn't cramp your hands and it's as simple to install as you could ask for.



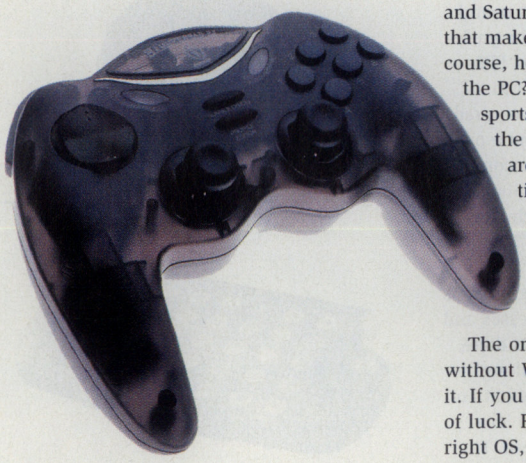
HammerHead FX

RATING ★★★★☆

MANUFACTURER Interact Accessories [www.interact-acc.com] COST $29.99

This gamepad is similar to the old Genesis and Saturn controllers, with six face buttons that make it perfect for fighting games. Of course, how many good fighting games are on the PC? Regardless, those using this pad for sports games and the like will appreciate the extra buttons and the rumble effects are well pronounced, although few titles support force feedback gamepads at this time. The placement of the shoulder buttons is a little strange, but it only takes a few minutes to become accustomed to the layout.

The only problem this pad is that those without Windows 98 or better cannot use it. If you have Windows 95, you're out of luck. Regardless, if you've got the right OS, this is the rumble gamepad of choice. It's priced right, it feels great, and it does everything it promises.



GoPad FX

RATING ★★★☆☆

MANUFACTURER Interact Accessories [www.interact-acc.com] COST $29.99

Even road warriors need a break from work on occasion, and that's where the GoPad FX comes in. This gamepad is specifically designed with laptops in mind, and it includes a carrying case and even a detachable USB cable. Instead of a directional pad, there's a pseudo-trackball in its place that offers decent resistance at the cost of pinpoint accuracy. This same ball can be used in place of the mouse as well, so those that have trouble with the "eraser head" included with many laptops will find this very convenient.

There are six top buttons and a pair of shoulder buttons to round out this controller. For those with the need, the GoPad FX will even support force feedback through the USB port and the results are acceptable. It's tough to picture the situation where this is a must-have controller for your laptop, but if you've just got to get nine innings in on the airplane, there's no other more portable or convenient controller for the job.



Top Gun Fox 2 Pro Joystick

RATING ★★★☆☆

MANUFACTURER Thrustmaster [www.thrustmaster.com] **COST** $39.99

For some reason, joystick manufacturers have taken to covering the "missile button" with a flip-up safety cover, even though most will leave it up all the time. The Fox 2 Pro has one of these, along with five programmable buttons, a decent trigger, a twistable handle for rudder control and a throttle lever. The joystick itself offers plenty of resistance, but the twisting action is too loose. The throttle is large and easy to control, although reaching for the base buttons will take a little practice. Finally, the fourth button is placed on the top, front right of the stick, making it awkward to hit.

Once you are used to it, this is a quality stick with a weighty base that won't slide around in intense combat. The trigger is placed out enough as to avoid accidental hitting and the rubberized grips make it easy to handle. Hopefully the next iteration of this stick will correct some of the button placements but even as it stands now, this is a quality stick with plenty of programmability.

Top Gun Afterburner Joystick

RATING ★★★½☆

MANUFACTURER Thrustmaster [www.thrustmaster.com] **COST** $59.99

The Afterburner is basically the same as the Fox 2 Pro with the addition of a detachable rudder and throttle and a few more buttons. The unique detachable design is handy both in usage and for storage space considerations. It has the same dubious fourth button placement, but the base buttons are on the throttle, making them much easier to hit. There's also a switch on the back of the stick that allows you to select either rotating the stick or using the levers under the throttle for rudder control, which is very convenient.

A stick of this size really needs more buttons, as most games that use such a controller have tons of commands and options. As it stands, it's a very programmable stick that doesn't quite live up to the standards set by the classic Saitek X36. On the same note, it's also $40 less. In the end, everything feels good and works well and for those playing simpler flight or space sims, it'll fit the bill just fine.

Raider Advanced FX

RATING ★★★½☆

MANUFACTURER Interact Accessories [www.interact-acc.com] **COST** $29.99

Interact's latest mass-market stick features vibration feedback and not force feedback. While this stick will rumble at appropriate times, it doesn't tug the stick in any direction. Regardless, this stick has a very small footprint and includes plenty of buttons for programming as well as an 8-way hat. One concern is that, because of its ergonomic design, the hat itself is intentionally a little off center, meaning that to push the hat straight up, you actually push up and a little to the left. It takes some practice to get this down.

The throttle is a little trackball-like wheel that has excellent resistance allowing for precise control, and the resistance when twisting the joystick is decent as well. The trigger is responsive, although it's a little too flush with the stick itself, meaning you can accidentally shoot at something unintentionally. For $30, though, this is a very competitively priced stick with more than enough features.

P8000

RATING ★★★½☆

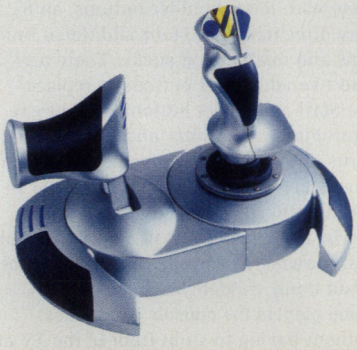
MANUFACTURER Saitek [www.saitekusa.com] **COST** $49.95

This is the strangest controller in this roundup, but it's also one of the most useful if used with the right games. While the packaging advertises it for everything from FPS games to web surfing, it's most useful in games where a lot of keystrokes are required for specific tasks. Any game where three or more keystrokes have to be used to accomplish one task will benefit from the P8000's 35 fully programmable buttons, which combine with a shift button for a total of 70 one-touch commands.

Programming it takes a rather long time, as it records time delays between keypresses and even how long a key is held. Once it's done, though, you'll wonder how you got along without it. There's an included 8-way hat and even a fire button, although we've no idea where anyone would want to use these. The controller is also hungry for desktop realty, so you'll want to clear some space for it. It's best used as a separate, programmable keyboard and in that role, it works incredibly well. There's nothing else quite like it.



Thrustmaster's stand-alone stick...



...and their similarly designed stick and throttle combo.



InterAct's affordable force-feedback stick.



Saitek's "file under other" controller can be very useful.

OPC-X7

A promising but worrisome machine

by Jason Cross

MANUFACTURER Overdrive PC [www.overdrivepc.com] **MSRP** $3499

Specialty PC manufacturers are a dime a dozen. Most don't last more than a year or two before bankrupting themselves, largely because they can't find a niche. If you can't compete with Dell or Gateway on price and you can't offer significant advances that people willing to pay more for, your days are numbered. Overdrive PC is a young manufacturer staking out its claim in the gamer market, and though it still got some learning to do, it shows a lot of promise.

Their OPC-X7 is dressed to the nines for high-end gaming. It's a 1.5GHz Pentium 4 with 256 MB of RAM, VisionTek GeForce3 card, Sound Blaster Live! with the LiveDrive connection plate in the front, slot-loading Pioneer DVD drive, 16X Plextor CD-RW drive, and two 40 GB IBM Deskstar 7200 RPM hard drives in an IDE RAID configuration. It's rounded out with a 19" Viewsonic PF790 monitor and the remarkable Klipsch 4.1 speakers, along with Microsoft's Internet Keyboard Pro and Intellimouse Explorer. The system is equipped with what Overdrive PC calls their "overdrive package," in which everything is overclocked by exactly 10%, meaning this system has a 440 Mhz front-side bus instead of 400 MHz, the CPU is running at 1.65MHz, and the GeForce3 is clocked to 220 MHz with over 500 MHz memory. All this is fully tested and protected under the standard 1-year parts and labor warrantee.

Naturally, the system runs like a bat out of hell. You would expect a high-end system overclocked like this to really scream, and for $2700 it had better do so. What's interesting about the system isn't the system specs or even the overclocking option, but the construction and extras. Overdrive PC pulls replaces all those crummy zinc screws with steel and puts rubber feet under every mounting point for the motherboard to keep it from flexing. Rounded IDE and floppy cables are used to promote airflow inside. A really tiny keychain light hangs inside the case so you can light up those hard-to-see jumpers. In a stroke of absolute genius, narrow strips of Velcro are used instead of cable ties to bind the internal cabling together. That way you don't have to cut and rebind them if you start adding or removing hardware. Note to every other PC manufacturer: crib the Velcro idea.

The cooling is also worth mentioning. It's the latest thing for hardcore PC manufacturers to have a fan on the side that blows down directly over your AGP and PCI cards, but Overdrive goes *overboard*. Their side fan is a gigantic monster that moves so much air that the four other fans (two in the front and two in the rear) all have to blow outward to keep the flow even. There's a three-way switch on the front of the machine that lets you turn off this fan, run it at low speed, or turn it up high to impress your friends with an audible whirr that gives the 400-watt speakers a run for their money.

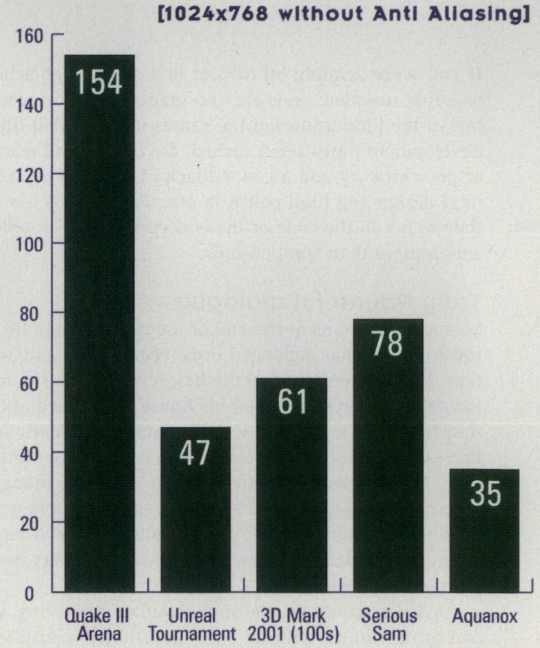
Overdrive PC is run by a couple gamers who seem to truly live up to the "we're gamers too" mantra that every Gaming PC manufacturer claims. Its website features art by gaming web cartoonist Scott Kurtz, it sponsors a top shooter clan, runs game servers, etc. Its heart is in the right place, but there are some concerns about such a young and inexperienced business. This system arrived with Windows 2000 loaded—not in itself a problem—but without the Administrator password written down anywhere. The CD drives were changed to be Z and Y... for some reason. The Programs section of the Start Menu was reorganized into folders in the root of the Start Menu. It's almost like they're *trying* to annoy you. Presumably during testing, someone left an *Armageddon* DVD in the drive (next time, leave in a good flick!). Click the "build it" section of their website and it's not working yet. Worse yet, the same is true of the "support" section.

These are the kinds of issues you'd expect from a small, year-old company, and while it's clear these guys have talent and some fine system-building ideas, they need a bit more polish to be a major PC manufacturer. We hope they stick around long enough to figure it all out. ●



UPSIDE	Overclocked everywhere, good parts, great cooling
DOWNSIDE	Company issues, questionable configuration choices
RATING	★★★½☆

BENCHMARKS

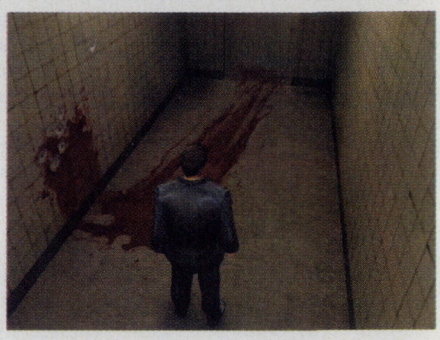


Benchmarks performed with vsync disabled, 32-bit color modes selected, and sound disabled. Quake 3 Arena used version 1.29f and the "four" demo, with all settings set to max. Aquanox test performed with the "Aquamark" demo. Serious Sam score reported is the "average without excessive peaks" value from the Karnak Peaceful Night Coop demo. Unreal Tournament was benchmarked using the UTBench test.



RATINGS

Extraordinary ★★★★★
Excellent ★★★★☆
Maybe ★★★☆☆
Mediocre ★★☆☆☆
Contemptible ★☆☆☆☆



Max Payne

Sometimes it just takes four years for a Remedy to work well

by Jason Cross

DEVELOPER Remedy Entertainment [www.remedy.fi] **PUBLISHER** Gathering of Developers [www.godgames.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 450, 96MB RAM, 16MB 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Mature

[left to right] Max Payne: Hero. Snappy Dresser. Solid advice on how to deal with this game.

This can't be good.

If you were heading off to your first day of high school when *Max Payne* was first revealed, odds are you graduated before you got to play it. It's one of the little ironies of the games industry that titles with protracted development times seem rushed, are buggy, and feature outdated graphics or poor artwork and a general lack of focus. What a surprise to find a tight design and high polish in *Max Payne*. This is a game with flaws, but they're not in the code or the concept, and the double-fisted lead-pumping action more than compensates.

Truly Payne-ful dialogue

Max's story begins at the end of the game, where he informs you that he must tell us what happened three years ago to explain his current situation. You're then taken to the first level, where the happy police officer Payne returns home to find his house vandalized and his wife and baby murdered. It's a tough sell—you're not emotionally invested in any of these characters, yet there's a big dramatic scene full of heartache and pain. It serves well enough to set up the story, though. The thugs who killed his family scrawled symbols relating to a new street drug on his wall, so Max joins the DEA to go undercover and settle the score. The game proper kicks off three years later, with Max heading to meet his partner in the subway.

As action games go, the story is rather interesting, involving a few twists and turns, run-ins with the mob, government conspiracies, and powerful mysterious strangers. There are Norse mythology tie-ins everywhere, some obvious and some obscure. A combination of in-engine cut scenes and graphic novel style story panels tell the tale, and it's a nice change of pace, even if the in-engine stuff looks a bit dated without lip-syncing.

The game box claims has a quote that the game is "fiendishly well-written." It's unclear what that actually means, but it couldn't be more wrong. In an obvious attempt to mimic old detective novels and film noir, Max narrates the story in a first-person past tense deadpan tone and uses more metaphors than a Dennis Miller monologue after a new release of Roget's Thesaurus. You can only take so many lines like, "Snow was falling like ashes from post-apocalyptic skies, but that was outside. Things would soon get hot in the Don's restaurant," before you begin to dry-heave. *The Maltese Falcon* this ain't. Spotty voice acting only exacerbates the poor writing. James McCaffrey's monotone Max is spot-on, but most of the secondary actors are so overacted it's comical. Every Italian mobster sounds like a bad Joe Pesci impersonator. Max would say, "The writing is a bitter pill, sour medicine I was forced to choke down like an old hangover remedy."

