THE 49 GREATEST DEVELOPERS!

PC GAMER

EMPIRE: Total War
EXCLUSIVE REVIEW

Alma
wants
You (to die)

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exposed in our
final verdict!

MMO
SUPERTEST
8 Worlds
Beyond
Warcraft
*Which ones should you
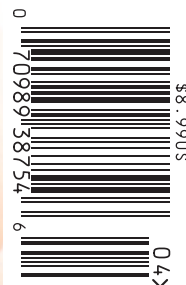be playing right now?*

F.E.A.R. 2
PROJECT ORIGIN

NO. 186
APRIL 2009

Read these stories,
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hello **Windows 7**
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PC GAMER

APRIL 2009

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Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

BACK TO THE FRONT

In the magazine world, we spend a lot of time studying how people read their periodicals. And guess what? A good percentage of you aren't alone, because plenty of your peers *also* read this magazine backward. We ink-stained wretches call those people Backward Magazine Readers (BMR), and we cater to them with robust back-of-book sections. In the case of *PC Gamer*, that's where we put our beloved columnists.

Until this month.

So where's Desslock? What of Mahood? Whither Norm? And how about our very own in-house columnist, the esteemed Mr. Stapleton?

Gone. All gone.

Well, not really. Right this second, Dan is sitting diagonally from me, likely sneaking in a session of *Defense Grid* in order to crush any hope I have of ever unseating him on the leaderboards. As for the rest of our contributors, they're still part of the PCG family, but we decided that now's a perfect time for a refresh. Heck, Andy Mahood has been penning stories for *PC Gamer* since before there were pens, and Desslock has explored just about every alternative there is to his regular life. But don't shed a tear just yet: We plan to have our friends join in on the fun now and again. Look for their bylines in upcoming issues…just not in the usual places.

Of course, we can't taketh without givething in return, and for your reading pleasure we proudly present an enhanced Eyewitness section, with a broader mix of news, previews, analysis, opinion, indie gaming, developer insight, gossip, lifestyle, and more. We've also worked overtime to offer you even *more* features, including the 49 Greatest Developers and our comprehensive MMO supertest. But while you're seeing lots of new bits and bobs, what hasn't changed is our commitment to being the most comprehensive and captivating source for all things PC games. That sentiment is especially true for our cover story. *F.E.A.R. 2* is easily the biggest release this month, and while the game isn't as impressive as we'd hoped for, our in-depth review is essential reading nonetheless. Rounding out this killer package is our gorgeous cover: an original piece of art commissioned exclusively for us, focusing on an unexpected yet oddly alluring aspect of Alma. So if all our other upgrades aren't enough to get you BMRs to start at the front instead, I'm pretty sure that sexy Alma will do the trick. Wowza!

GARY

/// GARY STEINMAN, EDITOR IN CHIEF ///

THE PLAYLIST 0409

GARY STEINMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF

Ah, the power of the press. Despite eschewing tower defense games as hobbled stepkids from a genre Gary doesn't particularly care for, Dan's *Defense Grid* review convinced him to give it a try. Now he's addicted—but he's not sure if it's to the game or to the *shame* that Dan keeps dishing him on the leaderboards.

LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Logan spent many nights this month painstakingly assembling his luscious new gaming rig—codenamed The Anchovy Project—based around Intel's Core i7-965 CPU. Now that he's finished, he can't help wondering which staff member will poison his muesli in order to inherit it.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

Dan has been utterly consumed by the mad quest of besting everyone he knows at every level of *Defense Grid: The Awakening*. Lucky that it—and every other game he's tried—is working perfectly on his Windows 7 beta machine, which he recklessly installed immediately after it launched in January.

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Though he continues to curse the scattergun as unbalanced, the Scout class update has finally given Evan's *Team Fortress 2* clan an excuse to start scrimming again. Meanwhile, *Red Alert 3's* skirmish mode is rekindling his love of carpet-bombing zeppelins, conscripted dolphins, FMV, and tough ladyfolk.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER

While Gary was defending his towers, and the *other* Dan was busy defending his high scores in *Defense Grid*, Fitzy took the opportunity to slip away to defend the world from the Dark Side by playing Lego Star Wars with his kids. His best move? Inspiring his oldest son with torrid tales of zombie buttocks. Don't ask.

AROUND THE OFFICE
GARY'S MONTHLY ROUNDUP OF RANDOM QUOTES, AMUSING EPHEMERA, AND OTHER TRIVIAL TIDBITS FROM THIS ISSUE'S PRODUCTION CYCLE

• *Third best quote of the month:* "Your finger is a disgrace to blue people everywhere." —*Evan Lahti*

• Moon Bloodgood is a name that begs to be googled. Go ahead and run that image search. You won't be disappointed.

• Who is Parking Lot Penguin? And does the scrappy little fella have what it takes to finally unseat Coconut Monkey as our mascot?

• I know I'm waaaaay late to this party, but I can't stop playing *Peggle*. And I still can't figure out if I'm actually having any fun.

• *Second best quote of the month:* "Nair. You just fill up the bathtub and sit in it. Simple. You can do it every weekend." —*Logan Decker*

• Covergirl Alma is anatomically correct underneath that logo. I kid you not.

• *Quote of the month:* "They like the way I use my ass." —*Dan Stapleton*

/// "Hello. I like you." ///

"Is it right to make games out of events that have caused such destruction and taken the lives of countless loved ones?"

SECOND THOUGHTS

I love shooter games and will always play them. I've gibbed hundreds of enemies in *Unreal Tournament 3*, and reduced many a foe in *F.E.A.R.* to red mist. I have done this unthinkingly and without any remorse. After all, it's just a game. But the other day when I was playing *Call of Duty 4* at a friend's house, I felt somehow disturbed when killing enemy soldiers. I love the game, and kept playing anyways, but it made me think afterward. Is it right to make games out of events that have caused such destruction and taken the lives of countless loved ones? —OLIVER GIVAN

Yes.

Although CoD4*'s story is based on fictional characters and fictional circumstances, its contemporary setting and the levels that take place in the Middle East certainly evoke current events. If that makes you uncomfortable, then by all means stick to shooters that don't mirror our present situation so closely. But the philosophers here at* PC Gamer *feel there's far more danger in trying to police games for content and even good taste rather than letting adults like yourselves determine what is and isn't appropriate for them to experience.*

TERROR ON THE HIGH SEAS

Regarding the preview of *Battlestations: Pacific* (February 2009), I noticed that both forward main turrets are trained on nearby destroyer. Useless. Due to the proximity, and since the barrels cannot be lowered past a certain point, the shells will fly over the destroyer!
—STEPHEN R. KAYARA

That's a pretty sharp eye you've got there, Stephen, but not quite sharp enough. Look closer and you'll find the real menace in that screenshot.

MILITARY DISPATCH

SAS REFLUX SYNDROME

I tasted bile at the back of my throat while reading the review on *SAS: Secure Tomorrow* (February 2009). The first line makes a grossly inaccurate comparison of the SAS to the U.S. Marine Corps.

The Special Air Service is more akin to Delta Force and other combat-oriented Special Operations units (i.e. Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces, or Rangers). They focus on small unit (surgical) operations, unconventional warfare, and anti-terrorist actions. This is not a matter of opinion; it is a matter of fact. Going through Marine boot camp is an opportunity available to anyone who meets the USMC's minimum standards. Becom-

ing an operator in the SAS is a grueling process and is only available to the best and the brightest British soldiers.

While the USMC is certainly useful and does amazing things for this country, they are not Special Operations soldiers. They are Marines. The job of the USMC is conventional (primarily amphibious) warfare.
—SGT KEVIN MCKENNA, FORMER ARMY RANGER

Bile in the throat can be an indication of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), which can be caused by the consumption of caffeine, fried food, and boneheaded civilian copy. We stand corrected, and apologize for the error.

⌶: LETTERS
Everybody's *thinking* it, but it takes someone with guts, a working knowledge of the English language, and a bit of free time on his or her hands to say it. So send your thoughts, reflections, and indignation to letters@pcgamer.com. We're all ears.

"Bioware is hailing choice in the game as some great addition. That is bull."

THE SMOKING GUN

As both a computer nerd and a gun nerd, I just can't get over the image used in the advertisement for *Far Cry 2*, which depicts apparently expended smoking rounds on the ground without the primers—the round metal "spark plug" in the base—showing any evidence of having been struck.

I'm not sure why this bothers me so much, but it has seemed to take away from my enjoyment of the game. I guess my point is that little things can kill a gaming experience. —JOHN

That's a pretty sharp eye you've got there, John, but not quite sharp enough. Look closer and you'll see that those are a very unique type of bullets.

CHOICE WORDS

I just watched a little video clip from the good people at BioWare about the upcoming *The Old Republic* MMORPG, and I have a major beef with these guys. They're hailing choice in the game as some great addition. That is bull. A principle reason to play video

CHATLOG

With all of the touch-screen technology that's currently on the market (iPhone, smart boards, etc.), has there been any speculation on applying this technology to newer PC games? Because I'd love to use touchscreens with RTS games such as CoH.
—Paul Duckworth

I had been meaning to write to PC Gamer about how much I loathe Quick Time Events, but it looks like Dan Stapleton beat me to the punch in the January issue.
—Jaime Lawrence

I play games for fun, not aggravation. GTA IV is a total failure as a package, with good gameplay elements that can't be appreciated due to its major flaws.
—John Marcson

GTA IV WTF
—Pete Manchester

games is to engage in something that isn't your life. I don't need to spend $60 on a game in addition to subscription fees only to have something I already have. My life is already composed of irreversible choices that I must make. That sucks. Game is fantasy. I want to make *all* choices—and not be boxed in by just one.

A good book is a directed, focused series of events that bring meaning to the whole. Did you ever ask yourselves why "Choose your own adventure books" aren't on the best-seller list? Just write an engaging story, and we will play. —DANA

This is a fine point. However, in times like these, we try to imagine what the Oracle from The Matrix *would say. And we think she might say that games are almost entirely about choices: Go left or right; attack or flee; combine the half-eaten baklava with the yardstick or the swatch of animal fur. She might also add that choices add replayability to games, thus justifying their high prices. Or she might just say, "Here's a cookie. By the time you're finished eating it, you'll start feeling better."*

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF THINGS

While flipping through your January issue, I was appalled to find a screenshot from *Left 4 Dead* depicting what is obviously the uncovered posterior of a zombie in your Killing Box column. I assume that because it's technically not "human" you felt that you could let the nudity slide. For shame! —ANSON WEESE

That's a pretty sharp eye you've got there, Anson, but not quite sharp enough. Look closer and you'll see that that particular posterior is neither human nor zombie in nature.

JANUARY 2009 PATCH 1.1

In "Lessons of the Dead" we neglected to credit Jeff Hitchcock for his photograph of Uwe Boll, which he released under the Creative Commons Attribution license. That was lame of us. Sorry, Jeff!

PRTSCN

The internet will be back on Monday! Sorry!!

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/// Why you couldn't play *World of Warcraft* last Sunday ///
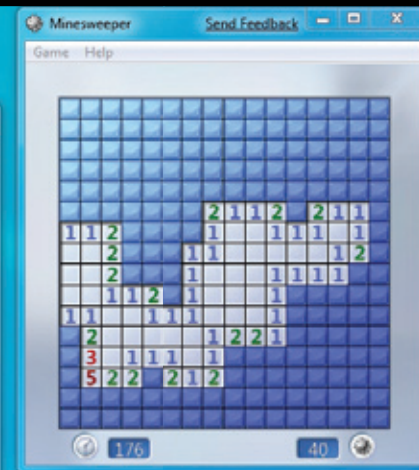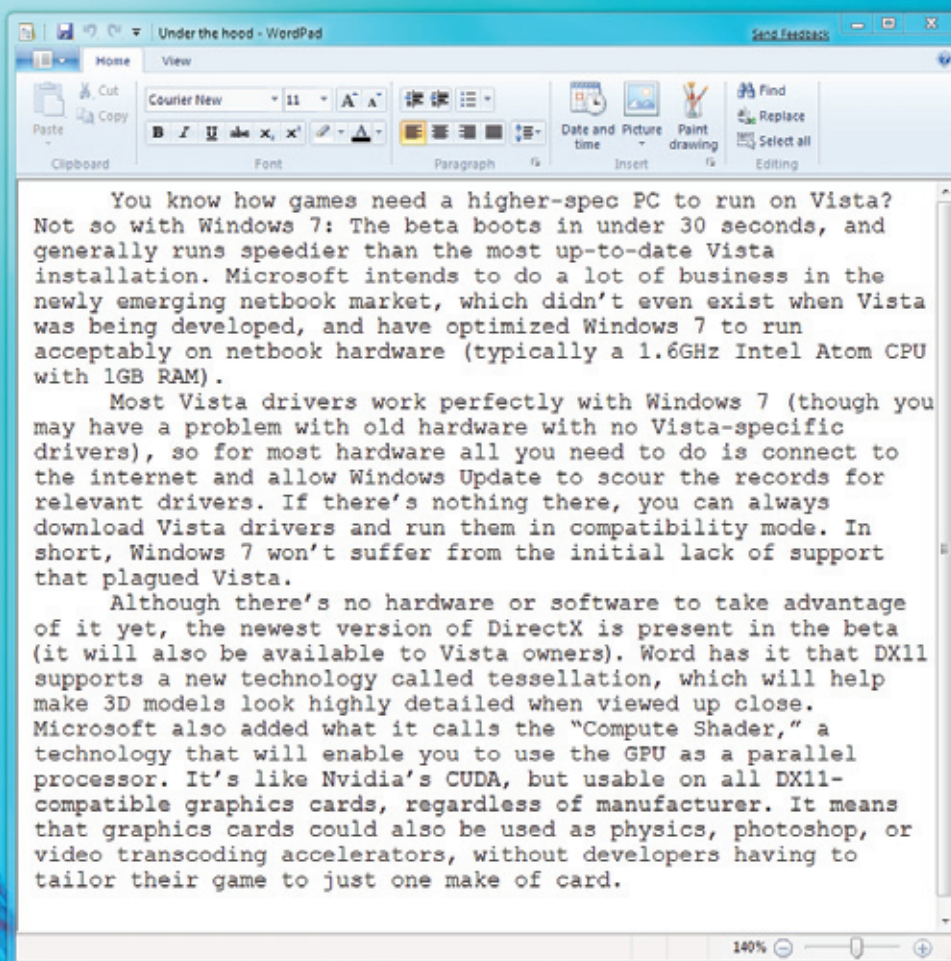
Send your favorite screenshots, photos of your case mods and gaming setups, or anything else that you think we might find interesting that doesn't involve your naughty bits or anybody else's, and if we print them in the magazine, you'll not only become a permanent part of the PC Gamer Historical Archives, but you'll feel really good about yourself for a whole day and a half!
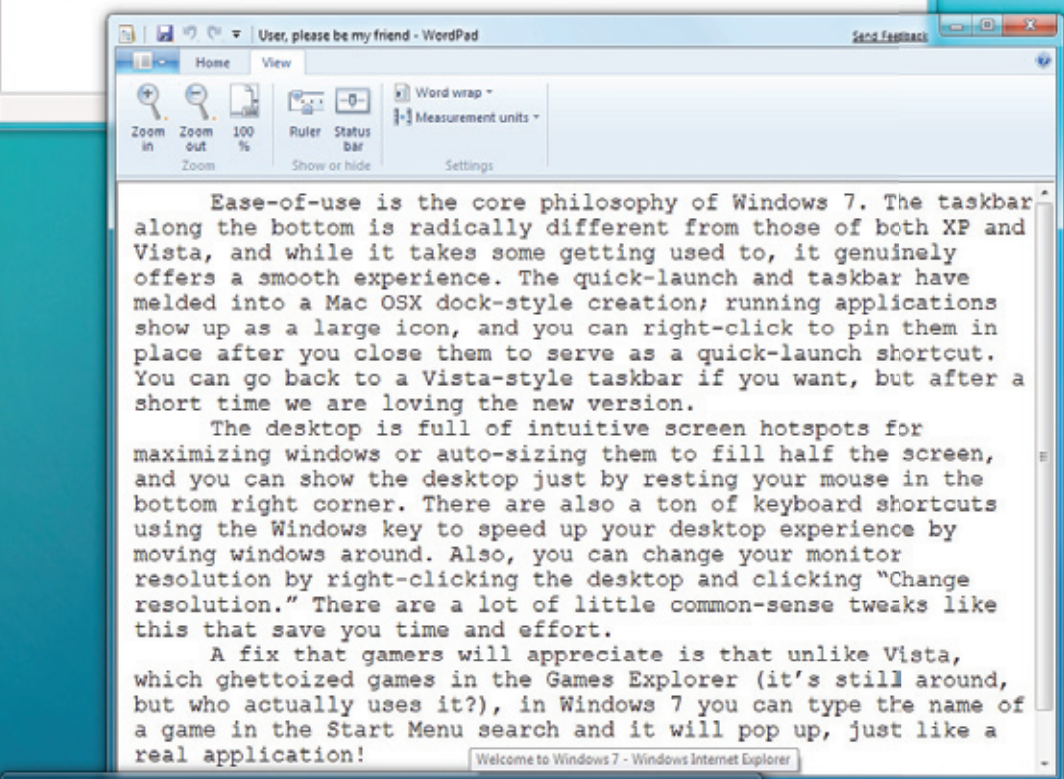
INTRODUCING
WINDOWS

7

The fact that it feels too soon for a new version of Windows after the release of Vista tells you plenty; Vista has now matured into a capable (though often annoying) OS, but the damage was done in the first year of hideous driver support, crashes, and outrageous demands for RAM and processing power while offering little benefit in return.

This year, Microsoft will release its latest OS, Windows 7, to a public who'd mostly rather forget their last effort. After Vista, everyone knew it would have to be good to earn back the public trust. The good news is that all the work that was put into improving Vista, together with lots of feedback and recent mobile computing trends, have conspired to make Windows 7 an upgrade we're looking forward to. Microsoft is so confident they've got it right they've already released a fully functioning beta. Here at PC Gamer we've been using it for a few weeks now, and so far we're very impressed.
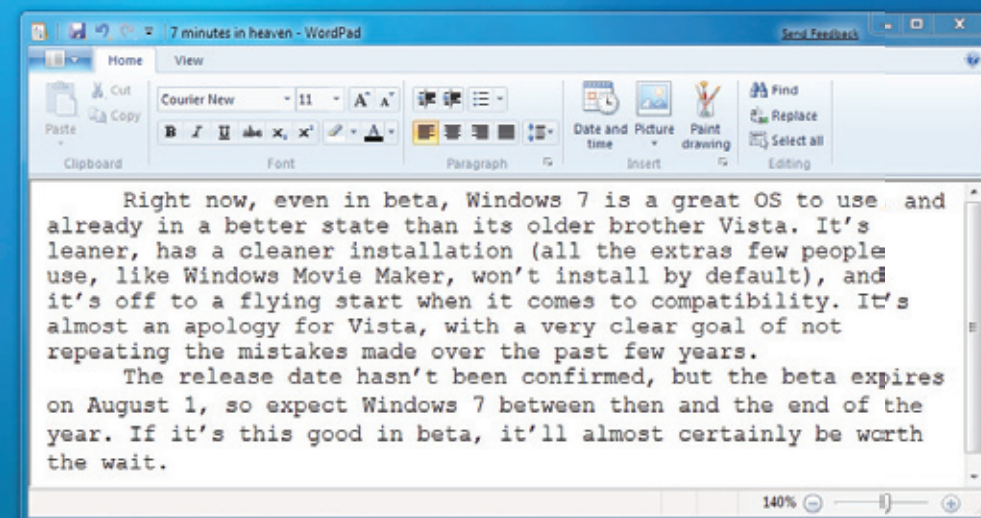
■ CAN THE NEXT VERSION OF WINDOWS WASH THE TASTE OF VISTA FROM OUR MOUTHS?

Ease-of-use is the core philosophy of Windows 7. The taskbar along the bottom is radically different from those of both XP and Vista, and while it takes some getting used to, it genuinely offers a smooth experience. The quick-launch and taskbar have melded into a Mac OSX dock-style creation; running applications show up as a large icon, and you can right-click to pin them in place after you close them to serve as a quick-launch shortcut. You can go back to a Vista-style taskbar if you want, but after a short time we are loving the new version.

The desktop is full of intuitive screen hotspots for maximizing windows or auto-sizing them to fill half the screen, and you can show the desktop just by resting your mouse in the bottom right corner. There are also a ton of keyboard shortcuts using the Windows key to speed up your desktop experience by moving windows around. Also, you can change your monitor resolution by right-clicking the desktop and clicking "Change resolution." There are a lot of little common-sense tweaks like this that save you time and effort.

A fix that gamers will appreciate is that unlike Vista, which ghettoized games in the Games Explorer (it's still around, but who actually uses it?), in Windows 7 you can type the name of a game in the Start Menu search and it will pop up, just like a real application!

Mousing over icons in the task bar pops up a preview of the window—in the case of IE, it will preview all open tabs!

You know how games need a higher-spec PC to run on Vista? Not so with Windows 7: The beta boots in under 30 seconds, and generally runs speedier than the most up-to-date Vista installation. Microsoft intends to do a lot of business in the newly emerging netbook market, which didn't even exist when Vista was being developed, and have optimized Windows 7 to run acceptably on netbook hardware (typically a 1.6GHz Intel Atom CPU with 1GB RAM).

Most Vista drivers work perfectly with Windows 7 (though you may have a problem with old hardware with no Vista-specific drivers), so for most hardware all you need to do is connect to the internet and allow Windows Update to scour the records for relevant drivers. If there's nothing there, you can always download Vista drivers and run them in compatibility mode. In short, Windows 7 won't suffer from the initial lack of support that plagued Vista.

Although there's no hardware or software to take advantage of it yet, the newest version of DirectX is present in the beta (it will also be available to Vista owners). Word has it that DX11 supports a new technology called tessellation, which will help make 3D models look highly detailed when viewed up close. Microsoft also added what it calls the "Compute Shader," a technology that will enable you to use the GPU as a parallel processor. It's like Nvidia's CUDA, but usable on all DX11-compatible graphics cards, regardless of manufacturer. It means that graphics cards could also be used as physics, photoshop, or video transcoding accelerators, without developers having to tailor their game to just one make of card.

> **"If it's this good in beta, it'll almost certainly be worth the wait."**

Right now, even in beta, Windows 7 is a great OS to use and already in a better state than its older brother Vista. It's leaner, has a cleaner installation (all the extras few people use, like Windows Movie Maker, won't install by default), and it's off to a flying start when it comes to compatibility. It's almost an apology for Vista, with a very clear goal of not repeating the mistakes made over the past few years.

The release date hasn't been confirmed, but the beta expires on August 1, so expect Windows 7 between then and the end of the year. If it's this good in beta, it'll almost certainly be worth the wait.

THE SPY

Like numerous alien races, half the cast of *Heroes,* and dogs, The Spy has psychic abilities. This month, The Spy trained his mind-reading skills on grabbing knowledge of *Star Wars: Battlefront III*, the last game under production by now defunct *Haze* developers Free Radical, straight from one of the designer's brains. But before he could figure out who's brain to tap, Free Radical lost the rights to the game, and *Alien vs. Predator* developer Rebellion Software is most likely to take over.

Next, The Spy discovered that Electronic Arts is to distribute a series of games based on Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time book series, under development by Red Eagle Entertainment. One of these is to be massively multiplayer, but the others are to tie in with a series of Wheel of Time movies under development by the same company.

Also popping up on The Spy's psychic radar: troubled publisher Eidos has announced takeover talks with potential buyers, though The Spy understands discussions to be "preliminary." The owners of series such as *Tomb Raider* and *Deus Ex* may have been struggling, but luckily, being The Spy is a recession-proof industry.

Lastly, Valve's Robin Walker proved easier to mind-violate than Deanna Troi. He let slip that, in addition to the recently released Scout class update for *Team Fortress 2*, there was also a radical new game mode in the works, and even ideas kicking around for a new class. But that won't see the light of day until after all the current character class expansion packs have been released. ✖

SPORE GALACTIC ADVENTURES

:: AN EXPANSION ON THE SPORIZON

Somewhere in a building in California (we know where, but it's more dramatic if we pretend that we don't), there are people creating content for *Spore*. Stuff you haven't seen yet. For a game that prides itself on sharing player-created content the moment a nose is tweaked, it's galling to have to wait.

But you'll have to. Maxis has an ambitious plan, fundamentally changing *Spore*'s endgame to enable you to beam down to planets, and adding a few new editors into the mix. You can already create creatures, buildings, vehicles; *Galactic Adventures* adds adventure and planet editors to Spore's packed toolset, enabling you to pollinate more than just giant wang monsters throughout the Sporepedia.

GALACTIC ADVENTURES works in a similar way to the Creature Stage: You'll be in direct control of your character once again, having dropped onto a planet flagged up with an adventure, and given tasks to complete. On the creator's side of the fence, the planet comes before the adventure: You have the ability to carve roads, and to raise and lower scenery and water levels. The editors are based on Maxis' tools, so you can change things like the atmosphere and ground coloration as well.

With the planet created, you can take up the adventure editor. Basically, you pull creations in from the Sporepedia, buildings and creatures, and decide their part in your adventure. It's deceptive in its simplicity: You give your creatures parameters within the adventure, like having it patrol a certain area or roam free, or making it an enemy or a friend. Then you can set flags: "kill five of these bunnies," for example.

Missions will propagate in the same way as all the other content: If you have the expansion, the game will automatically fill in the content, enabling you to collect the adventures as you would any of the other end-game missions. Exploring was always one of *Spore*'s strongest areas, and for the players a more diverse range of missions is likely to encourage it. ✖

VITALS :: **DEVELOPER:** MAXIS **PUBLISHER:** EA **RELEASE:** MARCH **URL:** WWW.SPORE.COM
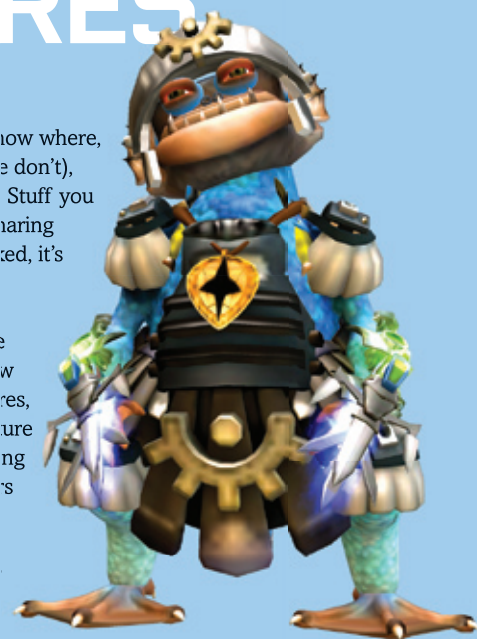
UNDERSTANDING GAMES

IN *UNDERSTANDING COMICS,* Scott McCloud used its own medium to explain what made comics unique and powerful. You might think someone should do the same thing for games and, naturally, someone has.

