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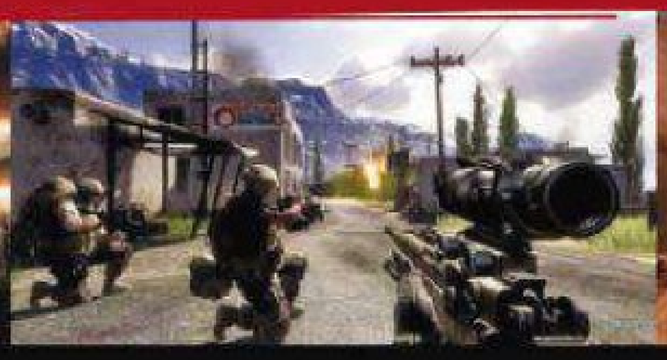
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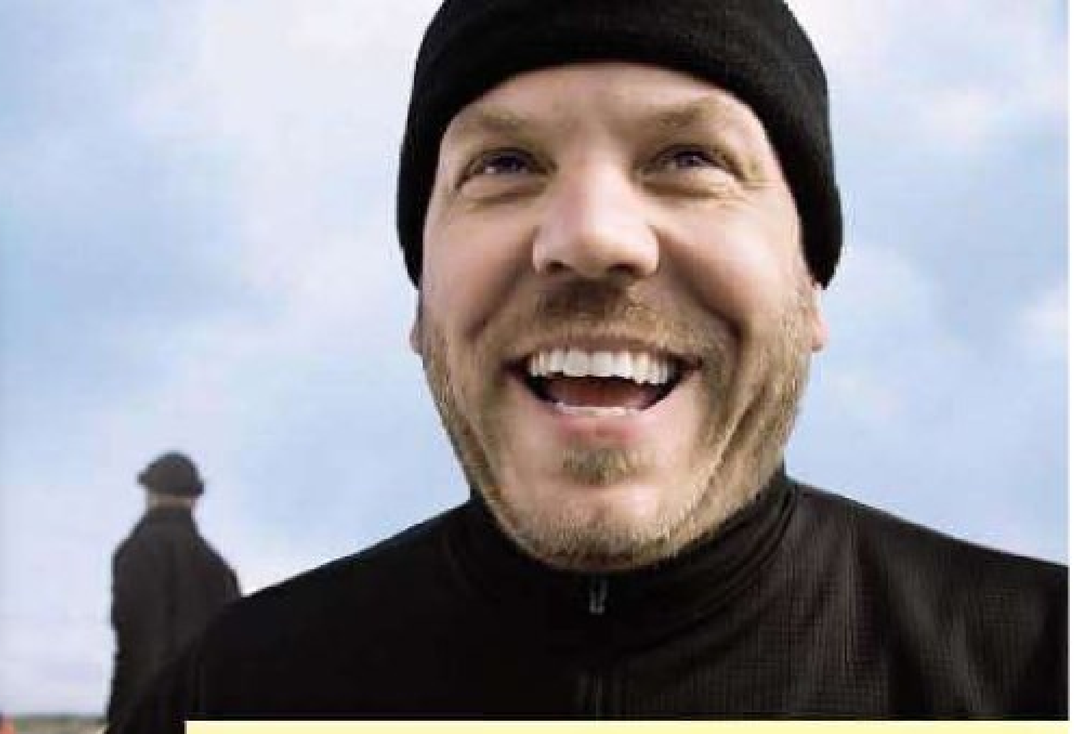
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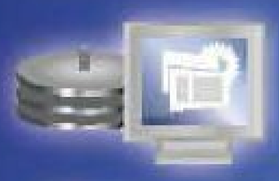
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Forceful

Here's a rarely comforting thought. The games industry is built on perception and risk. Vast sums of money are poured into works built from imagination. There's no physical product, just man-centuries of intellectual effort, years of careful artistry and technical development.



Then we show up, declare it "quite good" and make a recommendation as to whether you should play it or not. That's got to be nerve-racking for developers.

Star Wars: The Old Republic is clearly the most expensive investment in a videogame made to date. It is huge: an MMO, an RPG, an online service with all the technical and customer support the genre needs. It's a Star Wars game, bringing with it a library of backstory and lore to respect. And it's a PC game, so it'll probably break when you try to install it (JOKE!).

We sent Tom out to play it for two days solid at BioWare's Austin studio. Just to see if it's any good. Tom's report starts on page 44. If you work for EA or BioWare, you can stop biting your nails... now.

If all goes to plan, by the time you read this we'll have upgraded and updated our online home: PCGamer.com. We'd love for you to pop over, take a look, and let us know what you think.

Enjoy the issue.



TIM EDWARDS
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BRINGING YOU THE SCOOPS THIS MONTH...



Tom Francis
Did not agree with Texas. Rejected the state, forcefully. Needed to spend an entire weekend recovering. In bed.



Owen Hill
"What of it?" he yelled at a receipt from Whittards. "Yes, I spend money on expensive teabags... What of it?" *Sigh.*



Rich McCormick
Organised an evening of watching *SC II* matches. Invited all his friends. Two people came. The rest stayed away.



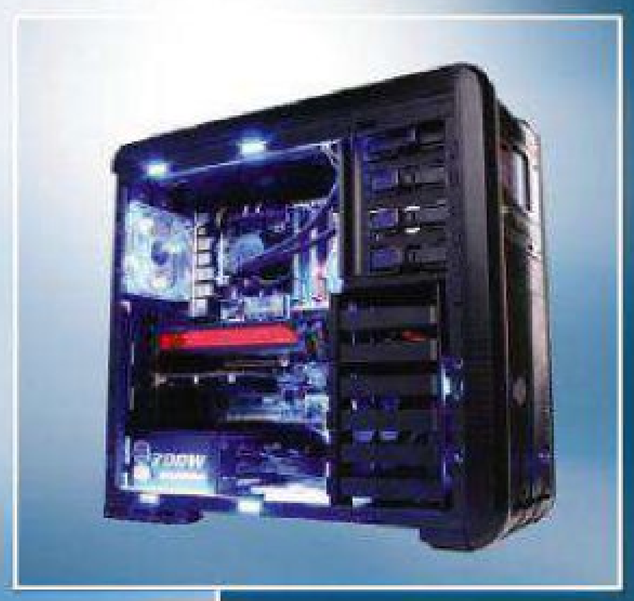
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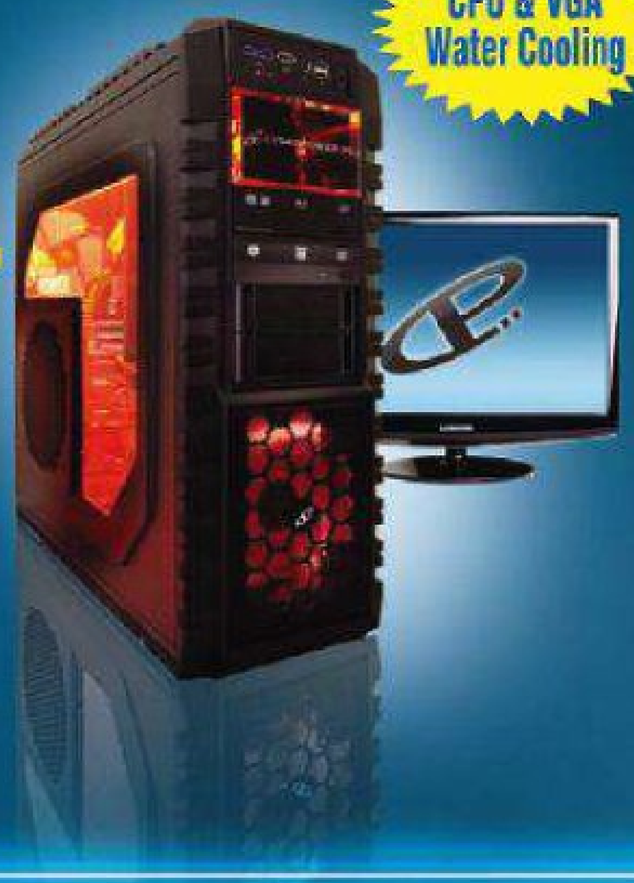
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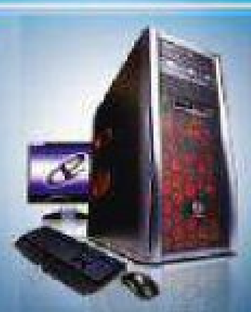
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Rich went to Vancouver to see Relic's latest Warhammer 40,000 title, and managed not to get corrupted by the taint of Chaos. At least, he tells us that as he sacrifices mice for the blood god in his corner of the office.