If anything, *Max Payne* underscores the fact that even action games have matured into powerful storytelling mediums, and developers who strive to deliver a story-driven game need to hire a professional, experienced script writer in the same fashion just as they hire professional artists to produce their models and textures.

John Woo was here

As bad as the writing is, the story is only one part of a much larger game that mostly involves running around 3D environments shooting bad guys. It is in this respect that *Max Payne* truly shines. Remedy succeeds in making dozens of repetitive gunfights fun in a way no game developer ever has. This is chiefly accomplished through the use of "bullet-time gameplay," whereby the player can kick into slow motion on a whim. Just tap the right mouse button and everything slows to a crawl, effectively giving you superhuman reflexes. But it also just looks amazing: muz-

zle flashes leap about, bullets crawl by, fires and explosions all but stand still, and a train of spent bullet casings float out of the sides of your twin Ingram sub-machine guns. Gunfire sounds and voices are muffled, nearly drowned out by a pounding heartbeat sound. It's hard not to hold your breath.

You only have a limited supply of bullet-time, however, and the hourglass meter drops quickly when it's activated. Killing thugs adds more time to the meter, but a good way to conserve the precious effect is to use a "shoot-dodge" by pressing the right mouse button along with a movement key. This will slow the game down, but not as far as regular bullet-time, while Max performs an acrobatic leap. Meanwhile, you can freely twist and turn in any direction, Berettas blazing, to plug the guy with the shotgun on your left and finish off his buddy with the pistols to your right. Bullet-time and shootdodging are not only incredibly useful game mechanics, but they make it easy and intuitive to do cool stuff with every enemy encounter. Don't be surprised if you start reaching for the bullet-time button in every action game that you play after you've finished *Max Payne*.

The bullet-time effects wouldn't look nearly as impressive without all the fabulous destruction that your stray shots cause. Wildly varying impact effects bring the environments to life and make the chaos of a pitched gun battle all the more exciting. Shoot a tile wall and it erupts into a shower of tile bits, leaving a cracked and splintered hole behind. Sink a slug into plaster, and bits of chalky dust pour out. Boxes erupt into splinters, cash registers shower dollar bills, TV screens and monitors break, you name it. The degree to which the environment reacts to being shot all to hell simply cannot be understated.

If John Woo were to make a game, this is what it would be like.

New York never looked so crappy

The environments do more than just interact with errant bullets, of course. It would be pretty jarring if everything reacted so well to being shot, but otherwise didn't work as expected. To that end, Max can perform basic actions like opening drawers and cabinets or turning on TVs. This often serves little purpose other than to find some stashed ammunition or painkillers (the equivalent of health kits), but it's nice that such pick-up items aren't just inexplicably rotating in the center of the room somewhere.



[top to bottom] Who says Satanists can't draw?

The dangers of natural gas.

All that interaction with the environment helps make it more immersive, but the level design is so good that the game hardly needs it. Though the world and its objects aren't made up of an impressive number of polygons, it's all textured in such impressive detail that it really comes alive. Scripted events are very common, and with the excellent animation and bullet impact effects provide a real sense of the world being in motion. Beautiful textures and a great sense of movement combine with fantastic level design to create a world that is fun just to run around in. *Max Payne*'s Manhattan isn't real—it's a grittier, emptier, graphic novel interpretation meant to mimic the '40s and '50s film noir atmosphere in modern times. New York never looked so crappy, and it's a beautiful thing.

Not another four years

When you first play *Max Payne*, there's only one difficulty level available. At this setting, the game automatically adjusts the strength of the enemies and amount of auto-aim assistance based on your performance, and this dynamic difficulty adjustment works very well—it remains challenging but never frustrating. The average action game fan will finish the game in about a dozen hours (and that's a dozen densely packed hours), after which harder difficulty levels and the "New York Minute" mode become available. New York Minute is a neat idea; you play through the game again with one minute to beat each level, and a little extra time is awarded for each enemy you kill. The frantic pace of this mode puts a nice twist on replaying the game and it's great to see a developer think about replayability in such a way, but this game's legs will surely come chiefly from user-created levels and mods. Editing tools come with the game and are fairly easy to use, as game development tools go.

Remedy has created a beautiful game full of memorable moments, suffering only from a clumsy attempt to mimic the writing style of old detective novels. The cinematic gunplay set against the dark urban decay of the bad part of New York during a blizzard is terrific; here's hoping for more Max, with a dialogue coach, and let's also hope we don't have to wait another four years.



UPSIDE	Detailed environments, exciting gunplay, smooth animation
DOWNSIDE	Troubled writing
RATING	★★★★½

Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura

Stretching the boundaries of computer role-playing games... again

by Benjamin E. Sones

DEVELOPER Troika Games [www.troikagames.com]
PUBLISHER Sierra [www.sierra.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Mature



Not your average flotsam and jetsam.

What if a somewhat conventional fantasy world—replete with elves, orcs, and magick—plunged into an industrial revolution? That's the fundamental question that lies at the heart of *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, and by the time the game is over you will become genuinely interested in uncovering the answer. *Arcanum* is a slowly seductive game, a deep and demanding affair with a steep learning curve and a voracious appetite for your spare time. It's all the more impressive that the more time you devote to the game, the more time you will be willing to surrender.

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

If you played either of the *Fallout* role-playing games, then you will immediately recognize *Arcanum's* pedigree. The game art depicts a completely different subject matter, but the style is easily recognizable. The writing is deft, marrying wry humor and witty dialog to a story that never fails to take itself seriously. Even the interface, which is somewhat more complex and is designed for different tasks, shares the same general layout. The game's overall philosophy is the most important similarity, however; *Arcanum's* driving principle is the idea that the player should be allowed to make choices, and that those choices should affect the game.

Decisions, decisions

This philosophy makes for an enormously immersive experience. You aren't merely unearthing bits of a story that someone else has written; instead the game trusts you to make all the important decisions yourself, and as a result the story becomes less about the events that are happening in the game world and more about the adventures of your character.



The character management could have been simpler, but it does offer a lot of choices.

That character can be nearly anything you want, thanks to an intricately detailed and somewhat intimidating system of character creation. Want to play a cursed wizard, a haunted man who sold his soul to the Darker Powers in exchange for arcane secrets? Arcanum has you covered. Or a spoiled rich girl with an unhealthy interest in firearms—the Dead-Eye Debutante, scandal of high society? Again, a definite possibility. Perhaps you are more in the mood to play the mad scientist, a dwarven outcast partly crippled by his own unholy experiments and accompanied by an entourage of mechanical spiders, automatons, and other technological terrors? You can be that, too. The game subtly acknowledges your choices; people will call you either sir or madam, elves will react to a dwarven character differently than they will to a human character, magick shopkeepers will refuse to deal with a character that stinks of technology.

The game gives you almost too many choices right out of the gate, in fact, and that may sour some players on the whole experience before they even get started. A window that pops up during installation recommends that you take a look at the manual, and you'll probably want to go even further and read it all the way through, perhaps more than once, before you fire up the game. Unlike *Fallout's* elegantly simple character system, *Arcanum* presents you with an awful lot of data to remember. You'll be well into the game before you fully understand how all the different skills and abilities function and interact with each other, but it's well worth living with the early confusion to reap the rewards that follow.

Stuff happens

Arcanum does a wonderful job delivering a story that manages to be quite adaptable to whatever type of character you choose to play. The premise, at least at first, is both very simple and universally compelling. You are a passenger on IFS Zephyr, an experimental dirigible that is shot down on its maiden voyage by a pair of orcs in aeroplanes. Stumbling through the wreckage you find a mortally injured gnome, who implores you to find "the boy" and gives you a ring bearing the initials "G.B." just before he dies, leaving you as the last survivor of the crash.

Your character may or may not be charitable enough to embark on the gnome's quest on good faith alone, but it doesn't really matter. Before you



Turn-based mode is the only viable option in any difficult combat.

can even leave the crash site, one stranger shows up and claims that you are the reincarnation of a dead elven hero, and another shows up to kill you. After that you'll find yourself dodging a constant stream of assassins, giving even the most selfish characters good incentive to figure out what the hell is going on.

As with real life, certain events are out of your control, but the game never fails to offer the opportunity to choose how you will react to those events. A group of ruffians have set up an impromptu tollbooth just outside the town of Shrouded Hills. Do you pay them their outrageous fee to use the bridge, or do you do the townsfolk a favor and kill them? Perhaps you could sweet talk your way past them, or even cut a deal and gain passage by helping the ruffians destroy a cache of supplies that the townsfolk plan to use to build a new bridge further downriver.

There is no single "right" answer to any problem in *Arcanum*. Quests are rarely simple affairs—the standard laundry list of tasks to accomplish so that you can earn experience points—but rather a series of choices that dictate how both the story and your character's personality develop. Some quests you may want to approach in a fashion that suits your character's temperament, others you may want to avoid altogether.

The sum of all your actions determines your character's current alignment, which in turn affects your ability to recruit followers. Non-player characters may opt to join you on your quest (as in *Fallout*, you do not control them directly) if your goals and morals are similar enough to their own. These characters provide ongoing color and even occasional quests of their own.

A brilliant backdrop

Though your character's antics will steal the spotlight, it helps that those antics take place against a highly compelling backdrop. The setting is a clever conceit that turns the tired Tolkien-inspired fantasy genre on its ear, a Victorian-era fantasy world in which gaslights cast their warm glow on the cobblestone steps of the local magick shop, where half-ogre servants dress in coattails and bow ties and orc factory workers protest poor wages by threatening to unionize. The dichotomy between magick and technology is the basis of both the setting and the story, and the specifics of both reveal themselves piece by piece like a good mystery novel. Every element of the game (right down to the manual, which is written with an infectious nineteenth century formality) is infused with consistent character and style.

You can travel pretty much anywhere you want in the land of Arcanum, though certain areas of the continent can only be unlocked by accomplishing specific goals. You will need a ship if you want to travel to any outlying islands, for instance, and you'll need to find a way to get past the mountains if you want to visit the northwestern portion of the continent. Still, there are many interesting locations that you can discover, sometimes by following up on rumors, sometimes by accident. Most of these side quests are not mandatory, but all of them give you additional insight into the considerably well-realized history of Arcanum.

In light of its non-linear nature, the game does an excellent job at keeping you from wandering aimlessly (though you can do that if you want) or losing track of your overall goals, even going so far as to annotate each of your save games with a brief description of your current "main story" goal. The length of the game varies greatly depending on how you play it, but it's not a short game by any metric, and the degree to which it manages to sustain interest and present new challenges is impressive. The game even gives you a multiplayer mode, along with a special multiplayer scenario and the complete game editor (so you can create your own). It's the gift that keeps on giving.

A complicated masterpiece

Given *Arcanum's* considerable appeal, it seems almost ungracious to point out any of its failings. To be fair, it doesn't have many, and given the incredible depth of the game world it's amazing that any developer could adequately test it at all. A prolonged period of testing may have contributed to the game's dated-looking graphics and character animation. The waypoint system, a sometimes-handy contrivance that allows you to travel from point to point in towns by selecting a destination, sometimes fails to function at all. A real-time combat mode is available, but is far too unmanageable for any but the most trivial battles. Fortunately the turn based mode works just fine.

Once the world of *Arcanum* sucks you in—and it will—these little quirks start to feel less and less important. You stop worrying about waypoints and start marveling at the story and setting that unfolds before you. Enjoy it while it lasts, because role-playing games like this don't come along very often.

UPSIDE	Impressive depth and interactivity, top-notch writing
DOWNSIDE	Steep learning curve, a few small technical problems
RATING	★★★★½



The game maintains a consistent Victorian-era theme, both in how it looks and in how it plays.



Impressive cityscape. Not pictured: stalled framerate; Camping a respawn spot; Fighting a dwarf while protected by the magical glow that only science can provide.

Anarchy Online

The rogue review Funcom doesn't want you to read!

by Erik Wolpaw

DEVELOPER Funcom [www.funcom.com] PUBLISHER Funcom [www.funcom.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 32MB RAM, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER Massively multiplayer ESRB Teen

Shortly after *Anarchy Online* hit store shelves, its publisher Funcom issued the following statement: "As for reviewing the game: we will send out review copies soon, but we would like to ask that you hold back on a full review until we have solved these problems."

In the burgeoning Persistent Online World genre, you judge a title as much on the quality of its ongoing service as its gameplay. It's not encouraging, then, that Funcom feels their product is ready for you to buy but not to be evaluated. A month after release, some of "these problems" have been corrected, while many remain. Perhaps in light of this, Funcom has yet to grant their official blessing to reviews, so consider this opinion entirely unsanctioned.

Anarchy Online is a "science-fiction" *Everquest*. What this means, more or less, is that the developers have taken familiar fantasy terms and then, in a sort of futuristic version of Mad-Libs, replaced them all with science-y sounding words. For instance, "magic" has been supplanted by "nanotechnology." Instead of "casting spells," you "run programs," though running these programs still involves making magical arm movements and having colored sparks shoot out of your hands. No space travel is included, and virtually all journeys are still accomplished on foot. Cars are available, but they're incredibly expensive and, therefore, rare. So in a lot of ways it's not quite as futuristic as, say, 1974. The setting is really only expressed in surface details.

The user interface is well designed, customizable, and is generally an evolutionary step forward for the genre. One especially nice feature is that you can drag any item into the chat window to have its name included in messages. Other people can then click on the name (which appears in blue text) to bring up a window that shows the object's complete stats. It makes buying and selling items easier, and represents the kind of small, logical interface enhancement that has a real effect on gameplay.

Visually, no game, online or off, has so successfully captured the feeling of wandering through an outdoor environment. Between the ever-changing weather patterns and day/night cycle, it seems as if you never witness the same sky twice. The horizon stretches as far as the eye could really see. If lost, you can actually climb to the top of a hill and try to find a landmark, such as the towering walls of a city, even if they're several miles away.

In an effort to reduce the "camping" style of play prevalent in *EverQuest*, *Anarchy Online* includes a system that features private missions, which are randomly generated areas open only to you and your party. In theory, it's a good idea, but the missions are all too simple and similar to hold your attention for long. And although the terrain graphics are beautiful, the interior areas in which almost all missions take place are cramped, boxy, and generally unappealing; they honestly look like the uncomplicated environments of the *Wolfenstein* era.

The missions also feature some of the game's most annoying bugs. Enemies several rooms away can attack you through walls. You can attack them back, but any illusion that you're in a real place is completely shattered. Lag is also a huge problem in the missions. You frequently (during peak hours, *really* frequently) are "disconnected" for thirty seconds to several minutes, during which time you can move around, but nothing reacts to you. The blandness and instability of the missions has resulted in many players preferring to simply camp at public respawn spots, bringing things full circle.

Lag is even worse in populated areas such as cities. Even on a powerhouse system, the framerate in these urban centers will often drop to below one frame per second, rendering the game unplayable. You can "fix" this bug by staying away from cities or by staring at the ground at all times. But these are absurd measures that you shouldn't have to take in the first place.

