F.our
Die by the sword

eight
Baldur's gate

VR *twelve*
Power boat racing

production

AmAYA LoPEz

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CHAT   REPORTS
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thanks to

everyone at interplay
for all their help

fourteen
A Fall

written by

chARLiE brookER

eighteen
Descent
freespace

die by The sword

According to the age-old maxim, those who live by the sword, die by the sword. CHARLiE BROOKER, however, lives by a brothel, so he's actively looking forward to an untimely demise.

Every weekend, you can guarantee that those areas of rural Britain lumbered with a sizeable hick population will be ringing to the sound of clashing steel as teams of portly, bearded, red-faced gentlemen with a predilection for real ale and beef-on-the-bone don costume-hire chainmail and prepare to do battle in a tedious 're-enactment' of some allegedly famous historical skirmish.
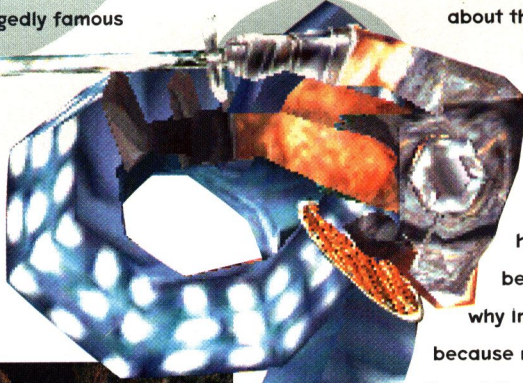
Two-and-a-half hours of mock heroics set to a thunderous soundtrack of shouts, screams, accented bellowing, and the wailing of an upset toddler somewhere in the audience. It's a pointless waste of time, energy, and period costume.

And what do we do about it? Do we point and laugh at these puerile buffoons, participants in an overblown version of the popular children's game 'Cowboys and Indians'? Do we run them out of town for perpetuating the myth that military carnage possesses an inherent glamour? Do we conclude that if old-fashioned brutality is what they want, then that's precisely what they deserve — and accordingly torture them to death with a selection of unpleasant mediaeval paraphernalia? No. We don't. Instead, we invite them onto *Blue Peter* to waffle on about their infantile hobby and stare up Katy Hill's microskirt.

If these worthless clowns really must indulge their sad blade-wielding fantasies, they could at least have the decency to do it behind closed doors. Which is why Interplay should be applauded because now, thanks to *Die By The Sword*, they can. And the really great news is that you don't have to be a corpulent, impotent, ale-quaffing, hayseed-chewing inbred local bore in order to appreciate the game — level-headed, well-adjusted thrill-seekers of any description will probably take a shine to it too. It's a kind of cross between *Tomb Raider*, *Quake* and *Tekken*, and it features the most revolutionary gaming control system we've seen in years. Interested? Then read on...

"Oi, gold bloke — get a load of this, you fat twat!" bellowed Enric, unsophisticated to the last.

○ *Enric regretted putting his thermal pants on that morning: his testicles were stewing in a soup of sweat.*

○ *"Lose weight now – ask me how," read the wording on the mysterious stranger's badge.*

BLADE RUNNER

Perfunctory storyline alert: the star of *Die By The Sword* is a big burly man named Enric, whose girlfriend, Maya, has been kidnapped, and the meat of the game concerns itself with his attempts to snatch her back... and wreak revenge on her captors into the bargain. Doing so involves a lengthy sojourn into the heart of a series of hostile environments, including dank, dreary dungeons, volcanic caves and underground rivers. Naturally, the journey isn't a mere orienteering exercise: there's a host of antagonistic creatures dogging your every move, each of whom must be firmly dealt with if any real progress is to be made. In other words, it's an unrestrained bloodbath.

The action is a curious blend of non-stop physical savagery, exploration, and problem-solving, with plenty of unpleasant twists along the way. Enric brandishes a sword for the most part, but it's also possible to use almost any other object in the game as an offensive weapon: even the severed limbs of your victims can be picked up and gainfully employed as a makeshift club in order to bludgeon someone to death. They never had that on *Jamie And The Magic Torch*.

The one-player 'quest' mode supplies four immense levels, each containing more psychotic aggressors than an express train full of tattooed Millwall supporters on their way to a fighting convention. However, rather than being a simple foray into mindless hack 'n' slash brutality, each stage also forces the player to strain his brain muscle, thanks to the inclusion of several head-spinning puzzles and apparent dead-ends. Often there will be more than one solution to a dilemma, and those who use their heads will
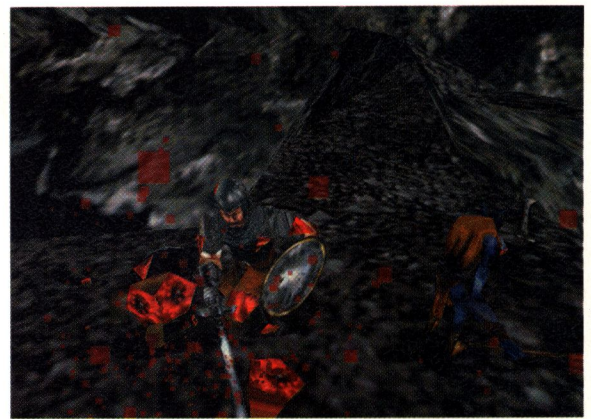
○ *Careful now. You'll have someone's eye out with that.*
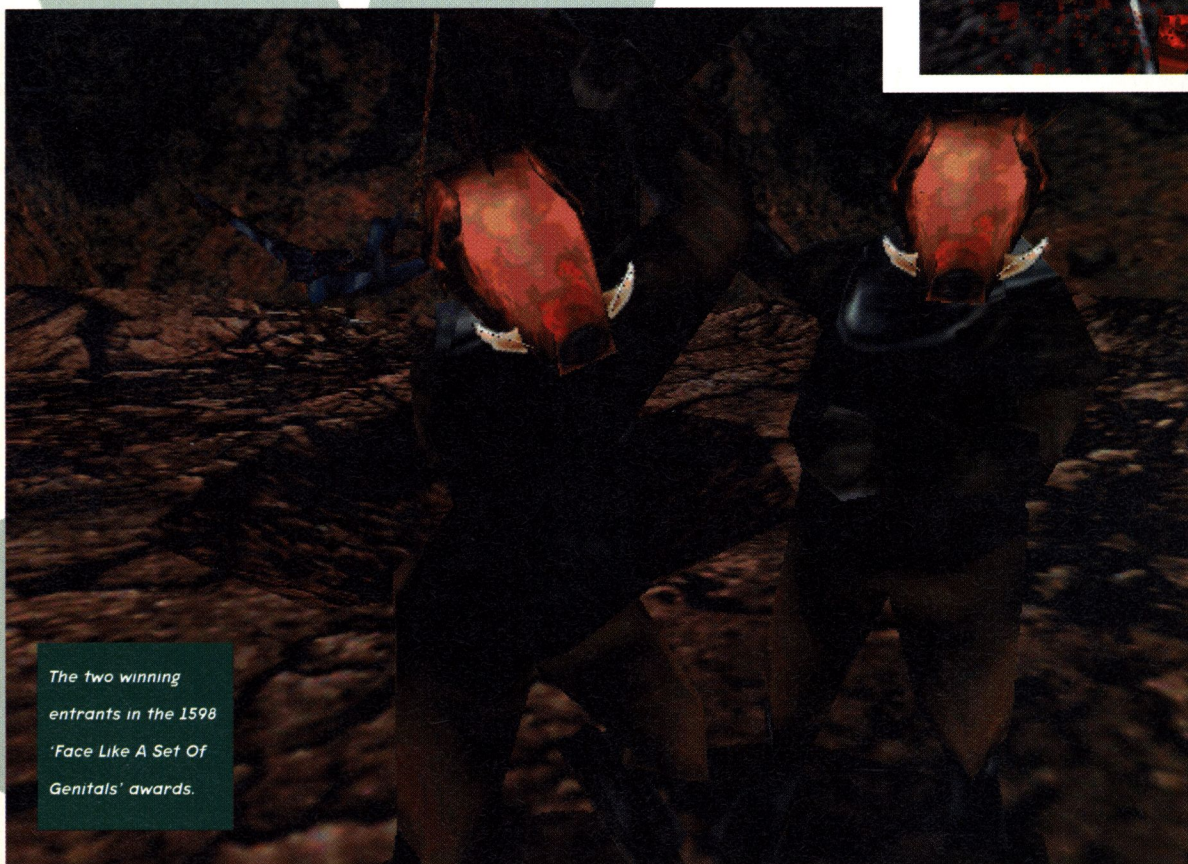
The two winning entrants in the 1598 'Face Like A Set Of Genitals' awards.

