BRITAIN'S BEST PC GAMES MAG

PCZONE

ISSUE 194

STARCRAFT II

THE ZERG WARS BEGIN!

Hands-on with the most important RTS of the decade

MAFIA II
The long-awaited crime sequel is here! The full exclusive story

ALPHA PROTOCOL
Bauer meets Bond meets Bourne in Obsidian's stunning new RPG!

WIN!
TINY COMPO
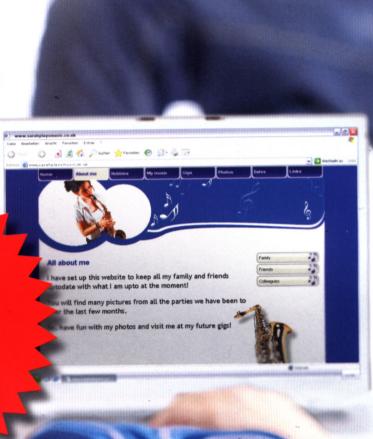In StarCraft, what is the name of the Zerg leader?

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COVER STORY

Blizzard's ferocious strategy monster draws us into its clutches!

NEVERQUEST **123**

"We can't help it, we love to sin..."

WHAT'S ON THE COVER?

Too busy? *PC ZONE* in 64 words...
Martin Korda is sent on a secret mission to uncover the mysteries of *StarCraft II*, while Ed swans off to France to preview *Warhammer Online*, taking a detour through a *Jumpgate*. Steve becomes a lawbreaker with *Mafia II*, while sticking a knife into *Assassin's Creed*. Finally, Log vaults through a window carrying a review of *Rainbow Six: Vegas 2*, causing a right old mess.

MAFIA II
A WORLD EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK AT A GANGSTER MASTERPIECE **44**

THE JOY FACTORY

MARTIN KORDA'S VISIT to Blizzard this month (p56) got me reminiscing about my own. The first thing that was out of the ordinary, other than an 8ft Orc chieftan, was a timid receptionist sitting behind bulletproof glass. Getting in was like entering a high-security prison, but where inmates wore T-shirts with Blizzard logos, rather than stripe-and-arrow affairs.

The visit didn't start as the Willy Wonka experience I hoped for, even if journalistic tradition dictated that I was with a fat German. People went about their business, including a few dagger-eyed business ladies who didn't seem the sort who spent their evenings making buffs out of spider guts. But then, I moved deeper. As I started to absorb the pictures that covered the walls and stole glimpses of *Warcraft* art on hastily covered screens, my heart began to race and I wondered exactly what was being worked on in areas hidden from me.

That was all in my head though. When I chatted to the people – from the Jeff Kaplans to the humblest of GMs – their enthusiasm and passion spilt out and sloshed around my feet. At that point I realised that it wasn't a big deal that I'd infiltrated a spiritual home of PC gaming, but more that I was talking to the people whose talent made it a success. Then I stole fizzy lifting drinks and was asked to leave.

Will Porter

Will Porter, editor

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14 PAGES of the world's best sci-fi fiction!

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...ere to save 2008: Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk and The Dark Knight!

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It's Chuck!
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X-Files 2
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• Gillian Anderson
• Frank Spotnitz
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05>

REQUIEM

SUPERMAN RETURNS!

Doctor Who!

X-MEN The Last Stand

KONG!
Ray Bradbury
XMAS!

LOST?

DOCTOR WHO LATEST

V FOR VENDETTA

Lana & Clark?
The Golden
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FLAME ON!
Cast and crew reveal how they aim to wow the fans this time

JOSS WHEDON

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WHERE NEXT FOR TV'S BEST NEW SHOW

Stephen KING

Heroes

HARRY POTTER MEDIUM PRIMEVAL LATEST

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We rate the top freeware games ever made, with the chance for you to play them all on our free cover disc!

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MEET THE TEAM
They're your friends, and a whole lot more

LOG
The funny one
AGE: 34
LIKES: Progress bars
DISLIKES: When they lie
FANCIES: Stuart
FAVOURITE GAME: British Bulldog
NOW PLAYING: *Dream Pinball 3D*

Log is still reeling from his sudden rash of opinion pieces in *The Guardian*. A rash that looks as if it might go from two to more. Because of this a remarkable transformation has occurred: gone are the days of Jon 'Log' Blyth being a drunken, lovable bundle of hugs. Recently he's been seeing plays, meeting with poets and pontificating on obscure Eastern European cinema. He's become too clever for us. He's changed. He's started mixing with an arty crowd and eating posh meat on sticks. That was until Brian Sewell invited him round to his house and Log drunkenly shat in his fridge.

PHILIP WAND
Unrevealed Cylon
When he was aged 15, Wandy wrote a column in *Amstrad Computer User* called Seek And Ye Shall Find. Anyone with a surviving copy, or a picture of a teenage Wandy, shall be handsomely (OK – poorly) rewarded.
NOW PLAYING: *Live for Speed*

STEVE HOGARTY
Space cadet
A sudden space nut, Hogarty has been banging on about *Sins of a Solar Empire* and *X³* since last issue. He claims to have "only banged on a little bit," but we've never seen banging on like this.
NOW PLAYING: *Sins of a Solar Empire*

WILL PORTER
Rural correspondant
Due to his mum having a dodgy foot, Will was called to the farm to help with the lambing. It's odd knowing your boss spent Easter with an arm up the wrong end of sheep.
NOW PLAYING: *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*

ED ZITRON
Opinion provider
While organising a party called Zitronapalooza and starting a blog called the Zitronosphere, Zitron attacked claims that he was an egomaniac while rewriting the hits of Craig David to include his own name instead.
NOW PLAYING: *All the MMOs*

MARTIN KORDA
Blue steel model
A muscle-bound Adonis lured into a dark room, and surrounded by a clamour of shy, yet excitable and sweaty Europeans? It sounded like a recipe for disaster, yet the distracting presence of *StarCraft II* saved the day.
NOW PLAYING: *Starcraft II*

DENVER
Last Dinosaur
This month Denver taught us important lessons about the value of friendship and the need to preserve earth's fragile ecosystem. He then fell off his skateboard, and we laughed.
NOW PLAYING: *Off-road Velociraptor Safari*

WHAT'S HELPED THIS MONTH... The official *PCZ* and readership *Second Life* protest putting a man in a Mexican hat right off his stride
WHAT HASN'T HELPED THIS MONTH... Will smelling like sheep, continued review code slippage and continued, belated, *Oblivion* addiction

WHAT WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT...

NPC PROTECTION MISSIONS 55 min "Has anyone ever actually found one fun?" "Why have them in *WOW*?" "What's the point?" etc.

FACTS ABOUT ICE 23 min A nuclear arms race of googling 'facts about ice and water' and shouting out the answer. The lives we lead...

OBSIDIAN 10 min OK, so *KOTOR 2* wasn't finished. But how can ex-Black Isle staffers make a bad game?

FACEBOOK GAMES 18 min Are they under the *PCZ* remit? Only this Packrat card game is rather more-ish...

SWAT 4 44 min Still unsurpassed in the realms of co-op. And returning champ of the lunch-hour LAN sesh.

ASSASSIN'S CREED 74 min PC-only content proves a mite duff. Not a medieval barnstormer.

BUGGY CONSOLE RELEASES 5 min What the hell happened with 360 *Bully*? We're not the only ones to suffer from par-boiled development it seems...

JAFFA CAKES 3 min Did you know that the smashing orangey bits are made of tangerine oil and apricots?

THE CANARY ISLANDS 4 min Did you know they are so-called because the Romans knew them as Canaris Insula? Meaning 'isle of dogs'?

QI: THE BOOK OF GENERAL IGNORANCE 10 min Did you know that Steve has a copy on his desk?

LETTERS

Will Porter stands next to an Orgrimmar mailbox, waiting for a pair of magic trousers

KING OF LETTERS

INDIE TRIUMPH

Having just been flicking through the latest *PC ZONE*, I reached the back cover and was presented with an advert for a futuristic war game. It was for *Frontlines: Fuel of War*, but it could just have been for any other near-future shooter that's being pumped out these days. We always seem to be moving from setting to setting, sucking all the enjoyment that can possibly had there (see World War II for reference).

I'm not one of these naysayers harking the end of PC gaming though (as seems fashionable of late), mainly because the magazine revealed some respite in Freeplay; namely the Independent Gaming Festival section.

The indie scene always seems to be doing something exciting. *Audiosurf* is a brilliant example of this. It's like nothing I've ever played before. The graphics are absolutely perfect, simple yet stylish. And the sound? Well, that's up to you, I

Audiosurf: whatever you do, tell everyone

recommend Queens of the Stone Age. It's massively addictive and once you top your first leaderboard (for a song that nobody else has played) and subsequently are informed by email that you've been 'dethroned', you're absolutely hooked.

At only $10, everyone should own this game. Just stay away from the high scores I've got for *Rated R*!

Simon

Agreed. PC gaming is going through a remarkable shift at the moment, something underlined last issue when we were writing the Meet the Team page and discovered that practically everyone's 'Currently

playing' was a free game. Developers are proving that they can work outside of the usual system (the *World of Goo* chaps worked for EA for example) to create gaming magic.

Is PC gaming dead? Nah, it's just changing into something even better.

DON'T SKIP THE END

There haven't been many games that I've been bothered to finish and they languish in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet. The list is endless: *Doom 3, Crysis, World in Conflict, GTA3, Hitman, F.E.A.R., Splinter Cell, Half-Life 2, STALKER*... Why? Simple. Many games are just style over substance and lack the ability to draw the player in and care about the character being played.

I have a high-spec system and there's nothing yet that I can't run with full eye candy switched on, yet this is the very thing that developers rely on rather than playability. If a game has some playability the endings tend to be naff.

Take *Crysis* for example, there was great promise until halfway through, then it turned into utter crap.
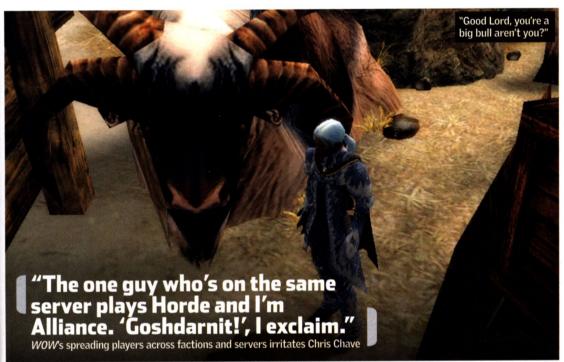
Now apparently I find that I'm not alone in this, I am one of the 60 per cent of gamers that never finish a game and that leaves me relieved. It means that the game developers are not hitting the right buttons with the majority of gamers and it means they are failing us. It makes me feel better that I'm not the only one who has wasted so much money on crap.

Mike Tomlinson

You say that Mike, but plenty of people don't finish games that are

You played it until she got better though... right, Mr Tomlinson?

"Good Lord, you're a big bull aren't you?"

"The one guy who's on the same server plays Horde and I'm Alliance. 'Goshdarnit!', I exclaim."
WOW's spreading players across factions and servers irritates Chris Chave

SEND US YOUR REVIEWS WIN A FREE GAME!

PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA
Sent in by Jim Hooper
PC ZONE score: 40%

What does Ed Zitron have against *Pirates of the Burning Sea*? As far as I can tell it's an interesting, deep and worthy MMO. It can be a bit of a chore early on (learning to be a pirate certainly involves more economics and bartering than I expected) but me and my friends are getting loads out of it. The naval combat, too, is nowhere near as dull as it was described – to be honest it's great to be free of the hack, slash, magic, buff nonsense of every single fantasy MMO out there. It's also way, way better than *Bounty Bay Online* – which was muck.
Your shout: 76%

Pirates have their fans.

Send your reviews with a maximum of 100 words, your name and a percentage score to letters@pczone.co.uk. Every one printed here wins a top PC game.

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compact and excellent – the most recent being the 40 per cent of people who actually completed *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*. My own opinion, and this is because when it comes to needless expenditure I am as tight as a duck's arse, is that when I buy a game I make damn sure that I (eventually) get every drop of enjoyment out of it.

However, what you're saying does ring true. Games are often front-loaded with their best offerings, while endings are often a tacked on afterthought that developers know few will reach – the ending to *Far Cry* being a case in point here.

I don't necessarily think that you're being so dramatically failed, but developers certainly need to learn how to keep momentum in games ticking over.

SUPER FRIENDS

Isn't it time that MMO designers stopped thinking up ways to prevent us from playing together? Back in my *Guild Wars* days, I found out a couple of the guys at work also played.

"Awesome," I said. "Wanna hit the Fissure of Woe tonight?" Which they didn't, because FOW was terrible, but we went on to have many happy adventures together, kicked butt across Tyria and chatted about it the next day in the office, thus doing far less work than we ought to.

These days, I've upgraded my addiction to a *WOW* habit and it turns out that some of the new guys at work play *WOW* too.

"We should group together some time!" one says. "Which server are you guys on?" I ask.

Turns out all but one of them play on different servers. The one guy who's on the same server plays Horde and I'm Alliance. "Goshdarnit!", I exclaim.

This problem's far from *WOW*-specific. I remember it being an issue in the *EverQuests*, in *D&D Online* and – to a lesser extent – in *City of Heroes*. It seems the only games capable of getting it right are the freebies. Sure *Diablo* and *GW* only allow it for instances, not cities or whatnot – but I'm not really that fussed about them. *WOW* proves in its battlegrounds that the technology is available to have mixed-server teams, but restricts it to a fraction of the game content.

I often find myself wondering why on Earth a game I pay money to play prevents me from teaming up with as many people as possible through instanced content, while a game I played for free managed to set it up so

---

ASK THE TXTPERTS

Want to know a PC game release date? Need advice on what graphics card to buy? Just want somewhere to rant incoherently in 'youth speak'? Simply text the *PC ZONE* 'Txtperts' (see what we did there?) and we'll answer you right here...

Modern combat? Modern conflict? It's *Modern Warfare*!
Anon

Not sure what you're sharing, but thanks.

I have a dell xps 420 with 1 geforce 8800gt 512ram. Is it possibld to put a second card in my machine?
Jonathan

Wandy says: "That XPS isn't an SLI machine gg bye" Which means it isn't possibld, no.

I'm watching *Time Team* and wondering if it'd make an interesting game!
Dewi

Like *Theme Hospital*, but you hire bearded jumper-clad geo-phys experts and choose your trench placement and dig? The future of edutainment is here! Make this game now!

Modern Warfare isn't rubbish.

I could group with anyone over the world.
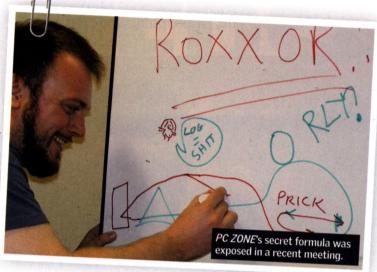
Chris Chave

The other thing that pisses me off is when a friend gets about two or three levels higher than you, and through his extra few hours of wolf slayage all of a sudden you're too puny to hang out together. *WOW* is a great game, but its complex structure and the way its servers work simply don't easily mesh with instant non-guild team-ups with real-world friends.

As you mentioned – *Guild Wars* is the outright leader in the field. What's more, *Guild Wars 2* will let you leap from server to server whenever you see fit, and even get into some server-on-server PvP – plus they'll have something similar to the sidekick/exemplar system from *City of Heroes* where mixed-level couplings can fight alongside each other without heinously damaging XP gains. A win for ArenaNet methinks.

AW SHUCKS

Throughout my life I have read many computer game magazines, yet there is only a single magazine that has not faded out of my life: that magazine is *PC ZONE*. I've been reading it now for nearly six years and have loved every page, so recently I got to thinking what makes me enjoy it so much.

Is it their ability to lace brilliant humour into honest reviews? The fact that you can to turn to the last page and not be bombarded by obscene adverts encouraging you to participate in mature phone sex? No, the reason

PC ZONE's secret formula was exposed in a recent meeting.

that I continually read this magazine is because of the people who make it.

The *PC ZONE* staff have somehow found a way to communicate knowledge, not in the stuffy formality of a magazine but with a more human nature, you find yourself almost associating them as friends instead of journalists. Sure all magazines now have a 'Meet the Team' page, but they're just faces, you don't know these people: in *PC ZONE* you do. When I head that Suzy Wallace was leaving I felt a genuine sadness for no longer being able to read her work, the same was felt when I head that Jamie Sefton was stepping down as editor.

When reading *PC ZONE* you know that the team who make the magazine aren't just doing their jobs, they do it with a passion and it makes their magazine better because of it.

I'm just writing this so that to make sure that the staff is aware of just how much their work is appreciated and how much better their final product is than the competitors.

Richard Dalglish

I'm normally a bit reluctant to print "Wow, you're great!" letters like this – mainly because I wouldn't want anyone to think we love ourselves to any particular degree – but shucks, thank you very much for your very kind words.

I can only hope that we can continue fending off bored housewife sex and seeming to be nice, passionate people till kingdom come.

CHICKEN'S OFF

You have let me down badly – I am depressed, disappointed, desperate, destroyed, dismayed. You had an excellent review of *Crysis* in issue 188. It reflected many of my own feeling about *Crysis* ('bin van with wings' was a great comment on the VTOL things). But you raised my hopes of splatting chickens on a breeze block wall.

I have played the game until I am blue in the face and no chickens to splat exist. You must have been playing an EA freebie, while mine has been edited to have no chickens for the market version. Oh! Oh! Woe is me. My poultry blood lust will never be slaked.

John MacGregor

What are you talking about John? The *Crysis* chickens are on the first level! Unless there's a previously unknown toggle somewhere in the menu system that says "Chickens: on/off" I'm at a bit of a loss as to what to suggest. Even if you don't find the chickens there are still frogs, moorhens and Koreans to throw at walls – so your bloodlust must have been slaked a smidge, surely? PCZ

WHAT'S ON THE PCZ HARD DRIVE?

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: SHIVERING ISLES
snipurl.com/shivering
Porter's second wind *Oblivion* run-through has him complete the expansion, leaving him a mite disappointed that his powers as a Mad God don't go much beyond changing the weather and ordering dancing women.

IRON DUKES
www.onetonghost.com/irondukes
A free-to-play *Pirates!* composed of cutesy boats and fun minigames. Perhaps not the most taxing of games but effortlessly charming and strange at every turn. While it's good in a browser, it's better downloaded.

WHAT'S ON YOUR HARD DRIVE?

THIS MONTH: DAVE BUCKLAND (SUNSCRAMBLE)

COMMAND & CONQUER: THE FIRST DECADE
Because nostalgia rules, and the other month's *C&C* article made me realise it.

AUDIOSURF
With the size of my music collection, it'll be a while before I play the same track twice.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
Just when I thought I was free, the unofficial *PCZ* forum guild on Runetotem-EU brought me back in. Contact 'Kremdementh', 'Hurbster' or 'Taidan' in game for details! (Plug!)

Want to tell us what's on your hard drive? Visit the forums at www.pczone.co.uk and let rip.

Crysis chickens do exist.

STARCRAFT

The strategy event of the decade is almost upon us!
Find out why this is Blizzard's 'best work yet'...

SO THERE WERE the remnants of humanity, clinging to existence on the very fringe of the galaxy. Then the organic swarm of the Zerg began a blitzkrieg through their territories, and the tech-minded and psionic Protoss turned up to cleanse the area of everything and anything that moved. And an intergalactic tragedy became a thunderously good strategy game – unbeaten in terms of fast-paced action to this very day. Now though, its sequel is upon us – and it's just as tight, just as primary-coloured and just as Zerg-rushy as it ever was before. Blizzard asked us for a willing volunteer to lock in a dark room in Los Angeles for a weekend, and we gave them Martin Korda. For his full report, read on...

I GET IT NOW

I'VE BEEN SINKING countless hours into *Sins of a Solar Empire*, even though two months ago I castrated the war general inside myself by admitting what a hopeless strategy numpty I was. Thing is, the reasons I'm enjoying *Sins of a Solar Empire* are possibly the same reasons a real strategy fan wouldn't.

Sins is a very slow game, so my brain has lots of time to fire rickety old electrical impulses down the disused, frayed synapses of whatever part of my brain handles research trees. And it's also a radically simplified game, with a tipping point when your expansive momentum becomes an unstoppable force of stellar oppression. Your resources begin to spiral upwards faster than you can spend them, your fleet phase jumps throughout the system, AI commanders of opposing empires retreat further into their own territory: it all becomes a bit easy.

Typically, I've found an accessible entry point into the strategy genre and within days absorbed all of its nutrients and declared myself the best at it. Where do I go now? I'm like a fly who, after batting against a window pane for 20 minutes, has finally found his way outside, into the world of strategy gaming. *The Fly* would make a good strategy game, with Jeff Goldblum as a hero character. You could create units in the teleporter machine. Actually wait, that's a bit rubbish. Getting sick on a donut doesn't lend itself well to the genre. Could you forget I said that?

Steve Hogarty

Steve Hogarty, section editor

THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING

Exclusive! Massive's *World in Conflict: Soviet Assault* expansion

www.worldinconflict.com | ETA Autumn

WITH THE COMMIE-BASHING *Red Alert 3* already on the way, developer Massive have confirmed they will be releasing a Russian-themed RTS this year with *World in Conflict: Soviet Assault*. While the company are making this a major console release too, the PC expansion pack will have enough extra juicy Lenin-inspired gameplay to satiate those of you who enjoyed the Classic Award-winning nuke-powered strategy title last year.

"We're aiming to keep the same explosive strategic gameplay and storytelling, but the new Soviet plotline will give players a fresh perspective on the established story," says lead game designer Magnus Jensen. "This is something

Still looks gorgeous.

Kabooms!

the fans have been crying out for even before we released *World in Conflict*, so it feels awesome to be able to deliver it finally."

While many details of the add-on remain off-radar for now, Jensen has confirmed to *PC ZONE* that they're developing several new Soviet characters the story will revolve around. What's more, these new characters won't be stereotypical Rrrrussian villains.

You wait all day for a rocket, and then three come at once.

"You're not going to fight the same battles, so we don't have to deal with the possibility of switching the outcome of any previously established battles," continues Jensen. "Instead, we wanted the Soviet story to complement the original story, with the Soviet missions taking place in other places or at other times. This way you get to experience something very different from the American campaign."

To keep *Soviet Assault* compatible with *World in Conflict* there won't be any new units, but Massive are including surprises to keep fans happy – including a level set in their native city of Malmö, Norway.

"As for multiplayer, we have a dedicated team that works with regular updates. With *World in Conflict: Soviet Assault*, we want to bring new players into a unified multiplayer community, so it's all going to be one big, happy family."

Apart from those who get nuked of course – so what about those mega-destructive weapons of beautiful carnage that were such a feature of the original?

"They're still alarmingly pretty!" We'll have more on *World in Conflict: Soviet Assault* soon...

STOP PRESS!

REELS OF WAR
Wyck Godffrey, producer of *I, Robot*, has said he's working on a *Gears of War* movie for a summer 2010 release. It might not be crap.

THE WITCHER: DUELMAIL
Developers of *The Witcher* are to release a Flash-based, free-to-play web-game focusing on one-on-one battles. Should be twice as good as *Line Rider*.

PROTOTYPE GOES SOLO
Radical reveal that mutant-'em-up *Prototype* will no longer have multiplayer, because they couldn't pull it off with the same panache as the single-player game.
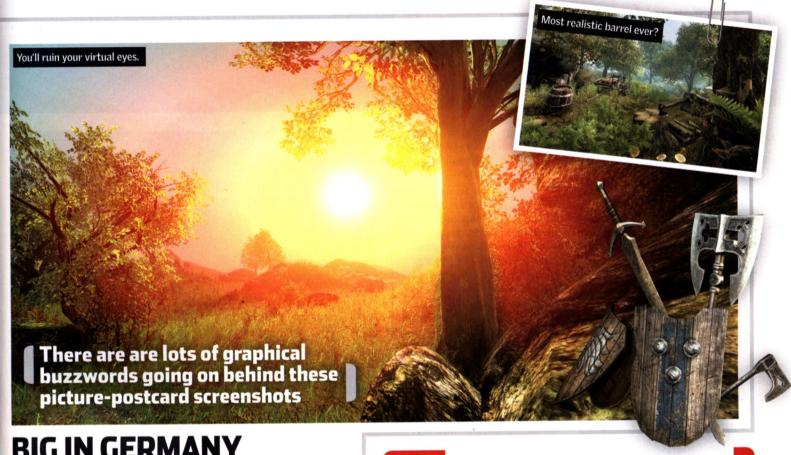
You'll ruin your virtual eyes.

Most realistic barrel ever?

There are are lots of graphical buzzwords going on behind these picture-postcard screenshots

BIG IN GERMANY

Gothic 4 is Spellbound

www.jowood.com | ETA TBA

THE *GOTHIC* SERIES is as massive in Germany as it is bemusing in the US and UK, and all previous attempts to blow open the English-speaking markets have met with shades of indifference.

Gothic 4 is a fresh start. A fresh start with development, as the eccentric Piranha Bytes have been ousted in favour of Spellbound, whose previous games include the respectable *Desperados* series. Spellbound's Trinergy engine may look similar to *Gothic 3* at this early stage, but there are lots of graphical buzzwords going on behind the actionless tranquility of these picture-postcard screenshots.

And there are fresh voices, too. Kamaal Anwar is the Canadian producer who came in to PC ZONE's offices to show off the game's new direction. He's got his own ideas about why *Gothic 3* failed to set the world alight:
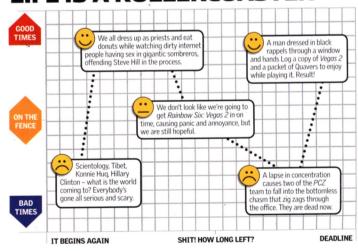
"They only had German people working on it," he explains. "This is not an insult – they're just two very different markets, and if you're trying to broaden the appeal of your game, it's always sensible to involve your new targets in the development process."

Facts about the game are sparse at the moment, with most pointing to faults that are being addressed. "One thing I hated about *Gothic 3* was in the combat," says Anwar. "Every attack would move you forward, so you had very little control over your character." He's also keen to express that the magic user is a much more viable character path, although official class titles will not feature. "In *Gothic 3*, the recharge was so long you'd be dead before you got a chance to attack again."

We'll have to wait a wee while longer before JoWooD's press machine is ready to spill more substantial information.

STUFF *Lord of the Rings Online* fans can start looking forward to their first expansion pack – *Volume II: Mines of Moria*. Players will be able to explore the Dwarven city of Moria, level up to 60, play as the new Warden or Rune-keeper classes, while looting and pillaging new items that can level up themselves. *Moria* is not due out until the end of the year, but make sure you keep your eyes peeled for a preview in the near future.

LIFE IS A ROLLERCOASTER

GOOD TIMES — We all dress up as priests and eat donuts while watching dirty internet people having sex in gigantic sombreros, offending Steve Hill in the process.

A man dressed in black rappels through a window and hands Log a copy of *Vegas 2* and a packet of Quavers to enjoy while playing it. Result!

ON THE FENCE — We don't look like we're going to get *Rainbow Six: Vegas 2* in on time, causing panic and annoyance, but we are still hopeful.

BAD TIMES — Scientology, Tibet, Konnie Huq, Hillary Clinton – what is the world coming to? Everybody's gone all serious and scary.

A lapse in concentration causes two of the PCZ team to fall into the bottomless chasm that zig zags through the office. They are dead now.

IT BEGINS AGAIN   SHIT! HOW LONG LEFT?   DEADLINE

WRECKING THE MOD

Has modding passed its heyday to become a shadow of its former self?

Carmageddon lives on.

Team Fortress Classic.

Tremulous for *Q3A.*

Reporter
Pavel Barter

LIKE HITLER'S INVASION of Poland or the first floor of the Empire State Building, *Counter-Strike* was always going to be the start of something big. Its release, in 1999, marked the bona fide birth of the modding scene, spurring bedroom developers to craft new adventures out of official titles. Modding had already been around for a while, spawning popular ditties like *Team Fortress*, but *Counter-Strike* was the first of its kind to encourage people to buy the original game, in this case *Half-Life*.

After *CS*, "game companies opened up their titles to modders, and modding went mainstream, more prolific," says Scott Reismanis, founder of the Mod Database (moddb.com). "These days you can look at any game development house and some of their employees started out as modders. Universities even have three-month and six-month final year mod projects as a way to give their students real-world experience."

Red Orchestra turned *UT2003* into a gritty war sim.

But, somewhere along the way, mods lost their mojo. Despite the occasional blast of genius, like 2006's *Tremulous* mod for *Quake III Arena*, there's cause for argument that the originality and quality of the early scene petered out. Stephen Gaffney, business development manager for Splash Damage (a mod team that went commercial with titles like *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*), reckons today's modders are much less prolific. "There are fewer mods today than in 1999 when *Half-Life* was big," he says. "I would say that the first *Half-Life* game alone probably had more mods than all contemporary PC titles combined, so there's definitely been a decline."

Gaffney points out a shift from total conversions towards smaller, more technical mods. This could be due to a change within the community. Once, the modding scene was a cottage industry, full of creative boffins that worked for months to ensure that their spin-offs would match the visual/design standards of the original titles. *Counter-Strike*, for example, went through six betas before its first incarnation.

"The mod community changed," says Luke Parkes-Haskell, a modern modder

who works with the Unreal Engine. "There are fewer dedicated hackers. People expect to make their dream game and hit the stumbling block of not having a clue how games are developed, let alone how to make small changes of their own."
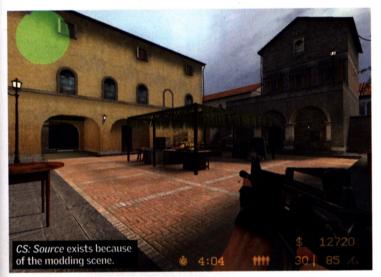
MODDER'S EVEREST

Placing the blame of the decline in mods solely on muppets within the community is unfair. The sheer size and complexity of today's games makes the challenge insurmountable. "The scale and expectation has changed, just as it has done for the base games," says Alan Wilson, Vice President of Tripwire Interactive (modders-turned-developers who made *Red Orchestra* for *UT2003*).

Asset production time has increased tenfold since *Half-Life*, and the amount of detail in modern game worlds is staggering. "Add in the fact that the software gets more expensive and complex," continues Wilson. "I'm not saying earlier modders weren't talented, it's just that the skill expectations matched the games of the period. Just as the games become ever more complex and expensive to create, so do the mods."

As modders changed, so too have the audience. Parkes-Haskell elaborates:

Crysis: a modder's heaven?

CS: Source exists because of the modding scene.

$ 12720
4:04   30 | 85

The complexity of modern games is a giant challenge for modders

"There was a time when gamers forgave animations popping from one to another or subtitles rather than voice acting, because professionals did the same. You could create a mod that made use of the skills you were good at, and use quick tricks like text subtitles or crude animation to fill in the areas you weren't so good at. You could be a one-man team, and release something that had enough polish to impress. Now people expect that polish across every aspect."

The decline in mods might also be attributed to the industry itself. When the modding scene flourished, developers snapped up the talent. Legions of former

modders now work in the industry: from Kaos Studios, creators of the _Desert Combat_ mod for _BF1942_, who went on to make _Frontlines: Fuel of War_; to Blue Omega, whose _UT2003 Damnation_ mod is set for commerical release.

Wilson recalls how TripWire started off as "just another mod team", working on the _Red Orchestra_ mod for _UT2004_. The team funded a retail version of their game after winning NVIDIA's Make Something Unreal contest. Splash Damage, according to Gaffney, "ran the team exactly like a professional development studio. The difference was that we were spread all across the planet and no one got paid."

MODDING FROM WITHIN
As Reismanis points out, modders have a living CV in the form of a game you can view and play. This makes them incredibly valuable to companies – it's also why so many get snapped up mid-way though projects. "A lot of the best modders already have jobs in the game industry, and mod by night to either

_BF1942_'s Desert Combat influenced _Battlefield 2_.

learn the trade, or exercise their creativity within it," he adds.

Some say that developers should do more to encourage talent in the modding community. Splash Damage, for example, have an Editing Wiki on their site (splashdamage.com), containing all their editing documentation and tutorials. Meanwhile, the new Make Something Unreal (makesomethingunreal.com) contest should kickstart the currently underwhelming Unreal Engine 3 modding scene.

But, ultimately, ask yourself what you want from the mod scene. These days, you want blockbusters. You want them now and you often want them for free.

And if it's not _Crysis_, it's probably not good enough. "I have to wonder where modders will stand in another five years time," ponders Parkes-Haskell. "Will they just die out from a lack of appreciation?" Forget _Hamlet_ or _Macbeth_ – the death of mods would be truly tragic. **PCZ**

Is there anything you want Pavel Barter to investigate? (Warning: some jobs might be considered too big or too small...)

@ letters@pczone.co.uk
✉ pavel barter, pc zone, 2 balcombe st, london, nw1 6nw

A REVOLUTION IN MMO WARFARE...

WARHAMMER ONLINE: AGE OF RECKONING

"WAAAGH!" bellows a jolly *Ed Zitron*, punching a dwarf

DEVELOPER EA Mythic PUBLISHER EA/Goa WEBSITE www.war-europe.com PREVIOUSLY IN... 190

ETA
SUMMER 2008

THE LOWDOWN

Huge-scale RvR combat with siege engines	✔
PvP made accessible	✔
Dedicated community features	✔
Tome of Knowledge an amazing concept for MMOs	✔
PvP really not for everyone	✖

WAR NEVER CHANGES. Literally in MMOs, as regardless of how bitter a conflict is it all whittles down to a few games of Capture the Flag with the eventual putting aside of differences to save the world. However, in the gritty Warhammer World, everything is to play for – every zone, every territory – as from Rank 1 onwards, you're very much at war, the enemy is near you, and you've got the chance to fight for your realm.

While on paper it sounds like *AOR* will be a horrible gankfest, allow me to put your fears to rest – I am a die-hard PvP hater, and *Warhammer Online* has revved my siege engine.

GET TO THE CHOPPA

First choose a realm – Order or Destruction – and your army: the human Empire (humans), High Elves and Dwarves who support Order, or the Dark Elves, Greenskins (Orcs and Goblins) and the demonic hordes

of Chaos (mutated humans, unique to *Warhammer*), who side with Destruction. Your last task when starting is to choose an army-specific career. This sets your basic ability to deal, take and heal damage.

AOR trades on its unique and distinct personalities, though – so while each army will host similar careers, their playing styles will be very different. For example, the Orc Choppa gains morale as he fights, building into a berserker frenzy. His most powerful abilities will drain these reserves, so he must keep slicing and dicing to keep his beserker ability powered. In comparison, melee combat powers the Human Witch Hunter's ranged attacks, so he must engage in and withdraw from hand-to-hand combat to be effective. Both are damage dealers, but have radically different styles.

The mastery system is EA Mythic's mishmash of *Titan Quest*'s tiers and *WOW*'s Talents systems, with a few tricks of its own. After level 10, you can specialise further, allocating mastery points across deeper abilities. If you play a High Elf Shadow Warrior, you'll be limited, at first, to killing from a distance. With progress, and well-chosen masteries, the warrior can turn into an brawling beast. Furthermore, you can combine masteries to make complex hybrids – tailoring yourself to either RvR or PvE combat, or making an amalgam adapted to both sides of this rough-and-tumble MMO.

WAAAGH! AND PEACE

The combat is a familiar affair, but while it still involves the tapping of

Orcs are resistant to pain and drawn to war.

Birth of... Mythic!
Mark Jacobs and Rob Denton combine forces to make Mythic Entertainment.

Camelot Ho!
Development begins on *Dark Age of Camelot*, their first MMORPG. It costs a lot to make.

Us vs The World
DAOC is launched. It's still going strong, in spite of competition from *WOW* and *EQ2*.

The scent of money
EA walks into Mythic's office wafting a cheque with a very big number on it. EA Mythic is born.

1997   1999   2001   2006

The Tome of Knowledge
This is your (second) life

The Tome of Knowledge is a quest log, storybook, map and an achievements system. Everything you do, down to the number of times you've died, gets chronicled in your own personal tome, along with a chapter-by-chapter recollection of all the major storyline events so far.

Every time you progress the main storyline, which can be done both by accepting and completing quests or just by entering an area, you gain a big chunk of experience and a 'tome unlock'. These always give experience rewards, but can range from simply meeting a race or an enemy for the first time, and all play towards achievements that can unlock titles, *LOTRO*-style.

Roleplaying and lore fans will love the Tome's detail about your character, the things you meet, and the history that it builds up over even a short time of playing. Grinders will adore the fact that achievements reward you with experience for completing objectives, and there're titles for status-hungry fame lovers too. It's a new way to grind, and it looks scarily addictive.

Behold – The Inevitable City.

Mythic have some awesome lore to work with.

The Bright Wizards' College. Warning: flammable.

"It's not so bad being a Chosen. Benefits are crap though."

It's a known fact that elves invented bloom.

hotkeys, the morale system shakes things up somehat. Morale builds as a battle continues, accruing and opening up bigger and better attacks, with larger, more successful groups gaining it faster than a solo combatant.

This is a simple and intuitive system that adds another dimension to longer battles, replacing powerful abilities that – in other games – would take five minutes to recharge, with shorter ones that keep battle momentum going. For RvR battles there are abilities designed to lower opponents' morale, which is especially useful when a bunch of

psyched-up Orc Choppas are about to go berserk on your hit points.

Another interesting addition is the tactics system, which allows you to equip enhancements on a battle-to-battle basis, possibly adding more damage against a particular army (for RvR) or beasts (for PvE), or weapon skills (for both). These item-like augments let you adapt your strengths, like adding more healing ability if a Warrior Priest wants to act as a group's medic, or more skill with hammers if they want to go solo – it's an easy way to specialise on the fly without the permanence of RPG skills.

UNDER SIEGE
EA Mythic are ensuring players won't be forced to spend months getting the best gear before they join the war. They want to pull together the disparate worlds of PvE and PvP into one game.

From the start you're introduced to Scenarios, *AOR*'s battlegrounds, which are bracketed into smaller level groups than MMO players are used to. This way *AOR* gives all players a chance to play a key role in the PvP missions. Even Public Quests

(see Public questing), can have PvE and PvP objectives. And unlike *WOW*, killing another player grants run-of-the-mill experience, as well as *AOR*'s second levelling commodity, renown.

GLORY IN DEATH

While there are 40 ranks of experience, which are gained through questing and killing, renown has 80 ranks gained exclusively by fighting your fellow players. This may sound like a powergamer concept, but it's one that works for more casual players too.

You gain real tactical advantages through taking and defending areas within a map. At the high end you'll improve your army's living capital city, while at the low end you'll receive immediate rewards – big experience, renown and loot are your prizes for defending keeps and key areas. So being selfish means that you'll leave yourself unprotected.