It's a common trait among online games that they all stink during the first few months. Since Funcom has raised the bar for monthly fees to $12.95 (almost a one-third increase from the de facto genre standard of $9.95), you might expect a corresponding increase in stability and service. Instead, *Anarchy Online* is arguably less stable than were its competitors during their respective launches. It features great graphics, a slightly modified version of *EverQuest's* gameplay model, and lots of frustrating problems. True to its theme, you should only consider playing it in the future.

UPSIDE	Best looking MMORPG yet
DOWNSIDE	Lots of technical problems
RATING	★★☆☆☆

MechCommander 2

Good looks, great features, and poor performance make this a mixed bag

by Robert Mayer

GENRE Real-time battling robot tactical strategy
DEVELOPER Microsoft [www.microsoft.com]
PUBLISHER Microsoft [www.microsoft.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 64MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Teen



The 'Mechs and the gameworld objects are nicely done.

Ah, the joys of making a sequel. You get to fix all of the things that didn't work with the original, and if the debut game was any good at all, you can count on an installed base of likely customers. Such is the lot of Microsoft with *MechCommander 2*. FASA Interactive developed the original for MicroProse in 1998, and while the game was decent enough, it had problems that drove many gamers batty. A real-time tactical game of battlefield command in the *BattleTech* universe, it suffered from bad design decisions and overly formulaic gameplay, but the compelling game setting almost allowed it to overcome its flaws. The sequel is essentially the same game with new missions, a 3D engine, and three years of work erasing most of the flaws and poor choices that plagued the original. The result is a discernibly better game in many respects, marred only by significant performance problems.

BattleTech, for the uninitiated, is a science fiction setting where, some 1500 years from now, mankind fights its wars via huge bipedal robots called BattleMechs, piloted by MechWarriors. There's a lot more background for the truly devoted, but that's the gist of it. The *MechCommander* games let you command a group of 'Mechs and their pilots with traditional real-time strategy mechanics, with combat based on streamlined versions of the arcane and detailed *BattleTech* game system. Each 'Mech has a mixture of weapons ranging from missiles to lasers to heavy cannon, and the 'Mechs themselves range from 30-ton scouts to 100-ton assault behemoths. Weapons ranges are short, so most of the combat is very up close and personal.

MechCommander 2 offers 3D terrain and units, a map with true line of sight spotting and no black shroud, the ability to save a mission at any time, though with only one quick save slot, and many other features that more or less completely address the criticisms fans leveled at the original title. You still proceed through a single-player campaign of canned missions with multiple objectives, selecting your forces each time from a pool of pilots and machines. Your pilots gain experience, medals, and skills as they survive missions, and a good chunk of the game is matching up MechWarriors to 'Mechs, and making sure each 'Mech is appropriate to the mission. Unlike the first game, though, the missions here are not pure puzzles, but actually allow some flexibility in approach.

In play, the sequel is very similar to the original. The 'Mechs look slightly better, the terrain is more realistic but oddly less visually stimulating, and you can now call in repair trucks, mine layers, and other support units instead of having to bring them along from the start. Nevertheless, the controls for moving and fighting are nearly identical, you still wind up doing a lot of "select all and click on a target," and the computer's ability to direct both friendly and enemy 'Mechs in battle, while improved, is still suspect. Then again, the first game was at times a superbly entertaining game, and the new one is that and more, with fewer problems.

In fact, if it weren't for the game's poor framerate on even high-powered machines and its kludgy quick save system, *MechCommander 2* might be a near-perfect upgrade of the original title. Yes, the missions are scripted, but the scripting is remarkably robust. Yes, there is nowhere near enough feedback in combat, but the game rewards the essentials of tactics and punishes stupidity. Yes, the AI could be better, for both enemy and friendly 'Mechs, but at least this time you can pause the game and giver orders, including waypoints, to your units. When you take it all into consideration, this is still the best *BattleTech* strategy game out there, no matter how you look at it.

Even on a fast machine with lots of RAM, though, the game can slow to a crawl; good luck if you are running on anything close to minimum spec. Given the number of 3D strategy games available today, nearly all of which perform much better than *MechCommander 2*, it's difficult to excuse the sluggishness of Microsoft's effort. The game is still good, and worth the time of *BattleTech* fans, but unless Microsoft fixes the performance issues it will never be a great game. Which is a pity, because most of the pieces are already in place.

UPSIDE	Great looking 'Mechs, enjoyable missions, many improvements over the original
DOWNSIDE	Sluggish performance, obtuse quick save feature, lack of feedback in combat
RATING	★★★½☆

Startopia

Where life among the stars is very good indeed

by Jason D'Aprile

GENRE Strategy DEVELOPER Mucky Foot [www.muckyfoot.com] PUBLISHER Eidos [www.eidos.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players, Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

It's good to know that even if games can't seem to muster a shred of originality, at least some aim for refinement. *Startopia* mixes elements from games such as *The Sims*, *Dungeon Keeper*, and the endless parade of *Theme* games in a brilliantly colorful, substantial, and comedic science-fiction setting. Had Douglas Adams created a game called *SimSpaceStation* before his demise, it probably would have been an awful lot like *Startopia*.

The basic premise is simple. You've been hired to run a space station, making sure that it's profitable, habitable, and pleasing to the various alien races who live, work, and visit there. You play the game in real time strategy building fashion, creating the buildings and devices necessary to keep the space station running, the aliens entertained and healthy, and profits rolling in. The main reason *Startopia* works so well on so many levels is the fact that it never lets the deep nature of its game mechanics get in the way of playability. You don't need to know anything about strategy games to jump right in and start playing, even though the game is far from shallow.

Every alien that boards your station is, in some manner, an individual, possessing both constant skills that are associated with his or her individual race, and stats that pertain to their unique manners and well being. As aliens board your station, you can hire them based on their skill and mood levels. If they do a good job, you can give them a raise, thus helping them stay happy. If an alien doesn't feel fulfilled, they'll leave. So, it's important to maintain a thriving station filled with restaurants, restrooms, berths and hotels, love nests, hospitals, and other buildings that help contribute to your denizens' quality of life.

Keeping them happy is important for one big reason—happy aliens spend money using your facilities, providing an important source of income. Trading with alien ships is another key financial element, and you'll have to maintain a comsensor, ship dock, and other technical units that will ensure communication with passing ships. The trading model is simple, entertaining and effective. Each race essentially has one type of item that they sell cheaper than the rest, and another type they'll pay more for. The Greys, for instance, sell medical goods cheap, and pay more for leisure equipment.

The game contains several tutorial missions to get you going, as well as ten actual missions (most of which pertain to catering to the needs of a specific race). The game is not short, however—even the early missions easily take over an hour to complete, and the later ones can be truly challenging. An added bonus is that you can keep playing with your space station even after you've completed the mission goals. Regardless, these missions are really just a primer for the best part of the game, the sandbox mode.

Here you can take the reins of a station and do with it as you please. The only goal is to keep the station operating, and you can handle the myriad of situations the game throws at you however you see fit. The game also supports a four-player mode, where each tries to wrest control of the station from their human opponents. This is actually the weakest part of the game, as it often devolves into a race to see who can get a security force up and running the fastest.

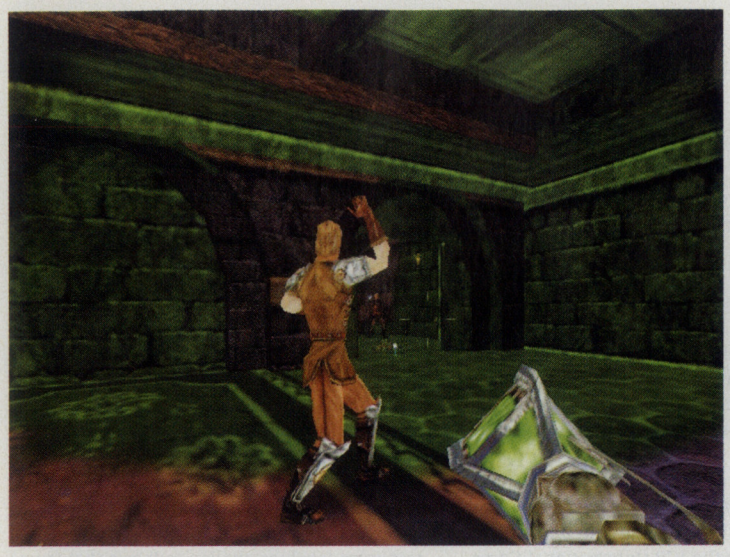
Everything in the game looks fantastic and has a charming, almost cartoonish quality to it. The aliens all have personality in the way they move and behave, and you can usually tell their mood just by looking at them. The mouse-based interface takes some getting used to, but it allows for easy camera movements. It is sometimes annoying that you can't move specific aliens where you want them, but there's little else to complain about.



It's like the Garden of Eden, only better!

Moving beyond real time strategy and theme park game clones, *Startopia's* lighthearted sense of atmosphere, great look, and easy playability really make it shine. It's fun, challenging, and thanks to a great sandbox mode and astounding variety of alien behavior and situations, has plenty to offer in the way of replayability. So, go ahead, give space a chance, and don't keep the sirens waiting.

UPSIDE	Great graphics and atmosphere, challenging missions, fantastic sandbox mode, easy to get into and entertaining gameplay
DOWNSIDE	Advanced controls can be tough to learn, multiplayer mode needs some balancing
RATING	★★★★½



Lighting effects are well modeled.



Experience life after death.

Legends of Might and Magic

What a long strange road it's been

by Brett Berger

GENRE First Person Online Shooter **DEVELOPER** New World Computing [www.3do.com] **PUBLISHER** 3DO [www.3do.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator **MULTIPLAYER** 2-16 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Teen

Legends of Might *and Magic* began its development as an ambitious first person role-playing game. Perhaps as revenge for all the so-so reviews of *Might And Magic VIII*, 3DO decided to pull a fast one and transformed the game into an online, first-person shooter. The fantasy setting makes the game a curious oddity in the shooter realm, but what else does the game have to offer? Short answer: not much.

Ambitious heroes begin by choosing one of six good or evil classes—Paladin, Druid, and Sorceress on the good side, and Warrior, Heretic, and Archer on the evil. Picking a character determines the side you will be on as the forces of good battle against the forces of evil in one of four game types. Class differences, which supply much of the "coolness" factor in games such as *Team Fortress*, are virtually non-existent. The only meaningful differences between classes are weapons and armor choices. You must purchase better weapons and armor at the beginning of each scenario. Money and weapons carry over between scenarios, which tends to favor those who hide and wait for the end. You'll find that once a few players have acquired the best weapons, those without them have a very difficult time advancing without being killed.

Strangely enough, there is no healing during a scenario; all damage accumulates until the next round. Certainly instant magic healing scrolls fit the fantasy theme better than instant first aid kits do the sci-fi or military themes. No healing tends to make games very short affairs as players tally up damage and rapidly die. Why not offer a cleric class that can heal teammates? The unique setting promises endless possibilities, but *Legends* seems satisfied to be more of the same.

One thing that could be attractive about a fantasy shooter is hand-to-hand combat with medieval weapons. Unfortunately, magic and missile weapons are so powerful that you'll never get close enough to even think about using a sword or spear. In fact, some of the weapons have more in common with sci-fi blasters than fantasy weapons, and some are powerful enough to score one-hit kills—a questionable design decision given that the game does not allow respawning. Other weapons will fire dozens of missiles that rebound off of walls and ricochet around rooms. These weapons make hiding almost impossible and add more frustration than fun to the mix.

Legends of Might and Magic adds a few innovations to the shooter genre. Each scenario can feature monsters that will attack both good and evil characters. Though this generates some additional variety and another way to gain gold, the lack of healing generally makes these denizens more of an annoyance than anything else. Auto balancing causes players to automatically move from one team to another if there is an imbalance in number of players. This is a good idea if you are a lone player but if you want to team up with some friends it can be frustrating to end up on the team opposing your buddies.

Visually the game is a mixed bag. Locations are well modeled—especially outside areas, where mountain slopes and towers almost induce vertigo. Characters, on the other hand, possess bodies that seem somewhat blocky and out of proportion, and there are some problems with collision detection as sometimes parts of characters can be seen through walls and floors.

Online team games had their genesis in *Quake* mods, and there is certainly room for more. *Legends of Might and Magic* puts this genre in a new setting but contributes little more in terms of design and quality of play. A comprehensive demo of the game is available on 3DO's website, so if you crave a new way to get your online gaming fix, try before you buy.

UPSIDE	There aren't many fantasy-based online first person shooter games out there
DOWNSIDE	A feeling of been there, done that, with some poor game design choices that limit the fun
RATING	★★☆☆☆

Conflict Zone

Make headlines, not war

by Scott Steinberg

GENRE Real-time Strategy DEVELOPER MASA Group [www.animaths.com] PUBLISHER UbiSoft [www.ubisoft.com] REQUIREMENTS PENTIUM II 300, 128MB RAM, 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; Internet, LAN, modem ESRB Mature

Desperate times demand desperate measures. All armed conflicts boast sizable numbers of civilian casualties for that very reason. Though rising innocent death tolls don't necessarily equate to poor military performance, they do make for bad press and lowered morale. It's this oft overlooked concept UbiSoft and MASA have tried to capture with *Conflict Zone*, an intriguing real-time strategy game that's truly like no other. Or perhaps like several others, only with a special, ethical twist.

The year: 2010. The setting: Earth. The two opposing forces you can choose from: pretty ticked off. Socio-political blocks have formed between once rival nations, driving wedges between these superpowers and independent holdouts. Wars rage, thousands perish, and an organization dedicated to preserving the status quo is formed. Enter the ICP (International Corps for Peace), said international military force, which routinely stamps out proverbial fires worldwide. Opposing these peacekeepers are GHOST, a secretive group composed of multinational corporations and sovereign nations. Stirring up crisis situations isn't just a hobby for these nut jobs—it's a specialty.



Rescue choppers are standing by to carry civilians to safety—and nightly news fame.

Both sides are viable play choices, boasting rich campaigns and unique advantages that offset an otherwise comparable unit selection. Which side you select should simply be a matter of preference. Fancy herding survivors into refugee camps and establishing radar-jamming devices? Try the ICP. Prefer manipulating media coverage, recruiting local yokels as soldiers, and planting spies amongst seemingly harmless populace? Go with GHOST, oh morally unconcerned friend. Both selections translate into a brilliant, lengthy campaign that'll have you hooked for days, if frustration doesn't set in first.

Conflict Zone serves up a full platter. Nay, make that a Roseanne Barr sized platter. As if simply combating often-faceless enemies on fully realized 3D terrain wasn't troublesome enough, you've got to be concerned with public perceptions as well. Alongside power and funding, popularity itself is a resource. You access new technology by championing the goals of your organization through actions, not words. Media coverage proliferates as play develops, casting generals in whatever light their latest round of decision-making has adopted. So if you want funding for that fashionable advanced tank, hold off on icing out the helpless females, soldier-boy.