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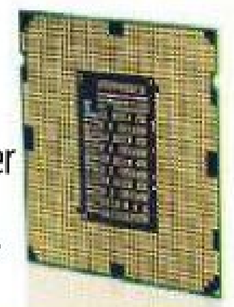
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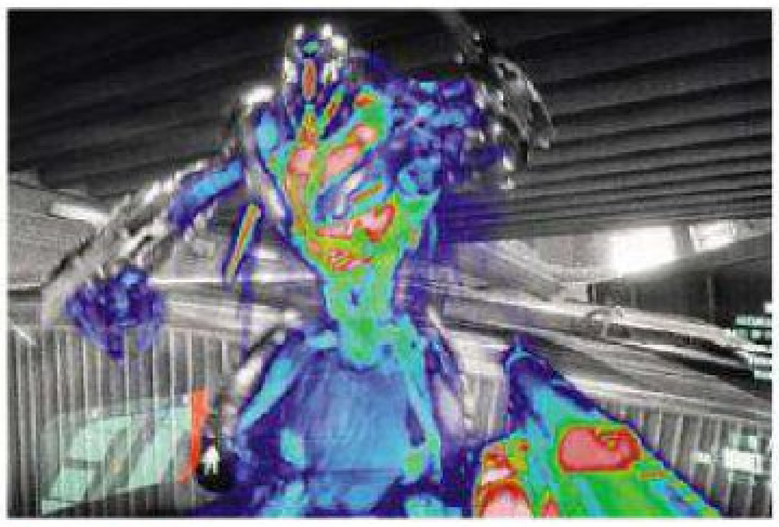
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Seen live, the complex lighting in this scene is incredible.

The future of graphics

THE BIG STORY You're going to need a bigger card: Epic unveil the future of gaming graphics

It takes three ultra-powerful graphics cards to power Unreal developer Epic's vision of gaming. No current card has the raw grunt required for the visuals they revealed at this year's Games Developer Conference. But that's the point.

The real-time demo, a battle between a shape-shifting alien and a group of brutal policemen, was Epic's statement of intent. Even though it's generations beyond the average PC user's technology, the new Unreal Engine upgrades are available for developers now. This is what games will look like in two years.

The new effects include Subsurface Scattering, which simulates the effect of light hitting a translucent material. It gives the character a much more natural glow when he's lighting a cigarette with a blowtorch. An important effect, according to Epic, because the "human eye is trained to recognise details in faces".

There's new camera technology, including a more realistic way of representing depth of field than simply blurring the background. When the hero flicks his cigarette over the edge of the building, the camera's tight focus blurs the rest of the cityscape beautifully. In the background, hundreds of dynamic lights are casting shadows, the street is slick rain.

Multiple light sources illuminate the fight on the street. The police slam into neon billboards, casting realistic shadows. The flickering light picks out individual raindrops. Epic aim for photorealism, and are getting closer with every engine.

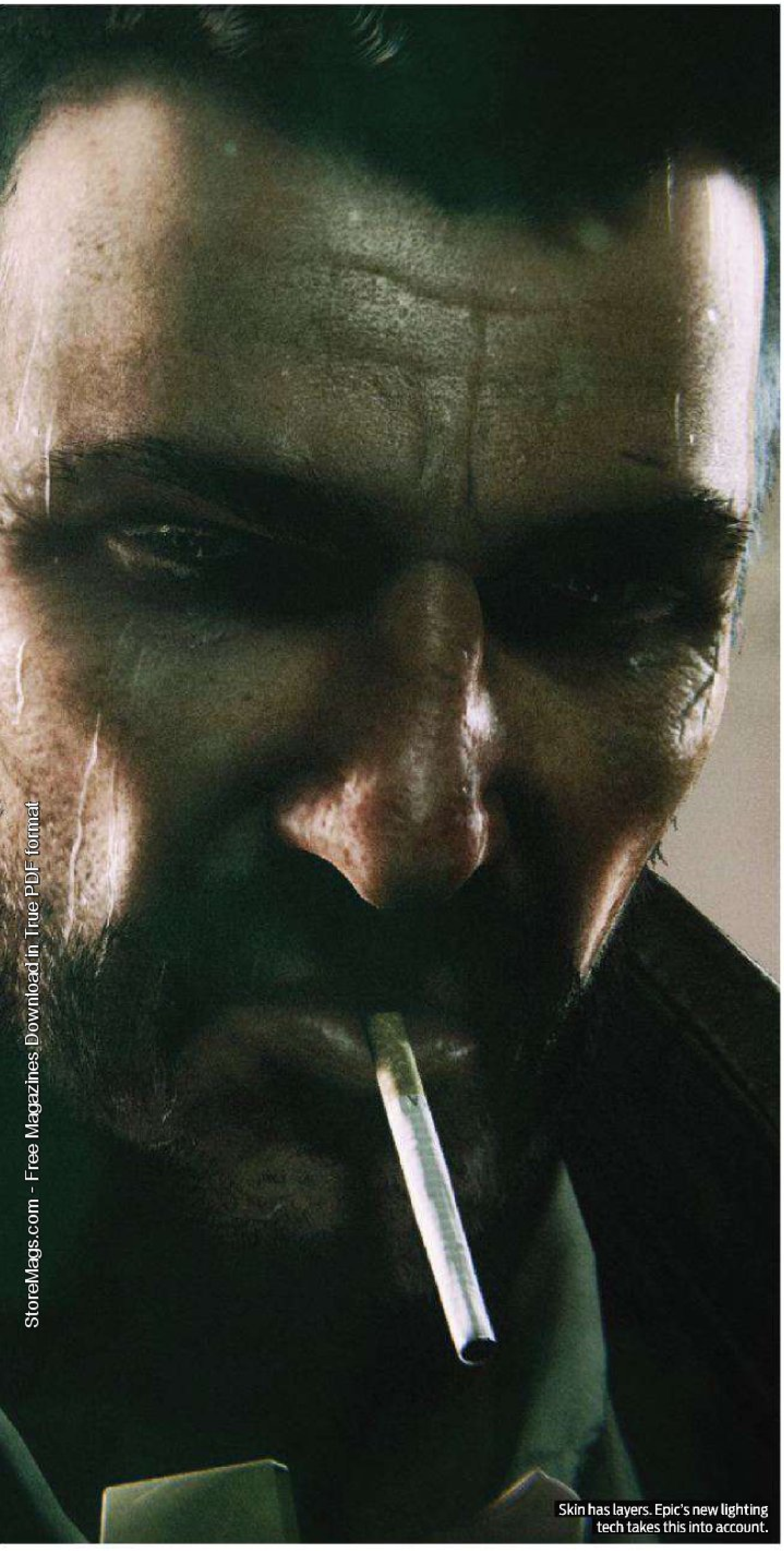
"The stuff we're showing today is do-able on PC now, but it's pretty darn powerful," said Epic's Mark Rein. "Maybe the next Nvidia graphics card bump means we can use two, we don't need three. And maybe the next bump means we can use just one. And the next bump after that means that we can use the mid-range card."