RvR and PvE areas flow together naturally, but you're warned very clearly both where they are and when you're

about to be flagged for combat. Don't worry about ganking – a higher level trying to smack up defenceless newbies will find themselves turned into a chicken and stomped into pate.

With each renown level, you're able to spend points on permanent statistical upgrades or tactics, as well as earn RvR-specific armour sets. There are also specific PvE sets, along with a bounty hunter set that can

only be collected through completing quests that combine both PvE and PvP objectives, such as killing a few of the opposing side, then having to head into dangerous territory to kill a monster.

This kind of accessible, realm-driven combat is an example of EA Mythic's main goal for *AOR* – NPC and player combat that flows together naturally, culminating in a siege of the main cities. This will be, the developers tout, a huge,

"Hello, and welcome to *Grand Designs: Altdorf.*"

Public quests are one of the best ideas in MMOs in years. There are over 300 of them and they take place as you walk through an area. For example, on a journey, you'll get a small box that will say that a public quest is happening, what phase it's on, and how to advance to the next one. These can range from defending an RvR objective to defeating hordes of monsters, the next phase advancing both the quest's storyline and placing you against bigger and badder foes.

To succeed, you'll need to have other players in the area (though you won't have to group) and really get involved: the big loot is awarded to those who had the biggest contribution, be it destroying particular objects, killing enemies, or healing those in combat.

The great thing about them is that they recycle every five minutes, and that they're heavily story-driven events that anyone can walk into and take part in. The ones we've seen encourage group play, but don't require you to turn up with a pre-configured army – in fact, the real fun is based on joining into a ragtag band and having an adventure out of nowhere.

100-200 person battle against players and NPCs, that finishes with a final scrap against either one of the leaders, such as Tchar'Zanek or Emperor Karl Franz. You'll be able to burn the town to the ground, while murdering the populace and looting for a day, real time, as well as exploring the city's unlocked dungeons, special vendors, and capturing the defeated leaders and placing them in stocks in your capital.

AOR stands to be the first truly war-based MMO. While I have hated PvP in its past forms for being a selfish, meaningless game of barrel-shooting, *AOR*'s RvR gives it substance and a point. In the past MMOs have stressfully forced combat against players away from the main game, but EA Mythic have, successfully I might add, made it not only useful, but enjoyable and accessible to the masses.

So, if you've been reticent about PvP combat, or ignoring *Warhammer Online* because of it, it's about time you stop doing so and start getting yourself ready – *AOR* is coming, and it's going to change absolutely everything. **PCZ**

> **EA Mythic have made PvP useful, enjoyable and accessible to the masses**

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ChartTrack

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2	↓	**FOOTBALL MANAGER 2008** Issue 188 90%
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4	↓	**CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE** Issue 188 89%
5	↑	**THE SIMS 2** Issue 147 82%
6	↑	**THE SIMS 2: BON VOYAGE** Issue 188 38%
7	—	**WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BATTLE CHEST** N/A
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18	↓	**SIMCITY: SOCIETIES** Issue 189 61%
19	RE	**MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR X DELUXE** Issue 175 89%
20	↓	**EMPIRE EARTH III** Issue 189 72%

THE SIMS 2: FREETIME
Something tells us this would've been on top with or without our relatively positive review.

DAWN OF WAR – SOULSTORM
Soulstorm's dragged a selection box around our collective hearts, and ordered us to love.

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE
How long have our charts been calling this "*Modern Combat*"? We blame generic naming conventions!

FLIGHT SIMULATOR X DELUXE
Peek-a-boo *Flight Simulator X*, you've been hiding just outside the charts haven't you? Well, hello!

Some really nice bunting there.

The damage modelling makes every car a joy to write off.

Keep up, Zitron.

Skids!

OFF THE GRID

Race Driver: GRID drifts into view

www.codemasters.com | ETA: Summer

WE LOVE A BIT OF *RACE DRIVER*, but there are a few of us who are awkward, cack-handed wheel-wranglers, spinning wildly over the track like a greased wheelchair. Lucky for us that, having played the most recent version, *GRID* is a much more accessible experience than its brethren. *ProStreet*-style driving assists soften the learning curve for rookies while higher difficulty levels reward you with cash and recognition for challenging yourself.

The actual driving experience has a new-found sense of speed on a par with the *Burnout* games, but still with the simulation elements that gave the past *Race Driver* games their fame. Cars handle with the trademark individuality of the series, with a huge dynamic shift between normal racing and the incredibly enjoyable drift competitions that have you careening around corners as an excited Japanese man shouts his appreciation.

Drifting requires a little more preparation than the *Ridge Racer*s of the world, demanding careful timing and attention to the track. But once you're used to the weight of the car and have restarted a few times, you'll find yourself kicking up mounds of dirt and making ridiculous scores as you attempt to wow the crowds.

What we've played is apparently about 80 per cent finished, but if this 80 per cent is just 50 per cent as much fun as final game, well, it could be great. *GRID* is shaping up to be a gorgeous racer that's both accessible and deep enough to appeal to a huge audience.

The man who conducted the *Overture*

TOM TJUBERT – GAMES WRITER FOR HIRE

Having worked on games such as the *Penumbra* series and *Black & White 2*, Tom Tjubert's a man not unfamiliar with the mechanics of game writing. We still his industrious pen for a moment or two to dab questions in his ears, and pluck answers from 'twixt his lips.

Q What games have you worked on before?

A I've been lead writer on both games in the *Penumbra* series, plus consulting on a couple of other unreleased projects, and I'm currently kicking off a new title with Frictional Games.

The lads on the *Penumbra* series have been great – I've ended up doing puzzle designs, in-game events, loads of shit that just really makes sense for a writer to be involved with. The only stuff they really came down on was anything outside budget and one joke about sexual harassment that I still reckon would have fitted the tone. Bleeding BBFC.

Penumbra: grim.

All the same, you're always constrained by something. On *Penumbra*, for instance, the high level plotting (about lost fathers and underground facilities) was mostly in place before I arrived, while the dialogue, original characters and in-game events were all down to me.

Is writing overlooked too often in games?

I think it's important to realise that writing isn't important in every game, but that it's going to be increasingly vital if we're to provide play experiences that are able to compete with the established entertainment media.

I think we can and should be advancing without writing as well, but it's got a part to play. That said, I think there is a tendency to somewhat dismiss plot and characterisation. Unless it's an RPG, a review will cover the plot in a single opening paragraph, then move on how many guns there are, and how many limbs are blown off in an fire fight. Wicked if you're reviewing *Quake IV* or *Postal* – I want to hear about dismemberment.

When you look at a review for something like *Portal*, though, where the ambience and characterisation are absolutely crucial to its charm, and the writing sometimes gets just a cursory paragraph, it's hard not to think it deserves more of a mention.

Do developers ever get snippy if you try to take the story in a direction they don't agree with?

The ideal is that you're involved from the get-go, so there's no confusion – you conceive the story together, and everyone's happy you're on the right path.

At the end of the day, everyone usually thinks they know better than everyone else, so it's just a question of trying to take the story in the direction you think is best, and pushing it as far as you can without treading on toes, or delivering an end result that's radically different to what the developers were expecting. Ultimately, your allegiance ought to be to the game, and developing a script that supports the gameplay without getting in the way.

Do you work with actors to ensure they interpret your script correctly?

I've been lucky enough to cast and direct the voice talent on three out of my five projects, but from what I understand that's pretty rare. For example, we had the female lead who needs to be rescued. I was bored with the women in games being whiny bitches, so we made her kind of chilled out with all the weird shit going on around her. One mag called it 'wonderfully laid-back dark humour'.

tat ZonE

Oooooh, Mummy! It's the scariest Tat Zone ever...

You stumble down a dark, familiar corridor. You find the light switch, the bulb flashes and dies – the flash revealing the tat monster standing in your bedroom doorway. Run. You must run now that it's seen you. Where are the stairs? It knows where you are, you can hear it coming. You make it down the stairs, oh God, it's so dark. There's the living room, it's bright. Your family are in there, pointing and laughing at you. Why?! Look for the 'PC Zoners' tag on eBay.

Buy our tat at www.ebay.co.uk All proceeds go to charity. Honest. www.entertainment softwarecharity.org

THIS MONTH'S TAT

WARHAMMER HAT
Ever looked at your head and thought, "Good, but not MMORPG-y enough"?

WARHAMMER BACKPACK
Super trendy multi-compartment backpack.

WARHAMMER T-SHIRT
Nobody wants to see your bare chest, wrap yourself up in this T-shirt.

WARHAMMER NOTEBOOK & PEN
Take note! This will hold your personal memories.

THE TAT BOARD

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	PIRATE FLAG For the price of two McDonald's meals, a man has forsaken his squids for this fine flag.	£7.50	11
	KANE & LYNCH: DEAD MEN HOODIE One lucky reader has managed to secure themselves a warming yet stylish *Kane & Lynch* hoodie. Swish!	£20.50	13

ARGUE THE TOSS

THIS MONTH: HORSE COMBAT

Dear Jon 'Log' Blyth,
I hear *Age of Conan* has horse combat in it – that insipid exercise of using a horse as a ladder to hit people below you. It doesn't make sense, it doesn't work, it's stupid and I hate it. It was in *EverQuest*, it made no sense there, and I can't see the point of it in an MMO. Yet here I am, hearing you romance about the chance to finally battle me on top of your fighting steed. Ugh. EZ

Dear Ed Zitron,
When I imagine myself fighting you, Zitron, I like to imagine myself four feet higher than you, 30 miles an hour faster, and with a sword keenly trained on your low, slow neck. Alright, so I'm not sure how horse combat between players will really balance out at the moment, and it's such a difficult idea I can see why they left it out of *Oblivion*. PvP aside, what doesn't make sense about slicing open a bunch of peasants and foraging their pockets for bronze? Don't damn it before you've seen it, you awful jaded slag. JLB

Dear Log,
Are you that much of a coward that you have to be on horse to kill peasants? What do you fear, their pitchforks? Their angry eyes? Do you want to be able to beat a hasty retreat in case you get taxed for being there? You even admit that it's impractical. I put it to you, Mr Blyth, that it's not even really combat. It's just riding forcefully. And who wants to ride forcefully in an MMO? Not this cat, no sir. EZ

Dear Ed,
Without combat, mounts are simply an apology. They're the MMO's way of saying, "We were having a laugh, taking the piss. You don't have to get around that slowly. The game simply doesn't have to take this long. This whole world is a grotesque and artificial timesink designed only to shift your focus from the end of the tunnel to a hundred glittering diversions." A mount could modify combat in any number of ways – adding new attacks, modifying existing ones, making cool whinny sounds – just cos you're too dumb to imagine how it might work, doesn't mean everyone else shares your cataclysmic lack of vision. JLB

Log,
Hogwash, bunkum, nonsense. You could simplify any game to that. *Call of Duty*? You shoot bad men and walk in a line to the next point to shoot bad men. *Command & Conquer*? Click things and send them to kill other things. That's all games are. They're all artificial. That's the point. Did you only just realise that MMOs aren't reality? Has this argument been some kind of gigantic revelation to you? What have I done!? EZ

Ed,
Point sidestepped like a grubby coward. I hope you bleed from every pore. JLB

That's *They* that is.

THEY'S COMING

When good grammar feels bad

www.they-thegame.com | ETA: 2009

THEY ISN'T COMING out until 2009, and it's already making a mistake in marketing itself as an 'FPS Mystery'. From the demo we received, the game's strengths don't lie in the storyline, which features a wise-beyond-his-years boy and a robot uprising fuelled by ghost-like aliens.

Instead, we were more impressed by the flexible gun management – one gun can be modified in endless ways, with the user's settings replacing different weapons. The parody of bad AI was fun, too – once you sever an alien brain from its robot host, the robot goes attack-mental, giving you added tactical options as you enter the fray.

Good graphics are a given today, but *They* (as well as causing grammar errors in Microsoft *Word*) has some of the best glass-smashing effects we've seen. Shooting out enough of a window to watch the remainder of the pane drop and smash is the icing on what will be a gorgeous graphical sponge. We'll tell you more once we know more.

Gryphons drop explosive dung.

Maglites beat ghosts.

A LEGEND IS BORN

Legendary tears into Pandora's Box

www.legendarythebox.com | ETA: Summer

WE ENCOURAGE YOU to open pizza boxes, post boxes, and game boxes, but not, as *Legendary* cautions, Pandora's Box. When Charles Deckard does so, he is marked with The Signet and unleashes mythical beasts upon the world. *Legendary* is an FPS by *Turning Point* developers Spark Unlimited, that pits you against minotaurs and gryphons in a modern setting.

Legendary looks like *Hellgate* should have – huge explosions and flying creatures tearing apart New York and London. While rather linear, it'll have gigantic set pieces and spectacular disaster movie scenes alongside regular gryphon decapitation. With forays into faction-work to gain allies, help will be available for your assault on the golems, werewolves and spectres making all the fuss.

Spark Unlimited didn't exactly blow us away with *Turning Point* (page 76) but it's possible they've learned from their mistakes and made *Legendary* something special. Well, maybe.

THE BUGS ARE BACK

We stalk Mike Gallo, producer on *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

www.sega.com/aliens | ETA: 2009

IF LAST MONTH'S First Look at *Aliens: CM* was a loving facehug which impregnated us with excitement, our chat with Gearbox's Mike Gallo is a chestburster joyously exploding from our ribcage. We pelted him with questions before kicking him out of an airlock...

Q Where will the game take place in the *Alien* canon?

A The game's set after the events of *Alien³*, which takes place very shortly after the end of *Aliens*. Our goal is to make a game that answers some of the questions from those two movies and picks up the story right after the marines were wiped out on LV-426.

What characters will you play as?
Throughout the game you will take on the role of several different marines from your squad and experience the story from several different points of view. In co-op mode everyone will be a marine and you can work your way through the campaign mode with up to four players.

Will you be using squad mechanics from *Brothers in Arms*?
One of the focuses in the game is on the squad and, of course, squad mechanics. We have a lot of experience making squad-based games, but this will be unlike any of our previous games – we won't be flanking the xenomorphs!

What locations can we expect?
Some familiar, like the Sulaco, and some all-new. It will be staying within the *Alien* universe of course, but we'll be going to some brand new places.

What elements of the movies are you most hoping to recreate?
Since *Aliens* is our closest influence, we have strived for authenticity to the film that players have never seen before. The look of the game is directly inspired by the film, down to the film grain and lighting. We've hired Syd Mead to go back and create new concepts based on artwork that he made over 20 years ago.

How realistic will the xenomorph's drool be?
We have guys in lab suits in a bunker somewhere testing the viscosity of every liquid under the sun so we can match it with an in-game shader to get the alien drool effect just right.

1

HOT SHOTS FALLOUT 3

DEVELOPER Bethesda **PUBLISHER** Bethesda **WEB** fallout.bethsoft.com **ETA** Autumn

THE BOMB IS soon to drop and now we have confirmation that Dogmeat, star NPC group member from *Fallout*, is making a comeback. In the original game you could hoodwink him into joining your party by wearing his master's leather jacket – but now it seems you find him in a junkyard facing off against some bandits, and can then heal and tame him.

As well as having a new best friend to fight alongside, you'll also be able to send him off to forage for ammo and pick-me-ups while you're snorting Jet on a ruined sidewalk. What's plain to see in these screens is how similar Bethesda's world looks to that of Black Isle's – notably on display in the design of ghouls and in the gun models.

7

The Bigger Picture

1 MUSCLIEST HOBO
Here he is – Dogmeat is back and fully trainable, although there's no word of whether he'll level up alongside you or gain extra abilities.

2 WHITE FANG
Fans of nerdlore will recognise that this shot echoes the final scene of *Fallout* – when the exiled hero walks back out to the wastes, spurned by his own people.

3 CAEK PLEASE
This scene is your 10th birthday. As well as enabling you to customise your character, a young Amata – the Vault Overseer's daughter and probable future love interest – will be eating too much jelly, while the Mr Handy robot will hilariously mess up cutting the cake.

4 PIP-PIP OLDBOY
The PIPboy 3000 is shaping up to be the best designed PDA and container of roleplaying stats around. And note the red buttons at its base – they carry the same sheen and design as those in the first games.

5 HOWDY PARDNER
A worry for *Fallout 3* is just how involved the dialogue will be, with the chat shown here being of an *Oblivion* standard, rather than a *Fallout*. Bethesda better have hired in a good director for the voice talent to boot.

6 GHOUL SYSTEM
This chap looks like *Fallout*'s Harold the Ghoul, even if he doesn't have a tree growing out of his head. Maybe another sign of Bethesda's standpoint on art design.

7 BOOM LEGSHOT
The question is, if you can blast bits off thundering great mutants, can they do the same to you? Still, imagine this slow-motion scene coming after you've selected a risky shot in a paused combat sequence – satisfaction is not the word.

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HEAVENS ABOVE! IT'S...
DEMIGOD

The God-like *Steve Hill* has a gas with Gas Powered Games' all-new action RTS

DEVELOPER Gas Powered Games PUBLISHER Gas Powered Games WEBSITE www.gaspowered.com

The Rook, replete with head-mounted trebuchet.

ETA AUTUMN 2008

THE LOWDOWN

Uses *Supreme Commander* engine	✓
Fantastical setting	✓
Mixture of genres	✓
Preposterous	✗
Potential resource hog	✗

DEMIGOD'S LEAD DESIGNER John Comes, knows how to make a first impression: "You're one of the bastard children of a god that's no longer there." Comes wasn't questioning my parentage (although I am now), but giving me the lowdown on the game that has wrongly been described as "Chris Taylor's genre-smashing RTS."

Taylor may be the main man at Gas Powered Games but as seven-year RTS veteran Comes clarified, "Chris has actually given me almost complete creative control over this. He likens it to when he was at Cavedog and given complete creative control to do *Total Annihilation*. Now he's giving that back by giving me the opportunity to build

Demigods are powered by Cheesestrings.

this game. It's actually really cool, it's been a real pleasure to build my own game with his support."

The game revolves around a storyline that can politely be described as poppycock. An opening has become available in the Pantheon of the Gods, and as a demigod you're fighting to ascend to the position of a full god, despite being the bastard described in the opening sentence.

Built on top of the *Supreme Commander* engine, *Demigod* is something of a mishmash of genres, or as Comes described it, "a team-based action game with RTS, RPG and fighting game elements. It was inspired from team-based games like *Team Fortress* and *Battlefield*, and there's also a *Warcraft III* mod called *Defence of the Ancients* that heavily inspired it."

FUTURE FANTASY

To put it more bluntly, *Demigod* involves great big fighting machines and their armies kicking the shit out of each other in a series of preposterous locations.

"Everyone's done Tolkienesque fantasy," explained Comes. "We wanted to do something different so we're doing fantasy-tech. We've kind of taken the fantasy world through 3,000 years. It looks tech, but because this world is 3,000 years in the future of fantasy it has empires that have come and gone, and it's ancient ruins built on top of

ancient ruins built on top of ancient ruins. And all these spires to the gods."

The maps he showed largely lived up to their description, with one battle taking place on an oversized Mayan sundial hanging inside a superstructure in the clouds.
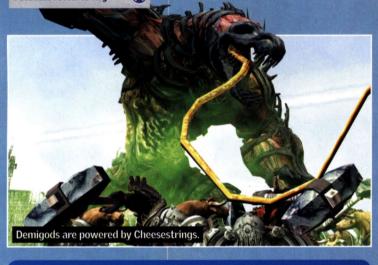
As Comes said, "You're a demigod: it's got to be something special."

As for the meat and potatoes of the combat, it can involve one-to-one up to five-on-five scraps, with a territorial battle taking place over a symmetrical map as each demigod attempts to destroy the others' key buildings. Making kills earns you experience and money which enables you to buy equipment, hence the alleged RPG element. Thankfully, you won't have to spend hours levelling up, as you'll go from zero to hero over the course of a bite-sized battle.

"We've streamlined a lot of the aspects of hardcore RTS games to make it more action-y," said Comes. "So you're not spending time calculating your exact ratios and deciding when to build and where to build stuff. The game's over in 20 minutes so you don't want to spend a whole lot of time doing that."

BALLS OF FIRE

This sounds like a less hardcore experience than *Supreme Commander* but Comes claimed, "there are some hardcore elements where you can

The barbecue ended in tragedy.

Assassins vs Generals
What kind of demigod are you?

Are you a loner, or do you run with the crowd? Do you prefer giving the orders, or looking after yourself? *Demigod*, unfeasibly, may provide the answers by featuring two distinct types of sub-deity: Assassins and Generals. The former acts alone, spending his time casting spells and managing his individual abilities. Conversely, Generals have only passive skills, concentrating on building factories and armies. This is a rift that looks set to divide the world of PC gaming.

"People are very polarised. I have guys at work saying cut all the Generals because they're stupid, nobody'll play them," said Comes. "Then I have other guys saying why do we even have Assassins? Who wants to play with just one unit." The argument looks set to rage...

Your choice: stand back or wade in.

THE STORY SO FAR...
GAS POWERED GAMES

UNDER SIEGE
Gas Powered Games make a sterling start with the highly rated *Dungeon Siege*.

SAME AGAIN
Sticking to what they know, *Dungeon Siege II* provides more subterranean thrills.

DON'T FIX IT
The *Dungeon Siege II: Broken World* expansion labours the point a bit.

SOMETHING NEW
Supreme Commander spearheads the RTS renaissance to strong critical acclaim.

2002   2005   2006   2007

The Torchbearer shows off his party trick.

You can't beat a bit of dinosaur artillery.

You'll go from zero to hero over the course of a bite-sized battle

micromanage what your stats are, as well as what items you buy and in what order to get the most out of them. But a casual player could jump in and have a good time because there's guys being thrown up in the air, fireballs being thrown around and it looks great."

While it's hard to gauge exactly how great *Demigod* looks on a laptop in a prefabricated box of air, there's a reason for our spartan surroundings: Gas Powered Games are publishing *Demigod* themselves.

"Because we're self-publishing, the amount of resources and budget we get fluctuates," said Comes. "So we've designed a game that's completely scaleable. So if somebody comes up and says 'Here's two big bags of money, and we want 20 demigods and 50 maps,' I'll be, like, OK. Right now we're aiming for 10 maps, but it's in flux, as is the number of demigods." You'll be able to know the exact number – and indeed how god-like the game is – this autumn. You godless bastards. **PCZ**

Cards shown:
- X-51 Nether-Rocket — Ally — Rocket — Redeem at www.WoWTCG.com/loot
- Personal (Ability)
- ...el's Old-Fashioned Pet Biscuit

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT
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To help you on your way we've got a ton of *WOW* goodies available for one lucky reader – including loot cards that unlock hugely rare in-game items that go on eBay for ridiculous sums of money. Whether they're spectral tigers, fishing shelters, ridable tortoises or dragon-shaped kites you can use to scare fresh-faced gnomes in their starter zones – the odd loot potentially contained within a Panini-style *WOW* pack on sale in your local comics boutique is remarkable. And lucrative too. The set of three on offer here, at the time of going to press, are going for about 500 of your eBay pounds.

Q Which isn't an existing *WOW* magic-user class?

A) Mage
B) Necromancer
C) Warlock
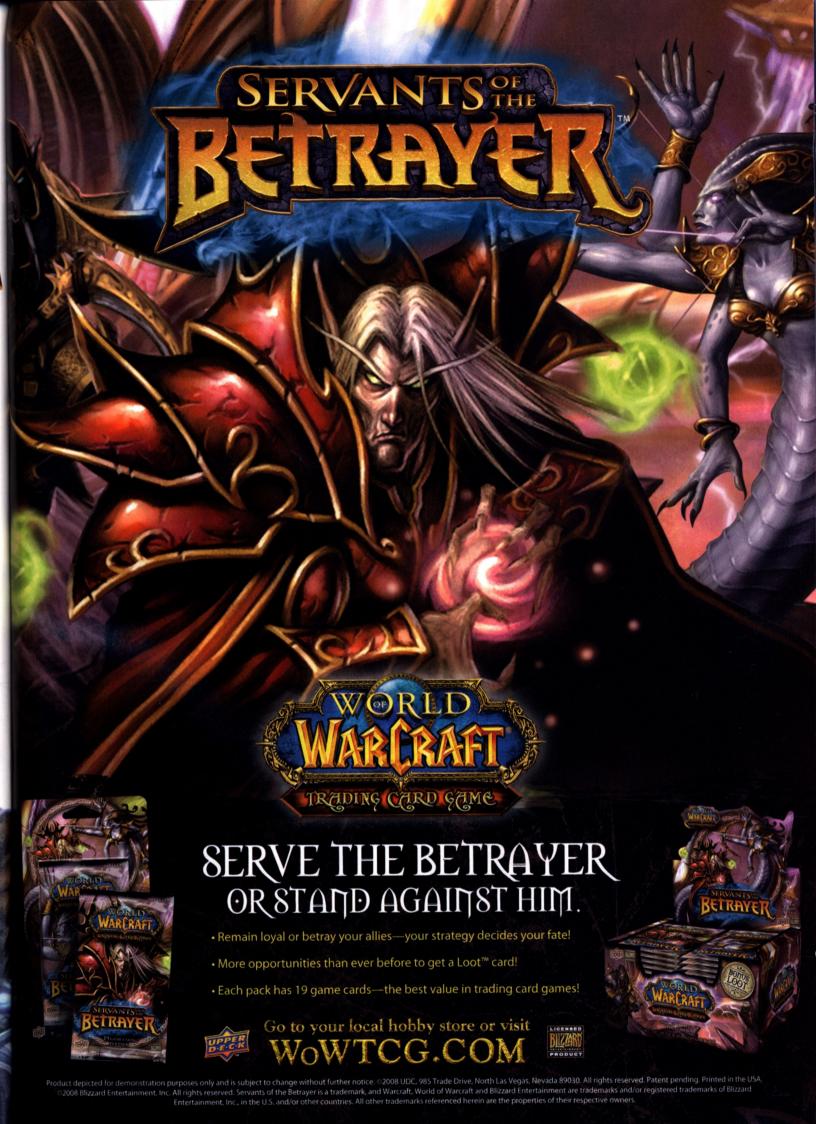
To enter send a text message to 87474. Start your message WOWCARDS, then a space, then enter A, B, or C, then a space, then your name and email address. It only costs 50p and you can enter as many times as you like. Competition ends 21 May, 2008, entries received after this date will be shunned. Standard competition and texting rules apply (see below). If you don't want to receive details of further offers and promotions from Future Publishing or other companies, then please put the word NO at the end of your message. If you ignore this technology you can enter by sending a postcard to *WOW* Cards Compo, *PC ZONE*, Future Publishing, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW.

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UPPER DECK   BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

STOPPING GETTING BOND WRONG...
ALPHA PROTOCOL

Are we really about to get a genuinely exciting role-playing spy thriller? *Will Porter* will self destruct in five seconds...

DEVELOPER Obsidian Entertainment **PUBLISHER** SEGA **WEBSITE** www.obsidianent.com

ETA SPRING 2009

THE LOWDOWN

Great concept	✓
Mixes Bourne, Bond and Bauer	✓
Proper role-playing	✓
Neat conversation system	✓
Standard of graphics more 'ooh!' than 'woo!'	✗

Parks: spy hideouts.

FROM BOND'S FIRST glowering stare across a baccarat table all the way to Tom Cruise whining like a petulant child and sticking explosive chewing gum on a fish tank – the international spy thriller has been a cornerstone of popular culture for decades. So why has it never really translated to games?

Only one Bond game was ever any good (which wasn't even on PC) and the rest were a sequence of gaudy car crashes and poorly clipped death animations. Other stabs at the genre were late-'90s shooters with internationally themed levels ("Wow! A Chinese sewer!" "An underground base in Mexico? Awesome!"). In fact, the closest we've come to matching a Bourne or a Bond is *Deus Ex*, with only internationally hubbed adventures like *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* treading on its coat-tails.

Well, no more. Not if Obsidian have anything to do with it anyway. You see, Obsidian are developers of outstanding pedigree (formed from the ashes of Black Isle, the creators of RPG touchstones *Fallout* and *Planescape: Torment*) yet of late they've been somewhat saddled with being known as the developer who delivered the borked ending to *KOTOR 2* and, with *Neverwinter Nights 2*, created a worthy game that went largely unnoticed. Now though, with their own world to play with and a remarkably fresh take on the genre, they're on the offensive.

Betrayed by his superiors. Hunted by his own country. The only man alive who has hint of a conspiracy that is soon to result in massive loss of life. A spy who's a bit rubbish at first, but does have some as-yet unfilled skill slots that could lean on the violent side. Michael Thorton (that's 'Thorton', not 'Thornton' like the high street chocolatiers or our production editor's home village) starts off in full-blown *Mission: Impossible* territory – gone rogue with only a list of names and potential safe houses, and several thousand air miles to help him. From there, Obsidian are taking him and us on a journey they hope will meld the aura of the three JBs – Jason Bourne, Jack Bauer and James Bond.

CRUISE CONTROL

"Yeah, Alpha Protocol has much of the edginess of the new James Bond movie," smiles Ryan Rucinski, one of Obsidian's senior producers, as we mull over his new roleplayer. "Although the development of *AP* actually started before the release of *Casino Royale*. So when the movie came out and we saw the results, we knew we had made the right decision. There have been a lot of movies that have influenced us during the conceptual creation – *Mission: Impossible*, the *Bourne* films, *Ronin*... However, one of the main contributors in look and tone was *Syriana*. If James Bond is where the action comes from, *Syriana*

Home life can be a bit boring for a spy.

"Come and get me, four-eyes!"

THE STORY SO FAR...
OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT

BYE THEN
P45s appear on the desks of everyone at Black Isle Studios. Time for a Plan B.

2003

NONE SO BLACK
Needing money to feed their families and go to the pub, most join Obsidian Entertainment.

2003

IS THAT IT?
Star Wars: KOTOR II is a good game, but one marred by a rushed development.

2005

WINTER'S TALE
NeverWinter Nights 2 emerges as a good – if buggy – sequel to the RPG classic.

2006

OK, so he does look a bit like Action Man...

Spies are especially great at hiding.

Michael Thorton: silhouette-hater.

Another hustle-bustle day in Taipei.

This man will help you find nuclear wessels.

has a big influence on the theme."

Yet what Obsidian want to stress more than anything is that *Alpha Protocol* is a role-playing game. You'll have multiple missions open in different hubs around the world (locations currently being bandied about include Taipei, Rome, Moscow and Saudi Arabia) and you'll be able to flit between them at will – each one containing

one overarching operation and a cavalcade of minor missions leading up to it – be they stealing sensitive data on a hard drive, tailing suspects or extracting information from grumpy NPCs through bribery, diplomacy or murder most foul.

"The mission structure is designed to present Thorton with an Operation, and then there are several avenues he can explore to tackle it using the skill set or preference of the player," explains Rucinski. "We don't want to force you through a linear series of levels, we want to treat every operation in the game like a mini-hub, where you get a number of missions you can tackle in any order, just to give the player more freedom."

THORT THAT COUNTS

As for developing the skills of young Mr Thorton, the system being developed is a classless one – with 10 skills in which to level up, each containing 10 slots to spend your valuable Advancement Points (or experience points) in. You won't be able to max out your character, instead you'll be moulding the game into your chosen form of super spydom – whether its gruff no-nonsense headshots, sneakily hiding in the dark, bloody and silent close combat or gadget-heavy explodifying.

A higher rank opens up different options and perceptions, while almost superhuman secret-agent abilities are on the menu too – working on a 'use and cool-down' basis during the action. The example of this that

You mould your own form of super spydom, whether it's headshots, sneaking or gadget explodifying

Chinwag Cleverness
How talking to pretty ladies works in Alpha Protocol

How you go into a conversation and how you respond within it changes people's attitudes to you throughout the game, adding a true feeling of active power over the narrative. Take these two possible exchanges with love interest (and token ginger) Scarlet Lake – a photographer you may well be able to bed if you play your cards right and don't say something stupid.

Scarlet: (sighs) You wouldn't believe the day I had...

Thorton: I think I've got you beat.
Scarlet: You ever been a pushy woman in Arabia?
Thorton: Once. Lost a bet.
Scarlet: (mildly amused) Cute.
Thorton: (slick) Yeah.
Scarlet: (sarcastic) You could keep that up the entire flight I bet.
Thorton: Did you already have plans?
Scarlet: I was going to invite you to slow down.
Thorton: You're right – it's a long flight, plenty of time to get your name and hotel room.
Scarlet: Wow. You just come right out and say those kinds of things, huh?
Thorton: When I'm not putting my foot in my mouth. By the way, I'm Mike.
Scarlet: I'm... Oh, you nearly got me there.
Thorton: Yeah...
Scarlet: So Mike, when you're not getting shot down, what is it that brings you to this part of the world?

Thorton: Probably not.
Scarlet: You too, huh?
Thorton: ...Sure.
Scarlet: Fella, don't take this wrong, but you look like you just got sucker punched by the world.
Thorton: What the hell's that supposed to mean?
Scarlet: Whoa, calm down – I was just...
Thorton: (sighs) Don't worry about it.
Scarlet: It's this country – does that to everybody.
Thorton: I guess.
Scarlet: If you don't mind me asking, what makes you want to come here?

Obsidian conjure up when prompted is, amazingly enough, heightened reaction times that let you assess situations in slo-mo before letting rip with a six-hit chainshot to decimate a room full of gun-toting terrorists

It's a mundane example, true, but *Alpha Protocol*'s over-the-shoulder chase-cam action does seem to be a step up from your average RPG. Combat will have you running and gunning, taking cover or sneaking about the place – but that's not to say you won't be able to build your character towards the hand-to-hand fisticuffs recently in vogue.

"If Thorton can get close enough to enemies or if enemies get the jump on him, we have a variety of martial arts moves you can employ. There's nothing as satisfying as getting close enough to a guy to have him turn around just in time to plant a jumping knee to his face," explains Rucinski, displaying a hitherto unexplored knowledge of Sunday League football. "For the very stealthy player, the martial arts can provide the most silent way to dispose of enemies."

Mixing your own skill with increasing RPG capabilities (weapons, hacking, electronics, traps, stealth or whatever) will gradually move further and further into comic-book heroism – but that isn't to say the game ignores realism. "Realism is important to *Alpha Protocol*. We've tried to create situations and themes from actual news items and hypothetical scenarios," says Rucinski. "Our technologies and

equipment are also realistic. We made it very clear early in development that we wouldn't have a near-indestructible bipedal robot running around shooting things. If we used a robot, it would look like what the military or SWAT would use, with wheels and treads instead of legs."

Near-future is the byword, so as to allow for more gadgets and gizmos than ever before. But this is entirely a *Casino Royale* rather than a *Die Another Day* "OMG invisible car and surfing on melting CG iceberg" exercise in

depressing Fleming-grave-turning.

GOOD CHATS

In a lot of role-playing games (mentioning no names, cough, *Oblivion*), the people you meet retread the same conversations again and again – mostly accompanied by a frown or a smile depending on what armour you chose to put on that day. Not so with *AP* – where first impressions count.

Meet someone and act all gruff with them and they won't be all that

impressed for a fair while – unless they're a sexy woman who's been designed to want to play chasey-sexy and might like that sort of thing (see Chinwag Cleverness).

"Essentially, the player chooses a 'stance' for Thorton (suave, professional, or aggressive – although the actual breakdowns branch a great deal from this) and then Thorton responds appropriately – and amusingly," explains Rucinski, having selected his own internal suave stance. "The dialogue system is also set up so that you can't repeatedly have the same conversation with an NPC to try to find the 'best' answer or all the information available. This means that if you are a jerk to a person you will get a reaction the next time you talk to them. It reinforces how important that first impression is."

Conversations will whip along at a realistic pace, with you selecting changes in how Thorton responds to maintain the flow of real-life chatter.

Gaming's former forays into the lives of secret agents, *Deus Ex* aside, have only ever focused on the guns-blazing elements, and perhaps a pretty lady or two in cutscenes. *Alpha Protocol* wants you putting in the legwork, doing the reconnaissance, chatting up the receptionists and looking moody in fancy hotels – it knows the excitement isn't all in the violence, but in the setup, the situation and the supporting cast. In premise and pedigree, it's a sure-fire licence to kill. Let's hope the execution is as flawless as it needs to be. **PCZ**

Action scenes: *Mass Effect* meets *Gears Of War*.

Take your PC gaming to the next level

Windows Vista brings a whole host of next-generation features to the discerning PC gamer. Here are just a few that you need to know about

Windows Vista is the brand new version of Windows. Not only does it offer huge improvements in security, usability and appearance over Windows XP, but it's primed to meet all the demands that 3D games will be throwing at it.

It all revolves around DirectX 10, the new interface that games programmers are going to be using to push the boundaries of 3D games. DirectX 10 brings with it incredible new levels of detail and the ability to have more complex objects moving around in each scene. The result is stunning and offers a much more cinematic experience. Want to see what we're talking about? Just take a look at the in-game footage of Crysis at www.crysis-online.com. You'll be blown away.

There are other improvements, too. Windows Vista also introduces a new Games Explorer, which will make all your games accessible from a single location. And if you share your PC with your kids, you'll be happy to know that there are built-in parental controls to prevent them playing games unsuitable for their ages. Also, if you own an Xbox 360, it's good to know that its wireless controllers will work with Windows Vista as well.

So, if you want to stay current with your PC gaming, then Windows Vista is the way to go. Oh, and those massive improvements in PC security, usability and appearance? Don't worry, they're all thrown in for free.

Game information
Click on any game icon and you'll see information about who made the game, when you last played it and what version you have.

See saved games
Simply right-click on a game's icon here to get to the Saved Games folder and access your previous saves.

Is my PC up to running Windows Vista?

Don't panic, there's every chance your PC will run Windows Vista without upgrades, especially if it's capable of playing the latest 3D games. But all PCs are not created equal, and to ensure that you get the best gaming experience, only PCs that are worthy can upgrade to Windows Vista.

It's easy to find out if your PC meets the requirements – simply download the free Windows Vista Upgrade Advisor from www.microsoft.com/windowsvista/getready. Run it on your PC and you'll get the definitive verdict on whether your computer is up to running Windows Vista.
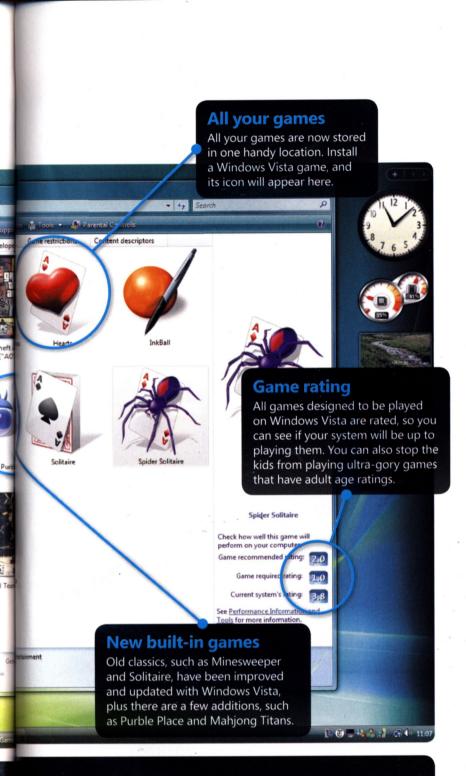
Windows Vista gives each PC a Windows Experience rating that tells you at a glance how powerful your processor, graphics card, memory and hard drive are, with a single combined score. The higher the number it comes up with, up to a current maximum of 5.9, the better your PC will be able to run Windows Vista and whatever games you want to play on it.