Now imagine being concerned with PR issues while you are trying to wage war, build bases, and manufacture troops. Sounds complex, right? Actually, in practice, the answer is yes and no. Commanding officers—to whom you can allocate resource points and specific tasks—alleviate most of these hassles. Even with a workmanlike command interface and semi-intelligent advisors, however, keeping tabs on multiple conflicts and kinder, gentler wartime efforts demands a Herculean effort. Never mind that you're also simultaneously dealing with supposedly intelligent units who ignore direct orders 50% of the time.

Regardless, the battles are oddly satisfying. Tactically sound decisions based on elevation, locale and seemingly innocuous nearby resources (such as civilian outposts that your saboteurs can seek cover behind) win the day. Learning to seize territory without leaving a trail of pitiable corpses that Hannibal Lecter would be proud of in your wake is much more compelling than you'd be inclined to think. By hook or crook, even veteran commanders-in-chief will find themselves soundly schooled through novel lessons in the ancient art of war, despite the fact that most direct conflicts bear too strong a resemblance to countless others witnessed before.

Looming over, or perhaps lurking beneath, this hustle and bustle is a sound visual engine. At high resolutions the game looks crisp and clean, rendering outdoor terrain snappily with no pop-up or slowdown. Lavish explosions that occur when large unit formations begin exchanging incendiary gifts don't bog anything down either. In fact, they just look damned good. Meanwhile, a sharp TV-style presentation and strong aural support reinforce the mood. Were modern military tunes and eardrum-shattering blasts this appealing in reality, every day would be a good day to die.

Compelling yet demanding, *Conflict Zone* is best reserved for grizzled recruits who demand a rugged challenge. There is a method to the madness—this is a strong, solid strategy title with various concessions to reality. If it had just made a few more concessions to ease of play and unit responsiveness, you might have been looking at a five star general instead.

UPSIDE	New spin on an old conflict, strategically sound, superb presentation, a real time killer
DOWNSIDE	Steep system requirements, too-independent AI, information overload
RATING	★★★★½

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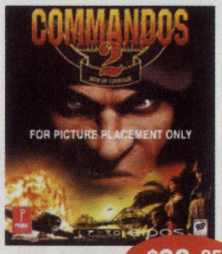
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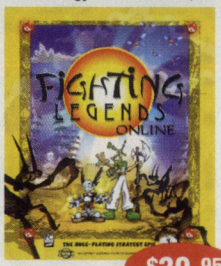
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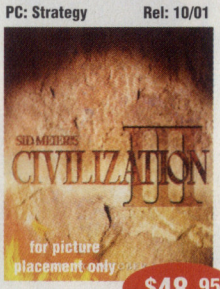
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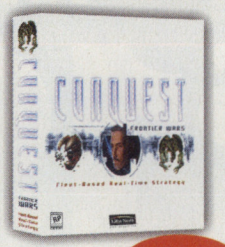
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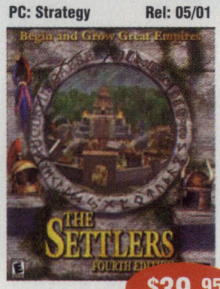
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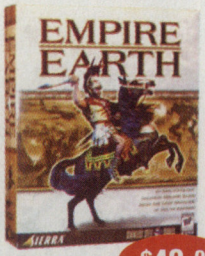
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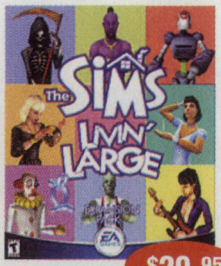
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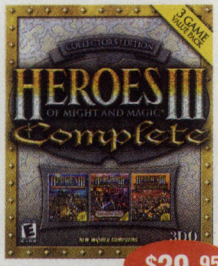
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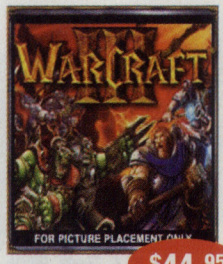
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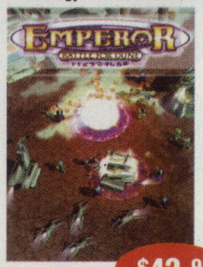
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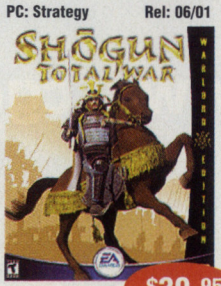
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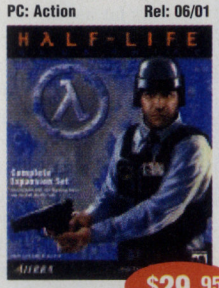
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PC: Action Rel: 06/01

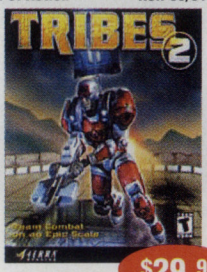
Half-Life: Blue Shift—Sierra



$29.95

PC: Action Rel: 03/01

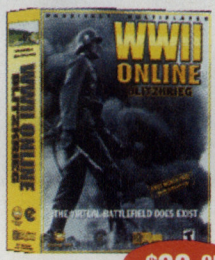
Tribes 2—Sierra



$29.95

PC: Action Rel: 06/01

World War II Online—Strategy First



$39.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 06/01

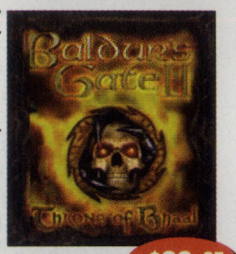
Diablo II Expansion Pack—Blizzard



$32.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 06/01

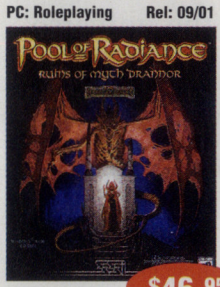
Baldur's Gate II Exp. Pack—Interplay



$29.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 09/01

Pool of Radiance—Ubi Soft



$46.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 09/01

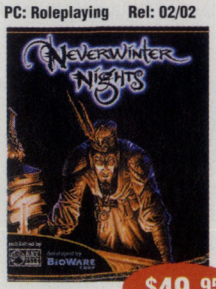
Arcanum—Sierra



$42.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 02/02

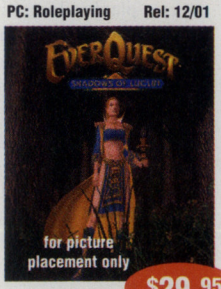
Neverwinter Nights—Interplay



$49.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 12/01

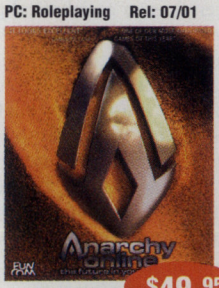
EverQuest: Shadows of Luclin



$29.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 07/01

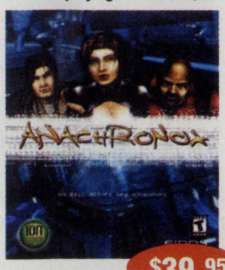
Anarchy Online—FunCom



$49.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 06/01

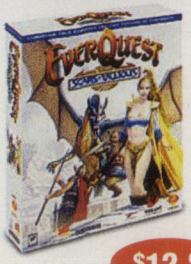
Anachronox—Eidos



$39.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 12/00

EverQuest: Scars of Velious—Sony



$12.95

PC: Roleplaying Rel: 10/01

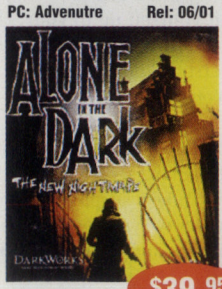
EverQuest Trilogy—Sony



$39.95

PC: Advenutre Rel: 06/01

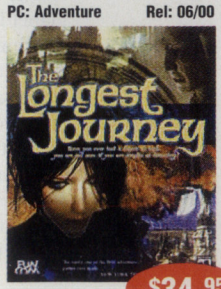
Alone in the Dark: New Ntmre—Infogrames



$39.95

PC: Adventure Rel: 06/00

Longest Journey—FunCom



$34.95



Cloud...umm...I mean...Boots invites a 'bot to eat hot blaster fire.

Anachronox

Tom Hall's guide to saving the universe

by Adam Fleet

GENRE Role-playing Game DEVELOPER Ion Storm [www.ionstorm.com] PUBLISHER Eidos Interactive [www.eidos.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 64MB RAM, 12 MB 3D Accelerator MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

What is Anachronox from Ion Storm? Is it a new line of hair care products from John Romero, guaranteed to keep your locks soft and manageable? Close, but no cigar. Is it the codename of Warren Specter's diabolical plot to take over the world, involving the Men in Black, Jimmy Hoffa, and a space alien named Phil? Getting warmer, but still no.

No, *Anachronox* is a console-style sci-fi role-playing game from the mind of Tom Hall. You walk through this little piece of Hall's brain as leading man Sylvester "Sly" Boots, washed-up private detective and reluctant hero extraordinaire. Just how down-and-out is Boots? During the course of the intro, Boots is thrashed by a thug, tossed through the window of his own office, and mocked by his own secretary. Broke, bruised, and in need of a stiff drink, Boots sets off under your control to make some dough before any more leg-breakers come back to finish the job. Several hours, numerous beatings, and one blown-up planet later, you'll find yourself up to your sleuthing ears in an adventure that holds the fate of the entire universe in the balance.

To say that Hall, a veteran of 3D shooters, borrowed heavily from past console games for his first big role-playing title is a little like saying the makers of *Duke Nukem 3D* might have seen *Evil Dead 2* and *Army of Darkness* before writing Duke's snappy one-liners. *Anachronox's* revolving party system—three members picked from a pool at select times—and active-time combat system—featuring battle skills that bear an uncanny similarity to Limit Breaks—are straight out of a Squaresoft game. Still, the game manages to skate the dangerously thin line between homage and theft with a kind of mocking acknowledgement that's just too funny to ignore or begrudge.

For a game that was years in the making, *Anachronox* falls short of being a treat for the senses. Some elements are well done, such as the character voices, which cruelly only come out to play during cinematic sequences but are colorful and well suited when they do. On the flip side, the music is what you would expect if the bastard love child of Yanni and Enya cut an album with John Tesh. It's eerily soothing, in a cure for insomnia kind of way, but it can mercifully be silenced if you can manage to stay conscious long enough to press the necessary buttons.

As far as the visuals go, there's no getting around the fact that *Anachronox* looks a little dated. It's nice to be enlightened and say that graphics don't really matter, but really they do, and an unfortunate side effect of the game's long development cycle is a modified *Quake II* engine that is showing its age like Keith Richards at an N'Sync concert. In high-resolution mode the damage is minimal, just giving the game a slightly retro look, but in low-res mode (640 by 480), the only other option, you get both retro and grainy, a bad combo for 30-plus hours of gameplay.

Another unwanted gift from the *Quake II* legacy are the smallish game areas, and the irritating load times. A linear, quest based structure makes up the majority of the plot, with Fatima (your trash-talking secretary) keeping track of what's required to move forward in the story. Side-quests, mini-games, and weirdly amusing bits of dialog are everywhere, but you're on your own keeping track of them. With quests throughout the game that require you to travel frequently across multiple areas, you'll learn to hate the sight of the loading screen pretty darn quick.

Anachronox provides an entertaining, if somewhat been-there-done-that, role-playing experience. The plot is irreverent and fun, if mostly formulaic, while the characters and dialog are a mix of *Monty Python* inspired humor and Douglas Adams style sensibility (or lack there of). It's obvious that Hall has used some tried and true elements from role-playing lore, but they're the classics for a reason, and they work as well here as they ever have in the past. Sadly, also present are some of the classic pitfalls, such as being forced to repeatedly talk to everyone in sight, follow some monotonous take-this-there quests, and suffer through numerous annoying area loads. Brief moments of brilliance speak of the fantastic game that *Anachronox* could have been, but it never quite makes it up to anything more than slightly above average. A good pick for role-playing fans, but don't expect the second coming.

UPSIDE	Console role-playing game style, tons of quests and mini-games, damn funny
DOWNSIDE	Dated graphics, some monotonous quest elements, irritating load times
RATING	★★★½☆



Honey! There are Manti at the door.

Empire of the Ants

Formicidae, yet not formidable

by Andrew S. Bub

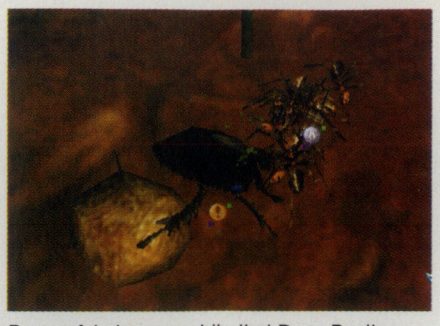
GENRE Strategy **DEVELOPER** Microids [www.microids.com] **PUBLISHER** Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 233, 3D accelerator card **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

Ants: the backyard proletariat, a pest mankind can truly admire. They work, they hunt, they fight, and they dedicate themselves selflessly to creating a sprawling underground kingdom. Ants are perfect fodder for a real-time strategy game and that's why Strategy First has brought this Microids developed game to our soil (it was released in Europe about a year ago).

Empire of the Ants isn't *Sim Ant*, though it borrows a bit from Maxis' earlier game, but it's hard not to wish it had borrowed a bit more. It's based on Bernard Werber's best selling novel about intelligent ant city-state empires and their struggles against the insect kingdom, their pursuit of innovation and, ultimately, relationship to humanity. Reading the book isn't required, though it helps you swallow some of the more unusual notions in the game, like ants riding on tamed Dung Beetles, acid-spitting ants, tank-ants, and so forth. It may feel as though they were stuffed into the game simply to make it play more like *Command & Conquer*, but they're actually straight out of the book.

You control the armies and workers of a Russet ant city, which is part of the Federation. The Federation consists of several colonies that make up the Russet Empire, and it's your job to build functioning cities, command them, and conquer your enemies. The game consists of a skirmish mode and a mission-based campaign and you play on two basic maps: an above ground resource gathering map, and an underground resource management map. Up above you've got to send teams of warrior ants in search of food and prey. After you find a crunchy stalk of edible grass or a hapless insect that you've killed, the workers will automatically move there and harvest the food for you. Below ground you'll store food and building materials, grow edible fungus, raise Dung Beetles and other ant war inventions, and collect honeydew nectar. Of course, the massive and all-important queen is housed down there too. You can have her lay specialist ants like nurse ants, ants that specialize in harvesting honeydew juice, or young queens, which are used to form new colonies.

The food and resource management makes the game somewhat like a less fun version of *Sim Ant*. Using tiles, you assign the priority of different types of foraging and building (digging), and you can quickly tell workers to begin a project in this manner. Building and repairing chambers is essential for an efficient hive; letting your queen's chamber get damaged may result in a queen less inclined to lay eggs, which is disastrous. But



Be careful where you bite that Dung Beetle.

the resources that you need are too varied and too widely scattered across the map. It becomes a chore very quickly, especially on the more complex later missions when combat is never-ending.