With Bob and Bub as your guides, the Understanding Games series explains the basic concepts behind our beloved pastime. It starts in Episode One by using Pong to describe simple notions such as the playing area, the player, fixed rules, and the effect of abstract ver- sus detailed graphics. In Episode Two, you compete in a color-collection racing game against three computer opponents, all in aid of exploring the effect of motivation upon the player. Episodes Three and Four guide you through how players learn and identify in games. Every episode lets you play each game for as long as you please, and in between there's a thoughtful, intelligent diatribe on exactly why games are brilliant. (Hint: it's because of things like this.) ✖

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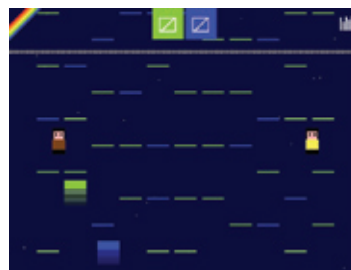
/// Bob and Bub put the *fun* back into the fundamentals of gaming. ///

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Wouldn't it be too cool if they made a game where you played as Rorschach and Nite Owl during their early years when they totally kicked all kinds of ass?

C'mon, admit it. Whether you read the classic comic back when it first hit your local newsstand in 1986 or if you recently picked up the graphic novel due to the hype surrounding the upcoming movie, you *know* you thought it. Granted, it's everything the comic isn't—a cheesy, pulpy, violent fantasy of two grown men beating the bejesus out of hordes of hooligans—but it can't be helped. Rorschach is the ultimate badass, and Nite Owl had so much friggin' potential, it'd be a shame not to see the duo in their prime, beating up baddies with reckless abandon.

Well…be careful what you wish for, because *Watchmen: The End Is Nigh* will be hitting PCs this March, and it's exactly the kind of licensed tie-in that comic auteur Alan Moore (and even Rorschach himself) would rail against. Tossing aside the brooding Cold War doomsday setting for a gritty, crime-riddled 1970s New York (before the Keene Act outlawed costumed heroes), *The End Is Nigh* is a by-the-numbers brawler that focuses on fast action over dense, thought-provoking scenarios. But while Mr. Moore might object to *Nigh* (after all, he still claims that his comic is unfilmable, and he has absolutely no involvement in either the motion picture or this game), we've played the first three levels of this six-chapter, download-only title, and we're convinced that it's worth a look for Watchmen fans, old and new. Here's why:

1 **It looks incredible.** Gorgeous lighting effects are just the icing on the fetid cake here. Each area in this rain-drenched, dreary cityscape is suffused with intricate details, be it the graffiti on the dented garage doors or the debris strewn about the decaying rooftops. But more important, Danish developer Deadline Games nailed the costumes. Nite Owl's electrified suit is shiny in all the right places, with one of the best-animated capes ever to grace a computer monitor. (Speaking of shiny, check out the Owlship!) And Rorschach's mask is spot-on, with dots that shimmy and merge to form an ever-changing pattern on his masked face.

2 **It feels authentic.** With comic-style cutscenes reminiscent of Dave Gibbons' original artwork (Gibbons is an advisor on the game), along with a script from comic scribe Len Wein (who served as editor on the original series), *End Is Nigh* feels like a proper prequel. It's too early to tell if the story turns out to be anything special—it only starts getting somewhat interesting halfway in, when our hands-on preview ended—but at least the main characters (along with some pretty cool cameos) behave like they should.

3 **No fighting over who plays whom.** *Nigh* is an offline co-op game: Play it with a friend in front of the same screen, or let the AI handle the other guy. At this point most of you are probably thinking, "I call Rorschach. No way am I playing as Nite Owl!" The good news: Each character plays differently, and each is as satisfying as the other. Rorschach is better for one-on-one brawling, with a more brutal set of moves; he can also pick up weapons dropped by foes. Nite Owl is a martial arts expert, which makes him more adept at handling crowds; his suit also helps out in sticky situations, allowing him to electrify bad guys or blast them backward with a Screecher Grenade. We played both, and to our surprise we liked them equally for different reasons. So if you *still* insist on taking Rorschach, fine with us; we'll play as Nite Owl any day.

4 **It's fantastic fan-service.** Look again at that opening statement over yonder. 'Nuff said.

5 **It's fun.** Don't expect anything revolutionary here. This is combo-based fisticuffs, with very little else on offer. Puzzles are paltry (a lever here, a switch there) and strategy is nonexistent (do I punch *this* guy or *that* one?). But what a difference a license makes! Lovingly crafted, gorgeously rendered, *The End Is Nigh* isn't anywhere near as revolutionary as the original comic, but it's on track to be a straightforward, down-and-dirty good time. Be sure to check back next month for the final verdict after we put the rest of the game through its paces. **/// GARY STEINMAN ///**
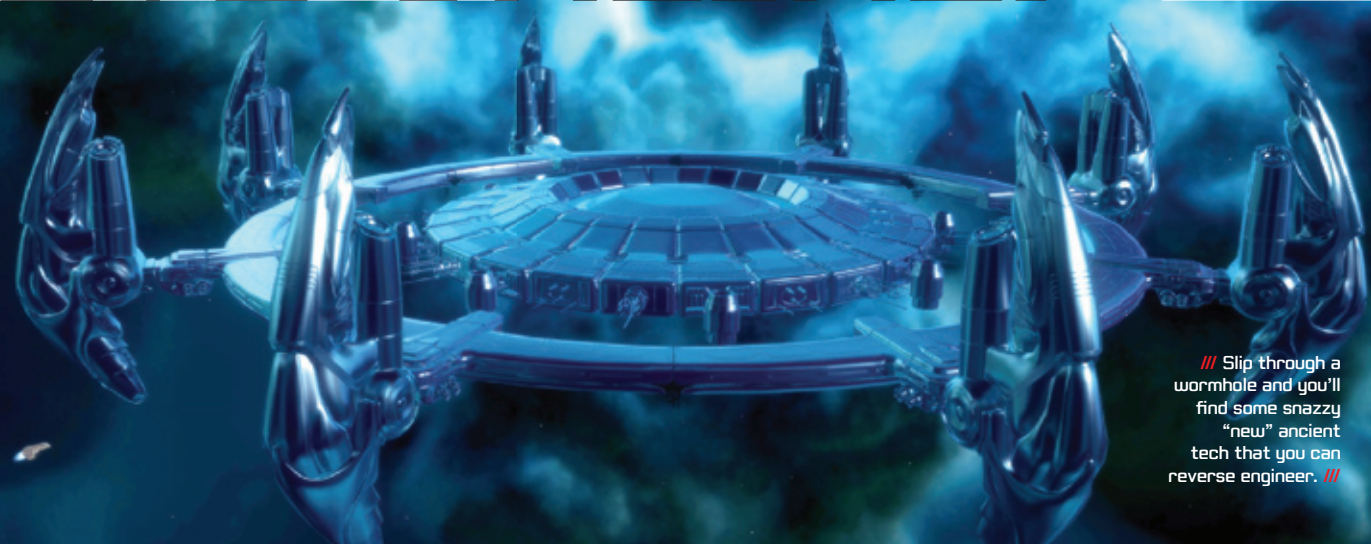
/// The game starts with a brutal prison riot: a perfect excuse to kick copious buttock. ///

And Silk Spectre, I see.

WATCHMEN
THE END IS NIGH

VITALS ::
DEVELOPER: DEADLINE GAMES
PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE
RELEASE: MARCH

EVE ONLINE: APOCRYPHA

/// Slip through a wormhole and you'll find some snazzy "new" ancient tech that you can reverse engineer. ///

▪ EXCLUSIVE INSIGHT ON THE GROWTH OF THE UNIVERSE

On March 10, our favorite Icelandic galaxy builders at CCP are rolling out the tenth and largest expansion to *EVE Online*, along with a re-release of the title at retail with the new content. *Apocrypha* is meant to not only boost the content available to *EVE's* more than 200,000 dedicated subscribers, but also be a minor reset to several game mechanics and systems that had scared some players away from the steep difficulty curve. Here's a warp-speed take on *Apocrypha's* tweaks and features, according to CCP's Lead Designer Noah Ward:

1. WORMHOLES
"We'll see more of these stellar subways occurring in New Eden. They lead to a new, dangerous area of space full of ancient technology that can be reverse-engineered if successfully brought back. Wormholes are temporary and can be scanned down using sensor technology. This is exploration in the truest sense of the word—undiscovered areas, an element of risk and journey across the stars. They are the perfect place to get a fresh start or ambush an opponent."

2. MODULAR SHIPS
"These customizable ships are brand new to *EVE*. Each vessel is made of a hull piece and five subsystem modules corresponding to ship's functions. Changing or upgrading a subsystem not only changes the ship's attributes, the amount of slots, and the available hardpoints, but also the ship's appearance. Multiple tiers to choose from for each subsystem for each ship will grant more unique combinations than there currently are ships available in *EVE*."

3. MASSIVE MISSION ARCS
"NPCs will dispense branching missions that serve up multiple choices for pilots and require

them to complete dozens of missions across multiple solar systems."

4. THE SLEEPERS
Torfi Frans Olafsson, Senior Producer, says: "Hidden deep within the mysterious wormholes, pilots will encounter an ancient faction known as The Sleepers. After being separated from the rest of civilization for thousands of years, the massive Sleeper structures and their defenses threaten any who encounter them with deadly force. The sentry ships display expertise and lethality greater than anything but the fully armed ships flown by the most talented capsuleers. The wreckage of any defeated Sleeper vessels will bring tremendous wealth to those who succeed in harnessing the technology through reverse engineering."

A GEEK AMONG JOCKS
▪ CHRIS KLUWE IS REPRESENTING MMOS IN THE NFL

When we approached Minnesota Vikings' punter **Chris Kluwe** to interview him about his level 80 Troll Rogue in *World of Warcraft*, he was more than happy to chat—on one condition: that we help him get out of the dungeon he was currently lost in. Being the team players we are at PCG, we did our best to help him out and he returned the favor by answering a few of our questions.

PC Gamer: So how long have you been playing *World of Warcraft*?
Chris Kluwe: Since December, the first year it came out. So that was …'05, maybe '04? I've been playing for quite a long time. I have about 166 days played on my character.

Are you able to find a lot of time for games during the football season?
Ah yes, yes I am. I have a lot of free time. I actually just got a laptop so I can play while I'm in the Minnesota Vikings facility. While everyone else has a lot of meetings, the specialists usually just have one

"It doesn't really matter what you do in real life; it's how you play the game."

a problem and obviously I don't raid on weekends at all because I have to concentrate on the whole kicking thing.

Have you ever run into another *WoW* player in the NFL, or is it pretty much don't-ask-don't-tell when it comes to MMOs in the locker room?
A lot of the guys are really into video games, but not MMOs. But I've pretty much become known in the locker room as the guy to come ask about what new video games are out and what to get.

There's an Internet rumor that you want to change your name to "World of Warcraft" to boost your jersey sales. Are you really considering that?
No, no. When Chad Johnson changed his name to Chad Ocho Cinco, I made a joke that I should change my name to Chris World of Warcraft, and the nickname has sort of stuck on the weekly radio show I host.

You're very open about your identity to other players. Does everyone on your server know who you are?
Yeah, I do a lot of forum trolling on our server's message board so everyone knows who I am. I write

Gamer, professional athlete AND chef—what *doesn't* this man do?

Chef Loate
The Flying Hellfish
LEVEL 80 TROLL ROGUE

Don't underestimate his sneakiness.

With 76% of all achievements in *WoW*, Kluwe has more achievement points than the PCG staff combined.

It doesn't matter if he's kicking it, skinning it, or making armor with it, Chris is into leather.

With almost 4,000 attack power and a 40% crit chance, Kluwe's entirely epic gear speaks for itself.

meeting and then we're free for three or four hours. So I figured I could get some fishing achievements done while I'm there.

You're in a guild called <Flying Hellfish>. Is that some kind of secret NFL-only guild?
Haha, no it's just a bunch of regular guys. We're actually one of the top raiding guilds on the server and I think we were the 13th guild in the U.S. to kill Illidan. We don't stay up super late to raid, so it's not much of

scathing comments about people—what better way to pass some time? Most players don't really care about sports that much and that's fine, it's a video game. It doesn't really matter what you do in real life; it's how you play the game.

Anything to say to Blizzard about balancing the game in PvP?
There are several that probably would not be fit to quote in the magazine.

# The MMO Times-Picayune

Modders, start your engines
Cyan Worlds shut down *Myst Online* but released the game code as open source to the community. We're keeping an eye out for the best efforts from the creative and talented mod teams working overtime to produce something worthwhile from *Myst*'s ashes.

IRS targets MMO gamers
In a report to Congress, the IRS's taxpayer advocate stressed the importance
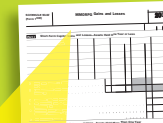
SCHEDULE WoW (Form 1040)	MMORPG Gains and Losses
Department of the Treasury Internal Revenue Service (99)	▶ Attach to Form 1040 or Form 1040NR. ▶ See Instructions for Schedule WoW (Form 10 ▶ Use Schedule WoW-1 to list additional transactions for lines 1 and 8.
Name(s) shown on return	

of taxes in "virtual worlds," claiming that the acquisition of virtual goods with real-world value—whether sold or not—could be taxable under the current system.

Beauty and the Death Knight
GamerDNA announced that even *WoW*'s murderous Death Knights can't resist picking the "pretty" races—54 percent are Human or Blood Elf; only 6 percent are Dwarf or Troll.

Pointless controversy of the month
Blizzard recently introduced minor *WoW*-related ads onto their official forums, inciting fierce backlash from people who apparently have never seen ads on the Internet before. Some have even threatened to cancel their accounts over the "issue."

The perfect MMO for the crazy cat lady
An otherwise unremarkable Japanese MMO, *Shin Megami Tensei Imagine* (currently in open beta) offers tactical depth with over 200 unique pets and on-the-fly swapping between control of your character and his/her demon companion.

You are likely to be eaten by a grue…again
Thirty years after the first *Zork* game was released, Activision announced it will publish a new installment in the franchise, *Legends of Zork*—a casual browser-based "persistent online adventure."
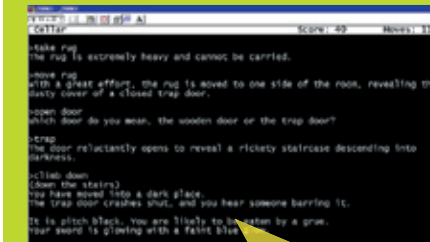
You are likely to be eaten by a grue. ...ing with a faint blue glow.

EXPANDEMONIUM

⦂ THE DROUGHT OF POST-RELEASE CONTENT HAS EVAN LAHTI HOPPING MAD…AND BIT NOSTALGIC FOR EXPANSION PACKS

s less really more? Though a handful of PC devs still deal in full-fledged expansion packs (Relic, Blizzard, and EA LA with *Command & Conquer*), more post-release content is tending toward the small stuff. Blame console consumers for feeding off monetized micro downloadables if you'd like—map packs, new vehicles, extra episodes, tiny avatar icons, and so on. I wish I could say it ain't so for my PC gaming kin, but the '90s era of generous, timely aftermarket support to PC titles seems gone for good. (Cue angsty Darth Vader: "Noooooooooooo!")

I wouldn't be so peeved about losing a cherished convention of our platform if its replacement offered a consistent improvement. Bethesda brought us maybe the last must-have expansion, *Shivering Isles*, in 2007. I had my Pip-Boy warmed up for *Fallout 3*'s first DLC, *Operation Anchorage*, only to load up a two-and-a-half hour combat-heavy spinoff that wasn't worth the $10 I paid, but I'll blame Microsoft's exclusive rights for that.

Sure, Valve's vision for games as platforms for iterative development has been a generous, wallet-friendly alternative to traditional expansions. It's a treat when Steam auto-patches *Team Fortress 2*, but we've only recently received the Scout class update, the first upgrade to *Team Fortress 2* since *August*. If that's a measurement of what's to come, we'll see the remaining five updates in place by summer 2010, the Chinese year of the tiger. Meanwhile, the dev's timeline for rolling out new scenarios for *Left 4 Dead* isn't officially announced.

I'm all about encouraging devs to try new approaches to DLC—so much so that I've picked through our massive library of boxed add-ons to recover a few of my favorite expansions, games that I think model what developers should abide by: releasing timely content that meaningfully grows the user's experience and meets their anticipation.

> "I wouldn't be so peeved about losing a cherished convention of our platform if its replacement offered a consistent improvement."

EVAN'S FAVORITE EXPANSION PACKS

⦂ GOLD STANDARDS FOR POST-RELEASE CONTENT

Duke Nukem 3D: Atomic Edition October 1996
- 11 new levels, three new enemy types
- Added bot functionality to "Fake Multiplayer"
- Added "Duke Tag," a CTF mode
- New weapon: the Microwaver Emitter

Wing Commander Prophecy: Secret Operations August 1998 (with additional monthly updates)
- *SO* eventually made it to retail, but was one of the first experiments in digital-distribution. The first of several free monthly episodes was a hefty 112 MB download for dial-uppers.

StarCraft: Brood War November 1998
- Seven new units, including the Protoss Dark Templar, Terran Medic, and Zerg Devourer
- Revitalized the original with distinct campaigns for each race, along with 100 multiplayer maps
- Developed Kerrigan and Jim Raynor

Command & Conquer: Red Alert – Counterstrike/Aftermath March 1997 / September 1997
- Two separate expansions, added all the units you'd drawn in your school notebooks: Tesla tanks, missile subs, Chrono tanks, demolition trucks
- 100 new multiplayer maps and 18 tough single-player missions
- The awesomely '50s horror/sci-fi "Ant Missions" Easter egg, where players battle giant ants in a military bunker

Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal June 2001
- 50+ hours of new gameplay (including the separate "Watcher's Keep" dungeon), and a nearly tripled experience cap
- 40 new monsters, 50 new spells

Half-Life: Opposing Force November 1999
- Totally different perspective than the original—you enter Black Mesa as one of the soldiers sent to eliminate Gordon Freeman
- A greater emphasis on combat, helped by a handful of marines in your squad and nine new weapons

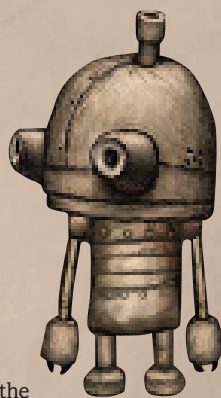◀ BACK /// CONTENTS /// NEXT ▶

MACHINARIUM

GEARHEADED FOR INDIE GREATNESS

For the cutest droids this side of WALL-E, look no further than *Machinarium*. Even the game's bad bots are lovable: A gang called the Black Cap Brotherhood is plotting to destroy the robo town's biggest tower using the most adorable WMD ever—a steel bomb filled with fruit, duct-taped to the side of the spire.

It's this sort of children's book charm and light humor that makes the indie point-and-click puzzle game worth highlighting. A seven-man team in the Czech Republic is cranking out some of the quirkiest 2D art we've seen in a game, crafting a detailed world stuffed with steel people framed by clockwork, steampipes, and oil puddles. Designer/director Jakub Dvorsky says the visual inspiration stems from the rusty machines and abandoned factories that dot his eastern European homeland, along with sci-fi standards like Stanislav Lem, Jules Verne, Ray Bradbury, and Stanley Kubrick. *Machinarium* also owes some hat-tipping to the decade-gone era of adventure games—including classics like *Grim Fandango*, *Myst*, and *Monkey Island*—but its eye-catching illustrations invigorate the gameplay. Players progress through hand-drawn scenes that quietly animate; part of the puzzler's appeal is seeing the art come to life. The adorable way your robot eats items to

add them to his inventory is a great running gag; unspool some rope from a spindle, and watch him slurp the line like spaghetti. Light bulbs, umbrellas, toy dolls: Everything your bot can grab is held in his steel stomach. That's the main mechanic for solving puzzles, too: You can only take or manipulate objects in arm's reach, so you're often click-dragging your bot to collapse or extend his tiny tin torso.

In one case, after your robot escapes from a lower-level holding cell, you click to poke your head up through a hole in the floor, into an entrance room with a guard sitting at a table. The sentry is busy practicing with his pellet pistol, shooting a target on the wall. You need to grab his ammo to solve another puzzle, so you have to wait for the right moment to reach out and give a gentle push to the chair he's teetering back in, then reach a little higher to nab the pellets on the table. When the lazy guard wanders over to the wall to grab more bullets, we yoink the key dangling from his belt.

CONTAINED GAMEPLAY was a welcome trait in the early build we tinkered with. Some adventure games have you wandering between a half-dozen areas to resolve errand runs, but because *Machinarium* has no dialogue or written words (meaning it automatically translates to gamers across the globe), simplicity comes naturally. Creating a makeshift disguise to cross a bridge (see below), rescuing a robodog, or rewiring a machine to advance to the next screen focuses your brainpower on what's in front of you. Our favorite puzzles had us decoding symbols on abstract control panels to move levers and lifts.

We totally relate to gamers who hesitate to devote a few hours to pixel hunting to solve puzzles. Running a cursor along the screen to find what trigger or item advances you to the next stage demands some patience, but *Machinarium*'s calming yet evocative art should help its cause. We won't call it 2009's *World of Goo*, but we hope indie efforts like *Machinarium* continue to earn attention for what they are: inventive, creative, charming little projects dripping with originality.

/// EVAN LAHTI ///

/// As his team's first big project after *Samorost*, Dvorsky says he'd like to see *Machinarium* released to as many retailers as possible, and is open to digital distribution through Direct2Drive or Steam. ///

VITALS :: DEVELOPER: AMANITA DESIGN PUBLISHER: TBA RELEASE: SEPTEMBER URL: MACHINARIUM.COM
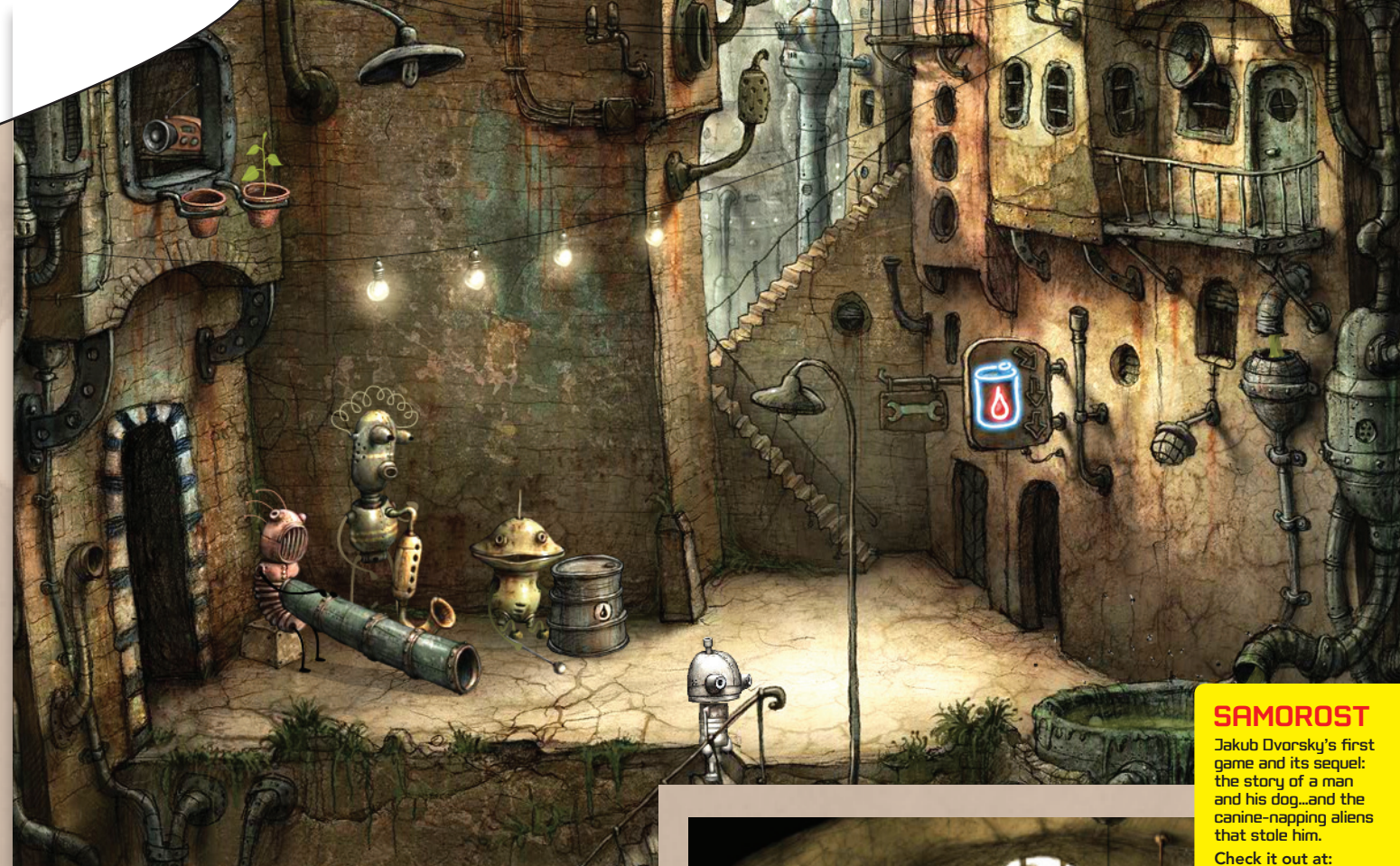
/// From robo sax to a corner oil bar—tiny details give *Machinarium* personality. ///

/// Fish your leg out of the pond, then swing across with this magnetic lasso. ///

/// The Black Cap Brotherhood: cunning, dastardly, wearers of questionable headgear. ///

SAMOROST
Jakub Dvorsky's first game and its sequel: the story of a man and his dog...and the canine-napping aliens that stole him. Check it out at: amanita-design.net/samorost-1

SOLVING A PUZZLE

1. Gatekeeper. You. Drawbridge.

2. Hey, there's a paint can under these cones.

3. Let's mix it with the white paint.

4. Lightbulb. Mine!

5. I'll dip one cone in the bucket for a hat. Lower the drawbridge, mmmkay?

6. You look like a policebot. Aiiight.

> "The first team to get a grenade through or exhaust their clips can suddenly dictate who has the advantage."

de_dust

REVISITING ONE OF THE MOST-PLAYED MULTIPLAYER MAPS OF ALL TIME WITH ITS CREATOR

If you were a gamer back in 2000, you almost definitely put hundreds of holes in one of **Dave Johnston's** greatest creations. *Counter-Strike* debuted with de_dust, and it's gone on to be perhaps the most-played multiplayer map ever. Many of us spent more time in the map than we did our own backyards; the tan sand, bricks, and boxes are nearly hallowed ground among PC gamers.