RATE YOUR PC Get an at-a-glance rating of how well your PC will run Windows Vista

Super Media Center

Windows Media Center is at the heart of the Ultimate and Home Premium editions of Windows Vista. Connect up your PC to an HDTV and browse your music and video collection. What's more, you can bin your set-top DVD recorder! With Media Center and a TV tuner card in your PC, you can play, record and timeshift TV programmes. Get hold of Windows Media Center Extender (a device that plugs into your TV) and you can stream your media from a PC anywhere in your house. If you own an Xbox 360, this Extender capability is already built into it.

LEAPING AROUND...
JUMPGATE: EVOLUTION

A barely evolved *Ed Zitron* sets out on a daring space adventure

DEVELOPER NetDevil **PUBLISHER** Codemasters **WEBSITE** www.jumpgateevolution.com

ETA LATE 2008

THE LOWDOWN

Plays like *Freespace 2*	✔
Addictive MMO aspects mix with space combat	✔
Mouse and keyboard controls are brilliant	✔
Lag could pervade the arcadey combat...	✘
Could lack depth	✘

BIRMINGHAM'S OMEGA SEKTOR, an epic web café cum gaming emporium, is home to many things – dim lights, rooms of humming PCs, squeaky leather black chairs upon which people often remark "That was the chair, not me," and, more recently, Codemasters' big ol' gaming bash.

There, I prepared to throw myself headfirst into *Jumpgate: Evolution*, NetDevil's new MMO. The comparisons leap out at you – *Stargate*, *Babylon 5* and even *Star Wars* all came to mind as I prepared to grapple with whatever crooked implementation of mouse-and-keyboard space flight they'd undoubtedly concocted.

To my great surprise, on letting my stubby fingers manoeuvre my spritely little fighter-jet into the infinite blackness of space, I was afforded the greatest of control. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that controlling *Jumpgate:*

Evolution felt not just good, it felt right. NetDevil have made a phenomenally easy-to-pick-up and visually stunning space sim within the MMO model, and within a minute I felt like Malcolm Reynolds and Han Solo's love child.
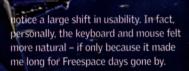
EVOLUTIONARY
Controlling your ship is much like your average FPS, with the weighty, smooth movement and combat of *FreeSpace 2* interspersed with the missions (read: quests) of an MMO that will have you hurtling all over creation. There'll be your average "kill 10 Conflux War Sprites" quests as well as more interesting, Death Star trench-style adventures, buzzing into the heart of a gigantic intergalactic ship like an angry mosquito, and taking it down from the inside and reaping the rewards. While (unlike *EVE*) you can't fly the big ships, you certainly find yourself fighting both next to and against them, usually as an agent in a bigger conflict.

Combat itself is similar to most space-sims – you lock onto a target, fly around them aiming for the best hit and fire until they're space garbage, before picking up their loot and moving on. The game's real-time nature makes it more interesting than some of the rest of the genre's combat, but it's a lot more forgiving of tiny errors within the first few hours of the game, with generous shields and remarkably unaggressive enemies easing you into the controls and the combat engine.

The modus operandi of the *Jumpgate* universe is accessibility and fun. NetDevil have with great pride spent months developing the keyboard control-system, as well as building in support for joystick junkies everywhere. I played with both a mouse/keyboard combo and a scary-looking thrust controller and a full-scale joystick that pivoted in my hand as I turned, and didn't

notice a large shift in usability. In fact, personally, the keyboard and mouse felt more natural – if only because it made me long for Freespace days gone by.

JUMP AROUND
On top of the space simulation elements are the classical MMO tenets of experience, loot, and advancement. Your avatar is your ship, which you can outfit with the finest weaponry, shields and tactical equipment, or even buy brand-new ships to move your equipment across to. Advancement is controlled both by your familiar experience bar (with a reward of experience with every kill) missions, and the as-yet-unspecified

Once more unto the breach, dear friends.

Hear me baby, hold together.

Don't drink and drive, kids.

THE STORY SO FAR...
NETDEVIL

JUMP START
Scott Brown, Peter Grundy and Steven Williams form NetDevil in Scott's basement.

FISH TALE
NetDevil releases the terribly titled *Jumpgate: The Reconstruction Initiative*.

NETDEVIL

AUTO ASSAULTED
Mad Max-style MMO *Auto Assault* is shut down in 2007 due to lack of subscribers.

BRICKING IT
LEGO and NetDevil begin work on a Lego MMO, causing much child-like glee.

1997   2001   2007   2007

Think they got this one backwards.

Sadly, large cruisers won't be pilotable.

Bloody gated communities.

Used fighter. One careful owner.

Have XP, will travel
Re-inventing the hamster wheel...

Space-stations: your hubs.

Licensing system. From what we've been told, it's there to control both twinking (buying high-level gear for lower-level players) and gold-sellers by using a *Gran Turismo*-style limit on what ships you can use until you've completed a certain amount of quests.

While the repetition of the MMO model threatens to bore the heart out of any genre, it works somewhat invisibly within *Jumpgate: Evolution*. Your missions involve the killing of X number of Y, but the immediacy of

the combat covers it up, transforming even a mundane kill-shit foray into an elaborate space opera. Later missions even involve you taking on gigantic battle cruisers, sniping out turrets and then taking out a shield core, which is a damn sight more dramatic than tapping your 1 through 4 keys.

JUMP N' GRIND
While the words "space" and "MMO" make you think "*EVE*" and "grind", *Jumpgate: Evolution* appears to be

the yin to CCP's yang. NetDevil are emphasising that the game will be about slick, fast-paced combat rather than routine repetition of hotkeys. From what we've played, *Jumpgate: Evolution* feels like its expanding the genre in a direction nobody seems to have noticed was there.

Purely as a game, without the online elements included, *Jumpgate* would be something to get excited about, but the MMORPG parts make it a red hot pepper in our exhausts. We advise wholeheartedly that you sign up for the beta at NetDevil's website, or plug your ears and wait until later in the year for the game's release. **PCZ**

It's about slick, fast combat rather than routine repetition of hotkeys

While the class system has yet to be announced, NetDevil say that elements, such as crafting, will not only have their own separate levelling curves, but will also allow players to level up, much like in *Star Wars Galaxies*, on their own.

Potentially, you could make it to the highest level by doing a great deal of mining, or through the inevitable ship builder option. However, if you're beavering away in the wrong place there's the threat of *Jumpgate*'s PvP system, which is currently being planned as part of every server, but, like *EVE*, is based in particularly dangerous sections of space. These sections will be free-for-all environs with objectives and missions that send you into them with experience and loot for the victor.

While they promise that players will never have to enter these sectors if they don't want to, the rewards will be there – as well as the danger of getting left as a filthy smear across the cosmos by a 14-year-old called D34TH_VADER.

ALL MY LIFE I WANTED TO REPLAY BEING A GANGSTER..

MAFIA II

Steve Hogarty opens a violin case to find the sequel to the PC's finest free-roaming shooter

DEVELOPER 2K Czech **PUBLISHER** 2K Games **WEBSITE** www.2kgames.com/mafia2

ETA EARLY 2009

THE LOWDOWN

Made by Illusion	✔
Huge living city	✔
Extremely well-written script	✔
Looks beautiful	✔
2K renamed the developer	✘

FACED WITH ONE the developers of the original *Mafia*, there's only one question any fan really wants to ask. So I asked it. Why was that bloody racing mission so stupidly difficult?

Daniel Vavra, lead designer at 2K Czech (formerly the far less bleak sounding Illusion Softworks) laughed and assured me that it was originally intended to be harder, and that only the endless nagging of his superiors prevented it becoming the most impossible-to-beat level in gaming history. Putting old grudges to bed, we set aside the only blotch on *Mafia*'s tenure as the PC's greatest, most well-written free-roaming shooter, and move on to the matter at hand – its sequel.

First, 2K Czech are keen to quash rumours – *Mafia II* is not a continuation of the previous game's story, nor is the main character related to the original protagonist in any way. *Mafia II* starts with a clean slate, and with that fact firmly stated, it's deemed appropriate to show off an early version of the game's introductory cutscene.

In it a locomotive pulls into a Grand Central-esque station. Out of this locomotive steps a neatly dressed soldier on leave – this is Vito, your character, who chose to enlist rather than serve time in prison having been arrested for a petty crime. He's home

for a month following a spell in hospital, though the war is coming to an end anyway. As he leaves the station Vito is met by a husky gentleman in a trench coat and trilby – this is Vito's childhood friend and criminal counterpart, Joe.

Vito asks how Joe knew he'd be arriving, to which Joe replies, "I've got my contacts". If the game's title didn't tip you off, Joe's dubious nature certainly will – this is a game about bad men, questionable morality and having contacts. As they leave the station, two policemen eye them with presumably warranted suspicion.

GREATFELLAS

Already it's apparent that, from its cinematic camera work to its superb voice acting, this is unmistakeably *Mafia* – infused, as ever, with *Goodfellas* and *Godfather* references. You've got Vito, the clever one, and Joe, the ruthless one – your typical aspiring gangsters destined to become embroiled in a war between two rival families. There's loads of swearing, which is both funny and clever, complementing a tight script written by Vavra. He wrote the original game's script too, so you know it'll be good.

Flitting about 2K Czech's office like an inquisitive fact-moth, I happen upon the game's
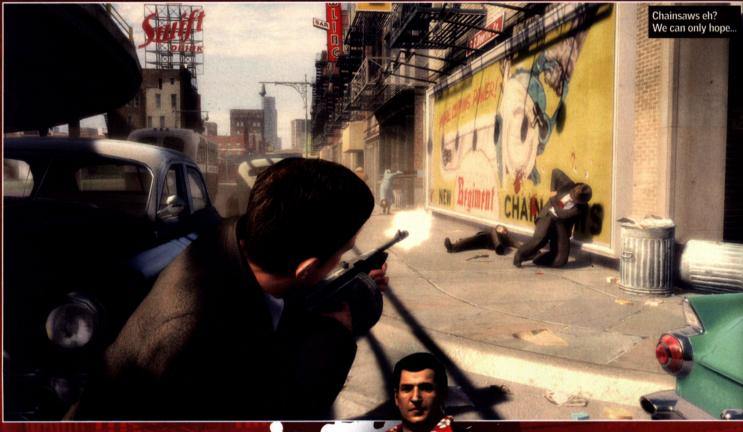
Chainsaws eh? We can only hope...

Cars look so good you won't want to damage them.

Grab a bite
Eating in games – does it work?

No, it doesn't work. At least it didn't work in *GTA: San Andreas*, where the grumbling stomach of your character rudely forced you into chicken shops. *Mafia II* will give you the option to eat at diners and cafés, though we're assured it won't be necessary.

Having a wholesome meal will instead boost your health (which now works in an implicit, *Call of Duty* manner – with no health bar and an ability to stay alive as long as you seek cover when hurt).

Alternatively, a coffee will boost your stamina, for more sprinting power. Just like real life.

"Four fried chickens and a coke, please."

Fences can be vaulted.

city designer, Pavel Cizek, who tells me about *Mafia II*'s game world. Girth fans will be pleased to hear that it's twice as big as *Mafia*'s Lost Heaven, with two and a half square miles in which to roam. Loosely modelled on Manhattan, *Mafia II*'s city contains memorable landmarks such as a version of the Empire State Building, which, as it's visible throughout the city, acts as a useful navigation aid.

The camera dives into the city and rolls gently along sun-drenched tenements, as Cizek demonstrates the density of the roadside furniture. Fences, bins, back-streets, burnt out cars, individually modelled windows, lootable shop fronts, meticulously realised fire escapes – there's a hell of a lot of detail on offer, and most of it can be mown down and destroyed.

Cizek flips the cityscape from day to night, to show how windows are randomly illuminated from the inside as imaginary folk move from room to room switching lights on and off. This might sound like the most ridiculous little thing, these glowing lights, but it's there to cement over any telling cracks in the game world's realism. The goal here is to create a city which supplements and supports the strong story aspects of the game. Through small details like these, 2K Czech plan to create the most

HIDING
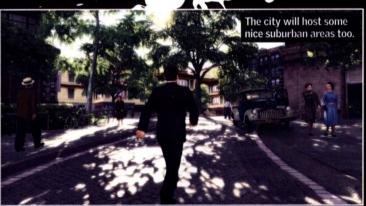Illusion Softworks released *Hidden & Dangerous*, earning a bucket load of respect.

OFFERING
They release a game called *Mafia: The City of Lost Heaven* and that respect increases.

HIDING AGAIN
Hidden & Dangerous 2 makes them the best loved and respected name in the industry.

WHO?
That industry name has its name changed to 2K Czech. 2K – please explain yourselves.

1999   2002   2003   2008

Petrol tanks can be shot, bringing car chases to an explosive ending...

Interiors are almost entirely destructable.

The city will host some nice suburban areas too.

Drive buses...

...trucks...

...and taxis...

Smuggling guns in your cheeks is guaranteed to work.

What we're promised is the next generation of urban environments – it's destined to be a wonderful thing

believable living, breathing city we've ever seen.

PEDIGREE

To this often-touted end *Mafia II*'s pedestrians have had a disproportionate amount of thought put into them. As unbelievable as it sounds, any member of the populace will have an observable routine, such as leaving their home, hopping on a bus, getting off at a clothes shop, trying on and then paying for a suit, before finally returning home by bus again. *Oblivion* started it and some city-builders have similar systems, but *Mafia II* is going to new extremes.

If a driver collides with another car (which occurs at random), both parties will exit their vehicles and exchange insurance details in an amicable fashion. Police will chase criminals if they spot a random crime in progress. The homeless will sleep rough and rummage in bins. Meanwhile, the previous game's strict speed limits are less enforced so police officers will turn a blind eye to somebody coasting at five miles per hour above the limit. In fact, other drivers will likely be doing the same.

What we're being promised is the next generation of urban environments in gaming (as awful a phrase as that sounds), and if 2K Czech can pull it off it's destined to be a wonderful thing just to sit back and observe – believable in its subtlety and surprising in its complexity. Whether it be in the gentle rocking of individual train carriages as they clatter along the rails, the understated build-up of grit and muck on your car as you hurtle recklessly along a dirt track (and the ability to wash it off), or simply the clothes and cars chosen to flawlessly recreate the '40s period – *Mafia II* will be a beautifully detailed game.

GUNPLAY

If my slack-jawed enthusiasm for the game's environments have confounded you – let me remind you that *Mafia II* is still a shooter, in which you're expected to kill many people. Rest assured that the liberal care that 2K Czech have massaged into the game's city has made it as far as the action sections. And as if to prove this, I am shown a shootout in a brewery.

As with the original game, everything will take place from a third-person standpoint, but *Mafia II* takes affairs slightly more over the shoulder. Vito (or at least the 2K Czech developer in control of him) begins outside a door with a pair of comrades, before kicking the door down and alerting the occupants to the intrusion. Brandishing a Tommy gun and firing from the hip, Vito manages to head shoot one of the goons, in the process reducing a cement column to a state of utter disrepair.

As bullets fly, so do chunks of the surrounding interior – including tables, crates of bottles, railings and barrels. Mercifully, *Mafia II* will allow you to take cover behind objects with the tap of a button – Vito does so behind a sturdy looking piece of scenery, and as if to demonstrate the capabilities and advantages of a man under cover, fires off some shots above his encampment, shuffles along a bit, and then fires off some shots around the side. Wonderful.

As retaliatory fire ricochets and pings off every surface, Vito's mates desperately try to avoid having their faces shot off, while available cover peels away with every round fired. Heightened by the deafening noise and scattering debris, the stand-off becomes increasingly tense, with Vito and his cohorts working their way up two floors to leave the final enemy a slumped ragdoll,

Even during a car chase. Vito keeps his hair neatly parted.

> **What I've seen has strengthened my certainty that this game will be even more influential than _Mafia_**

Gangsta cribs
Inside the home life of a mafiosa

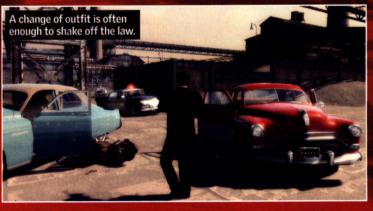_Mafia II_'s interiors are incredibly detailed places, and they'll exist in the same game space as the exteriors. This means there won't be the faintest whiff of a loading screen as you enter a building, and also that the views from the windows will be of the actual city itself.

TVs and radios, taps and toilets, light switches and windows – there's a huge amount of interactive objects to dick about with between missions. You'll even be able to grab objects in your kitchen and throw them at people in the street below – just like insane people do in New York.

Breweries: not just for piss-ups

Vehicles make excellent cover when they're not exploding.

A change of outfit is often enough to shake off the law.

casually flung over a bench. The man controlling Vito runs him through some physics-enabled cardboard boxes, by means of celebration, causing them to fly across the room.

While it wasn't shown at the presentation, we're told hand-to-hand combat will also feature in _Mafia II_. When guns fail, objects like bottles can be used to attack your foes – initially as a means to bludgeon them and, once smashed, to give them a glassy stab.

Keen to prove that such actions at least exist at this early stage of development, a bottle is swiftly smashed over the head of an innocent, cowering warehouse employee, who'd been hiding in a corner.

MISSIONARY

The missions will be structured similarly to the original game, in that they're rather less sandbox-y than _Grand Theft Auto_ (a game _Mafia_ was frequently and inaccurately measured against). You're free to go wherever you please in the city, and equally free to play about with the law – go way over the speed limit and the police will flag you down and give you a ticket, flaunt your new Colt M1911s and they'll put out a warrant for your arrest.

No all-seeing eye will register your crimes either – as with the original,

Exploding barrels, now there's something...

"Honey I'm home. And I got those high-resolution door handles you wanted."

Shootin' up the diner
Mafia II's environments are plenty destructive

As the demonstration trundled onwards, Vito arrived at a New York diner, with rock 'n' roll classic *Shake, Rattle and Roll* crackling out of a chalky radio at the end of the bar. This was 2K Czech's playground of destruction.

Breakable objects work around breaking points, to keep things realistic. Fences, for example, will have a whole load of fracture lines and break in different ways, depending on what they're hit with.

Sliding a pistol from his jacket, Vito fired off a few rounds into the diner's tables, which splintered and broke in two. He took aim at a shelf behind the bar and fired again, causing it to fall down on one side and the plates it was holding to roll off and smash on the floor one by one, just like in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon. He turned then to the windows – the first bullet put a hole in the pane, the next created a hairline fracture, and the third blew shards from the frame. For my money, these are the best smashable windows ever.

A couple of gents with clearly unfinished AI routines sat amidst this ruckus sipping their coffees, oblivious to the madness around them. Point taken though, there's a lot of breakable crap in *Mafia II*. Indoors and out.

"Protection money, please."

your notoriety in *Mafia II* is determined by the ability of those who've witnessed your crimes to reach a phone or radio to report them. Once reported, police will be looking out for people matching your description, or the vehicle you were last seen in – so buying a new outfit or changing the number plates on your car acts as a solution in this case.

Prolonged criminal goings-on in one area of the city will prompt the mayor's office to increase the police density in that area, making life difficult for your mafioso upstart. In these cases, bribing the mayor will bring the police presence back down to more manageable levels. A respect system is also in place, appearing on the HUD at all times. This was something 2K Czech weren't ready to talk about – could it hint at your standing with the two rival families?

Asking them about the potential for branching storylines and missions saw them shuffle their feet nervously, damning proof that there's more to the respect system than meets the eye. Something they were happy to mention

was that massacring innocents has a negative impact on your respect – and that subsequently low respect levels could lead to you being 'whacked'.

VROOM
A further in-game cutscene shows Joe introducing Vito to Mikey the mechanic, who, as Ralphie did in the original *Mafia*, opens the gateway to automotive theft by asking you to nab cars for him. Unlike the original game, you'll be able to pick the lock of every car from the outset, either through a lockpicking minigame or by simply smashing the car's window.

The cars themselves have had a massive handling overhaul. Without getting any actual hands-on driving time myself, it's difficult to say whether they've nixed the authentic ricketiness of *Mafia*'s fragile '30s motors in favour of a crowd-pleasing arcade approach, though what I've seen looks promising.

The cars appear more solid and fun to drive, with a new physics model allowing for some nifty skids. Traffic

in general is denser and the range of vehicles more varied. The damage modelling has also been rethought, with the dynamically crumpling wrecks of the original being replaced by scripted, location-based damage.

2K Czech are calling this 'Hollywood damage' – paint will scrape away, while bumpers will hang off and swing, scraping along the tarmac in a shower of sparks, while panels will deform and dent in a myriad of pre-determined ways – and the end result should make car chases that bit more thrilling.

SMALL CONCERNS
There are some things to worry over. The reticule system has an assisted-aiming feature designed for controllers, leading your shots towards enemies in a way that's unnatural – 2K would do well to let PC gamers turn it off. That isn't to say *Mafia II* will be a console-led title, as everything else at the presentation suggested heavily that the PC version will, yet again, be the definitive one.

While initially nervous about

Mafia II (my cynical mind immediately assuming that none of the creative genius behind the original would be working on its sequel, whereas the opposite is true), what I've seen of it has strengthened my certainty that this game will be as special, and even more influential, than *Mafia*.

What was amazing about that first game was how all of these separate features came together to form a cohesive, believable world, in which the story could unfold with all the finesse of Martin Scorsese's best. Strongly defined characters, an enigmatic and cinematic environment that permeated the game so naturally, an extremely well told story and some wickedly unpredictable missions: it all combined to create a game which remains a *PC ZONE* favourite.

Whether such perfection can be mustered once again remains unknown, but just knowing that the original game's scriptwriter is leading the project is the most glowing assurance Illusion (sorry, 2K Czech) could have given us. **PCZ**

HAIRY BLOKES AHOY...

AGE OF CONAN: HYBORIAN ADVENTURES

Jon Blyth guts a fox and wears it like a hat

You shouldn't ask a lady that...

DEVELOPER Funcom **PUBLISHER** Eidos **WEBSITE** www.ageofconan.com **PREVIOUSLY IN...** 190

ETA
**MAY
2008**

THE LOWDOWN

Good-looking game world	✓
Innovative tackling of the genre	✓
A rich world of lore	✓
Appealing new combat system...	✓
But will that appeal last...	✗
And is it a gimmick?	✗

Filled guilds build
SimCity endgame seems genuinely interesting

The most interesting thing about *Conan*'s PvP play is the city building aspect. As part of the endgame, guilds of over 30 members can build a town, using RTS-style of resource collection (wood, stone, iron, and so on). The shops in the town open up access to better items and recipes – so instead of learning blacksmithery yourself, simply get to level 80 and you can visit one. There'll be nine PvP guild towns, which can be sieged with

He's not too bright, but he's happy.

trebuchets and catapults (but not before issuing a warning) and a potentially limitless number of instanced PvE towns for more cowardly or unsuccessful sorts.

FOR ANYONE NEW to the *Conan* MMO, it's the game that Funcom hope will decapitate every complaint anyone has ever had with the MMORPG genre. During its five-year development cycle, what's emerging most strongly is that it's a game of compromises. That might sound like damning with faint praise, but remember that compromise can be a good thing.

The first 20 levels are a blend of single-player nighttime action and multiplayer daytime gaming. So you have more of a significant role in the universe, compared to a regular MMO that can't allow you to leave a lasting stain on its world. In *WOW*-alikes everything fades and everything respawns, and nothing reeks of futility like waiting for an owl to pop back into existence just so you can kill it again.

Conan's nocturnal single-player campaign has no such constraints and allows for more world-changing missions, in the style of *Elder Scrolls*.
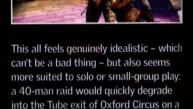
Compromise is laudable, but tricky. The day-night cycle of low-level Hyboria isn't immediately intuitive and nowhere is the need for explanation more evident than in *Conan*'s hybrid combat. This is a combination of traditional tactical MMO decisions and button-tapping combos. Your basic attack can be to the left, right or centre. When you choose a more powerful attack, you're presented with a chain of key presses, which you have to follow, to complete the attack (it's a bit reminiscent of *Street Fighter*).

Meanwhile, the enemies are repositioning their shields: three white barriers which shift around as the creature responds to your directional attacks. Whale on the right flank and eventually the shields will move there, giving you opportunity to attack from another flank, or, even more effectively, select a powerful move that ends on a side with few, or no, shields.

GET IN LINE

When I played the game I was thrown in at the deep end and while it felt like a system that's instantly satisfying in single-player, it required slightly more co-ordination than a room full of curious journalists possess to figure out effective group play. Most of my longer combos were hindered by the fact that everyone else wouldn't get out of the way while I pulled off a groovy stab.

The ethos behind the combat is to make it feel more real. So, contrary to the genre standard, collision detection prevents you from all standing in the same place, priests are required to face their target and you don't have to get off your mount to slice open a peasant.

This all feels genuinely idealistic – which can't be a bad thing – but also seems more suited to solo or small-group play: a 40-man raid would quickly degrade into the Tube exit of Oxford Circus on a rainy Saturday.

PLEASING EVERYONE

Conan isn't just a compromise between genres – Funcom have had to compromise between these ideals and the desires of the beta testers. The original intention was to give the player a blank slate, allowing them to decide their class and specialisations long after the character creation screen. But people didn't like that, so rolling a new character now sets the template for all 80 levels.

The four archetypes – Rogue, Priest, Soldier and Mage – couldn't be more recognisable. And don't be put off by the *Conan* canon – the Stygian Herald of Xotli is pretty much a shape-shifting Druid and anything with a succubus following it is cursed with comparisons to *WOW*'s Warlock. The feat points system is directly comparable to *WOW*'s talent points and with a level 80 cap, they're considerably more involved, too. There's plenty of options you'll be forced to neglect, making for a larger number of possible specialities.

Age of Conan is unexpectedly beautiful for an MMO – Funcom's DreamWorld engine has seen a fair amount of overhaul since the archaic days of *Anarchy Online*. Mounted combat – although we weren't allowed to try it – seems like an entertaining addition, presuming it works as well as the demonstration – and the acting and

ANARCHY ONLINE
One of the earliest MMOs was a world of angry sci-fi and very visible polygons.

2001

DREAMFALL
An engaging story-led adventure, marked out by good writing and puzzles and that.

2006

AGE OF CONAN
What these two pages are about. Look down. Do it. We're not telling you anything here.

2008

THE SECRET WORLD
After *Age of Conan*, Funcom will go great-guns into their modern-day fantasy MMO.

2009

This happens a lot around here.

Combat can be very chaotic and jostly.

"Have you seen a guy run past with a paintbrush?"

script were all far better than you might expect from certain '80s movies.

NIGGLING DOUBT

Any concerns? Well, the combat is the main focus of any fighting game and that's where my main concern is. Is the directional stuff really about making the game action-packed? Or is it more about the difficulties of squeezing an MMO onto the 360? Will using combos in combat slow you down? Also, the chance for a one-hit decapitations might be graphically appealing, but in PvP we can imagine a fair few all-caps complaints from foul-mouthed teenagers who've had their noggin unfairly lopped off.

Like we said, *Age of Conan* is a game of compromises, and it'll take a lot longer than two hours in a dark room to work out whether Funcom threw the baby out with the bath water. And a bit longer again to decide whether the replacement baby is worth feeding a monthly subscription. **PCZ**

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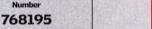
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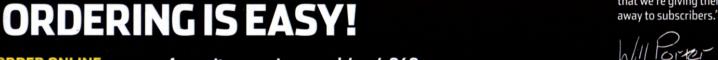
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DREADNOUGHT HOLIDAY...
DAWN OF WAR II

Jamie Sefton grips his bolter pistol and storms into Relic's Warhammer 40,000 RTS sequel...

DEVELOPER Relic PUBLISHER THQ WEBSITE www.relic.com

ETA SPRING 2009

THE LOWDOWN

- Focus on small squads makes action intense ✓
- RPG-style "wargear" for powering up units ✓
- Uses the excellent *Company of Heroes* engine ✓
- Co-op in Campaign mode ✓
- Still no Tyranids confirmed ✗

SPACE MARINES, THE Imperium, Blood Ravens, the Eldar, Dreadnoughts – for the legions of *Warhammer 40,000* fans that spend their weekends painting tiny models, planning elaborate table-top battles or playing some of the franchise's numerous game outings from the past two decades, this is the stuff of futuristic legend.

I know the strong pull of Games Workshop's fantasy sci-fi universe personally, having nearly failed my degree because of too many glorious late nights combining Polish vodka with epic sessions of the board game *Space Crusade*.

Four years ago, developer Relic unleashed *Dawn of War*, a superb, violent and faithful RTS version of the *Warhammer 40,000* universe, featuring epic battles between the brave Space Marines, the hideous Orks, the traitorous forces of Chaos and the mysterious alien Eldar. Featuring dozens of powerful fighting units – with fantastic detailed animation – plus a story-driven campaign and strategic gameplay concentrating on delivering raw, bloody action rather than tedious micromanagement, *DOW* and its expansions are still worthy of any PC gamer's collection.

GODS OF WAR

However, *Dawn of War II* looks set to eclipse the success of the previous game, with Relic drawing on the experience gained from the creation of the mighty WWII RTS *Company of Heroes*, so that you can look forward to greater physics implementation, destructible scenery and real-time lighting, plus a host of other exciting improvements and additions.

Full environmental damage means you can now take your Space Marines into an area and, using heavy weaponry, such as the Dreadnoughts, bring down buildings and other structures on top of startled enemies. The rubble and burnt-out buildings are then automatically used by the AI squads to flank opponents, or as cover to receive defence bonuses. Although you'll have to make sure they don't get trapped or cornered by any foes armed with explosive grenades or flamethrowers.

As with *Company of Heroes*, *DOW2* will have a much tighter focus on five or six squads of an elite strike force – guys

We am make squad! Waaagh!

Expect awesome, garrisonable locations.

THE STORY SO FAR...
RELIC

DAWN OF RELIC
Relic is founded in Vancover. Their first game *Homeworld* is an RTS classic.

DAWN OF CREATURES
After the poor *Impossible Creatures*, *Homeworld 2*'s launch is a return to form.

DAWN OF WAR
Relic's first trip into the Warhammer 40,000 universe is a rampant success.

DAWN OF HEROES
Company of Heroes remains our favourite strategy game – a visceral WWII adventure.

1999   2003   2004   2006

Orks are not exactly church-goers.

Based on a Manchester Cathedtral.

Heavy Metal

The Imperial Dreadnought makes a glorious return to battle

I live to fight... again

There are many classic units in *Warhammer 40,000*, such as the Chaos Lord and the Force Commander. But one of our particular favourites is the stupidly-powerful hulking mechs called Dreadnoughts. Able to cause huge destruction with close-quarter combat, or unleash merry death from ranged weapons, the Dreadnought isn't a robot, but an armoured sarcophagus containing the remains of a fallen Space Marine, kept alive by a sophisticated life-support system until the unit is destroyed. Coming in various sizes and flavours, including the Hellfire Dreadnought armed with an assault cannon and missile launcher, Robocop has nothing on these fellas...

with a name, face and speciality that you'll carry with you from mission to mission, rather than anonymous grunts churned out by the Emperor's war machine. However, in a nod to the RPG genre, you'll be able to upgrade your characters with 'wargear' in-between missions.

These items, such as power armour, are acquired in the form of loot on the battlefield. With much smaller numbers of marines available, the use of the powerful Force Commander characters in your squads will be essential for victory in battles where, most of the time, the Space Marines will be vastly outnumbered by Orks or other nasties.

WORLDS-WIDE WAR

Major changes are happening to the Campaign mode too, which will now involve a battle over numerous Imperium worlds, with several missions to choose from, and each having consequences on the storyline depending on how victorious you are: do you leave the planet as a thriving battle-hardened community or a devastated war-torn wasteland?

Also, as with the recently announced *Red Alert 3*, you'll be able to enjoy the entire campaign with a friend in two-player co-op and they'll be able to jump in or leave games at any time.

Drop Pods give devastating tactical advantages.

Early gameplay demonstrates hectic, intense firefights featuring the Space Marines attacking an Ork stronghold, with their squads using standard bolters and chainswords. The green menace retaliate with melee attacks and stikbombs, which detonate in a gorgeous shower of pyrotechnics. Other units can be called in using huge Drop Pods, which crash to the ground, crushing any enemies underneath their mighty metal frames and unleashing precious reinforcements such as Imperial Assault Marines, complete

with handy jetpacks. A huge, ferocious Ork warboss is one of the larger greenskin foes in *DOW II*, and can silence whole squads and bring down buildings with one beat of his fists. Fortunately, the marines have commander units to counter, who wield massive melee weapons such as thunderhammers and call on devastating laser strikes from fleets orbiting the planets.

FAR-FUTURE WAR

There's much to look forward to in *DOW II* – less base-building and

resource-gathering in favour of more concentrated RTS squad action, vastly improved troop AI, a story-driven co-op mode, a steady stream of rewards to tool up your squads like an RPG, and blistering graphics built using an enhanced version of the Havok physics-heavy Essence Engine (the powerhouse that drove *Company of Heroes*).

Much has yet to be revealed (the storyline, how squad member deaths will be handled, multiplayer modes and whether we'll see other *Warhammer 40,000* staples such as the elusive alien Tyranids and the terrifying Genestealers) but even at this stage of development, the 41st millennium has never looked so enticing... PCZ

> ### Early gameplay sees Space Marines and Orks in hectic, intense firefights

BROOD AWAKENING...

STA

Marti K

RCRAFT II

...inKorda gets to grips with *StarCraft II* and gets the lowdown on the newly evolved Zerg

ETA
WHEN IT'S DONE

THE LOWDOWN

Three massively diverse factions	✔
Titanic, intense battles	✔
Open-ended single-player campaign	✔
Interactions with characters	✔
Multiplayer relies on fast fingers	✘

WHAT WERE YOU doing in 1998? Chances are if you owned a PC you were playing *StarCraft*, a breakneck RTS from the creators of *World of Warcraft*.

On its release, *StarCraft* blew through the RTS genre like a cyclone, generating a fanatical fan base that still thrives to this very day, especially in South Korea.

The game's allure stemmed from the diversity of its three factions, each of which required a radically different approach to annihilate the enemy. Now, a decade on, these three warring races – the technologically advanced, cybernetically enhanced Protoss; the determined, conventional Terrans (humans); and the insectoid warrior Zerg – are set to clash once again in a battle for supremacy.

Journey with me now to a room rammed with networked machines and games journos at Blizzard's LA offices. Next to me sits a representative from a German *StarCraft* fan site, who sobs gently as he strokes the hairy hide of a 3D Ultralisk (a massive Zerg unit), a decade-long wet dream a reality.

For the next two days we've been given unrestricted access to the latest multiplayer build of *StarCraft II*. With Blizzard having already revealed the

revamped Terran and Protoss races, we've been invited here for a world-exclusive reveal of the game's final race, the Zerg.

"*StarCraft II* is the best strategy game we've ever made," proclaims lead designer Dustin Browder as we twitch expectantly, waiting to be unleashed on the first multiplayer session of the day. "It's the most fun. It encourages you to think creatively, to try and be clever. We want to build on the philosophies of the original, to provide ease of use for new players and a big enough challenge for hardcore players. *StarCraft* has its own style, which is fast-paced RTS. *StarCraft II* is meant to bring that niche to the current generation."

As my German companion dives into a six-player free-for-all, buck teeth gnashing excitably, I rise from my seat to corner lead producer Chris Sigaty in an attempt to understand why we've waited a decade for the resurrection of this revered game.

"It was really a case of right place, right time," he explains. "Once the *Warcraft III* products were finished, we talked about what to do next. Technology was in the right place for us to be able to put loads of units on screen, which is what we wanted if we ever made another *StarCraft* game. Timing was a factor though. We've had a

➘

Fly my beauties, fly!

Familiarity smacks me across the chops like a berserk, bucking fish

The Protoss Colossus can dish out some serious punishment.

What we need now is a giant swatter.

lot of big titles in development that have required lots of resources, and it's been impossible to start working on another huge project until now."

Curiosity satisfied it's time for me to join the killing fields. Opting for the newly revealed and revamped Zerg, I enter the fray. Familiarity smacks me across the chops like a berserk, bucking fish. Drones are sent to collect Vespene gas and minerals (the game's resources), buildings are constructed and units assembled. Every click is key as I rush to build a force capable of striking at the enemy before they can threaten my holdings.

This is *StarCraft* just how I remember it: attack biased, packed with early rushes as each player seeks an early advantage. I lose myself in a mass of clicks and orders, never pausing, acting on instinct alone, ignoring the ingrained RTS urge to build defences as I force myself to concentrate solely on amassing a force built for the single purpose of destruction.

Minutes later I've churned out an army from countless Hatcheries (the Zerg's main construction building) – dozens, scores, myriads of units. I march them across the map in search of my enemies, only to wade headlong into an opponent's equally sizeable attack force. Unabated slaughter ensues, the screen a mass of scrapping aliens. But as the carnage unfolds, a second enemy storms my unguarded base and suddenly it's game over. Eight minutes, 17 seconds. That's *StarCraft II* multiplayer in a nutshell.

HIVE MIND

Keen to discover more about the Zerg's evolution since the original, I corner Browder and spit out a torrent of questions.

And now, ladies and gentlemen... this year's Miss Zerus contestants.

THE STORY SO FAR...
BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

HORDE
Blizzard slams into the RTS strategy scene with *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*.

DEVIL YOU KNOW
Diablo's frenetic click-and-fight online action transforms the world of RPG gaming.

A STAR IS BORN
The first *StarCraft* enjoys massive critical acclaim and retail success.

WORLD APART
World of Warcraft takes the world by storm and becomes Blizzard's cash cow.

1994   1997   1998   2004

Robots vs insects. Now you're talking!

The Zerg have evolved!

Ultralisks are the Zerg's deadliest units.

"The Zerg are a hyper-evolved organic race," he explains as I fire up a new game. "They're entirely biological and use their own bodies to attack enemies. They can burrow and hide, then ambush their foes. They're also fast builders and can rapidly move across the battlefield."

Zerg units mutate from larvae spawned at a Hatchery. Every 20 seconds a new larva is born. However, with no limit imposed on the number of Hatcheries you can construct, the Zerg can churn out a frightening number of units in seconds. "This mechanic makes the Zerg play uniquely," continues Browder. "They're much less predictable and more adaptable than the other two races."