Both maps are 3D and rotate-able, but the corridors are tight and the graphics are muddy and outdated, making it hard to see what you're doing and fairly dull to watch. The game engine can zoom, and at full distance things look pretty good if unmanageable—the foliage and sense of scale are particularly well done. But up close, this is one ugly game.

Combat is simplistic at best. You control small platoons of warriors rather than each individual insect, but the strategy still amounts to roping units and flinging them towards the enemy. The enemies are relentless, if idiotic. They may never attack in any coordinated way, but your warriors must be replenished or your resource gathering workers are going to get slaughtered. Spiders and other bugs can also ambush you. Lose your workers and your hive (and warriors) will starve and you'll slowly begin a slide that leads to losing the game.

Add to this non-reactive AI that has your warriors sitting idly by while their charges get eaten just a few body lengths away, and there's no warning system at all to alert you enemies are near when you're below ground. A single massive enemy Harvester ant can ruin your entire day in just a few minutes, killing group by group while you're watching tunnels get built.

Empire of the Ants is a simple city-building sim that plays like a real-time strategy game. Or perhaps it's the opposite of that. But more control of your units is necessary for a strategy title, and more impressive graphics and more complex tasks are important for a city builder. As it stands, this game gets neither right and has little to offer aside from a great concept.

UPSIDE	There really should be more ant-based strategy games
DOWNSIDE	Tries to be a city-building sim and a real-time strategy game and falls short at both
RATING	★★☆☆☆

Cossacks: European Wars

A clunky name for a pretty good game

RATING ★★★★☆

GENRE Real-time Strategy **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World [www.cossacks.com] **PUBLISHER** Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 200, 32MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2-7 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

This first-time offering by Ukrainian game company GSC Game World delves into the 17th and 18th centuries, an era when Cossacks were important in European warfare—at least in Eastern Europe. Real-time strategy veterans will be comfortable with *Cossacks'* basic concepts and controls. In most games, you start with a handful of peasants and some resources on a mostly



Masses of 18th Century cavalry can be created over time; Polish Winged Hussars! Who knew?



unknown map. It's up to you to establish a viable economy, explore the map and ultimately defeat you foes in battle. Pretty standard fare—what sets *Cossacks* apart from other games is its spectacular visuals and its attention to historical detail.

The wars of this era helped shape the world as it is today, but few games of any type have covered them, and this is where *Cossacks* really shines. True to the 17th Century, pike and shot is the order of the day, supplemented by cavalry and artillery. On entering the 18th Century, musketeers become the dominant infantry and cuirassiers replace the heavily armored cavalry of the previous century. With a drummer and an officer, infantry can be organized into units that can assume various formations that enhance their battlefield performance. Oddly, you must have exact numbers of troops to create these units.

The game comes with 16 nations, each well differentiated by its own unique artwork and special advantages and disadvantages. Buildings come in a variety of flavors, and some must be built before others become available. All this takes time, research, and resources (there are five), which in turn require their own buildings. The game is quite long—in addition to the five campaigns (about 10 missions each), it also offers several historic battles boasting thousands of troops. These can only be played in the online mode, however, which is prone to drops and lag.

Although there are troop upgrades galore, there is little information available on how combat works. *Cossacks* ships with a nice 195-page manual, but it casts little light on the game's parameters. Still, there's plenty here for the history fan who has always wanted to command Janissaries, Hetmen, or Xebecs, and the manual gives a great deal of historical background.—*Willie Albright*

Atari Anniversary Edition

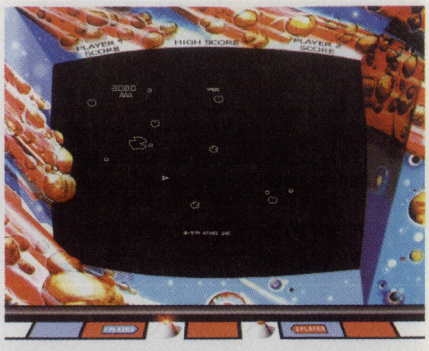
Time to line your monitor with quarters

RATING ★★★★☆

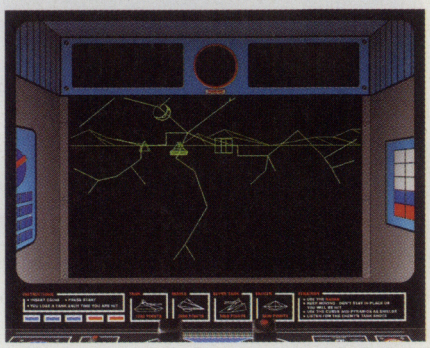
GENRE Arcade **DEVELOPER** Digital Eclipse [www.digitaleclipse.com] **PUBLISHER** Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 133, 16MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** 2 players, same machine **ESRB** Everyone

"It was thirty (odd) years ago today... Nolan Bushnell taught us all to play..."

On that note (and with apologies to Lennon/McCartney), Infogrames has trotted out a spiffed up retread of the old *Atari Collection* game package. *Atari Anniversary Edition* features ten perfectly emulated Atari coin-op classics including *Pong*, *Gravitar*, *Super Breakout*, *Missile Command*, *Asteroids*, *Battlezone*, *Tempest*, *Warlords*, *Crystal Castles*, *Centipede*, and a couple retread sequels (*Asteroids Deluxe* and *Millipede*). Each of the 12 games features the original screen artwork and includes working one player/two player buttons (which you have to click on to play the game). Additionally each game has a new mode that alters the graphics and mixes up the levels and challenges.



Asteroids is much cooler with its original screen border; This means Game Over.



You can choose to install the game to your hard drive, but it plays just fine from the CD-ROM itself. Disappointingly, you must have the CD in the drive even if you opt for the full install. That's a shame, because this sort of gaming begs to be available on a whim. The only other issue is control. *Battlezone*—which featured two joysticks in the arcade—just isn't a keyboard game, and *Tempest* is awfully imprecise without its signature dial.

As an added bonus there are 37 minutes of interview footage with Bushnell, fonts, wallpaper, icons, and other Atari goodies. In the interviews you learn, for example, that the name of the company came from the Japanese strategy classic *Go* and that Bushnell probably wouldn't have sold the company had he simply taken a vacation from the early grind. It's nice to see such an exhaustive conversation with a luminary, but it would have been even nicer to hear from specific developers concerning their own games. That's how the excellent *Williams* collection did it, and it made for more brisk and interesting viewing.

At the bargain bin price, this is the perfect arcade classic package for hardcore retro gamers, parents looking for something simpler and less disturbing for kids and, of course, thirty-somethings looking to recapture a little of their past glory. —*Andrew S. Bub*





A zoomed-out view is necessary to see the impact of the French storming Fort Ratisbon; The scale of the battle of Teugn-Hausen can be seen in a zoomed-out 2D aspect.

Campaign Eckmuhl

Nappy off guard

RATING ★★★★½

GENRE Wargame DEVELOPER John Tiller
PUBLISHER HPS [www.hpssims.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium 133, 32MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2 players; Internet, LAN, Hotseat, Play-by-Email ESRB Everyone

If you've followed John Tiller's *Early American Battles* series, you wondered when Napoleon was going to horn in on the act. Well, he's here, albeit in a neglected campaign. *Campaign Eckmuhl* covers the 1809 fighting when the reformed Austrian army first tried its new system in Bavaria. Although the Austrians met their usual fate, this attempt made for interesting times and makes for an interesting game.

Game mechanics and basic play are the same as in *1776* and *1812*. Click-and-drag, toolbars and drop-down menus ease control of battalions and batteries in this turn-based game. With the sharp but simple graphics, you choose from five different views to see the field. On-screen or printed-out, the manuals will have you charging around quickly. Spicing up the over 150 scenarios is easy with the scenario and campaign editors.

Don't think that this product is just the older series in Imperial glory. Tiller has made adjustments to capture the unique feel of Napoleonic combined arms tactics. You command many different nationalities and unit types in huge battles. You can shake out separate skirmisher units and deploy into square and two-hex formations. Lancers, Cossacks and heavy cavalry have unique melee effects. Gunners of unlimbered artillery pieces hide from melee and can re-crew their guns later. Tiller elegantly solves problems in tactical Napoleonics that have stymied other designers. The essence of strategy in 1809 stands out in the campaign decision tree with truly linked battles.

A few problems remain, however. While morale and supply work well enough, you'll run into communication problems in the command-and-control system. The AI plays like it's afraid of its own shadow and cavalry doesn't counter-charge or run amuck.

For all that, *Campaign Eckmuhl* is a major advance in computer Napoleonic gaming. Like Archduke Charles in 1809, the series has a ways to go, but it'll get there. —*Jim Cobb*

911 Fire Rescue

Fall into a burning ring of fire

RATING ★★½☆☆

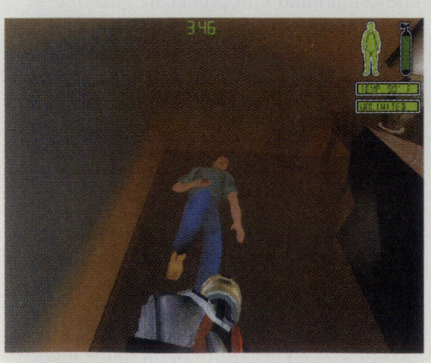
GENRE Firefighting Action DEVELOPER Sunstorm Interactive [www.sunstorm.com] PUBLISHER WizardWorks [www.wizardworks.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

By launching that entire hunting game craze with the original *Deer Hunter*, Sunstorm Interactive and WizardWorks destroyed PC gaming. That game's incredible success, inexplicable as it may have been to most rational humans, led to shelves full of oh-so-bad budgetware games that, on the surface, seem conceptually interesting but are executed with all the subtlety and flair of William Shatner singing an aria on speed. Now they're lighting gaming's bloated corpse on fire and dousing it with *911 Fire Rescue*, a fully 3D game poised to do for dousing fires what *Deer Hunter* did for slaughtering helpless woodland creatures.

The game includes 17 missions of wildly varying difficulty set in your normal non-fire retardant locations: houses, offices, and roads with car crashes and flaming concrete. The difficulty is mostly artificial—each mission has an arbitrary time limit—but despite this, the missions are oddly... entertaining. You have to complete each one to unlock the next, which makes the game a sometimes-frustrating exercise in "repeat mission until you throw the box across the room in disgust." It only takes a few hours to finish things up, though serious firefighter simulation fans can keep playing each mission repeatedly to better their previous score.

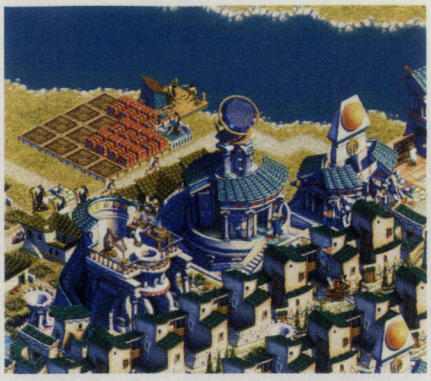
It's tempting to let anonymous cubicle farms and their zombie workers burn to the hell that spawned them, but the game doesn't have actual dynamic fires—they just sit there flickering, waiting for your mighty hose to wash them away. Despite this technical limitation (which would require a considerably more complex game engine), the actual smoke and flying ember effects are shockingly good; unfortunately, the water effects are so bad it looks like you're spewing cotton balls from your mighty hose. Aficionados of this "burning" genre will also be disappointed to find that the various bodies littering the levels aren't properly flambéed. Blame Senator Lieberman.

While starting fires is generally more entertaining than putting them out, *911 Fire Rescue* is surprisingly north of completely sucking (the air out of a room, as a fire is wont to do). But it's also south of not entirely sucking (again, the air out of a room), which puts it firmly in the camp of being nearly worth its $20 price tag. —*Steve Bauman*

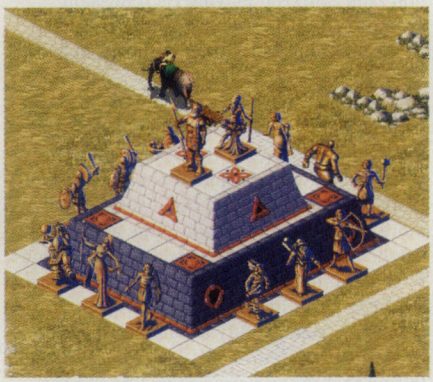




He's, like, so dead; Put out that concrete before it consumes us all!



Several of Poseidon's new science buildings dominate the skyline of a small city; Now that the Pyramid of the Pantheon is complete, maybe the gods will stop destroying your city as fast as you can build it.



Poseidon

Much, much more of the same isn't a bad thing

RATING ★★★★☆

GENRE Strategy **DEVELOPER** Impression Games [www.impressiongames.com] **PUBLISHER** Sierra [www.sierra.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Zeus: Master of Olympus **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Everyone

Most expansion packs really don't add much gameplay to the original title. A few additional levels, some new techs, and a couple graphics tweaks are usually enough to coax more dollars from fans of the first game, freeing developers to pursue their real interest, the inevitable sequel. *Poseidon*, the follow-up to Sierra's city-builder sim *Zeus*, ignores this conventional wisdom and delivers as much gameplay as the game on which it is based.

Set in the mythical lands of Atlantis, *Poseidon* offers 45 new scenarios spread over six challenging campaigns. Your city grows from its lowly beginnings as a small farming city to the capital of a mighty maritime empire with interests and colonies from Central America to Greece. Smaller, sandbox style adventures allow you to tinker with city design unhindered by campaign goals, or to experience the destruction of Atlantis at the hands (and thunderbolts) of an angry pantheon.

Poseidon also offers many new buildings. While the replacement of *Zeus*' podiums, theatres, and gymnasiums with observatories, laboratories, and bibliothekes won't alter your city design strategies much (though they're great eye-candy), other changes are more significant. Hippodromes provide an income and prestige boost, if you can find enough room for their huge tracks. Pyramids, which contain Egyptian, Mayan, and Greek design elements, are both attractive and powerful. Completing the Pyramid of the Pantheon, for example, ensures that no wrathful deities will attack your vulnerable home.

Though none of *Poseidon*'s new features changes *Zeus*' core gameplay in any meaningful way, there is an awful lot of new content here. On one level, *Poseidon* is merely (much) more of the same, but you'll be having too much fun to care. —*Dave Markell*

Steel Soldiers

General Zod and friends crack open some fresh cans of you-know-what

RATING ★★★½☆

GENRE Real-time Strategy **DEVELOPER** Bitmap Brothers [www.bitmap-brothers.co.uk] **PUBLISHER** EON Digital Entertainment [www.eon-digital.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 266, 64MB **MULTIPLAYER** 2-8 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Teen

Several years ago, *Z* belched onto the strategy scene with a mix of irreverent humor and frantic gameplay. *Steel Soldiers*, its belated sequel, adds a new spatial dimension with its move to 3D terrain, while at the same time removing one of the characteristics that helped distinguish its predecessor. In *Z*, no one could build unit-producing factories—they all had to be captured.

Both games feature a resource model based on claiming and holding territories, not on harvesting wood or building mines on metal deposits. This shifts the gameplay towards tactics rather than economy, as the focus is almost purely on expansion and the mix of units that will best achieve that goal.