VSIM For Victory

If there's one element of *Die By The Sword* which is truly revolutionary, it's the control system. It all hinges around a new motion scripting routine which the team call 'VSIM'. Whether this should be pronounced 'vee-sim' or 'vizzum' has been the subject of much passionate debate at *PC Zone*.

So what does VSIM actually 'do'? Put simply, it affords the player free rein over the on-screen character's every action. Not just the ability to walk, run and jump – we're talking complete skeletal freedom. To date, combat games have featured characters with a set number of moves, each triggered by the touch of a button. Any attack you perform, be it a light punch or a heavy kick, is uniform and pre-defined, created by the programming team's resident sociopath. By contrast, when you play *Die By The Sword* in VSIM mode, Enric (the hero) doesn't have any pre-set moves. Every swing, slice and stab is designed, on the fly, by you the player.

The VSIM system plays host to bewilderingly complex mathematical calculations, whose goal is the accurate replication of authentic human motion in real time. Previously, the most reliable way of producing believable character animation was to use the motion capture procedure. It's a popular technique, which may be convincing to watch, but it isn't all that convincing to play. The player has no control over the pre-defined animation routines. It's also prohibitively expensive and time-consuming. VSIM does away with all that by creating a 'virtual body' and then allowing the player to manoeuvre the body parts at will.

The system was the brainchild of qualified mathematician and long-time computer game fan Dr Peter Akemann. While teaching at Berkeley, Akemann, together with partner Don Likeness, created a basic prototype for the VSIM system – a relatively simple 'virtual hand' holding a sword, which could be manipulated by the user. A couple of years later and *Die By The Sword* springs to life and the VSIM system comes into its own. The unique engine "allows limitless freedom of motion", according to executive producer Alan Pavlish. "You can take a swing of the sword from above your shoulder down to your opposite foot, slashing the belly of your opponent and continue your swing to slice your opponent's arm off," he adds, with barely-concealed relish. "This freedom of movement makes the game revolutionary – there's nothing else like it."

○ *(Above) In the words of Tina Charles: "What a mover he was."*

It's Just a Flesh

There's another advantage to the unique VSIM system that should delight demented maniacs and comedy fans alike: since every character movement is calculated on the fly and based around a kind of 'virtual skeleton', it isn't only the combat moves themselves which are eerily realistic – the appalling aftermath of your actions is also authentic. No two blows from the sword ever have quite the same effect – their potency is entirely dependent on your skill, timing, and aim, plus the position and velocity of the victim.

In other words, the violence looks mighty real, which should satiate the bloodlust of angry loners everywhere. To the delight of any self-respecting sociopath, the marketing blurb promises "real satisfaction when you hit a guy in the head and knock him off balance. Or hit him in the legs and trip him up. Or punch him in the face and have his

be rewarded. Indeed overall, only those with the sharpest of minds are likely to come out on top – although the ability to rapidly carve each and every opponent into a cloud of funsize strips of bleeding flesh will also come in handy.
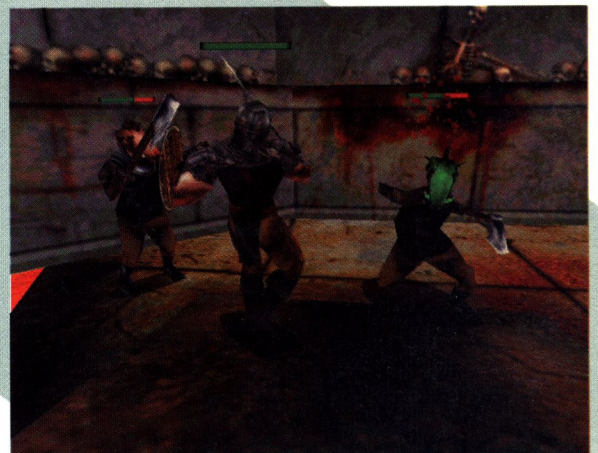
○ *An almighty barney: note the opponent on the right has lost a good part of his arm. Clumsy idiot.*

head snap back. There's no end to the reactions you can get out of each character." Except, presumably, appreciation and a lasting sense of camaraderie.

Satisfying though the infliction of a physical beating may be, it can't compare with a spot of amputation – another department in which *Die By The Sword* excels. With a modicum of skill you can slice off an opponent's limbs – and your victim won't die outright. He'll keep on coming at you. Assuming you've got a warped sense of humour, the effect is hilarious. You'll be swinging the sword through a veil of hysterical tears, as freshly-amputated aggressors hop toward you, doing their utmost to take you down. With skill, it's possible to hack off more appendages, until the unfortunate target starts to resemble a gigantic, bleeding Twiglet. It's the gaming equivalent of the notorious 'Black Knight' scene from *Monty Python & The Holy Grail*. Eventually, your victim will bite the dust, but the truly vindictive can carry on cleaving great big slices off the recumbent corpse, until they need a good lie down to make the voices go away.

It's not just limbs either – decapitation and full-on torso division is also possible. How can Interplay justify such brutality? They probably can't. But who cares? It's funny.

ARENA FOR MEN

The solo-player adventure mode isn't the only string to *Die By The Sword*'s bow: there's also a revoltingly grisly multi-player "arena of death" option, in which up to four embittered outcasts can vent their frustrations on each other. The unique VSIM movement routines guarantee plenty of belly-laughs, with regular limb-slicings and head-loppings an absolute certainty. Longevity shouldn't be a problem, thanks to the sheer versatility of the system, which allows for a genuinely limitless number of 'moves'. The player has to learn how to fight before he can win. All of which means that *Die By The Sword* could well be the first combat game to require genuine skill, as opposed to the ability to memorise a complex combination of buttons in order to perform a pre-set 'special move'. Speaking of special moves, *Die By The Sword* has an original take on those, too: experts can 'record' their favourite manoeuvres and assign them to 'hotkeys' for maximum ease of use; these 'homebrew' moves can be exported and traded via e-mail with other players. Now there's a new idea.