Among de_dust2, cs_assault, cs_office, fy_iceworld, and de_aztec, it's a space that not only stands as one of the most popular maps of all time, but its layout and design represent millions of gamers' first shooter, first headshot, or first gaming clan. Formative FPS experiences were forged here: failed flank attempts through the underpass, eating an HE grenade in the middle area's crossroads, last-second bomb defusals. By any measure, de_dust is worth remembering, which is why we were delighted to chat up its creator, now a senior level designer at Splash Damage in the UK.

PC Gamer: You attribute some of de_dust's popularity to its brighter lighting and accessible layout, but was there anything else about the design that made it so replayable?
Dave Johnston: I can't say for sure. On one hand, it's incredibly open and each team can approach each round in a different way than the last, but on the other there are clear areas that shout "snipe here" or "rush here." I suppose as prescriptive as those areas are, they're also quite flexible. You could snipe with an AWP from the sniper nest, but if sniping isn't your thing you could use an MP5 instead and still have some success.

You mention in "Making Dust" (http://tinyurl.com/pcgdust) that screenshots from the original *Team Fortress* directly inspired the map. Do you remain a fan of *Team Fortress*?
Yep, I'm a huge fan. Unfortunately I don't have much time to play it, and I think I still prefer the feel of *TFC*. I greatly envy Valve's level designers for the universe they get to work with. Can't pick out a favorite map, but their overhaul of Well6 was both very brave and surprisingly successful, I think.

There's something about the timing in the indoor middle area—how each side is racing toward it to gain position before the other team does. Can you speak to the strength of that space?
That area is a happy accident, really. That hallway holds the entire map together and the outcome of a round can be determined directly from the first few seconds of skirmishes inside there. The first team to get a grenade through or the first team to exhaust their clips can suddenly dictate who has the advantage; it's amazing how so much relies on the outcome of the battle there. It couldn't have turned out better.

When you think about that AWPing spot near the counter-terrorist spawn point... that little overhang trained thousands of FPS players in sniping, right? Do you have any specific feelings for that spot as a lookout for AWP-users?
That's by far one of my favorite spots, partly because people use it exactly as I wanted them to, and also because they don't. It's designed specifically for AWPers, but the crates were carefully placed for the terrorists as well. They moved a few times as people's aim got better and better in subsequent releases, so I hope it's still balanced now.

In terms of tools or techniques, how has map making changed since the '90s?
At a high-level, it's the same. At a low-level, it's ten times as much work. So many things we never used to care about (accessibility in particular) now occupy most of our time. If *CS* was a 2008 game rather than a 1999 game, Dust would have been an impossibility.

Any closing notes to share with counter-strikers?
Yes—camping is a valid tactic, even on Dust. Also, our new Splash Damage HQ is quite fancy and shiny, and it smells of delightful things.

DAVE'S FAVES
BOMB-PLANTING SPOT: "B. It's exactly where the CT spawn, right in the middle of enemy territory, and also offers loads of places for hiding and Benny Hill-style chases round the buildings once the bomb's ticking."

TACTIC: "I particularly enjoy rushing the central hallway with an XM1014, tossing in a flashbang and mowing people down. Unfortunately people get wise to this tactic rather quickly now."

FACTION: "Depends entirely on my mood. Terrorist if I want to go all gun-ho, or CTs if I want to strategically lure them into my crosshairs. I just hit 'auto select' and let the game decide."

HOT SPOTS

AWP OVERHANG
A sniping nest if there ever was one. The entire left side of the map could be locked down by a talented CT sharpshooter.

BEST MEMORY: Pinning would-be flankers under the bridge, then calling in teammates to ambush.

MIDDLE AREA
Whichever side threw the first on-target frag or flashbang could tilt the round in their team's favor. Poor visibility, long hallways, and lots of traded fire to lure opponents out.

BEST MEMORY: Knowing precisely where the other team will be six seconds in, and angling the perfect grenade off a wall as they round the corner.

UNDER THE BRIDGE
Flanking 101. If a few of your teammates could keep your opponents busy in the middle, a successful flanker could rout them through here.

BEST MEMORY: Being the last one alive, hiding behind a box as a troop of enemies pass, then jumping out to shoot 'em all in the back.
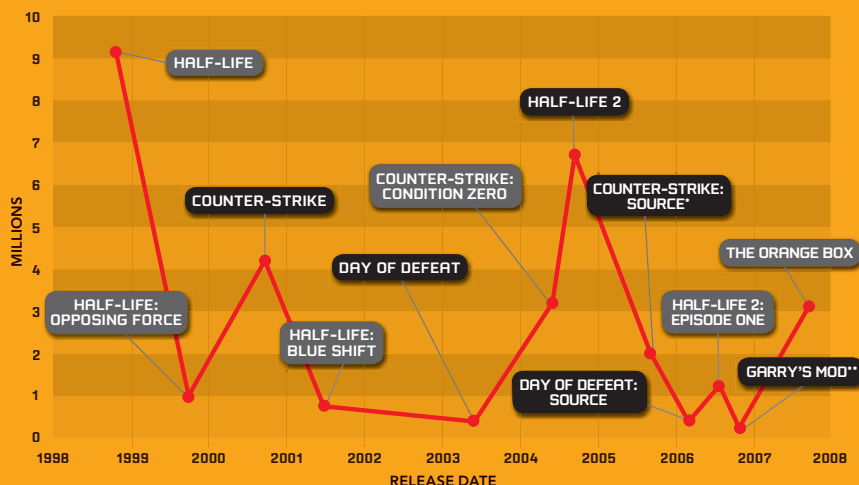
Battle *Bejeweled* in spaaaaaaaaaace! Clear gems to laser enemy ships, then customize weapons and skills. Shields up!

*Delivering only the information you need, without any messy details or adjectives!

VALVE OPENS UP

⏹ LIFETIME RETAIL SALES FIGURES REVEALED

We've always known Valve had sold squillions of games, but the secretive developer has long been quiet regarding their actual sales figures.

Late last year, however, they released data for their non-digital distribution, amounting to just over a decade of sales. Overall, Valve has sold more than 32.8 million copies in the shops. Their original game, *Half-Life*, tops the charts with an incredible 9.3 million copies sold since its release way back in 1998.

Valve's second biggest seller is *Half-Life 2*, and while *Counter-Strike*'s separate incarnations don't approach that number, when you add all the sales together for the different versions, they still total a dizzying 9.2 million.

The numbers below aren't the complete picture, however. The figures don't include Steam sales, and Valve's digital distribution platform has 15 million users. We asked Valve at the beginning of last year—after the launch of the *Orange Box*—what the split was between retail and Steam sales, and they estimated "about 50 percent." There's every chance the *Orange Box* has sold six million copies by now.

It's an amazing way to cap off a decade of game development. Valve claims they're a small developer, and a small part of PC gaming, but the way the numbers stack up shows that they're being embarrassingly modest about their importance in the industry.

*Originally released with Half-Life 2. **Published by Valve.

RELEASE METER 0409

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING

Eat your greens. Drink your milk. No dessert until you finish dinner. While most parents are careful to drill the tenets of proper nutrition into their sugar-craving children's craniums, they often forget that a balanced gaming diet is just as important. *PC Gamer* encourages you to enjoy daily servings of RTS with Natasha and Tanya (FMV cutscenes are part of a balanced breakfast), and don't forget to grab a spoonful of hearty RPGs complemented by generous portions of FPS as well.

—*Josh the Intern*

⊞ Q2 2009

Champions Online	2K
Arma II	505 Games
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	Activision
The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena	Atari
Ghostbusters: The Video Game	Atari
Bionic Commando	Capcom
Dark Void	Capcom
Street Fighter IV	Capcom
FUEL	Codemasters
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
Red Alert 3: Uprising	EA
Sims 3	EA
Spore: Space Expansion Pack	EA
Divinity 2	Ego Draconis
Batman: Arkham Asylum	Eidos
Battlestations: Pacific	Eidos
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Cities XL	Monte Cristo
Two Worlds: The Temptation	SouthPeak
Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor	THQ
Anno 1404	Ubisoft
Avatar	Ubisoft
Demigod	Stardock

⊞ Q3 2009

Mafia II	2K
Borderlands	2K
Machinarium	Amanita Design
Starcraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Jumpgate Evolution	Codemasters
Section 8	Gamecock
Prototype	Sierra
Edge of Twilight	SouthPeak
Hearts of Iron III	Paradox

⊞ Q4 2009

BioShock 2: Sea of Dreams	2K
Aliens: Colonial Marines	Sega
Metro 2033	THQ

/// In the 22nd century, dwindling energy resources limit the number of habitable areas on Earth to only a handful. Enter agencies: player-created, high-tech guilds that compete for the remaining real estate. ///

"We were inspired by the fluid, action combat feel of [*Tribes* and *TF2*], but wanted even greater diversity of classes and devices and set our game within a persistent world of player-driven conflict where the results of combat matches really affects the world."
—*Erez Goren, founder, CEO, and lead designer*

/// Medics' agony gun can heal allies or zap enemies with a defense debuff. ///

/// Graphically, suit models and weapon effects get the most attention in *GA*. ///

/// Verticality is a major map theme. ///

/// All this fresh air makes room for flight and fight alike, but melee combat isn't ignored. ///

GLOBAL AGENDA

LASERS, ENERGY KATANAS, AND ESPIONAGE APLENTY IN THIS 'SPY-FI' SHOOTER MMO

In our perfect world, everyone wears a jetpack. Like rainbow sprinkles, they tend to improve anything they're attached to, and that includes shooters—just ask the 30-foot war obelisk we've commissioned to commemorate *Starsiege: Tribes*.

When we touch down in the testing area at Hi-Rez Studios, 15 high school students are jetpacking about in a 10-on-10 match—screaming taunts, strategizing,

dropping force fields and sticky mines, hurrying to deploy turrets. It's a loud little LAN at the independent dev, but Erez Goren doesn't mind the ruckus—the self-made software entrepreneur has dropped more than 20 of his own millions to get *Global Agenda* off the ground. He's the lead designer of his own dream project, one influenced by his affection for *City of Heroes* and a hundred-hour investment in each of *Team Fortress 2*'s character classes (yes, even the Scout). In one brief skirmish, we're seeing a kind of *TF2* with lasers, even a second coming of *PlanetSide* on a smaller scale.

We roll onto a capture point with our sneaky recon class character, decloaking behind a medic (who's tethered his heal ray to a minigunning assault class) to take a slash with our katana, felling the medic in three

swipes before a missile turret blasts us down. Sound familiar, *TF2* vets? Gameplay straddles a kinetic and cooperative feel—in a given round, we'd cycle our weapons to fit the situation (like using a thermal grenade launcher when we stumble on a group of enemies), protect a turret-building teammate so he can hold the middle of the map, dish out heaps of splash-damage, and hover through vast vertical space.

WHERE'S THE MMO MEAT?

The massive aspects (sci-fi styled lobbies, PvE missions, training areas) are more in place to frame your matches and create persistency within a player-driven space. Character customization (most of it stylized, some of it quirky, like holiday-themed reindeer antlers) and other MMO vitals are here, too, but for a flagship feature, Hi-Rez is introducing a month-long PvP alliance campaign that agencies (*GA*'s player-formed guilds) compete in simultaneously. On a macro level, it looks like a board game—each agency is allotted its own map of hexes that they develop by terraforming territory and building structures that earn
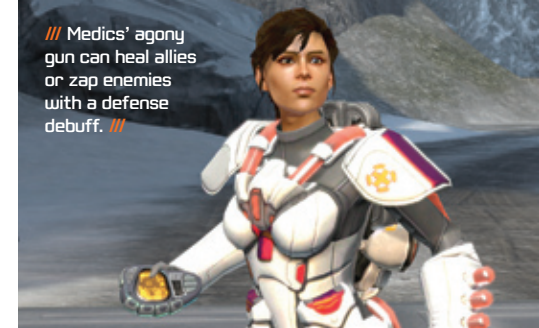
resources or add defensive buffs once you're in combat. Week-to-week, other agencies target individual hexes to attack, which each represent a map instance for scheduling a match. Lose the match, you'll need to rebuild that area—you'll do better if you're able to build a safe border of structures to surround your HQ.

On-screen, Hi-Rez's tweaks to the Unreal 3 engine look good—neon-hued weapon effects and shiny suits slot well with bright environments. Otherwise, we loved one game mechanic in particular: the power pool that anchors your actions. Rocket launchers and other weapons don't use ammo, they pull from a shared battery used by your jetpack and other items, meaning you always have a sense of your combat capability as it drains and restores.

Although a shooter-MMO has yet to find lasting success on any platform, *Global Agenda*—which repackages the fond, familiar cooperative and mobile combat of *TF2* and *Tribes* with layers of MMO goodness—seems like a sound candidate as we might get this year. Look for the beta to drop during second quarter preceding a year-end release. /// EVAN LAHTI ///

:: HOPES/FEARS ::

+ A promising genre hybrid with a fundamental focus on action over slow-paced MMO conventions. Refreshing character design; abilities like super-leaping, flight, and invisibility made us feel like a sci-fi supersoldier.

– Being light on lore and mission content, a good part of *GA*'s experience will rely on player conflict to keep it interesting.

/// Handymen of the future, the robotics class can deploy flak, missile, and other turret types.

CRIMECRAFT

ROBBERS AND ROBBERS

The Horde hates the Alliance. When there's a downpour downtown in *City of Heroes*, the villains don't give the good guys a ride to work. A high elf archmage in *Warhammer Online* wouldn't take a goblin shaman to prom.

Conflict sustains MMOs. If you're putting in 30 or 40 hours a week, lore can only do so much—at some point, player-created history, alliances, and rivalries start driving the experience. With that in mind, we can't think of a better stand-in for "meet you in the parking lot after school" than an MMO set on a lawless penal island colony—Sunrise City, *CrimeCraft*'s urban dystopia ruled by player-formed gangs competing for prestige, with nary a hero in sight to ruin the fun.

WE'RE WANDERING THROUGH an alpha build of Sunrise to gather missions, recruit members, and swap the scope on our sniper rifle before queuing for a match. Think of Sunrise as a massive, graffiti-lined lobby for gathering items and socializing; not a combat zone, but a contextual space to justify why we're dressing up in a camo vest and exchange-student jeans to lob Molotov cocktails in an 8-on-8 team match.

Behind Unreal 3 tech, the loose combat prioritizes action over tactics, like *The Club* or *Mercenaries 2*; we sprint-roll between stacked shipping crates at a dockyard, recklessly sprinkling C4 and mines on surfaces, two of our three maximum abilities. Our other feat, optical camo, makes us invisible long enough to hole up in a corner and pick off a few targets through our custom scope. Active

loot adds another chaotic element: At one point we rush to a corpse we didn't kill to nab some dropped goods; later on, we use another loot-littered corpse as bait to lure an opponent.

EXP is earned when the round wraps up, but better, our gang rank also jumps, letting us unlock a new hideout item. We like the idea of gang hideouts, customizable private areas (animal-print upholstery!) where your crew can socialize and strategize, and operate crafting stations to create weapons or "substances," less-than-legal consumables that enhance combat ability.

There are more than a few social shooters en route to the PC in '09 (*Quake Live*, *Parabellum*, *Global Agenda*, *Battlefield Heroes*), a trend we hope spurs a multiplayer scene that actively preserves the time we invest. We want more persistency in our shooters—something that puts our rivalries and leaderboard rank front-and-center, flaunts our 10:1 kill/death ratio, and gives us enough offensive emotes to rub our foes' faces in it. We'll see if *CrimeCraft* takes this approach when the beta rolls out this summer. /// EVAN LAHTI ///

:: HOPES/FEARS ::

+ Has promise as a platform for social shooting, over-the-top character customization, and third-person warfare in an innately conflict-encouraging setting. Integrated voice chat, instanced PvE, and leaderboard tracking are welcome adds.

– Will shoehorning MMO elements water-down the shooting mechanics? We're hoping for a land-grab campaign or something similar to give gangs a way of competing month-to-month.

Can't get enough smack talk? *CrimeCraft*'s web-based social network should let players smear rivals and fill their inboxes with Rickrolls.

/// Outside Sunrise City's hubs of vendors, skill trainers, and PvE mission portals, industrial combat areas await. ///

VITALS :: **RELEASE DATE:** Q3 2009 **DEVELOPER:** VOGSTER **PUBLISHER:** VOGSTER **URL:** CRIMECRAFT.COM

TERMINATOR SALVATION

:: POPCORN APOCO-OP

For all its credentials, Skynet may be the least-evil sounding world-dominating AI ever conceived. The defense supercomputer did pancake the Earth with nukes and release an army of roboskeletons to kill us all, but we still think it sounds kind of like a British cell phone service.

Intimidating or not, you'll fight Skynet head-on in *Terminator Salvation*, a game prequel to the upcoming film aimed at establishing the movie's backstory. You play as John Connor, savior-in-training of the human resistance force as it retakes a ruined Los Angeles. In co-op, a second player joins as Blair, John's apocalypse arm candy voiced by actress Moon Bloodgood.

LIKE GRIN'S OTHER movie game (*Wanted: Weapons of Fate*) or a *Transporter* sequel, *Terminator* centers itself on being an attractive but straightforward third-person action title. The dev's vision for post-nuke LA includes a lot of grassy patches crawling over a ruined cityscape, which really pops compared to the bevy of broken concrete we've seen in the destroyed world genre. In combat, *Salvation* leans on its cover system. Most encounters mean duck-rolling into protection, then blasting our shotgun at packs of flying aerostat scout ships or T-70s: crab-walking minigun bots that are one of the enemies unique to the game.

A bit of blind firing, leapfrogging between scenery, and lobbing EMP grenades, and we were on our way to the next skirmish. If you've got *Gears of War* in the back of your head, you're not far off—Connor and Blair are accompanied by two squadmates for most of the campaign; presentation details like tapping a button to snap the camera on an explosion or event in the distance evoke Epic's shooter more than a little.

As did the on-rails sections GRIN demoed for us. The first we saw slapped Connor behind a Jeep-mounted turret to bring a hunter-killer gunship to the ground by targeting its engines and weapon systems. On another, we stood at the back of a modified passenger train, flicking RPGs at moto-terminators with Blair while the robobikes tried to overtake our caboose. Watching our teammate fire and reload her RPG beside us made the section feel a little bit like a lightgun arcade game against the shooting gallery of speedy terminators.

Engaging moments like these seemed sparser than we'd hoped in *Salvation*, and we have a feeling its quality will come down to the mission variety GRIN is able to pack in. Since we don't have the time-traveling energy spheres to find out if it'll end up as another by-the-numbers movie game, we'll hold out hope that *Salvation*'s solid art direction hints at the attention to detail we'll see in May. /// EVAN LAHTI ///

/// "Hey babe, think I can flex and blind fire at the same time?" ///

/// Acronym action: HK gunship, meet RPG! *Salvation*'s on-rails sections evoke *Gears of War*. ///

:: HOPES/FEARS ::

+ GRIN's worked closely with the movie's art directors to forge a visual style that matches the film, and having much of the movie's voice talent on-hand should grant it some authenticity; cooperative campaign play sounds better than a forced competitive multiplayer mode.

– A speedy development schedule lined up for the film's release might limit what GRIN is able to do. The build we viewed showed off only a handful of weapons and enemy types.

VITALS :: DEVELOPER: GRIN **PUBLISHER:** HALCYON GAMES
RELEASE: MAY **URL:** TERMINATORSALVATIONGAME.COM
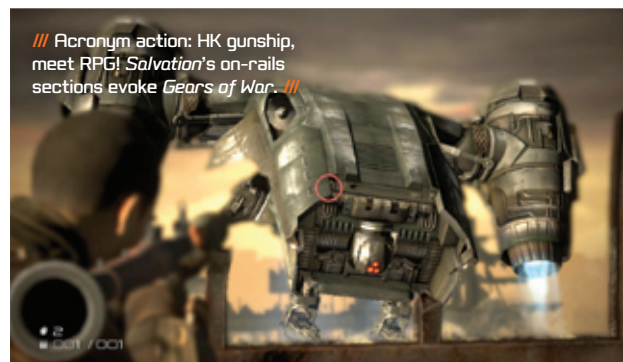
WORLDS BEYOND WARCRAFT

■ THE OTHER MMOS, TESTED

There are other massively multiplayer games out there, but given *World of Warcraft's* domination, you wouldn't know it. With more than 11 million players—and growing—Blizzard's game distorts the market, drowning out anything said about the other fine games available. For the lapsed *WoW* player who grows tired of Azeroth, or for the rebels who just refuse to give in and join, there *are* alternatives.

The fact is, some of these alternatives offer radically different, and in some cases better, experiences than *WoW*. They're also thriving: hooking new players daily, and receiving makeovers and patches to retain their existing subscribers. Over the next five pages we've collected the best, most hyped and most interesting, and taken hard looks at where those games stand today.

WARHAMMER ONLINE
AGE OF RECKONING

VITALS ■ URL: WWW.WARHAMMERONLINE.COM ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS: 750,000 (IN OCTOBER, SOURCE MMOG CHART) RELEASED: SEPTEMBER 2008 PRICE: $49.99 - $14.99/MONTH

What's the game?
That familiar orcs-and-chums vs. elfs-and-chums setup, but with more scowling. This is an MMO with player-versus-player as its bedrock, rather than the ill-fitting, extraneous hat it is in other games. If you join *WAR*, fighting others isn't optional. It's the entire point of the game.

How good is it?
An MMO that's truly focused on constant player war, rather than collecting a dozen elf toes, *WAR* has *really* hit the spot. You can go the whole game without encountering a single NPC mob if you like. It's simpler and faster to get into a player-versus-player scrap than in any other MMO, and the character classes are built to reflect this: even healers kick out serious damage.

How has it improved?
It's the youngest game here, so it's too early for sweeping changes. The one really major update hit just before Christmas—restoring two of the four player classes that were cut during the game's development. They're both tank classes, and their meaty frontline nature adds a swathe of new tactics to the PvP game. For a while at least, they also injected some life back into the otherwise tomb-quiet early zones.

/// Get your ork on in *WAR*. ///

Any problems?
The single-minded PvP focus has come at the expense of world-building. If you're not involved in a big player skirmish, the zones and their quests feel sterile and bland (with the exception of the spectacular capital cities). Early PvP action is focused on instanced battle-grounds, rather than the open war; Mythic has really failed to incentivize the game's major selling point. There's also a lot of grumbling about ongoing connection problems at the higher tiers. Perhaps more critically, it's suffered a

THE VERDICT
Warhammer Online is a smart combat-focused MMO that just needs more players. Wait for a free trial.

population crash since the server queues of launch month, and that's really seriously hurting the early game on some servers. Unlike a PVE-focused game, *Warhammer's* focus on large-scale combat simply *needs* people to work. When you're crawling through the first couple of tiers almost alone, you see almost nothing of what makes the game worthwhile. Even worse, it's meant that public quests—an innovation that asks players to group together for longer—are impossible to complete.

How should I start?
Pick a busy server. The game will try to direct you to an underpopulated one, dramatically decreasing your odds of a good time. Aim, too, to join a Guild as soon as possible. Being part of a cooperative makes all the difference.

What's the endgame?
It's here that the sense of two-sided war is really cemented, with the open-world PvP areas constantly contested, and in particular the Keep skirmishes drawing a crowd. In theory, it all leads up to sieges upon one of the two capital cities, but despite being one of *WAR's* major selling points these remain fairly rare. Most important, this is where the game is busier. It's where everyone who joined *WAR* at launch is now.

Is it here to stay?
It's in decent health, but it's not growing. *WAR* needs to attract a second wind of players to ensure long-term survival. It's the only game here that doesn't offer a free trial: that needs to change as soon as possible. A forthcoming Korean release should mean a big cash syringe for it, too.

/// Public quests need a crowd. ///

/// *WAR's* combat is fast-paced. ///
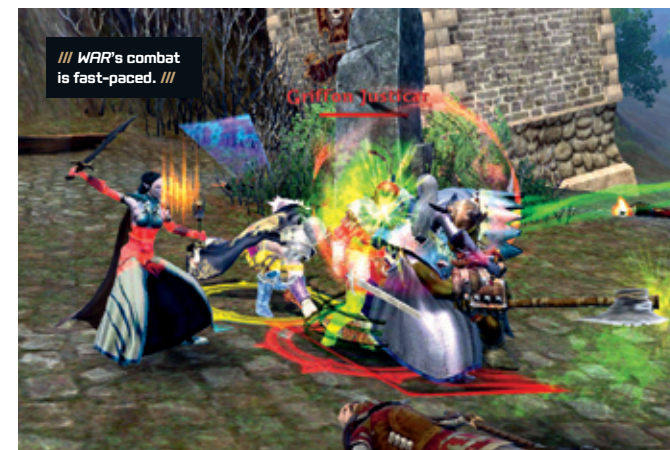
:: WHERE BALROGS FEAR TO TREAD
THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

VITALS :: URL: WWW.LOTRO.COM ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS: N/A RELEASED: APRIL 2007 PRICE: $39.99 + $14.99/MONTH

What's the game?
The official online recreation of the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, a lovingly crafted manifestation of Middle-earth. It's *EverQuest* and *WoW*-inspired MMO transplanted to locations and events from the Lord of the Rings books.

How good is it?
Impressive from the get-go. There's much to recognize and admire; the quests are well written and the level of detail in the locations and dungeons is impressive. We also like the way it presents major events to soloing players from the start. You'll flee a Nazgul, or collapse a mountain mine within a few hours. You're not forced into a group to enjoy the best bits.

How has it improved?
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar is referred to as "Volume One" of the game, and the epic storyline presented within is in the form of a series of "Books" with individual "Chapters" to follow. At launch, *LotRO* contained eight such Books with a further six released as free content updates. These add both new zones

/// Just don't forget your banjo. ///

ANGMARIM PRIEST

and features. Players can now enjoy housing, for example.
    The recently released first full expansion pack, *Mines of Moria*, takes the story into Volume Two, increases the level cap to 60, introduces "legendary" items (objects that themselves can be leveled up to unlock new abilities), and provides the Mines of Moria to explore. It also adds two new classes: the excellent Warden, who chucks spears, and the awkward RuneKeeper, a kind-of magic, kind-of aggro-management blokey.

to smack other players in the face you have to join the ludicrous "player versus monster" zones, in which you can pretend to be a giant spider.