The inclusion of construction robots, however, tends to weaken the distinction between *Steel Soldiers* and its other real-time strategy brethren. You can use them to construct their own factories and air hangars on any open spot of ground. Rugged terrain limits these choices, but this feature gives the player some freedoms the original did not permit.

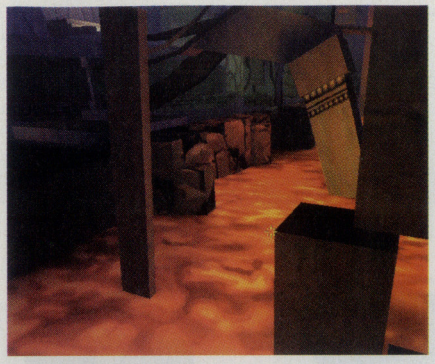
Single-player campaign games are most stimulating during their beginnings, where both sides scramble to claim the surrounding territory, and then dig in. The maps—sprinkled with bridges, rivers, and ridgelines—tend to be linear, which reduces the end game to a matter of using one's superior resources to squeegee the enemy from his remaining territories.

Both the visuals and interface are very pleasing, although it took a few small patches before the interface was up to its current state (one standard—assigning to a factory the aggressiveness of the units it produces—is still sorely needed). Pathfinding, line of sight, and group behavior all exceed the norm for this type of game. Add a solid plot and great voice acting to this mix, and the resulting game proves quite entertaining despite a general lack of originality. —*Dave Perkins*



As in the prequel, destructible and repairable bridges play strategic roles; Note the reflecting water, the smoke trails of the rockets, and the armored personnel carrier, which pops open its door to indicate that it can hold more passengers.





Even Atlantis has lava.

Atlantis: The Lost Empire

A good game for grade-schoolers, a boring one for everyone else

RATING ★★½☆☆

GENRE Action DEVELOPER Zombie, Inc. [www.zombie.com] PUBLISHER Disney Interactive [disneyinteractive.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 266, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-4 Players; Internet, LAN, Modem ESRB Everyone

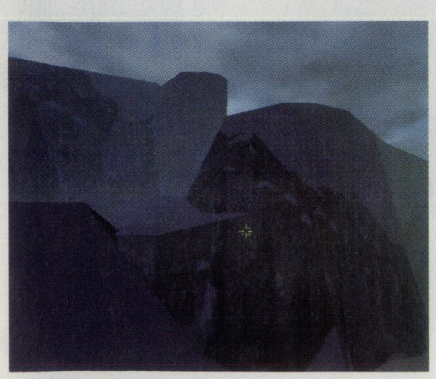
Atlantis: The Lost Empire, based on the movie, takes you on an escapade from Iceland to the lost city itself, which despite sounding pretty entertaining is as thrilling as watching *The English Patient* on Valium. Granted, the game isn't trying to be the next *Half-Life*—in fact it's recommended for gamers eight years and up—but even youngsters might find the game stale and at times even a bit boring.

As you would expect from a Disney game, the story isn't bad. There are two separate adventures, "The Search for the Journal" and "Atlantis: Trial by Fire." The first is set in 1901 in Iceland. You play Milo Thatch, a linguist and a cartographer, who is part of an expedition to recover the lost journal that reveals secrets on how to locate the infamous lost city. After locating the journal, it's time to undertake the second adventure that takes you into the heart of Atlantis itself.

The bigger problem is the gameplay. Each level begins with a quick mission briefing. Once you begin a new area, you can't save your game until you finish it. The old "reload until you get it right" formula simply isn't fun, no matter how old you are. The levels themselves, while at times imaginative, are mostly mundane. The game itself is also very short. Each adventure contains 12 levels, and some can be completed in a matter of minutes. This may explain the lack of a save game feature, but it doesn't make for a particularly compelling game.

On the plus side, the graphics aren't too shabby. The monsters look good (the giant insects are especially creepy) and the environments are superb. Atlantis itself looks sharp and has a unique architectural structure. The game also ships with full multiplayer, with multiple game types (Capture the Flag, Race, and Tournament).

Atlantis isn't going to tear anyone away from *No One Lives Forever*, but it's a decent game for a youngster to cut his or her teeth on if new to gaming. It's also a safe bet for parents who feel that games like *Soldier of Fortune* are a tad too insane for their nine year old. —*William Abner*



This just looks downright cold.

X-COM Enforcer

Fans of the series, prepare to run in terror

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Action PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] DEVELOPER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

It seems the de-evolution of the *X-COM* series is complete. This latest game, *X-COM Enforcer*, has all the complexity and depth of a frying pan. It's a safe bet it will send fans of the beloved original into fits of apoplexy. If you don't mind your action fast and mindless, however, you may find something to like. When you get right down to it, it's hard to deny the fun of smashing all those familiar *X-COM* aliens from *Enforcer's* rapid fire, *Unreal Tournament* engine-powered viewpoint.

As the robotic creation of an overly chatty scientist, you go forth into the world to do some spot alien extermination. With over thirty-five levels ranging from canyons, sewers, and urban sprawls, to trailer parks, secret bases, an alien space ship, and a football field, the action certainly gets around. You face constant hordes of aliens small and large (and in some cases, really huge), and there's seldom a break in the action throughout the game. This is a good thing, since the game doesn't have much else to recommend it. It only lets you save after completing a level, the Enforcer can carry a grand total of one weapon at a time, and there's a puzzling lack of vertical camera control.



The Enforcer takes it to the streets to battle evil alien hordes.

For all that, anyone looking for a mindless action buzz will find that *Enforcer* fits the bill. The graphics are sharp, colorful, and detailed. The twenty different enemy types are suitably bug-eyed and vicious, and you can even change the skin of your Enforcer to make him look shinier or scarier. The biggest bright point is the inclusion of co-operative gameplay. Playing with a friend over a LAN makes the levels far more manageable, and while both the single and multiplayer gameplay can get monotonous over the long haul, it's entertaining in smaller doses.

X-COM lovers will hate this game, and it's clear the label was just tacked on as some lame attempt to cash in on the series' brand appeal. Beyond that, *Enforcer* doesn't even try to be an innovative shooter. It sticks to the very basics, relying on eye candy, constant action, solid level design, and cool guns. It's the game equivalent of a popcorn movie, and on those terms it holds its own. —*Jason D'Aprile*



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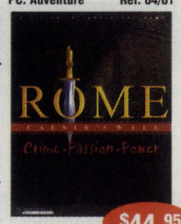
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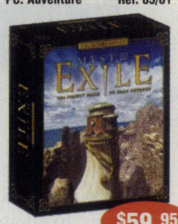
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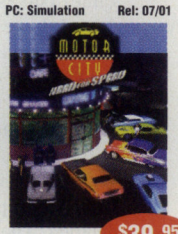

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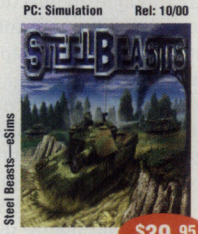

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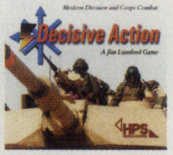

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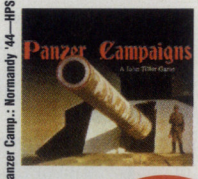

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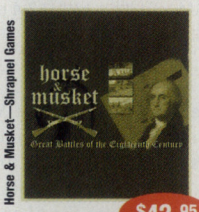

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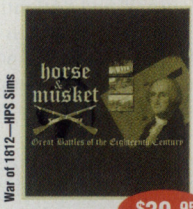
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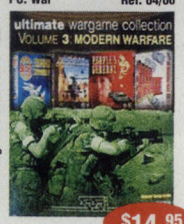
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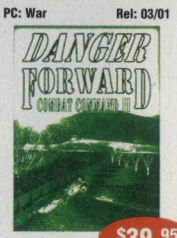

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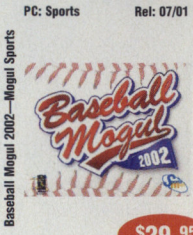
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What a great day for a hanging!



Infiltrating this place is not going to be easy.

Desperados: Wanted Dead or Alive

A fun yet frustrating journey through the wild, wild, West

by William Abner

GENRE Strategy **DEVELOPER** Spellbound [www.spellbound.net] **PUBLISHER** Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium 233, 32MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** None **ESRB** Teen

Desperados: Wanted Dead *or Alive* is a love it or hate it kind of game. Either you hate puzzle-based strategy designs that force you to "get it right," reloading saved game after saved game until you figure out the proper way in which to complete a mission, or you love the challenge of figuring out how the designers want you to approach a specific scenario. If puzzle games are to your liking, *Desperados* is well worth your time.

Much like *Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines*, the game it most resembles, you need to approach each mission as if it's a puzzle. You lead a small squad of outlaws through 25 story-linked scenarios; each member of your team has unique abilities and it's up to you figure out the best way in which to utilize them. Thankfully, the game isn't so scripted that only one plan of attack works. Usually there are multiple solutions to a problem, especially once you get your entire team together.

Your gang consists of the protagonist, John Cooper, a quick drawing tough guy that immediately reminds you of Clint Eastwood, Gary Cooper, and John Wayne, all rolled into one. He carries a knife, which he alternately uses to gut people or free them from capture. He also has the ability to scale sheer surfaces; he's quite the hero. Other partners include Sam Williams, who is good with explosives. Doc McCoy is the team's healer, and also lobs vials of sleeping gas. Kate O'Hara is the sex kitten of the group who shows some leg in order to distract bad guys. Mia Yung is a blow dart expert and uses her pet monkey to distract enemies (we don't make this stuff up). Finally, there's Sanchez, the hefty Mexican who drinks Tequila in great amounts and hurls enemies out of windows.

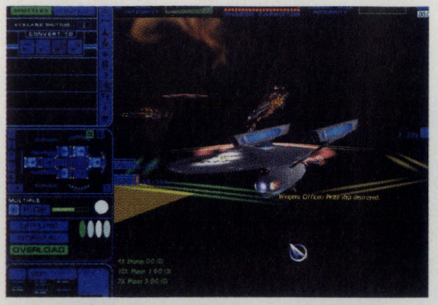
The environments in each mission play a key role. In fact, studying the landscape is critical to success as it all factors into the puzzle of each scenario. For example, high grass is good for lying low—so much so that if you are in tall grass it's virtually impossible for the enemy to see you even if you are shooting at them from five feet away. Using your character's items in conjunction with the terrain makes for some compelling and rewarding gameplay.

The bad guy and townsfolk AI is scripted, but in a game like this that's not necessarily a bad thing. If a commoner sees a dead body lying in the street he or she will run off and alert the authorities. Thankfully, you can drag bodies out of sight as to avoid such a calamity. However, your teammates' AI is a bit odd in that it's completely nonexistent. Your team does nothing at all without direction. Even when being filled full of lead they sit there and take it with a smile.

The biggest problem is that the game is exceedingly difficult, and there are no difficulty settings to aid the unsuspecting. Even with the ability to save your game at any point during a mission, the game is just too tough and unforgiving. It's not uncommon to reload a quick save 20 or even 30 times on the harder scenarios until you "get it right." All it takes is one false mouse click or a missed shot that alerts guards and it's time to reload. It's just no fun to play a mission for five minutes, save, play for five more minutes, save... You become more concerned with saving your progress during the longer missions than you are with enjoying yourself. Nothing is more frustrating than playing a mission for an hour, forgetting to save, and getting killed by a sniper that you didn't even see. Time to reload and check your blood pressure.

Desperados is a tough game to categorize. While it's impossible to overlook the game's unforgiving level of difficulty, it is often very entertaining. If you have a plethora of patience and are looking for a wildly challenging puzzle/strategy game then it's worth a look.

UPSIDE	Sharp graphics, polished Old West atmosphere, multiple ways to solve each mission
DOWNSIDE	More of a puzzle game than a strategy game, frustrating, voice acting is atrocious
RATING	★★★½☆



Kirk and crew gracefully fly through the burning wreckage.

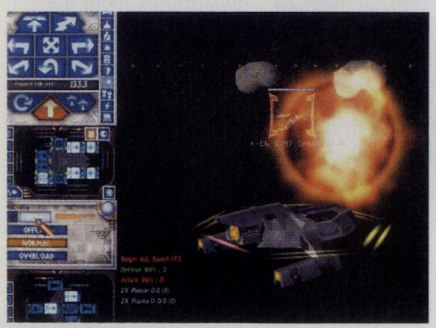
Starfleet Command Volume II: Orion Pirates

Hoist the Jolly Roger and bring on the green Orion women!

RATING ★★★☆☆

GENRE Trekky Strategy DEVELOPER Taldren [www.taldren.com] PUBLISHER Interplay [www.interplay.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN, serial connection ESRB Everyone

Starfleet Command II provided a graphical facelift and some more stuff to the inspired strategy series, but the ambitious multiplayer component wasn't working when the game shipped. Now that Dynaverse II is finally up and running, Interplay is beaming a stand-alone expansion pack into stores. Its mission: to attract those who shied away from *Starfleet Command II's* troubled launch and to hand over some more stuff for die-hard veterans.



Pour the Romulan rum, and hoist the Jolly Roger on subspace!

To that end *Orion Pirates* offers a bunch of new skirmish missions, a new campaign, a handful of new ships and weapons systems, and eight new pirate cartels. Each pirate group uses the same ships and weapons though, so they differ only in goals. Interplay only holds the license for the original series, so the new pirate cartels bring the faction total to seven (including the Federation, Klingons, Romulans, Gorn, Mirak, Hydrans, and the ISC).

Once again where *Starfleet Command* succeeds is in the strategic combat and the balance that hinges on ship's energy usage. Adapted from the classic *Starfleet Battles* board game, the ship to ship combat is unparalleled in depth or complexity. These hardcore gaming roots lead to what remains the game's biggest fault, however—the missions and single-player Dynaverse II are soulless and completely lacking the personality that is integral to the *Star Trek* setting. In that way *Orion Pirates* is a missed opportunity to spice up the game with a real story-based campaign. Still, some of the missions are clever, and the ones that are inspired by classic *Trek* episodes ("A Piece of the Action") are welcome. But don't expect cut scenes or a whole lot of voice work.