BACKCHAT

Name: Alan Pavlish
Nickname: Bonehead
Age: 34
Job description: Head of Action Division, Interplay
Favourite Muppet: Kermit

WHAT'S so unique about the VSiM system and how does it affect the gameplay?
IT'S the only animation and control system that will let your character do literally anything you want with him. Enric has no pre-set moves, so he can move his sword just about wherever he wants to.

THERE'S plenty of limb-slicing going on in there... ever seen *Monty Python & The Holy Grail?*
WHAT do you think?

WHAT'S more, the way you can hack and slice at the fallen bodies of your victims is a little disturbing, isn't it? Are you suppressed serial killers at heart?
ENRIC has a split personality, going from a mild-mannered swordsman, to a crazed, bloodthirsty lunatic slicing up dead bodies.

WHAT'S your favourite element in the game?
I really love the controls... and slicing off body parts, of course.

COULD you handle a sword in real life?
LET'S just say I'm much better in the game.

ARE there any plans to use the VSiM system in other titles?
YES, certainly, but nothing's been announced yet.

APART from the unique control system and the complex gameplay, can you give me one good reason to buy *Die By The Sword?*
BECAUSE you're tired of Lara Croft.

SO, if Enric and Lara Croft had a fight, who'd come out on top?
I hear Lara likes to be on top, which is just fine for Enric. Oops, you asked about fighting. Well, since Lara has a gun, she'd probably shoot him, but if it was a fair hand-to-hand sword battle, there's no doubt that Enric would tear her apart.

○ *"This beer tastes like stale orangutan piss," Gregory whispered to the voice in his forehead. "No wonder the place is deserted."*

○ *"By Jove!" gasped Gregory as he surveyed the lobby. "I knew TraveLodge were giving each of their motels a facelift, but this does take the biscuit."*

comprised of seven chapters. Seven chapters! More than the accumulated total number of chapters from all the books Noel Edmonds has ever read. And it contains over 10,000 screenfuls of hi-resolution graphics. 10,000 screen-sized images! That's almost half the number of illegal pornographic jpegs lurking in the average Internet user's Netscape cache.

What's more, the makers are aiming for quality as well as quantity. Bioware (the developers behind the title) have made the most of their official licence – *Baldur's Gate* is
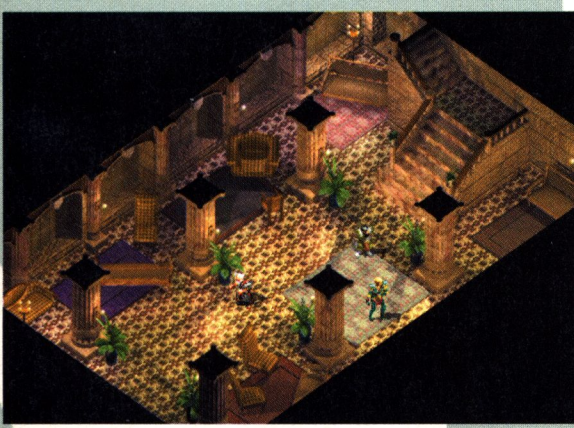
○ *"Well I'll be damned," Gregory spluttered. "In all my years of rail travel, this is by far the most spectacular, yet strangely foreboding, waiting room I've ever encountered."*

set in the Forgotten Realms, and each of the monsters, stats, and spells are torn straight from the TSR rulebook. According to producer (and avid *PC Zone* reader) Ray Muzyka, the end result will be "the best translation so far" of the world of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. And you can trust him, you know: he's a doctor (a real one), as are Greg Zeschuk and Aug Yip, the other two leading players in the *Baldur's Gate* story. Ray, Greg, and Aug met each other while at medical school; they formed BioWare after graduating in 1995.

As well as being dedicated computer game nuts, they're also long-time D&D fans – so the production of *Baldur's Gate* is something like a dream come true for them. Not that the world of medicine has lost out: incredibly, despite their commitment to BioWare and its output (alongside *Baldur's Gate*, the company is also hard at work on a sequel to *Shattered Steel)*, the three still find time to hold several surgeries each week. The resultant career-clash must be a tad disorientating – one minute you're fiddling around with a pre-rendered sprite, and the next you're slowly pushing a cold rectal thermometer up the local greengrocer's anus. Which pretty much describes the average working day here at *PC Zone*. Still, if *Baldur's Gate* is anything to go by, the potentially confusing digital entertainment/rectal thermometer axis doesn't seem to

interplay

○ (Above) "So platform three's that way, is it?" said Gregory. "Thanks. The London Underground can be so terribly bewildering late at night."

NO RESPITE FOR SAVEGAME SLUTS

One particularly refreshing feature of *Baldur's Gate* is the way it will 'punish' players who repeatedly re-load a saved game every time an event not entirely to their liking occurs. Those who carry on regardless, despite, say, suffering heavy losses in a battle, will find themselves gaining more experience points than those who habitually rewind and try again. The makers insist that they aren't penalising cowardly players — simply rewarding the more vigilant ones — and it sounds like a good idea to us. A bit of discipline, that's what you spoilt bastards need. Coming soon: the game that pokes you in the eye if you select 'Easy' mode, and murders a close relative whenever you use a continue.

have adversely affected the team's output, so hey — maybe every software house should give it a go.

YOU'VE GOT TO ROLE WITH IT

Apart from being big and pretty, *Baldur's Gate* will also sport a fully-fledged multi-player mode (see interview for more details), 60 different flavours of monster, 24 unique non-player characters (any one of whom may join your party of six), almost 100 spells, and over 200,000 words of dialogue. And if you don't like it, you can use the CDs to make an attractive mobile, which you could hang from the ceiling of a loved one's bedroom, and use as the centre-piece of an informative discussion about the nature of light refraction, the colours of the spectrum, digital technology, and creative recycling. Basically, it looks like for once you the customer can't lose. So keep watching the hallowed pages of *PC Zone* for further developments.

○ Gregory decided it was definitely worth having a duel over who would sit in the Conran-designed, medieval-style loft apartment.

BACKCHAT

Name: Dr Ray Muzyka
Nickname: Zuke
Age: 29
Job description: CFO and Joint-CEO, BioWare Corp. Producer, *Baldur's Gate*
Favourite Muppet: Fozzie Bear

BALDUR'S GATE is a pretty immense undertaking, isn't it? Have you been working on it for long?
YES, it is rather huge. We started working on it in January 1996 and haven't looked back. I have a fantastic team of over 30 people and thanks to them we have a great game close to completion. We also get a lot of support from our publisher, Interplay. Working with such a talented group of people makes the scope of the game rather less frightening to me.

WHAT kind of scope are we talking about here?
PROBABLY greater than almost any other RPG that I can think of — close to 10,000 screens of 16-bit colour, hi-resolution isometric graphics. And the storyline is close to 500 pages.