How should I start?
The best starting class is the Hunter, an archer and trap setter. They can chuck out high damage from a distance, track foes, and fast travel. The Warden introduced with *Mines of Moria* is also a new favorite, with a combination of ranged attacks with javelins and close-up melee action dealt by spear and shield. If you're a fan of the lore make a beeline for Hobbiton: *LotRO*'s recreation of the Shire is the best we've seen in any media.

What's the endgame?
Level 60 players can enjoy a range of raiding areas to suit groups of all sizes. The refinement of legendary items and advancement in tiers of crafting will also keep you busy for a long time yet.

Any problems?
LotRO suffers from the grind scourge afflicting all current generation MMOs. For every compelling and engaging expedition, you'll unearth an attempted masking of that lowest common questing denominator: kill 10 of these things and bring me their hoofs, ears, horns, hides, beards, whatever.
    It's also slavish to the lore, and that can cause problems. Healers don't cast spells: they play banjos to improve group-mate's morale. Worse, there's very little player versus player action—if you want

Is it here to stay?
We're still many expansions away from the gates of Mordor. We'll be playing *LotRO* for years to come.

THE VERDICT
If you want a no-frills alternative to *Warcraft*, *Lord of the Rings Online* should be your first choice.

/// They call me the "Boar Whisperer." ///

:: NO SUBSCRIPTION NECESSARY
GUILD WARS

VITALS :: URL: WWW.GUILDWARS.COM ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS: N/A (NO SUBSCRIPTION FEES) RELEASED: APRIL 2005 PRICE: $29.99

What's the game?
It's an MMO without the fuss. There are no subscription fees—it's entirely funded through sales of the game itself and of its expansion packs. But it's also less about big open worlds. Players only meet large groups of other players while in towns and outposts, while active quests are completed in "instanced" environments. At high levels, *Guild Wars* is also a very competitive arena-combat RPG.

/// You'll face *Guild Wars*' missions alone. ///

How good is it?
Without the subscription renewals nagging at you to get your monthly money's worth, you can feel relaxed about slowly leveling through the storylines. The quests are well balanced events to solve a meaty meta game where guilds of players compete for league rankings. The skill isn't just about firing off spells: it's in choosing the right combination of abilities (eight, from dozens) before you enter into combat. If you can't be bothered to reach the max level before you enter the competitive arenas, you can roll an instant level 20 character, too.

How has it improved since launch?
Two new full retail games, termed campaigns (*Nightfall* and *Factions*), and an expansion, mean there's

seemingly no end to the content. That comes to four new classes (or professions, in the game jargon), nine new regions, and a colossal 650 new skills. The one expansion, *Eye of the North*, demands a level 20 character, but fixes the endgame: there are now multilevel dungeons to explore, ten new AI controlled heroes, and some killer armor sets.

What's wrong with it?
Venturing forth into the environments of *Guild Wars* to reach your desired quest or target location can be a frustratingly mundane affair at times. It feels linear. You are guided to your destination by the restrictions of the surrounding landscape. Loading screens as you transition into your instanced area can feel intrusive and are a far cry from the almost endless, wide open landscapes of *The Lord of the Rings Online* or *World of Warcraft*. *Guild Wars* characters tend to be very similar looking, too.

THE VERDICT
It's a more casual MMO, best suited to players who want to dip in and out of leveling.

/// *Guild Wars*: quite pretty. ///

/// Orbital cannon versus dog. ///

:: THE MASTER RETURNS
EVERQUEST II

VITALS :: URL: WWW.EVERQUEST2.COM ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS: 200,000 (JAN 07, SOURCE: MMOGCHART.COM) RELEASED: NOVEMBER 2004 PRICE: $19.99 + $14.99/MONTH

What's the game?
The high fantasy MMO sequel to the first seriously successful MMO. The sequel takes place in the same world of the original, Norrath, some 200 years later and following a cataclysmic event that has "re-imagined" the landscape. Read: crushed.

How good is it?
EQII is better at character differentiation and development than many of its peers, showcasing its hard-RPG roots. For a start, once you've decided how big your ears are in the character creator, you'll choose an alignment: good, neutral, or evil. Useful for roleplayers, your alignment also affects how other races and factions respond to your character. As you level, you'll be able to swap and modify your classes: level one fighters will morph into level ten brawlers into level twenty monks, gaining new abilities and attributes at each stage.
    EQII's crafting is more in depth than the competition. You'll have to complete a mini-game as you build each item—the quality of which is dependent on your success. Since there's a large, loyal, and knowledgeable fan base—some of whom have lingered in Norrath since the original—chat is generally more mature than in most MMOs,

potentially reflecting a higher average playing age.

How has it improved since launch?
There has been a constant stream of rich new content since launch, both free and paid for, with five full expansion packs, the most recent of which being *The Shadow Odyssey*, and a series of three smaller "adventure" packs. Graphical updates have kept the game engine current to keep pace with hardware advancements. Developer SOE has also released famous areas from the original *EverQuest* environments that have proved popular with long-term fans.

THE VERDICT
EverQuest II can't match *WoW*'s polish, but it is significantly underrated. Give it a try.

Any problems?
Progress can feel dauntingly tough at times, and the stodgy and slightly inept high fantasy might not be to your taste. The interface is overcomplicated, too, and could do with an overhaul.

/// Welcome to Norrath, 200 years later. Still elf-ridden. ///

:: A GALAXY APART
EVE ONLINE

VITALS :: URL: WWW.EVEONLINE.COM **ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS:** 250,000
RELEASED: MAY 2003 **PRICE:** $14.95/MONTH SUBSCRIPTION

What's the game?
It's a cruel and difficult game of competition and space violence. Beautiful, but extremely treacherous. *EVE* takes place in a single science fiction universe containing all 250,000 players. You pilot a series of spacecraft in third-person perspective. Combat is in real-time but your leveled skills determine how accurate turrets and missiles are.

/// Space zap! *EVE Online* has excellent explosions. ///

How good is it?
Its complexity and ambition mean that there's always some element of the game that's unfinished, but for gamers seeking something with depth, there's almost no other option. The endgame is where the fun is at: get involved in a large player alliance and you'll almost certainly become embroiled in territorial conflicts and corporate wars. It's that emphasis on player versus player combat that makes the game both unforgiving and so damned exciting.

How has it improved?
Last year saw a graphical overhaul of the engine to support fancy DX10 technologies, but even more impressive was the lag-defeating server tech that now supports up to a thousand pilots in the same solar system.

Any problems?
It's just too damn hard. There are too many ideas to get your head around before you can master the game, and when you do make progress someone will kill you and you'll lose everything.

You have to play with and rely on other people, and *EVE* drives you into their arms unapologetically. The balance of ships for PvP is also constantly being tweaked, and there's always someone ready to quit over the slightest nuance.

THE VERDICT
The only game here that feels like a real universe at war. Recommended for MMO veterans.

Any advice?
Skills train over time, so leave a long-time skill running when you aren't playing. Also note that the learning skills improve how fast you develop. Two weeks on those will pay off enormously.

Is it here to stay?
EVE has grown continuously since 2003, and will see more major updates in 2009 (turn to p.18 for a peek at the *Apocrypha* expansion). Devs CCP think its evolutionary design could let it run for another 50 years.

/// Own your own ship in *EVE Online.* ///

:: ARRR...GH
PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA

VITALS :: URL: WWW.BURNINGSEA.COM **ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS:** 65,000
[SOURCE: MMOGCHART.COM] **RELEASED:** JANUARY 2008 **PRICE:** $19.99 • $14.99/MONTH

What's the game?
It's the clear market leader in the 18th century, Caribbean-based, seafaring MMO sector. Japes aside, it's a clear alternative to the high fantasy and science fiction themes that jockey for position in the crowded MMO arena. After you've aligned yourself with the Spanish, French, English, or Pirate nations, you'll take control of a ship and blammo your way into fleet battles. *EVE Online* players might find it a pleasant diversion, particularly given the sophisticated supply-and-demand economy.

How good is it?
That complex economic system works in the game's favor. You'll need to balance time spent fighting other nations and trading with them. The fun naval combat is both robust and easy to handle.

Any problems?
Making your first fortune can be frustrating and confusing in equal measure. The land and on-board combat is a bit of a disaster; it's clumsy and tedious and badly animated. That's due to get a refresh later this year.

/// Swordfights in *Pirates* are tedious. ///

:: THE FORGOTTEN SOLDIER
PLANETSIDE

VITALS :: URL: PLANETSIDE.STATION.SONY.COM **ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS:** 20,000
RELEASED: 2003 **PRICE:** $19.95 • $12.99/MONTH

What's the game?
It's a science fiction shooter. The goal is to capture bases on the frontlines of combat. But it's ageing rapidly, and the mechanics are feeling rusty.

How good is it?
You need to get involved in organized battles to get any enjoyment out of it, because the launch boom has long since faded. It's the ageing warrior of the MMO scene—one we'll always reminisce about, but never play again.

How has it improved?
SOE keeps updating it, but the game has only diminished since launch. The one expansion, *Core Combat,* was a disaster, introducing far too much geography to an already dwindling playerbase. The game was eventually relaunched with smaller maps to cater to the dropping numbers.

Any problems?
PlanetSide was never designed to scale to smaller or larger numbers of players, so it faltered badly as the subscriber base dropped off.

Is it here to stay?
Probably not much longer. There's still a bit of fun to be had, but it's diminishing. That hasn't stopped us praying for a worthy successor.

/// Purple forever. We play the violet Vanu. ///

:: A BARBARIC EXPERIENCE
AGE OF CONAN

VITALS :: URL: WWW.AGEOFCONAN.COM **ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS:** UNCONFIRMED **RELEASED:** MAY 2008 **PRICE:** $29.99 • $14.99/MONTH

What's the game?
Funcom attempts to transform the baroque fantasy of the Conan adventures into an online RPG, with mixed results. With standard level-based questing plus high-end siege warfare, it's classically rendered for MMO success. It's also more of a brawler: combat focuses on action more than in most MMOs. And it's full of naked ladies.

How good is it?
Solid, but not as great as we'd hoped. Then again, it's also nowhere near as bad as you might have heard.

It's beautiful and has some excellent instanced questing, but these games are all about personal creativity, dressing up in funny hats, and having fun collecting things. *Age of Conan* does very little to facilitate any of these things, and ends up seeming a bit humorless.

How has it improved since launch?
The game's been out for a year, but the improvements have been mostly about just bringing it up to scratch. A recent (free) expansion added a load of new content, but there's still a distinct lack of mid-level material. That's worrying. Worse, the developer has yet to release its fancy-pants DirectX 10 tech for those with high-end 3D cards. That technology was promised, but eventually dropped, for the *launch* of the game.

Any problems?
It lacks charm. MMOs are places where you have to spend gigantic amounts of time, and the harsh, unforgiving world of Conan really doesn't do that kind of commitment any favors. The game needs more lowdown variety and some greater detail in the PvP high stakes. We weren't impressed that it took us nearly two days to download, install, and patch the client to get it working, either. Conclusion: try *Age of Conan* once you've exhausted the competition.

/// Don't mess with the Archbishop of Canterbury. ///

THE VERDICT
Conan is improving, but it's got a long way to go. Hold off until they've fixed the problems.

How should I start?
The tutorial sections of *Age of Conan* are meaty and well done. Blast through these and you'll be in good shape, but do make friends along the way. It's tough to get party members for low level group quests right now, so if you help out others, they're likely to remember you.

What's the endgame?
Once you're finished leveling your character, you'll spend the majority of your time besieging or defending fortresses in the borderlands area.

This is a huge PvP playground where guilds can contest ownership of keeps and build their own castles. Battles play out in huge mob-like skirmishes, making for some of the most epic of fantasy MMO combat. It's a little limited in scope, but a fun brawl. There are, of course, high-end dungeons to grind as well.

Is it here to stay?
The developer banked on a massive launch (they claim they catered for 700,000 players, but still had to add server capacity), but then the servers emptied. The scale of the launch means that the game has a long way to go before it really gets in trouble, but there's every reason to believe that this will be one of the losers of the MMO war. There simply isn't enough interesting stuff here.

/// *Age of Conan* will give any MMO player the grumps. ///

PC GAMER MAGAZINE ++ APRIL 2009

PC GAMER

49 GREATEST DEVELOPERS

Meet the visionaries who made PC gaming

BY RICHARD COBBETT

Some developers are born great, others achieve greatness, and some simply try to thrust greatness upon themselves. Yes, American McGee, we're looking at you.

Becoming a legend isn't as easy as getting your name on the box, and in many cases, it's the names we don't know who've contributed the most to the wonderful world of gaming. So who should we really be thanking?

We've gathered together 49 names from 'across the gaming world—some individuals, some companies—all of whom can truly claim to have made a difference. For some, their presence on the list is a simple matter of having released nothing but great games that elevated their reputation from mere mortals to legendary beings. For others, it might be one moment that redefined what it meant to be a PC gamer.

Bear in mind as we begin that almost every great developer of the past 20 years has had a great team behind them without whom they could have never realized their visions of gaming greatness. We salute them all here as well, even though we don't have the space to name each in turn.

And in case you're wondering why we stopped just shy of that magical number 50, that's because we wanted to leave one slot open for you to fill in. Send us an email at letters@pcgamer.com to let us know who *you* would add to the list.

THE KINGS OF GAMING

When these developers release a new game, you've got to play it. By order of the Game Gods. Who, conveniently, are usually the people with their names on the boxes.

POPCAP
One more go... one more go... one more go...
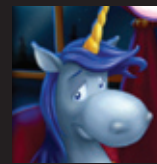
Casual games never used to be cool, not before *Bejeweled*, *Bookworm*, *Zuma*, and *Peggle*. PopCap may not always create original games (compare *Zuma* to *Puzzloop*, or *Rocket Mania* to *Pipemania*), and they're certainly not the only developers out there doing interesting things. However, PopCap has been the biggest driving force since *Tetris* to turn simple games into Internet-wide sensations, and make bouncing a little ball around a screen every bit as worthy as saving the universe from the evils of Planet Zog. Take that as you will. An incredible amount of polish mixed with deep-down design to make every click as satisfying as humanly possible makes almost any PopCap game worth playing. Except *Talismania*. That one's crap.

BLIZZARD
All hail the conquering heroes!
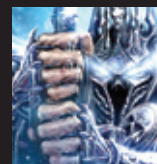
Blizzard is among the few companies who can hold their heads up high and say that after almost 20 years, they've never made a bad game. They're the ones other companies look up to; not just for their hats made of *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo 2* money, but for having the guts to polish and polish and polish every release until they're happy with it. Not many developers would spend a year and a bazillion dollars developing a game like *Warcraft Adventures: Lord of the Clans*, only to pull the plug because they just weren't happy with it. Fewer still would put the kibosh on an action game spin-off (*Starcraft: Ghost*) guaranteed to make money, as Westwood should have with *C&C: Renegade*. Blizzard didn't get here by accident, or by being lucky. They got here with passion, talent, and a lifetime's supply of elbow grease. Nobody deserves success more.

/// WARNING: Playing PopCap Games Is Addictive. Don't Start. ///

ROCKSTAR NORTH
King of the sandbox
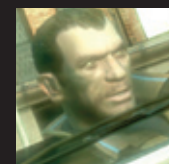
Much as nobody has ever managed to beat Maxis at *The Sims*, nobody is even close to recreating the all-out wonder of stepping into a new *Grand Theft Auto* city. Yes, the PC isn't *GTA*'s home, but to be honest it never technically was, either for the game or for DMA Design (who became Rockstar North), so we can't hold it against them. When the games finally make their way to our screens, at least we know we're getting the ultimate version. One hour with *GTAIV* gives you more imagination and more attention to detail than 10 games from lesser developers. Now, if they could only iron out their infuriating PC-porting problems...

IRRATIONAL GAMES
Yes, we know. But 2K Boston is such a boring name...
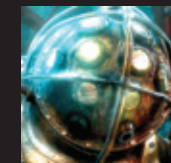
Tragic as the loss of Looking Glass was, at least it gave us Irrational. With *BioShock*, Ken Levine finally created a game in the *System Shock* vibe that sold as well as it deserved to, and that's coming from some of the biggest SHODAN fans this side of Tau Ceti. *Freedom Force* and its sequel remain amongst the mere handful of games to break the comic book curse and make slipping into a pair of tights something more than a weekend hobby. Even their supposed weak link, *Tribes 3*, was a wonderful little gem, turning the team-based action into a highly creditable single-player narrative game, although not one that encouraged many to go online.

BETHESDA
Worlds away from your average RPG developer
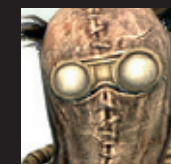
We could praise the high-tech wizardry of the *Elder Scrolls* games, or the seemingly endless content of post-apocalyptic RPG *Fallout 3* (up until the last five minutes, anyway), and that'd only be fair. But that's not the company's greatest achievement. No, if you want to see true gaming greatness, it's in facing the *Fallout* universe's toughest opponents—the legions of fans behind rose-tinted glasses—and being awarded the greatest compliment such people have to offer: "Yeah, s'alright." Saints have achieved immortality for less. From Tenpenny Tower to the Oasis, *Fallout 3*'s world is spectacular enough to singlehandedly keep single-player RPGs alive.

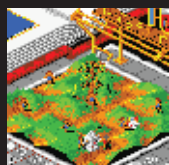*/// Fallout 3 is the best RPG in years. Apart from the ending. ///*

THE CLASSIC HALL OF FAME

Some companies become more than just the sum of their games, moving into the realms of legend. Just thinking of their best moments can be almost as much fun as playing them.

BULLFROG
The most exciting developer ever to croak

Populous. Syndicate. Theme Park. Bullfrog had a knack for creating not only great games, but unforgettable experiences that caught our imaginations. Most began as simple tech demos, from the gouraud-shaded landscapes that would become *Magic Carpet*, to the isometric landscapes of *Populous*. Bullfrog didn't survive their acquisition by EA, but it's telling that of all the companies that its members founded after that happened, none truly recaptured the magic that made almost every Bullfrog game worth getting excited about.

ORIGIN
Cinematic epics (if your PC could run them)

Origin's slogan was "We Create Worlds," and with both *Wing Commander* and *Ultima* under their belt, they damn well delivered on it. Origin had the highest of ambitions, and didn't care how many PCs they had to melt to fulfill them. These games demanded the best from your hardware, but repaid you with a level of complexity and cinematic polish many of today's games can only dream of. *Ultima VII* remains a paragon of world interaction, while interactive movies *Wing Commander III* and *IV* both handily humiliated the atrocious "real" movie that finally hit the silver screen. As for the Internet, the in-depth virtual lives offered by *Ultima Online* may have been beaten by the simplicity of *EverQuest*, but make no mistake—it was a world like no other.

LOOKING GLASS STUDIOS
A reflection of true greatness
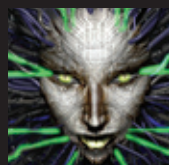
System Shock. Terra Nova. Thief: The Dark Project. Ultima Underworld II. Any one of these games would have won LGS its place here. Looking Glass was a pioneer of emergent action, of the style of gaming that set you a challenge, handed you a toolkit, and left the details up to you. The games turned atmosphere into an artform, whether it was skulking around Citadel Station, or taking to the air in *Flight Unlimited*.

LUCASARTS
A long time ago, in an industry not so far away...
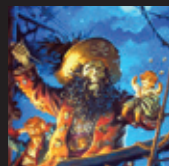
There was a time when LucasArts could do no wrong. They were the Pixar of gaming: Their big releases relatively rare, but always little moments of perfection. They resisted the urge to fall back on the easy options. Big licenses were saved for games that deserved them, whether it was the *X-Wing* series that dominated space until the launch of *Freespace*, or the real Indy 4—*Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*. LucasArts was a house of near unparalleled imagination. The time-bending *Day of the Tentacle. Full Throttle's* biker cartoon. Stephen Spielberg's *The Dig.* If it had the LucasArts logo on it, you didn't even need to read a review. So what went wrong? We don't know. But if Satan ever takes credit, we won't be surprised.

SIERRA
Up next: random death, death, and more death. Later, sports.
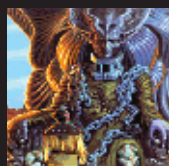
If LucasArts was the movies, Sierra was your favorite TV station. Their faster schedules and seemingly endless satellite companies made them insanely prolific. Dynamix brought us some of the earliest interactive movies, like *Heart of China*, along with the Rube Goldberg-inspired *The Incredible Machine*. Their adventure departments took us to every setting they could think of, from the sophisticated style of *Gabriel Knight* to the storybook realm of *King's Quest*. If you grew up in the '80s and '90s, Sierra's logo is likely carved into your brain.

MAXIS
Could it all just be a simulation?
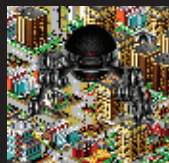
Before earning all the money in the entire world with *The Sims*, Maxis was famous as the guys who took ideas that should have led to the dullest games in the world, only to produce magic. Take *SimCity*, or *SimTower*, which is still the only game in history built around a commercial elevator simulator. Or *SimAnt*, where any bugs could be written off as an ironic bonus. They even simulated the world, and that's no exaggeration: *SimEarth*, 1990.

MONOLITH
### Cult 45 action from the masters of rose-tinted memories

Opinion varies on the merits of Monolith's games, but there's no arguing that few FPS titles hold as warm a place in many gamers' hearts as *No One Lives Forever*, *Shogo*, and even *Blood*, if only for the amazing fairground level at the end of the shareware episode. It's the *NOLF* games that really stick for us, though, especially the first one. Finally, we had a game that let us do damn near everything James Bond ever dreamed of, including saving the world in a sexy orange dress. Do we have an ulterior motive here? Yes. We want *NOLF 3*. Soon as you're ready, guys.

INFOCOM
You will not be eaten by a grue
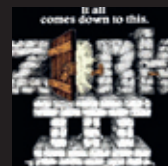
Forget *Crysis*. The best graphics in PC history didn't need a single colored pixel to work their magical charm. Infocom turned the text adventure into nothing short of an artform, both in terms of settings and stories (including the first female lead character in a narrative-based game with *Plundered Hearts*, and the first real-time text adventure with *Border Zone*), and advanced game mechanics that delighted in stretching the parser interface to its very limits. Play *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, *Nord and Bert*, or *Suspended*, and enter a whole new world of gaming.

/// **No One Lives Forever 2** had style, humor, and decent action too. ///

AUTEUR! AUTEUR!

▮ While game development has always been primarily a team affair, some names stand out from the crowd: the guys whose monikers can justifiably go on the box. We salute them here.

RICHARD "LORD BRITISH" GARRIOTT
Gaming's first royalty

With the money he made from the *Ultima* series, he built himself a castle. But not just any castle. For several years, it was the ultimate haunted house, with a changing array of actors, custom-built traps, and physical challenges that could take several months to build and $100,000 to create each time. But it's something else that wins him a place here: in an era when gaming was becoming the new easy target for moral crusaders, he proved that games could be both virtuous and adult by making morality the core of the *Ultima* series. That's vision for you. Shame about *Tabula Rasa*.

RON GILBERT
Wow! Games can be funny?

The one man on Earth who may know the Secret of Monkey Island stands almost alone in the industry for having created a truly, genuinely funny game. *Monkey Island 2* isn't just a great adventure; it's a masterclass in how to make a game funny. Yes, Gilbert's been quiet for a long time, but we can't wait to see what he does with *DeathSpank*.

TIM SCHAFER
A rollercoaster ride through a beautifully warped mind
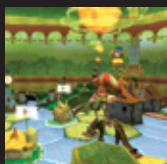
From *Grim Fandango* to *Psychonauts*, Schafer is our Tim Burton and our Terry Gilliam in one cuddly package. To play one of his games is to enter a world unlike anything else you've ever seen, from the film-noir Land of the Dead to a city that only exists in the mind of a deranged lungfish. Schafer is one of the few designers capable of mixing this kind of imagination with a real sense of heart and character; one as comfortable jerking the tears out of you as making you stare in disbelief at the amazing nonsense on your screen.

SID MEIER
Master of history, and of tanks beating stealth bombers

Three words: *Sid Meier's Civilization*. Four more. *Sid Meier's Railroad Tycoon*. Oh, what the heck, three more: *Sid Meier's Pirates!* He's one of the true fathers of the strategy genre, a member of the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences' Hall of Fame, and strategy gamers everywhere owe him a debt. He's also one of the few designers whose name on the box means something more than an overexcited marketing department, making him somewhat unique in the history of John Romeros and American McGees.

BRIAN REYNOLDS
Strategy that surpasses the test of time

Genius that Meier is, it's Reynolds who took the lead on some of the most loved games bearing Sid's great name. *Civilization 2* took everything the first game did and made it even more epic, while *Colonization* lowered the stakes and upped the complexity. The crowning achievement? *Alpha Centauri*, whose mix of hard sci-fi, memorable characters, and a planet that fought back remains nothing short of a strategy gem.

RAND AND ROBYN MILLER
Myst opportunities
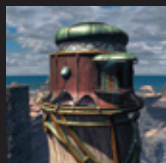
While the original *Myst* didn't have much story to it, the later games (and books, and now a planned movie) moved into full-on narrative archaeology, the lonely worlds hiding a rich backstory and ever more fiendish puzzles. *Myst* became one of the PC's biggest-ever sellers, only faltering when it moved to high-spec systems requiring 3D.

CHRIS AVELLONE
Who says games can't tell great stories?

Any time a developer's name being attached to an RPG is enough to whip fans into a frenzy, it's worth looking to see why. Chris Avellone isn't necessarily a household name, but as the head honcho on *Planescape Torment*, and the designer of *Fallout 2*'s amazing New Reno, he's done more than most to build amazing RPG memories that go far deeper than simply saving the world. We'll try to forget the mistakes of his last game, the brutally hacked-up *Knights of the Old Republic II*, in favor of looking forward to his next, Obsidian's *Alpha Protocol*.

WARREN SPECTOR
The creator who... no... don't call him the Creator
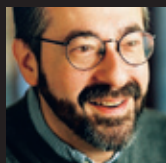
Most developers go largely uncredited for their work. Others desperately slap their name on the box in the hope that we'll forget the rest of the team. Warren Spector never seems to forget his team. From Origin to Looking Glass to his crowning achievement, *Deus Ex*, call him the c-word (*creator*, we mean) and watch him share the love. That's gentlemanly behavior, and speaks volumes for his style—of gathering good people around him and letting the good times roll.