Until then, you can see the presentation in all its HD glory at *bit.ly/ftZbMn*. ■

Craig Pearson

StoreMags.com - Free Magazines Download in True PDF format

Release: StoreMags & FantaMag



Skin has layers. Epic's new lighting tech takes this into account.

StoreMags.com - Free Magazines Download in True PDF format

THREE WAY

THREEQUEL SEQUEL TO 3-PLAYER *TRINE* IS ANNOUNCED

The first *Trine* was a delightful puzzle-oriented platformer. Players could switch between a wizard, a thief and a warrior at will in singleplayer, each having specific skills that could assist in getting past a fiendish obstacle. That trifecta has returned in *Trine 2*, as an early trailer shows. Set in a colourful fantasy realm, it sees characters manipulate the world's physics to progress: the warrior uses his shield to direct water flow, and the wizard conjures a block out of thin air to counterbalance a see-saw. *Trine*'s best bit was the chaotic three-player multiplayer – hopefully this will make a return. It's still early, but keep an eye on *trine2.com*. **RM**

WAKEY WAKEY

FIGHT FREELY MORE *DOTA* GOODNESS IN *RISE OF IMMORTALS*



If you're tired of *League of Legends*, and can't wait for Valve's *DotA 2*, Petroglyph have just announced *Rise of Immortals*. The free-to-play fantasy smashathon takes the *DotA* structure (teams of heroes supported by NPC units) and twists it to give the players of the often brutal PvP games more options for fighting the computer, as well as persistent character progression. Experience earned in PvE games can be brought into the versus battles. It's in closed beta right now. Sign up at *www.riseofimmortals.com*. **CP**

HEALTH BAR

SORTING GOOD NEWS FROM BAD

Winners

Notch
Minecraft won the main prize at the Independent Games Festival, as well as the audience award.

Battlefield Heroes
Seven million gamers have registered to fire cartoon guns at each other.

Intel
According to Epic's Mark Rein, their latest round of integrated graphics chips "don't suck".

THQ
Their revolutionary shooter *Homefront* was leaked online before the game came out.

Bungie
They claimed at GDC that they were working on an MMO, then said it was a joke. No lols were had.

PC Gaming Alliance
Sony have joined Microsoft and Nvidia in abandoning the PC gaming-centric think tank.

Faildogs

Release: StoreMags & FantaMag

Install 'em all

Ten programs you must have on your PC

Your PC might be new, or just freshly formatted, but at some point it'll need software on it to do what you want it to do. Sure you could open up Google, stick your tongue out the side of your mouth, furrow your brow and search for the handiest things to install to make PC gaming a doddle. Or, you could use this page, which will tell you exactly what to download. There's only one question to answer: what do you want to do? ■

Craig Pearson

The best place to buy games

New PC? You need Steam. Steam is a terrifying, multi-limbed colossus bestriding PC gaming. It's *the* place to get games, though. Not only are they often discounted in the mid-week and holiday sales, but Valve allow you to access your account from any PC, and they recently added a cloud save feature, so your save games follow you around as well.

www.steampowered.com

Talk to friends online

You don't need to be in the same room to speak to your friends. Ventrilo underpins all of our large-scale MMO action and *Arma II* military manoeuvres for free. It enables you to talk though your tactics, record the session, use multiple private channels, and it can even do text-to-speech.

www.ventrilo.com

Record your awesomeness

Fraps is an impeccable screen-shot tool, but it does more. It benchmarks your PC and even records the last 30 seconds of any in-game action, so if you do something amazing, you can simply save the past half-minute.

www.fraps.com

Play old games on modern PCs

DOSBox emulates the old, non-Windows OS that games used to to run on. It's fiddly, but the list of supported games is now huge, and if you have a pile of classic PC games still in their cardboard boxes, it'll release their spirits. Fly, my pretty 640 x 480 graphics. Fly!

www.dosbox.com

Save your game save files

Game developers hide save files all over your hard drive, so if you need to reformat, you're likely to lose some. Game Save Manager can back up all your saves to one file. It knows where each game keeps its saves, and they've even got it to work with Games for Windows Live.

gsm.duncsweb.com

Play LAN games online

Hamachi is a magic program that creates a virtual LAN across the internet. Why is that useful? Games only require multiplayer CD keys if you're connecting through their dedicated servers, so if you're not up for creating a profile, if your key doesn't work, or if the company-controlled dedicated servers are shut down, you can still play the multiplayer without too much fuss.

bit.ly/eF8dLc

Make room for more games

Shogun: Total War 2 is a 15GB install, and *APB* takes up 8GB. A lot of games are approaching 10GB in size. Treemaps are the clearest way to see what files are taking over your hard drive, by showing the size of folders relative to each other. Space Sniffer is the best, quickly scanning your drive, showing you what's where and telling you how much space there is.

bit.ly/ft52Jp

Play games in your browser

You might not realise yet just how important the browser is to gaming, but there's a big shift coming with browser-based games. Chrome's strength is that it's continually updated, lightning fast and comes with Unity – a 3D platform that a lot of high-end games use – baked into the code. EA are taking the *Tiger Woods* series to the PC solely via the browser.

www.google.com/chrome

Take your game saves with you

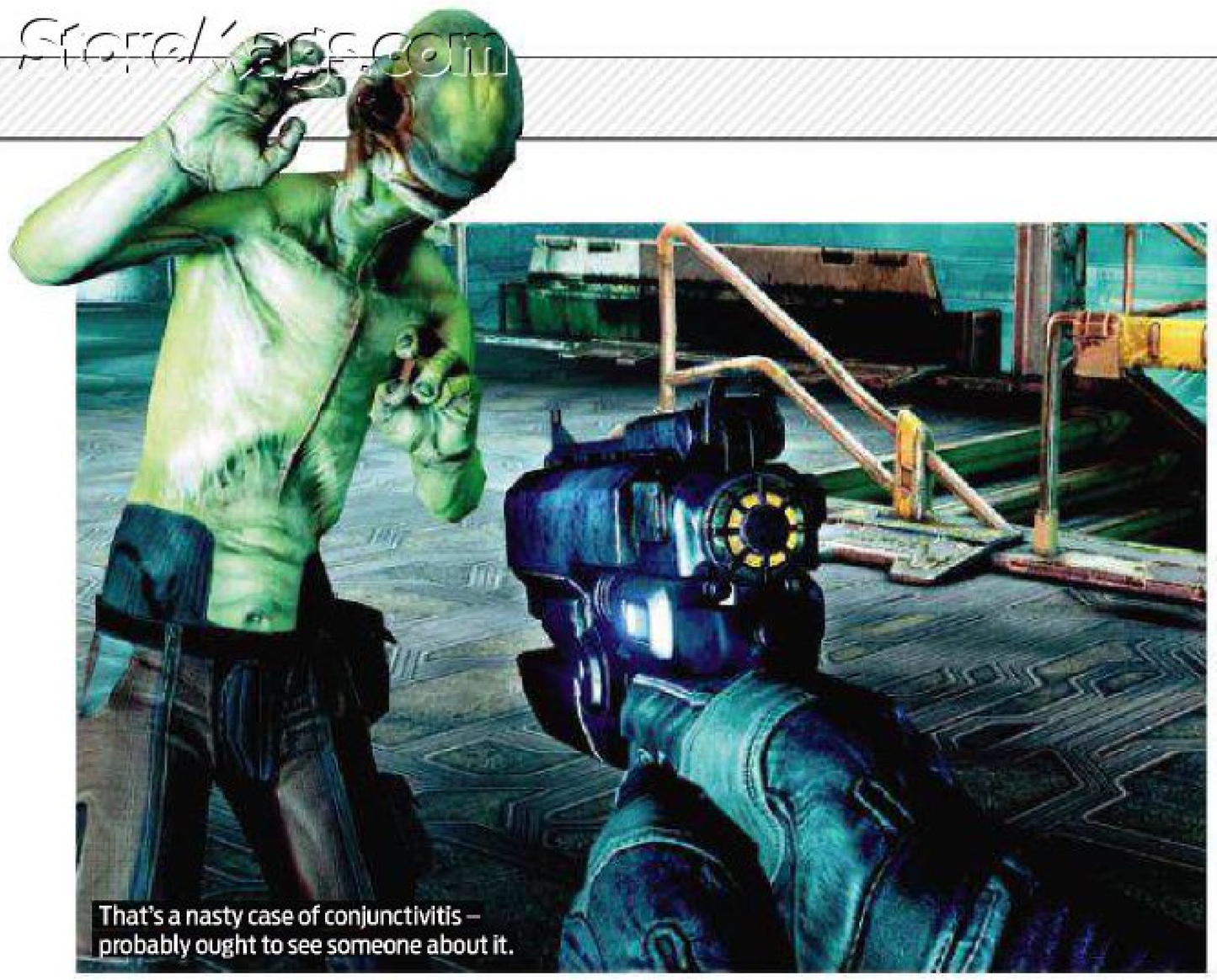
Windows Live Mesh is a program that monitors folders, and keeps them synced across different computers. It's perfect for keeping non-Steam Cloud save games synced across different PCs.