While the Zerg's lightning-fast unit generation makes them a formidable fighting force, it's the faction's infestation units that truly set them apart from the Terrans and Protoss. The Corruptor is a squid-like air-to-air unit that turns enemy craft against their masters, while the Infestor brings your opponent's buildings under your control for a limited period of time. Acting on Browder's advice, I spawn a legion of Corruptors and Infestors, then storm a nearby Terran base. What begins as an equally matched slugfest soon degenerates into a massacre as my Corruptors turn the fleet to my whims, while the infested barracks spew out marines loyal to my cause. Within seconds, a once well-defended stronghold is nothing more than a pile of rubble. Mwahaha!

With victory mine, Browder tells me that resources and observation posts (relics scattered throughout each map that push back the fog of war when captured) can also be infested with a unit called the Overlord. "The Overlord has two abilities," he begins. "One is an infestation ability that targets observation towers and crystals so that enemies can't use them until the infestations are destroyed. The other ability allows the Overlord to generate Creep, a terraforming ability that prevents your

Learn Don't Burn
Multiplayer tutorial mooted to help newcomers compete

Given the unforgiving nature of *StarCraft II*'s multiplayer games, it's a relief to hear that Blizzard are planning a series of aids to help newcomers get to grips with online skirmishes.

A multiplayer tutorial is currently under consideration, as are a set of advanced tools that'll provide you with detailed feedback after every game, which should hopefully make it apparent where you're falling short and where you're improving.

Blizzard are also feverishly working on several innovations to its Battle.net player matching tools (which automatically pair you off against a player of similar skill), which should minimise your chances of being matched against an infinitely superior opponent.

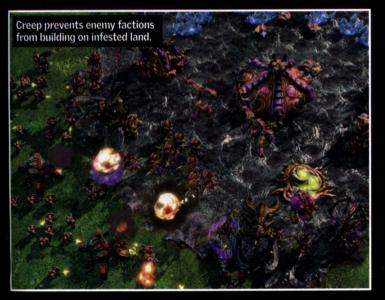Multiplayer aides are set to help newbies.

> *StarCraft* could be about to mount a triumphant return a decade after it first took the RTS genre by storm

Lambs to the slaughter.

Don't Like It
Moan, moan, moan, moan, moan!

With technology moving in giant leaps since 1998, it's hardly surprising that *StarCraft II* is looking infinitely more impressive than its predecessor. Judging by these screenshots, you can clearly see that Blizzard's art department is making the most of re-inventing some classic units and creating new ones. But with some hardcore fans reportedly unhappy with even minor changes, Blizzard has its work cut out to appease everyone. As Browder explained, "The most difficult thing is making sure we cater to the game's huge fan base and to newcomers."

From what we've seen, *StarCraft II* looks set to strike an excellent balance. However, if any 'Don't Like Change' detractors insist on moaning after the game's release, we recommend they piss off back to their 486s and play the original. Simple as.

Progress – deal with it!

Mountain Dew: space toxin.

opponents from building on or using infested areas of the map."

WHO'S QUEEN?

Perhaps the most notable change in how the Zerg play is the revised role played by the Queen, a giant, scuttling killer that looks like a distant cousin to the mother from *Aliens*.

"We've evolved the Queen into the ultimate base defender," explains Dustin. "As your base technology evolves, you can evolve your Queen. She gets bigger and more powerful, and can even bring your buildings to life to defend your base. She can also heal a building instantly for several hundred hit points and quickly tunnel around areas infested with Creep."

The Queen has now become one of the game's most impressive units, a truly formidable warrior capable of tearing through enemy ranks as though they're made of wet toilet paper. She can also lay eggs throughout your base, which then hatch into kamikaze base defenders whenever a foe approaches.

If the Zerg had one weakness in the original game it was their lack of a tough, scrapper unit, a shortfall that Blizzard is keen to rectify here with a ground-attack arachnid warrior called the Roach. Sporting some seriously rapid regeneration abilities that

Terran buildings can be flown to new locations.

make the Hulk look like a slow healer, a massed pack of high-level Roaches can cut through a sizeable enemy force and come out virtually unscathed.

As well as the newcomers, the Zerg also welcome back a number of familiar units, including the Lurker, Hydralisk, Mutalisk and pesky Zerglings that remain the perfect weapon for quick strike attacks on undefended enemy bases.

Also making a return are the towering mammoth-like Ultralisks, which inflict devastating amounts of area damage with their massive tusks. They also have the ability to burrow, enabling them to pop up from below the ground and launch surprise attacks against passing packs of enemies.

With Browder called away to answer questions at another table and my German companion now hooked up to an oxygen tank to help control his excitement at the new wing configuration of a Terran aerial unit, I dive into a succession of multiplayer games, each as unrelenting as the next. But with each game ending in either a dominant win or a crushing defeat, a gnawing doubt begins to scrape its molars down the back of my brain.

If the original *StarCraft*'s multiplayer games had one shortfall, it was the sense that there was a set formula for victory; an optimum order in which to construct buildings and units that simply couldn't be countered if built quickly enough. With *StarCraft II*'s multiplayer games seeming to head down a similar route, I asked Sigaty about this design choice.

"*StarCraft II* is a fast game, a mean game, it's all about attack," he explained. "We tried to add in tougher base defences, but it stopped people rushing. They just hid behind their base and no one attacked for a very long time. Whenever the game defences get too strong the game suffers.

"If you're not as good as someone else you're going to lose, just like in any other sport. If you try to hit a baseball thrown by a professional pitcher, you won't have a good time and in the same way if you play a professional *StarCraft* player you will get trounced."

With much balancing still ahead, and with the implementation of a collection of player aides that could help level the playing field for newcomers (check out the Learn Don't Burn boxout for more) it's more than possible that my niggling concerns will become moot by the time the game ships. Here's hoping.

While the reveal of the Zerg may be the main focus of this event, I haven't travelled all this way to ignore the game's other two races either, by the way.

The Terrans are the game's most instantly recognisable faction, sporting a collection of marines, tanks, buggies and cruisers that are spewed forth from barracks and weapons factories. Perhaps the least modified of the three races, the Terrans also possess some of the game's most visually impressive units, including the lumbering Thor attack walker and nuclear strikes that can be called in by covert ops units.

Better still, Terran buildings can be flown to new locations, though they are highly vulnerable while trundling to their new destination. A well-balanced faction with the game's best defence capabilities, the Terrans are shaping up to be the ideal entry point for any *StarCraft* beginner.

Conversely, the Protoss have undergone some major changes – most notably their ability to warp in new units anywhere where there's a power pylon (including within enemy bases if you manage to construct one there) and their array of powerful aerial units.

The Protoss also possess the game's only super unit, the Mothership. Vulnerable if sent into battle alone, but devastating when backed up by a fleet, this humongous cruiser can suck enemy units into a vortex of destruction and wipe out an entire army with a single attack.

Other Protoss highlights include powerful cloaked killers called Templars, a shielded three-legged walker with a powerful death ray called the Colossus and a massive battleship that sends out myriad fighters to pepper enemy units.
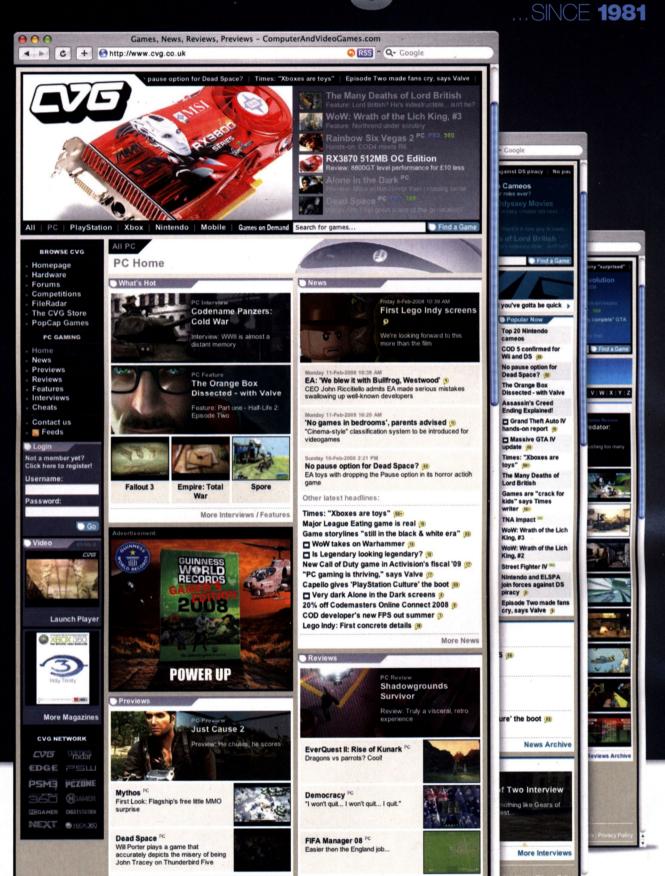
GUNNING FOR GLORY

As the two-day playtest comes to an end, I reflect on just how rare it is to be given so much hands-on time with a game at this stage of its development. It's testament to Blizzard's confidence in its product that we've been given such unfettered access to it. Still at pre-alpha stage, *StarCraft II* not only has the makings of another classic Blizzard RTS, it's already more stable than many finished games, with bugs virtually nonexistent.

With an open-ended single-player game also in the offing (head to the Choose Your Own Conquest panel for more info), and with the already sublime collection of factions being built upon with impressive imagination, *StarCraft* could be about to mount a triumphant return a decade after it first took the RTS genre by storm.

Perhaps you've never played the original, but if Blizzard continues along its current development path, then I'm willing to wager you'll be playing the sequel when it finally hits the shelves.

As for when that will be. Well, when it's done of course. After all, this is Blizzard we're talking about... **PCZ**

Creep prevents enemy factions from building on infested land.

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64 ⟩ ASSASSIN'S CREED

Running up walls and smashing up stalls – Altair finally makes it to the PC

Dwindle me this

I'VE JUST NOTICED something. This is my second column in the blue bit of the mag, after they shifted me out of the red bit to make way for that pipsqueak Zitron. And my column is fully 100 words shorter. Downscaling me, is it? Trying to silence me, yeah? Is it 'cos I found that box full of The Man's secrets, and you reckon I could bring the system down, right?

I took this one to the top, and apparently it's because people get more use out of the "Must Buys" box below than they do reading me banging on about imaginary "men". Apparently this magazine is about "games". I'm in no mood for accepting rational explanations, though. They'll tell me we're format specific next.

Anyway, this month we've got an Ubisoft Double Whammy, with *Assassin's Creed* and *Rainbow Six: Vegas 2* finally pulling up in their limousines for their gala premier. Will they stretch out an elegant stocking-clad leg, or drunkenly flash us their unbeknickered downbelows?

Jon Blyth

Jon Blyth, staff writer

Must Buys! ✓

PC ZONE Classics are hard to come by, and when you see one you should drop to the floor and refuse to move until someone buys you the game...

Crysis   Sins of a   The Orange Box
          Solar Empire

The PC ZONE Awards

CLASSIC • CLASSIC
PCZONE

RECOMMENDED
PCZONE

↓ DUMP ↓

CLASSIC (90%+)
Games scoring in this bracket are air-punching, heart-soaring triumphs. Buy them.

RECOMMENDED (75-89%)
Head-turning, if not eye-popping, games. But then, who wants their eyes popped?

DUMP (0-19%)
PC ZONE's dirty protest. If a game is bad, we won't shirk our duty.

AND THE REST

ONLINE ONLY
Don't have an internet connection? Then you're wasting your time. Move along please.

EXPANSION PACK
See this and you're going to have to own the original to play the expansion. We know – life's not fair.

ON THE DVD
Good news! Check out the cover DVD for a playable demo or movie.

The PC ZONE gaming machine

As you'll see on the many pages of resplendent reviews that follow, we list the minimum specifications you need to play each game in each review. Please refer to the publisher's website to check out their recommended optimum specs that'll make the games super-whizzy. We review all new games on a variety of systems, including our top-spec, very desirable Xworks X81-C2D, (pictured right). For more info on Xworks, tap into the wonder that is the Internet and type the following selection of letters into your browser: www.xworksinteractive.com.

PCZONE SWEARS...

● To only review code signed off by the publishers AND the developers
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"This is where I come to cry."

Strike when an opponent is about to attack to counter.

There's a button to make your horse do this.

ASSASSIN'S CREED

Steve Hogarty was jumping about on the roof, and now he can't get back down. Someone call the fire brigade...

DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montreal
PUBLISHER Ubisoft
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AT A GLANCE...

Dance through the Third Crusade, using your acrobatics to interrogate targets before stabbing them in the neck. This is how you win.
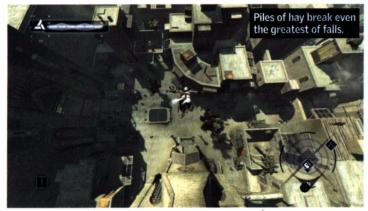
Minimum system requirements:
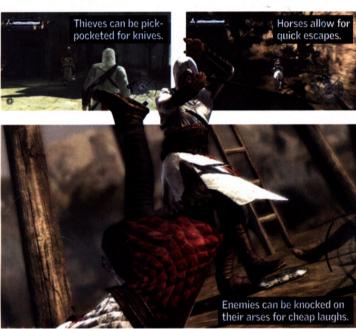2.6GHz dual core processor, 2GB RAM and a 256MB video card.

HOW IT STACKS

PRINCE OF PERSIA: SANDS OF TIME	84%
TOMB RAIDER: ANNIVERSARY	80%
ASSASSIN'S CREED	72%

OH HELLO, IT'S *Assassin's Creed*. Finally decided to show your face at the PC party, did you? And what's that you've brought with you? It had better be steaks and blow jobs for all of us impatient PC gamers, because you've kept us waiting a pretty long time. A whole six months you've been sitting inside the oven of development, and what have you got to show for it? Certainly not sirloin and fellatio, but four new kinds of mission and a fast travel system instead. You're just lucky you're so goddamn pretty.

A lot of people will have, at the very least, peripheral knowledge of *Assassin's Creed*. Released on the Xbox 360 back in 2007, it elegantly rode the crest of an immense surge of anticipation before washing up on a pristine beach of great sales figures. But this beach resides in the cove of unfulfilled expectations – this was one of the most powerful examples of style over substance you could ever hope to gawp at. Ubisoft claim that those six months of

conversion limbo have been used to address such criticisms though. They claim we PC gamers are getting the definitive version.

The thing is, the substance really wasn't all that lacking – it's just that the style was laid on so thick, the poor substance could barely hope to match up. Anyone with an eye for beauty couldn't fail to be won over by this big, stylish bastard. *Assassin's Creed* is an alarmingly beautiful game; even using Massive Attack's *Teardrop* in the TV ad didn't even seem pretentious.

JEWOOSALEM

The setting, if you're not already familiar, is a generous slice of the Crusade-era Middle East, squeezing in three huge cities and a menagerie of smaller towns and outposts across the surrounding countryside. You play Altair, the strongly characterised and hooded assassin, who is part of a society of becloaked hitmen who maintain world order by blending in with massive crowds and stabbing folks in the neck. However, Altair's

reckless attitude towards the rules of his profession sees him badly muck up. So the game is his attempt to redeem himself.

Except the Crusades isn't really when the game is set – the true setting is the near future, and your true character is a descendant of Altair, who's accessing his ancestor's memories through a (rather silly) genetic memory recalling machine. The slowly unfolding story plays out in both timelines, though in the present day you're trapped in a stainless steel laboratory. The tale is ridiculous, but it's so far-flung that you can't help but nod in admiration.

How Ubisoft are really hoping to impress you though, is through the two-fold implementation of both crowd dynamics and free running acrobatics. Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus are the game's three atmospheric cities. They're sprawling urban playgrounds – every wall and rooftop is effortlessly scaleable, giving you free reign to carve your own path through the city with unerring fluidity.

This parkour travel system is a technical marvel, as your character's hands and feet connect neatly with every ledge and crevice and every jump and swing is seamlessly blended into the next. The climbable surfaces aren't signposted and labelled with vines, big blue circles, or what have you – they simply exist

A rare moment on terra firma.

Altair chases a lost frisbee...

counter

counter

**Anyone with an eye for beauty couldn't fail
to be won over by this big, stylish bastard**

Piles of hay break even the greatest of falls.

Thieves can be pick-pocketed for knives.

Horses allow for quick escapes.

Enemies can be knocked on their arses for cheap laughs.

Gravity: the original assassin.

Monks and vigilantes
A civilian in need, is a civilian indeed

When on a bench, Altair becomes effectively invisible.

Scattered about cities you'll find citizens being harassed by soldiers. Saving these people by slaughtering the soldiers is in your best interest, as doing so 'unlocks' one of two things during missions. The first are monks, who are dressed similarly to Altair. They'll let you walk with them, head bowed, past guard posts. This is usually the only way of getting to certain areas undetected and so monks will always be lurking nearby. The second are vigilantes, who will start fighting with any guards chasing you.

'Unlocking' people is another way in which Assassin's Creed feels worryingly artificial, because in real life people aren't unlocked, they're born. The game half plays it off as those characters suddenly appearing in your jogged genetic memory, but really, who'd forget this many monks? And what is it about beating up other men that makes you remember deeply supressed memories? This doesn't add up!
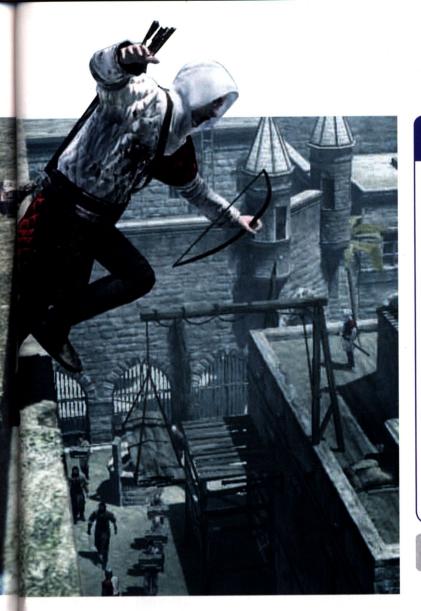
in the form of regular brickwork and architecture. Assassin's Creed allows you to rethink the ways you move your character about the game world, from a go-anywhere, climb-up-anything sort of perspective.

The fug of adrenaline that follows a successful assassination sees you bounding away from the scene of your crime like a man-sized squirrel, desperately seeking refuge by darting across rooftops and down alleyways at a spirited pace. The game takes enough control out of your hands to make it more a matter of choosing the direction in which to scarper, rather than have you micromanage your limbs and time every jump precisely. You could, in theory, hold

down three keys and watch Altair do a fully automatic parkour prance across half a city, all by himself. The result is a highly technical, stylised and flowing feel to the game, something in which the developer's previous title, Prince of Persia: SOT, dabbled regularly.

The crowds are rendered with similar attention to detail, allowing you to walk in and around the thronging mobs with nary a clipped polygon to be seen. Altair deftly places hands on nearby shoulders, and twists his upper body to gently and discreetly manoeuvre his way past people. Such smoothness gives you a weighty sense of self in a beautifully detailed world, and makes you realise just how forgiving you are

Death scenes take place in cyber-limbo.

Don't look down.

The stealth system in *Assassin's Creed* is more an indication of how aware those around you are of your presence, rather than how hidden you are. A yellow indicator means you're being watched by a guard – fairly normal circumstances, as the guards watch everybody. Start a fight while being watched and the law turns a blind eye, but pull a weapon and they're forced to get involved.

A red indicator means guards are suspicious and any strange action undertaken by you will get you immediately noticed – this happens, for instance, when a guard discovers a dead body. Do backflips during this phase and you'll move on to the flashing red triangle indicator, which means you're being chased and guards want you dead. Flashing yellow means you're being chased, but nobody can see you – in these cases you can dive into a roof garden or pile of hay, blend in with monks, or sit on a bench to give your pursuers the slip.

This all works extremely well, and logically too – traipsing about on rooftops, guards will rationalise, is exactly what the murderer would do.

Such a paint-by-numbers approach to murdering a man is grating in what is otherwise a sandbox world

of the rough-edged animations that fill almost every other game you've ever played.

REMEDIES

So these problems with the Xbox version, the ones Ubisoft said they'd do their utmost to patch up for the PC. What were they and have they been scrubbed right off? Well, having played both versions to completion I can speak with cocksure impunity.

First off, the sense of control over Altair given by the 360 as he flips through the Middle East was jarringly minimal and the clambering was fairly autonomous. This hasn't changed, though the paring down of complexity is probably necessary, given that with a bit more control you'd be fecklessly hurling Altair into spikes and down wells with the acrobatic skill of a mental patient. Enough control is afforded in choosing your escape routes anyway, especially when you're using your acrobatic abilities to escape guards and soldiers. And, lest we forget, it looks amazing when you do it. Then

there's the rigid and systematic mission system, which finds itself at odds with the freedom on offer in other aspects of the game. Once you've reached a city you must find a vantage point – usually a spire or tower – to unlock mission objectives within a certain radius. These objectives require you to pickpocket, eavesdrop or intimidate, and all are activated using artificial-feeling key presses. By carrying out these simple missions you gather intelligence and once you've got enough, you unlock the assassination mission.

Such a paint-by-numbers approach to murdering a man is grating in what is otherwise a sandbox world, and the routine of driving Altair to these viewpoints and effectively repeating the same gamut of missions continues throughout most of the game. The new PC-exclusive missions do very little to remedy this, having you destroy a required number of market stalls, or assassinate archers, or just collect flags – they're minigames at best. Also, one of the

missions is voiced by an Irish guy, and I'm not sure how historically accurate that is.

IN CONTROL

Ubisoft have gone to great lengths to adapt *Assassin's Creed* to PC – but as much as we appreciate the effort, they've tripped up at a few key points. If you're not endowed with a widescreen monitor you'll be stuck with looming great black borders, which might look cinematic, but ultimately make it feel like you're playing from inside a post box.

The control system, originally designed to work specifically with the Xbox control pad, has been exported to the keyboard in rather an awkward fashion. What was once mapped to four simple buttons now finds itself spread across various keys surrounding WASD, while the right mouse button acts as the gear change between low-profile actions (gentle pushes and blending) and their high-profile counterparts (sprints, jumps and fights). Where *Gears of War* made the transition from

Horses make travelling easy.

Just act natural...

Assassin's Creed present-day sections move the story along.

gamepad to mouse seem effortless, the mouse and keyboard combo simply doesn't feel ideal for Altair. The assassinations aren't what you'd hope for either, wonderful characters though the victims may be. Rather than stealthily approaching your target and eliminating them with as little fuss as possible – like the creed suggests – your victim nearly always puts up a fight, or forces you to fight your way past their guards.

Occasionally you'll pull off a quick kill with your wristblade and feel brilliant about yourself, but all

Sprinting through crowds increases your chance of falling.

The spectacular way Assassin's Creed is presented is enough to make most players overlook its problems

counter
Stabs to the armpits are absolutely fatal.

"I want down."

Roof gardens provide hiding places.

Monks are always up for harbouring murderers.

too often you'll be chasing your screaming target through crowded streets, knocking people over and waving your sword about like a twat. Rarely do you feel that you've done what the game intended you to do, and instead you find yourself blundering about, assassinating nothing but subtlety.

The fluidity so carefully threaded through the rest of the game just doesn't appear in the construction of the missions and that's *Assassin's Creed*'s greatest problem.

LAZARUS TRICK

Then again, the game has its free-running, crowd-dodging tricks, and pulls them out every time your interest slackens to astound you in such a spectacular and visual way to prevent you ever realising that, if you were to peel away the splendour of its cinematic presentation, *Assassin's Creed* becomes a plain, nothing sort of game. While it sounds unbelievable that the look and feel of a game could overpower its underlying dryness, it does. And frequently enough to make the game well worth playing.

Take this one occasion in the city of Acre, the Crusader stronghold: having spotted the huge church spire dominating the skyline, you traverse a mile of rooftops to get to it before navigating the church's tricky religious architecture. Getting to the peak of the spire takes a good five minutes, which

tapers off to a nice big cross which you can then climb over using nothing but your blaspheming limbs. Perched at the very tip, with just enough space for his feet, Altair crouches and balances while his assassin's garb flutters in the wind. The city far below you lies unfolded and expansive, from its guarded gates to its busy docks. Torn clouds roll across the sky, casting great sweeping shadows across swathes of the landscape.

A tangible sense of drama in games is rare, and *Assassin's Creed* frequently beams profundity from every pixel it can muster. The notion that you could go down into any of these streets and start putting your hands on people's shoulders is dizzying.

And easy as it is to clearly outline the game's faults, it's more difficult to pinpoint exactly what makes it great fun to play. Just when the sense of repetition stretches the illusion past its elastic limit, *Assassin's Creed* pulls a moment of faultless graphic flair out of its gorgeous hat and it immediately becomes a delight to play again.

The fighting system is one such saving grace, working around a deceptively simple framework of blocks, ripostes and attacks which combine to form a more impressive array of visually enticing moves. You time your mouse clicks to coincide with the clashing of swords to initiate a combo, which culminates in one of several fatal,

Tarantino-inspired attacks. Altair runs swords through chests, slaps his foes before backstabbing them, breaks their legs at the knee, gouges fleshy chunks from necks – it's a grotesque display, enhanced by the cinematically aware camera angles and increasingly bloodied steel.

So is this the definitive version? Well, in some ways it is. You can plug in a control pad if the controls bother you that much, it's running at a higher resolution than the Xbox version (despite the forced widescreen) and it's got some extra mission types thrown in, and when both timelines intertwine it makes for a intriguing storyline (and one whose blunt ending blows the doors wide open for the rest of the trilogy).

You can pick away at the game's faults, much as you might criticise the individual ingredients of a fine custard tart, as the performance issues and demanding system specs are just too blatant to deny. But if you forgive the tardiness, you'll find *Assassin's Creed* remains luxurious and sweet.

The spectacular way in which the game is presented is enough to make most players want to overlook the deep-running problems it harbours and plaudits must be paid to a setting this original and so excellently realised. However, for many this will be too superficial a game to provide anything more than somewhat hollow entertainment. **PCZ**

ENEMIES REMAINING
JUNG IS DOWN
YOU MUST SAVE HIM
ENGAGING ENEMY
ASSAULT

Jung is down. That's poignant that is.

Brilliant. More civilians to get in the way.

The cleaner is going to love that.

RAINBOW SIX: VEGAS 2

Jon Blyth rappels buildings. Honestly, they just can't stand him...

RECOMMENDED PCZONE RECOMMENDED

AT A GLANCE...

Big tactical romp through the bits of Vegas you don't instantly think of. Slick, enjoyable, and engaging as hell.

Minimum system requirements:
3GHz processor, 1GB RAM (2GB for *Vista*), and a 128MB video card with Pixel Shader 3.0.

HOW IT STACKS

GEARS OF WAR	90%
VEGAS 2	83%
VEGAS	82%

WITH A SERIES that dates back 10 years, you can't really start a review without giving a brief overview. People might assume I was ignorant, and as a reviewer and a vain bastard, I simply couldn't handle that. In the case of *Rainbox Six*, it's also a great chance to bang on about the hey-day of tactical shooters on the PC.

From 1998 to 2003, the *Rainbox Six* series was the poster boy for unforgiving military tactical simulations. Even the third game, *Raven Shield*, saw the game survive the move to Ubisoft with its excellence intact, and the PC and Xbox versions were so different that the accusations of dumbing down never flew too thick or fast.

Lockdown changed all that, when a critical panning was the reward for a tactically bereft fourth game of brainless bang-action. Then, Clancy's company Red Storm Entertainment was sponged up by Ubisoft Montreal and *Rainbow Six: Vegas* capitalised on the newly-lowered

expectations of the world, by being a thoroughly enjoyable (and admittedly flawed) compromise of the two approaches.

BACK IN VEGAS

Take off your headsets, gentlemen, we've arrived at today. And you'll be unsurprised to hear that *Vegas 2* isn't so much the sixth *Rainbow Six* game, as the second *Rainbow Six: Vegas* game. While it's more of the same, Clancy's multicolour franchise has long since cashed in its hardcore chips and no-one was seriously expecting *SWAT 5*. And hey, it's better than *Lockdown*.

We're still in Las Vegas, but don't expect a game that's all slots, hookers or a combination of the two. There are some scenes in clubs and casinos, but your pursuit is of the bomb letting-off terrorists, so there's no time for prostitutes and fruities. Mostly your trip to Vegas features rooftops, conference centres, libraries, junk yards – basically anywhere where there's an interesting map layout, lots of stuff to hide

behind and an episode of *CSI* being filmed. The locations have the feel of dust and grime and although they serve their purpose, they're still a little lacking for 2008, with plenty of glimpse-snagging polygons to break the illusion. If the models of your teammates weren't so good, it'd make sense that some of the NPCs look like an Irish Wolfhound took a shit in a tin of corned beef. As it is, it doesn't.

But hell, that sort of fixation on graphics is exactly why game development costs have rocketed, and that's why *Rainbow Six* went commercial, so let's not trap ourselves in a self-perpetuating spiral of complaint. We care about stories too and *Vegas 2*'s is standard Clancy, with a group of terrorists, led by a greasy looking type and his brother, who've been making bombs. The Rainbow Six team have been landed with the job of investigating the contents and locations of these dirty blow-ups and defusing them. Then, you'll hunt the guys responsible down, like the big blue jeans and freedom-hating dogs they are.

Predictable it may be, but it's told with more flair than *Vegas*; the pacing of the tutorial is not patronising nor remiss, and there's no drawn-out Mexico scene to kick things off. (If you're a connoisseur of tutorials, then you're weird – but *Vegas 2* will keep you happy.)

With hit-and-miss graphics and an eminently ignorable storyline, it's ➤

Nice dance moves.

He regretted wearing a red circle on his head.

Next we hit the swimming pool and the male changing room!

"It's OK. I'm just listening in on your dialogue."

Your pursuit is of the bomb letting-off terrorists, so there's no time for prostitutes and fruities
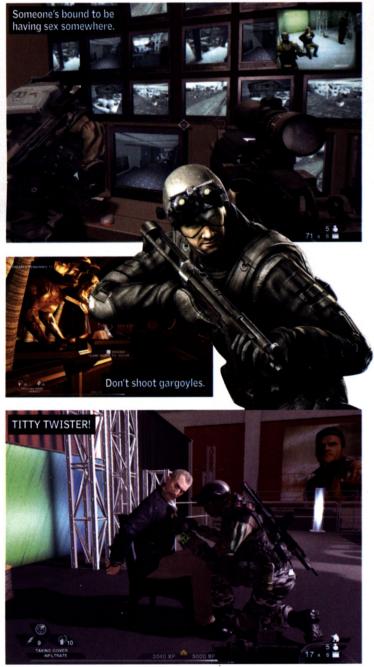
Stupid, stupid, stupid
This is why soldiers look down on civilians

You've just saved this lady's life. She's so thankful, that she's going to let you through a gate. We can only assume she doesn't tell you the code because she likes punching it in herself. No lie, the mercifully short journey from her rescue to that gate will make you hunch into an angry, wretched ball. In what is overall an excellent game, she stands out as its outright nadir.

"Can't we kill the civillians? Please?"

Imagine the squad members of *Half-Life 2*, whose gawping was mitigated only by the fact that they politely retreated a couple of steps when you ran into them. This stubborn cow doesn't back off. She follows you down corridors and blocks your retreat. She doesn't respond to your orders, like your team-mates. And she cheerfully moves into your line of sight while you're picking off a soldier.

Congratulations, Ubisoft, for making the single most aggravating experience of the entire *Rainbow Six* series.

Someone's bound to be having sex somewhere.

Don't shoot gargoyles.

TITTY TWISTER!

Everything is very flattering to the skills of a military layman

God, you're warm.

down to the gameplay to drag the game up. And thankfully, that's where it all comes together. The main thrust of the action lies in the console-friendly areas of context-sensitive action buttons, regenerating health and squad members who can take far more damage than your flimsy wee self. In short, everything is immediately playable and very flattering to the skills of a military layman.

YOU'RE JUST GREAT

Stacking your men by a door, while you run up to the roof to support them with sniper fire makes it easy to think you're amazing. When you're not dying – and you will die, a lot – *Vegas 2* really pampers your self-esteem. Despatching your guys to the other side of the room with a glance and a tap of the space bar feels natural and awesome.

Tentatively edging through an exposed room with multiple access points and a skylight, through which terrorists are probably going to rappel any minute, is gripping. The music (which you'll turn down) swells to an abrasive crescendo in times of tension, and is tooth-grittingly appropriate.

The heat vision and night vision modes both look great – and beyond that shallow observation, you'll use them because they're useful. Finally, sliding your snake cam under a door to get the lay of the land and tagging guys for death makes you feel like a big man.
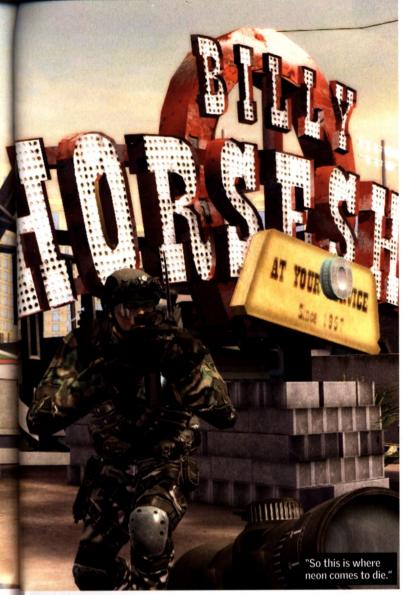
A big bloody man with a bloody great snake cam. Yeah.

EXPERIMENTATION

A slight irritation emerged after delivering a couple of accidental rounds of friendly fire to the spinal columns of my squad, so I started to investigate why. What became clear was that my fellas weren't always taking the most obvious path to my indicated destination. They might have been taking a more tactical route, I can't honestly say – but how tactically superior did they feel when they walked into my line of fire? How black ops did it feel when I peppered your buttocks with buckshot, eh?

The way around this is to keep your guys involved in what you're doing. Don't give them a vague order to run somewhere over there. Keep them tight. Make them flank a door. Don't leave them hanging around unless you've got a sound reason. Basically,

"So this is where neon comes to die."

ENEMIES REMAINING: 25

You can hang back and let your team open doors.

TEAM 'MOVE TO' DOOR

Here, the advantages of blind fire are demonstrated.

"Here's a 'early morning special', buddy."

accept the fact you're fighting in a team and stop being such a glory seeking cock.

That one minor drawback is perhaps a symptom of a much larger good thing; the various ways in which you can progress through a level. There's always more than one route to your goal and securing a room with more than one door usually involves a bit of reconnaissance – or the abandonment of boring doors in favour of sniping through a window. If you're finding progress difficult, take a step back and look for another door. Go upstairs, get the drop on those bastards.

CONTROLS

The space bar is your universal wonder key. Place your sights on anything, and if you can do anything with it, the space bar will probably do it. Point to a door, it'll make your squad prepare for entry. Point it towards a rappel line and you'll order them to 'knot up', which means hop onto a rope

for a nice slide. The V, B and N keys then replace the 360 controller's D-pad in fine tuning those options. If they're surrounding a door, V will make them throw in a flash, then run in and kill everything. B is a straight enter and clear. And N will drop a frag grenade in, before storming the room. The options are literally three.

Seeing as this is a compromise control method, does mouse and keyboard work as well as a 360 controller? Yes. This is an FPS, it's what mouse and keyboard were designed for. And although some of the multipurpose keys don't quite work (holding E for inventory is a slight failure), stretching your finger all the way over to N makes you feel like you're delivering a particularly obscure and clever command.

CHATTING NPCS

Nice touches are littered throughout. The conversations of the NPCs – when they're not unnecessarily repeating themselves – are a treat to listen to. These range from poignant insights into the humanity, private lives and moral ambiguity of your enemies, to slightly embarrassing conversations when you're watching them through the always handy snake cam.

With your sights trained on them, they'll say, "It feels like we're being watched." Then they'll needlessly continue, "What if their

sights are trained on me right now?" You almost expect one of them to say "Oh shit, what if my hands are just pixels?"

The cheekiest example of this has to be in Act 4, where two terrorists are talking about a new war game in which there is no violence.

"You just send in the diplomats," explains one soldier. "You don't control them, you just send them in, and they make everyone happy." When asked what the point of that game is, the soldier explains that it's to make a huge bunch of money.

Touché, Ubisoft. Touché.

PROMOTION

The game forces you around to its way of thinking, like a particularly severe dog trainer. Disobey the rules of gentle, tactical progress and run into a room with your tongue hanging out and you'll quickly find your gizzards smeared across the stuff you should have been using for cover. You'll understand the value of keeping your squad members around you and you'll quickly learn to value (and abuse) their accuracy and bullet absorbing. They can be dropped any number of times and will only require you (or better still, a teammate) to heal them. In fact, in the two easier modes, it's a temptation to use your squad as a dipstick for danger.

Play nice
Console yourself with multiplayer co-op

"No, I'm not hiding."

Multiplayer extends the game considerably – and not just in endless confrontations – the co-op modes add a substantial amount of play life to the game, with the entire campaign playable as a co-op game and the Terrorist Hunt mode offering another, more substantial challenge in which you (and, if you like, a friend) fend off a customisable influx of bad guys.

Put more terrorists in, and set the skill level to Realistic, and you're in for a varied and substantial addition to the relatively short story campaign. Treat the single player as practice.

A player's gotta play (online)

Vegas 2's new co-op and PvP gameplay stripped bare

Vegas 2's new multiplayer modes, complement the previous game's formidable array of online options.

The Team Leader mode involves one team attempting to get their leader to an extraction point on the far side of the map. Both team leaders can see one another's respective locations on their HUD, making their communication with the rest of the team, and the ability to shoot through certain materials, vital.

"Don't worry, we've got him cornered."

The demise of the team leader dismisses that team's ability to respawn though, turning the game on its head as victory becomes a matter of dogged survival.

Meanwhile Demolition whiffs of the succulent pong of *Counter-Strike*'s bomb-planting mode, with one team attempting to secure three objectives (planting bombs, establishing satellite uplinks etc) while another tries to sabotage their actions at every opportunity.

Shoot someone in the arse for extra XP. Seriously.

Terrorists: not ones for fashion.

Bombs. Everywhere.

No dignity in death.

Context insensitive commands.

This is cleverly deterred by the game's experience and promotion system. Let your guys do the all the thinking and you'll rise the ranks at less than half the speed. You only get full XP for a kill from your own gun, or a kill by your squad which you tagged through the snake cam. What's more, your progress through the A.C.E.S. ranks – the disciplines of marksmanship, close quarters battle (CQB) and assault – depend on specific kinds of kill that you have to deliver yourself. This system gives such regular and satisfying rewards that you'll resent the kills of your teammates and use the rules of engagement options to limit their fire. They can be set to fire at will or return fire only.