WHAT'S the basic thrust of the storyline?
YOUR party of up to six adventurers explores this world and tries to solve two basic problems. First off, your main character is on a quest for his or her identity — there are shadows of dark secrets in his or her past, and it's up to you to find out what they are. Second, you must try to resolve the growing conflict between the two great city states of the southern Sword Coast — *Baldur's Gate* in the north, and Amn in the south.

HOW would you describe the *Forgotten Realms* games to a newcomer?
AHA – difficult question. I guess the best thing to say is that it's a fantasy game setting, which uses TSR's Advanced Dungeons & Dragons rules – and really the only limits on what happens in this universe are the constraints imposed by your imagination. We play the role of the Dungeon Master in *Baldur's Gate* – much like the DM would in a pen and paper game of AD&D. The game interprets the ruleset of AD&D in a real-time adaptation – which can be paused to allow turn-based fans to play it as well.

WHAT makes this game different from the other entries in the series?
WELL, *Baldur's Gate* is really the first in its series – it's the first RPG of this sort of scope that Interplay and BioWare have produced. SSI had the AD&D licence before Interplay did and their games were great – I played almost all of them – but *Baldur's Gate* approaches the genre in an entirely new way. Our scope is much larger. We have a more robust combat system, more spells, more detailed graphics, a detailed character and monster AI scripting system, and overall the game is much more current. Not that the SSI games weren't great – they were – but they were good games for the years when they came out. Baldur's Gate is a game that represents the new generation of role-playing games.

IS the game fairly open-ended?
YES. You can continue playing the game, solving subquests even after you finish the main quest. There are multiple ways to solve problems: we strive for non-linear gameplay as much as possible.

WHAT online options will *Baldur's Gate* include?
WE plan to include co-operative multi-player support. This is quite different from the multi-player gameplay of *Diablo* or Ultima Online – in *Baldur's Gate* you play through the same story in either single or multi-player games. The other five members of the party can either be AI-controlled or human-controlled. This will happen over the Internet or a local area network.

IT'S all faithful to the AD&D rulebook, but have you had to 'bend the rules' for the sake of gameplay?
WELL, of course. But only to the extent that all DM's

in AD&D are allowed to modify rules somewhat to fit the flavour of their own campaigns. We're trying to remain true to the original spirit of the game.

SPEAKING of which, what exactly is an 'orc' anyway?
ORCS... are... hmm. Let me quote the description from TSR's Monstrous Manual: "Orcs are a species of aggressive mammalian carnivores that band together in tribes and survive by hunting and raiding... orcs vary in appearance... in general they resemble primitive humans with grey-green skin covered with coarse hair... orcs are carnivores, though they prefer game meats to human flesh..." You get the idea. Not the kind of fellow you'd want to go to the pub with.

DEPENDS on the pub. Anyway, we understand that player-characters will be carried on into future sequels to the game. How will this all work?
WE plan at least two sequels to *Baldur's Gate*. The first game takes your character and your party from levels 1 to 6. The second game takes you up to level 13, and the third will advance you to level 18 or so. Mission packs are planned, which will plug into the first game, and take you up about 1 more level each. They'll be value priced and released at intervals of about three months after *Baldur's Gate* is released.

CAN you envisage a time when digital RPGs will completely replace the paper-and-pencil variety?
NO. I think there's a definite place for the human interaction of the pen and paper game. Online RPGs are more for the people who can't be in close enough contact with other RPG fans to play pen and paper RPGs, or alternatively for those that prefer the more visual media of the computer.

WE know how the TSR world looks and sounds, but how do you think it smells?
AHA! You ask the best questions. I would say it depends. The wyvern's cave smells like rotten flesh and dung, provided you live long enough to smell more than your own fear; the forests of Cloadwood smell like fir and maple, with a touch of something... sinister... mixed in; and the monks' library of Candle-Keep smells like musk, mixed with more than a hint of dust and old paper.
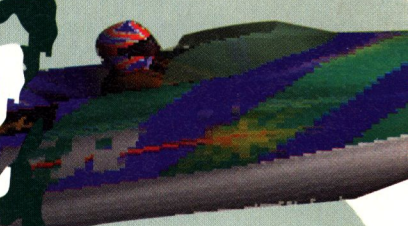
CHEERS Zuke. Can we call you 'Zuke'? Hello?

© Baldur's Gate *looks so lovely, we've just thrashed ourselves silly, all over this very page. Give it a good hard sniff. Go on.*

VR power boat racing

CHARLiE BROOKER had a racing boat. He sailed the seven seas.

And he learnt about the birds and then he learnt about the bees.

But soon the vessel hit a rock and sprang a mighty leak.

He had to block the hole up with his penis for a week.

And when at last they came to dock along the city harbour.

His private parts had withered up, so no more 'how's your father'.

Hey everybody — let's talk boat. There are three main types of water-going craft: first, let's look at manually-propelled vessels, which, to be honest, are fairly shit. Canoes are okay provided you don't mind getting the odd mouthful of salty fluid*, but rowing boats are rubbish and punts are the exclusive preserve of Oxbridge students, cads, poets, and drippy characters from Merchant-Ivory productions, all of whom deserve to be rounded up, frog-marched to the centre of a muddy field and beaten ridiculous with a shovel. Despite a troublesome similarity to the punt, gondoliers are cool, but we'll disregard them on the grounds that they're foreign and therefore aren't 'proper' boats at all.

Next up: wind-propelled vessels. These are much better. Yachts are ideal for sun-drenched Mediterranean cruising, inter-island drug-smuggling, mysterious disappearances at sea, and the filming of hard-core pornographic motion pictures. Gigantic great wooden galleons aren't half bad either, although you'll require immediate medical attention if one accidentally sails all the way up your arse.

Finally, we come to the most impressive category: mechanically-propelled vessels. This classification covers everything else, including hovercraft (ace), tugboats (cute), roll-on roll-off ferries (fair to middling), and of course, jet skis (superb). Best of all, though, are the powerboats.

Powerboats are the F1 racing cars of the waterborne domain; supercharged vessels which regularly take part in highly competitive sporting events, driven by blokes in helmets, and watched by an audience openly flouting moustaches, mullets, baseball caps, whopping great pairs of light-reactive sunglasses, T-shirts with Status Quo's 1987 tour dates printed down the back, pendulous beer guts, unpleasant belts and nasty 'cowboy' boots (if you'll forgive the generalisation). Powerboats also provide the focus for *Powerboat*, an altogether swell-looking arcade simulation from Promethean Studios and Interplay.

MOTOR BOATIN'... DANN DAN DANNNNN... MOTOR BOATIN'...