www.mesh.com

Give your PC protection

If you're a PC gamer, then you need to be online, meaning you'll need some sort of security suite on your PC. Microsoft's antivirus program is free, unintrusive, integrates with the OS, and is currently one of the most highly recommended by security experts. See, they can do something right, after all.

www.microsoft.com/security_essentials


That's a nasty case of conjunctivitis – probably ought to see someone about it.

Prey 2 revealed

Portals replaced with parkour

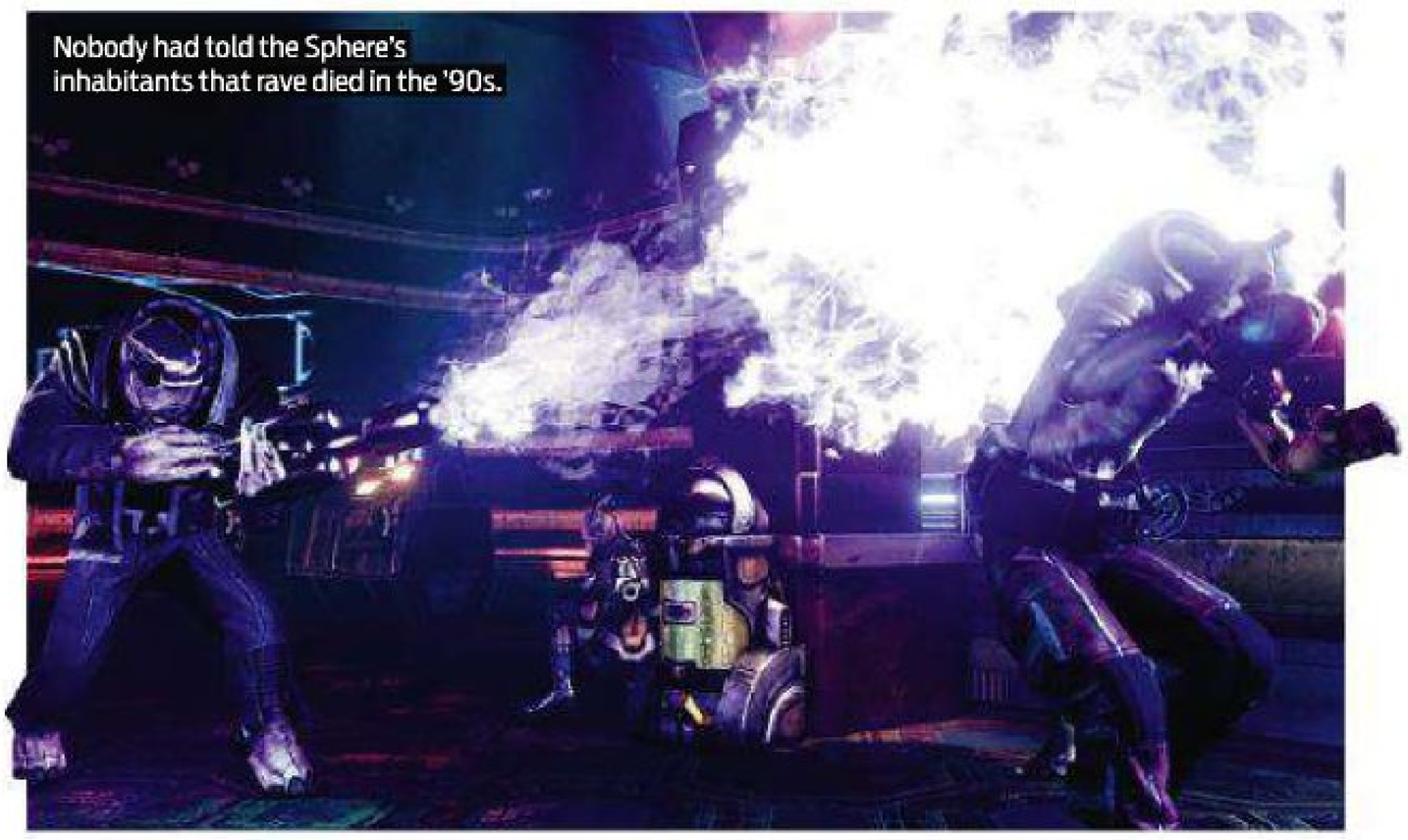
Bear with me here. *Prey* was a game about a man making his way through an alien spaceship – the Sphere – via regular use of portals. When that man died, he was able to return to life using the ghost of his dead hawk. At the end of the game, he blew up the ship he was on and returned to Earth.

Okay? *Prey 2* is also about a man, but that's just about all it has in common with its predecessor. Human Head's new game leaps forward a year and a half to another world. The Sphere is now a handful of space-dust, and the man is the sole human being in a city of aliens. He's also a bounty hunter. And he can run and jump like the lady from *Mirror's Edge*. And it's set in a semi-open city. And there are no portals.

Killian Samuels – our new man – was aboard the plane Tommy Tawodi saw smacking into the Sphere during *Prey*'s intro. Instead of being vapourised, space-magic teleported him to the Bowery, a city on the planet Exodus. The place is full of odd-looking aliens, but as a rule they're friendlier than *Prey*'s shred-your-skin-on-sight variation – you can now chat with them, and conversations promise to go further than, "Oh God, stop eating my leg."

Samuels has been bounty-hunting for a while: he's got a special visor for tagging targets. As soon as a quarry is spotted, the chase begins, with the open world acting like *Assassin's Creed*'s cities. Human Head have also shown the tables turn: sometimes Killian gets ambushed, and must make a parkour-fuelled bid for freedom. It's about a big a departure as possible from *Prey*'s standard corridor shooty template, and turns a potentially staid sequel into an interesting concept. ■

Rich McCormick


Nobody had told the Sphere's inhabitants that rave died in the '90s.

WATCH TRIBES ASCEND

SHAZBOT VENERABLE FPS SERIES BOUNCES BACK TO LIFE



Tribes' bouncy-bouncy jetpacks added a frosting of battle strategy to standard twitch-based FPSes, and *Tribes Ascend* aims to resurrect the experience. Vehicles are promised, as well as the return of skiing – bouncing down hills in short jetpack bursts.