Much more successful is the late-in-coming Dynaverse II multiplayer campaign. Promised with *Starfleet Command Volume II*, but not actually delivered until six months later in the form of a free patch, it's a semi-persistent version of the solo-campaign. It's just more fun joining a faction and assaulting enemy sectors populated by other players. Through the constant chat room babbling, you can add some much needed life to the game. The result is a perfect launching point for anyone new to the series, but it simply isn't worth the steep $30 price tag for anyone who already owns *Starfleet Command Volume II*. —*Andrew S. Bub*

Front Office Football: The College Years

Solecismic goes back to school and earns high marks

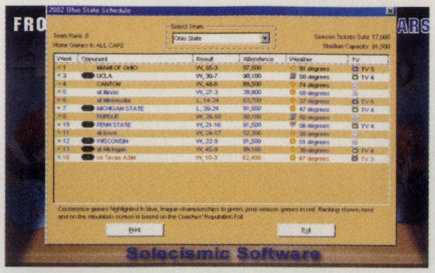
RATING ★★★★½

GENRE Sports DEVELOPER Solecismic Software [www.solecismic.com] PUBLISHER Solecismic Software [www.solecismic.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 266, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

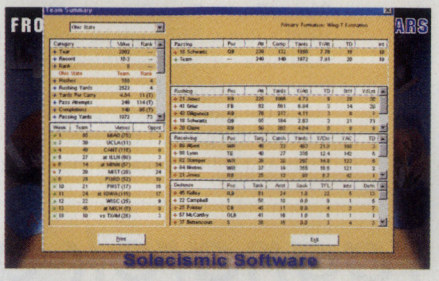
Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

College football games are few and far between on the PC, but Solecismic Software, creator of the award-winning text-based *Front Office Football* games, rescues hardcore PC football fans with the release of *Front Office Football: The College Years*. It's so deep that is simulates nearly every facet of college football, right down to telling you whether a player has a girlfriend or not.

Fans of the series are sure to feel right at home with the general interface as it's basically the same design, albeit with a college tilt.



The Bucks whip Michigan en route to a 10-2 season; the new Team Summary screen provides a wealth of info.



Nearly every Division 1-A school is in the game, though some teams must be modified (South Bend is actually Notre Dame, for example). The Bowl system is in place, but you need to edit the names of them, as well. It does a wonderful job creating an entire college football universe. Everything one you possibly want in a college football game is here: players must pass classes or risk being suspended, scholarships are assigned to walk-ons, players that have off the field issues may perform sporadically—it's exhaustingly detailed.

The high school recruitment process in the game is deep—very deep. In fact, it's so time consuming that it's not a bad idea to let your assistants recruit high school talent for you until you get the hang of it. It's possible to spend hours (literally) each week just doing recruit work. But it's worth it when that number one ranked stud signs a letter of intent.

The game's biggest shortcomings are in the way it ranks teams and assigns Bowl match-ups (thankfully the game comes with the option to play a 24-team post-season tourney… damn the BCS!). There are times when the rankings simply make no sense whatsoever. For example, if a team wins the Big Ten, it laughable that the same team would be ranked below *two* other teams in the same conference at season's end—especially if they beat those teams during the season.

Bowl and ranking oddities aside, *The College Years* is a must for college football fans that don't need graphics to enjoy a sports game. It's as deep a simulation of college football that you'll find anywhere, and with the absolute dearth of football games for the PC it comes along at the perfect time.
—*William Abner*

OUT of the BOX

Rick "Dark" Francis wanted more from Human Head's *Rune*. Although he enjoyed the game immensely, he felt that it was missing a certain something because of the lack of a cooperative play mode. Instead of taking the easy way out and moving on to another game, Francis chose the more arduous path and decided to make a cooperative multiplayer mod for the game. I had the chance to chat with Francis recently about the trials and tribulations of developing the mod.

ragnarok and roll

Rune goes co-op

What inspired you to design the Rune Coop mod?

Rick "Dark" Francis: I'm a big fan of *Heretic 2* and its cooperative play, so when I saw that there was no coop in *Rune* I was disappointed. After finishing the game I knew that it just had to have coop added. So I decided to look into the editor and see what could be done with the maps. After some testing, I saw that coop could be implemented. That's where I started looking around for other team members to help out. I contacted a friend of mine named Richard Sorensen to help with the level editing, and a few months later I found Rickardo Cleaver online in the *Rune* game forum. Richard, Rickardo, and I spent six months working on *Rune Coop*. We put in over 750 hours to get the mod to a professional level.

Did the project get bigger than you anticipated?

At first it seemed that this wasn't going to be hard, but we soon learned that we had jumped into something bigger than the three of us. We ran into many obstacles that we just didn't count on. Every level had to extensively modified. *Rune* wasn't written for solo campaign multiplayer and this presented big problems. By this time I'd contacted Dave Halsted at Human Head for help, and there wasn't a day that went by for over four months that Dave and myself didn't have email contact.

One of our biggest problems was fixing the AI's fixation problem. This is where the AI would lock onto the first character it saw and refuse to fight anyone else. Then we had to figure out how we were going to get the SARK transition to work, the part where the hero turns into a Hell Spawn. These were major tasks that required many programming changes. We also had to deal with the level changes for the players, as they wouldn't take their current weapons to the next level with them.



Getting bloody with friends.

Are you satisfied with the final product, or are you continuing to tweak things?

We're very happy with the way the mod turned out. We were going to do as little as possible just to make coop work, but the more we worked the more we did to make the game itself even better. The feedback from the community was great. We completed what we set out to do and that was very rewarding in itself. We've been working on a few of the maps to fine tune things even more, and those maps are included in the full version of our mod. Unfortunately, *Rune*'s publishers at Take 2 elected to not put our coop mod in the Gold edition of the game. This was a big disappointment for us and Human Head.

How much do you think that the mod community would benefit from this level of developer support?

We can't say enough great things about the guys at Human Head. We had daily contact with Dave Halsted, Ted Halsted, and Tim Gerritsen. Without their help, *Rune Coop* wouldn't have turned out as good as it did. I think that developers should help out the mod community. Look at what *Counterstrike* has done to *Half-Life*. This says a lot about what a mod can do.

Any plans to continue with level design in the future?

Actually, we have plans for a future project, but I can't say what yet. I've also been invited to help out on a new mod to add cooperative play to *Deus Ex*. ●

Getting More From...

Diablo II

Once Baal has been sent back to hell, you can continue your dungeon crawling with the aid of *Eastern Sun*. This modification makes dramatic changes to character skills, incorporates a brand new set of powerful unique items, increases your inventory and stash sizes, pumps up the strength of many monster types, and even adds some new variations on a few beastly favorites. Online play is not supported by Blizzard s Battle.net service, though there is a free server dedicated to *Eastern Sun*. More than 1,000 users are registered, so finding an online opponent or partner isn t difficult. The mod s community is even active enough to sponsor monthly tournaments.

Icewind Dale: Heart of Winter

Those of you disappointed with the measly 15 hours of gameplay served up by the *Icewind Dale* expansion pack *Heart of Winter* now have less to complain about. Interplay and Black Isle Studios have listened to your criticisms and released *Trials of the Luremaster*, a free download that gives you a mysterious haunted castle to explore. This, um, add-on expansion pack (both *Icewind Dale* and *Heart of Winter* must be installed to play *Trials*) features a new style of gameplay, with devious puzzles replacing the hack and slash combat of the earlier efforts. The only catch here is the download size at 72 MB, a high-speed Internet connection or a lot of patience is a prerequisite.

Black & White

If the once-engaging spectacle of your naughty tiger treating villagers like Slim Jims has begun to drag a little, download some new goodies. Start with the official map pack from development house Lionhead Studios and then move on to interesting third-party creations such as ATG003 s Daycare map that helps you develop your creature, CrazyBoy s CrazyBoy World bizarro skirmish map with lots of miracle dispensers, and much more. Anyone interested in doing some design work with *Black & White* should head to the Black & White Editors site and grab the B&W Utilities Beta, an editor that allows the manipulation of villager names and in-game images, and SADEX, a sound file ripper.

Quake III: Arena

While there are a lot of *Quake III: Arena* mods out there, nothing looks quite like *Bid for Power*, a total conversion currently being fashioned after the Japanese anime cult hit *Dragonball Z*. The mod incorporates the vivid colors and interesting characters of the TV show into numerous multiplayer gaming styles from standard deathmatch through a Capture the Flag variant called Capture the Dragonballz and other unique modes. Role-playing elements are noteworthy, with each character featuring different attack options and level advancement. Also noteworthy is the dramatic palette of Japanese anime, which has completely replaced the more subdued hues of the original game and turned the grimy killing floor of *Quake III* into a brilliant cartoon that wouldn t be out of place on your television.

Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn

Anyone struggling with the vast number of spellcasting choices available to their clerics and wizards should surf to Jochem van t Hull s *Baldur s Gate II* Spell Reference website. All of the incantations available in the game are covered in depth, including strategic tips, handy range-effect stats (hey, watch where you re casting that Fireball!), and a table of buff protection spells.

Jagged Alliance 2

Even though *Jagged Alliance 2* didn t exactly set the North American sales charts on fire, Sirtech s turn-based game of squad combat has developed a cult following online. A number of mods can be found at the *Jagged Alliance Galaxy*, including the noteworthy *Deidranna Lives*. This fan-designed sequel takes the nastiest mercenaries who ve ever flipped through a copy of *Soldier of Fortune* back to Arulco for another encounter with Queen Deidranna. If you do your job properly, maybe she ll stay dead this time.



Icewind Dale: Trials of the Luremaster is what you might call an "official" mod.



Quake III: Bid for Power— mod making at its finest, or lawsuit in the making?

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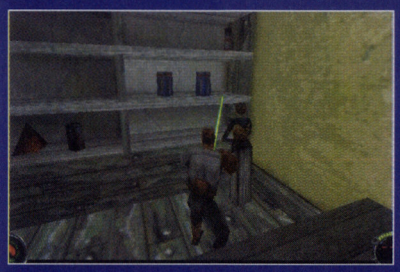
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Jedi Knight Dark Forces II

As part of the LucasArts Archives value line, *Jedi Knight* can now be had for as little as $14.99. While the visuals are a little dated, blasting stormtroopers never gets old, and contemporary systems make everything look nice and pretty in crisp 1600x1200 resolution. [LucasArts/1997]

Need for Speed High Stakes

Still arguably the best arcade racer ever released for the PC, *Need for Speed: High Stakes* is now available as an EA Classic budget title for just $14.99. [Electronic Arts/ 1999]

Caesar III

Although *Caesar III* lacks some of the refinements featured in later additions to Impressions Games' highly regarded City Building Series, great attention to detail makes it a must-play... particularly if you can find it for less than $15. [Sierra/1998]

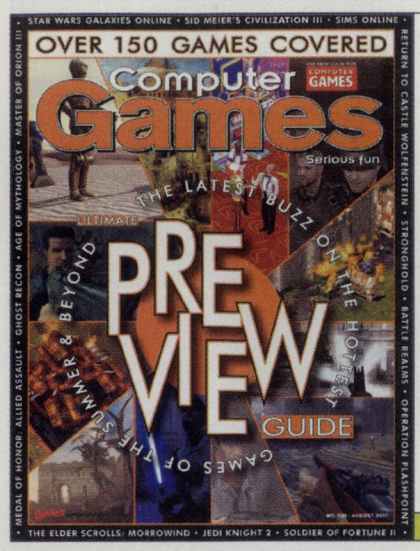
Wheel of Time

This unsung first-person shooter take on Robert Jordan's acclaimed *Wheel of Time* series of fantasy novels is a steal at less than $10. One of those critically acclaimed sleepers that just never sold, *Wheel of Time* garnered critical raves for its innovative magic system, challenging puzzles, and an elaborate and involving plot. [GT Interactive/1999]

REBOUND

readers speak their minds

email us at editor@cdmag.com



Where have all the good letter writers gone? Where are the wonderful incoherent scribes, the glorious letters full of righteous indignation… are we slipping, or are you? Anyway, in reference to the comment in August's editorial that there's a "27% chance" the computer industry is doomed, reader Zoom Zoom wrote in explaining that emulation is the secret. "As computers keep on getting faster, they will have the power to emulate any console system." He/she/it wasn't as enamored with the preview guide itself: "As much as I like previews, over 150 games is just too much… I mean, you covered games like S.W.I.N.E, with pigs fighting rabbits! That's pathetic." Yeah, well… judge not lest ye be judged. It may end up being the best "pigs fighting rabbits" game ever made. And then who will be laughing, huh, punk? Bah! On with the letters.

Too many games

You asked if PC gaming is dying—I seriously doubt it, but I won't be doing my part to support it for a while. Out of all those myriad and fascinating games previewed in your magazine in August, I will be buying one. Count them, one. I have been waiting for *Civilization III* for almost two years now, but the rest of them can just wait.

All you editors get to play all the time, but I only get a couple of hours on weekdays, 3-4 on weekends. A lot of that is spent playing either *Civilization II* or *Alpha Centauri*, and I am so far behind on those games that I can't even appreciate the improvements in the newer ones.

Empire Earth, *WarCraft III*, and *Emperor: Battle for Dune* look fascinating, but there's no way I'm going to try them until I get further into, or maybe finish, *Dune 2000* or *WarCraft II*, each of which I'm only a few mission into. I'm not going to get *Age Of Wonders II* when I have barely scratched the surface of *Age Of Wonders*. *Dungeon Siege* looks really good, but I still play a lot of the original *Diablo*, and am just getting into *Darkstone* and *Nox*.

I have dozens of fantastic games that I haven't finished. I just can't spend my precious gaming time on these new games. Although the games industry is putting out many great games, I won't be buying them (excepting *Civilization III*). Maybe I'm contributing to the "death" of PC games; sorry, but I'm just buried.

Darryl R. White

Drug wars

This is a somewhat touchy subject with me, and I don't want to come across as snooty or overly sensitive. In the article on game testers in the July edition ["True Confessions of the Game Testers"] one of the big, highlighted quotes in this article said some off-the-cuff remark about methadone and how it "doesn't really fix the problem." Being someone who uses methadone I would have to argue that it "fixes the problem" better than any other known treatment. The success rates of MMT (methadone treatment) are phenomenally higher than 12-step programs. I understand that what was meant by the comment was "that to be effective, a patient would need to keep taking the methadone," i.e. it does not "cure" addiction, but this is essentially the same as saying insulin doesn't "cure" diabetes.

Someday I hope the war on drugs will become rational and we may see how effective methadone can be for things like alcoholism. Knee-jerk, attempting to be "hip" comments like this contribute as much to negative public perception as does the far right prohibitionist rhetoric.

This is probably more than you wanted to know, but it's hard when something that's helped me so much gets such a bum rap. If game testers worked as well as MMT, I'd never have to worry about patching these damned games again.

Rich Rodgers

Console rant

After reading Jason Cross' preview of the upcoming "console wars" and views on E3, I had to question whether he actually played the games. Before getting started, I just want to say I was one of those fanboys. Did he simply look at the screens for such games as *Pikmin*, *Luigi's Mansion* and *SSB Melee*? After playing them, I'm sure he would be hooked. Instead, he dismisses them for their cartoon-y graphics instead of realizing that that they only add to their appeal.

In his conclusion, Mr. Cross states that he believes the games in Nintendo's lineup are unoriginal. Having played *Pikmin* and *Luigi's Mansion*, I just have to question his sanity. How could one possibly fit those games into any genre? Please remind him to judge a book not by its cover or reviews, but by its content.

Noah Herskovitz

Jason Cross responds: Yes, I did play most of Nintendo's lineup and no, *Luigi's Mansion* and *SSB Melee* did not "hook" me. I'm not sure where you got the impression that I "dismissed" the graphics, but I stand by my statement that, aside from *Pikmin*, they're not particularly innovative. They're not exactly stretching from the typical Nintendo fare and delivering the kind of out-there, ambitious game designs we're seeing on some other platforms.