Overseeing the project is Promethean's managing director, the animated Russell Ritchie (favourite Muppet: Animal). He's a fan of the sport, in which he's played an active role from an early age: "I've always had a keen interest in Powerboating. I got my first boat at 16 – I won three games of snooker and paid 50 quid for
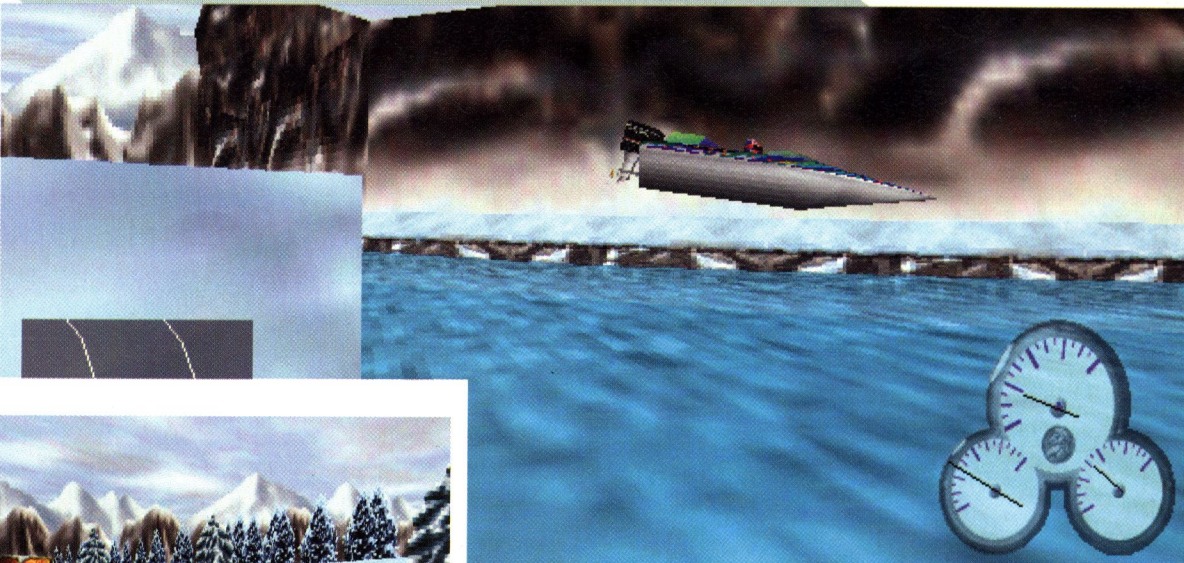
○ (Above) Up, up and away, in my beautiful... erm... boat.

○ (Left) Look, it's a boat. It floats on the water and everything. You can pick up sailors in it. And kiss them.

*And from what we've heard, you don't.

12

Interplay

Rubber-Neckin good

Anyone who's acquainted with the world of the arcade racing game will have noticed the ongoing trend for nifty little 'trackside incidents' – such as a helicopter swooping overhead, or a rocket taking off – which spice up the visual content a little, but don't really add much to the gameplay. Well, not to be outdone, *Powerboat* includes loads of these background events – and actually incorporates them into the main thrust of the action. A good example is the New York track, in which a cops 'n' robbers car chase comes to a halt alongside the dock. The robbers' car crashes into a pile of crates – which tumble into the path of your vessel. Oooh, we say. Oooh.

Thus inspired, we put our thinking caps on and came up with the following list of wilfully distracting 'trackside incidents', any of which we'd really like to see in a racing game, waterbound or otherwise:

○ Gary Numan crashing his plane into some overhead power cables
○ A spectator picking his nose and eating it
○ Another spectator being eaten alive by a big, mad horse
○ A gigantic penis rising up out of the ground for no reason whatsoever

it. First time out, I was doing about 40 knots when a hole appeared in the hull, rapidly followed by a huge jet of water streaming over my right shoulder. I had to beach it on a bank at high speed. The previous owners had just covered the hole up with masking tape!"

With a bona fide powerboating enthusiast at the helm, it's not surprising that *Powerboat* looks set to be the most realistic
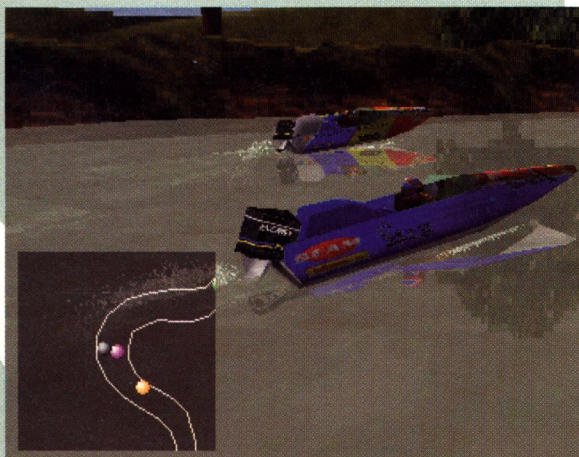
○ *A pair of boats sharing a private joke yesterday.*

○ *Two boats and an airship. Now that's transport.*

video game portrayal of this white-knuckle sport yet. Mind you, there aren't that many boat racing games around anyway...

"There's a couple coming on the market now, but most people shy away from water-based games because getting water movement in a 3D world is such an enormous challenge," explains Russell. "Coding the real world is damn complicated, but we've got an amazing water effect. In fact, it's not an effect – our powerboats and other objects interact with a real water motion."

Indeed they do. *Powerboat* plays host to a bewilderingly complex set of water motion simulation routines, and the end result is a series of stomach-churningly accurate aquatic race courses. Just as in the real world, the high-speed craft skip and bob across the surface of the water, rising over waves, crashing into troughs, shooting off ramps, and occasionally becoming completely submerged (a phenomenon known as 'submarining' in powerboating circles). And it all happens at an utterly frenetic pace. Indeed, the engine is so realistic that there are reports of playtesters suffering from seasickness during trials. Our advice: breathe slowly and deeply, focus your attention on the far horizon, then hurl the contents of your stomach all over your new trousers. Ahh, that's better.

BOAT! iN THE NAME OF LOVE

As befits a game that aims to effortlessly straddle the gap between the furrow-browed realism of a dedicated simulation and the cheeky nonchalance of an arcade/action knees-up, *Powerboat* also features a spiffing multi-player split-screen mode (enabling up to four opponents to race on one machine), a choice of several sexually provocative camera angles, eight distinctive gaming 'locales' (everywhere from Mount Fuji to Monaco), and a smattering of secrets and 'hidden' tracks. As is rapidly becoming the norm, the game is entirely 3D accelerator-friendly, so rest assured it all looks luvverly – you can find out how well it plays for yourself come late February.

13

Interplay

Fallout

"You're about as easy as a nuclear war," sang Simon LeBon in Duran Duran's epoch-shattering *Please Please Tell Me Now*. There isn't anything easy about this post-apocalyptic RPG either. Cowering in the bunker lies lily-livered Charlie Brooker.

Sewer-dwelling zombies feasting on human flesh? That's not very nice, is it?

Okay, let's imagine you've entered a contest to see who can come up with the most depressing concept for a computer game. You've got four minutes to come up with an idea. When I say go, I want you to put down this magazine, and think hard about your entry until the time limit runs out. Ready? Go!

Tick tick tick tick... BOOOOOM! TIME'S UP! So, let's see what you came up with... hmm... Gary Oldman's *Nil By Mouth* – the Computer Game. Not bad. What's this? Paraplegic Test Match Cricket? Sorry – that's rife with unintentional humour,

and therefore isn't depressing at all. Theme Hospice? Hey. Nice try. That's definitely harrowing. But it doesn't quite cut the mustard. Nope, we're just going to have to give the award for "Most Depressing Game Scenario of 1998" to... *Fallout* from Interplay.