To be clear, this isn't the *Tribes* MMO, *Tribes Universe*. Both games are being developed by Hi-Rez Studios – makers of the similarly jetpack-obsessed *Global Agenda* – but *Ascend* is a standard multiplayer shooter. It's set to launch on PC and 360 in 2011. **RM**

LIFE ON THE STREETS

GANGSTA VOLITION MAKING *SAINTS ROW: THE THIRD*

Saints Row: The Third's first shots include a woman armed with a five foot dildo smacking a man wearing a lucha libre mask. It's comforting to see Volition continue their mission to distance their series from *GTA IV*. The third game continues the story of the Third Street Saints, moving base from the city of Stilwater to Steelport. This thrusts the player back into a four-way gang battle, with many an opportunity for sex-toy beatdowns. More info soon. **RM**



SAY WHAT?

THE MONTH IN TONGUES

"It's great that we know who Jon Blow and Notch are. Yet in 20 years in the industry, I've never met a single Rockstar employee. Isn't that weird?"
Cliff Bleszinski, **Epic, talking to Gamasutra**

"He just stood there frozen; we ALL just stood there frozen, as the dog with the prolapsed bottom merrily sauntered out of the door."
Peter Molyneux, **Lionhead, telling that story about meeting Sega's old boss**

"I don't think [piracy] is something at the forefront for us. Let's make a game that's worth stealing, and then we'll worry about making sure they don't."
Eric Barker, **Volition studio manager, talking sense to Eurogamer**

THE SPY



The Spy stubbed his toe and could not scream.

The human face is an emotional ticker-tape parade. That's why The Spy invests so heavily in botulism treatment. There's nothing like that cool sting of the needle in the forehead, and the resultant freezing of The Spy's muscles not only keeps his innermost thoughts safe from those who might be on the lookout for an errant forehead wrinkle, but also gives a youthful glow that works wonders with the ladies.

Of course, fully paralysing the emotions in a human's face also renders their powers of speech somewhat comical, reducing words to a string of dribbly consonants. "Hrrrrrh ddddbbbb cffffff lmmmmm." That's what asking for a "half double-decaffeinated half-caf, with a twist of lemon" sounded like during The Spy's mission preparation.

Uncomfortably numb

Thankfully, The Spy has gadgets to help. The 'Debotulator' allowed him to talk his way past IO Interactive's receptionist, electronically unfreezing his mouth muscles. Its multitude of settings allowed her to believe The Spy was a member of Danish royalty, visiting to see '*Hitman V*'. The Spy made a 'V' with his fingers, just for fun. It's a little known fact about Danish people that they're conditioned to respond favourably to royalty: the receptionist waved The Spy on with a curtsey.

Inside IO, people were busy. They were definitely making a new *Hitman*, in fact they're preparing to show it to the world very soon. They're already toying with the community, running an ARG that's so far yielded the image of a cutscene script with a few notes. In the script, Agent 47's assistant Diana seems a lot more involved, appearing twice, while he dispatches a couple of guards. Internally, the chatter is of an E3 reveal, but The Spy expects something a touch sooner. The Spy smirked. Well, he tried.

Snow patrol

Next The Spy had to head off to the HQ of Avalanche, Scandinavian brothers of IO. It was minus OMG degrees, a pervasive cold that freezes the face. Not even the Debotulator could help. Brute force entry was required, so The Spy put a robotic limping kitten in a tree outside the building. The office emptied in a surge of civilised sympathy and concern. Inside, The Spy uncovered two small nuggets of interest. Firstly, the company are currently working on a multiplayer game, not to the scale of *Just Cause 2*, but with plenty of their trademark OTT action. It's download only, and so far only listed as a console game, but expect it on the PC: they did really well with *Just Cause 2* DLC on Steam after all. Secondly, Avalanche had been working on a game for THQ that ended up being cancelled. It was called *Arcadia*, which has a certain fantasy whiff to it.

> **"Fake royalty and kittens wouldn't work on Rockstar"**

When the staff realised the kitten was a robot, they all rushed back into the building, sealing the exits. The Spy left through one of the many entrances instead (©1977, Ronnie Barker), heading off to visit an old friend.

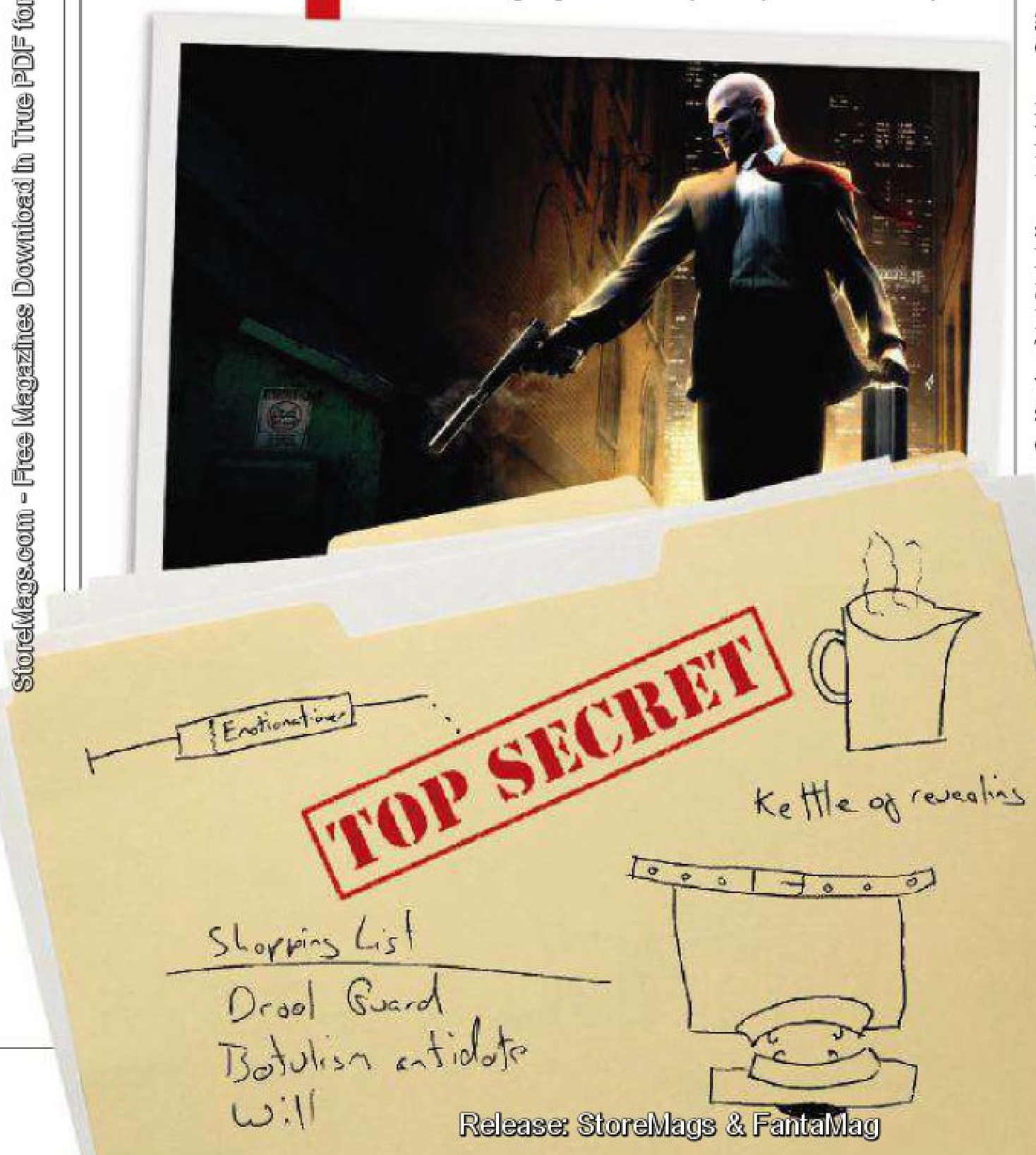
We meet again, Rockstar. Frozen faces, fake royalty and kittens wouldn't work on these twitchy developers. In fact, a direct assault wouldn't do at all. Instead The Spy hooked up with a casting agency working for 2K, Rockstar's publishers. They loved the lack of emotion in The Spy's jowls, and admired his headshots. While they were staring at the photographic sexiness, The Spy steamed open a pile of envelopes. 2K are currently casting for a wide range of characters for a game called '*Rush*', a codename that's looking more and more like *GTA 5*. The LA-set game includes Brother Adam, a 'Welsh monk/cult leader/yoga teacher', and Chad: '29 – pretty boy misogynist Beverly Hills party boy. Made money, but not as cool as he thinks he is.'