CHRIS SAWYER
Father of the Tycoon genre, but don't hold that against him

Until Introversion, Sawyer seemed to be the last of the bedroom programmers. With the help of a couple of freelancers to handle music and art, he gave the world the smash-hit *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, not only beating the *Theme Park* series at its own game, but opening the floodgates for roughly 100,000 other copycat *Tycoon* games, up to and including *Toilet Tycoon*. Yes, really. The fact that none of these pretenders (not even *Toilet Tycoon*) even got close to what he created on his own speaks volumes.

ROBIN WALKER AND JOHN COOK
Spy's sappin' every other game in 2007!
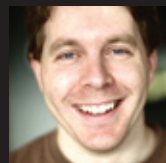
Team Fortress 2 never quite reached *Duke Nukem* levels of vaporware, but it was close. When we finally saw what Walker, Cook, and friends had made, nobody would ever dare speak out against it again. Proof positive of just how good a game can be when its developers live and breathe it for year after year after year, especially supported by a company like Valve that has no interest in releasing anything before it's ready. *TF2* is the best multiplayer shooter ever made.

BEHIND THE SCENES

:: Not all the most important figures in gaming focus on the action and explosions directly. Let's take a look at some of the people who make it all possible.

EPIC
Bringing the gaming world together through the power of hyperviolence

We could point to Epic's shareware catalogue, complete with great games like *Jazz Jackrabbit* and *Tyrian*, but it's the Unreal engine that truly stands out. It's behind some of the world's greatest games, not least *Deus Ex*, and one of the few cross-platform engines that let developers target both the PC and consoles simultaneously (even if they all too often don't bother). Flexible, powerful, and endlessly impressive, Unreal became as close to a standard for 3D engines as you could find—the middle-ware that never became middle of the road.

ION STORM
More than just a stern warning from the past

Let's not dwell too much on *Daikatana*. It may have been what sank Romero's Folly, but at least we got the genuinely wonderful *Anachronox* and *Deus Ex* out of the deal before the whole thing collapsed. Ion also marked a turning point for the industry in being one of the first times it was taken seriously by the outside world. The lessons learned in the fall of Ion Storm still resonate today, as a valuable demonstration of what happens when ego and hubris are allowed to take over from professional, responsible company management. Every designer that split from their parent company to set up shop themselves owes some debt to the failure of Ion Storm—if only by being able to see exactly what not to do.

CREATIVE LABS
The sweet sound of silence... banished forever

In an era when every PC comes with a full orchestra bolted to the motherboard, it's tough to remember a time when computer games were nothing but bloops and bleeps and farty little noises pretending to be high-powered rocket launchers. Adlib beat Creative Labs to the market when it came to music, but it was with the addition of a dedicated Sound Blaster card that the PCs of the '90s came alive. Previously silent games bloomed with full soundtracks—even speech, if you were lucky—and you knew that you would never, ever be able to go back. When was the last time one card so totally transformed your gaming life?

THE SCUMMVM TEAM
Keeping the past alive and setting it free

Keeping the past alive is a worthy goal, and the teams behind DOSBox, Exult, Ur-Quan Masters, and so many other great retro projects achieve it in style. However, for sheer scope and passion, you just can't beat SCUMMVM, letting generation after generation enjoy the greatest LucasArts titles (and a few more besides) as they were meant to be played. By people. On computers. That these games have been kept alive all these years is nothing short of a miracle, and one we should all be thankful for.

JOHN CARMACK
Master of Mathematics and King of the Nerds

If you want to split the eras of PC technology, you can do worse than start with the release dates of Carmack's 3D graphics engines. He's not necessarily the first, nor are his engines the most advanced— *Ultima Underworld* did things *Doom* could only dream of, while Bethesda's *Terminator: Future Shock* cracked full 3D years before *Quake*. But that's not the point. Carmack's engines hit the ground running, ready for the rest of the world to start making use of them. CryEngine and Unreal may have outpaced Carmack's creations in recent years, but as the old saying goes, it's not over until the fat demon screams.

VALVE
Blowing steam up the industry's bottom

Why so much love for Valve? Simple. It's not just about *Half-Life* and *Team Fortress 2*: Steam is a whole second story. Valve remains one of exactly two companies (Stardock is the other) to take on digital distribution the right way—with an eye on customers. Compared to locked-down systems like Direct2Drive and The EA Store, Steam is a model of how things should be. It doesn't care how many PCs you use. It lets you mod your games. It's quick, it's easy, and it never gets in your way. At a time when too many companies have gone consumer-hostile, this is how things should be.

MICROSOFT
What have the Romans done for us lately?

It's tough to remember just how damn complicated PC gaming used to be. In DOS, almost every game needed its own complete system configuration. In Windows, 3DfX wouldn't talk to PowerVR and vice versa. DirectX and its many libraries changed that forever, turning the PC into a proper platform instead of a loose assembly of warring components. Finally, developers could focus on the important stuff, and when they did, we players had a pretty good chance of having them just work. Evil empire or not, it'd be a very different games industry without Microsoft.

INDEPENDENCE AWARDS

:: Who needs an army of programmers and a AAA release? Let's take time out to reward some of the smaller teams who make gaming interesting.

THE NETHACK TEAM
Makers of the game that hates you and wants you dead

It's not beating *Nethack* that matters; it's knowing just how few people have managed to do it. If you can get to the bottom of its dark dungeons, you're a member of an exclusive club—one known for its patience or baldness. Behind the challenge is one of the most fiendish cabals ever to plot your randomly generated doom. If you've ever defeated a cyclops by blinding it with a custard pie, you'll know exactly why the second most common sentiment thrown their way is, "They think of *everything*..." The first, of course, is "Bastards."

TELLTALE GAMES
To Be Continued...

The episodic gaming craze seems to be on the way out. Of the many companies who tried it, only Telltale actually managed to pull it off—not once, not twice, but three times, by bringing back *Sam & Max* for two seasons, and recently finishing off

/// Telltale's *Strong Bad* games delivered monthly comedy. ///

the first of *Strong Bad*. They're not the greatest adventure games you'll ever play, but you've got to respect the amount of content you get over six months for the cost of just one full-price game. More variety and pacing wouldn't hurt, but if more people could manage such a schedule, maybe episodic gaming would've had a chance.

## INTROVERSION
The other kind of rockstar developer

Spooky hacker sim *Uplink* introduced them to the world, then *Darwinia* made them a force to be reckoned with. The Introversion boys are amongst the brightest stars in the indie developer world—true bedroom programmers, creating the games that they want to play without the need for expensive cutscenes and endless marketing budgets. The crisp retro style of *Uplink*, *Darwinia*, *DEFCON*, and *Multiwinia* hides fiendishly clever game concepts, each drilling right to the heart of your innermost geek. In a good way. Where some larger companies obsess over scale and dramatic spectacle, Introversion's focus on pure game mechanics sends you right back to the good old days, and further cements the indie scene as a place where great stuff can happen.

/// *Darwinia*: the little game that could. ///

SPIDERWEB SOFTWARE
Get caught in its devious web of intrigue
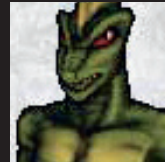
Remember that thing about "gameplay" being more important than "graphics"? That's as close to Spiderweb's credo as you get. The five *Geneforge* games in particular are ugly, clunky things, but get past that and you'll see why they're some of the most popular indie RPGs around. Offering freedom and masses of game for your money, they're the kind of RPGs that you can slip into until the clock strikes three (and spending the next day in full-on zombie mode is guaranteed). An excellent lesson in role-playing game design straight from the old school.

GRAHAM NELSON & EMILY SHORT
A powerful text message

Come to think of it, who needs graphics at all? The interactive fiction community—call them text adventures if you prefer—still rolls along, headed up by the amazing Inform 7. Graham Nelson wrote the software; Emily Short made the examples that inspire both old hands and newcomers to the genre, coding their own stories from scratch—and that's before you get onto her games. Galatea (in her eponymous game) remains one of the best-written NPCs ever created, while Emily's blog peels back the curtain on this fascinating genre. Did text adventures die out with the dawn of graphics? The number of people checking out each year's IFComp entrants don't need a parser to tell you the answer is "No."

THEY CREATED GAMING

❚❚ Even when the original games and ideas pass into the mists of time, some developers live on as the acknowledged geniuses behind it all.

KEN AND ROBERTA WILLIAMS
### Gaming's original husband and wife team

As well as largely creating the graphical adventure, the Williams family were pivotal in popularizing many of the technologies we now take for granted. The original *King's Quest* was largely written for IBM in the early '80s to prove that the PC platform could handle powerful games. *King's Quest* also introduced much of the world to the joys of soundcards, courtesy of Adlib, as well as paving the way for speech and CDs (*King's Quest IV*), Hollywood actors (*VI*), full-motion video (*Phantasmagoria*, even though it sucked), and more. Never have such charming games been so committed to pushing forward the bleeding edge of technology.

WILL WRIGHT
The world is his playground
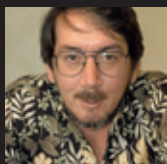
Wright is a true gaming visionary, and it makes us happier than a whole basket of ferrets that after years of being told *The Sims* would never, ever work, he's been proven so right that any lie he might ever tell will be rendered as law to compensate. Disillusionment with educational styles led him to become the single most important figure in edutainment (with the possible exception of Mavis Beacon and Carmen Sandiego, although Wright has the clear advantage in that he's a real person). We all got a bit carried away with what we hoped *Spore* might be, but we should be happy with what's still an iconic sandbox game.

WESTWOOD
Command. Conquer. No cuddling allowed.

OK, technically, there was an RTS before Westwood's *Dune 2*. It was called *Herzog Zwei*, it was on the Genesis, and it'd have been entirely forgotten if not for people shouting "What about *Herzog Zwei*?!" every time someone calls *Dune 2* the father of RTS gaming. Got that? Good. In every real sense, *Dune 2* deserves the title. It spawned *Command & Conquer* and *Warcraft*, and the game mechanics it created are still present in most modern strategy games. Without this one game, we might never have seen *World of Warcraft*. That's gaming's twisted DNA for you.

THE GOLLOP BROTHERS
The gods of turn-based strategy, still unbeaten
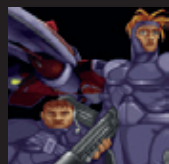
Perhaps the true mark of genius design is that, 15 years on, nobody's managed to even match the original game. We're talking *X-COM* here, or *UFO: Enemy Unknown* to give it its original title. Forget those horrible sequels, and let's never speak again of the space-fighter version *Interceptor*. *X-COM* was one of those seminal game experiences we may never be fortunate enough to see again. Strategy and tactics, wrapped in perfect atmosphere, and delicately balanced to keep you on a knife-edge as you single-handedly counter an alien invasion and turn the smelly invaders' own technology against them in the fight to save Earth. Gaming perfection.

BRAD MCQUAID
The name that launched a thousand chilly elf girls

At the dawn of MMOs, there were two competing philosophies: the virtual world of *Ultima Online*, and the MUD-derived hack-and-slash of *EverQuest*. *EverQuest* won out, and while it unsurprisingly looks incredibly primitive compared with *World of Warcraft*, the two games have more in common than not. McQuaid was the first to get a game like this out and turn it into a hit, making him and his team almost the core designers of every major release that followed. To top the mighty *Warcraft*, whoever comes next will need to produce something so radically new, even guessing what it'll be like seems pointless. But we're sure there'll be orcs in it somewhere.

ID SOFTWARE
### Rocket-jumping its way into history with every new game

Deathmatch. Forget the engines, the millions of dollars the founders made from the games, and the disappointment of *Doom 3*. When *Doom* brought Deathmatch to the world, it cemented the PC's position as the platform of choice for true gamers everywhere. From *Doom* to *Quake* and beyond, a keyboard and mouse became the ultimate weapons, ones so powerful that console kiddies still run screaming to their mommies if forced to take it on. There'd be a PC gaming world without *Doom*, but one reliant on adventures and RPGs, with consoles taking the lead on more outwardly exciting games. Fire up *Doom* today, and it's amazing just how well it's held up against the ravages of time.

BIOWARE/BLACK ISLE GAMES
### Casting Raise Dead on a genre
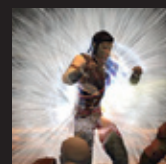
In a dark age when RPGs seemed to be going the way of the graphic adventure, two companies kept the faith. Black Isle and BioWare didn't simply revolutionize the genre, they saved it from itself. BioWare continues to lead the way with *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Mass Effect*, while Black Isle showed just how mature things could get with the *Fallout* games and *Planescape Torment*, arguably the best-told story we've had. Without these companies, we might never have swung our +2 swords again…

GEOFF CRAMMOND
Still in pole position
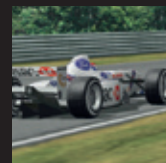
He's dropped off the face of the Earth in recent years, but Crammond will always be the father of racing games. His interest in physics, years before such things were considered cool, led to blisteringly realistic racing and intense attention to detail. Prior to that, *Sentinel* was one of the first games to experiment with stealth-based action instead of shooting, with more than a few players' nightmares filled with jagged landscapes and its all-seeing baddie. His last game, *Grand Prix 4*, released back in 2002, still holds a special place in racers' hearts. If he's working on any new four-wheeled project, he's not telling.

/// Neverwinter Nights was BioWare's ultimate D&D adventure. ///

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENTS

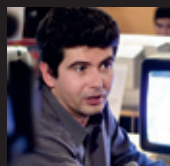**I:** Not everything has to be a defining moment. The smaller achievements in development history can be every bit as worthy of our attention.

MICHEL ANCEL & FRÉDÉRICK RAYNAL
**A French love letter from the weirder side of gaming**

French games are a bit weird. That's our perception, and much of it's down to these two fine designers. Raynal brought us *Alone in the Dark* and the wonderful *Little Big Adventure* games (worth a mention just for having a villain called Dr FunFrock and a hero who tells him "I'm taking you out, and I don't mean for pizza!"). Ancel created *Beyond Good & Evil* and *King Kong*, arguably one of the few non-*Star Wars* games to improve on the original movie in every way. Both have an army of fans desperate to see the next instalment of their most famous series. In the case of *Beyond Good & Evil* at least, it's finally happening.

APOGEE
Episode 1: Birth of a Sales Technique
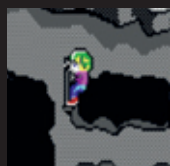
How long should a demo be? A level? Two levels? Apogee had different ideas. Starting with the concept of "shareware" (try before you buy), they pioneered the idea that a game could be successful by giving out anything up to a third of the full game for free, and encouraging gamers to pass on the disks. This was how *Doom* was first sold, not to mention *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Duke Nukem 3D*, and of course, *Traffic Department 2192*, which we all remember fondly. Right? Unlike demos, these offered a full game experience, start to finish, and became the standard way for indie developers to get started. Sometimes it backfired when the demo experience was too

///*Empire: Total War* is Creative Assembly's crowning glory. ///

satisfying to need the rest of the game—*Descent* suffered heavily from this—and the model was largely phased out when demos could be easily downloaded from the Internet.

CREATIVE ASSEMBLY
Bringing total war to the desktop
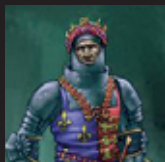
What BioWare did for the RPG, Creative Assembly did for war. After years of increasingly tired *Age of Empires* and *Warcraft* clones, *Total War* finally gave us the blood, scale, and tactics we never even knew we were missing. Glorious conquest! Battles so good, they built a whole TV program around them! It all started back in 2000 with *Shogun*, but since then they've come close to perfecting the formula of dramatic battlefields mixed with continent-spanning campaigns. Fans can't

///Dani Bunten-Berry's *M.U.L.E.*—multiplayer PC gaming back in 1983. ///

agree on whether *Rome* or *Medieval II* is best, and now the debate has been invigorated by the shiny new *Empire*.

CCP
**Proof that the future probably won't be like *Star Trek***
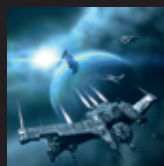
Most MMORPGs restrict their players to basic crafting and questing, with the economy feeling like an afterthought. *EVE* has a dedicated economist just to track how players rip each other off, wage war, and build the future in a world that more than any other, they control down to the smallest detail. *EVE* may not be the easiest game to get into—hell, it ain't even on the shortlist—but you won't find a more political, expansive, and occasionally toxic gameworld anywhere else online. That's what we call giving power to the people. Power, and

spaceships bristling with incredibly dangerous guns. Even better.

DANI BUNTEN-BERRY
Remembering the designers' designer
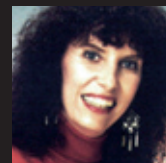
When given the chance to meet Berry, Warren Spector famously declined on the grounds that he wouldn't have known what to say. She was the creator of *M.U.L.E.*, and one of the true pioneers of game design, and more specifically, multiplayer games. *Modem Wars* was the first commercial game aimed at online play outside of universities and other networked institutions, while *M.U.L.E.* swapped out the usual guns and bombs of multiplayer combat for the tactics of supply and demand. Chances are you've never heard her name, but you'll have seen the results of her work. Will Wright dedicated *The Sims* to her memory, and is far from the only designer to cherish it.

DEREK SMART
All hail the Supreme Commander of the Internet

We're not huge fans of Derek's games—the *Battlecruiser* series and its many spin-offs—or the tiresome Internet flame-wars that follow him. We include him because Derek Smart is spectacularly committed to creating the ultimate space game, refuses to compromise on what he considers the right decisions, and never lets anyone stand in his way of that dream, regardless of who he pisses off or how much it costs. We admire that. And while we may bash the games, don't be fooled. We want Derek Smart to succeed, and we'll be first in line to applaud when he does.

F.E.A.R. 2
PROJECT ORIGIN

BY DAN STAPLETON

:: ALMA IS MORE BARK THAN BITE IN THE LONG-AWAITED SEQUEL TO A CLASSIC SPOOKY SHOOTER

Like Jason Vorhees and Freddy Krueger before her, Alma's blood lust couldn't by satisfied in one installment—as everyone who waited through the end credits of *F.E.A.R.* in 2005 knows, the nuclear-scale bang that concluded the Japanese horror film-inspired shooter just made our psycho-psychic girl angrier. In *F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin*, developer Monolith does impressive things with Alma's paranormal horror atmosphere, occasionally even succeeding in creating a sense of dread more authentic than most actual horror films, but they are disap-

pointingly unambitious when it comes to making the shooter gameplay feel any more compelling than it was four years ago.

FIGHT OR FRIGHT

As a disclaimer, what people find "scary" is a very subjective thing. I was one of the people who thought *F.E.A.R.* was a scary game, and for me, right from the sequel's opening vision of Alma as a little girl strolling through a ruined and burning city street toward an eerie glow, *Project Origin* is a very spooky game—the kind best played with the lights

"THE NOVELTY OF PLAIN OLD SLO-MO HAS EXPIRED"

/// Ew, nose bleed! Tilt your head forward and pinch your nose for five minutes. ///

24/353   3

down and the volume cranked up on a surround-sound speaker setup. It's the type of scary that's designed to tingle your spine rather than release your bowels, so it relies less on obnoxious startling "BOO!" moments (though there are plenty of those, too) and instead envelops you with more subtle but unsettling sound effects, brief flashes of horrific scenes, eerie visions of figures walking across a hallway only to vanish when you get there, and full-scale elaborate hallucinations of Alma in her various forms and glimpses into her warped mind. Oh, and there are also buckets and buckets of blood.

It's a real shame that the shooter action (which is helpfully segregated from the spooky parts, so your ability to be creeped out won't be ruined by some jerk shooting at you, and vice versa) relies completely on a slow-motion ability that's essentially unchanged from the first game. While it isn't dull, it's as fresh as a rotting corpse; "bullet-time" was borderline cliché back when *F.E.A.R.* did it, saved only by the spectacular smoke, spark, and debris effects that created beautiful scenes of destruction. Now, despite flashy new versions of the same effects, the novelty of plain old slow-mo has long since expired.

/// In such a linear game, the sniper rifle is only really useful in a few specially made areas. ///

/// Troopers aren't terribly bright, but are able to leap over hurdles realistically. ///

WHY DON'T THEY DIE WHEN I SHOOT THEM IN THE HEAD?

Seriously, when someone launches a five-inch glowing green stake into your eye socket at high velocity, the polite thing to do would be to scream in agony, maybe throw in a wail of "My eye, my eye!" for dramatic effect, and then fall down dead. This is a long-standing tradition amongst videogame enemies, dating back to the beginnings of location-specific damage. But not the soldiers in *F.E.A.R. 2*—no, these guys just shake it off and keep coming at you. Even their depth perception seems unaffected by the massive chunk of metal protruding from where their eyeball used to be! Similarly, taking a soldier out in one shot with anything short of a sniper rifle or rocket launcher is frustratingly rare, regardless of
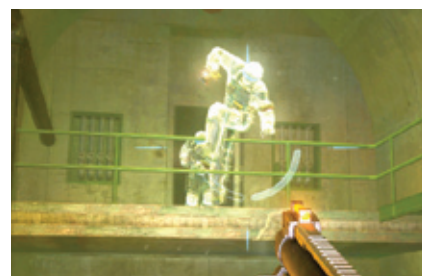
where you shoot them. The disappointment of not having your skillful shots rewarded makes combat that much less interesting, but I can see why Monolith made this decision—slow-mo makes it relatively easy to turn every shot into a head shot.
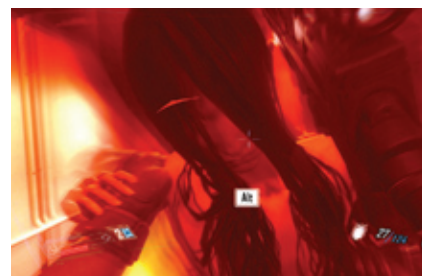
/// DIE. Just DIE, damn you! ///

/// Oh hi! Alma will randomly pop up and grab you. Mashing the melee button drives her off. ///

⠿ We asked principal game designer Craig Hubbard to share his insight on Alma's assorted aspects.

HAVEN'T I SHOT YOU BEFORE?

As a result, when I took control of the new character, Michael Becket, and was dispatched with a team of Delta Force operatives to rescue Armacham executive Genevieve Aristide from a corporate cleanup hit squad at her penthouse apartment (this happens concurrently with the last minutes of *F.E.A.R.*) and was subsequently roped into a risky plan to stop Alma's rampage, the firefights with mercenary soldiers and later leftover Replica clones were mostly forgettable. The trooper AI will realistically vault over rails, kick over tables for cover (you can perform this trick too, but it's only real use is to alter the feng shui of the room, since it's almost totally ineffective in terms of actually shielding you from enemy fire), and chuck grenades at you. You'll also hear them call out when you're spotted or when their friends go down, but these guys never really surprised me the way their predecessors did by appearing to coordinate attacks and outflank me through clever scripting. Aside from their stubborn resistance to being shot in the head, they have no good tricks up their sleeves to make fighting them feel different from the army of dudes you shot up in whatever shooter you played last.

Even attempts to spice up the action, such as driving a 20-foot-tall armored mech through the streets of a devastated city populated by ash sculptures of citizens caught in the blast zone, are visually rich but oddly tedious. While this mech does absolutely everything a mech needs to do—namely, stomp around noisily and fire big-ass guns and rockets at waves of enemy fodder while shrugging off massive amounts of damage—that's *all* it does. There's nothing special at all about it (unless you count the very cool HUD), and your movements are constrained to a claustrophobically tight path. I found myself wondering when the mech sequence would end well before it actually did.

It's far more interesting to battle the supernatural foes, such as the Golem-like experiments-gone-wrong that scamper along the walls and ceilings of Armacham's underground research facilities and pounce on you—they can be legitimately freaky, and their speed and agility makes the slow-motion ability and melee attacks come in handy. The same goes for the Replica stealth assassins—more of these types of wall-crawling enemies, perhaps mixed with other types (you never fight anything else while you're fighting these guys), would have lent

YOUNG ALMA

"HAG" ALMA

"HOT" ALMA

THE THREE FACES OF ALMA

What part of Alma's psyche does this form represent?
The little girl is an incarnation of Alma's last conscious memory before she was sealed away. It's not who she actually was at eight years old, but rather how she remembers herself.

What influenced the visual style of this phase?
The most direct influence was the little girl in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Séance*, but there's also inspiration from characters like Sadako/Samara in *Ring* and the twins in *The Shining*. We wanted to give Alma a distinctive color, and red made the most sense for a variety of symbolic and technical reasons.

What are Alma's motivations when she's in this form? Her role in the game?
Alma appears in this form prior to being released from the Vault at the end of *F.E.A.R.* and comes to realize what she truly is. As for motivations, Alma is driven more by primal emotional need than by a conscious, willful agenda. In *F.E.A.R.*, she was in some sense a scared, tormented child trapped in a dark, terrible place, reaching out for someone to save her. The fear turned to anger, with pretty severe consequences as a result of her incredible power.

What part of Alma's psyche does this form represent?
This is Alma as she really is when she's released. It's her physical form.

What influenced the visual style of this phase?
The basic idea was that her father had put her in a sensory deprivation tank in an induced coma when she was eight, taking her out only twice to give birth to the prototypes (Paxton Fettel and the player character from *F.E.A.R.*). She was in her early twenties when they pulled the plug on her life support and sealed up the Vault. She remained in that tomb for over a decade, medically dead but refusing to die. With that in mind, we figured she'd be pretty nasty looking, but we still wanted her to be recognizably feminine. It didn't

make sense that she'd be wearing anything if they had her floating in liquid. It also seemed like it would be more disturbing if she were naked.

What are Alma's motivations when she's in this form? Her role in the game?
Again, she's an abuse victim who was betrayed and violated by her own father, so she's more primal than rational. *F.E.A.R. 2* explores how her emotional state manifests and evolves. There's the obvious, extremely dangerous side effects of the damage she's suffered, but there are other aspects that are less obvious and hopefully more disturbing. It's all built around the psychological consequences of abuse, taken to an apocalyptic, supernatural extreme.

So you really want to keep the details about this aspect a secret, eh? Can you share *anything*?
This is one of the mysteries we explore in the game, although what this form of Alma represents and what motivates her is alluded to rather than explained. Hopefully we provided enough clues that players can draw their own conclusions…

the combat a greater (and much-needed) sense of variety.

Speaking of the too-similar combat, while the game mercifully steers clear of extended quick-time event sequences, it does make use of a "light" variety in which you hammer the melee button to free yourself from pouncing Golems or occasional "psychic tackles" from Alma. There's also a five-stage boss fight scene where, in stage one, you hammer the melee key. Second stage: hammer the melee key. Third stage: melee key. Fourth stage: melee key. Fifth stage, click once. Thankfully there's only one of those—I found it much less entertaining than a boss shootout, even a bland one, would have been.