MUTUALLY ASSURED DESTRUCTION

Fallout is a highly polished RPG set in an upsettingly convincing post-apocalyptic wasteland, a joyless wilderness where life is cheap, water is scarce, and live ammunition is exchanged on a regular basis. Take the carefree cartoon pageantry of the average Disney theme park, invert it, and that's the world of *Fallout*. It's a world of decay and despair. Broken machinery and declining compassion. Rust. Dust. Mistrust. And, um, pus. Leaking from dead men's eyes. Into the mouths of starving jackals. It makes Wolverhampton look nice.

Still, that's what happens when you go and have a nuclear war, innit? Unless, of course, you're lucky enough to shield yourself from all that unpleasantness by holing up inside a gigantic nuclear bunker. A bunker big enough to comfortably house 1,000 people, with a self-contained supply of food and water, for over 80 years. That's the cushy situation you find yourself in as *Fallout* opens. Then dear, oh dear – the

○ Here's the kind of interior decor you'll be endlessly gazing at through a veil of tears, following the inevitable apocalypse.

○ Using a flame-thrower to toast a group of overgrown mutant scorpions? That'll be Armageddon, then.

Interplay

Look closely and you'll see how much detail has gone into the construction of the pre-rendered landscape. That 'entrance tunnel' is actually part of a disused train...

water purification chip malfunctions and someone is chosen to venture outside into the landscape beyond in search of a replacement. And guess what? That someone is you.

PROTECT AND SURVIVE

Despite the doom-laden background, *Fallout* is actually anything but depressing. Instead it's enthralling. Producer Tim Cain and his team have taken inspiration from *Wasteland* (a similarly-themed and much-respected RPG which several years ago was all the rage Stateside) and created a refreshingly adult RPG with plenty of ultra-violence and not a goblin in sight. The gameplay is a combination of free-ranging exploration and *X-COM*-style turn-based combat, replete with an adaptive non-linear storyline: in other words, the player is free to act at will. If you want to behave like a proper Corporal Hardnuts, you can run around blasting everybody and everything in the mouth with a shotgun. If, on the other hand, you've still got a shred of human decency in you, you can converse with the characters first. And then blast them in the mouth with a shotgun.

Either way, you're sure to notice just how ugly the damage that a shotgun inflicts can be. *Fallout* is absolutely riven with gore: faced with the task of creating some realistic 'death sequences', the artists responsible have clearly gone about their work with unseemly relish. "Victims don't just perish," it says in the press release, "they get cut in half, melt into a pile of goo, or explode like a bloodsausage into chunks of flesh." And for once, that isn't just a load of PR ballyhoo.

Yet behind the stomach-churning grand guignol and the disheartening post-nuclear setting lurks a comfortingly sturdy RPG backbone, replete with reams of personal statistics, piles of different weapons, a huge inventory that (as per tradition) somehow never quite seems big enough, and a huge range of non-player-characters for you to join, outwit, murder, or team up with. Best of all, alongside the main ongoing quest, there are a bewildering number of unrelated 'mini-quests', ranging from amateur sleuthing to trading runs to full-blown massacres. *Fallout* looks great, and if you aren't looking forward to it, you're a plum.

BACKCHAT

Name: Tim Cain
Nickname: "Sadly, I have none."
Age: 32
Job description: Producer and Lead Programmer
Favourite Muppet: Beaker

WHERE did the inspiration for *Fallout* come from?
WASTEWORLD was a big inspiration for the gameplay itself, of course. We also watched *Road Warrior* for that post-nuclear grittiness that we wanted. For visuals, we pulled elements from the movies *Brazil*, *City Of The Lost Children*, *Ghost In The Shell*, *Star Wars*, and even *Batman*.

WE haven't seen such a solid RPG on the PC for a while now... do you think *Fallout* will help lead a revival for the genre as a whole?
I certainly hope so. *Fallout* represents the kind of RPG I'd like to play. I like a non-linear plot, stats and skills that actually matter during gameplay – and a world that reacts to my character.

THERE'S plenty of gruesome activity in the game – are your artists disturbed?
YES, they are disturbed. During production, I'd often hear a discussion like... "There's not enough blood in this death." "No, we need more gore." "How about having an organ, like a lung or a spleen, fall out?"

JUST how big is the game?
TIME-WISE, there's about 30-60 hours of solid play, depending on when you want to finish and how many side quests you do. There are lots of adventure seeds that have nothing to do with winning or losing the game, and some only show up for certain characters.

The entire scenario's a tad depressing isn't it? Do you think nuclear war is an inevitable part of mankind's future? Are we all going to die?
No, just Europe and parts of Canada.

Early press releases made much of the GURPS/ Steve Jackson link... so what happened?
The bottom line is that Steve Jackson didn't like the art, especially the opening movie and the Vault Character used in the opening movie. We didn't want to change this, and it had nothing to do with GURPS anyway, so *Fallout* became a non-GURPS game.

Give us a handy gameplay tip.
Don't give Ian the Uzi. I mean it.
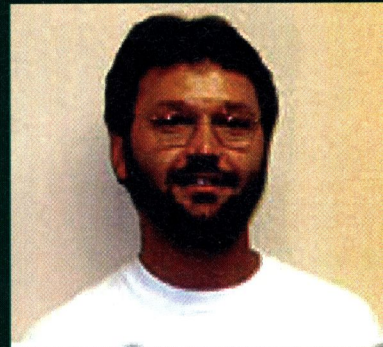
Max 2

This is my boss, CHARLiE BROOKER. A self-made millionaire. He's quite a guy. This is Mrs. H. She's gorgeous. She's one lady who knows how to take care of herself. By the way, my name is MAX 2. i take care of both of them. Which ain't easy. 'Cos when they met, it was moidah.

In case you're wondering, the 'MAX' bit of the title stands for "Mechanised Assault and eXploration", and the '2' denotes that this is a sequel to the original *MAX* game which first saw the light of day back in 1996. Then, *MAX* was an entirely turn-based affair. Now, inevitably, it all takes place in real time – although patient fans will be delighted to learn that turn-based combat is still an option. So get that bunting ready.

Now, those of you on the verge of dozing off at the sight of what looks like *C&C* clone #8,934 can just about buck upright and listen: *MAX 2* is a little more... refined than most lookalikes. For a start, there's a lovingly-created in-depth background to the action – the basic storyline revolves around an alliance of exotic intergalactic species (including us humble homo sapiens) joining forces in an attempt to halt the march of the Sheevat, an evil race of alien critters intent on dominating the galaxy. Each of the species in the alliance has its own history, personality and characteristics, all of which affect the outcome of any given battle. Then there's the unprecedented number of available units to consider: a full one hundred of 'em in total, any of which can be endlessly customised and upgraded – that's more than enough to keep even the most easily-bored psychopaths entertained.