Marksmen unlock higher ranks through headshots, long-range kills and so on. CQB is rewarded through close-up kills (not just melee) and shooting a man from behind, amongst others. While progress along the assault path is made by kills from explosives (grenades and, of course, exploding barrels) and shooting people through soft cover. Your progression in military rank unlocks new camouflage and armour, and advacement along the specialist trees unlocks new weapons, all of which can be taken into multiplayer. What was once the remit of Vegas' multiplayer alone has now joyously encompassed the entire game.

So far, so Rainbow Six: Vegas. But while the sequel may not have been a complete –

or even substantial – reinvention, it did promise some new stuff. Amongst which was improved AI, giving the enemies more reactions and more ways of attacking you.

Although it's impressive to see a terrorist react to your laser sight on his forehead by dropping to the floor and firing blindly, there's never a real sense that the terrorists have the claimed number of options open to them. Perhaps it's the curse of Airborne – give the enemy AI the chance to behave in an unscripted and unpredictable way and it'll just do the same things over and over again anyway. But progress through the more difficult maps is seriously helped by memorising where the enemies came from on your failed attempts. Not guaranteed, but definitely helped.

Sadly, the AI does suffer from exactly the same problems as in Vegas. When it works, it works. But all too often, shooting someone in the leg doesn't make them realise they've got a shit hiding place, which is a problem Ubisoft explicitly said they'd be addressing. And worse still a terrorist will occasionally stare blankly through you, stubbornly refusing to be woken by your unstealthy advances. A couple of times, I watched my men and bad guys standing face-to-face, racing to reload. I'm no soldier, but I'd have taken cover myself.

This is all immersion-breaking rather than game-breaking, but it's something that

should have been fixed. As for the new weapons and armour, well – they're still guns and armour and they're more for people who like guns and armour, rather than representing a massive gameplay enhancement. Every little helps, though.

MULTIPLAYER
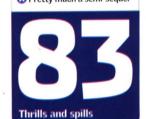
The multiplayer additions (see the box outs) generally work well and are good solid fun. Any game setup problems seen on the consoles, when the servers are filled with the public, have yet to be seen at the time of writing – but there's no denying that they're decent diversions when up and running. If somewhat unlikely to steal happy military type players from beneath the noses of Call of Duty 4 and Counter-Strike.

In summary, Vegas 2 is a refinement and general improvement on Vegas, as it's better paced, more consistent and bigger. Of course, its had most of its dramatic thunder stolen by the fact it's a deeply similar game to its predecessor, but that just makes it easier for me to unthinkingly gob out a fatuous cliché like "If you liked Vegas, you'll like Vegas 2 a bit more!" And this is certainly an accessible entry point to the series. If you're new to the Rainbow Six series and tactical squad shooters on the whole, this is an entertaining entry point. Just don't expect to get all the glitz and glamour that the title implies. **PCZ**

A Nazi, refusing to learn to share a gun. Typical.

TURNING POINT: FALL OF LIBERTY

Dan Marshall takes another Hitler-shaped bullet for an increasingly amused team

DEVELOPER Spark Unlimited
PUBLISHER Codemasters
WEBSITE www.codemasters.co.uk/turningpoint
ETA Out Now
PRICE £34.99

FOR all the unspeakable horrors it brought, World War II did one thing right – a black-and-white, Good vs Evil setup, ripe for later generations to refer back to in morally ambiguous times. The trouble is that it all took place in '40s Europe and it all gets a bit samey after a while. Endless muddy fields, trenches, farmhouses, bombed out villages and a bit where you're in a castle's twisty staircase.

What World War II needs is a breath of fictitious fresh air. Presumably that's the thinking behind *Turning Point*, which has the audacity to bump off our lovely Mr Churchill back in 1931, leaving him unable to fulfil his destiny as Britain's go-to man for upbeat speeches. As a result, Hitler and his platoon of bumbling buffoons do considerably better in their little war and pluck up the courage to have a pop at The Good Ol' US of A.

That's the last straw for Dan Carson, a New York construction worker who's trying to do a spot of hammering on the 13th floor when the Third Reich turns up. After making his escape, he gets involved in the American Resistance movement and quickly finds himself with all manner of hopes – if not medals – pinned on him. There might be more qualified people to push out of a plane above London on a top-secret mission. But if there's one thing FPS games have taught us, it's that the might of a nation is nothing compared to a quiet bloke.

The whole thing is an interesting premise, which makes it such a shame that it's so poorly executed. The idea of running round Nazi-occupied '50s Manhattan ducking behind yellow taxis and watching Zeppelins loom overhead should be amazing, but *Turning Point* has turned the concept into a dull slog, making the whole thing as appealing as a naked Heinrich Himmler, bent double and smothered in wasps.

STORY TIME!

As you trudge from location to location, from set piece to set piece it suddenly dawns that there are no bones whatsoever underneath all this fighting meat. There's no characterisation or gripping plot to get your teeth into, so *Turning Point*'s amazing setup becomes a masterclass in how not to tell a story. We know nothing whatsoever about Carson, who he is or why he's doing what he's doing. The only reason I even know his name is because I looked it up in the manual. The intrinsic lack of a fulfilling, satirical, deep or life-changing storyline is *Turning Point*'s biggest failure and it's a massive shame.

Instead, what we have is a bog-standard, linear FPS with no surprising, interesting, clever or unique elements whatsoever. *Turning Point* does what it does, and it never pushes the boat out. In this day and age, that's travesty enough, but when a title has such massive potential, as this game does, it stings all the more.

CLOBBER 'IM

One of the game's only promising gameplay additions is the ability to scuffle with a Nazi. If you can get close enough and grab them, you can either turn them into a fairly useless human shield, or beat them silly with your big monkey fists. While the fistfights themselves are relatively varied and superbly dramatic, the real joy is in the occasional 'environmental' kill – a custom

Back to Rapture already?

Nazi spaceships!

The world's most preposterous sniper rifle.

Cheeky Nazis ruining London. Tsh.
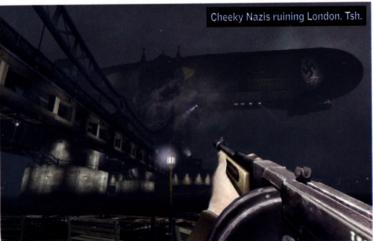
> ## There's no way I could recommend that anyone spends any money on *Turning Point*, let alone 35 smackers

animation that plays depending on context – which sees you trapping some poor chap's bonce under a truck or locking him inside a burning furnace. They're little moments of preposterous joy in an otherwise repetitive world of wave-after-wave shooting.
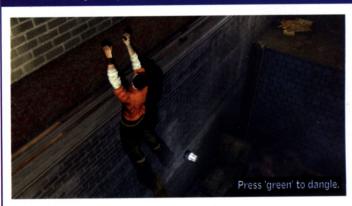
Talking of which, there's nothing more annoying than an ambiguous death – which is presumably why dead alternative-history Nazis get catapulted 12ft away by the hopelessly over-eager physics engine, while their newly-liberated weapon is slung an equally absurd distance in the opposite direction. Each time it happens, this is a farcical sight, which will never fail to delight the simpleton in you.

These screenshots actually make the game look exciting...

"Why am I doing this now? I'm a builder..."

Turning Point isn't a complete disaster, after all there are some nice touches – such as the more injured you are, the more monochrome the screen becomes – and it's a fairly entertaining old romp through unexplored territory. Also, the soundtrack's written by the guy who did the music for *Lost*, and is an impressive mish-mash of the themes from *Star Wars* and *Aliens*, while the ending is surprisingly exciting.

That said there's no way I could, as a human being with a conscience, ever recommend that anyone spends any money on *Turning Point*, let alone 35 smackers. But, if you happen to find yourself walking past a bin in the street, and there's a copy poking out of the top, then it's worth fishing out. While you're there, you might as well give that can of Tennent's Super a little shake to see if there's a wee drop left in the bottom. Today could be your lucky day. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics	Occasionally above-average
Sound	Unremarkable. But good music
Multiplayer	The usual suspects

✓ Interesting premise
✓ Impressive music credentials
✗ Bog-standard gunning
✗ Criminal lack of story

59

Wasted opportunity

The alien recreation of Uttoxeter was deemed a partial success.

A universe at war.

The races are all bizarre.

Open fire!
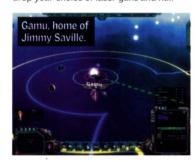
LOST EMPIRE: IMMORTALS

Lost in space, *Ed Zitron* holds out a thumb and hopes for the best

DEVELOPER Pollux
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive
WEBSITE www.paradoxplaza.com/lostempire
ETA Out Now
PRICE £29.99

IF YOU WANT to rule the universe, you have no right expecting it to be simple. And *Lost Empire: Immortals* certainly doesn't do anything to make it easier for you. Starting in the aftermath of an intergalactic war, your species has to rebuild itself and take over space using economic or military means (as if there's any other kind) through turn-based resource hogging, world colonising, warfaring and talking to poor 3D models of aliens.

Playing *Lost Empire: Immortals* involves dealing with a deluge of micromanagement, and building intricate connections between your planets to make everything work properly. If you want to colonise a world, you have to build a colony ship. But to build a colony ship, you need to design it – by which I mean drop your choice of laser guns and hull

Gamu, home of Jimmy Saville.

sections into a template. Then wait a few turns for it to build.

Once that happens, the wretched colonists will probably get attacked and wiped out – either before they leave, when they're en route, or have arrived at their new home/graveyard – so you'll have to re-appraise the ship's load. Out with another needless balance of hull space, fighter bays and weapons, and try again. And this is long before you have to consider building multiple ships to form a fleet.

STARBUCKS

Overwhelming as the micromanagement is, once you get a head for what weapons do, what ships are the most powerful, have researched some new technologies, and have a full-scale interplanetary trade network set up, you can swan around the galaxy making friends, enemies and corpses of everybody you meet.

While the story is light and terribly translated at times, the quests are rewarding enough (resource-wise) to keep you doing them, although you'll get tired of random civilisations saying, "We are tired of your presence, give us some minerals." You may even find yourself lapsing into a fugue state involving automatically blowing up anyone you meet, just to stop them complaining about you.

While this is isn't a particularly original nor brilliant game, it's fun once you get past the bomb of research and design that the game drops on you. Just don't expect a tutorial that will explain how to play this game; trial and error are your friends. Once you've allied with them, *Lost Empire: Immortals* will be one too. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics	Average, sparse UI
Sound	Hilariously bad techno
Multiplayer	10-player online

✔ Engrossing
✔ Lots to do
✖ Awful learning curve
✖ Overwhelming options
✖ Doing anything takes a long time

67
Get *Solar Empires* instead

Stinky by name, stinky by dialogue.

THE U.S. PATENT OFFICE CAN *CENSORED* MY *CENSORED* PUS-FILLED *CENSORED*!

SAM & MAX 2.04: CHARIOTS OF THE DOGS

Back from the doghouse

DEVELOPER Telltale Games
PUBLISHER Telltale Games/Steam
WEBSITE www.telltalegames.com/samandmax
ETA Out now
PRICE $9 (£4.50) per episode, $35 (£18) for all five episodes

Minimum system requirements:
800Mhz processor, 256MB RAM and a 32MB graphics card.

No, it's not a disguise.

SAM AND MAX have felt trapped recently. In a world that relies on in-jokes, new players are alienated by the exclusivity of the self-references. However, if you've played all the games, you can't help but notice – and begin to weary of – the template that the adventures all fit. Last month's vampiric romp had strong jokes, but the puzzles were dazzlingly routine, and only my lowered expectations let me enjoy it as much as I did.
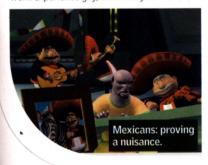
Telltale won't be getting another chance; *Chariots Of The Dogs* is a cold slap that reminds you how good the series can be. The pre-game intro script feels like it was written by the work experience guy, but once you

reach its *DOTT*-style time-machine, everything is fresh, clean and complicated. Your progression is far less obvious than we've become used to – the problem seems like a knot, rather than the transparent three-strand puzzles of late. The science may be sub-*Torchwood*, but puzzle logic is intact. Even if you'll spend a while knowing the answer, and trying to let the game know you know the answer, it's still the most satisfying and funniest episode of the season.

If you want in on even half the jokes, don't start here – but if you've followed the sine wave of quality that brings us all to this 10th episode, *Chariots Of The Dogs* will quickly become one of your favourites.

Jon Blyth

Mexicans: proving a nuisance.

PCZONE 81

Pedigree chum

"Will my massive bowl of cereal impress the judge?"

Mum's electrocuted!

"And a dash of bleach..."

THE SIMS 2: FREETIME

Steve Hogarty spends his free time filled with insoluble rage

GOD DAMN. I was so certain *FreeTime* would be the worst *Sims 2* expansion pack yet. I mean, with a name like *FreeTime*, how could it be anything other than day-scouringly dull tripe? So, with hopes soaring, I strode into the office, demanded to know if the atrocity had arrived yet and if I "could do a review of it please".

Our reviews editor did not reply, and instead used a single finger to slide the game box across his desk into my grasping monkey hands. I'd been waiting all week to shit all over a *Sims* expansion. I'd even prepared some new metaphors, like "a bull farted in my candy floss", which doesn't even mean anything when you take it out of context like that.

But *FreeTime* isn't bad. Actually, it's very good. If at any point you thought it would be an aimless scattering of new actions, you, like me, were stupid and wrong. *FreeTime* is about the pursuit

of hobbies, rather than the simple act of carrying them out.

Take, for example, the food hobby path. Cook a meal and your *Sim* will gain enthusiasm for cuisine, pursue this and it'll become something he can talk about with his friends. Take it further again and you can subscribe to cookery magazines (subscribing to magazines – brilliant!), as well as gaining membership to cooking clubs, or entering cooking competitions to win prizes. This expansion appeals to the progress-bar fan inside us all.

There are 10 different hobbies, each with ladders to climb as your enthusiasm for that hobby grows. And as with every *Sims* expansion, a whole brigade of additional unrelated content comes with it – the Best Friends Forever status (which grants the 'inside joke' action), custom radio stations playing your own MP3s, a PC pre-installed with *The Sims 3* and the Lifetime Aspiration Meter, which allows for a second aspiration. There's also an Unsavoury Charlatan who skulks about the public lots preying on women. Superb!

FreeTime reignites *Sims 2* by adding an unexpected new depth to the game. So perhaps it's just the shattered remains of my cynical husk speaking here, but *FreeTime* is a *Sims* expansion pack I can definitely get behind. **PCZ**

"I'm going to kick this."

AT A GLANCE...

Hobbies for your Sims allow them to develop in new and honestly exciting ways. If you like progress bars, you'll love this.

Minimum system requirements:
1.4GHz processor, 256MB RAM and a 32MB graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

THE SIMS 2: PETS	**72%**
THE SIMS 2: OPEN FOR BUSINESS	**72%**
THE SIMS 2: FREETIME	**70%**

PCZONE

Graphics	**New outfits**
Sound	**Custom radios**
Multiplayer	**No sir**

✅ Hobbies
✅ Best Friends Forever
✅ Unsavoury Charlatan
❌ It's still a grubby expansion
❌ The box is full of EA advertising

70

Leisurely

Calm down mate, we've all had a drink...

NINJA REFLEX: STEAMWORKS EDITION

Click, chop, punch

DEVELOPER Nunchuck Games
PUBLISHER Steam
WEBSITE www.ninjareflex.com
ETA Out now
PRICE $9.95 (£5)

Min system req:
1GHz processor, 256MB RAM (512MB for Vista), and a 128MB video card.

I'm a black belt, see?

WHEN THE VALVE offices came to a halt for the casual majesty of *Peggle*, the result was *Peggle Extreme*, an *Orange Box* branded set of bonus levels. We're guessing the Seattle HQ has become similarly taken with *Ninja Reflex*, because the *Steamworks Edition* is littered with Companion Cubes and headcrabs.

You can almost see why. Almost. *Ninja Reflex* is *Brain Training* for your hand. There are six trials, each with different mouse-based motor skills. In Shuriken, you click to lock on and move the mouse to throw, Koi has you tracing fish movements, and in Hashi you'll also catch flies with chopsticks. They all work well too, with some reservations about the figure-of-eight movement used in Nunchuck.
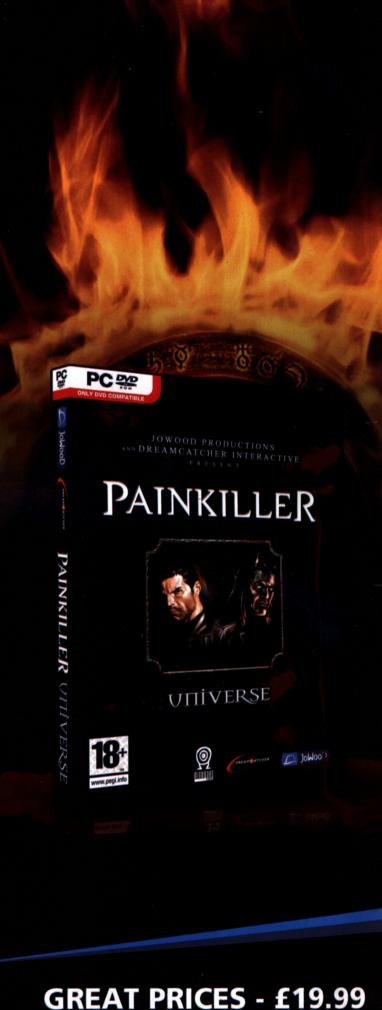
By the time you reach Green Belt, all 36 minigames are unlocked, with six slight variations on each of the six weapons that are really far too similar to call new games. After that, the progress to Level 3 Black Belt is just a matter of ratcheting up the difficulty. At the very hardest stages, some games feel more like luck than reflexes. But then, I said that about those Shaolin Monks. Fluky bastards.

A crippling absence in the multiplayer is online play. In a state-of-the-art framework where you can join your mate's server in a single click, it's baffling that *Ninja Reflex* expects four people to huddle around one monitor. At a fiver, this is a interesting, stylish, simple diversion. Just don't expect to be doing backflips once you're done.

Jon Blyth

You can lead a lambda water... is that a joke?

PCZONE
67
Handy fun

Dream Pinball has it all... castle bumpers...

...helicopter combos...

...dinosaur multiballs...

...fish multipliers...

DREAM PINBALL 3D

Jon Blyth puts on some oversized shoes as beans spew out of his TV

DEVELOPER Zuxxez
PUBLISHER South Peak
WEBSITE www.dream-pinball.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £9.99 (£20 download)

AT A GLANCE...

A pinball game that puts all of its eggs in the simulator basket, instead of in the exciting thrill basket.

Minimum system requirements:
600MHz processor, 256MB RAM and a 3D graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

REAL PINBALL	**BETTER**
DREAM PINBALL 3D	**70%**
SPACE CADET	**WORSE**

WHAT DO PINBALL and *Deal Or No Deal* have in common? Think hard: pinball isn't hosted by a smug prick, and *Deal Or No Deal* (sadly) doesn't involve you pushing something as hard as you can until the thing you're slapping goes dead between your palms. The answer is both lose something important as videogames.

Game shows lose their sense of reward and jeopardy, while pinball loses a sense of physical engagement. On the *Star Trek: TNG* pinball game, I once earned a place in the vaunted Q Continuum during a two-hour session in which I'd honestly say I was more pinball than man. How do you simulate that?

Dream Pinball 3D, staggeringly, does a fair job. From a physics and technical point of view, this is far and away the best pinball sim I've played. The game looks great, the glassy reflections adding literal polish. The selection of camera angles are

well judged: you can choose from a tactically useful (but graphically distant) overview, down to a visually impressive (but overwhelming) close-up on the ball. Faulting the basic toolset is impossible. The six different balls, with different physics, are a bit of a gimmick, but it's by no means offensive.

The problem is the tables. The six themed boards each have their own sound effects – from the ghoulish creaks of Monsters, to the limp yelps of "Oh no! It's a T-rex!" in Dino Hunt – and the bumpers and ramps are in different positions. Beyond that though, they all play similarly.

While it might feel unfair to compare a pinball sim to classic real-world pinball tables like *TNG* or *The Addams Family*, those games kept you interested by constantly dangling carrots and doing things. The *Dream Pinball 3D* tables often leave you feeling like you're coaxing out whatever action they have to offer.

The basic problem is that you only ever feel like you're surviving, never achieving something grand.

With more ambition in the table design, *Dream Pinball 3D* has the potential to be great. As it stands, it's just good.

One last thing – if they'd included a table designer, I'd have added 20 to the score right off. The world needs more cock-shaped pinball tables. **PCZ**

...helicopters again...

...and flippers!

PCZONE

Graphics	Perfect for the job
Sound	Sometimes hilarious
Multiplayer	Four people around the same computer

- ✓ Looks fantastic
- ✓ Feels like pinball
- ✓ Pleases classic pinball fans
- ✗ Disappoints modern pinball fans
- ✗ Needs a construction kit

70

Mean pinball

Sidewinder

51 Combo!

...utoyo Yamanouchi

Man Chong

Alee-OOP!

220

Cao Pi

Cao Pi

268

The Sword of Ribena spreads teeth-rotting death with every swipe.

517

Push, damn you.

WARRIORS OROCHI

One-man army *Ed Zitron* goes to war with nothing but a razorblade and a keyboard

DEVELOPER Koei
PUBLISHER Koei
WEBSITE www.koei.com/whoisorochi
ETA Out now
PRICE £19.99

SOMETIMES IT'S NICE that games aren't that close to real life, especially in the case of *Warriors Orochi*, a title that defies all logic, storytelling and good sense to create a manic frenzy of death.

The game all takes place in a bizarre time warp scenario involving the Dynasty Warriors (from Koei's *Dynasty Warriors* series) and the Samurai Warriors (a spin-off of *Dynasty Warriors*) getting thrown together in a battle royale, eventually realising that they're all going to die unless they kill the Serpent King Orochi.

You select one of several groups of players, following something approaching a storyline that leads you into gigantic battles against wave after wave of enemies that are predominantly devoid of AI, charging willingly towards you then standing still as you lop them apart.

Their officers are slightly more clever, deliberately knocking you off your horse or using special attacks, but it doesn't get much more cerebral than tapping a key (beware driver conflicts if you're using a 360 pad) before saddling up and chasing down the next officer.

CAN YOU DIG IT?

The little strategy you use comes down to following the objectives that centre around killing officers, protecting areas, or saving your hopelessly stupid allies before launching a final assault on the enemy leader. The simplistic action gets very repetitive – to the point that you'll probably get tired of clearing enemies, and choose to ride directly to the final boss without touching any of his cohorts.

This approach misses out on valuable experience and massive cohort combos though, and because your three freely-switchable characters don't share experience, problems can arise. What anyone but the most laboriously patient player will find is that one character will generally be a useless distraction to pull out while your better characters heal up.

Warriors Orochi never rises above simple hack-and-slash, but is fun, visceral and silly, with daft voice acting and Asian techno-jazz. **PCZ**

AT A GLANCE...

Repetitive and silly samurai slasher that pits you against armies of the willing-to-be-chopped-apart.

Minimum system requirements:
1.6GHZ processor, 256MB RAM, and a 64MB video card.

HOW IT STACKS

SWORD OF THE NEW WORLD **70%**

DYNASTY WARRIORS 4 HYPER **70%**

WARRIORS OROCHI **60%**

Out of my way fool!

Defeat Dong Xi and Chen Lan to enable the fires to be put buff

210

Slither out of this one, you reptilian!

50

Bloody fake cigars...

PCZONE

Graphics	Crisp, smooth
Sound	Terrible music, sword clashing
Multiplayer	On the same computer

✓ Huge-scale combat
✓ Good fun in short bursts
✓ Slick, crisp graphics
✗ Repetitive
✗ Story forgettable
✗ Horrible voice acting

60

Come out to play

You won't find any of these indie games in the shops, but you can download them or get trial versions on our discs.

indiezone

PCZONE ON THE DVD

Martin Korda fights monsters, hunts for treasure and pollen, then cooks soup

DEPTHS OF PERIL

INDIE ZONE GAME OF THE MONTH

DEVELOPER Soldak Entertainment **WEBSITE** www.soldak.com **PRICE** $29.99 (£15)

DEPTHS OF PERIL is so deep that if you threw a coin into it, it wouldn't hit the bottom until next June. As a mage, warrior, rogue or priest, you must set up a faction and defend the community of Jorvik from enemy attacks, while vying for control of the city with rival groups.

Striking a balance between co-operating with your rivals to safeguard Jorvik and trying to wipe them out is far from easy. Leave the threats to the town unchecked as you attempt to overthrow your foes and you'll be left with one hell of a fight when it comes to the inevitable siege. Work too closely on the external threats and you'll find your faction being wiped out by your urban adversaries.

The massive open world may not look the prettiest, but what it lacks in aesthetics it more than makes up for with sheer weight of content. Mixing instantly familiar RPG elements with intelligent diplomatic challenges, *Depths of Peril* has to go down as one of the most innovative RPGs currently doing the rounds on the indie circuit. Get emptying that copper jar!

PCZONE 82

OK, who forgot the Raid?

You have not accidentally thrown up on the page.

TREASURES OF RA

Armana
Room II of II: Curse of the Pharoah

DEVELOPER Kudos Games **WEBSITE** www.kudosgames.com **PRICE** $20 (£10)

IF YOU'RE THE kind of person who used to sit in the front row during physics lessons with your tongue peeking out from the side of your mouth in wet-lipped exhilaration, or if spending your evenings staring at Sudoku puzzles gets you moist then you're halfway to loving *Treasures of Ra*.

Here's the score: by moving and rotating mirrors, blocks and other objects around each level, you must redirect a ray of light to a set location before the sun goes down. With over 130 increasingly taxing levels, it's only a matter of time before your mind oozes out of your head, begging for mercy. And if you do complete the game, you can even create your very own levels.

Apart from some clumsy movement controls, *Treasures of Ra* is a highly competent puzzler, packed with brain-thumping but highly entertaining puzzles.

PCZONE 70

Redirect the beams before the sun sets.

Many of the puzzles are massively challenging.

THE GREAT TREE

DEVELOPER Reflexive Entertainment
WEBSITE www.thegreattreegame.com **PRICE** $19.95 (£10)

IF YOU'VE EVER found yourself staring out of your office window wistfully wishing you were a pixie, then your yearning may be about to be fulfilled without the need for a high degree of reconstructive surgery and the ignominy of having your workmates berating you for having a pair of wings stuck onto the back of your shirt.
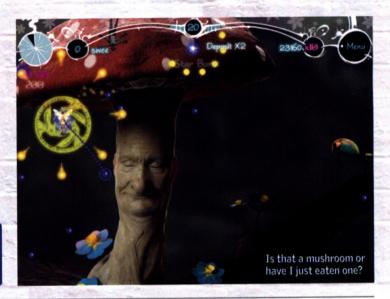
The Great Tree has you navigating a sprite around levels and collecting pollen for the Great Tree (to which your very existence is linked) while avoiding nasty pixie-hating enemies.

Between each mission you can upgrade a modest collection of skills – agility, health, strength and magic – and get access to some spells, which you use to get some payback on those pesky enemies.

This is all very simplistic and while *The Great Tree* does entertain in short, sharp bursts, and is remarkably easy on the eye, playing it for a longer length of time is as gripping as listening to a sonnet from a Middle-earth Ent about daisies.

PCZONE 62

Is that a mushroom or have I just eaten one?
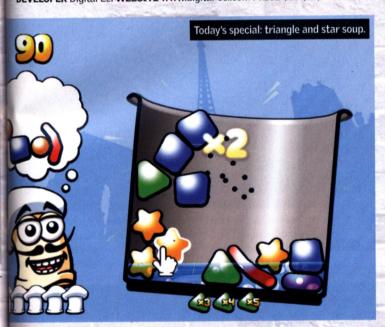
SOUP DU JOUR

DEVELOPER Digital Eel **WEBSITE** www.digital-eel.com **PRICE** $10 (£5)

Today's special: triangle and star soup.

I CAN'T EVEN begin to tell you how many match three and match four games I've come across over the past few years. Not only have I lost count, but had I kept a tally, the total would probably exceed 26, which is as high as I can count without the aid of my abacus. To make things worse, I lost my wooden mathematical aid when I made a bet with someone that I could count to 30. I thought they said 13. Still, never mind.

Soup Du Jour is a bit like *Tetris* only nowhere near as much fun and at least 26 times easier. The game casts you as an aspiring chef (possibly similar to the limb and torso-less, moustached creature above) who must pull matching coloured shapes together as they fall into his pot.

Why Digital Eel didn't make these shapes into real ingredients rather than stars and circles is anybody's guess. (Although today's kids are more likely to know what a star is than a scallion.) Link four shapes together and you clear them. Clear enough and you move to the next level. And because you can pull shapes together no matter where they're stacked, losing a level is about as likely as losing your nose. Pap!

PCZONE 26

TOP 5 INDIE GAMES

1

ROBOBLITZ
www.roboblitz.com
Reviewed Issue 177
This stunning third-person action puzzler about a robot trying to defend a space cannon from attacking pirates is the highest scoring IndieZone game we've ever had. Packed full of physics-based puzzles, excellent combat and jaw-dropping Unreal Engine 3 visuals, you simply can't allow yourself to ignore this gem.

2

AVEYOND II: EAN'S QUEST
www.amaranthia.com
Reviewed Issue: 192
Play a young elf on a mission to save his friend from an evil snow queen in this accomplished RPG, which bears a resemblance to *Zelda*.

3

NAKED WAR
www.zee-3.com
Reviewed Issue 177
An addictive turn-based strategy game played over email in which your team of four soldiers must kill off your foes with guile and tactics.

4

MORNING'S WRATH
www.morningswrath.com
Reviewed Issue 163
A superbly written, beautifully crafted isometric RPG that leads you on an epic adventure to save your land from destruction.

5

MR. ROBOT
www.moonpod.com
Reviewed Issue 181
Like an isometric *Roboblitz* with zany RPG-style combat. You play a robot that must bring a malfunctioning starship back online.

BUDGET

The *PC ZONE* staff wander through the car boot sales of PC gaming

BUDGET GAME OF THE MONTH

ANCIENT WARS: SPARTA

PUBLISHER: Mastertronic Games **WEBSITE:** www.mastertronic.com **PRICE:** £9.99

ANCIENT WARS: SPARTA has one thing in common with the movie *300*, which came out roughly the same time – they both used the technology of the day to add gore and effects to a well-known template. And for an RTS, this is definitely retreading old ground – you'll be immediately at home with the resource collection and unit building. But where *Sparta* fails in innovation, it scores in execution, with units behaving sensibly and requiring you to be organised and tactically coherent, but never a nanny. However, some of the touches of realism (the same troops can man chariots, boats or horses) make organising an assault frustrating for unfocussed players.

Sadly, the Spartan campaign – which should be the thrilling highlight – is a slow-burning tutorial, and the two other single-player campaigns lack hooks. These faults doesn't take away the games competence though, so if you've got a wide streak of patience *Sparta* has some love to give.

PCZONE 64

Weather's too nice for fighting.

Let's kill each other in the shade.

Phanpy! Use your trunk attack!

INFERNAL

PUBLISHER: Mastertronic **WEBSITE:** www.infernalgame.com **PRICE:** £9.99

BY MURDERING DEMON monks and skewering holy types with your massive ungodly tendrils, and wrapping it in a stylish John Woo veneer, *Infernal* taught us an important lesson: never get bummed by the Devil. While the superpowers with which you'll be imbued are pretty nifty (firearms, teleportation and the like) they ultimately lead to the repetitive sort of mindless action purveyed here.

Infernal wasn't a terrible game, but it was mediocre enough for the drop from full-priced product to £10 budgeteer to stir little more than a blink of underwhelmed indifference. That said, if you're easily pleased or desperate for something to while away the tedium of living, fill your diabolical wee booties.

PCZONE 59

Mana-a-mano.

THIS MONTH PCZONE SAVED MONEY BY...

Richard tolerating mismatched curtain hooks, instead of buying another bag.
Saving: £2.99

Log lying, telling a company he did write to them, cancelling his membership. CANCELLED
Saving: £49

Steve having one portion chips at Nandos, not two.
Saving: £1.75

RESERVOIR DOGS

PUBLISHER: Mastertronic **WEBSITE:** www.reservoirdogsgame.com **PRICE:** £9.99

FIFTEEN YEARS IN the making, you might have expected that a whole world of thought, effort and passion had gone into this adaptation of the action that was alluded to in the film.

So this was a fairly predictable disappointment. The driving levels are repetitive and thoughtless, the crowd control levels discourage you doing a Mr Blonde and killing everyone, and if you want the "consummate professional" rank, you are trapped into a 30-second cycle of take hostage, knock hostage out, get another hostage.

While you can do a dance and slice an ear off, the game's baffling showpiece is the slo-mo "bullet festival" which sets the duff tone for a duff game. The soundtrack and the storyline are worth a tenner, but the game is a big drab squib.

PCZONE 25

Look, I'm just not a professional OK?

LITTLE BRITAIN: THE COMPUTER GAME
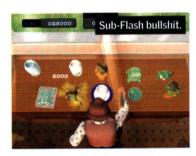
PUBLISHER: Mastertronic **WEBSITE:** www.blast-games.com/en **PRICE:** £4.99

INVITE SOMEONE YOU hate to hack up a wedge of green snot and smear it onto your forehead. Then thumb a golf tee into your urethra. Break into a leisure centre at night, wedge a razor blade into a blob of chewing gum, stick it halfway down the swimming pool slide, and then go down it again and again until you fill the pool like sliced bacon. To follow, gently scratch the surface of your eyeball with a pair of compasses. Remove your clothing and embrace an ice sculpture of your father until he melts, in an agonising and physically traumatic metaphor for the life of a child corroding that of its parents.

Do all of these things, by all means. Just do not buy, play, or even consider the existence of this game, ever again.

PCZONE 4

Sub-Flash bullshit.

And the rest...
Be a cheapskate and be proud...

CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 2006
£9.99, EIDOS INTERACTIVE
This was a return to form for the series, after the risible *CM05*. Less hardcore than its rival *Football Manager*, *CM06* still has enjoyment to be milked from it. If you want an up-to-date database, buy the slightly superior *CM08*.

PCZONE 64

DAWN OF WAR: COMPLETE COLLECTION
£39.99, THQ
This may not seem a budget buy, but you're getting the entire *Dawn of War* series here, so it's a bargain. The point-capturing rather than base-building action makes for brisk combat, and it's all in that great dirty futuristic world.

PCZONE 82

VIRTUA TENNIS
£9.99, WHITE LABEL
While it's essentially pong with some delightful-looking 3D models, *Virtua Tennis 3* was and is still the most enduring sports games on release. For a tenner, there's little else out there that outdoes this, tennis-wise..

PCZONE 75

BUYER'S GUIDE

The greatest games that money can be frittered away on...

PCZONE TOP 5 GAMING ELEMENTS

1. **NEED FOR SPEED: CARBON**
2. **HITMAN: BLOOD ANTIMONY**
3. **THE WEAKEST ZINC**
4. **TINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE**
5. **MEDIEVAL 2: GOLD EDITION**

PCZONE TOP 5 PC AMNESIACS

1. **THE NAMELESS ONE** (PLANESCAPE)
2. **THE MARKED ONE** (STALKER)
3. **KAY'L 669** (OMIKRON: THE NOMAD SOUL)
4. **CONRAD B. HART** (FLASHBACK)
5. **DARTH REVAN** (KOTOR)

PCZONE TOP 5 TV BULLSHIT TORNADO

1. **THE WEAKEST LINK** (45%)
2. **KEITH CHEGWIN'S PARTY QUIZ** (10%)
3. **LITTLE BRITAIN** (8%)
4. **DEAL OR NO DEAL** (3%)
5. **ALAN HANSEN'S SPORTS QUIZ** (IDENTICAL TO CHEGGERS. NO REVIEW)

FPS

Must buy!

HALF-LIFE 2 + EPISODES
PCZ Issues: 148 (97%), 170 (91%), 187 (82%)
Excelling in terms of action, storyline, emotion and ingenious set pieces, the continuing adventures of Gordon Freeman have yet to be equalled. Yes, a moderate amount of the action has faded through repetition by the time the episodes kick in, but with its Combine-defying freedom fighting, this is still the most finely crafted shooter experience ever released on PC. Gordon's alive, and long may he remain so.

BIOSHOCK
PCZ Issue: 185 – 96%
The psion of System Shock 2, BioShock will suck you right into its intricate, art deco world. A destroyed Utopia under the sea, terrifying characters and emergent combat make this an unmissable experience.

TEAM FORTRESS 2
PCZ Issue: 187 – 93%
Beautifully balanced and engaging, Valve's update of the classic mod is a triumph, bringing together everything that's good about online shooters and topping it all off with superb animation that rivals Pixar's films.

UNREAL TOURNAMENT III
PCZ Issue: 189 – 90%
The daddy of online shooters returns with a mule-kick of intense deathmatch, epic vehicles, high-speed combat, Warfare mode, and a graphical sheen that outdoes its ageing insta-gib rivals.

BUDGET
BATTLEFIELD 2
PCZ Issue: 157 – 94%
If it's online action you want, look no further. BF2 sets the gold standard for team-based shooting, with huge 64-player maps, squad and commander modes and the ability to zap people with medic shock pads.

CRYSIS
PCZ Issue: 188 – 92%
A retooled, condensed Far Cry for newer hardware, with Crysis's neat nanosuit and 'anything can happen' action-bubble mentality making it a winner. The last act falters, but the Korean-bullying is endlessly replayable.

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE
PCZ Issue: 188 – 89%
Big, brash and extremely loud, Infinity Ward's latest ultra-intense shooter offers some strikingly original military action. With superb multiplayer in tow, it's often an utter delight to play.

Strategy

Must buy!

COMPANY OF HEROES
PCZ Issue: 173 – 93%
The fact that despite hailing from that most overpopulated of genres, the WWII RTS, Company of Heroes is still number one is a testament to how utterly refined and slick it is. Relic have taken the best bits from strategy games and stripped out the crap, leaving you with a game that's fun, intelligent, accessible, taxing, tactical and exciting. And with that many positive words in one sentence, you know it must be good.

WORLD IN CONFLICT
PCZ Issue: 186 – 92%
A stunning RTS set at the height of the Cold War, World in Conflict offers genuinely innovative online play, a solid single-player campaign, jaw-dropping graphics and the best nuclear blast you're ever likely to see.

CIVILIZATION IV
PCZ Issue: 162 – 92%
A Buyer's Guide without a Civ game would be a sorry place indeed, and the latest version is the greatest yet. It's now available with added warmongering and diplomacy thanks to the expansion packs.

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE
PCZ Issue 193 – 91%
This startling beauty came from nowhere, and quickly converted us from indifferent idiots into grateful idiots by surprising our eyes with its rich and accessible complexity, and deep space strategy.

MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR
PCZ Issue: 175 – 91%
A blend of maniacal plotting on the strategic map and cheering with delight as your warriors collide spectacularly with your opponents' armies. Now complemented by the excellent Kingdoms expansion.

RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS
PCZ Issue: 168 – 91%
Takes the great gameplay of RON, improves on it with elements from Civ IV and Total War and wraps the whole lot in a sci-fi setting. An RTS bursting with innovation and imagination.

SUPREME COMMANDER
PCZ Issue: 179 – 88%
Massive battles and armies composed of thousands of air, sea and land units? Giant stompy robots and a superb tactical map? One of the most original RTS titles around? Check, check and check.

Action/Adventure

Must buy!

GEARS OF WAR
PCZ Issue: 188 – 90%
Who knew the all-conquering console title would work so well with a mouse and keyboard? GOW's skirmishes against the aggressive Locust Horde are enjoyably tactical, while its cover system and difficulty level combine to make you genuinely fear the bullets flying around you. With the battle against the almighty Brumak near the game's close, the PC has the best version of an already excellent shooter. So hooray for us.

MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE
PCZ Issue: 136 – 93%
A bit frayed around the edges now, but it still shows how to do bullet-time right. A noirish tone, a glowering voice-over and remarkably evergreen gun action mean that Payne is still a force to contend with.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS
PCZ Issue: 155 – 92%
To think that the simple top-down car game has turned into this – a work of creative genius. Violent, brutal, smutty, freeform and hilarious – San Andreas is the pinnacle of gaming achievement.

BUDGET
SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY
PCZ Issue: 154 – 91%
A tour de force from Ubisoft, Chaos Theory takes the Splinter Cell format and runs with it in solo, co-op and the now well-established spies vs mercs multiplayer. Smooth, lithe and good with a knife.

FAHRENHEIT
PCZ Issue: 159 – 90%
Murder most foul, with you as the killer. Boasts a twisting, turning, brilliantly told story, featuring multiple character control, split-screen tension, branching scenes and several endings. From the brains behind The Nomad Soul.

BUDGET
PSYCHONAUTS
PCZ Issue: 156 – 90%
Clever, witty, impeccably detailed and absolutely off its rocker – Psychonauts is proof that the anarchic edge of LucasArts hasn't completely left us. A slightly flawed game in some respects, but still a dazzling feat.

BUDGET
BEYOND GOOD & EVIL
PCZ Issue: 138 – 89%
We heap praise on this game on a monthly basis, but it's for a reason. Michel Ancel's superb journey through the strange land of Hillys is nothing short of storytelling magic. It's cheap now, so go out and buy it.

MMOs

Must buy!

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
PCZ Issue: 152 – 95%
Blizzard's recreation of the classic strategy world in MMO form doesn't disappoint. Beautiful to look at, absorbing to play and with more content than you can shake a magic stick at.

LOTR ONLINE
PCZ Issue: 182 – 87%
A near-perfect representation of Tolkien's stories, with solid combat and engaging plots, all bound up in a tasty MMO bundle. Meet Gandalf! Play as a hobbit or a spider! The whole of Middle-earth awaits...

EVERQUEST II
PCZ Issue: 150 – 95%
A Star Trek to WOW's Star Wars, EQII gives the original game a much-needed lick of paint, and adds a whole new world to play in and a greater sense of depth and immersion. A timesink in a good way.

GUILD WARS
PCZ Issue: 156 – 94%
How to make a gaming genre accessible to the masses. A lot of polish and thought have been applied, and there are no subscription fees. Newbies can feel at home too, thanks to a totally skills-based setup.

EVE ONLINE
PCZ Issue: 130 – 88%
Elite online has been a long-held fantasy, and this space sim has come the closest yet to making it a reality. Its slow pace belies the options on offer, from mining to trading to piracy – it's up to you.

Simulation

BUDGET

X³: REUNION
PCZ Issue: 162 – 92%
Finally, a space sim to better X²: The Threat, and it just happens to be the sequel. Possibly the best-looking game ever to appear on a PC. Oh, and it plays pretty well to boot.

IL-2 STURMOVIK: FORGOTTEN BATTLES
PCZ Issue: 128 – 92%
While flight sims are getting rarer and rarer, at least the quality remains high. None are more impressive than this ultra-classy WWII combat sim. Chocks away, comrade!

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR X
PCZ Issue: 175 – 89%
This latest iteration of the Microsoft Flight Sim series is the biggest since they started using actual polygons. What's more, the visuals may just sear your eyeballs.

BUDGET

FREELANCER
PCZ Issue: 128 – 84%
If X³ is too slow for you, Freelancer should fit the bill. Plenty of trading, bounty-hunting and space piracy, but with the emphasis on action rather than realism. Space has never been this much fun.

SILENT HUNTER 4: WOLVES OF THE PACIFIC
PCZ Issue: 181 – 82%
If a life beneath the waves tickles your fancy, then this submarine simulator fits the bill. Tactics, torpedoes, sonar and sailors combine to make the ultimate ship-sinker.

Driving/Racing

Must buy!

GTR2
PCZ Issue: 173 – 92%
Can't afford a Ferrari? Then pick up this scarily realistic driving sim and race the car of your dreams. It comes with an improved driving model, new modes and many other improvements.

GT LEGENDS
PCZ Issue: 161 – 92%
While GTR takes care of modern-day racing, GT Legends, a natural successor to Grand Prix Legends, does the business for historical driving. It's like the swinging '60s never ended.

LIVE FOR SPEED
PCZ Issue: 158 – 90%
Online racing at its best. LFS offers realistic handling, hilarious crashes and a racing community second to none. On the right servers, that is. A remarkable achievement by such a small team.

COLIN MCRAE: DIRT
PCZ Issue: 183 – 88%
The rallying legend returns, and this time he treats us to a host of other off-road events, an excitable Travis Pastrana and some of the best-looking graphics to grace any driving game on PC so far.

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED
PCZ Issue: 163 – 88%
Thrill-packed racer from EA, this time with the emphasis on high-speed police chases and notoriety factors. You can still make like Westwood with the car pimping, though.

Oddball

PORTAL
PCZ Issue: 187 – 89%
Ingenious and absurdly funny, Portal is a four-hour slice of perfect puzzles and discovery. Hurling yourself through floors and walls sounds odd, but games are rarely more delightful.

GARRY'S MOD
PCZ Issue: 179 – 88%
The god game-like Garry's Mod gives you the tools to create almost anything you can think of in the Source engine, from working robots to saucy ragdoll JPEGs. Try it out and see for yourself.

VIVA PIÑATA
PCZ Issue: 190 – 85%
Madder than a mercury-blooded clown, Viva Piñata looks simple but is a ridiculously addictive animal-raising game. Don't be put off by the kiddy graphics – it's a keeper.

PEGGLE DELUXE
PCZ Issue: 183 – 83%
A weeping unicorn and a sequence of bagatelle-inspired peg-bouncing puzzles combine to make a casual game of unparalleled addictiveness. If you doubt us, you haven't played it.

BUDGET

THE MOVIES
PCZ Issue: 162 – 95%
Life as a movie mogul – games don't get better than this. Not only a god/management game par excellence, but also a complete home movie-making kit. Brilliant.

Sport

Must buy!

FOOTBALL MANAGER 2008
PCZ Issue: 188 – 90%
The latest version of the 'still playing at 3am' title is all about noob-attraction and an improved interface. As usual, FM succeeds, and is the best management sim on earth.

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2008
PCZ Issue: 188 – 87%
Still in a different league to FIFA, PES lacks the official stamp but offers amazingly lifelike football. Whether it's end-to-end stuff or a nil-nil slog, it's always compelling.

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 06
PCZ Issue: 161 – 85%
Not the most recent version, but still our favourite, Tiger 06 has you time-travelling as Mr Woods. The best PC golf game yet, mainly thanks to the two career modes.

FIFA 08
PCZ Issue: 188 – 80%
A veritable compendium of all that is football, and a good sports game too, the recent FIFA still lags behind PES, but benefits from layers of EA spit and polish. A decent variant of the beautiful game.

NHL 08
PCZ Issue: 187 – 80%
Bringing the American sport we 'get' (it's like Speedball!) to our PCs, the latest NHL is chock-full of large Canadians knocking seven bells out of each other. Exciting, fast, smooth and exhilarating.

Role-playing games

Must buy!

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION
PCZ Issue: 167 – 95%
Oblivion's sublime graphics, intuitive character-creation and massive freeform gameplay put paid to the myth that you have to own a beard to enjoy RPGs.

THE WITCHER
PCZ Issue: 188 – 88%
Adult and intelligent, the world of The Witcher is as fascinating as it is violent and corrupt. With moral bite and an epic story, this has come out of nowhere to revive an ailing genre.

BUDGET

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC
PCZ Issue: 137 – 94%
KOTOR is the best Star Wars game of recent years. Moving, dramatic and fairly adult in tone, it also has a hefty dose of lightsabers to keep you happy.

BUDGET

THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND
PCZ Issue: 116 – 94%
This could be the most intimidating yet wonderful game we've ever played – the breadth and depth of Morrowind remains a remarkable achievement.

BUDGET

DEUS EX
PCZ Issue: 93 – 94%
This remains the benchmark in FPS RPGs. Twisting sci-fi plots, exciting freeform levels and some moments of pure exhilaration and drama ensure Deus Ex remains the alpha male of the gaming world.

INCOMING!

All approximate monthly dates are correct at the time of going to press

May

AGE OF CONAN: HYBORIAN ADVENTURES	EIDOS
MASS EFFECT	EA

Spring/summer

A VAMPYRE STORY	ASCARON
DEAD SPACE	EA
LEGO INDIANA JONES	ACTIVISION
MERCENARIES 2: WORLD IN FLAMES	EA
RACE DRIVER: GRID	CODEMASTERS
SPACE SIEGE	SEGA
SPORE	EA
STALKER: CLEAR SKY	DEEP SILVER

Autumn/winter

LEGO BATMAN	WARNER BROS
EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR	SEGA
FALLOUT 3	BETHESDA
FAR CRY 2	UBISOFT
GHOSTBUSTERS	VIVENDI
LEFT 4 DEAD	VALVE
PROJECT ORIGIN	WARNER BROS
PROTOTYPE	VIVENDI
RED ALERT 3	EA
SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION	UBISOFT
TIBERIUM	EA

TBC

MAFIA 2	2K
STARCRAFT II	VIVENDI/BLIZZARD
WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WRATH OF THE LICH KING	VIVENDI/BLIZZARD

Wii | GAME BOY | DS | GAMECUBE

Nintendo®

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!
Unleash The
BEAST!

It's Sonic... but not as you know him!
We reveal Sega's **Sonic Unleashed!**

HARDWARE

Better gaming through technology

Good ol' BT

I'VE RENEWED MY broadband contract with BT several times over the years and each time I've said that I don't want any of the gimmicks they use to buy my loyalty. Email addresses I'll never check, routers that wouldn't fetch a fiver on eBay, plus 10 per cent off products at Nigel's Eco Store.

A quick look at Nigel's website (www.nigelsecostore.com) reveals he sells computer products such as the 'Ecobutton', a £14.99 USB device designed for treehugger types and which enables you to hibernate your PC. It's basically a power button on the end of a cable, no doubt made in a Chinese factory which heaves more CO_2 into the atmosphere making Ecobuttons than every PC owner in Europe combined.

But back to BT. I'm OK with their service, I like the way they return my support calls – even if I haven't a clue what they're saying – and all I wanted to do is renew. Couldn't they please throw out all the crap, as that's all I'd be doing with it, and take money off my bill instead?

Astonishingly they said they would. I renewed for 12 months on the basis that I'd have a £4 off my monthly fee, proving that you really do just need to ask. But they went ahead and sent me a router, and I had to phone the accounts department twice asking for my rebate.

But what were you expecting? BT is a British company after all.

Phil Wand, hardware editor

XP FOR EEE

Teensy-weensy ASUS machine made available with *Windows*

IF YOU'VE BEEN putting off your Eee PC purchase because of the machine's kooky operating system, ASUS will now sell you one with *Windows XP* pre-installed for under £300.

Of course, you can buy an Eee, wipe its *Linux* OS and install *XP* yourself, but the process isn't straightforward – you have to dip in and out of the machine's BIOS and reconfigure many of the deeper aspects of *Windows*, such as where user data files are stored.

While ASUS provides all the tools you need to do this, it isn't really what the solid-state PC is all about. A hefty proportion of Eee buyers wanted something affordable that they could simply charge up and use – much like their mobile phone, except with a more usable 800 x 480 pixels from a 7in screen.

The wireless mini-lappy is a runaway success for ASUS, and so the addition of *XP* was only a matter of time.

"With the new *Windows*-based offerings, there's full compatibility with *Windows* applications," said Jonathan Tsang, Vice Chairman of ASUS. You also get *Windows Live Mail*, *Windows Live Messenger* on the handheld PC and the Eee's built-in webcam makes using *Skype* a breeze.
uk.asus.com

The Eee is wee but it's mighty popular.

ONE CARD CROSSFIRE
Sapphire mATX board allows you to use a HD 3400 series card in CrossFire mode

SAPPHIRE'S NEW BOARD features AMD's 780G chipset and supports Phenom plus all AM2+ 64s, FXs, X2s and Semprons. As well as an integrated DirectX 10-compliant GPU, the new board features a PCI-E slot and a special CrossFire X driver which allows you to use a HD 3400 card in tandem with the board's own graphics capability (see page 92).

The PI-AM2RS780G looks to be a seriously flexible graphics solution for any living room PC, given that you don't have to have the noise of a separate card, but you can add one and double up on your gaming grunt. www.sapphiretech.com/uk

The PI-AM2RS780G features Hybrid CrossFire X Graphics mode.

NEWS ROUND-UP

In the US, Sony has introduced a laptop configuration option called 'Fresh Start'. When selected, your new laptop will be cleansed of all the rubbish that manufacturers like to smear in your hard drive in order to make a buck back from the people who wrote it all. Could it be that laptop manufacturers are actually listening to buyers, and the days of McAfee pestering you to register software you didn't want are due to close? www.sony.com

Vista Service Pack 1 is being squirting down the *Windows Update* pipe, and owners of the Intel 945G chipset need to make sure they've patched their graphics drivers before upgrading. The reason being that *Service Pack 1* is otherwise incompatible. www.microsoft.co.uk

WHY NOT BUY A PS3?

Vista Home Premium, a Blu-ray drive and a dual-tuner TV card costs around £400. With the PlayStation 3 out for £300, what's stopping you getting Sony's console? Your existing PC, of course.

Since 780G will be adding to the computers in your house, rather than replacing them, you'll be able to network them together, run your existing software, play any manner of file formats the PS3 would choke on, and of course you'll not be wasting money on a sealed box you can't ever upgrade.

> What the 780G does best is live in your lounge, fanlessly gulping internet and Freeview

AMD 780G

PRICE from £59 **MANUFACTURER** AMD board partners

780G IS A new motherboard from AMD that allows system builders to create reasonably powered, low price and low noise home theatre machines by adding a processor, RAM and hard drive.

The machine sports a £48 AMD Athlon 4850e dual core processor, a £31 AMD Radeon HD 3450 card working in tandem with the onboard graphics of the £55 Gigabyte board, and 2GB RAM that costs more than £39. We're talking a hardware spend of less than some sound cards.

Haderstandably, such bargain-basement numbers will lead anyone of a gaming bent to believe that the average 780G machine is slightly less powerful than one of those foggy plastic magnifying glasses in Christmas crackers, and they'd be right.

The chipset will of course support any other AM2 or AM2+ based chip, meaning you could factor in a Phenom – perhaps the 2.3GHz 9600 for an additional £100 – and end up with something that will lope along in some of the less-demanding titles from a few years back.

HORSES FOR COURSES

AMD's clever hybrid technology can, in some cases, double the output of the on-board graphics (thanks to CrossFire X with any HD 3400 series card inserted in the PCI-E slot), but you'll still be nudging detail sliders left instead of right. Put simply, all a faster processor would do is mask the platform's weaknesses, rather than emphasise its strengths.

What the power-sensible 780G does best is live in your lounge, fanlessly gulping internet and Freeview while nibbling genteelly at your electricity. Rather than throw money at bigger processors, spend £100 on a 5.25in internal Blu-ray player and £50 on Corel *WinDVD* or Cyberlink *PowerDVD* to read the discs. You'll then be able to enjoy *Casino Royale* in high-definition, with the 780G system hooked up directly to your flatscreen TV using a single cable from the built-in HDMI port. It's remarkably easy and just works.

My only quibble is with the way AMD are positioning what is obviously a media hub as the groundwork for an awesome gaming PC. And while you're free to add a rapid CPU and HD 3870 X2, it's a misuse of resources. Understand what you're buying and the 780G is hard to beat.

PCZONE 86

CYBORG MOUSE

PRICE £35 **MANUFACTURER** Saitek **WEBSITE** saitek.co.uk

THE CYBORG IS a 3200dpi rodent with amazing features, but it does need the right kind of hand.

You can see from the picture that your thumb has a rest and a weird little roof, as well as all surfaces offering multiple buttons. If you have fat digits, or have recently slammed one in a door, you'll feel clumsy using it.

The Cyborg has the best party trick of any mouse on sale: a body that be configured to fit your hand. Holding the button on the top normally reserved for switching the resolution of the laser, lets you use the programmable four-way mini D-pad to adjust the shape of the mouse. Tiny motors move the rear section about as you're holding it. There are further adjustments which stiffen the feel of the scroll wheel.

The main clickers feel just right and the gaming responses are everything you'd expect from Saitek. I loved it.

PCZONE 90

N9600GT

PRICE £122 **MANUFACTURER** MSI **WEBSITE** www.msicomputer.co.uk

GOT £125 TO spend on a graphics card, but don't know which one to buy because they all look the same?

You're not alone. There are now so many mid-range product variations, with so many photo finish benchmark results, with so many cut-price deals available all over the web, that it's simply not possible to single out a clear winner.

The best advice is that those of you working to a strict £125 budget should concentrate on the new GeForce 9600 GT seen here and on the Radeon HD 3870. Both are 512MB cards offering visually identical value and performance in most games, but

with the 9600 GT showing a clean pair of heels to older technology once detail levels rise.

Those of you who can find the extra £10 required for an 8800 GT 512MB will see results a league above. Find that tenner, that's my advice.

PCZONE 78

XLR8 8800 GTX 768MB

PRICE £379 **MANUFACTURER** PNY **WEBSITE** pny-europe.com

PNY'S XLR8 GTX falls into the same 'Worthwhile only when £100 cheaper'. category as the XLR8 Ultra opposite.

This card is a wonderfully mean-looking thing but it's a monument to last year's technology, not a card gamers are likely to get excited about. With the Radeon HD 3870 X2 making similar scores for a lot less, and with its £139 8800 GT 512MB stablemate making more sense overall, this card is likely to be bought by shoppers unaware of the better-value alternatives.

Still, it's not as though you're buying a missile with no warhead. The GTX gives games an explosive burst of power,

with more slack capacity than gamers with 1280 x 1024 LCDs and a liking for *World of Warcraft* will ever use. Paired with a quad core processor, you might even forget the price.

PCZONE 71

XLR8 8800 ULTRA 768MB

PRICE £399 **MANUFACTURER** PNY **WEBSITE** pny-europe.com

WITH NVIDIA HAVING launched a GX2 flagship for under £450, the old Ultra here needs to be cheaper before it adds up. Much cheaper.

The newer NVIDIA 9800 GX2 is essentially a 8800 GTS double-decker, slowed down to stop things boiling over. While you might argue that the 9800 GX2 is just a niche toy, who's been buying the Ultra here? The two cards are trying to win the same customers and for the same price.

Despite the 'Ultra' moniker carrying more weight than 'GX2' and PNY having lifted every clock frequency, the older card no longer takes your breath away. It's trailing

newer technology and it's £100 more than the HD 3870 X2 – the Raddy being just as capable in benchmarks.

Tool up with an SLI motherboard and get a pair of 8800 GTs instead.

PCZONE 70

DEAR WANDY

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. If it ain't working, don't panic...
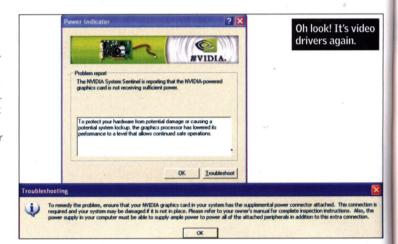
INNO BOTHER

Q I've just bought myself an Inno 8800 GT for a system I built myself. I tried *Crysis* and *Need for Speed: ProStreet*, both of which played very well – making me pretty pleased with my new PC.

That night I switched it off and the next day turned it back on, and before I could do anything received an "Insufficient power to the card" error. I tried removing HDDs and my DVD writer, but still saw the error. I then borrowed my dad's brand-new Thermaltake 600W power supply – the same as mine – and plugged it in and it worked perfectly.

I guess that my PSU was simply at fault, but I turned my PC again the next day and to my surprise had the error again. Please could you let me know what the problem could be?

Glen Murray

A *If you turn on your PC and your graphics card doesn't have its auxiliary power feed connected, you'll know all about it before you see anything on the screen. I've tried it just now with my GTS, and my PC let out high-pitched yelping that had the neighbour's cat flying up the nearest tree. This means that unless you're deaf, there's no chance that this is a dodgy connection or that there's something wrong with the power supply. But as the problem repeated itself with an identical brand-new unit, it means the fault is with the drivers.*

Oh look! It's video drivers again.

And would you believe it, NVIDIA have made the following announcement: "Several users have reported an issue on GeForce 8800 GT and GTS cards which can cause the NVIDIA System Sentinel to display a false low power warning message, which causes the GPU to operate in low power mode, resulting in low performance or application crashes. This issue has been reported on various power supplies. NVIDIA has reproduced the issue and is working on a fix with a new version of our drivers. We will update the community promptly when a fix is available. We apologize for any inconvenience or frustration gamers may be experiencing with this issue." Watch www.nvidia.com for a fix.

Q SLIDE SHOW QUAD
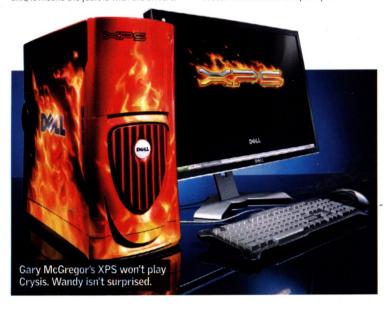
I bought what I thought would be a future-proof Dell XPS 700 some 15 months ago and paid a lot upgrading it. I now find it's struggling with *Crysis* and can only play on medium settings and crashes a lot.

What do I need to upgrade or do – if anything – to get the best from it for this and other upcoming games? My PC recently had the XPS 720 motherboard upgrade and I upgraded the RAM from 2GB to 4GB. The machine has a Core 2 Extreme X6800, two 320GB striped drives, two 1GB GeForce 7950 GX2 cards in quad SLI, AGEIA PhysX 128MB and a Sound Blaster Xtreme. As far as I know, all drivers are up to date.

Gary McGregor

A *Your PC might be a gamer's wet dream, but I've not come across a rig that can run* Crysis *on high detail at more than 30fps without trimming the shadow fidelity to make the game playable. And throwing heaps of money at each component seems to have little impact.*

Anand Lal Shimpi of AnandTech (www.anandtech.com) tested Crytek's first-person behemoth with no fewer than three 8800 Ultra cards, yet he barely scraped beyond 40fps – and that was without any anti-aliasing! When you consider that most people prefer to see 100fps or more in Counter-Strike: Source *and* Battlefield *with heaps of both anti-aliasing and filtering, you should be able to see why* Crysis *makes people want to invent a time machine to skip ahead a few years to when PC hardware is able to do it justice.*

Gary McGregor's XPS won't play *Crysis*. Wandy isn't surprised.

Andy Hall's letter explains why there's a toaster here.

"Upgrading to 64-bit is like buying a four-slice toaster when you can only eat two slices of bread"
Wandy eats operating systems for breakfast

As for the crashing, I can only suggest that you pay close attention to whether you have the right PSU to run all those toys and then turn to monitoring temperature – you have the equivalent of your grandma's bathroom heater chugging away inside your case, and if you're finding that the machine becomes less stable the more you use it, it's almost certainly due to a lack of proper cooling.

Q FLIPPING OBJECTS

I'm using *Vista Home Premium* and have been having a problem recently with any type of USB mass-storage device. It seems that whenever I plug any item in whether it's a PlayStation Portable or a digital camera, *Vista* searches for the drivers and finds them.

However, it always finds an unknown driver when I have a mass-storage device connected. It lists this item as an 'unknown device' and won't let any mass-storage items work until it's found.

I've been on various forums and I've pointed *Vista* to drivers in my System32 folder, and while it finds a generic driver it can't install it.

I don't know what else to do other that wiping the whole machine and installing *Windows* from scratch! Please help as my wife has been pestering me to get our holiday pictures off the camera!

Grant Sutton

A *If you look in your Windows\Inf folder, you should have two setup information files there called usbstor.inf and usbstor.pnf. My thought is that these files are either corrupted or just plain missing, which is why* Vista *is unable to talk to any of your mass-storage devices, digital cameras and the like..*
Browse to Windows\ System32\ DriverStore\ FileRepository and look for one

or more folders whose name begins with usb.inf. Choosing the most recently modified of these folders, copy the .inf and .pnf files from within to your Windows\Inf folder, and try inserting your device again.

Q TOAST ANYONE?

I'm getting a new rig next Tuesday, but I can't make up my mind about the operating system. People say you need the 64-bit version of *Vista* with the Core 2 Quad Extreme Edition QX9650 chip I'll be buying, and if I use 32-bit it'll only show 3.2GB RAM. But how would that actually affect my system?

My main concern is compatibility. Could I run *Battlefield 2* and *Battlefield 2142* without problems?

Andy Hall
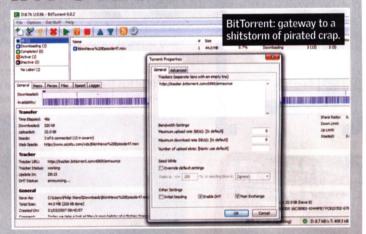
A *The fact you're buying the QX9650 tells me you're looking to build the fastest thing on four rubber feet, and that a 64-bit operating system is alluring because 64 is obviously bigger than 32.*
In actual fact, the 64-bit editions of Windows *have always been things home users should avoid. While it's true that more of us are banging into the limits of 32-bit computing and 64-bit is clearly the way around this, the current limitations affect just a tiny minority of PC users.*
And if you have to ask the question "What does 64-bit really give me?" you don't need it. Stick with 32-bit. I could guarantee that none of the games and applications you run need anything more.
While Microsoft have been working hard to iron out some horrible driver and compatibility headaches, the reality is that 64-bit offers gamers very little. It's like buying a complicated four-slice toaster when you can never eat more than two slices of bread. And that's all you need to know.

ELEMENTARY LESSONS IN PC TECH...

BitTorrent: gateway to a shitstorm of pirated crap.

02 BITTORRENT

When you download stuff from the web, your browser makes a connection to a server and requests the file you want. Starting at the front and working through to the end, the server reads the data on its disk, sending it to your browser so that it can create a copy of the file in your PC's hard drive.

The problem with this method is that it's rather intensive on the server. If you have 100 people requesting a file, the server ends up sending the same data 100 times. And if there are thousands of people, the amount of data the server ends up having to shift is silly.

And this is where BitTorrent comes in. Some estimates says that up to a third of all internet traffic now uses this protocol – a way of distributing files that's been with us less than 10 years.

Unlike normal file downloads and FTP services, BitTorrent works by splitting a file

into thousands of tiny fragments and making everyone downloading it connect to one other and share what pieces they already have. Whenever you grab a torrent, you are in fact copying tiny pieces of the file from people who already have them – even if they haven't finished downloading the file yet – and the traffic burden is thus shared by everyone.

All you need to do is download the torrent tracking file. This contains the data BitTorrent needs to locate other owners of the file, and for them to find you.

So you see, BitTorrent is a very sociable way of downloading. So it's rather sad that because the file you download is not stored centrally on a server, the torrent file which describes how the pieces fit together isn't actually the file itself and because no-one person sends you a complete file, the protocol has become the backbone of piracy sites across the globe.

wandy.com @
w16nw

REMEMBER:

High resolution and realistic graphics aren't the aim here, because there's no fun to be had from an amazing looking action title that moves like a comatose sloth. In a fast-paced, online multiplayer shooter, frame rate rules all.

HUH?

Frame rate (fps) describes how many frames of the game are created by your graphics card each second. Some claim that beyond 30fps is wasteful, as the eye can't register rates higher than this, but that's bollocks.

V-sync caps frame rates to the maximum capability for your monitor. This has negative effects when the rate drops below the cap, such as when entering combat.

Steamapps is a subdirectory of a Steam folder, containing downloaded games in **Game Cache Files** (GCFs). Many are over 1GB in size.

The **Steam console** gives you access to the hundreds of configuration settings that determine how the game works, from draw distance to your name. You need to enable it either by entering "-console" as a command line parameter, or by clicking the Advanced button in Keyboard options and checking "Enable developer console".

ONLINE GAMES RUN SMOOTHLY

Getting jerked about by *Counter-Strike* and other online Source games? It's all in the preparation, says *Phil Wand*

STEAM GAMES ARE getting heavier, and PCs are finding it harder to cope with all the flab. Not only does it take an age to reach just the main menu, but minutes later when the level has loaded and you're ready to roll, you experience frame rates rivalled only by monsters in '50s *Sinbad* films . Every mouse move takes an agonisingly long delay to translate on screen and every fight has the whole world lurching drunkenly, shots landing where you were facing seconds ago.

Let's get real here. People play computer games to be challenged, thrilled and entertained, not to see high-resolution vegetation rendered in stop motion. If you want realistic plant life, go outside.

This guide will teach you how to stop your PC working overtime and get back to making your Steam games feeling freer, faster and altogether enjoyable again. And don't worry, you won't need to replace any hardware or reprogram *Windows*.
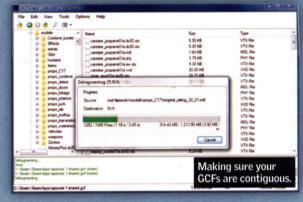
01 Defrag your GCF Files

While I'm not a proponent of defragmenting whole drives, the same process applied to one of Valve's colossal GCF files can shave seconds from loading times.

Close Steam, then download *GCFScape* from snipurl.com/gcfscape and run it. Make sure Write Access is enabled in the Options menu, then click Open on the toolbar and browse to SteamApps. Choose a large file and click Defragment from the Tools menu.

TIP: You can check the fragmentation of a GCF prior to defragging it by right-clicking the root node in the left panel and selecting Properties from the pop-up menu.
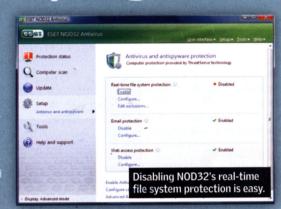

Making sure your GCFs are contiguous.

02 Shut down everything else

Before launching a game, make sure you've closed down every non-essential process. This needn't take more than a few seconds if you use CloseAll (snipurl.com/closeall) – just double-click its icon to shut all open applications but leave Steam running.

Now remove all system tray icons, and make sure you deactivate your anti-virus program. These spend most of their time monitoring access to your hard disk drive, so make sure you temporarily disable protection on your machine, as it can be a serious performance handicap.

TIP: Create a new user account in *Windows* and use it exclusively for games. Restrict applications and other clobber to your main account.

Disabling NOD32's real-time file system protection is easy.

03 Reduce all the game's detail settings to minimum

You now have to unlearn everything that manufacturers and developers have been telling you the last 10 years – that higher detail equals more fun. For average gamers with average PCs, the opposite is true. Higher details mean slower frame rates, jerky gunfights, and less fun.

Click Options, select the Video tab, and make sure the resolution matches your screen. Now hit the Advanced button and choose the lowest setting for every detail level, and set everything else to either "None" or "Disabled".

On the Multiplayer tab, disable sprays and where applicable select a minimal HUD. Click the Advanced button, lower the decal limit to 64 and choose to not download audio files from servers.

TIP: Right-click any Valve game in Steam, click Properties and then Set launch options. Type -novid in the box. No more time wasted watching start-up movies!

Turn everything down – right the way down.

04 Learn to appreciate the results

On a year-old Dell with an E6600 and £129 GeForce running 1680 x 1050, the results are startling. Frame rates on complex maps jump from between 35-40fps to over 60fps and peak rates indoors stay well above 100fps.

Load times are reduced, switching to the desktop becomes less painful, and there is no lag or that 'swimming' feeling whenever you make quick turns. Multiplayer is just more fluid, the higher responsiveness really suiting a twitch shooter style.

TIP: To see your frame rate in a Source game, drop the console and type net_graph 1.

Low-quality graphics, high-quality gameplay.

05 Get better network performance

The Steam console can tweak your connection to the server. You needn't concern yourself with deep understanding about these commands, just know they'll improve your experience.

To assign a value to a setting, open the console and type the setting's name followed by a space and then a number, for example: cl_updaterate 100. To check a value without changing it, simply type the setting's name, for example: cl_interp_ratio.

RECOMMENDED STEAM NETWORK SETTINGS

CONSOLE SETTING	BROADBAND	LOCAL NETWORK
Rate	25000	30000
cl_updaterate	100	100
cl_cmdrate	60	100
cl_smooth	0	0
cl_interp	0.1	0.1
cl_interp_ratio	1	1

ISN'T THERE MORE TO TWEAKING?

There's a near-limitless combination of settings you can apply to any Source engine game to improve the gameplay. But while you can spend days or even weeks raising, lowering and fine-tuning various settings, you'll not see much of a difference in the way a game looks and plays. For that, you need to follow the steps here and make sweeping changes to your detail and network settings. That's where you'll have the biggest impact. After that you can always try to overclock your graphics card – for a tutorial on that, take a look at *PC ZONE* 193.

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Q Is frame rate really all that important?

A Action games, such as those which use the Source engine, are best experienced when they're fast and smooth.

Q Will a higher frame rate give me an advantage when playing online?

A No. But it makes you feel more connected to the movements you see on your screen.

Q Steam says the game files aren't fragmented, but *GCFScan* says they are. Which is right?

A *GCFScan* gives you the most accurate image of cache fragmentation.

Q Can setting changes help people cheat?

A There are variables which would give players an advantage online, but servers block their effects by default.

Q Will all of this tweaking improve my game?

A Might. But if you genuinely suck, you'll still suck.

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WATCHDOG

Richard Cosgrove fights the good fight. And wins! Usually...

Here to help!

Problems with connecting to broadband are caused by the ageing UK phone network

The warranty for an Alienware power adapter should be as long as the laptop's.

ALIENWARE

THE ACCUSED: Alienware

THE PROBLEM: Bust power supply

The power adapter for Matt Mangan's two-year old Alienware D9T is vital, as the battery for this desktop replacement notebook holds about 10 minutes of juice. So when the adapter broke down Matt contacted Alienware, assuming it was covered under the same three-year warranty as the notebook. But he was "told that the adapter only has a 12 month warranty and that it was not covered," and that Alienware didn't supply new adapters for "older models". This meant Matt had to buy a new power adapter to get his gaming PC to work.

PC ZONE INVESTIGATION: When we contacted Alienware their representative said Matt will be "receiving a full refund for the AC adapter he purchased. He was charged for this part in error and an internal review of procedures is being carried out to ensure that this does not happen again." And that, "Within the European area the adapter warranty is valid for the same length of time as the notebook warranty." Alienware also gave Matt a new adapter and repaired damage to the case caused by an overheating issue which wasn't covered by the warranty.

Twelve-month warranties are standard with most desktop PCs. Extended warranties for desktops aren't vital, as their modular nature makes repairing faulty parts easy and cheap. But they're a near necessity for laptops.
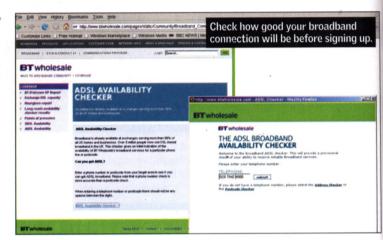
Always check the length of the warranty of a new PC; what it protects against; what parts are covered; and whether it offers return to base (RTB) or on-site repairs, and if it's RTB, who pays the cost of sending the PC in.

FINAL VERDICT: Apology, refund, new adapter and a repair job. Success.

tiscali.

THE ACCUSED: Tiscali

THE PROBLEM: Sloth-like broadband

When it came time for Ross Sillifant's father to upgrade to broadband, Ross decided to sign up with Tiscali as "they promised cheap, easy to install, 'no fuss' broadband." But problems soon arose.

Check how good your broadband connection will be before signing up.

To start the router didn't get a connection, although it was set up correctly. The Sillifants called Tiscali and were told that everything was good at the ISP's end. When there wasn't a connection the next day, Ross arranged for BT to check the line. Ross said three BT engineers told him "Tiscali's signal was very, very poor!" and the "fault lay firmly with Tiscali."

The laptop still failed to connect to broadband, despite more investigations and actions by Tiscali.

PC ZONE INVESTIGATION: After Watchdog contacted Tiscali Ross's father spoke to a representative from "Tiscali high level customer complaints" who assured him that the fault would be fixed and there would be some form of compensation.

Tiscali have said they've repaired the fault at their end, but there's a problem with either the phone line or the exchange, which BT must fix.

Often problems with connecting to broadband are caused by the ageing UK phone network, and not your ISP. The copper wires that form the bulk of our telecom network are capable of supplying broadband speeds of 8Mbps. However, damage to phone cables – either due to age or through accidental damage – reduces the amount of data a line can carry. Also the further you are from an exchange the slower your broadband connection will be.

If the problem is down to a poor phone line, you can ask your ISP to get BT to investigate and repair it. But BT can charge ISPs for this, who might pass the charge onto you. And BT may not take action unless more people in the area complain. The second problem is due to physics, and BT can't change the laws of physics.

Before deciding to sign up to broadband with BT visit the BT Wholesale ADSL checker at snipurl.com/btadslcheck. Enter your phone number and you'll find the maximum broadband speed you're likely to get. If this is too slow consider using Virgin Media's cable broadband (snipurl.com/virginbb) or satellite broadband (visit www.broadbandchecker.co.uk to find satellite ISPs that serve your area).

FINAL VERDICT: Wait and see. **PCZ**

SAINTS NOT SINNERS

When Jed Stone's new water-cooled gaming PC from Scan Computers (www.scan.co.uk) leaked, the company arranged to collect the PC to be repaired the next day, and returned it two days later leak free.

Then the PC developed stability problems. After Jed's attempt at re-installing the BIOS killed the PC he bought a new motherboard. When he contacted Scan to let them know what happened, he was shocked when they said they'd give him a credit note for the motherboard he'd damaged.

Stunningly fast repairs and a swapping gear when they didn't need to, means Scan Computers are worthy winners of a Watchdog sainthood.