It doesn't help anything that the environments, while mostly well-designed and widely varied (one of the main criticisms of *F.E.A.R.* was its repetitive office levels; *F.E.A.R. 2* doesn't share that problem), are as strictly linear as ever. Yet in some places they're still unintuitive—debris like file cabinets will block doors you're not supposed to go through, but in some places you need to use the action key to heave cabinets or soda machines to clear a doorway. That inconsistency had me wandering around looking for alternate paths for a while until I happened to get close enough to the door to trigger the on-screen tip.

GHOST OF A STORY

While the atmosphere is strong, *F.E.A.R. 2*'s story falls short of the original in terms of character depth. Alma's motives are as unclear as a supernatural temper tantrum—I had no idea what her goal was, if she even had one. Meanwhile, there's no good human minion to follow in Paxton Fettle's bloody, cannibalistic footsteps. The Armacham commander, for example, is as two-dimensional a thug as they come, and Aristide is never threatening enough to be a good villain. Also, because so much of the game is spent on your own, without backup, I never really got to know my teammates beyond a brief introduction, and I didn't like them enough to care when they're in danger. This becomes a bit of a drawback when some of them go on to play significant roles in the story (including the "Really? *That's* the final battle?" ending) and I was struggling to figure out why these people were doing what they were. The story is at its strongest in its peripheral bits, when you're uncovering pieces of the puzzle scattered throughout the levels

/// Unlike the Replicas, Armacham soldiers aren't supposed to be clones... they just appear to have been manufactured by Generic Paramilitary Henchmen Inc. ///

/// Be sure to leave the cleaning staff a $20 bill as a tip on your way out. ///

/// Alma likes to strut her stuff around dark hallways, but shooting at her is pointless—she's a lover, not a fighter. And by "lover," we mean "non-corporeal psychic apparition of rage." ///


/// The first game showed Delta Squad troops getting shredded in the first few minutes to emphasize how tough F.E.A.R. operatives were... and now you're a Delta Squad man. Uh oh. ///

/// Lt. Stokes is in radio contact with you for most of the game, asking the questions your mute character can't. ///

SLOW-MO MANIA

SO MANY GAMES have used slow-motion combat now that it's hard to get excited about it anymore. Just to name a few: *Max Payne, Max Payne 2, TimeShift, Fallout 3, Stranglehold, Mirror's Edge, Gun, Call of Juarez, The Matrix: Path of Neo, Jedi Knight II, Jedi Knight III, Project: Snowblind, Alpha Prime, SAS: Secure Tomorrow,* and *Tomb Raider Underworld.*
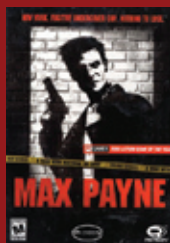
FOES OF F.E.A.R.

REMNANT These zombie-like mini-bosses resurrect dead soldiers with ethereal tendrils and control them like marionettes. They look fantastic, and the puppet movement is really weird and unsettling, but the corpse-puppets are so weak that the most dangerous part of the Remnants is their ability to absorb ammo like a sponge.

MECHS In one specific area, you fight a few armored mechs with an RPG (you can knock out their shields with EMP grenades or nearby power transformers)...but then, strangely, never again. I carried that RPG through the entire second half of the game looking in vain for some armored targets to blast, to no avail.

SPECTERS They don't pose a real threat, since they evaporate with a single shot or after doing a bee sting's worth of damage, but just seeing these flickering malevolent spirits loitering around the ruined environments really gives you the willies.
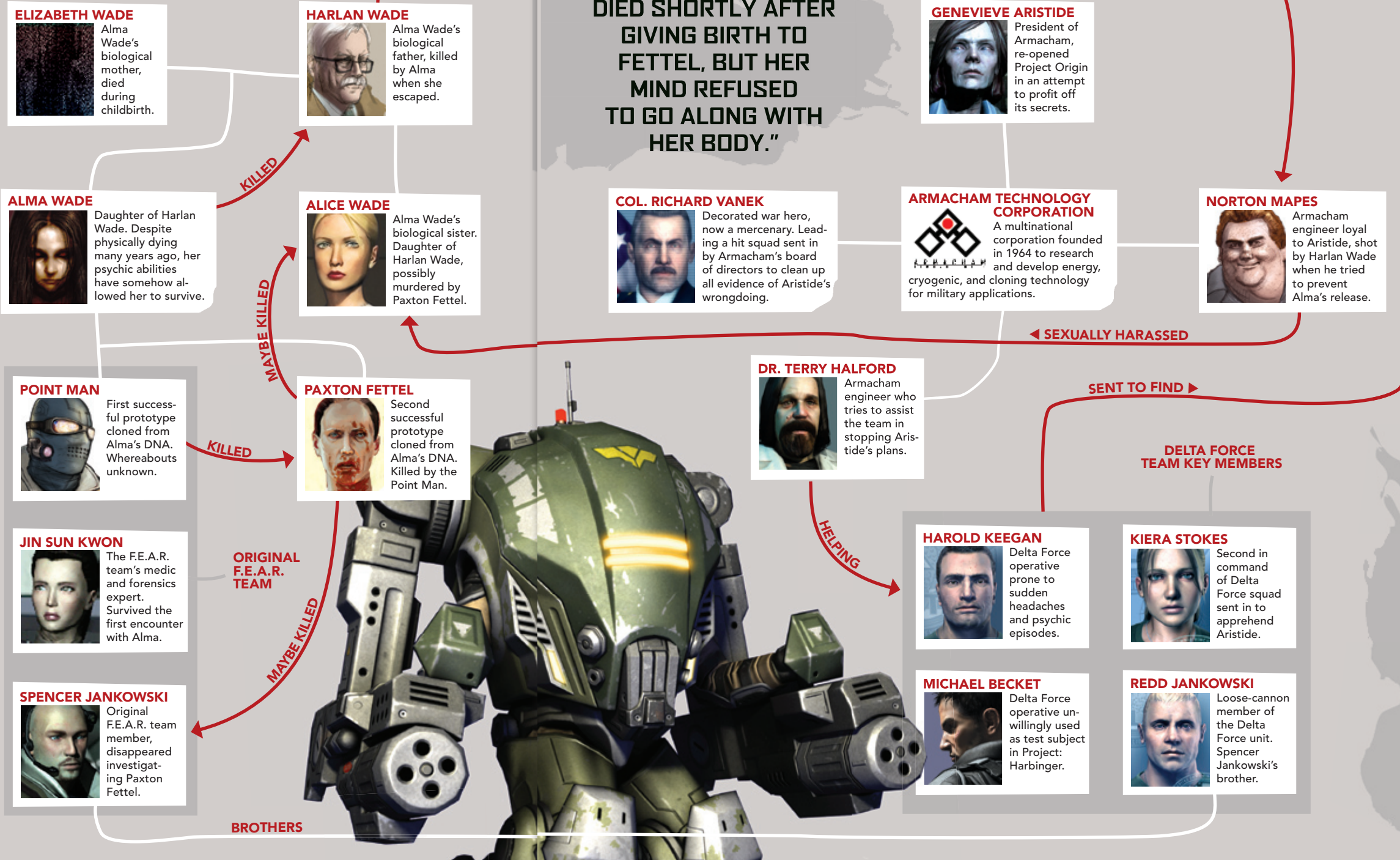

REPLICA ASSASSINS The acrobatic "stealth" assassins from the first *F.E.A.R.* return to star in the game's most spectacular entrance and most memorable moment; however, I found it hard not to laugh at their comically ineffective stealth suits, which make them appear as an impossible-to-miss white glow.

TWISTED FAMILY TREE

HAVING A HARD TIME recalling the original *F.E.A.R.*'s storyline? Or were you unable to untangle its twisted tale of psychics, corporate abuse, and motherly love in the first place? If all you got out of *F.E.A.R.* was that Alma was your mother, Paxton Fettle was your brother, and some illegal experiments were going on, then you've missed a hell of a lot. We're here to tie up the threads that the game left hanging with our helpful family tree. But first, a quick recap of the original game's setup:

You're a freakishly fast and strong operative of the First Encounter Assault Recon (F.E.A.R.) super-special forces. Your first job is to find out why a powerful psychic named Paxton Fettle has taken control of a clone army and assaulted a water-treatment plant and Armacham Technology Corporation (ATC). During your operation, you're assailed by visions of a little girl in a red dress, and Fettel taunts you with psychobabble. It emerges that ATC has colluded with the government in a classified project called Origin to genetically engineer psychic soldiers. ATC used the psychic daughter of Harlan Wade, a member of upper management, to breed a pair of super-soldiers to lead the army of clones. One of them is Paxton Fettel, and the other is you.

Harlan subjected his own daughter, your mother—Alma Wade—to experiments from an early age, until ATC became frightened by her uncontrollable power and locked her away. Alma biologically died shortly after giving birth to Fettel, but her mind refused to go along with her body. She remained contained in ATC's underground Vault facility, until ATC President Genevieve Aristide decided to poke around and see if the project could be salvaged, releasing Alma into the world...

ELIZABETH WADE — Alma Wade's biological mother, died during childbirth.

HARLAN WADE — Alma Wade's biological father, killed by Alma when she escaped.

GENEVIEVE ARISTIDE — President of Armacham, re-opened Project Origin in an attempt to profit off its secrets.

ALMA WADE — Daughter of Harlan Wade. Despite physically dying many years ago, her psychic abilities have somehow allowed her to survive.

ALICE WADE — Alma Wade's biological sister. Daughter of Harlan Wade, possibly murdered by Paxton Fettel.

COL. RICHARD VANEK — Decorated war hero, now a mercenary. Leading a hit squad sent in by Armacham's board of directors to clean up all evidence of Aristide's wrongdoing.

ARMACHAM TECHNOLOGY CORPORATION — A multinational corporation founded in 1964 to research and develop energy, cryogenic, and cloning technology for military applications.

NORTON MAPES — Armacham engineer loyal to Aristide, shot by Harlan Wade when he tried to prevent Alma's release.

POINT MAN — First successful prototype cloned from Alma's DNA. Whereabouts unknown.

PAXTON FETTEL — Second successful prototype cloned from Alma's DNA. Killed by the Point Man.

DR. TERRY HALFORD — Armacham engineer who tries to assist the team in stopping Aristide's plans.

JIN SUN KWON — The F.E.A.R. team's medic and forensics expert. Survived the first encounter with Alma.

SPENCER JANKOWSKI — Original F.E.A.R. team member, disappeared investigating Paxton Fettel.

DELTA FORCE TEAM KEY MEMBERS

HAROLD KEEGAN — Delta Force operative prone to sudden headaches and psychic episodes.

KIERA STOKES — Second in command of Delta Force squad sent in to apprehend Aristide.

MICHAEL BECKET — Delta Force operative unwillingly used as test subject in Project: Harbinger.

REDD JANKOWSKI — Loose-cannon member of the Delta Force unit. Spencer Jankowski's brother.

> "ALMA BIOLOGICALLY DIED SHORTLY AFTER GIVING BIRTH TO FETTEL, BUT HER MIND REFUSED TO GO ALONG WITH HER BODY."

(Diagram labels: MAYBE KILLED ▶ · KILLED · MAYBE KILLED · SEXUALLY HARASSED ◀ · SENT TO FIND ▶ · HELPING · KILLED · ORIGINAL F.E.A.R. TEAM · MAYBE KILLED · BROTHERS)

AN UNREMARKABLE ARSENAL

MOST OF *F.E.A.R. 2*'S weaponry is extremely by-the-numbers with absolutely no secondary fire modes, quirks, or unique abilities. Their names alone convey everything you need to know: pistol, SMG, pump-action shotgun, assault rifle, automatic shotgun, missile launcher, sniper rifle, and grenades (frag, incendiary, EMP, and smoke). A few are more interesting:

NAPALM GUN As opposed to the conventional short-range flame-thrower, this gun launches a flaming ball of napalm at a target. It's slow-firing, and the flames take a few moments to kill a target, so it's best

/// Napalm Gun ///

used in conjunction with a quick-firing backup weapon. But unless you hold onto it, you'll never see it again after the first couple of levels.

HAMMERHEAD The most memorable weapon from *F.E.A.R.* was the Penetrator, which has been rechristened as the Hammerhead despite being virtually identical. It launches huge depleted uranium spikes that

/// Hammerhead ///

skewer their targets, with the killing blow propelling the victim several feet backward and nailing them to a wall. There's some good slapstick comedy value here, as well as amazing accuracy and armor penetration. (Physics question: Why do lethal shots have more momentum than non-lethal shots?)

LASER The effect for the laser is pretty cheesy—especially in slow-motion, it looks like a *Ghostbusters* proton pack beam effect out of a

/// LASER ///

2001 game—but it slices enemies in half effectively enough. Conveniently, their wounds aren't cauterized, so there's plenty of blood.

TYPE 12 ENERGY WEAPON *F.E.A.R. 2*'s one "Holy crap, what was that?" weapon fires a blob of sparking energy that zaps anything in its path with arcs of electricity. It's an effective room-clearer.

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F.E.A.R. 2

When you slow down time, you can see the path of bullets…but not in time to Neo yourself out of their way. Looks cool, though.

Your "reflex meter" recharges, governing how much time you can spend in slow-mo.

Enemies are highlighted in slowmo, as if they were too hard to hit while moving like snails.

Exploding barrels are precariously placed throughout most levels, except for the elementary school. Even schoolchildren know better than to leave this stuff lying around.

MULTIPLAYER MEDIOCRITY

TO PUT IT BLUNTLY, there are no compelling reasons for PC gamers to flock to *F.E.A.R. 2*'s multiplayer, which strips out the best parts of single-player: the supernatural aspects and the slow-motion combat. What you're left with is very a straightforward multiplayer shooter where Armacham and Replica troops battle it out in deathmatch, team deathmatch, Failsafe (bomb planting), Blitz (capture the flag), Control (point capture), and the slightly more interesting Armored Assault mode that adds the huge armored mechs to a point-capture game…but they're the same mechs from the single-player game that weren't much to get excited about to begin with. It's a serviceable multiplayer component, but because it doesn't add anything new to the genre I doubt the servers will be crowded for more than the first two weeks after the game hits stores.

/// Camping the mech suit with a sniper rifle is a good way to have fun by ruining other people's. ///

/// Mech versus mech slugfests look like a lot more fun than they really are. ///

"ONLY ALMA'S ANTICS SAVE *F.E.A.R. 2* FROM BEING JUST ANOTHER SHOOTER."

(Continued from page 66) that reveal Armacham's research projects—most notably in the Armacham-sponsored Wade Elementary school, where you discover evidence of experiments conducted on unsuspecting children.

In its favor, *F.E.A.R. 2* runs like a champ, with tons of motion blur, smoke and fire effects, bloody dismemberments that leave smears on the screen, and gritty textures that make the game look above average

(though not outstanding). I suffered a couple of crashes to desktop in the dozen or so hours of play, but otherwise the experience was bug-free. And save a few minor quibbles like the scroll wheel not working in your PDA interface and being unable to map your mouse's thumb buttons in the controls, you wouldn't be able to tell *F.E.A.R. 2* was developed primarily as a console game except for one terrible, unforgivable flaw: checkpoint saves. They're frequent enough that dying loses you little progress, but still, c'mon. Give me a quicksave!

After the ground-breaking first game, it's a disappointment to see that only Alma's antics save *F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin* from being just

another shooter. It's atmospheric, and an enjoyable game that's competently crafted, but what it rarely does is *surprise* you. I've seen most of this stuff before, and I'll almost certainly see it again in the next shooter I play. I craved more ambition and innovation here, but I'll have to wait for a third installment for that—and I'm confident there will be one, because good horror monsters are notoriously difficult to kill. ✖

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Spooky atmosphere; diverse level settings; good graphics; wall-crawling enemies.

LOWS// Uninventive gameplay; weak villains (besides Alma); checkpoint saves.

BOTTOM LINE// *F.E.A.R. 2* fails to innovate, which would make it merely a respectable but forgettable shooter if not for some good scares.

0%   BETTER >>   100%   **72%**
++ GOOD ++

VITALS :: DEVELOPER: MONOLITH **PUBLISHER:** WARNER BROS. **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2.8GHZ (3.2GHZ VISTA), 1GB RAM (1.5GB VISTA), GEFORCE 6800/RADEON X700 VIDEOCARD, 12GB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** CORE 2 DUO 2.2GHZ, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 16 **ESRB:** M **DRM:** STEAM

EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

▮: FOR WHICH REAL LIFE IS CANCELLED INDEFINITELY

"One of the most playable, and therefore important and accomplished, games ever created."

This is the grandest, most spectacular work of strategy gaming on the PC. If you've never tackled a *Total War* game before, or assume that they're not for you, I challenge you to play *Empire* and not be impressed, or even fundamentally changed by the experience. This is one of the most playable, and therefore important and accomplished, games ever created.

Total War occupies its own territory between *Civ*, classic RTSes, and the hex-based wargames armchair generals get all excited about. It is both a vast, turn-based historical escapade, and a gritty real-time battlefield engine that delivers the most cogent picture of mass conflict we've yet seen.

The field of conflict in *Empire*, most global of the *Total War* games, is the 18th century. Assuming you're going to play the gigantic Grand Campaign, you'll start in 1700 and have a turn every six months until 1799. At the back of your mind, you're always aware of that clock, ticking down toward victory or defeat.

If you're playing as Britain, as I did, victory means controlling Egypt and a chunk of both India and North America. This is a game in itself. And when you're done there, you'll want to try a different nation and its different victory conditions. Whatever you do, this game is a colossal undertaking. Completing a campaign is one of those gaming exploits that you know will be with you for the rest of your life, simply because it will consume so much time. Even when you're not playing, you're thinking about it: planning, plotting, and preparing your colonial ambitions.

Yes, colonial. Unlike the Medieval and Roman-era empire building, these are very much colonial enterprises. *Empire* takes a great deal of its design philosophy from the events and trends of its era, and that real history is reflected in the core challenges different nations face, and in the smaller tasks you'll have to deal with to grasp the upper hand in war. Playing as the European powers, for example, places you in a fascinating position—one that seems astonishingly close to how the real colonial powers must have played their real-world game. Your fortune lies across oceans, but you cannot lose your foothold in Europe. As Great Britain, my fate was closely tied to that of the Thirteen Colonies in North America, and only by being a remarkably strong international power was I going to keep them as a protectorate. What's more, I knew that I couldn't afford a land or sea war with local European powers, and spent many early years buttering up France and Spain with gifts to reduce the pressure that hostilities might place on my shipping. Empire for Great Britain means a powerful Royal Navy—in the game, just as in real life. Play as land-locked Poland, on the other hand, and you face a different challenge. You'll want to pick off all the smaller one-state nations, one at a time, before facing down the Russian Bear.

THERE HAD BEEN RUMBLINGS

about *Empire* being simplified to better appeal to American gamers, especially with its introductory mini-campaign "The Road to Independence." This may indeed have been included to guide newcomers, but don't think the complexity of the main game has been sacrificed. *Empire: Total War* is more, and better, than we've ever had before. Creative Assembly doesn't seem to have shirked their responsibility, or ever stepped back from including more features or more detail. *Empire* is the opposite of dumbed down. It has a superabundance of smart gaming.

While it feels familiar, *Empire* manages to deliver more nuance on the campaign map than ever before. What's most immediately obvious is the effect of international trade. While some trade does occur between trade partners over land, it's the maritime trade routes that really print money.

The trade routes arc around the huge main map, which is divided into two principle sections: North America and Eurasia. The core map stretches from Iceland on the top left, to Sri Lanka on the bottom right. Scrolling across an empire that spans this vast distance is a pleasure indeed. Red, yellow, and green status marks materialize to show who you're sharing that sea-route with and how threatened you are. Pirates camping the route will need to be physically removed.

The trade routes then snake off into the rest of the world, including the four "trade regions"—South America, the Ivory Coast, the straits of Madagascar, and the East Indies. These are purely coastal regions, in which fleets can be placed to generate

/// The British Navy is on the hunt for that crafty Jack Sparrow. ///

/// OK, this screen isn't as pretty, but the research system is a different kind of beautiful. ///

/// Sending cavalry into an infantry melee can turn the tide in seconds. ///

/// Rifle-wielding foot-soldiers now play a major role. ///

money. It's then down to your diplomacy, and the grit of your admirals, to keep those trade routes open and to keep your nation rich. Once at war with the Ottoman Empire, my Great Britain campaign saw me bottling up the Ottoman fleet in the Mediterranean, keeping my Atlantic traders safe from attack. Had I instead picked a fight with Portugal or Spain, with their Atlantic-facing coastlines, things would have been very different.

INEVITABLY, THE REAL ACTION
still goes down in the main, land-based conquerable regions of the campaign map. These are far more detailed than anything we've seen previously. Each region still has a capital, but there are now separate ports, towns, and farms. All of these can be built upon and upgraded, bringing you farming estates, ports for military or trade use, mines, schools, centers for religious learning, or even defensive forts.

How all this infrastructure builds up will depend largely on your schools, which allow you to research different streams of technology. An empire can have up to four educational establishments and use them to research many different technologies at once. Balancing the flow of your research funds is a constant challenge; putting all of your money into industry and military research might give you an edge on the battlefield, but it will leave your populace undeveloped and result in negative sentiment in the electorate. And, if you don't let your academics develop

democracy, you might have a domestic revolution on your hands.

One of the new agent types is a "gentleman," a unit that can be installed in schools to speed up learning. This means you can push industrial, military, agricultural, or social research at different levels, and reap the rewards.

In fact, the tech tree and research process is one of the areas that *Empire* seems to have nailed down best. It's genuinely satisfying to see your efforts poured into agriculture result in a leap in taxation profits from farming, or to know your men are going fight more effectively on the battlefield because they've got well-made bayonets on their muskets. Early races into particular areas of technology really

do pay off, especially when you combine them with the diplomacy screen, trading technological supremacy with your friends for advantage over your enemies. Truly, this is a multilayered game of cold-blooded strategy.

It's the thirst for detail—much of it historically accurate, some of it simply entertaining—that defines the entire game. It's on the turn-based campaign map that we see the best of it. It's now genuinely possible for a region to become war-torn, as enemy units occupy and torch outlying settlements—devastating your infrastructure if your armies remain safely garrisoned inside a fort or walled city. Seeing the columns of smoke rising reminds you how much work you still have to do.

With new depth-of-field effects and wispy clouds floating above it, the campaign map is visually arresting. But it's *imaginatively* arresting too, as you zoom out and witness the scale of the thing: from the Midwest of North America to the Far East. Then zoom back in and look at the little details, such as the single-faction nations: the Knights of St. John occupying Malta, for example, or even a pirate outpost on the Windward Isles of the Caribbean. It's exquisite.

What's even more thrilling, although currently unseen and untested, is that Creative Assembly intends to make the campaign map *multiplayer*. This feature won't ship with the release version of the game, but within a couple of months you and a friend could be taking on the AI nations in a

THE WORLD'S FOUR CORNERS
▌ BUSY, BUSY: PLACES TO GO, PEOPLES TO CONQUER
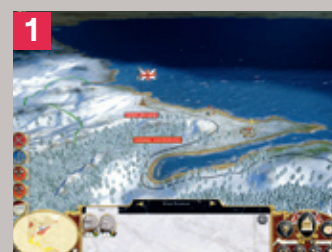
1

Conquer the Inuit, and you can have your own hunting camp in northeast Canada. Just the ticket if you like going clubbing.

2

What's this? The Portuguese have already captured Hindu-hippie paradise Goa? Well, my enormous land army needs a tan...
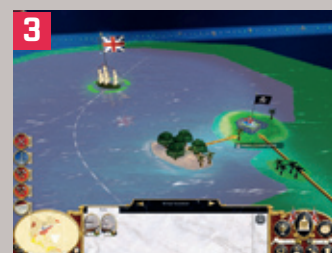
3

The pirate capital in the Leeward Isles, today known as the superb holiday resort of Antigua. Coconuts and mangos for all!

4

Another small faction sits on Malta: the Knights of St. John will remain there quietly unless you choose to invade.

CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE AND AMBITION

This is a missionary, who should be preaching in one of these cities. I might send him off to Syria to spread the Lord's word there instead.

This green line designates a trade route. It's green because it's not shared with or camped on by any enemies. Hovering over it shows its value.

The gray area around this fleet indicates its area of influence (armies get them, too). If the enemy enters this area, they cannot continue without being attacked.

Ports are utterly essential. They can be fishery-based, set up for trade, or put to military use. Upgrade them for naval success.

Edinburgh, Scotland

London, England

Smaller towns and farms can be captured and ransacked by enemy troops, so you must be careful not to leave them exposed and vulnerable.

---

battle for 18th-century dominance. We can't score a game on what it's going to contain in the future, of course, but it's worth mentioning because hey, it's exciting.

Of course, most of those layers of government, from construction to policy, can be auto-managed by the game, leaving you to perform the most cursory state management and unit production—and to concentrate on the thing that truly beats at the heart of *Total War:* the battlefield itself. While being a great statesman is very useful, victory will ultimately be decided by war. Taking the regions necessary for a grand-campaign win condition will require armed conflict, and that means spending some time on the battle map, where a human mind is *always* better than an automated conflict.

HERE TOO, THE SHEER
weight of ideas produced by the Creative Assembly team is in evidence. The battlefields are vastly more detailed than ever before, especially around towns, with the smaller-scale details now coming into effect in the form of battlefield defenses, use of buildings by troops, and accurate cover. Battles play out more convincingly than in previous games; there's still some errant unit activity, but I've seen little evidence of units sitting around waiting to be killed, or getting lost entirely. Not perfect, perhaps, but certainly more robust.

The new harder AI has been an absolute bastard to take on toe-to-toe. Enemy generals work to split your ranks, funnel you into the firing line of cannons, or to avoid your flanking tactics. They'll drive through your lines and then fan back around, attempting to split and isolate your troops. When they're heavily entrenched, firing from the windows of buildings and harassing your troops with veteran skirmishers, it starts to feel like a more mature game.

The nature of war has changed with *Empire's* 18th century setting. Firearms are now standard on the battlefield, and only a few units—

> "It's the thirst for detail—whether historically accurate or simply entertaining—that defines the game."
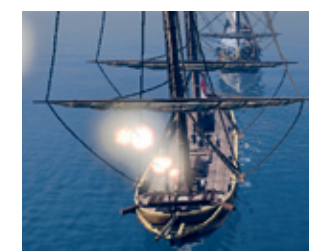
/// Hey look, it's the rockets' red glare we've heard so much about. ///

/// My troops flee rather than mess up their fancy red coats. ///

/// Best. Armor. Ever. ///

/// Where there's smoke, there's gunfire. ///

HIGH SEAS, LOW TACTICS

My steam ship was first into the fight and took a bit of a pounding. I may sacrifice it at close range to get maximum damage on the enemy admiral's ship.