It's a bit of a visual spectacular too. You can tell when a programming team is proud of a new development, because they come
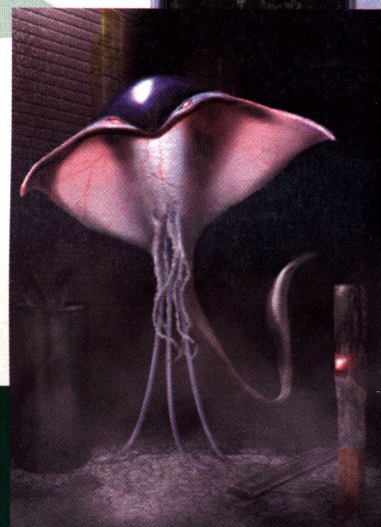
Brothers in Arms

Part of MAX 2's appeal derives from the inclusion of many weird and wonderful species or 'clans', which fight on the side of the Concord alliance. Any one of them would stand out a mile if they moved into Coronation Street, although they're all better-looking than Deidre...

THE FEN
The Fen are described as a "humanoid semi-aquatic race", so by rights they should look like the bastard offspring of Duncan Goodhew and Sharron Davies. And in a funny way, they do – with a bit of Jarvis Cocker in there as well. They favour planets with a hot and sticky atmosphere and their favourite TV show is *The Man From Atlantis*.

THE CLOAKS
According to Interplay's website, the Cloaks are a bitchy race who have "long since forsaken the straight path for the back alley approach". Judging by this description, you could be forgiven for expecting them to look a bit like John Inman, but no – we're talking huge floating manta rays here. Takes all sorts.

THE BEAKER
A clan of cybernetic creatures, the Beaker represent the perfect synthesis of biological matter and mechanical engineering, although for some reason they have chosen to make themselves look like a bunch of robotic weasels, and are therefore often mistaken for PR people.

THE KAMREN
The cutest entry in *MAX 2*'s menagerie of warmongers, are a bit like Mrs Tiggywinkle, only considerably more vicious. They have their own natural armour, which is handy. But don't touch them – they're probably riddled with fleas.

THE AVEN
Descended from a race of birds, the Aven take great pride in their bodies. Feather you favour foul play or an honest game, the Aven could prove your nest bet if you want to end up ruling the roost. (You're sacked – Ed.)

THE PHEMERS
The Phemers sound like a right bunch of xenophobic tosswits – they look down on everyone but themselves – but it's this quality which makes them such good fighters.

THE ASPEN
The Aspen represent the ultimate eco-warriors: they're plants. Weed recommend picking the Aspen to anyone who shoots first, asks questions later, and doesn't like to conseed defeat. Sow what are you waiting for? The eleventh flower? (You're sacked again – Ed.)

THE ELAN
Yer classic 'grey' aliens, the Elan were the architects of the Concord alliance. Now most of them are sick, ill or dying. Not an especially cheery bunch of funsters, then.
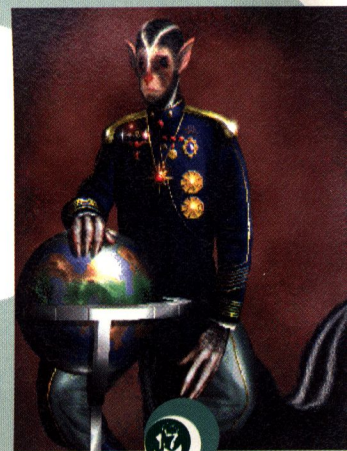
Legions of enemy forces move in on Judith 'Wish You Were Here' Chalmers – justice at last.

up with a snappy moniker for it. *MAX 2* introduces three such nicknamed innovations. First, we're promised "3D Parallax Scrolling", which aims to convince the player that he or she really is hovering over a genuine landscape, commanding units hither and thither like some kind of omnipotent digital God. Secondly, "Unlimited Zoom", a slightly misleading term for a routine which actually affords 50 levels of in-and-out seeing-eye funkiness. Finally, there's the Spy-Cam, an ingenious feature which enables you to place a concealed lens in an important location, and then continually keep an eye on it thanks to a cute little window set aside from the main viewing area.

BIG BAG OF WANTS

So then, what else? You want multi-player options? Up to six people can play against each other at once. They can also form alliances with one another and kick communal bottom. You want sophisticated AI? *MAX 2* has seven different CPU AI settings, which provide a range of intellects, from the dizzy heights of Bamber Gascoigne to the blank-eyed lows of Paul Gascoigne. You want a poncey interface? Hey, it emulates a futuristic laptop-style liquid video display screen, so when you run the mouse cursor over it, it ripples. You want it right now? Hey, sorry. You'll have to wait. Can't have everything.

BACKCHAT

Name: Paul Kellner
Nickname: Pauly
Age: 193
Job description: Janitor/Producer
Favourite Muppet: The big furry one.

SO what's new in *MAX 2*?
TURN-BASED and real-time play, fully rendered 3D environments, Spy Cams, adaptive unit personalities.

HOW do these developments improve the gameplay?
THAT'S correct, they certainly do.

ER... there are several similar titles on the market... what makes *MAX 2* different?
THERE are several cheap clones on the market. *MAX 2* blows these away... nothing comes close.

DiD you have to study footage of explosions to make the in-game detonations as realistic as possible?
NO, our friends at the pentagon took our artists out for a night of explosive fun over (insert name of least favourite foreign country here).

WHAT'S your favourite unit and why?
THE Sheevat Stasis Generator, because it projects a time distortion field which effectively stops time.

WHAT would you do with it if you had one in real life?
MY favourite weapon in *MAX 2* is the Incubator, but describing what I'd do with it would be too obscene.

iS on-line multi-player the future of gaming?
IT'S all just a fad. In fact the entire internet/computer thing is going to dry up any day now.

WHERE did you and the team draw inspiration for the sci-fi visuals?
OTHER than stealing ideas from every good sci-fi story and movie ever made, the concepts in *MAX 2* are all completely original.

IF a doctor offered you the chance to own a robotic arm which could crush a steel ball, cut through concrete and fire miniature nukes, would you take it?
NO. Having *MAX 2* is all I need. (Creep. – Ed.)

○ (Below) Some of MAX 2's alien critters in all their glory. Don't fancy yours much, mate.

Interplay

Descent: Freespace

The story of CHARLiE BROOKER'S day-to-day life has been described as "an inexorable and prolonged descent into madness and despair". And that was by one of his primary school teachers. Who better, then, to take a look at an altogether different kind of 'descent'?


Conventional wisdom has it that *Descent 1* and *2* were solid chunks of slam-bang entertainment, although those with a fear of confined spaces would strongly disagree (from outside the window). Confined to a series of labyrinthine corridors, the original *Descent* titles were essentially indoor spaceflight simulators, with lashings of fiery combat lobbed in for good measure, a bit like a cross between *TIE Fighter* and the London Underground. Great fun for action addicts, bad news for claustrophobes, who probably played the game from behind a sofa.

Well, now it's bad news for agoraphobes instead: here comes *Descent: Freespace,* which is identical to its predecessors in many ways except one — somebody's knocked all the walls down with a big 'virtual hammer'. The action takes place in the great outdoors; in fact, the 'greatest' of outdoors there is — the limitless, cavernous expanse of space, a place so huge and extensive, it could comfortably house both of Vanessa Feltz's hulking great buttocks in their entirety (although her ego might feel a little cramped). No longer do you have to

worry about smacking into the sides — we're talking full 360-degree freedom here.