There's chatter of this game being unveiled at E3, but if the casting call is only going out now, The Spy thinks that's a bit too soon.

Thought you could slip *that* past The Spy, eh? You and Bethesda, both. The publishers of *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* are in the process of setting up a customer support office in Ireland, creating hundreds of jobs. Hundreds, Bethesda? What sort of game requires that number of support staff? An MMO, obviously. They're gearing up to announce something big this year.

Spy out. ■

The Spy



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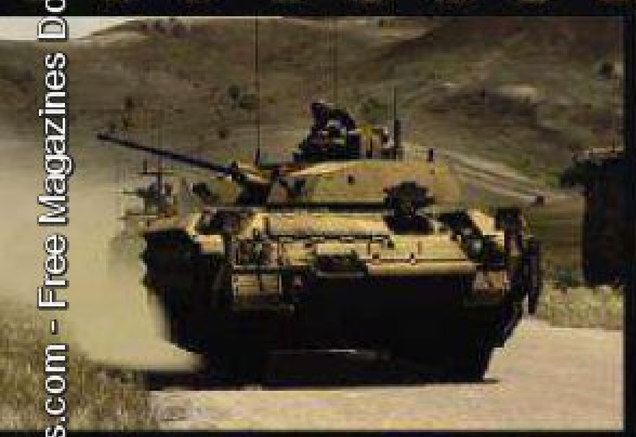
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2009 Game of the Year WINNER
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ARMA II
REINFORCEMENTS

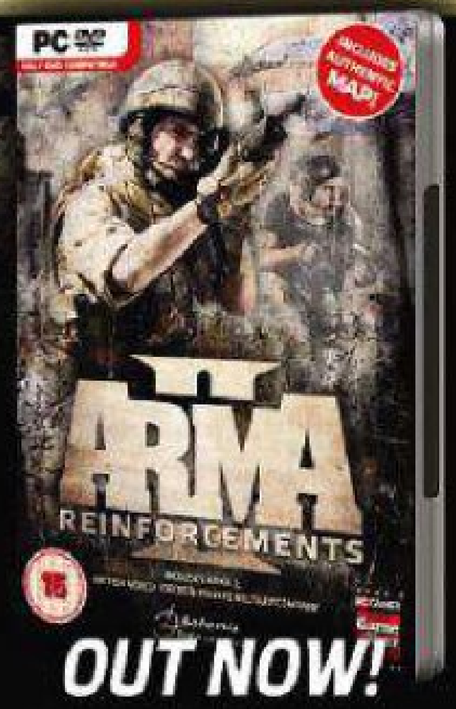
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FACE OFF

Should we praise designers past their prime?



YES The merit of famous game developers can't be undone by later, lesser works.



NO People shouldn't get a free pass just because they once created great games.



Graham Smith would buy all Chris Taylor's future games right now based solely on *Supreme Commander*.



Rich McCormick won't trust anyone unless they pass an aptitude test first. It involves backflips.

GS: The Beatles haven't released an album recently, but that doesn't mean that we stop respecting and celebrating the enormous impact they had on music while they were producing new material. It also doesn't mean that the music they once produced stops being good, or any less worthwhile. The games industry has so few elder statesmen, and we should celebrate those we do have even if it's been a few years since their last hit.

RM: Music is music though. No one's invented the hyper-guitar yet, so anything released 50 years ago follows broadly the same musical principles as it does now. Games have changed immeasurably in five years. Ten years in gaming and the landscape changes beyond recognition. How are these devs' skills still valid when gaming is moving too fast for them to keep up? We fawn over people purely because their names are attached to good games. What have they done for me lately?

GS: Richard Garriott's *Ultima* series shaped so much of the western RPG, and aside from ageing graphics the games are still progressive today. By comparison, *Tabula Rasa*, his last game, was a flop. But Garriott still has more experience in this young medium than almost anyone, and by ignoring him and others like him, we'd be returning as an industry to a *blank slate*. See what I did there? I put it in italics so you would see what I did there.

RM: Why would we be going back to a *blank slate*? I'd imagine at least one still-relevant developer can incorporate the lessons of the *Ultimas* into their as-yet unannounced game. We don't keep the person who invented fire on ice somewhere so we can thaw him out and ask him how the fuck he did it every time we want to turn the hob on. Garriott should cease being important as soon as his games cease to be good.

GS: Obviously older designers shouldn't get *unqualified* respect, but at what point do you think we should stop listening to them or looking with interest at their new games? After five years? After one bad game? If they'd made five good games in the old days, do we listen for longer than if they'd only made a couple?

RM: You're being flippant, but you're onto something with the ratios. If every game you touch turns to eminently playable gold, then you've bought yourself some legitimacy. But there are caveats: if your classics came in an age when imagining a resolution above 800x600 was considered witchcraft and punished by drowning, then you don't get a free pass and fawning articles. If you've only made one or two in comparison with later dreck, who's to say you weren't the guy in the room who said "let's make the lead character a TALKING SCORPION," and just got shouted down?

GS: Most of the people we're talking about here ran the companies they worked for, so let's assume they weren't shouted down. But my point is that great design is great design, and the people who made it must have had talent and skill. Those things don't go away. Eric Chahi hasn't done much since his exotic platformer *Another World*, but even if he had, and even if it had sucked, I'd still be interested in what's next from the mind that once produced something so brilliant.

RM: Yeah, but you're an adle-brained madman. There's a line between 'being interested in' and 'automatically falling at the feet of', and it's that reservation I'm arguing against. I'm 'interested in' a man putting his hand in farm machinery, but I don't think the outcome's going to be good. I'm worried that you and your benefit-of-the-doubt giving chums do.

GS: Me and my chums, on our yacht, having a great party you're not invited to, don't assume the next game is going to be great. But we think it might be. We think smart games are made by smart minds, and smart minds continue to be worth paying attention to. Whether that's hearing what Molyneux has to say, or casting an eye towards Romero's next project. We also believe without these older hands, new designers will miss tricks and repeat mistakes. We also love our yacht.

RM: Your yacht is rubbish, because it was built by a once-great yacht builder that got all his yacht-wishes granted. So he got lazy at building yachts, and bored of the sea entirely, and ended up building a yacht that tried instead to be a car, and then it sank. Look deep into that story, there is a lesson to be learned. Don't trust the yacht-builder until his yacht is under your feet, and it's seaworthy. (The yacht is an analogy for 'games'.)

The debate is past it
But whose best years are still to come? Let us know at *pcgamer.com/forum*

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BLACK MIRROR III

THE CURSE WRITES ITS FINAL CHAPTER

The celebrated horror saga reveals its last secrets:
Black smoke rises from the ruins of Black Mirror Castle. A dark harbinger, since the grim curse that haunts the Gordon family has still not been averted. Murderous visions plague Darren Michaels, threatening to tip him into insanity. Darren's fate seems to be sealed with a bleak certainty. Can he still turn his bloody destiny around and finally break the centuries old curse?