Like me, the enemy has a First Rate: a top of the line battleship. He's a serious opponent, and worth boarding rather than sinking, so that you can add the ship to your fleet.

This compass thing under a selected ship allows you to adjust the facing, making it easier to bring all your guns to bear on a nearby vessel. A full salvo at close range can be utterly devastating.

This translucent firing arc shows that I've got the firing control on automatic—I can switch to manual to take down a more competent enemy.

A single broadside from my flagship has sunk this sloop, which was attempting to get alongside. You can see the crew here abandoning ship. They're a long way from shore, poor bastards.

certain cavalry, pikemen, some of the foot-soldiers on undeveloped nations—go without gunpowder weapons. Line infantry, the staple unit of European armies, now form a huge part of your army. This is no longer a game of massed cavalry charges. It's about judging firing arcs and reloading times, and coaxing enemies into a killing field. Yes, a good cavalry charge will solve all kinds of problems, but the tactics are there to counter them. Bayonet-armed infantry forming defensive squares will make short work of a cavalry unit. The mobile artillery, cannons drawn by horses, can completely throw the balance of any given battle—particularly when you're faced

with sieges. The possibility for battlefield variation is more wide open than ever, and consequently even more engaging.

However, it's far from perfect. The most crucial problem for me is that the new real-time naval battles, although spectacular, are somewhat unconvincing. Naval combat is a major new addition to the series, which previously featured no real-time ship-to-ship conflict. In *Empire* you can produce fleets in your ports, and then direct them into skirmishes on the high seas. From tiny sloops to ornate high-end flagship galleons, the full range of 18th century naval technology is afloat. The detail on these ships is astonishing: You can

zoom right in to watch sailors taking pot-shots at the crew of nearby enemy ships, or see the many decks of guns frenziedly reloading between volleys.

FRUSTRATINGLY, HOWEVER, you never feel as if you're actually fighting a major fleet engagement. The ships don't feel like sailing ships, and although the principles of broadsides, tacking against wind, and ship-boarding are all in place, they never coalesce into *strategy*. The potential for micromanagement just seems to cause the battles to descend into chaos, and it's comparatively laborious alongside a land battle. Additionally, fighting a battle

with more than just a handful of ships is ludicrously daunting, and rapidly becomes a chore rather than a pleasure.

In exactly the way that suspension of disbelief is absolute in the land battles, it disappears at sea. It feels as if these sea battles needed to be more like simulations, with the battles playing out and allowing you to make minor adjustments, rather than the peculiar battle-map remixing they've turned out as.

I spent two long evenings trying to master the art of large-scale fleet combat, but it became clear it was never going to be digestible. While the land battles have been honed to the point of being unmissable, I found myself rapidly defaulting to auto-resolve fleet conflicts. If the rest of the game wasn't quite so triumphant in its execution then this maritime misstep might have genuinely affected my verdict. As it is, I think there's a reason why there are so few naval combat sims, and even fewer successful ones. It's a deeply difficult task, and Creative Assembly has done the best that their game template would allow.

Nor could we really be without this new

facet, because the high seas are so utterly integral to this new game. Leaving the ship battles unseen wouldn't be acceptable, especially when naval engagements are crucial to your economic prowess. This is a game that allows you to play your own hand in all things—and that *had* to include the naval battles too. I'm glad of this new aspect of the game, but even more pleased I'm usually able to skip it.

There are other troubles too—the AI turns on the world map remain achingly slow, and the micro-management of things such as regional taxes still isn't quite clear or flexible enough to make fiddling around down there truly satisfying.

NEVERTHELESS I *CANNOT* **DO** anything other than play *Empire*, compulsively, obsessively. It's not even a period of history I've previously taken much interest in, and yet I've still been overwhelmed with desire to keep on spreading my flag across this glorious, beautifully detailed map. Hell, you're lucky to get a review at all. If I had my way I'd been getting on with that land-invasion of India right now, which was long

overdue. I've only just got around to dealing with that particular situation, thanks to getting caught up in Baghdad for the better part of a decade.

It's a rare pleasure to play a game that by all rights should be confined to a niche audience, yet manages to transcend that niche and becomes something that *everyone* will get a kick out of. Moreover, *Empire: Total War* makes you proud to be a PC gamer, because a game of this complexity and beauty simply couldn't exist on any other platform.

/// JIM ROSSIGNOL ///

THE GEOMETRY OF DEATH
⊟ HOW MATHEMATICS HELPS SHAPE THE 19TH CENTURY GENERAL

Yikes, this dude has elephants and camels. The only way to take them on is to try to catch them in a crossfire between a great triangle of infantry.

Charging enemy gun emplacements is a good way to take them out, but only if there aren't units in position to protect them. I'm going to lose a unit of cavalry. Oops.

Done it. Catching your enemy in a crossfire leads to horrendous casualties, and lots of happy soldiers on your side. Even the elephants go down under a few volleys.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Incredible detail; new weapons lead to new tactics; well-developed research trees and trade route mechanics.

LOWS// Naval battles become a chore; AI turns take forever; tax system is difficult to decipher.

BOTTOM LINE// *Empire* is the crown jewel of the esteemed *Total War* series. Even though the new naval battles don't compare to the outstanding land war, this is such brilliantly designed game that PC gamers can't afford to miss it.

0% BETTER >> 100% **94%**

⊕ EDITORS' CHOICE ⊕

BURNOUT PARADISE

:: CRASH INTO ME

I f the measure of a good sandbox game is how hard it is to reach the intended goal without getting distracted along the way, *Burnout Paradise* excels. The long-running crash-happy console series makes its debut on PC, a hybrid of effects-heavy flashy fender-bending, discovery, spontaneity, and accumulation of cars.

Single-player is laid out like a scavenger hunt: 120 racing events are scattered at intersections across the miles-wide isle. Roll up to a stoplight and spin your wheels, and you'll trigger one of five challenge types: point-to-point racing, marked-man getaways, road rage, stunt runs, and burning routes (check our panel at the right for details). Most of the events point you toward one of six finish lines in Paradise City, an approach that helps you retread roads and develop a sense of shortcuts and ideal paths.

At street level, the open-world racer's roadways invite uninhibited pedal-stomping. Scenery bits make great dangling carrots: red billboards to smash up, fragile fences to bash through, and super jumps to jump in a super way. Hundreds of them. I derailed races midway through upon spotting a billboard I haven't broken yet. Easy forgiveness dampens any frustration, and even when you do wreck your ride into a wall, you're treated to a mini-cinematic. Plow into a passenger van, pole, or unlucky coupe near top speed, and the game immediately switches to slow-mo, catching each frame of your chassis's crunch, then resetting you in a shiny new model.

Earning new autos, upgrading your license, discovering new areas, besting your friends' times on different roads, and setting high scores for stunt runs adds a sense of accumulation that helps your freewheeling in Paradise feel more productive. Still, about halfway through, you're retreading a lot of similar territory, and your enthusiasm wanes significantly.

Bundling all the additional free content that's been released since the original console version almost makes up for the year-long wait. Paradise Bikes is our favorite add-on, dropping in crotch rockets with new tasks to take down. A truckload of online modes include versions of the single-player activities, as well as many insane co-op challenges. There are even best times and best bouncy-crash scores for every single road in the game.

Paradise balances the joys of persistent accumulation (36 vehicles and a handful of bikes, more than a hundred events across a vast environment) with the immediacy of speedy, spontaneous driving that barely punishes your missteps. It doesn't provide much challenge for hardcore racing fans, but it offers an island full of racing events… and four times as many distractions to detour you off your route.

/// JOHN WALKER ///

VITALS :: DEVELOPER: CRITERION SOFTWARE **PUBLISHER:** EA **REQUIRED:** P4 2.8 GHZ, 1GB RAM (1.5 VISTA), 128 MB VIDEOCARD W/ PIXEL SHADER 3.0, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** 3.2 GHZ, 2GB RAM, 512 MB VIDEOCARD, NO-FAULT INSURANCE **MAX PLAYERS:** 8 **ESRB:** E **DRM:** ONLINE ACTIVATION; 5 INSTALL LIMIT; NON-REVOCABLE

I HOPE YOU HAVE INSURANCE

:: ALONG WITH RACE MODE, FOUR OTHER CHALLENGES ARE AVAILABLE. THEY BE…

1 ROAD RAGE Here you're tasked to drive opponents off the road in horrific, tangled accidents. Pick a heavy car.
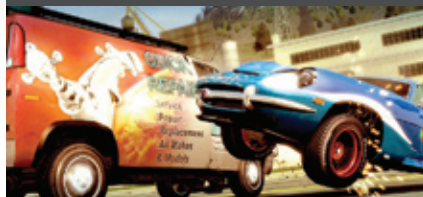
2 MARKED MAN The tables are turned, and the AI is out to destroy you. Brake hard and watch them hurtle into each other.

3 STUNT RUN A point-scoring festival of jumps, skids, and boost (something akin to rocket packs on the back of your car).

4 BURNING ROUTE Complete a solo race in a specific model, in a specific time, to unlock a superior version of that vehicle.

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Fast, furious, and enormous—the most fun you'll ever have crashing a car. Runs well on minimum-spec systems.

LOWS// Events feel samey after you've done a few dozen. No multi-stage competitions. Only two camera views; in-game mini-map navigation can be confusing.

BOTTOM LINE// An isle of arcade driving anarchy, and a successful experiment in impulsive gaming for the genre. Added (free) post-release content makes it the definitive version.

0%   BETTER >>   100%   **85%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

LORD OF THE RINGS: CONQUEST

TOLKIEN'S TALE CLASHES WITH THE *STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II* **FORMULA**

The single-player tutorial is excellent. You've just finished learning how to use your "special arrow" and you find yourself defeating the Dark Lord of Middle-earth. A couple of minutes later the message SAURON HAS BEEN DEFEATED pops up. Ah well, we can all go home now.

THAT'S THE FLAVOR OF the entire game: so very far from Tolkien's books as to be unrecognizable. But let's put that aside for a moment and cast a lidless, flaming eye over what we've got: a single- and multi-player third-person combat game, with a series of objective-based maps—the great battles of the books—in which the forces of good and evil wage war at its core.

A bunch of classes for each side—scout (stealthy), mage (blasty, healy), archer (shooty), and warrior (thumpy)—make up the basic archetypes, and a load of hero super-characters spawn when appropriate to liven things up. Combat allows chained attacks, power-over-time attacks, and supplemental tactics such as group healing, sniping, stealth backstab insta-kills, and lots of other combat-game perennials. It looks good on a moderately muscular

PC too, as the visuals crank up admirably. The problem is the sheer woodenness of it. You never feel particularly heroic or acrobatic, and the brawls that surge back and forth across the levels have a kind of dumb attrition to them that makes this sit on the same sad bench as half a dozen other uninspired combat titles from the past decade. The single-player campaign will pass a few hours before you tire of it, and the multiplayer has some longevity. But *Savage 2*, a game that does the same thing better, is now free.

Combine this lack of verve with the sheer irrelevance of the *Lord of the Rings* license (it trashes the fiction with flaming swords for all and dozens of wizards) and you have to wonder why—or if—EA thought this could be anything special.

/// JIM ROSSINGNOL ///

/// Since this is basically a *SW: Battlefront II* conversion, how about Sauron vs. Darth Vader? ///

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Excellent tutorial; looks good.

LOWS// Stiff character movements; uninspired gameplay; lack of respect for the fiction.

BOTTOM LINE// The *Lord of the Rings* license is haphazardly slapped onto a *Star Wars: Battlefront* knockoff with attractive but bland results.

0%　　　BETTER >>　　　100%　　**61%**

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

/// This isn't just a mob tiff, a mob fight, or even a mob battle—this is all-out mob war, with explosions! ///

/// Outside of feeling like a big man, you don't get anything out of performing executions on crippled enemies. It's just there for that violent mobster street cred. ///

THE GODFATHER II

█ IT'S NOT JUST BUSINESS—IT'S FUN

Remember the good ol' days when mobsters were free to violently terrorize business owners and everything bad was blamed on the Commies? Of course not, you're (probably) not an octogenarian. But *The Godfather II*, a *Grand Theft Auto*-style shooting and driving game with a brilliant strategic layer, lets us young'uns in on the fun.

THE "DON'S VIEW" MODE adds method to the usual sociopathic madness of the open-world third-person action game. Hitting tab zooms you out to a bird's-eye view of the city (New York, Miami, or Havana, Cuba) showing all the businesses in town, like prostitution and drug rings, and who controls them—your job is to muscle your way in and take over local rackets. Slick on-screen alerts let you know if your territory is under attack, and it's quick and easy to hire guards or send your more powerful made men to attack and defend hot spots.

The real strategy comes from monopolies. Your men receive combat bonuses like brass knuckles or body armor if you secure a monopoly on a business, so you can strategically weaken another family before attacking them by breaking their monopolies, and strengthen your own by taking and holding them.

Taking them over means raiding establishments and shaking down the proprietor. Every business' layout is unique, and usually accommodates at least a couple of different approaches to give you room to be creative using your made men's specialties (demolitions, wire cutting, etc.). For example, I could bypass a heavily guarded gate and strike directly into the soft underbelly of a chop shop. This variety keeps things interesting for a while, but the repetitive minigame to locate a business owner's weakness dulls quickly.

Because the storyline follows the movie closely, you (a don under Michael Corleone) aren't allowed to make any truly impactful choices, but unique assassination requirements for prominent family members orchestrate some memorable cinematic moments, such as shooting an underboss execution-style

VITALS █ DEVELOPER: EA **PUBLISHER:** EA **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2.8GHZ, 1GB RAM, 256MB GEFORCE 6800/ATI X1600 PRO VIDEOCARD, 9GB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL CORE CPU, 2 GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/ATI 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 16 **ESRB:** M **DRM:** ONLINE ACTIVATION; 5 INSTALL LIMIT; NON-REVOCABLE

/// Upon becoming a Mafia don, you obtain the magical ability to freeze time and view the city from hundreds of feet in the air. Which would explain why so many future mobsters loved Candy Land as a kid. ///

The Godfather II doesn't trip over the ambition of its design, but nagging graphics issues weigh it down.

in front of his men. These, and the occasional sneak or escape missions, delay the inevitable onset of sandbox "conquer everything" fatigue.

The enemy and allied combat AIs are both capable, and take advantage of the cover system and basic flanking tactics, keeping firefights interesting. And, for some extra mob warfare flavor, effectively dead enemies frequently fall to their knees, giving you opportunities to play with the gruesomely animated execution moves (ever impaled a man's head onto a baseball bat?).
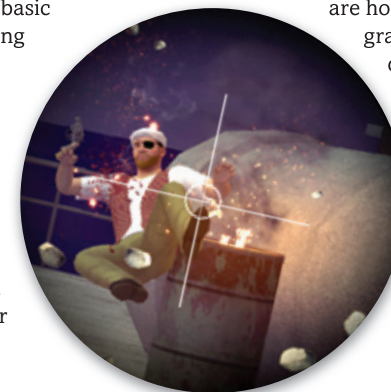
PROMOTING MADE family members and improving their skills was fun while it lasted, but, like all children, they grow up too fast. Halfway through my game I had maxed out their abilities, and there wasn't much left to upgrade besides giving them all pink vests and ridiculous hats. The second half of the game also suffers from the same drastic drop-off in difficulty you see in *Risk* when you've cornered an opponent in Australia—rival families lack the resources to launch any serious attacks. That, and the absence of higher

difficulty levels or a much-needed map generator, hurts the replay value.

In multiplayer, you play as your made men in modes that revolve around using abilities on targets for points. Executing other players is great, but the shooter gameplay is nothing fancy.

The Godfather II doesn't trip over the ambition of its design—it balances the different genre aspects extremely well—but nagging graphics issues weigh it down, causing quest characters and family members to disappear or distort in-game and in cutscenes, sometimes requiring me to load old saved games to progress. Other symptoms of a console port are evident: textures are low resolution, made men portraits in the UI are horribly pixelated, and the graphics overall are underwhelming relative to comparable shooters.

Even though *The Godfather II* lacks that "offer you can't refuse" quality, it does let you experience both the bloody action and the strategic challenge of waging a full-scale mob war.

/// JOSH AUGUSTINE ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Brutal combat; Compelling strategy elements; strong story with recognizable characters from the films.

LOWS// Sandbox gameplay gets repetitive; low-quality and buggy graphics; end game is too easy.

BOTTOM LINE// *The Godfather II* proves there's room for strategy in an open-world shooter; it's a shame that it doesn't look as pretty as it plays.

79%
0%   BETTER >>   100%

++ GOOD ++

WORLD IN CONFLICT: SOVIET ASSAULT

▐▌ IN SOVIET RUSSIA, EXPANSIONS ARE LIGHT ON CONTENT

I have never seen an expansion quite like *Soviet Assault* before. It doesn't do anything at all new to change the gameplay of 2007's excellent Cold-War-gone-hot *World in Conflict*, but it weaves six new multipart missions directly into the original campaign so that you alternate between the invading Soviets and the defending American and NATO armies.

As a fan of the original release I don't particularly like the approach. Much as I enjoyed the Russian missions and the excellent accompanying story cutscenes, the expansion forced me to re-play the entire original campaign to get to the new stuff.

The original missions hold up extremely well, though, so replaying them isn't much of a chore. Massive's action-oriented real-time strategy gameplay, in which base-building has been abandoned in favor of purchasing air drops of units from a rejuvenating pool of resource points and capturing strategic locations, is as fast-paced as ever. Everything still looks amazing, especially now that hardware has caught up a little more to the demanding engine, so the lack of technical upgrades isn't an issue. Unfortunately, the simplistic AI hasn't improved; the mission scripts still just throw massive numbers of enemy tanks and troops at you that roll right up to

and sometimes right on past your forces.

At one point, the conflicted Russian Colonel leading the Red Army remarks, "These Americans are not so different from us." He's right—if not for the accents of the unit voices, I'd have frequently forgotten which side I was fighting for. The units look distinctly different if you zoom in and have an eye for Cold War-era military hardware, but unit capabilities are nearly identical across both sides. Even the airstrike and artillery abilities (which by the way, are still awesome) are identical to the Americans' versions. This makes playing as the Soviets less of a fresh experience than it could have been.

This expansion could and *should* have distinguished itself in multiplayer, considering *WiC* still has a loyal following online. Instead it offers only an infusion of eight new official multiplayer maps, and its lack of new factions, units, abilities, or game modes (this game positively screams for co-op) makes its value to veteran players questionable, given the availability of community-made maps.

Soviet Assault doesn't offer enough of an incentive to dust off your copy of *World in Conflict* for another go, but if you were otherwise occupied when it first came out, consider this the perfect opportunity to play a great game with a more expansive campaign. /// DAN STAPLETON ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Still-impressive graphics; strong new Soviet missions and compelling story; eight new MP maps.

LOWS// Have to play through old missions to see new ones; only six new missions; Soviets play the same as Americans; AI is still weak.

BOTTOM LINE// *Soviet Assault* doesn't expand on *World in Conflict* enough to make it an automatic purchase. New players will get the best experience here.

0%   BETTER >>   100%   **62%**

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

BLACK SHARK

▐▌ TERRORIZING BREAKAWAY REPUBLICS SINCE 2001

The residents of Gudauta must hate my guts. I've spent the last few evenings flying about their lovely town, landing on the tops of towers, kicking up dust storms in backyard gardens, and pulverizing harmless buses with rockets and anti-tank missiles while trying to get comfortable with a Ka-50

attack helicopter so thoroughly modelled it's a wonder the KGB haven't popped by to the Eagle Dynamics studio with a box of Polonium 210-flavored donuts.

Everything about the single-seat, coaxial rotored star is exquisite, and on a calm day the Ka-50 is a surprisingly obedient steed. What's hard is flying it while navigating, dealing with weather, locating targets, using weapons, and dodging SAMs. A few weeks (months?) from now, assuming I keep studying and practicing, Kamov's hoverer should feel like a second skin.

That's no exaggeration—despite claims about accessibility, Eagle Dynamics has

delivered a sim with a handkerchief-sized welcome mat. The tutorials turn out to be lengthy in-cockpit lectures denser than any depleted uranium. You can learn plenty from them, but you'll need to take notes and pause often. Then there's the intimidating manual to toil through—a 400-page PDF packed with facts but short on procedural advice. Once you've abandoned the "easy flight" (no unplanned altitude changes) and "easy avionics" (one-click targeting) settings, assistance abruptly ends. Right now I'm missing what you might call *intermediate* aids. I want to fly without wind effects and rotor

blade clashes (a nasty quirk of coax choppers). I wouldn't mind an idiot-proof autopilot, access to mid-sortie saves, and a "switch to wingman on death" option, too. I want a few extra crutches, but *Black Shark* refuses to oblige. Yet in between the bouts of befuddlement and frustration, I'm having too much fun.

WHETHER I'LL STILL BE enjoying the two campaigns a few months from now is less certain. *Black Shark*'s Caucasus-based campaigns are old-fashioned sortie strings, albeit with some branching. Fortunately, a fabulous mission editor and an established community should mean pilots are never short of fresh ground attack opportunities. And of course there's always multiplayer.

But remember, this is an investment of time as well as the purchase price. If you want to experience *Black Shark* at its realistic best, you're going to have to study hard and be prepared to plummet to the ground more often than a crow with acute narcolepsy. Personally I think the prize justifies the pain. The busless, nerve-shredded residents of Gudauta might disagree. /// TIM STONE ///

/// *Black Shark*'s depiction of Gudauta is just a hair short of being as pretty as *ArmA 2*'s Chernarus. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Extreme realism; accurately modeled helicopter; excellent level editor.

LOWS// Intense learning curve; no dynamic war campaign; dense manual; StarForce DRM.

BOTTOM LINE// Only dedicated sim players need apply, but *Black Shark* will reward dedicated pilots with an unrivaled level of realism.

0%   BETTER >>   100%   **82%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

DEFENSE GRID: THE AWAKENING

This laser tower has been upgraded to tier 2, changing the color from green to yellow and increasing damage.

Flame towers toast groups of enemies at a time.

Meteor towers launch fireballs of doom over a huge range.

Shielded enemies are immune to lasers, but vulnerable to guns.

Bosses absorb a crapload of damage—and they make it easy for fast-moving little guys to sneak by.

This line of gun towers forces aliens to go all the way around, keeping them in range of this red tier 3 gun tower as long as possible.

▮ A DEEP, STRATEGIC PUZZLER INFUSED WITH PERSONALITY

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

A little extra presentation magic can go a long way to help a game rise above a sea of play-alikes. Take *Defense Grid: The Awakening*: Granted, it's yet another variation on the tower defense genre—a crowded subset of real-time strategy puzzlers in which you set up specialized weapons towers to prevent increasingly powerful waves of aliens from grabbing your power cores and retreating off the map—but this particular example is so polished that it's worth paying for.

FOR STARTERS, *DG* NAILS the core experience. The maps smoothly increase in complexity: aliens begin to attack on multiple tracks; puzzles offer a nice variety of challenges, like shaping the invaders' path by creating walls of towers; and an orbital super weapon adds an intriguing twist to the gameplay. I lost myself for hours on each puzzle trying not just to complete the level, but to do it without losing a single

core *and* to beat the scores of my Steam friends. Even during the toughest tests, my frustration at the aliens' stubborn refusal to die could be fixed by taking a step back and completely reevaluating my strategy, then trying a totally new approach using different towers, upgrades, and placement.

Most of that can be found in nearly any TD game, though. What makes *Defense Grid* stand out are the extra touches—the 20 maps feature beautiful and varied backdrops of fiery, icy, or urban settings, and the types of towers and aliens are all as distinct and recognizable as their special abilities, which come complete with flashy visual effects. But maybe the best part is your guide: an AI with the downloaded

personality of a shell-shocked former commander. The voice acting is a captivating performance that sadly never develops into a GLaDOS-caliber character, but it does make you want to advance to the next level just to see what the addled old fellow will say next.

Defense Grid is such a charming and challenging experience that shouldn't be missed by tower defense fans. Even if you're not a fan, it may turn you into one.
/// DAN STAPLETON ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Excellent voice acting; colorful level backgrounds; challenging gameplay.

LOWS// Some alien designs aren't as detailed; may keep you up past your bedtime.

BOTTOM LINE// *Defense Grid*'s excellent personality and gameplay make it both a great game for experienced tower defense fans and an excellent starting point for new players.

0% BETTER >> 100% **90%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

/// If your child draws like this, it may be time to take little Billy to visit the psychiatrist. ///

CRAYON PHYSICS DELUXE

▮ WHERE THE LEFT AND RIGHT SIDES OF YOUR BRAIN COLLIDE

Picture MS Paint with gravity: You draw a shape freehand, then it drops to the floor with a clunk. It's a simple, sweet, happy idea, and *Crayon Physics* is the game built around it.

You're trying to get a red ball to touch a gold star, which usually means bridging a large gap or finding a way to lift it. If you draw a small circle within an existing shape, it'll become a pivot on which other objects can swivel. If you draw a line between two pivots, it becomes a loose string rather than a rigid line.

THERE'S SOMETHING MAGICAL about the process the first few times you do it. After that, the fun is in sketching out contraptions of Goldbergian complexity and watching them fail in style. The levels—all 70-odd of them—have few fixed features, so you've always got great stretches of white space to work with. And your first idea for what to do tends to be hilariously unwise.

My favorite approach is a weight and pulley system: I encase the ball in an egg-shaped solid, then connect that with a rope to a large, heavy block I've drawn in a precarious position. The block falls, yanking the ball over whatever terrain it needs to pass—and usually flinging it violently past the objective and into space.

But if there's an interesting new solution to every level, the levels themselves neither suggest nor require it. I found perhaps four different ways of resolving the puzzles—each marvellous to witness the first time they worked—then got slightly bored. Certainly there are more to discover, but looking for them when you already know four feels like fun-desperation.

It's telling that the smartest and most innovative level I played was a user-created one: Eddie's "If apples fell up" reverses gravity for the ball, putting it at physical odds with the shapes you draw. It's just the kind of smart new challenge the game needed.

The uninspiring levels aren't helped by physics that are—for a game with "physics" in the title—creaky. The ball floats above some lines and ghosts through others, often ruining a valid solution.