Further changes are afoot: the boundless nature of the playing area has ushered in a suitably ambitious mission structure. In the original *Descent* games, completing a level involved collecting a series of keys, locating and destroying the reactor, then zipping through the exit before everything exploded around your ears. *Freespace* is more demanding: it shoves an entire military campaign under your nose and brusquely insists that you get on with it. Behind each skirmish lurks a unifying storyline which unfolds as you play: the missions themselves are 'branched' — meaning there are multiple 'paths'
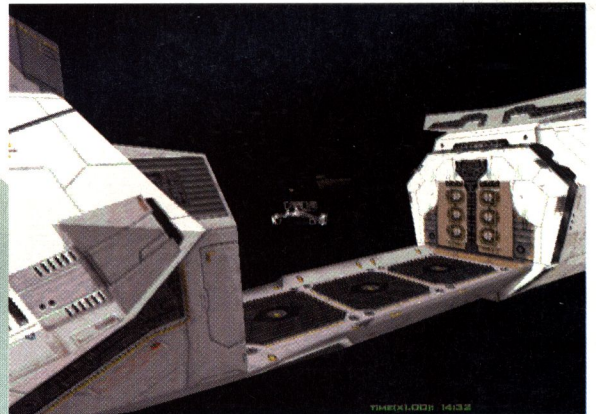
Rare shot from a hitherto unseen episode of On The Buses. *Set in space. And featuring none of the usual cast.*
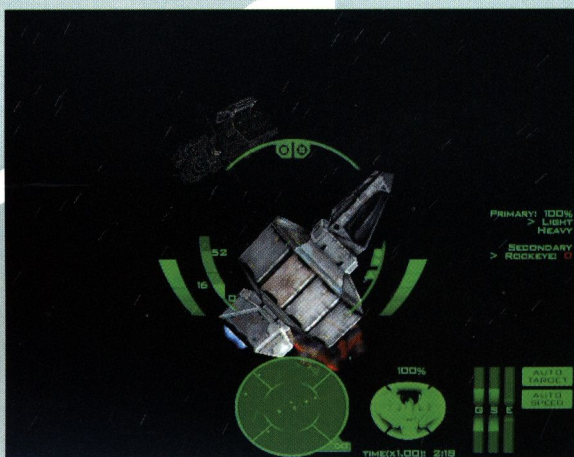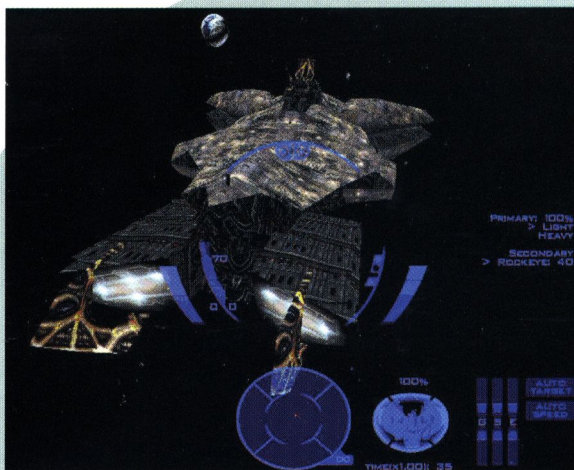
Intergalactic Interaction

Another thing *Descent 1* and *2* were famous for (apart from having level maps which closely resembled a contortionist's lower intestine) was the plethora of multi-player options provided by Parallax, the programming team. With this in mind, it's perhaps not surprising to find a hefty emphasis on multi-player concerns pervading the *Descent: Freespace* design specifications. To wit, players are promised a smooth, varied, and intense link-up mode, in which up to 16 unstable delusional psychotics may participate at once. With many gamers feeling distinctly underwhelmed by the flawed multi-player epic *X-Wing Vs TIE Fighter*, perhaps *Descent: Freespace* can grab the ball which LucasArts fumbled, and run all the way to the touchdown crossbar thingamijig with it. And score a goal. Or a hole in one. Or whatever it is that you score in that stupid so-called 'sport'. It isn't proper football anyway. Bloody Americans.

This screenshot looks like it's upside down, but apparently it isn't. Not that we give a monkeys either way.

which lead to the overall conclusion. Which, when you think about it, makes *Descent: Freespace* a bit like a grand metaphor for life itself (*What the hell are you going on about, you wittering imbecile? Any more meaningless asides and I'll break both your knees and push you down a flight of stairs like an old rag doll. If you haven't got enough information at your disposal, just make something up. Plots are always a load of impenetrable nonsense anyway, so no-one'll know the difference — Ed.*)

THAT *DESCENT: FREESPACE* PLOT IN FULL

Descent: Freespace makes the daring move of borrowing its plot from Rob Reiner's 1989 romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally*, except Billy Crystal has been replaced by a huge squadron of spacecraft. And so has Meg Ryan. And they don't fall in love.

Look, the truth is we don't know anything about the *Descent: Freespace* storyline, except that according to the press release, it's "an epic science fiction saga told through breathtaking cinematic sequences", a vague description which could apply to pretty much anything from *Starship Troopers* to *Spaceballs*. Still, we don't give a fiddler's pluck about the storyline anyway. We know enough about the gameplay to keep us interested, particularly since *Descent: Freespace* would appear to be a visually sumptuous cross between the strategic whizz-bangery and story development of the *Wing Commander* series and the satisfying, polished atmosphere and crystal-clear graphical

style of the legendary, wonderful *TIE Fighter* games. Whichever way you look at it, this has to be a good thing.

And there are other elements worthy of note, such as the spacecraft themselves, which are intricately detailed (they've even got proper little turrets on them), impressively varied (they come in many, many different flavours, most of which can be 'test-driven' by the player), and extremely easy on the eye (thanks to the hi-resolution texture maps). There's the intriguing long-term tactical matters: it's possible, for example, to disable your enemies rather than destroy them outright. You can then steal their craft and all the related technology that goes with it — often kick-starting the development of new weaponry for your own side. And there's the elaborate nature of the battles themselves: on occasion, the player will find himself commanding up to 12 fellow wingmen in an almighty dogfight.

Anyone with a passing interest in ventilating high-speed spacecraft with a well-aimed salvo of laser bolts should take to *Descent: Freespace* like a duck to water, and the final product is likely to turn a few heads when it sticks its head over the gaming fence later next month. Keep your beadiest eye out for a dribbling, leering, salacious and sexually explicit review in a forthcoming edition of *PC Zone*.

Descent 3, no sirree

One important thing to remember about *Descent: Freespace* is that, despite its moniker, it isn't '*Descent III*'. Not that there isn't a *Descent III* in the works — there is — but that's being written by a separate team. You see, Parallax Software, the brains behind the original *Descent* titles, have 'split' into two interdependent halves — a bit like a paranoid schizophrenic might, except to our knowledge they aren't accusing the government of controlling the weather, or screaming about voices, or any of that zany business that mad people seem to get off on. One half of the organisation is now called Volition — they're the ones working on *Descent: Freespace*. The other half is known as Parallax, and they're doing *Descent III*. There's also a third, shadowy 'half', known as 'Norman', which spends its time in a darkened room sharpening knives and preparing for the coming Apocalypse. But we're not allowed to talk about that.

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