HARDWARE DIVIDE

We see plenty of new gear at *PC ZONE*, but these are the bits we just adore

LOADED?

GRAPHICS

9800 GX2

EXPECT TO PAY £370
MANUFACTURER ASUS
WEBSITE uk.asus.com

Pound coins weighing you down? The GX2 is the first card capable of making *Crysis* look like a game rather than a slideshow. While it's matched by two 8800 GT cards in SLI, the flagship 9-Series remains the fastest – and most expensive – single card solution on sale.

PROCESSOR

CORE 2 QUAD EE QX9650

EXPECT TO PAY £660
MANUFACTURER Intel
WEB intel.co.uk

A silly price makes for awesome power and magical performance in games. Not only will this chip cost the same as several entire PCs, but like everything else inside your PC it'll seem slow and be obsolete within two years. If you've got the money, and your PC's motherboard can take it, what the hell!

MOTHERBOARD

D975XBX2

EXPECT TO PAY £155
MANUFACTURER Intel
WEB intel.co.uk

Everything that was good about our long-term favourite D975XBX, only with a thick coating of overclocking goodness. Intel's flagship desktop product represents all that's good about the company's products: solid, reliable, no-nonsense and fast. Saddle up with a Core 2 Duo and away you go!

HDD
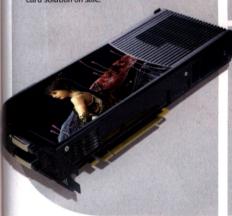
WD7500 AAKS

EXPECT TO PAY £109
MANUFACTURER Western Digital
WEB wdc.com

Almost as fast as the outgoing 150GB Raptor but with five times the capacity and half the noise. Products like the WD7500AAKS and Hitachi's (noisy and pricey) Deskstar 7K1000 are now so quick that you don't need to be spend extra on 10,000rpm drives. So don't.

SCREEN

SM226BW

EXPECT TO PAY £219
MANUFACTURER Samsung
WEBSITE samsung.com/uk

The Samsung SM226BW is handsome and fast – just 2ms grey to grey – and has no hint of the motion sickness that plagued LCDs a few years ago. It produces a bright, evenly lit image that's full of reverberant colours, sharp edges and dark blacks, making it ideal for any kind of game.

SOUNDCARD

SOUND BLASTER X-FI FATALITY FPS

EXPECT TO PAY £130
MANUFACTURER Creative Labs
WEBSITE uk.europe.creative.com

Slightly bonkers soundcard for audiophiles. Supports EAX 5.0, with 64MB X-RAM for top-quality sound effects. CMSS-3D works magic on a stereo signal and makes headphone gaming crystal. Sounds nicer than an Audigy, but still ultra pricey.

SPEAKERS

Z-5500

EXPECT TO PAY £195
MANUFACTURER Logitech
WEBSITE www.logitech.co.uk

The price has just dropped below £200 and these speakers are simply the best we've ever tested. They make both games and movies ravish your ears, and you'll soon find yourself blowing the dust from your old CDs and DVDs just so you can sit in the middle of the sound and revel in it.

SKINT?

GRAPHICS

GeForce 8800GT

EXPECT TO PAY £142
MANUFACTURER XFX
WEBSITE XGXforce.com

Ladies and gentlemen, the card of the moment. While we've yet to put a retail GeForce 8800 GT against its Radeon opponents, reference benchmarks have shown that the NVIDIA box is the one to buy. Just avoid those fussier model variants that sail close to £200.

PROCESSOR

CORE 2 DUO E2180

EXPECT TO PAY £55
MANUFACTURER Intel
WEBSITE intel.co.uk

At the budget end of things, it's a tough choice between the E2180, E4500 and E8200. Unsurprisingly, things get faster the more you pay – but which is best value? That's easy: the E2180 here is a flexible engine that's great for gentle gaming or an overclocking frenzy.

MOTHERBOARD

CONROEXFIRE-ESATA2

EXPECT TO PAY £60
MANUFACTURER ASRock
WEB asrock.com

Paired with an E6300, this ASRock board can help you wring high-end performance from a budget rig. It features a 1066/800/533 MHz FSB, SATA II with RAID, *Vista*-friendly 7.1 HD audio onboard, Gigabit LAN and ASRock's easy overclocking features. It even has CrossFire support.

HDD

CAVIAR 1600AAJS SATA-II

EXPECT TO PAY £30
MANUFACTURER Western Digital
WEBSITE www.wdc.com

It's not like a 160GB hard drive is unfeasibly huge any more, but it remains more than enough for the casual gamer to do a spot of casual gaming. A few good titles, Steam, a couple of thousand music files and the odd porn flick still leaves plenty of room for *Windows* to manoeuvre.

SCREEN

VA903M

EXPECT TO PAY £118
MANUFACTURER ViewSonic
WEBSITE www.viewsonic.co.uk

The VA903m ousts our favourite VE710s as it's cheaper and has a 19in screen. Plus, it's a better bet than any of the similarly-priced widescreen variants as there are more pixels on the screen: its 1280 x 1024 pixel panel offers greater depth than the 1440 x 900 panel of its VA1912w sibling.

SOUNDCARD

SOUND BLASTER AUDIGY 2 VALUE

EXPECT TO PAY £20
MANUFACTURER Creative Labs
WEBSITE uk.europe.creative.com

If you're a casual gamer, there's little point throwing half a mortgage payment at your soundcard because you'll not be able to tell the difference. The cheap Audigy features EAX 4.0 and Dolby Digital EX support, and makes an awful lot of sense.

SPEAKERS

X-530

EXPECT TO PAY £55
MANUFACTURER Logitech
WEBSITE logitech.co.uk

Say goodbye to Creative's P5800s, longest serving denizens of the *Buyer's Guide*, and guten tag to Logitech's swisher X-530s. With the edge on quality and available everywhere, the Swiss-designed 70W, 5.1 system offers Logitech build quality with superb sound in games, movies and music.

INSIDE PC GAMER

DAWN OF WAR 2
The full story – only in PC Gamer!

FIRING MIND BULLETS
Play games with the power of thought!

PLUS...
STARCRAFT 2 › AGE OF CONAN › ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES › ALONE IN THE DARK › MYTHOS › DUNGEON HERO › ALPHA PROTOCOL › ASSASSIN'S CREED › EVE'S UNIVERSE AT WAR › TF2: THE MUSICAL › RAINBOW SIX: VEGAS 2 › LOVE › MORE...

FREEPLAY
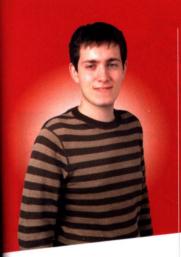
The free things shall save us all

FREE GAMES!

WHAT'S FREE THIS MONTH

Getting Real Mad

FROM MY DARK tower above Shepherds Bush I have been screaming the most foul of all words, all because of one thing – *World of Warcraft*'s PvP. It's a woeful exercise of annoyance, a never-ending waltz of turning, clicking and pounding of hotkeys that has no rhyme, reason or point to it without hours of grinding to "prepare" yourself.

Like an abused puppy, I return to it every few weeks, thinking, "Oh, this time it'll be different," only to get a kick in the face from somebody with more time on their hands. There is no way into *WOW* PvP anymore without game after game of standing back and soaking up the honour until you have good enough gear to fight back with any gusto. But what's the point? It's all just a treadmill that ends with you becoming a resilient, not better, player.

More positively, through Fight Club, I've found *Team Fortress 2*, a game that's both instantly accessible and that, over time, rewards me for both learning maps and other classes. It's also helpful that I get to play with some delightfully friendly regulars who never cease to challenge and entertain me to the point where I usually feel like playing a lot later than is good for me.

It's amazing, too, because even though I get killed a damn sight more than I would in *WOW,* I find *TF2* a much more placid, enjoyable experience, as there's not such a huge degree of helplessness. I return after every death with the knowledge that revenge isn't outside of my grasp because I haven't grinded out better armour for my heavy.

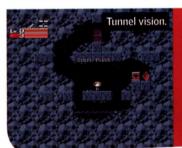Or maybe I'm just shit at PvP.

Ed Zitron

Ed Zitron, Disc Editor

Super highway.

102 **Demo pages**
Welcome to the demo pages, we've got your trial games.

Goo-d for you.

104 **News**
The hottest news along with an interview with some Goos!

Tunnel vision.

106 **The Thrifty Fifty**
Our top 50 freeware games of all time!

Lasery days.

114 **Mods**
Hide in a box and shoot some laser-guns with some crazy mods!

Firing squad.

116 **Online Zone**
We fight you, we talk to you, and we blog you sideways.

0 HOURS

968.1 HOURS*

*Approximate amount of completely free stuff this month

Demos

Ed Zitron floods your computer with demos

AUDIOSURF

Turning your Neil Diamond collection into a thrill ride...

www.audio-surf.com

AUDIOSURF IS ONE of the most heart-racing puzzle/action games we've played. Pick an MP3 from your collection and the game creates a track populated by blocks that you either have to dodge or collect.

When you link three or more blocks they vanish, raising your score that can be uploaded to worldwide leaderboards. This may sound rather dry as a concept, but once you've loaded up a good track, the way that *Audiosurf* manipulates your music into a cacophony of dodging and weaving is unbelievably addictive.

This demo lets you play as the Mono in Casual (easy) and Pro (medium) difficulty levels, and the Pusher at Pro. The Mono means you only have to pick up blue blocks and dodge greys, and The Pusher lets you organise blocks into combos. The aim is to make as combos from high-scoring hot-coloured blocks, while matching the abundant cooler colours, and keeping columns from overflowing.

When you love the demo, buy the game from Steam.

Queens of the Stone Age: 3's & 7's

HE AIN'T EASY...
You need to be careful not to try and take on the rarer, higher-value blocks unless you're prepared to build combos around them, otherwise you'll overflow and not be able to pick up new blocks for a while.

BACK TO MONO
The Mono teaches you the basics of moving your car. If you hold down the left mouse button the car collects blocks from across the whole track, and the right button will make the ship jump over blocks.

EVERYBODY MOVE TO THE MUSIC Kickin' lyrics right to your brain, keyboard and mouse...

LEADER OF THE PACK
Even though it's a demo, you can submit scores to the leaderboard and see how well you fare against other players. And there'll be plenty of people out there who are a lot, lot better than you.

PUSH IT REAL GOOD
The Pusher is challenging, as you'll have to push blocks left and right to get the highest-value combos, which is easier said than done in some of the faster songs we've tried out with the demo.

SAM & MAX: NIGHT OF THE RAVING DEAD

A game of cat, mouse, rabbit and zombie...

www.telltalegames.com/samandmax

WHEN A ZOMBIE bursts into their office and steals Jesse James' hand, Sam and Max are thrown into yet another genuinely funny – if occasionally weak, puzzle-wise – adventure that takes them to Stuttgart, Germany to get to the bottom of the oncoming Zombocalypse, or at least the annoyance of zombies in 3D glasses shuffling around the streets.

This demo will let you get a taster of what the new episode of *Sam & Max* has in store for you, such as the new rat casino and Jurgen, the emo vampire, and his Zombie Factory club/catacomb/castle of evil.

Antagonists to antagonise
Other major players in *Night of the Raving Dead*

C.O.P.S.
The Computer Obsolescence Prevention Society are a co-op of old machines that lead Sam and Max towards the source of the zombie panic.

JURGEN
Effeminate, whiny and self-loving, Jurgen is the mastermind behind the zombie invasion. When we first meet him, he's planning to murder our heroes. The bastard.

LOST EMPIRE: IMMORTALS

Taking turns killing aliens
www.paradoxplaza.com/lostempire

TONGUE-TRAPPING TITLE aside, *Lost Empire: Immortals* (page 76) is a fun and engrossing turn-based strategy game. This demo sets the *Civilization*-esque task of expanding your way into the universe. You get 350 turns to experience *Lost Empire*'s ship-building, economic, diplomatic and war-fairing features. While you could cheat and just keep hitting "end turn", normal people will get at least an hour's fun out of it, depending on your love of tech trees and menus.

1 Look ahead
As you explore, you'll be able to scout out more planets and gain vital information about its vegetation, trade capabilities and resources.

2 Talk to me
A ship's yellow ring is its scanning range, and the blue is its communication range. You'll can only talk to ships within that circle.

3 Iconography
A planet's icon shows what industry they're built for. For example, outposts protect nearby planets from sudden attacks.

Conquer the Galaxy
Tips for founding an empire

A brand new colony
In the first 30 turns churn out as many colony ships as possible to establish a viable economic backbone and an interplanetary trade network.

Trading Spaces
Each planet specialises in a kind of production. Click on the planet, then look at the bars – the tallest one shows what the planet is suited to.

PCZONE HOT DOWNLOADS

STARCRAFT II: ZERG TRAILER
www.gamershell.com/tv/10582.html

RTS nutcases who have already been drummed into a frenzy by our preview of this game, will pop their clogs at the sight of this trailer. You'll see Zergs popping out of the ground and men firing guns, and get a solid idea of the mayhem that will be *StarCraft II*.

SINS OF THE SOLAR EMPIRE
www.gamershell.com/news_46837.html

An immense and accessible RTS epic that we're all enjoying has finally spat forth a demo, but not in time to arrive on 194's disc. This demo has 90 minutes of space combat and economics that are bound to make you want the real thing.

THE BEST OF THE REST

101 TOP FREEWARE GAMES
Going hand-in-hand with this issue's Top 50 Freeware Games (page 106), you'll find 101 of the blighters across both sides of the disc, including both those mentioned in the feature and another 51 of the finest out there. If we were to calculate how much fun they'll give you, our calculators would explode – and that's a fact.

TERRORIST TAKEDOWN 2: US NAVY SEALS
www.terroristtakedown2game.com
Being a terrorist isn't easy, especially with games like *Terrorist Takedown 2: US Navy SEALs* on the market. This arcadey shooter isn't exactly going to blow your socks off, but it might move them enough that a cool breeze will lower the temperature of your tootsies.

COMBAT MISSION: SHOCK FORCE
www.battlefront.com/products/cmsf
The yin to the above yang, *Shock Force* is a military simulation of a hypothetical combat situation in which Syria falls under a new rule that supports terrorism. Naturally, NATO get involved, and the whole situation becomes rather war-like. Enter you, the gung-ho war-loving player. Anyway, it's on the disc, if that's your kind of thing.

GOO EITHER WAY

We quiz the Gooey 2D Boys and about their *World Of Goo*...

Steady now boys.

If you get stuck you can always retry   retry   0 of 32 collected Menu

IRRITABLE BOLL SYNDROME
snipurl.com/uwepostal
Director of terrible movie adaptations of games Uwe Boll has boldly ranted about Steven Spielberg. Boll told website Bloody-Disgusting.com that Spielberg has "got sloppy" and that his own "performance in *Postal* as 'Nazi Theme Park Owner' outperforms easily Ben Kingsley in *Schindler's List!*" If only Kingsley had had a theme park to work with...

YOU CANNOT HAS PWN YOU
snipurl.com/pwnagetm
PC-stressers Futuremark have filed papers to trademark the word "pwnage" in America. They've registered the overused internet term in an attempt to "protect themselves from squatters... people looking to trademark the name on false pretences," while they develop a product currently named 'Pwnage'. Reports that NVIDIA are ringfencing 'ghey noobs lol' are said to be speculative.

You can Goo 'em anytime.

There's nothing sadder than a stranded Goo.
0 of 10 collected

CREATED BY THE two-man team 2D Boy, *World of Goo* is a physics-based puzzler that has you make structures out of tiny creatures – the Goos – to allow their brothers to travel along said structure to reach a tube, a tube that releases them from the torment of imprisonment.

This amazingly beautiful, addictive and fun game is due to be released on PC later this year, and 2D Boy co-founders (and ex-EA staffers), Ron Carmel and Kyle Gabler were kind enough to answer a few of our questions about it...

> ## If the game industry is high school, indie games are the geeky kids

Q What was the inspiration behind *World of Goo*?

A Gabler: We've realised that the plot of *World of Goo* is the unusual story behind our little two-man indie studio. The Goo balls are dumb and naive, their eyes are filled with stars, and they are excited to go exploring. Meanwhile, the ominous World of Goo Corporation is extremely efficient at processing the Goo balls into World of Goo Corporation Brand Soft Drink, and other trademark licensed Goo Products.

It's kind of a really blatant metaphor, but the World of Goo Corporation is becoming the embodiment of some of our hilariously horrible experiences with occasional unscrupulous publishers.

What are the challenges of working with only two team members?
Carmel: There's a lot of work to be done and we haven't earned a salary since we detached ourselves from the corporate udder back in 2006. We both had periods where we were really stressed out. Also, Kyle and I barely knew each other when we started working on this project and figuring out how to best work together when we both have so much on the line was occasionally a bumpy ride.

How do you think independent games are affecting the industry as a whole?
Carmel: Now that digital channels are allowing smaller, stranger, experimental games to be profitable, I think we'll be seeing more and more large studios making indie-esque games.
Gabler: Indie games are kicking ass! If the game industry is high school, and big-budget games are the cool kids, indie games are the geeky kids with glasses and ugly hair. But we're living through one of those movies where the ugly kid gets voted prom queen and shoots lightning out of her eyes. The cool kids are mortified at first, but then they realise they want to shoot lightning out of their eyes too. But by the time they figure out how, she's already levitating.

What post-*World of Goo* plans do you have? Will you expand content for the game or do something new?
Ron: I hope we can do both. We have a list of ideas we're eager to prototype and play around with. We also have this idea of collaborating with a bunch of artists and releasing more content with totally different art styles in each level.

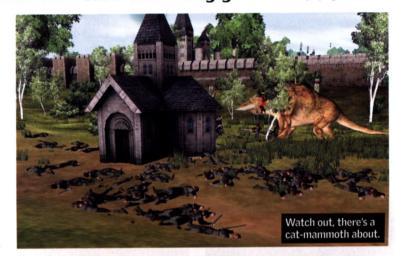I wish we could clone ourselves and work on everything at the same time!

SAGA FRONTS FREE GAMEPLAY

MMORTS combines itself with card-collecting games
www.playsaga.com

AS THE CLASSICAL MMO subscription model breaks down like wet cardboard, bizarre iterations of the genre keep popping up, much like Saga Games' *SAGA* – an MMORTS with collectible elements and booster packs that you can buy to bolster your forces.

This is a bare-bones strategy game of warfare, espionage and kingdom building, with a backbone of trading, resource collection and city growth.

There's no money down and it's free as a bird for you eager tactical beavers, so you might find it an enjoyable romp. *SAGA* costs $20 for the full version, which is far less than the kings' ransom of subscription-based games.

Watch out, there's a cat-mammoth about.

MOD ME HAPPY

CrosuS makes your modding dreams come true
isotx.com/crosus

IN A WORLD made easier by the existence of devices such as the toilet, microwaves, hairdryers and Steam, modding has become a crude art of trying to find the right part of your steamapps and gingerly dragging and dropping files before proceeding to load the game with your fingers crossed. No more, as CrosuS automates downloading and installing mods for your games, in an easy-to-access way.

You can also download and run a tepid selection of indie games from inside the service to middling results, but the remarkable part of CrosuS is the simplicity of mod installation.

You select a mod from the browser-like interface, which is serviceable but has a few kinks, and it downloads and installs them into your Steam Games list, making them selectable as if they were downloaded from Valve. Plenty of non-Steam games are supported too, including *WOW* and *C&C3*. CrosuS saves effort compared to trawling through mod sites in the hope of finding something that isn't in the "vague character diagrams" stage of development.

While there are a few bugs that need to be ironed out, CrosuS is a promising service.

Mods have never been easier to use.

FLASHY STARCRAFT RPG
snipurl.com/starcraftrpg
The internet every so often drops something truly disgusting into our otherwise joyful lives, like a slug in your coffee. Today, it's the turn of this Flash RPG that uses *StarCraft* sprites and automatically resolves battles. It feels just as unwieldy as you'd imagine an RPG using someone else's graphics and game-setting in a browser could ever be.

WRIGHT ON
www.capcom.com/phoenixwright
Handheld detective/lawyer-'em-up *Phoenix Wright* hit Japanese PCs recently. The first episode was free, with the remaining ones priced at $19 (£10). There's no word on an English translation yet, but we're sure we'll get something.

Bug-Fix of the Month

THIS MONTH
MEDAL OF HONOUR: AIRBORNE

"The 'r' in PunkBuster was added in the credits." Brilliant. We did get a bit worried, to be honest.

Movie of the month
X³: TERRAN CONFLICT

The stand-alone expansion to Steve Hogarty's favourite space-flight simulator game is as ever a freeform space-shooter like *Elite*, but with wider space expanses and even glitzier graphics. You can be a space money-hog, a space explorer, a space pirate, a space policeman, or even a space-ship pilot. Wonders never ceasing, etc.

The space Porsche – ride in style, even when our alien overlords punish us for doing so.

Expect larger battles, with huge battlecruisers like this beefy machine.

While these missiles are pretty, they aren't accurate. Shame on you, Terrans.

Seems like Egosoft have taken a few pages out of *FreeSpace 2*'s book – not that that's a bad thing.

The Thrifty

The 50 best freeware games the internet ha

5 DAYS A STRANGER

50 A free point-and-click by Ben 'Yahtzee' Croshaw. Built using the *Adventure Game Studio*, *5 Days* also comes in a premium version costing $5 that has a developer's commentary. If you're anything like us, it'll make you want to make your own adventure. Before realising it'd probably be rubbish.

ORBITER

49 The passion of space nerds is a powerful thing, enough to drive them to create freeware space simulator *Orbiter*. The space being simulated here isn't your typical *Star Wars* stuff though. It's serious – realistic shuttle launches and docking procedures, plus elliptic projections and trajectories. Terrifying, but deeply satisfying.

DISMOUNT

47 Excellent rag doll nonsense. In the *Porrasturvat* version you fall down stairs, scoring the most points for violent trauma to the head and neck of your hapless crash test dummy. In *Rekkaturvat*, a truck helps you to mutilate your man. These games are essentially construction kits for creative sociopaths.

THERE'S A CUBIC inch of grey mush in our brains which insists that things you don't pay for, like air, your neighbour's WiFi and your housemate's toothpaste, are worthless. Perhaps it's a healthy bit of self-delusion to believe that something you've shelled out money for is better than it actually is, as the alternative is to live every day crushed under an elephant of regret. But throw away the shackles of monetary convention and you open the doors to what we like to call Freeware Country.

On this month's DVD you'll find not only the following top 50 freeware games, but 51 more, adding up to the 101 best freeware games ever made. From one-off indie ventures to professionally made platformers, developers of free games are so unshackled by commercialism that their creativity runs rampant. If it's free, and it's ace, it's most definitely here. Put your wallet away dear, this one's on us.

COTTAGE OF DOOM

48 The game that claims to "accurately simulate the reality of being trapped in a cottage and having to hammer planks to the doors and windows to keep the zombies from coming in". You've got a shotgun in case they do, though, so prepare to score some point-multiplying "zombos" when the walking dead inevitably break in...
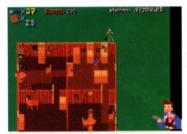
GAMBARE NATSUKI-SAN

46 A bizarre platforming fruit-fest that has you jumping around, fixing yourself to walls with a gigantic spring-loaded claw that you can precisely position to help you reach the next peak. The gaudy anime visuals don't manage to ruin the fun, though, and the random flashes of incomprehensible Japanese always manage to make us laugh.
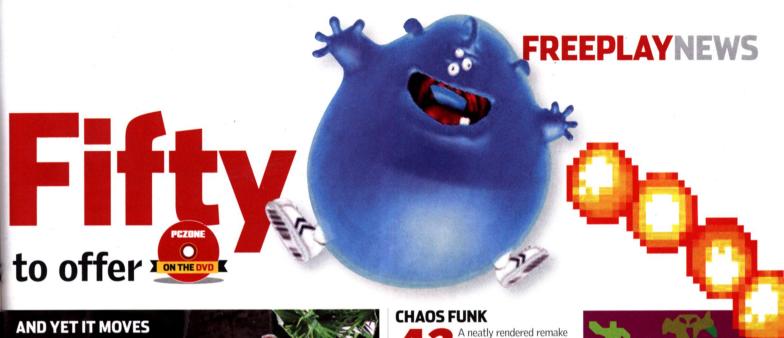
TALE OF TWO KINGDOMS

45 Another point-and-click adventure game made using *AGS*, *ATOTK* was released to much acclaim and puts the player immediately in mind of the old Sierra and LucasArts classics. Made by a dozen or so people, the game is better than many modern full-price adventures, and is an achingly sincere tribute to the genre.

Fifty
to offer

PCZONE ON THE DVD

AND YET IT MOVES
44 A delightful platformer set in a paper world, *And Yet It Moves* lets you not only run and jump, but revolve the world itself to deal with its platforming perils. It's a really original-looking game, too, and at the very least is one of the more innovative freeware platformers ever to be released.

SUPER SECRET NINJA
41 A gorgeous little platformer in which you use a grappling hook to swing across an 8 bit-esque Japan, building momentum to leap huge gaps while avoiding alerting the law to your presence. The game becomes fiendishly difficult, but even repeated failed attempts are enjoyable.

NOMLTEST
39 An insane sprite-based shooter from our friends in the Far East, the hard-to-pronounce *Nomltest* merges the frantic and crowded clamouring of classic shoot-'em-ups with the twee retro charm of that most pervasive of gaming icons, *Space Invaders*. Probably not safe to expose yourself to it for more than five minutes at a time, to reduce the onset of an inevitable addiction or fit.

CHAOS FUNK
43 A neatly rendered remake of the ZX Spectrum classic *Chaos*, *Chaos Funk* pits up to eight wizards against one another on the plain of limbo (a lovely excuse to use a black screen as a background). Using randomly assigned spells (including the ability to spawn forests and monsters), players take turns to magic one another to bits. Fantastic.

MINISHOTERRS
42 This looks, smells and feels like a professionally made Japanese side-scrolling shooter, despite the fact that it's only about the size of four icons stuck together. You'll duck, you'll weave, you'll shoot things, and they'll explode. It's easy to get the hang of and has incredible amounts of spit and polish.

CHOLO
40 A remake of a game from long ago; in *Cholo* you are a slowly evolving AI subroutine, traversing an epic wireframe *Tron*-like world. You exist in the electronic brain of a robot, and through solving cryptic puzzles you can leap into the minds of other, better robots, gaining abilities as you go. At one point you're a tank.
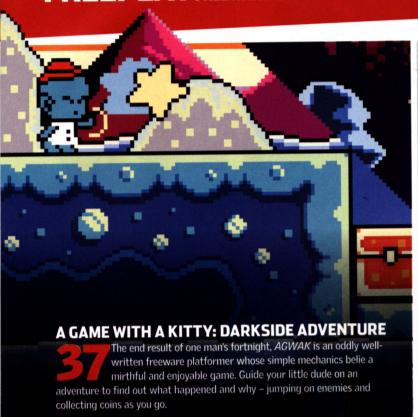
KRIEGSPIEL
38 A Napoleonic turn-based wargame with buckets of class, *Kriegspiel* is the beautiful creation of French situationist Guy Debord – founder of the Society for Strategic and Historical Games. There's no AI, and a solid brick wall of a learning curve, but this is hardcore strategy at its most stylish. Personally, we like the little cardboard horses most of all. ➔

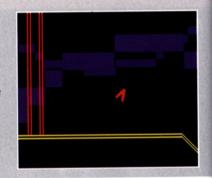## TUMIKI FIGHTERS

36 From the artful Kenta Cho comes this building-block inspired shoot-'em-up. Destroy enemy ships and collect their broken parts to bolster your own mass and strength. Huge bosses can be conquered and their unique firing patterns attained. Think *Katamari Damacy* fused with *R•Type* and you'll start to understand *Tumiki Fighters'* appeal.
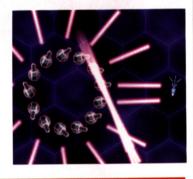
A GAME WITH A KITTY: DARKSIDE ADVENTURE

37 The end result of one man's fortnight, *AGWAK* is an oddly well-written freeware platformer whose simple mechanics belie a mirthful and enjoyable game. Guide your little dude on an adventure to find out what happened and why – jumping on enemies and collecting coins as you go.

FLYWRENCH

35 A tense, constantly challenging little puzzler that has you flip-flapping your way through a maze, trying to avoid touching the sides while changing colour and shape to pass through gates. It's horrendously tough and visually underwhelming, but fantastically balanced and equally fun.
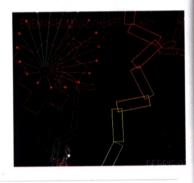
RAY-HOUND

34 A twitchy, passive shoot-'em-up in which your means of attack is to deflect shots from enemy turrets back at them. Your enemies increase in number as the game rolls onwards and what starts off as a simple premise soon evolves into a geometrically pleasing laser show, with your space-bending shield as the glorious centrepiece.

CLEAN ASIA

33 By googling "Clean Asia" you run the risk of ordering a new (presumably clean and Asian) wife, but if there's one game worth taking that risk for, it's this one (and the 32 games above it, logically speaking). A shoot-'em-up with some of the most creative and ball-tinglingly difficult bosses, this one will have you slapping yourself with glee.

SPOOKS

32 As far as point-and-click adventures where everybody is dead (and everybody makes jokes about being dead) go, *Spooks* is up there with *Grim Fandango*. Hardly realistic, as we don't go around making puns about being alive, but fun all the same.

CHALK

31 *Chalk* has you destroying spinning blocks and enemies by drawing lines using chalk to link their weak appendages, or by drawing a line through both them and their own gunfire. It's frantic, it's pretty, it's punch-your-mother hard, and something that will go down well with all of you shooter fans out there.
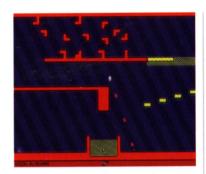
JELLOCAR

30 Using the tools afforded by Microsoft's XNA development kit, *JelloCar's* creator has designed a game filled only with wobbling jelly objects. Your car (whose engine sounds consist of childish, wibbling lip noises) must traverse the bouncy terrain and reach the goal without falling into the limitless expanse that lies underneath it.

SAMOROST

ONLINE ONLY

29 One of the early uses of Flash as a stylish, world-building tool. Replacing spine-bending action with tiny animations, the pixel-fine attention to detail in this point-and-click exploration adventure was an absorbing and unaccustomed pleasure to find in a web browser. snipurl.com/samorost

NINJAH

28 This perilous platformer has you tripping switches to change your colour, which must match whatever gate you walk, swing or propel yourself through, or whatever floor you stand upon. It's tricky and requires both careful timing and patience, but if you can stand a few hundred messy deaths, you'll be rewarded in leaps and bounds.

GUNROAR

27 Some might say this is Kenta Cho's finest shoot-'em-up. We didn't say that though, as another Cho shooter has found a place in our top 10, but those people have a point. A frantic, trippy, and visually chaotic shooter, *Gunroar* is the sort of game you could unknowingly sink hours into – a real gem.

GRID WARS 2

26 Is *GW2* a carbon copy rip-off, or a tactically refined extension of *Geometry Wars*? It looks the same, but *Grid Wars* fostered a slightly more thoughtful play style, until Microsoft killed it to pave the way for the PC version of their game. It's still available, though, so Google your heart out.

THRUST XTREME

25 Nipping at the heels of the angular-spaceship-remake to the left, *Thrust Xtreme* carries off a similar imitation with a tad less blatancy. The game is a re-imagining of *Thrust*, in which you navigate your way through tunnels, avoiding walls and the ever-present bitch that is gravity. Grab the objective and struggle with its weight as you evacuate the planet.

CRAYON PHYSICS

24 *Crayon Physics Deluxe* is in development now, and it takes the *Penny Crayon* ethic of "what you draw becomes real" to its logical conclusion. You can only draw squares and lines, but the potential for absorbing physics-based puzzles is obvious, even in this fairly limited version. We heavily advise you to give this man money as soon as *Deluxe* debuts.

SUMOTORI DREAMS

23 The game boasting most laughs per kilobyte; *Sumotori Dreams* fits into just 90k, and the whimsical physics and AI is like watching a couple of angry and randy gay drunks decide whether they want to fight or make out. It's one of the few games that is genuinely a spectator sport.

TOWER OF GOO

22 Build your tower as high as you can in a game that manages to combine experimentalism gameplay a great, physics-led mechanic. It's the inspirational building block on which the upcoming *World of Goo* is founded, and that promises to be one of the feel-good indie hits of the year.

POYO

21 Freeware's littered with great platformers – the genre absolutely thrives in this non-commercial environment – and *Poyo* is one of the best of its kind. Rather than a sprawling adventure, *Poyo* is broken into challenging levels. Death resets the level, forcing you to master every nuance before being allowed to move on.

BLOCKSUM

20 If *Tetris* was an exercise in spatial awareness, then *Blocksum* has you adding up dozens of combinations of numbers to match and remove similar sums. With an exponential difficulty curve that quickly rips open your false sense of security, *Blocksum* is like *Brain Training* for people who actually enjoy playing video games too.

OFF-ROAD VELOCIRAPTOR SAFARI

ONLINE ONLY

18 Take one jeep, one spikey ball on a chain, and put loads of velociraptors a little too far apart, and you've got *Off-Road Velociraptor Safari*. Using the Unity Web Player (unity3d.com/unity-web-player-2) – a browser plug-in that, unlike Flash, is specifically made for games – ORVS looks shockingly good in a *Firefox* window, and is solid, uncomplicated fun to boot. **www.raptorsafari.com**

DEATHWORM

19 Imagine you're a big bloody worm. You'd be pretty annoyed, and if you were big enough, you'd want to mess up some cattle and trucks. Now you can, with this simple but addictive game, in which you play a massive sandworm who uses his forward momentum to bring down biplanes and scoffs animals to stay alive.

FROZZD

17 *Frozzd* merges the planetoid-navigating of *Super Mario Galaxy* and the minion-gathering of *Pikmin*, while filling in the gaps with some highly original design. The objective is to rescue the frozen Mubblies, who join your side as you fight to free all their mates.

THE BLOB

16 Sometimes the sheer graphical friendliness of indie games makes you wonder why all the big companies are chasing after some gory bullshit version of reality. Instead of all of that nonsense, *The Blob* sees you painting a dull grey planet all the colours of the rainbow, and has more than enough charm to force you to overlook its adorable flaws.

NETHACK

15 An ASCII dungeon trawl from yesterdecade, with a complete lack of graphics that forces your imagination to do the work. Create potions, train your pet, and find a cunning way to rob the shopkeeper blind – the sheer number of options available to you is mind-numbing. By the time you get to the final boss, you'll be shit-scared of capital Ds.

DUTY AND BEYOND

14 If an adventure game about delivering a pizza seems slightly obscure then you'd be right. The sheer, bewildering length of *Duty And Beyond* makes it an exercise in needless complication unseen since Douglas Adams' Infocom adventure, *Bureaucracy*. No spoilers, but you end up in Egypt.

NOITU LOVE AND THE ARMY OF GRINNING DARNS

13 Spell the main character's name backwards and you get this round-faced platformer's theme – evolution. Puzzles are solved either by regressing to your ancestral simian state (to jump higher and further) or by evolving to a psychic being (to attack bosses with your psi-powers). *Noitu Love* is extremely polished and brimming with character.

KNYTT

12 A small creature, in a world that's not only without boss battles, but with most characters seemingly completely uninterested in killing you. How such character can be contained in so few pixels is a mystery. If *Knytt* bears a passing resemblance to *Within A Deep Forest* (#9), that's because it's made by the same Swedish musician, Nicklas Nygren.

NARBACULAR DROP

11 The fairy tale story of a princess who created a way of getting from one place to another very quickly. That princess was Kim Swift, and she teleported from university to Valve's development coven with this puzzler that was to inspire *The Orange Box*'s quirky *Portal*.

SEIKLUS

10
A charming and magical platformer, *Seiklus* merges puzzles with simply drawn yet immediately loveable locations and landscapes. A great change of pace from the more manic *Cave Story*-style platformers, *Seiklus* also features some fantastic chip music – the sort of thing you could unashamedly slip on to your MP3 player.

WITHIN A DEEP FOREST

09
More 8-bit looking action, as you navigate a bouncing ball through a forest. You'll navigate around gusts of wind, and unlock ever bouncier balls. Even though this is a fairly ambient and relaxing game, that draws you in with its rhythmic bounce, there're still speedrunning videos on YouTube. Is there anything those hardcore buggers won't speedrun?
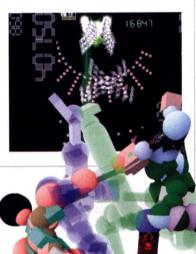
TRILBY: THE ART OF THEFT

08
Nothing would provide more satisfying schadenfreude to victims of his harsh reviews, than Ben "Zero Punctuation" Croshaw's stealth platformer turning out to be shit. But this gem validates his internet rants, by proving he's not all talk and no tits. Had it been released 20 years ago, Trilby would be regarded as a classic.

PROTOTYPE

07
There's a fine legal line to tread when recreating the genre-defining *R•Type*, and *Prototype* walks this line expertly by being just original enough to stand on its own two legs. Providing shooter action on par with its '80s progenitor, this side-scrolling classic both looks and plays beautifully, emulating the retro mechanics and sprawling alien landscapes with newfound finesse.

TOP: 00010000 HOLD

FORCE METER:

RROOTAGE

06
Kenta Cho sits about his living room in nothing but a housecoat and some sock-suspenders, having established himself firmly in the shoot-'em-up genre. He makes freeware games seemingly for his own amusement, and *rRootage* is his way of doffing his cap to that all-time great, *Ikaruga*. It's also the greatest shooter the man has ever created.
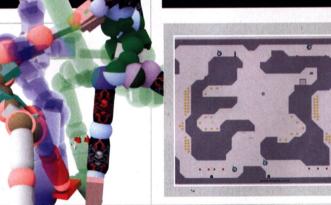
TORIBASH

05
Plucking a new genre out of thin air like it's honestly no big thing, *Toribash* is like Claymation *Mortal Kombat* – a turn-based beat-'em-up in which you control every joint and limb of your fighter's body in 10-frame bursts. Original and genius, the game even allows you to tear off your own head and hurl it at your competitor – over the internet.

N

04
Recently launched on Xbox LIVE! Arcade, *N* is a visually unimpressive and unabashed old-school platformer. However, the perfect combination of subtle stick-man physics, community-created levels, and demanding wallplay make this a long-standing classic and an unwavering freeware favourite around the office.

GOLF?

03
When describing *Golf?* to someone, you always run the risk of sounding like a pretentious idiot. "Well," you'll say. "It's like golf has been transported into a world of artistic freeform expression." Eventually, you just have to make them play it.

What actually happens when you play *Golf?* There's the game of golf, of course. But in the LAN-only multiplayer, you all play at the same time, so you'll mostly drive around in your caddy cars, on a landscape littered with architectural follies. The golf is just a vague reason to be there. There's a lot of humour in the physics, and the developers have wisely restricted it to po-faced absurdity, rather than in-your-face craziness. The feeling of directionless is liberating – and exploring the playground of design is a pleasure.