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INCOMING

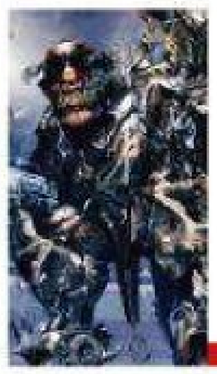
3 MONTHS AWAY



OPERATION FLASHPOINT: RED RIVER

A quickly developed sequel to the disappointing military shooter. Will they have ironed out all the problems?

Release APRIL 21



DUKE NUKEM FOREVER

The world makes no sense. The old-school shooter that was never going to be finished, starring an amalgam of every '80s action hero ever, will be out in June. Battle aliens, smoke cigars, kick ass.

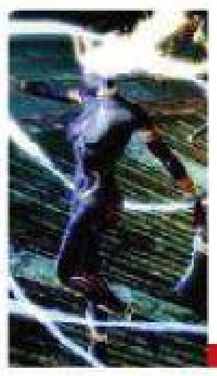
Release JUNE



THE WITCHER 2 ASSASSINS OF KINGS

An open-world fantasy RPG sequel. Take Geralt from being tortured in a prison to fighting the world's villainy. Also, there's definitely some sexy times.

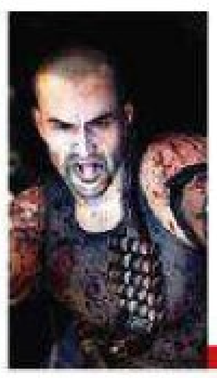
Release MAY 25



DUNGEON SIEGE 3

A loot-grabbing, skeleton-smashing dungeon trawl. You know the score: you click the mouse, demons and uglies explode in a selection of new weapons and armour. Should do until *Diablo III*.

Release MAY 27

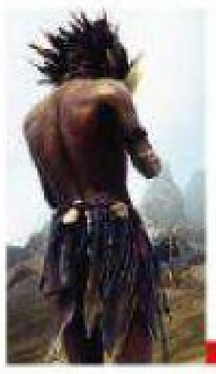


RED FACTION ARMAGEDDON

The carnage moves underground in this Mars-based action game, but there are still plenty of buildings to crush with your giant hammer.

Release JUNE 3

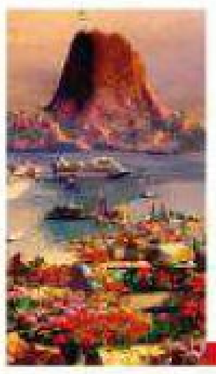
6 MONTHS AWAY



FROM DUST

Ubisoft's elemental god game. Sculpt and shape the land to keep your little tribe of villagers safe from this hostile planet's violent weather systems. Their life is is in your hands, dude.

Release SUMMER



TROPICO 4

Grow a beard and invest in cigars, as you lord it over a Caribbean paradise during the Cold War. The game will update your Twitter account with all your despotic deeds, so best block your mum.

Release SUMMER



RED ORCHESTRA 2: HEROES OF STALINGRAD

Return to the Eastern Front in Tripwire's obsessively detailed online FPS. It has guns you have to *learn* how to shoot.

Release SUMMER



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: DAGGERDALE

A four-player co-op RPG. An AI dungeon master oversees the adventure on your loot-grabbing jaunts.

Release SUMMER



DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

There's still a childish amount of excitement in the office over Eidos's upcoming *Deus Ex* prequel. Everyone here is already planning their multiple playthrough styles.

Release SEPTEMBER 15

9+ MONTHS AWAY



BATMAN ARKHAM CITY

Grand Theft Auto: Bats. Assassin's, er, *Bats?* However you pithily package it, the third-person action game looks like another surprisingly slick battle for Gotham.

Release OCTOBER 21



THE DARKNESS 2

A sequel to a console FPS that never appeared on the PC. You're a Mafia hitman with two extra demonic limbs to control. Yep, you're quad-wielding guns and tentacles. In a suit.

Release AUTUMN



THE ELDER SCROLLS V SKYRIM

Fight the dragons on the northernmost, chilliest continent of Tamriel. Emergent missions and Max von Sydow's glottal stops are the most exciting things to us.

Release NOVEMBER 11



BATTLEFIELD 3

The PC is leading the charge for DICE's military shooter. Expect jets overhead, frantic action and earthquakes in this year's most anticipated multiplayer game. Oh, and it has singleplayer as well.

Release 2011



MASS EFFECT 3

The final ballad of Commander Shepard. Rally the forces of civilisation to rescue Earth in BioWare's reporter-punching RPG. Do yourself a big favour and pick the female Shepard.

Release 2011

SLIPPED!

Max Payne 3
Yeah, we expected it to be out by now. Not a peep from Rockstar since it was announced. We know the game's about slow-motion, but this is ridiculous.

CAN'T WAIT?

YOU CAN PLAY THESE GREAT GAMES RIGHT NOW



Dawn of War 2 Retribution
Relic's RTS tosses dozens of Orks around, and puts you in the middle of the slaughter and screams.



Bulletstorm
The shooter where guns are secondary. Electrified whips and a big boot to the back is preferable to a bullet in the head.



Monday Night Combat
It's *Team Fortress 2*, but with robots and tower defence. OTT in the best possible way.

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E-sports goes global

World auditions for US *StarCraft II* tournament

The North American Star League is the West's counter-punch to South Korea's Global StarCraft II League. The NASL is split across four seasons – each with a grand prize of $100,000 – and is open to all comers. The organisers have thrown the digital doors open to competitors to prove their own worth, and professional gamers across the globe have submitted entry auditions.

We've highlighted some of the best, but to see more, head over to *teamliquid.net*'s compendium at *bit.ly/fkTsHx*. ■

Rich McCormick



MC

TEAM oGs **COUNTRY** South Korea **LINK** bit.ly/dQfEI0

MC is the most recent GSL champion, and a beast in the playing booth. His audition video showcases his confidence, as well as his English skills.



July

TEAM ST **COUNTRY** South Korea **LINK** bit.ly/fmBUxF

An *SC* veteran, July brings experience and a hyper-aggressive style to the tournament. His video is worth it for the giggling fit at the beginning.



NaDa

TEAM oGs **COUNTRY** South Korea **LINK** bit.ly/f0Bg6x

D'aww. NaDa looks disarmingly cute in his audition, speaking halting English. Don't be fooled. He's the most consistent *StarCraft* pro ever.



IdrA

TEAM: EG **COUNTRY:** USA **LINK** bit.ly/gN0t8w

America's great Zerg hope, IdrA was doing well in the GSL before switching to the NASL. Relentless and principled, he recorded his video while playing.



SlayerS_BoxeR

TEAM SlayerS **COUNTRY** South Korea **LINK** bit.ly/dT8qau

Still the biggest name in e-sports. BoxeR has won more money from playing *StarCraft* than anyone else, and appears on billboards in South Korea.



TLO

TEAM Liquid **COUNTRY** Germany **LINK** bit.ly/ekhhNK

TheLittleOne remains one of *StarCraft II*'s most inventive players, developing mad strategies and executing them in major tournaments.



DeMusliM

TEAM EG **COUNTRY** UK **LINK** bit.ly/ghUvjr

DeMusliM flies the British flag for *StarCraft II*, even if he does live in Germany. His audition video shows his broken arm, collected after a drunken 'skirmish'.



MoMaN

TEAM Cyber Nation **COUNTRY** France **LINK** bit.ly/I26CuT

MoMaN wasn't famous until his audition, which reinforces as many French stereotypes as possible, ending with a baguette and the Eiffel tower.