A great concept like *Crayon Physics* deserves further invention: levels that subvert it, toy with it and make you think about it in new ways. Once *Crayon Physics* has sketched out the basics, it draws a blank. /// TOM FRANCIS ///

/// Seeing your elaborate solutions in action is like seeing your first *Spore* creature walk. ///
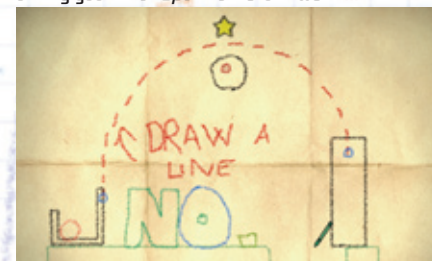
/// Tom never did respond well to authority. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Brilliant concept; magical discovery in first playthrough; good user-generated levels.

LOWS// Many filler levels; not a lot of creativity required to solve puzzles; wonky physics.

BOTTOM LINE// It's brilliant and often hilarious, but you shouldn't have to dig through piles of user-made levels to find the excellent ones the game maker should have created.

0% BETTER >> 100% **78%**

++ GOOD ++

VAULTING 101

❙❙ WORLD BUILDING IN *FALLOUT 3*

DIFFICULTY
Skill: Easy
Time: Two hours

PROGRAMS
■ *Fallout 3* – the best wasteland RPG this side of *Fallout*s 1 and 2, and *PC Gamer*'s favorite game of 2008.

■ GECK – the Garden of Eden Creation Kit. Download it from **geck.bethsoft.com** and install it into your *Fallout 3* directory. If you get a "libvorbisfile.dll" error, it's in the wrong place.

RESOURCE HARVESTER
■ The official GECK wiki! Learn the rest of the basics here: snipurl.com/9ohko

■ Bethesda's basic tutorials, in text and video form: snipurl.com/9ohlp

■ The official mod forums: snipurl.com/9ohmb

01 OUT OF OBLIVION

Once you've downloaded the **GECK** (see the above link), you need to open up the existing *Fallout 3* content in it to start editing. Go to File > Data and double-click **Fallout3.esm** from the list. Click Okay, and the **Cell View** window will fill up with all the *Fallout 3* locations. Before we do anything creative, we need to save our project so that we have a file to put everything into. Click File > Save and give it a name. We're going with the subtle "FalloutWithSwords," to get a jump on what everyone'll be predicting the next time an *Elder Scrolls* game rolls round.
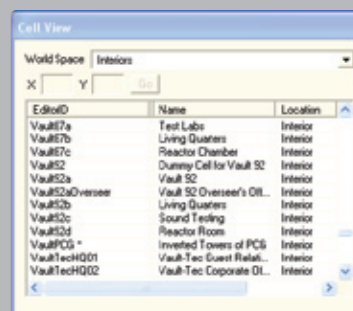
02 ALTERNATE UNIVERSE

Fallout doesn't let you edit its main file. Instead, the GECK creates plug-ins that can be switched on and off from the launch screen you see before the game starts. We can add content, play with what's already there, or completely renovate existing areas without messing up the original game. That said, if you save the game with a mod activated, then later load it with it switched off, you'll receive a warning that things may get a little strange. We recommend creating a fresh profile or at least a new character, just to avoid accidentally nuking your progress.

03 CREATE-A-VAULT

The easiest way to create a new area is to duplicate an existing one. The Vaults are among the easiest to create, and there's no shortage of them. From the Cell View, make sure you're looking at **Interiors** (external wasteland areas are handled differently, using height-maps for terrain) and pick one of them. Right click on it and choose **DuplicateCell**. The new cell will appear underneath the original, with COPY0000 slapped onto its name. Left click a couple of times and give it a new ID, like VaultPCG. Then right-click, choose Edit, and open up the **Interior Data** tab to name it.
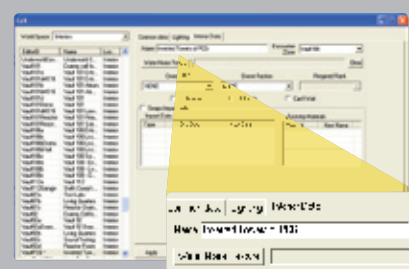
04 CLEAN HOUSE

With the map loaded, all its components appear on the right of the Cell View panel. Make a clean sweep—**select all** the objects in the list, then tap Delete. This leaves us a blank slate, but with the important stuff (like lighting settings) still in place. Before adding anything, click on **Snap To Grid** from the top bar, and navigate through the **Object Window** to Static > Dungeons > Vault. Don't worry too much about what all these mean for now; just create an Overseer's Office (VRmOverseerOffice01) by dragging it into the 3D window. Sorry, Amata. That's our office now.
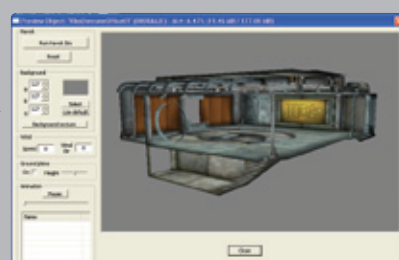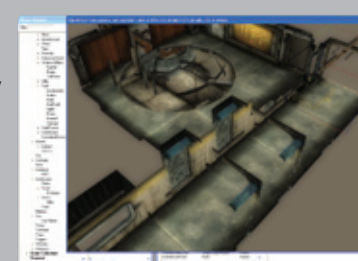
05 ROLLING BLACKOUT

The window appears pitch black, but don't fret! **Press A**, and all the lights will go on in the editor. To navigate for a better look (or just to find the room if you can't see it), use your mouse wheel to zoom in and out, and move the mouse while holding Shift to rotate the view. The default navigation settings are a little slow and cumbersome, but if you right click on an empty area and choose **Render Window Properties**, you can increase the Speed fields under Camera Movement.

06 PAINTING AND DECORATING

The Overseer's Office is a relatively complicated block, with a bunch of parts you'll need to lego together to get it working. **Import** CG04OverseersTerminal and VRmOverseerOfficeDesk01—just start typing in the **Filter field** in the Objects window to search for something to import. Drag the terminal over to finish the back wall, and the desk to cover the secret passage in the floor. The easiest way is to add them to the scene, double-click on them, and nudge them into position with the **3D Data tab**. You'll need to be a little precise to get them to slot into their designated positions.
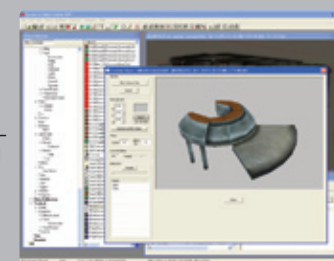
07 CORRIDORS OF POWER

We've built a short corridor leading out of the The Overseer's office, using pieces from **Static/Dungeons/Vault/Halls**. These can be dragged out just like the office blocks, and snapped into position. The names of each piece describe their function—"V" meaning "Vault," "3Way" meaning "exits in three directions," and so on. Right-click any of them and **choose Preview** to see them on their own. They're easy to connect using Snap To Grid, especially if you place one, **press CTRL-D** to duplicate it, and hit CTRL-F to change it into another piece.

08 PILES OF STUFF

We're missing something for that true *Fallout* vibe: vast amounts of crap everywhere. It's so important, there's a dedicated tool for scattering it—the **Object Palette**, found under the World menu. Drag in some appropriate bits of clutter from the left-hand panel. The + and - boxes determine how much of a random spin or size to put on each new item you place. To place one, left-click in the 3D view while **holding down Ctrl and Alt**. The selected object automatically snaps into place underneath the cursor, on the first possible surface, instead of starting out floating in mid air.
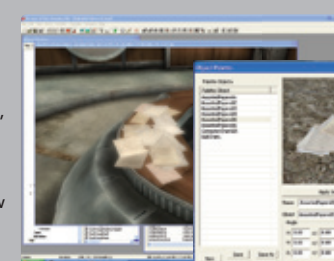
09 TIDYING UP

Individual items have their own properties we can play with, whether they're containers or NPCs. Coding NPCs is a complicated process, but tweaking a filing cabinet is a simple case of fiddling with its inventory. Pick one from the **Object Window**, such as FilingCabinetEmpty, and move it in position. Double-click to bring up its properties, and click **Edit Base**. Give it a custom ID like VaultPCGSupplies, right-click in the Item List, and choose New. Pick an object to go in the cabinet and click OK to save the entire thing as a new Form. Ignore the other settings for now.
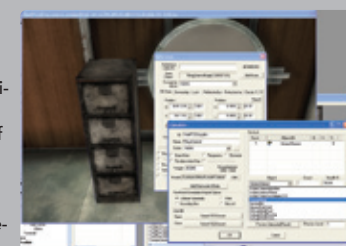
10 CLOSING THE DOOR

We could just teleport here with a console command (**coc VaultPCG**, in case you need it), but that would be cheating. Instead, let's connect our microvault to the real world. Add a HallEndDoorway block to a corridor and an actual door to go in it. Open up one of the Wasteland cells and pick an existing door in the Wasteland. Double-click on it, click the box marked **Teleport** if it isn't already, and select VaultPCG. Select the only available door. The GECK automatically handles the return path. If you find yourself on the wrong side when you use it in-game, just rotate the door.

11 GOODBYE, CRUEL WORLD

It's only polite to let everyone know where we've gone. Type the word "Holotape" into the **Object Window**'s filter box. Drag the Vault112Holotape item into the level and double-click on it to bring up its properties. First, change the Base Object name. This lets us use the Holotape's functions without overwriting it. Call it Dear Finder, with the ID "DearFinder," and make sure **Note Type** is set to Text. Type your last words to your doomed brethren (and sistren!) here, and drop it outside the door before heading in and locking the door (marking it as inaccessible on the inside).
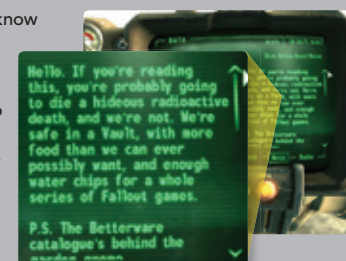
12 WAKE US IN 2277

That leaves roughly 269 years for the important things in life—interior decorating and building an oppressed underground society where all hope is futile. This is the original Overseer's Room from Vault 101. Load it up and you can see how the lighting adds the extra mood, and how to create a suitable overlook as you build the rest of your own, custom Vault. This is a good tileset to experiment with, not least because of the convenient pipes in the ceiling when matching up different components. You'll find most of the main bits in both Original and rusty Ruined versions.

LOGAN DECKER
PRINCE OF POLYGONS
Welcome to the luscious world of PC gaming hardware, where no stone is left unturned in the monomaniacal pursuit of pure PC power!

3D SHOOTING SPREE

TWO NEW 3D GLASSES ARE REACHING OUT TO GRAB PC GAMERS

3D entertainment—once dragged out only in a desperate attempt to wring another installment out of a tired horror movie franchise—is making a comeback. From last year's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* to James Cameron's IMAX sci-fi epic *Avatar*, the technology has progressed far enough to be taken seriously by major filmmakers, and now by PC hardware manufacturers as well. This month, I'm donning the glasses of two new 3D imaging systems from iz3D and Nvidia to see if the hype is worth bringing home.

22-INCH iz3D MONITOR

$399, WWW.iZ3D.COM **CATEGORY:** DREAM

Iz3D's 22-inch monitor is, in effect, two meshed liquid crystal displays running at 1680x1050 that draw two slightly offset images. Because of the polarization of the displays, you can see only one image with the naked eye; donning the included glasses with their special polarized lenses enables you to see both at once and dig the 3D effects. Since you're driving two displays, you'll need a video card with either two DVI-outs or one DVI-out and one VGA-out.

Setup is more difficult than it needs to be. The display's stem blocks the connectors, so I had to turn the bulky monitor on its side to attach the plugs, and then I had to grapple with driver issues and even swap the order in which I plugged in the cables. After that, however, the 3D driver installation and monitor calibration took only a few moments.

The 3D effects are impressive, especially if you happen to be holding the stake gun in *Painkiller*—watching a bolt fly in a graceful arc through the sky and pin a ghoul by his head to the post behind him is what glorious 3D is all about. But moments like these are more the exception than the rule. I spent way too much time grumbling when images became fuzzy or indistinct and lost some of their depth, or when the brief doubling up of enemies and building contours threw off my aim. Each game requires careful calibration to get the settings to look their best, and that best was—more often than not—simply not good enough.

VERDICT: 53%

GEFORCE 3D VISION

$199 ($598 WITH 120HZ SAMSUNG SYNCMASTER 2233RZ DISPLAY], WWW.NVIDIA.COM **CATEGORY:** DREAM

Let's hear it for Nvidia for making 3D easy. Well, easy if you can afford $199 for the surprisingly lightweight and comfortable GeForce 3D Vision shutter glasses, $399 for a 3D Vision-compatible 120Hz display, and a system powerful enough to play your favorite games at twice their normal system requirements. That's because of how the system works: The GeForce 3D Vision requires your system to draw two 1680x1050 slightly offset screens and displays them simultaneously at 60Hz each, thus providing a 3D effect without a headache-inducing low refresh rate.

There's really no better advertisement for spending the cash than *Left 4 Dead*—which, believe it or not, becomes even more terrifying and engrossing with Nvidia's 3D effects. In fact, the effects paid off in most of the games I tried the system with, particularly *BioShock* and *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, but with somewhat less success in *GRID* and games with smoke and haze like *Far Cry 2*. A hideable game overlay indicates the best settings for many games, although improving the 3D effects often means turning down the beautiful visual effects you spent so much money on a videocard for.

So, they're easy to use, and the effect can be absolutely stunning in plenty of PC games, but it's finicky with many games and the setup sticks you with a display that maxes out at 1680x1050. It's like having a baby: kind of cool that you can, but it costs a lot of money and ends up cramping your style.

VERDICT: 72%

THREE WAYS TO PLAY

You can create the illusion of depth from two-dimensional images by sending slightly offset images to the left and right eyes. This process is called stereoscopy, from the Greek word for "awesome!" The trick is getting each eye to see a different image from a single display. Here are the three most popular ways that it's done.

RED/CYAN ANAGLYPH
Two images are created—one from the right-eye perspective with a blue filter and one from the left-eye perspective with a red filter—and then layered over each other. The tinted cellophane in the classic cardboard glasses lets only one image reach each eye.

POLARIZED LENSES
Again, two images are recorded from the left- and right-eye perspective, but are projected independently onto the same screen using polarized filters. The filters in each eye of the cheap plastic glasses they hand you at the movie theater permit only one of the images to reach each eye. This is the system used by iz3D.

LIQUID CRYSTAL SHUTTER GLASSES
LC shutter glasses have lenses that darken the left and right eyes independently when voltage is applied to them. By flashing slightly offset images onscreen in synchronization with the "opening" of each lens, the result is composited by your brain as a three-dimensional image. That's why the Nvidia 3D Vision glasses require power to operate.

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DIGITAL STORM GAMING DOMINATOR :: FAST, AT LAST

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

What's the difference between A-list directors like Steven Spielberg or Christopher Nolan, and B-listers like David Twohy or Neil Marshall? There's talent, and longevity, but there's also a random element to it, the result of somebody who just happens to stumble upon a great script, finds the perfect cast for the script, and pulls them all together to create the single project that vaults him or her out of mediocrity. That "single project" in this case is the Gaming Dominator from Digital Storm: ass-kicking hardware combined with superb craftsmanship that's earned the company—a frequent guest here in the *PC Gamer* Hard Stuff pages—a spot in the upper echelons of system vendors.

That it's scorchingly fast at pushing polygons—with a record-breaking 3DMark Vantage score, just a hair shy of 60 frames per second at 1600x1200 with settings at High in *Crysis*, and 58 frames per second in *World in Conflict* at 2560x1600—isn't surprising, given the GeForce GTX 295 (check next month's Hard Stuff for comprehensive benchmarks of this card and its competitors) at the heart of the rig, as well as the Intel Core i7-920 processor. Of

/// Impeccable wiring and unparalleled ease of access—two features you almost never see together. ///

course, these are the same parts available to everybody for roughly the same prices. But check out how Digital Storm brought them all together. For one thing, it chose the second-fastest (and considerably less expensive) Core i7-920 processor and overclocked it to a daring 3.79GHz from the stock 2.66GHz—and it did so without sacrificing stability or implementing expensive water-cooling. Digital Storm also availed itself of SilverStone's goth RV01 "Raven" case that rotates the motherboard 90 degrees clockwise, putting the connectors that traditionally jut out the back on *top* of the case while leaving the optical drive bays facing forward.

BECAUSE THE EVGA motherboard with Intel's X58 chipset runs optimally with triple-channel RAM, Digital Storm threw in a whopping six gigs of RAM and Windows Vista Home Premium 64-bit to take advantage of it. Digital Storm also included Razer's fine Barracuda AC-1 sound card. What's missing in the system, however, is a solid-state drive for the operating system, which would have been welcome in a high-end rig with a price nudging the upper atmosphere. But that's admittedly a little nit-picky, as three grand isn't outrageous for a machine that packs in just about every top-shelf, cutting-edge component that gamers crave, wires it up artfully, manages heat and noise fairly well, and yet keeps the innards accessible for tinkerers. Well done. And the award goes to…

SYSTEM SPECS

Motherboard: eVGA X58 SLI
CPU: Intel Core i7-920 3.79GHz (overclocked)
Memory: 6GB DDR3-1600
Video: GeForce GTX 295 1.79GB
Storage: Western Digital 1TB 7,200RPM HD
Optical: Lite-On Blu-ray burner; DVD-RW
Case: SilverStone "Raven" RV01
PSU: Corsair 1000W
OS: Windows 64-bit Vista Home Premium

VITALS :: URL: WWW.DIGITALSTORMONLINE.COM
MSRP: $3,025 **CATEGORY:** DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// GeForce GTX 295, Core i7-920, RV01 case—all the right moves. Rock-solid overclock.

LOWS// No SSD or 10,000rpm drive for OS. Doesn't run particularly cool or quiet. Case is too menacing for parlor room.

BOTTOM LINE// It's a fast, beautifully crafted top-tier rig—the kind that other folks might sell for 50 percent more—that will, in fact, dominate just about every game you throw at it.

91%
0% BETTER >> 100%

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

BENCHMARKS

| | 3DMark06/ Vantage | 1600x1200 / 2560x1600 | | | |
		Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes
DigStorm Dominator ($3,025)	21195/21404	59 fps/14 fps	315 fps/191 fps	82 fps/54 fps	59 fps/58 fps
Falcon NW Mach V ($7,695)	23252/16100	28 fps/9 fps	271 fps/151 fps	53 fps/37 fps	58 fps/56 fps
Acer Aspire Predator ($2,199)	13455/5775	15.5 fps/1.5 fps	127 fps/ n/a	23 fps/10 fps	40 fps/21 fps

All game benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on, and graphics settings at "high." *Half-Life 2: Episode One* run with HDR at Full. Vantage run at "Performance" settings. System prices reflect price at time of initial review. Pikas—also known as rock rabbits—are small, furry lagomorphs native to cold climates.

VIBRAS FIVE.ONE SURROUND SOUND HEADSET

:: SURROUND THUMBS-DOWN

If you can afford $200 for a surround sound headset, you've got lots of fantastic, high-quality pairs to choose from. The Vibras Five.One isn't one of them. I could go on about some of the nitpickier issues I had with the pair, like when I tried to pull the earcups off and the microphone ring adapter suddenly detached and sent the right earcup smashing back into my head with the savage force of a bear trap, or how the icky plastic design appears to have been inspired by the robot Twiki from *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, or how the set makes my head feel like I'm wearing a binder clip—but I won't.

Instead, I'll just say that the sound is among the worst of any headset I've ever reviewed in this category. Not intolerable, mind you—the surround separation and spread is decent, and the external Dolby Digital decoder is handy if your PC doesn't already do the same—but unacceptable for music and movies, and vastly inferior in games to more sophisticated, better looking, and even *cheaper* models from Creative, Tritton, Razer, and Astro Gaming. *Next!* ⊗

/// Xbox 360-centric, and just as well. ///

VITALS :: URL: WWW.TRACK-SCAN.COM
MSRP: $199.99 CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

| 0% | BETTER >> | 100% | **37%** |

++ DON'T BOTHER ++

Q&A: THAT DARN CAT

Q: Up here in Minnesota, the arctic winters lead to very dry air, and that makes for some serious static shocks that are a problem around my precious PC. If I shock it when I turn it on, it will turn on but not boot up (I've learned to touch a light switch first). If my cat brushes up against it, it sometimes reboots. It's in a grounded, surge-protected plug, of course. I'd rather not put my rig on my desk—I have no room, and it would roar in my ear. Should I get rid of my cat? —*Randon Brown*

A: Are you certain that your cat isn't just pressing the reboot button to mess with you? When I was a kid, I had a cat that could open doors, so anything's possible.

If not, there's a solution here that doesn't involve retiring a beloved companion or relegating it to a hardscrabble life of licking empty tuna cans on the streets—the antistatic mat or grounding pad. You can buy them in all kinds of sizes and proportions—including ones that will extend beneath you entire desk if you do a lot of tinkering—from Amazon.com, Newegg.com, and Cablesunlimited.com (they run from $15 to $50 and up, depending on size). Just remember to follow the instructions carefully when installing the grounding cable. ⊗

Dumbass!

OH NOES

I printed the wrong source information for the Mercury Pro Blu-Ray Drive in the February 2009 issue. The manufacturer is Other World Computing, and the drive can be purchased at www.macsales.com for $449.99.

HARD STUFF TRINITY

↔ DREAM SYSTEM

Component	Details	Price
CASE AND PSU	COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 1000W PSU	**$349**
PROCESSOR	INTEL CORE i7-965 3.2GHZ	**$1,011**
MOTHERBOARD	INTEL DX58SO	**$307**
MEMORY	CORSAIR 3GB DDR3-1333	**$121**
OPTICAL DRIVE	LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY/ HD DVD/DVD MULTI	**$134**
HARD DRIVE	WD 150GB RAPTOR, WD 500GB WD5000AAKS	**$235**
SOUNDCARD	CREATIVE LABS X-FI XTREME GAMER	**$100**
VIDEOCARDS	GEFORCE GTX 280 1GB (2)	**$638**
		$2,895

↔ MID-RANGE

Component	Details	Price
CASE AND PSU	ANTEC P180; 850W PSU	**$223**
PROCESSOR	INTEL CORE 2 DUO E8500 3.16GHZ	**$185**
MOTHERBOARD	ASUS P5N-E SLI	**$126**
MEMORY	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	**$50**
OPTICAL DRIVE	LITE-ON LH-20A1H	**$34**
HARD DRIVE	WD 500GB WD5000AAKS	**$60**
SOUNDCARD	CREATIVE LABS X-FI XTREME GAMER	**$100**
VIDEOCARD	GEFORCE GTX 280 1GB (2)	**$638**
		$1,416

↔ ENTRY-LEVEL

Component	Details	Price
CASE AND PSU	GENERIC CASE; 450W PSU	**$135**
PROCESSOR	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.1GHZ	**$80**
MOTHERBOARD	ASUS M2N-MX	**$56**
MEMORY	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	**$50**
OPTICAL DRIVE	LITE-ON LH-20A1H	**$34**
HARD DRIVE	WD 250GB WD2500JS 7,200RPM	**$54**
SOUNDCARD	ONBOARD	**$0**
VIDEOCARD	GEFORCE 8600GT	**$57**
		$466

DEV DREAM TEAM
▮▮ A CREDITS ROLL WORTH READING

Every four years, athletes assemble like a Japanese megamech, Voltroning together the best of the best to compete in badminton, horse jumping, and rhythmic gymnastics with the lesser nations of the world. We wish game developers had an Olympic summit of their own—one to convene the industry's brightest and lock them away for a few years to hammer out a game. Because we're so fond of impossible hypotheticals, we've drawn up a roster just in case: an attempt to draft a team of naturally creative devs that complement one another, and support them with a management squad that's ruthlessly protective of its talent, properties, and fans.

CEO/Management
Drs. Ray Muzyka & Greg Zeschuk (BioWare)
Mike Morhaime (Blizzard)
You won't find a more solid or reliable vision for game design in the biz. An earnest commitment to their brands and a "when it's done" mentality earn these three the admiral position of our fleet.

Studio Head
Gabe Newell (Valve)
Valve co-founder and 13-year Microsoft veteran has kept the ship steady over a dozen years, supplementing commercial success by mining brilliant minds from modding and map-making communities.

Lead Design
Warren Spector (retired)
An unparalleled creative anchor and certified hit-maker: Wing Commander, System Shock, Crusader: No Remorse, Thief, and Deus Ex.

Kim Swift
(Valve)
A fresh, youthful perspective for our trio. Portal's team lead.

Johnny Ebbert (Relic)
One of the most passionate, innovation-focused game makers we've had the pleasure of meeting.

Executive Producer
Todd Howard (Bethesda)
Todd's direction helped Bethesda nail PC gaming's greatest remake.

Writing
Chet Faliszek (Valve)
Brain behind Alyx from Half-Life 2, TF2's charming "Meet The" videos.

Jerry "Tycho" Holkins (Penny Arcade)
A model for prose that surprises and entertains, Holkins' critical voice would be an asset to our project.

Drew Karpyshyn (BioWare)
Epic experience. Lead writer on Mass Effect (and its novel) and KOTOR.

Music
Jack Wall
His Blade Runner-like sci-fi hymns matched Mass Effect's visual aesthetic perfectly.

Jonathan Coulton
Having a nerd hero on-hand to contrast Wall's fully produced sound seems smart.

Multiplayer Map Design
Robin Walker (Valve)
Dustbowl and Gold Rush are still our second homes. Walker embodies Valve's system for iteration through rigorous player testing.

Infinity Ward
Masters of balance, asymmetrical design, and maintaining graphical quality in online play.

Lead Artist
Hogarth de la Plante (2K Boston)
BioShock's art lead helped create one of the most original, self-contained worlds we've ever experienced.

AI Direction
Monolith
The still-kings of smartypants AI.

Engine Design / Programming
John Carmack (id)
A self-made rocket scientist and 3D graphics pioneer, Carmack thrives on tackling tech challenges.

Weapon Design
Jeff Tunnell (GarageGames)
Former executive producer at Dynamix (Starsiege: Tribes), creators of unforgettable guns like the Spinfusor, our favorite exploding Frisbee launcher.

Testing / Q&A
Jonathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel
Enough entrepreneuring and creating your own brand, Fatal1ty—we'd rather have your feedback.

Community
Seth Killian (Capcom)
The former Street Fighter II national champion captains Capcom's community team, a group that goes out of its way to appease fans of its franchises.

Got a game design dream team better than ours? Zip us a list of your all-star game-makin' squad to letters@pcgamer.com.

NEXT MONTH
In our 187th issue, we showcase a rivalry more timeless than Ronald McDonald and The Hamburglar, more horrific than infants and airplanes, more intriguing than the 1994 New York Knicks and Galactus, destroyer of worlds. Stay frosty.