More testing

I read with some interest your tale about QA testers. I tested games at one point in my life and my roommate tests them right now. In the article, Brian King, supposed hardcore gamer, warns that after testing games all day, hardcore gamers lose their taste for games.

For my money, and I talk from experience, if you test

games for 15 hours a day and come home and play more games, you are hardcore. If you test games for 15 hours a day and then "lose a taste for it" and start comparing games to frilly candy like "chocolate," then you weren't hardcore to begin with, so get out of my freaking favorite magazine, you freak. You might as well go get married to that girl you met posting to the webpage "Multi-User Dungeons and the Hermeneutics of Community," because you are worthless to us now.

As for the real hardcore gamers out there: If your dream is to work in gaming, then ask a friend to forcibly retrieve you from your *Unreal Tournament* or *Counter-strike* for just one second so that you may write a resume to get into one of the greatest industries on earth.

Gargle Gaflarglebargen.

You're harshing my buzz, man. –ed

B.A. Baracus

Hey! Your magazine is the best! I pity the fool who reads anything else! I put those fools into a world of hurt!

Mr. T

Thanks for writing in, big guy. We missed ya. Good to see you still getting some work in those fine 1-800-COLLECT commercials. But why does such a swanky guy like you have a Hotmail account? You should have your own domain, man! Hannibal, Face, and Murdock do. –ed

Freaking incoherent

You guys are so freaking awesome. You have such a freaking good magazine, and the little blurbs in are so freaking funny. I can't freaking believe I'm writing to you... this is so freaking awesome. Wow, you guys are freaking cool.

Your freaking fan,
Freaking Alton Murphy

Yes, we are indeed freaking awesome. –freaking ed

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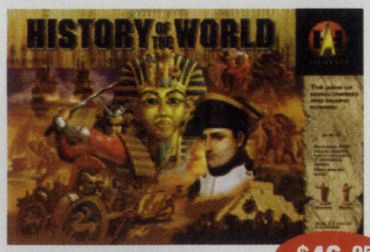
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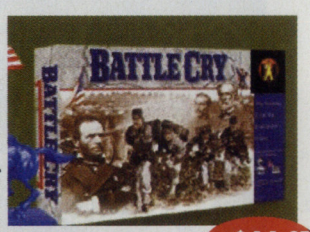
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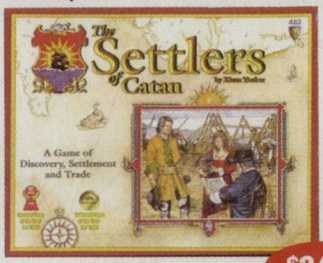
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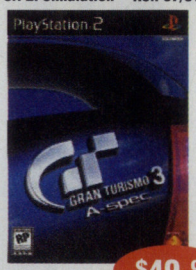
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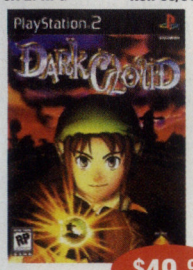
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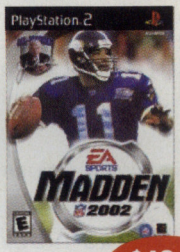
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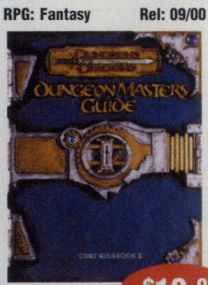
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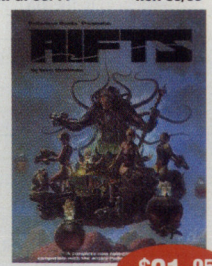
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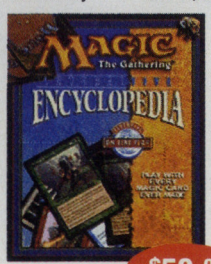
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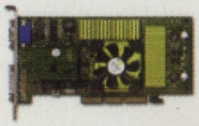
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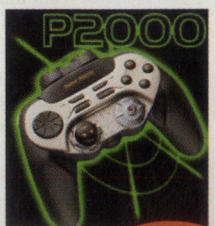
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CINDY YANS

road to nowhere

the rites of passage

Old world values in a new world order

When I attended the 2001 Game Developers Conference earlier this year, I was interested to observe somewhat of a dichotomy. Oh, of course there would be a lot more than two factions if you tossed all of the attendees into a kettle and boiled them down to their component parts, *a là* Sid Meier's *SimCannibal*, but broadly speaking, there were the technology whores, and the, er, non-technology whores.

The technology whores raced from seminar to seminar, excitedly sucking up information about the latest, greatest, most powerful framerate solutions, sophisticated creature AI, distributed networking for multiplayer games, all the stuff that helps to makes today's games speedier, more beautiful, "smarter," and hardier. And we love them for that.

Then there were the others—the ones who traveled from seminar to seminar in the Game Design track—whose very demeanor was a bit quieter, more introspective, more "organically focused," so to speak. While there were many burgeoning writers and developers in this group, many of these folks had been around a long time, some with 10 to 20 years or so in the games industry under their belts. It was interesting to watch The Elders (whether or not they would appreciate the moniker) host their own presentations and watch each other's with well-deserved attention and respect.

> "And if [plot, character and storytelling] are central, it doesn't matter what the rest of the trappings are like. The game will have life."

This year, Legend Entertainment's Bob Bates (one of The Elders) released a book called *Game Design: The Art and Business of Creating Games*. This is an extremely comprehensive guide covering all aspects of the game development process, including tips for all genres, licensing, teamwork, writing, storytelling, and more. It is one of the must-reads for anyone who has ever said to her or himself, "I want to make games." Although it broadly covers many development issues in every genre, looks at business and marketing concerns, and contains tips on how to break into the industry, its core message is simple. Hearkening back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, Bates brings to the forefront the importance of plot, character, and storytelling in the gameworld. While these elements are often peripheral and sometimes lost in the *gorgeous* games of late, they should somehow be central. And if they *are* central, it doesn't matter what the rest of the trappings are like. The game will have life.

What made me think about this (again) lately, was an e-mail message from one Darris Hupp, asking if we would take a look at his game *Passage: Path of Betrayal*. I took it home one weekend, and installed it. "Oh brother," I thought, seeing that the design, graphics, dialogue, and animation were all credited to Darris Hupp. "Talk about *amateur*." It has no voiced narrative or dialogue, primitive artwork, and even more primitive animation.

With a skeptical outlook and jaded eye, I began playing the game. Astoundingly, it wasn't long before I was *in* the game...I was Riff, a young man whose mission is to save the world of Arkane during the time of the Passages, ancient rituals designed to transport the land's horrors and evildoers back to another dimension. It wasn't long before the primitive art style became a welcome representation, taking me on a journey through beautiful sets of pastel and watercolor paintings. It wasn't long before I cared about what happened to Riff and his family, and found joy in the whimsical characters, good dialogue, and well-developed, well-integrated puzzles. Six hefty chapters later, I hated to see the game end.

I thought, "Now *this* is either someone's thesis, or a well-conceived resumé prototype. This guy knows pretty much what he's doing." I wrote to tell him that it would be a disservice to review the game according to the standards we set for commercial games from huge companies. I asked him a whole set of questions about his company, concept, background, distribution model, etc., so that I could at least give the game a mention at some point. "It's hard to answer some of these," he replied. "You see, I am 17 years old."

Are there many more of a "lost" generation that has come full circle? Hupp is someone who has already learned so much about what it takes to make a game special—someone who knows that "soul candy" can hold its own with eye candy any day. Maybe someone should send him a copy of Bates' book. You can find out more about *Passage* at www.dragon-works.net. For old-style adventure lovers, it's probably worth the price of admission. ●

SPOTLIGHT REVIEW:

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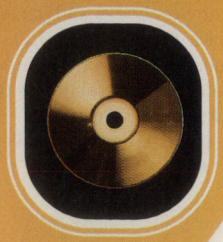
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PHIL STEINMEYER

INSIDE the sausage factory

still chugging

A new Railroad Tycoon, sorta



After finally putting *Tropico* and it's variations (Macintosh and foreign versions, demo, etc.) to bed, we started working on a follow up to our last big game, *Railroad Tycoon II*. No, I'm not announcing the development of a *Railroad Tycoon III*—we were working on yet another version of *Railroad Tycoon II*, a "Platinum" edition.

When the sales and biz guys at Take 2 originally proposed it, I thought it was a bad idea. We had already done three major versions: the original that was released in fall of 1998, *The Second Century* expansion pack of 1999, and the *Gold Edition*, which combined the original, the expansion and 12 extra scenarios, which was released in the fall of 1999. Releasing a new version of a three-year old game, after all of these prior editions, seemed like a bad business move and felt vaguely like a rip-off. But after looking at the numbers behind the product, I've come around. I think it's a good deal for our publisher and for retailers. And after assembling the contents of the product and knowing it'll sell for $19.99, I think it's a good deal for consumers, too.

> "Retailers can't be persuaded to take more copies of the game without a new sales hook, so we've thrown everything we could into this new version of the game."

For our publisher, it makes a lot of sense. Take 2 has been reluctant to print more copies of the original game, as its elaborate box, thick manual, and glossy reference card make it only marginally profitable at the standard budget price of $19.99. In a new, simpler box, with an electronic manual rather than a printed one, the cost of goods can be reduced from $5.50 to about $2.25, and a wholesale price of $12-14 will allow for printing, shipping, returns, and still yield a decent profit.

But the retailers need a hook, too. While the previous versions had relatively long lives, they have finally disappeared from the shelves. Retailers can't be persuaded to take more copies of the game without a new sales hook, so we've thrown everything we could into this new version of the game. The Platinum version will contain all the scenarios from the previous three versions (about 75, total), an electronic version of the manual and strategy guide, plus 50 new scenarios. Forty are from the Internet, and could be downloaded by hard-core fans, but we've done a pretty good job culling the best scenarios, testing them, cleaning up rough spots as needed, and we've added 10 new in-house created scenarios, too. We've also switched over the music score from using redbook CD audio—which limited the original to about 40 minutes of music—to using MP3 compression, which allows a little over two hours of original blues music and reduces the repetitive feel you get when playing the game for extended periods.

Is it ripping off the public to put yet another version of the game out there? Consumers get a great game with over 125 scenarios and two hours of music for $20—three years ago, we sold it with 28 scenarios and 40 minutes of music for $50. And without the new version, the game would be unavailable to any potential new fans.

Sometimes I look at things the other way around. Why would anyone buy a new game for $50 at Best Buy the week it comes out? If the game flops, it'll be available in the bargain bins three months later for only $10. If it's a hit, there will be expansion packs, gold editions, mods, patches, and most likely a much better edition a year or two later for much less money. This phenomenon isn't unique to games—movies can be seen in theatres for $9, on pay-per-view for $5, as a new release rental for $3.50, and ultimately, as a bargain "oldie" rental for $1. Books start as high-priced hardbacks, then cheaper paperbacks, and often end up in still cheaper collections and bundles.

Game developers and publishers depend on both high priced initial sales and longer-term budget sales to cover our costs and pay for the high percentage of games that flop and don't sell well at *either* full-price *or* budget.

Ultimately, consumers get to make the choice. Those who want to be current on the latest and hottest movies, books and games pay through the nose. Patient (or thrifty) consumers can choose the best of the lot a year later for (usually) considerably less than the original price. *Railroad Tycoon II Platinum* is aimed at this latter group. We hope they enjoy it. ●

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TOM CHICK

THREE finger salute

lessons in humility

Because some are more equal than others

Although *TRIBES 2* has been out a few months, I only recently got the hardware to run it: a Pentium III 850, GeForce card, and DSL connection. But it's still unplayable because every time I log onto a server, I die. Often and early. At the hands of people using the default weapons. I think I've even been fragged with a targeting laser.

While I was saving up to buy the faster processor and better videocard, everyone else was practicing. It isn't fair. The window of opportunity between a game hitting the shelves and hardcore players dominating the servers is too small—right now, it's about six hours. So I wait at the local store for a game to hit the shelves. I snap it up the moment the FedEx box is opened. I speed home, reading the manual on the way. I install the game, and try to log on so I can enjoy my limited window of opportunity, fragging newbies with slow computers who haven't read the manual yet. Whereas some players are good at hand/eye coordination and stuff like that, my advantage is that I can read the hell out of a manual. I don't have to chat to ask where the reload key is. I try to log on to a server...

I will crush the beginners who don't yet know where the reload key is. I can't log on...

I will win round after round as the maps cycle and people drop out because I'm so damn good. Where's the multiplayer button...?

They will be fumbling with keys to put new clips in their pistols akimbo while my score skyrockets. I still can't figure out how to join online games...

> "The Church should teach that excessive gaming will give you hairy palms."

It turns out *Max Payne* doesn't have multiplayer support.

I know what you're saying. "Why don't you practice more? Be patient. Build up your skills." Yeah, but while I'm doing this, what do you think all those other guys are doing? The same thing. They're getting better, too. They're still playing, practicing, building up their skills. It's as pointless as hoping to one day be older than your older brother.

"Why don't you play a different game?" you're saying. Okay, smart guy, what game? *Counter-strike*? A guy doesn't stand a chance in *Counter-strike*. Not only are those guys really good, but they actually cooperate with each other. *Age of Kings*? *MechCommander 2*? *Unreal Tournament*? It's too late. Everyone else already knows which civilization is best, how to trick out a Mad Cat, and where the shield belt is. I am the Vikings on a map without water, leading a pair of Fire Ants and brandishing a half empty snot gun.

This has to stop. I demand the IDSA quit frittering their time on trivialities like pirating because, dammit, I'm not paying $50 a month for a DSL connection just to learn a lesson in humility.

In Kurt Vonnegut's short story, *Harrison Bergeron*, we are all equal at last. Smart people have noisemakers going off in their ears to scatter their smart thoughts. Graceful people are draped with sandbags. Beautiful people are covered by masks. A Handicapper General makes sure no one has an unfair advantage. It's time we do something like this for multiplayer games.

I propose a monitor that occasionally blacks out or a keyboard that scrambles input when you're in the lead. Or a mouse that administers an electric shock when you get a kill against someone with a lower score than you. Computers should have a score limiter installed. Single guys have an unfair advantage. They should be required to get girlfriends who make them leave the computers to cuddle and see *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* rather than using all that extra time to practice. College students should be given more homework, or required to attend keg parties. The Church should teach that excessive gaming will give you hairy palms.

Better yet, victory should be randomly chosen rather than arbitrarily given to the guy who happens to have the highest score. Everyone should get an award, like in summer camp when I couldn't finish the swim race because Steve Peabo kept splashing me. I still got a little plastic trophy anyway. We've leveled out public schools, college admissions, and the workplace. Now it's time to secure a place for mediocrity in multiplayer gaming. Because, as the French say, "Something-or-other! Egalite! And some other thing!" ●

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