FAÇADE
02

A genuine insight into the interactive future of gaming, *Façade* is a first-person drinks party simulation – in which you, as a guest, enter a New York apartment and attempt to either placate an arguing couple called Trip and Grace, or drive them further apart.

Depending on the way you tap conversation into the parser by the end of the 10 minute game one might have broken down and admitted an affair, or they may have temporarily reconciled. Or, more likely, they may have thrown you out for calling Grace a slut or picking up an object from the mantelpiece and slowly walking in circles chanting obscenities.

The amount of phrases recognised, or at least the illusion of it, is remarkable, while the human emotion that seeps from the game remains unheard of in commercial games.

Façade's two developers are working on a game called *The Party* – where you host a party of seducable neighbours, angry bosses and bitter exs and can misbehave *Desperate Housewife*-style – which could be a milestone in gaming.

CAVE STORY
01

Moore's Law said two things. Firstly, that computers will get smaller and cleverer until we're inhaling whole clouds of super-intelligent nanobots. Secondly, that 2D platformers will fall out of fashion in such a dramatic way as to almost wipe them from the face of commercial gaming forever. Who'd have thought that the final resting place of the platformer would be on our least powerful platforms (handhelds) and our most powerful platforms (our beloved PCs)? Not only that, but who'd have foreseen that one of the best 2D platform adventures ever made would be a PC exclusive? And that it'd be stark raving free?

Consider how finely in tune *Cave Story* is with the greats of the genre – your *Metroids* and your *Marios* – and you realise that this could easily have been a forgotten classic of the 8-bit era. A cast of characters ranging from the cutesy rabbit-like Mimiga tribe to the entertainingly nefarious antagonists, a chip music soundtrack that infuses the entire game experience with unique retro flavour: you can analyse any component of *Cave Story* and find intelligent game design down to its very core.

The quality doesn't relent either, taking you through hours of adventures and rewarding you every step of the way, be that through weapon upgrades and story progression, or simply by introducing you to a sassy malfunctioning factory robot. The whole game's been meticulously translated from the original Japanese too, so the story arrives unscathed and, as far as we can tell, just as beautifully written as the original.

Cave Story isn't just our favourite freeware game, it rates highly compared to any full-price release (as evidenced by its appearance in our Top 100 Games feature). This is where classic platforming has been hiding for the past four years, right here on the PC. The phrase 'you get what you pay for' couldn't be more untrue.

OFFICIAL **R** REVIEW

grand theft auto IV

The ultimate, unmissable, unbiased **10-page review!**

On Sale Now!

Useful Dave slipped on a marble, spelling his doom.

Fire missiles!

Turn into a ball!

Dispatch War Rocket and Ajax!

PROJECT: VALKYRIE

Play: MOD

Morphing into primal
www.project-valkyrie.com | Mod for: *Team Fortress 2*

NAMED THE 'THREE-month mod' after its teeny-tiny gestation period, *Project: Valkyrie* made our editor say, "Wow, modding isn't dead," because it looks, sounds and plays like a high-quality expansion.

The game plays like a mixture of *Metroid Prime*, *Quake III* and *Halo*, with players dressing in Valkyrie suits (which resemble *Tron*'s snazzy outfits) and doing battle across *Blake's 7*-style environs (plain white walls and mysterious LEDs), double-jumping and lasering each other to little fleshy pieces. Your suit has a

chargeable beam cannon (similar to Samus' from *Metroid Prime*), an energy blade for melee, as well as missiles and deadlier Super Missiles.

The suit can also morph you into a ball (à la Samus from *Metroid Prime* – there's a theme here) and roll around in a remarkably easy-to-control and fluid fashion, dropping bombs and spinning around the level's holes.

Combining the Suit and Morph Ball modes allows for some remarkable acrobatic frolicking, letting you boost yourself into the ether as a ball and then

become humanoid to lay down fire on those below while in mid-air.

Blackened Interactive have created a simple yet adaptable system, making an original, playable homage to a game that most PC folk wouldn't naturally gravitate to. *Project: Valkyrie* reeks of class, effort and sheer love of the game, and while the code we tested was brittle, causing a few crashes, this mod's overall quality was above and beyond what's expected from its short design time.

Because we were so impressed by this mod, we organised the first of soon-

to-be-many impromptu mini-Fight Clubs, rounding up you, our readers, to battle with us in *Project: Valkyrie* for some wonderful prizes.

After the bloodbath, in which we managed to crash the game's servers – and each other's PCs – several times, long-time readers [Quite]Rob and Useful Dave won winner and runner-up respectively, receiving free games as a delightful reward.

Keep reading this space and visiting www.pczone.co.uk for details on future Mod Fight Clubs.

Hot lava! Can't touch the floor.

The new effects are very, very pretty.

Jump up, jump up, blow up.

BOX BOB

First Encounter Balloon Recon

www.deleicht.dk/boxbob | Mod for: *Half-Life 2*

Play: MOD

PCZONE ON THE DVD

SOME BOYS LIKE toys, some boys like guns and some boys like boxes. Bob is the latter, and has such fun playing with his box that it eventually swallows him up, throwing him head-first into a world of puzzle adventure.

Box Bob is a bizarre non-violent mod that has you scaring balloon-animals into respectively coloured circles and trapping them. Thus allowing you to flip the box to collect smaller box pieces to escape.

You scare the balloons using the left mouse button, but need to be careful not to either hit them (scattering them unpredictably) or scare them into the wrong circles, as that releases all the trapped balloons, wasting valuable time.

Box Bob is a high-quality yet frustrating puzzle romp, doing something remarkably different with the Source engine. At times it's eye-bleedingly hard, with a rogue balloon wasting Bob's precious time, ruining your scare-tactics and leaving you thrusting your fist into your monitor. But if you can take pleasure with equal measurements of pain, you'll find Box Bob a gorgeous escapade through the mind of a little boy and his love for boxes.

Help release Bob from his boxy nightmare.

Freeze, you bloody bastards.

HALF-LIFE: RESIDUAL POINT

Black Mesa: Reloaded

snipurl.com/toxagen | Mod for: *Half-Life*

Play: MOD

PCZONE ON THE DVD

THEY SAY IMITATION is the highest form of flattery and if that's the case, Toxagen's *Residual Point* is a kneel and a zip away from making Gabe Newell a happy, happy man.

This isn't a carbon copy of *Half-Life*, but it uses a lot of the original textures, some of the original map layouts and most of the original models to create an authentic, remarkably long, hard-edged *Half-Life* adventure. You play as an employee of Black Mesa, who may or may not be Gordon Freeman, who has to push a strange material into a Tesla-esque reactor thing which (surprise!) causes lots of things

to go wrong and sends you to Xen. Here you jump around a mercifully short set of platforms to get back to Earth, where the action kicks off.

While on one hand you can say that *Residual Point* feels a lot like *Half-Life* – as to be expected, it's a collection of maps, not a conversion – *Residual Point* has an authenticity to it that should make Valve get their cheque- and Korean phrase-books out with the intention of snapping up this young mapmaker.

We all hope that Toxagen gets himself together and releases something like this for *Half-Life 2* – that would be amazing.

MIT didn't have a seminar about this!

Kleiner's on the booze again.

Magnums solve all problems.

Online Zone

Can't wait for the next *PC ZONE*? Don't panic! Just hit **www.pczone.co.uk** now for up-to-the-minute news, exclusive features, forums, special competitions, pubcasts, Fight Club news, online chats and the *PC ZONE* blog!

ON THE BLOG

PCZONE 2008

What's been happening in ZONE's web diary this month...

WE ARE FILTH-MERCHANTS made of disgust and misery, and thus our main blogs this month were centred around the organisation and aftermath of Steve Hill's Neverquest protest on *Second Life* sex. What was meant to be a sedate organisational blog detailing how to protest became a rogue's gallery of men dressed in fluorescent pink penis costumes and the most filthy of frottage. Aside from that, we all had a giggle at the fact a Korean stand-up has managed to bring an audience to tears with his impressions of StarCraft units and what, we're sure, are their hilarious adventures. A surprise for blog readers was an impromptu game of mod *Project Valkyrie*, which we discuss in Freeplay Play. We also posted a blog how console ports, ultimately, aren't such a bad thing, because they're not, are they? Just see our reviews section this month. We're positive chaps, we are, and that's what our blogs are all about.

NOTES FROM THE FORUM

Lost: Via Terribulus

I apologise, but I am about to rant like an elderly gent would about the kids and their skateboards.

Now I'm not saying *Lost* is the greatest show ever on TV, but it's certainly in the top 20 per cent in terms of narrative and ball-tingling cliffhangers. So under the unwitting influence of what, on reflection, must have been meth or possibly acid, I foolishly committed myself to buying the game just to see if it would be a giggle.

How in the name of Greek buggery did they get it so wrong? The developers seem to assume all PC gamers use 360 pads. And even though they grace us with a key mapping facility, half the buttons can't be remapped, so throughout the game it's like playing whack-a-rat on the keyboard.

They have endeavoured to make a game version of the show, instead of making make a good game set in the *Lost* universe.

Randyspooge

To be fair to the developers, they were actually not allowed to add

A visual metaphor for *Lost: Via Domus*.

anything new to the show or carry on the new series; just to add more background for the past seasons. The reason for this is that the producers apparently found out that fans don't like being forced to buy crap games in order to get all the story. See *Enter The Matrix* for a good example. And, you really should've guessed it'd be awful.

TheTingler

I'm sure the reason it was pants is simply because they knew that any game with the *Lost* name on it would

sell bucketloads to people who watch the show but aren't 'hardcore gamers' and don't read game reviews. The publishers saw they could release a half-arsed product and still make piles of cash.

-Doomus-

This is pretty bad, but not as bad as *Battlestar Galactica*, a PC/X360 shitfest of diabolical proportions that sees you spending most of your time flying backwards.

SunScramble

PCZONE PUBCAST!

Round 7 now available on the ZONE website and iTunes!

POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE

WIN!

Send us your MMO character screenshots to win stuff...

You already know all about our '*PC ZONE* Around The World' bit in Letters, where we ask you to send in your photos of yourself holding your favourite mag all over the globe. Well now, you're cordially invited to send us screenshots of you or your guild in your favourite MMO with a brief, jolly explanation of what you're up to. The best two postcards sent to us every month at letters@pczone.co.uk will be printed here and win a PC game. Get snapping...

FIGHT CLUB

The new internet excitement that gives you the biggest kick of your life!

COME AND TAKE ON THE ZONE STAFF IN OUR MONTHLY ONLINE GAMING FREE-FOR-ALL!

FALLING ON A MONDAY for the first time in a century, this month's Fight Club was an instant bloodbath. With faces old and new turning up to the fracas, a medley of awful tactics and straight-up madness set the tone for the day.

=Van= Pinapple redefined the entire Heavy class as a fist-fighting nightmare, playing it 'wrong' (says Ed) yet still managing to rack up a fair number of kills. As ever, Log, Steve and Will crammed themselves onto one server and managed to kill each other until they were jibbering goons. Predictably Will was widely lambasted for being rubbish, despite his protestations that he wasn't quite as shit as usual.

The ultimate test, though, was trying to herd our readers into one place without them shooting each other for the team photo. It was remarkably hard, especially when a bizarre Mexican stand-off took place between the Reds and the Blues, with neither side knowing if the whole thing would turn into a bloodbath before the photo was even taken. Luckily, Will snapped one before it was time for everybody to die. We look forward to shooting you up good soon!

This can't end well.

Red and Blu in harmony...

ZONE CHAT

Priest to meet you, Zone Chatters

THIS MONTH'S *ZONE* **CHAT** was supposed to act as a preparatory aid for Steve Hill's Neverquest protest in *Second Life*, but was instead eerily silent as half the readers were off gallivanting in virtual sex clubs. There was some excellent discussion of how the MMO genre has progressed and how *Call of Duty 4*'s story is replayable, except on Veteran, when it's just a bit too hard. The highlight was the competition, in which we asked readers to phone up our office with a super-secret codeword. Congratulations to Sarevok and Beast, who won copies of *Frontlines: Fuel Of War* and *Sins of a Solar Empire* respectively. Apologies to our production editor Richard, whose phone we used, for all the confusing voicemails he picked up the next day.

We're all beaming.

How to join in!

To be a part of next month's Zone Chat, join our Steam Community group: PC Zone (PCZ). Keep an eye out for announcements at the www.pczone.co.uk forums for the date of the next chat event...

Can't make Fight Club?

If you can't make it to Fight Club – perhaps you're too busy picking daffodils and crocuses, you big girly-man – then join other *PCZ* readers on the following public servers. Who knows – some of us might even be there. The latest info can be found at www.pczone.co.uk.

WHO'S WHO

Jamie Sefton PCZ_NorthernScum
Will Porter PCZ_Batsphinx
Steve Hogarty PCZ_escaped_monkey
Phil Wand PCZ_People's Front Of Judea
Jon Blyth PCZ_Log
Ed Zitron PCZ_EdZed

1 COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE
cs.zonegames.co.uk:27015
cs.zonegames.co.uk:27025

2 HALF-LIFE 2 DEATHMATCH
hl2.zonegames.co.uk:27065

3 DAY OF DEFEAT: SOURCE
dod.zonegames.co.uk:27085

4 TEAM FORTRESS CLASSIC
tfc.zonegames.co.uk:27045

5 ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS
pczone2.jolt.co.uk

6 CALL OF DUTY 4
Coming soon

7 BATTLEFIELD 2142
bf2142.zonegames.co.uk:16567

8 TEAM FORTRESS 2
pczone2.jolt.co.uk:27115
pczone2.jolt.co.uk:27125
pczone2.jolt.co.uk:27135

Holiday greetings!

"Here I am playing *Mythos* as my new cyclops, Murtin, chatting it up a priest. He's having none of it though. In a minute I'm going to head off and kill some stuff in frustration. It's a cool little game by the way."
Murtin
(Micheal Marks)

Wish You Were Here!

"As you can see here, in *Lord of the Rings Online* I'm having an affair with this cow, and the other cow is looking at us, UDDERLY forlorn! Ho-ho. Maybe later we could go to the MOO-vies. Then I'd eat a MILKy bar"
Scarbrilious
(Nathan Bennett)

gam
rac

RetroZONE

DESCENT

"Down, down, deeper and down," hums an upside-down *Will Porter*

BUT HOW?

If you want to play *Descent* today, we've popped the original 3MB demo onto the cover disc. While it's old, we managed to get it working without DOSBox – after an auto extraction program and an old-fashioned DOS installation, the game started in *XP*. Our *Vista* installation did require the emulator, which is on the cover disc.

Descent ran a lot faster than we remembered, but that could be our memories failing us – if it were an issue with frame capping, we'd have been flying around at a million miles an hour.

Links...

1 www.thq.com
Where Parallax ended up. One splinter group, Outrage made the forgettable *Alter Echo* – for consoles only.

2 www.interplay.com
After selling *Fallout* to Bethesda, it looks like *Descent*'s publisher is planning a comeback...

GETTING LOST IN a game these days doesn't get much more than backtracking through a bullet-ridden corridor and wondering why there's no-one to kill. Way back in 1995 being lost in a level could have you staring at the ceiling, enveloped in a winding shaft/corridor that was tiled with matching textures and poring over a 3D wireframe map that could have been designed by a drug-addled spider.

Perhaps that *Descent* punishes those without a perfect sense of direction was why it never made it to the pantheon of the videogame greats, but it was a literal revolution. The premise was to take a craft deep into zero-G mines on various planets, collect coloured keycards, zap patrolling robots with missiles and lasers and eventually find your way down to the heavily guarded reactor which was in dire need of destruction.

With the reactor so damaged, *Descent* became an authentic recreation of the Millennium Falcon's escape from the Death Star in *Return of the Jedi* – with a timer counting down the seconds until the mine exploded, as you skimmed through endless tunnels to escape.

This was the point that you realised exactly how hot your spatial awareness skills were, as you either navigated using a surprisingly effective mix of panic and instinct. When you hear level designers

talking about guiding the player in a way that he feels is his own choice, Parallax clearly believed in getting you lost and blowing you up.

And lo, it was that *Descent* begat *Descent II*, which went on to begat *Descent*³, which had a little begat of its

own with the *Mercenary* expansion. Before anyone knew what was happening, *Descent: FreeSpace* was begat, which set about begatting *FreeSpace 2*. Sadly, *FreeSpace 2* had small metaphorical reproductive organs (sales figures), and that is where the begatting had to end.

Remember those featureless grey walls for on the way out.

Burrow through porous rock, eh? Bet you do.

INTERPLAY GREATS
Other action-based products of the fallen publisher

KINGPIN: LIFE OF CRIME
Thugs, hos and the best FPS flamethrower ever. Morally bankrupt, brilliant NPC behaviour and deaths.

MDK
Beautiful animation and silky action brought sniping and gliding to the PC before it was fashionable.

REDNECK RAMPAGE
Brothers Leonard and Bubba fight aliens in to rescue their pig Bessie. Wonderfully offensive.

DIE BY THE SWORD
Essentially a bodged game version of the Black Knight scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

EARTHWORM JIM
Everyone's favourite mud-guzzler is an institution who never should have been lost.

FREESPACE 2
A beautifully constructed space game whose sales showed that space had become less sexy.

NOW & THEN

Age Of Conan vs Barbarian: The Ultimate Warrior

NOW

AGE OF CONAN

THEN

BARBARIAN: THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR

FUNCOM'S NEW MMO is in the same vein as *The Witcher* – a combination of mannish fantasy and boyish gaming, which has lots of storylines involving big-titted witches and prostitutes.

But this wasn't the first barbarian-themed game to notice the booby bridge between fantasy and videogame. Back in 1987, Palace Software saw the link between mammaries and cash, by getting Page 3 girl Maria Whittaker to appear on the cover of *Barbarian*, draped around a beefy guy's shins. They also let you cut your opponent's head off, and the tiny gush of blood was enough to start one of the first controversies about violence in games.

This speck of redness was like Tom had just sliced Jerry open with a photo-realistic claw, and it was probably released in the same year that the first mother went up to her husband, and said "Have you actually seen the games he's playing? You chop heads off, and blood comes out. And it comes with a sexy poster, and there's a boy and a girl on it and I can't tell which one he likes best. He just stares at it."

This cocktail of erotic violence is how we got to today. If you need to blame moral decay on anything, blame it on Palace Software. If for no other reason that *Cauldron II* was way too hard.

PLAY IT!

MAME FRAME

WAI WAI JOCKEY GATE-IN!

Developer: Jaleco | Year: 1984

WAI WAI JOCKEY GATE-IN!

Horse Decide!

WE'RE TRAVELLING BACK in time. Before Engrish.com began compiling lots of mad-grammared Japanese signs. Before native English developers pretended to be badly translated as a joke. Before the Mega Drive version of *Zero Wing* sparked that "All Your Base" meme. This is before we'd learned to laugh at foreign cultures with warmth. Because in the '80s we were all booted bovver boys still wary of anything beyond the White Cliffs of Dover.

So, *Wai Wai Jockey Gate-In!* is the daddy of *Twilight Princess's Fish On!* It's the step-mum to *Super Mario Sunshine's Shine Get!* And it was surgically

separated from its conjoined twin *Goat In!*, before being allowed the kindness of death.

The game itself is an early of the rhythm action genre – maintain a steady button-tapping beat (too slow, you'll lose the race, too fast, you'll exhaust your horse and lose the race) and jump over obstacles and the kind of sticky green shit you rarely see on real racecourses.

Like most games on MAME, it's an exercise in trying to recover the patience you had as a child, and let's face it, that wasn't really patience, it was being an obsessive idiot with nothing better to throw 10p at.

WHAT IS MAME?

MAME is the *Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator*, currently emulating over 3,500 games. You can download it from www.mame.net – use Mame32 for a nice front-end. Then you can download *Robby Roto*, which is legal. You can play all the others too, but not legally. So stop it. Right now.

Point Accrue!

Gate In!

BACK IN THE DAY...

Cauldron: not as hard as the sequel.

PALACE SCUM
By Log

Writing about *Barbarian* reminded me of my most profound gaming disappointment. I wrote to Palace Software as a stripling 13 year-old, asking if I could visit them for my work experience – when I wanted nothing less than to live with them as a mascot. I had already imagined living with them until 21, at which point we'd all get married, and so I wrote to them using my best handwriting – the kind where you put your tongue on your lip. I told them how much I loved their game, I listed my ideas for *Barbarian 2*, and you know what? They never replied. A psychiatrist would probably explain that this is why I've ended up in games journalism: I'm still after those bastards.

SUPERTEST
BEING THE BAD GUY

We thieve some pots and cudgel some cops...

INSPIRED BY STEVE'S ecstasy about crime-'em-up sequel *Mafia II*, and the concept of the criminal portrayed as a hero, this month we discussed the many shades of good and naughty in video games, and the ever-present temptation to be evil in a world where it doesn't really matter.

Naturally, the discussion flowed towards *GTA3*, and the now-classic situation in which you were allowed to commit suspension-testing acts of lewdness with a prostitute, before reclaiming your cash with fatal violence. Will defended the act as testing how far the developers will let you go – which both astonished and appalled Ed to his frail, pious core.

Moving on from prostitute murder, the talk swerved towards *Thief* and its sequels, and whether or not to play the game properly meant you had to completely forego violent conduct, lest you break the sacred bond with being a creature of the shadows.

Mafia was universally agreed upon as a different kettle of fish in almost every way to *GTA*, with a strong moral context to a young up-and-coming gangster and his life on the streets of Lost Heaven.

Finally, we all felt guilty over completing the Dark Brotherhood missions in *Oblivion* – mostly because we had so much fun doing it.

So, what's your favourite way of breaking the law in PC gaming? Don't you love it when morality isn't all about killing or saving a little girl? Tell us on the forums at www.pczone.co.uk, where we'll gather up your best-formed opinions and put them in the column on the left. **PCZ**

I'll cheer these hoodies up.

Mafia II: bad to the bone.

Will – the world's wimpiest mugger.

He must be evil – he's wearing a hoodie.

We all felt guilty completing the Dark Brotherhood missions in *Oblivion* – mostly because we had fun doing it

STEVE HILL'S
NeverQuest

Steve Hill grudgingly joins the second great *PCZ* priest protest...

SINCE I WAS thrown out of a strip club dressing room by R2-D2 I haven't returned to *Second Life*, mainly because I haven't been able to access my account. However, following a change of surname, I'm reborn as one NeverQuest Coker, replete with a nightclub-friendly outfit and a layered feather cut.

This is no social visit though, as I've been summoned to chronicle protest against the pornographic acts perpetrated by the inhabitants of this most deviant of worlds. It's a confused agenda to say the least, but it appears to involve dressing up as priests and berating the residents for their actions while they're in flagrante.

Not only is the whole *PC ZONE* team involved, but a rallying call has been sent out to you readers, who have responded in numbers. A meeting point has been arranged and 20 priests are milling around. When arriving, I almost wish I hadn't, as I'm greeted by what was easily the most disturbing sight this column has ever thrown up.

COCKY UFOS
Heading gingerly towards the flock of protesters, I can make out a giant issue of *PC ZONE* incongruously stood next to some puppies, with a selection of charming pink flamingos dotted about.

Elsewhere, other indeterminate pink things are floating in the air, which on closer inspection turn out to be massive throbbing penises, pulsating inches from my face. I physically balk as I come eye-

to-eye with a particularly rampant member drifting towards me.

Regaining my composure, I peruse the selection of placards that the team have industriously created, bearing such searing political slogans as 'EASY NOW', 'RUDDY NORA' and 'I'M NOT KEEN.' Still not entirely sure of my stance, I help myself to a 'DOWN WITH THIS SORT OF THING' and stand nervously next to a throbbing blue vein. Father Tedeschi (aka Log) appears to be the ringleader and announces, "OK! Cocks and placards away, gentlemen," before inviting everyone to join him in Sexy.

GOD SQUAD
Sexy turns out to be an alfresco strip club, the patrons of which are surprised at the sudden influx of new customers. They're even more surprised when the impromptu flash mob pull out obscure placards and start cursing the punters in a biblical fashion.

"God disapproves of such carry on," preaches Garth Merryman to a nonplussed pole dancer.

"I daresay God disapproves of pixelated sex in a simulated environment not of his creation," says Impretty Gay.

"I am not impressed and I am certainly not keen," yells Father Waco, aka Ed Zitron.

"We can't help it, we love to sin. Try it out Father," replies 'Sexy DJ' Serafina Carr in her defence.

"This stripper is bald," I point out, before reverting to type and declaring, "That's it, I'm going for a lappie," a plan

"Wait for it... wait for it..."

"Unleash the phallus army!"

I physically balk as I come eye-to-eye with a particularly rampant member

unfortunately scuppered by the fact that I have no cash.

With the protest only a partial success, Father Tedeschi instructs us to leave, ignoring my plea to stay as they're playing a bit of AC/DC. In the event it's immaterial as some twat called Barry Breda announces "I am banning some assholes," and we are promptly kicked into a field in the middle of nowhere.
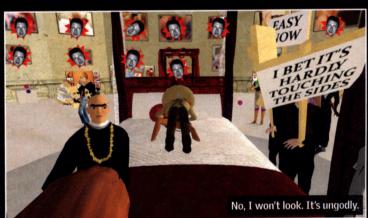
IT'S COMING UP
Regrouping, we next hit Sexy Beach, a peaceful cove that is enlivened by a dozen *PC ZONE* readers performing a conga to the euphoric sounds of *Dare* by Gorillaz, while hurling religious opinion at the natives. Although horrified by what he has unleashed, even Will gets into the spirit by turning out in what appears to be a floral Victorian bathing suit, something he attempts to excuse by claiming he found it in a barrel.

"Hill, I've given you my cock," exclaims Father McDonnell, much to

my surprise. It's a generous gift that transforms me into a giant inflatable penis, along with the majority of the ever-lengthening conga, something that can't help but get us noticed alongside a largely silent priest who's covered himself in so many placards that he resembles a plywood nightmare.

Inevitably kicked out, but hugely buoyed by the experience, we plan one more hit on a place called Sex4All. Here, our gaggle of 20 priests gather around a four poster bed upon which the avatar of a pneumatic lady is ground upon by a fat man wearing a massive Mexican hat. It's a strange scene indeed, but one of interrupted coitus that begins the inevitable slide of our brethren towards the pleasures of the flesh. Details of which I've been instructed not to divulge. Suffice to say it all gets very dark and I end the evening performing a lewd act with Steve Hogarty, a reader, and a woman called Maureen. May God forgive us... **PCZ**
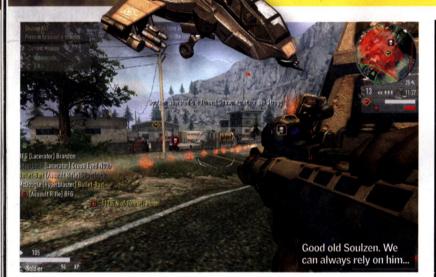

"Let's all do a conga. Let's all make it longer..."

EASY NOW
I BET IT'S HARDLY TOUCHING THE SIDES
No, I won't look. It's ungodly.

DEVELOPER'S COMMENTARY
ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

Jamie Sefton talks Strogg with Splash Damage

DEVELOPERS SPLASH DAMAGE began as a bunch of fanboy modders, before growing into one of the UK's most important games companies, creating *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* and most recently *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*. We fought off Stroggs advancing on Bromley to ask art director Richard Jolly (left) and creative director Paul Wedgwood (right) about the making of this *Quake*-inspired tactical blaster and discover what it's like working with a famous developer based in the US...

Good old Soulzen. We can always rely on him...

01 **FIRST IDEAS:** Wedgwood: "I remember we flew the whole company out to E3 2003 in Los Angeles to celebrate *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*'s completion, and arrived to find there was a significant server crash bug in the release code. So what was meant to be a vacation ended up being seven days in the basement of Activision, trying to find a solution for this bug. Because we were tied up in the basement, Kevin Cloud at id and I were able to send this high concept for the next game back and forth. Up until that point there hadn't really been much in the way of standalone multiplayer combat games – it had just been a component of a single-player game. We'd already been thinking about how it would be cool to have RTS elements, such as anti-personnel turrets or radar, on the battlefield and it just developed from there and became the basis for *Quake Wars*."

> **"We'd been thinking how it would be cool to have RTS elements on the battlefield and that became the basis for *Quake Wars*"**
> Paul Wedgwood on how *ET:QW* came about

02 **REJECTS:** Wedgwood: "In *Quake Wars*, because we had these larger maps, we thought it would be fun if both teams could fight each other directly with the objective of destroying each other's base. We stuck really rigidly to this for about six months trying to make it work, but what happened was that everyone wanted to be on the assault, so all the players would just run past each other to get to an empty base that was completely undefended! We also designed a combat role called the Gravitech which was all about the manipulation of game world physics and stuff."

Jolly: "We went really overboard with the design of the bases – we had a factory in there producing the vehicles, and a lot of artwork that we ended up having to throw away. We built a complete command centre where you could re-equip and it ejected you out through doors..."

Wedgwood: "I think that's where having the mentoring of id Software helped, because we only made big mistakes like that once. The guys at id were saying, 'We don't think base vs base is going to work. Why don't you concentrate on the objective stuff 'cos we know that works really well?' So we returned to moving frontline gameplay. Because none of our founders came from the games industry, we've always been prepared to cut stuff that doesn't work."

The base vs base idea was soon dropped.

The colour scheme of the GDF came from the original *Quake*.

04 **SANDBOX GAMEPLAY:** Wedgwood: "Sandboxes are fun – but they're more about the introduction of rules to gameplay, otherwise it's just a kick about in the park rather than a proper football match. But with *Quake Wars* we realised that you can't be too constraining with your toolset, and have to make it intuitive or people won't find it fun.

"We had a massive advantage because of the progression of objectives through *ET:QW*'s maps. What that meant was that you had this naturally shifting frontline, and people understood when an objective was completed.

"As an attacker, you get this feeling of progress with stuff being built and so on, while the defending team get this feeling of having lost territory and being pushed backwards. However, both teams still know where the frontline is, so that as a player you can choose to head straight there but have a shorter life span, or you can skirt around the frontline to outflank the enemy, and get into fighting with vehicles."

03 **STROGG STYLE:** Jolly: "We came from a *Quake III* engine background with *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*, then made the jump to *Doom 3*. It was a whole new technology with so much to learn – how normal maps worked, lighting and stuff – so it took a good year until we got to the point where we had decent-looking art. I remember for the Strogg characters we were working on with Kevin Cloud [id Software's lead artist and co-owner], we went through 45 different revisions to nail down the look – it was crazy the amount of work that went into it. The premise of *Quake Wars* is that it's a prequel to *Quake II*, so we ended up with a more retro Strogg look. We looked at the Strogg and thought, 'What would his father have looked like?'

"We took a lot of things from *Quake II* as well, such as the breather masks, and were able to take a bit of license with the other characters, so with the Oppressor class we had an open mouth which you'd never really seen in a *Quake* game before. Also, the brown armour from *Quake I* was very much the inspiration for the GDF."

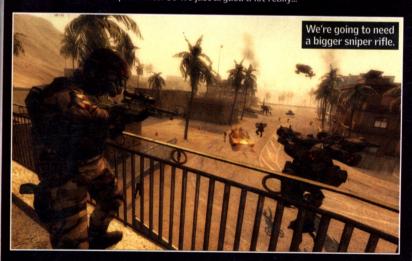"Put the giant pool table right here, please."

Quake: spiritual home of the electro-zapper.

05 **RPG ELEMENTS:** Wedgwood: "I think *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* was the first multiplayer shooter that when you played online you got promotions according to your rank, and you could unlock attribute modifiers to your character.

"From the very beginning in *ET:QW* we really wanted to make your status persistent, and so in the original game design, we kept the idea of gameplay rewards through a campaign, but they would then reset after that so you'd get a level playing field. You didn't go online and find that because someone had been playing for months they had a rocket launcher or something and the game was completely unbalanced. Instead we reset the gameplay rewards, but your status as a player was reflected persistently. I think that's worked out really well, going by the number of people that play on the ranked servers compared to the unranked servers."

> **"You don't go online and find that because someone had been playing for months they have a rocket launcher or something"**
> Wedgwood says the *ET:QW* team found rewarding online players wasn't easy

Ex-pro gamers tested *Quake Wars* to its limits.

07 **MMM... MEGATEXTURES:** Jolly: "The megatexture was the brainchild of John Carmack. The story goes that Kevin Cloud showed the game to Carmack and he came up with using a unique texture for every terrain. Kevin came back and told us, and we were like, 'That's crazy, it'll never work!'. But John gave us some code and our tech director booted it up and amazingly we had prototypes up quickly. However, we didn't have any tools, so myself and another artist had to hand paint everything.

"The main textures were 32,000 by 32,000 pixels and the files were so big we couldn't edit them in *Photoshop*. So we split them up into 16 different tiles, and each took about a day to produce. We dreaded changes because it would take half-an-hour just to open up the files. Luckily we got the tools soon after that."

Megatextures – too big for *Photoshop*.

06 **BALANCE OF POWER:** Wedgwood: "We had four approaches for feedback which worked well for *Quake Wars*. At the really hardcore end of it, we hired eight production testers from ex-professional gaming teams and high-level clans, who focused on really hardcore specifics, such as 'Is this window sill one pixel too high?' Then we'd have less hardcore, more analytical matches between us, id and Activision, plus our QA team at Activision would work 24 hours a day tracking down bugs. Finally, we had the community, with about 2,000 people initially in a closed beta, opening up to 60,000 for a public beta to capture things like crash reports from different hardware setups.

"There was a real balancing challenge with two asymmetric teams in the game – there's no easy way to directly correlate a GDF medic's ability to revive someone on the battlefield versus a Strogg technician's ability to create a spawn host for a teammate to spawn into. So we just argued a lot really..."

We're going to need a bigger sniper rifle.

"There was a real balancing challenge with two asymmetric teams"
Ensuring neither the GDF or Strogg dominated maps was problematic

08 **WORKING WITH ID:** Wedgwood: "We've always had a great relationship with id Software and have always communicated by ICQ, even when we were a mod team when we first started out chatting to Robert Duffy (lead programmer at id), who back then was just a tools programmer, helping with the development kits for *Quake III*. We were pestering him all the time – 'give us beta, give us a beta!' – and that way of communicating continued through *QW:ET*. We tend to work long hours in the office anyway to make it possible for us to talk to them in US time zones."

Jolly: "Often we ended up working longer hours than id! One time, it was very late on a Friday night and the phone rang. I answered it and heard, 'Hi, it's Tim Willits [id's co-owner and lead designer] who's this?'

We hadn't had any dealings with Tim at that point, so I was like, 'Oh my God! Why is he ringing us?'. Tim asked in a stern voice, 'Who else is there?' and I started reeling out the names of people who were in the office – Tim used to be in the army and is a scary guy.

"Then I suddenly hear lots of laughter and he said, 'Oh man, you guys need to stop working so hard – I just lost $50!' Him and Robert Duffy were drunk in a bar, and Robert, who knows us well, had a bet with Tim that we'd still be in the office at midnight..." **PCZ**

NEXT MONTH!
FAR CRY 2
It came from Africa

World exclusive first play of the jaw-dropping free-roaming shooter

MASSIVE REVIEWS ISSUE

MASS EFFECT
The first, authoritative verdict on the PC iteration of BioWare's sci-fi blockbuster

TUROK
The dino-hunter is back from extinction. But is this console port as shit as it looks?

PRECURSORS
Are the creators of *Boiling Point* working on an *Elite* beater?

GRATIS!
A *World of Warcraft: The Trading Card Game* pack for every reader!

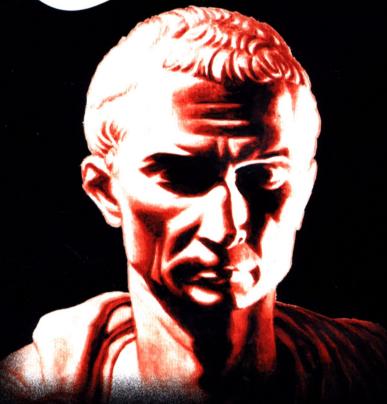## PLUS!
The latest on STALKER: Clear Sky, Fallout 3 and Space Siege!

ON SALE 22 MAY

ALSO! We rate the new maps and modes being filtered into our favourite shooters and Steve Hill does a NeverQuest that's a bit less rude than this month's.

Start!

Introducing! The Game Of

Perpetually Postponed Pleasure

"Because playing the game is only 7% of the fun"

Congratulations! You've just bought a PC Game. But that's just the start of the long adventure ahead of you, before you enjoy the world's most powerful gaming platform. To play the "play the game" game, you'll need a finger, the singular of dice, and a willingness to play a game that was clearly intended as a joke. In case you're exactly that dumb, here are the rules!

1. Roll the die. You must roll three consecutive sixes before you may take a turn. **2.** If, after rolling three sixes, you roll a 5 or 6, do not move. Instead, take a CHANCE card. **3.** If you rolled a 1, the DVD is scratched, and you must return to the shop. **4.** If your finger lands on a square that has another player's counter on it, there has been a hardware conflict and you must both start again. **5.** The first person to get to the end square gets to play the game, if they still want to.

Finished!

DIVERT!
Miss one turn to leaf through the insubstantial packaging. Miss another two turns to write a fevered lament on the internet about the good ol' days of big-box PC games.

STARFORCED!
The game's copy protection disables your game and reports you to the American police. Pause 4 turns to get frisked by a bunch of snarling Alsatians.

PATCH HER UP!
The game isn't finished. Pause seven turns to find the missing bits, located in booby-trapped tombs around the world.

PAIN!
Unwrapping the box, you snag your fingernail on the security tag. Pause one turn to take a sharp intake of breath.

ANACHRONISM!
Your dogbox of a PC cannot play the game on any of the available graphics settings. Pause 5,000 turns to some technology exists.

OMG! FORMS
The prospect of being told of forthcoming Ubisoft products is too thrilling to resist. Miss a turn, go back a turn and take a Chance while you fill in the form.

ACHTUNG!!
The installer is in German. Ich ist ein installen? It's not even real German. Zurück gehen zwei Räume, ja?

HOORAY!
You find an old polystyrene airplane with a plastic bit on the end and wave it around your head. In celebration you point BitTorrent to some pornography and go outside to play.

CHANCE!!
Attracted by a pretty girl's invite to play throw it at her, lodging and take game and. Go back to the A&E. her knee.

CHANCE!!
Your mum thought the DVD was biscuit and has neatly slipped the entire thing into her gob. Spend two hours (turns) prying it from her lips without slicing her mouth open.

CHANCE!!
A dog has leapt through an open window, grabbed the DVD and run off into the middle distance, turning and staring at you two spaces

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

MAFIA II

The stunning return of a genuine crime classic

The full exclusive story