FRATRICIDAL STRATEGY

FAMILIAL BROTHERLY LOVE BETWEEN PRO-GAMERS SHOWN

Sean 'Day[9]' Plott makes instructional and regularly hilarious *StarCraft II* videos. His brother, Nick 'Tasteless' Plott is a commentator for the world's biggest e-sports league. After a *Reddit.com* thread discussing Sean's 100th video, in which he explains his roots, filmmaker Brian Kim piped up with video evidence – a documentary that shows brother facing brother at the World Cyber Games 2005. Watch how far they – and e-sports in general – have come at *bit.ly/fHrrf6*. **RM**



HACK GABE'S PC

SECURITY VALVE HEAD OFFERS HIS STEAM PASSWORD TO THIEVES

Gabe Newell wants you to steal his stuff. Well, his Steam stuff. And he only says it because he's so sure that Steam Guard – the download system's new security service – will keep his account safe. He told the crowd at German event Cebit his full account details, daring them to nab his precious games. We assume it went well, unless the successful hacker is too busy gaming to gloat. See Gabe's bravery at *bit.ly/hVrKyO*. **RM**

LOL OF THE MONTH

LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD

A tender, touching story from the least tender and touching game in the world, *Black Ops*. Treyarch have commemorated the release of their first exorbitantly priced map pack – First Strike – with an overblown power ballad. Two soldiers on different sides walk the length of the Berlin Wall, singing plaintively to each other about loss, sadness, and not looking at explosions. *bit.ly/f6VZ3u*



PC GAMER **Special Report**

Breaking into the Indie Fund

The investment fund for independent games, by developers for developers

When Kyle Gabler and Ron Carmel were making *World of Goo*, they did it in coffee shops without a publisher. Just over two years later they're helping to bankroll other independent developers, giving them an opportunity to make the best game they can without having to cave in to financial or publisher pressure.

The Indie Fund is made up of Kyle and Ron, plus Jon Blow, the developer of *Braid*, Aaron Isaksen, who made *Armadillo Gold Rush* (Blackberry), Kellee Santiago, co-creator of *flOwer* (PSN), Nathan Vella developer of *Critter Crunch* (PSN), and Matthew Wegner who developed *Off-Road Raptor Safari*.

Chosen ones

The money they've put together will initially fund three games, the top-down co-op thief game *Monaco* (*www.monacoismine.com*), the first-person puzzle game *Q.U.B.E.* (*www.qubegame.co.uk*), and the puzzle platforming game *Shadow Physics* (*www.shadowphysics.com*). All three fascinated the fund in different ways.

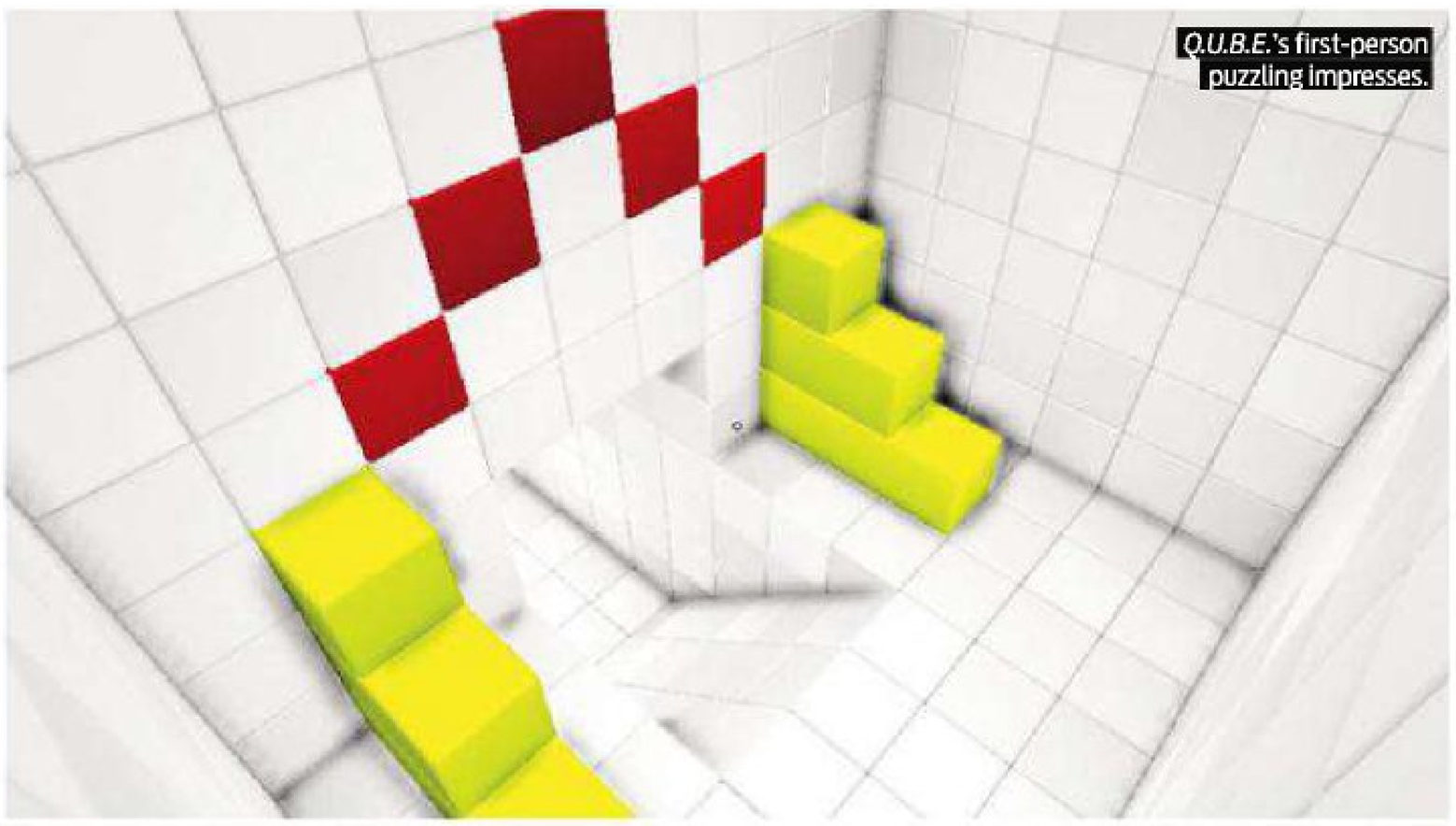
Ron explains: "I was in love with *Monaco* from the first time I played it as part of the IGF judging process. It had distilled the essence of stealth games down to a concentrated solution of 2D tiles without losing any of the thrill. The addition of the 'line of sight' visibility made it a mesmerising thing to look at, and the realistic and detailed audio design rounded out the whole experience.

"*Shadow Physics* is the game we funded earliest in its development cycle purely based on potential. The interplay between shadow objects and real objects and how it splits your attention between two parallel worlds was fascinating. The original set of puzzles that Steve demonstrated showed that he had the ability to come up with surprising mechanics and puzzles and really explore the possibility space of this idea.



Craig says: People give up their livelihoods to create their dream game, so the Indie Fund is a remarkable statement.

"The main draws of *Q.U.B.E.* are partly about the game and partly about the team. The game is fun and interesting, and much like Steve with *Shadow Physics*, the team demonstrated an ability to explore the possibility space of the idea in depth. There's something else that's special about *Q.U.B.E.* though: it's a team of three, and they're making an entire game with UDK [Unreal Development Kit] without a programmer! The notion that you don't need a programmer to make a video game is kind of remarkable, and would get you laughed out of the room a few years ago."



Q.U.B.E.'s first-person puzzling impresses.

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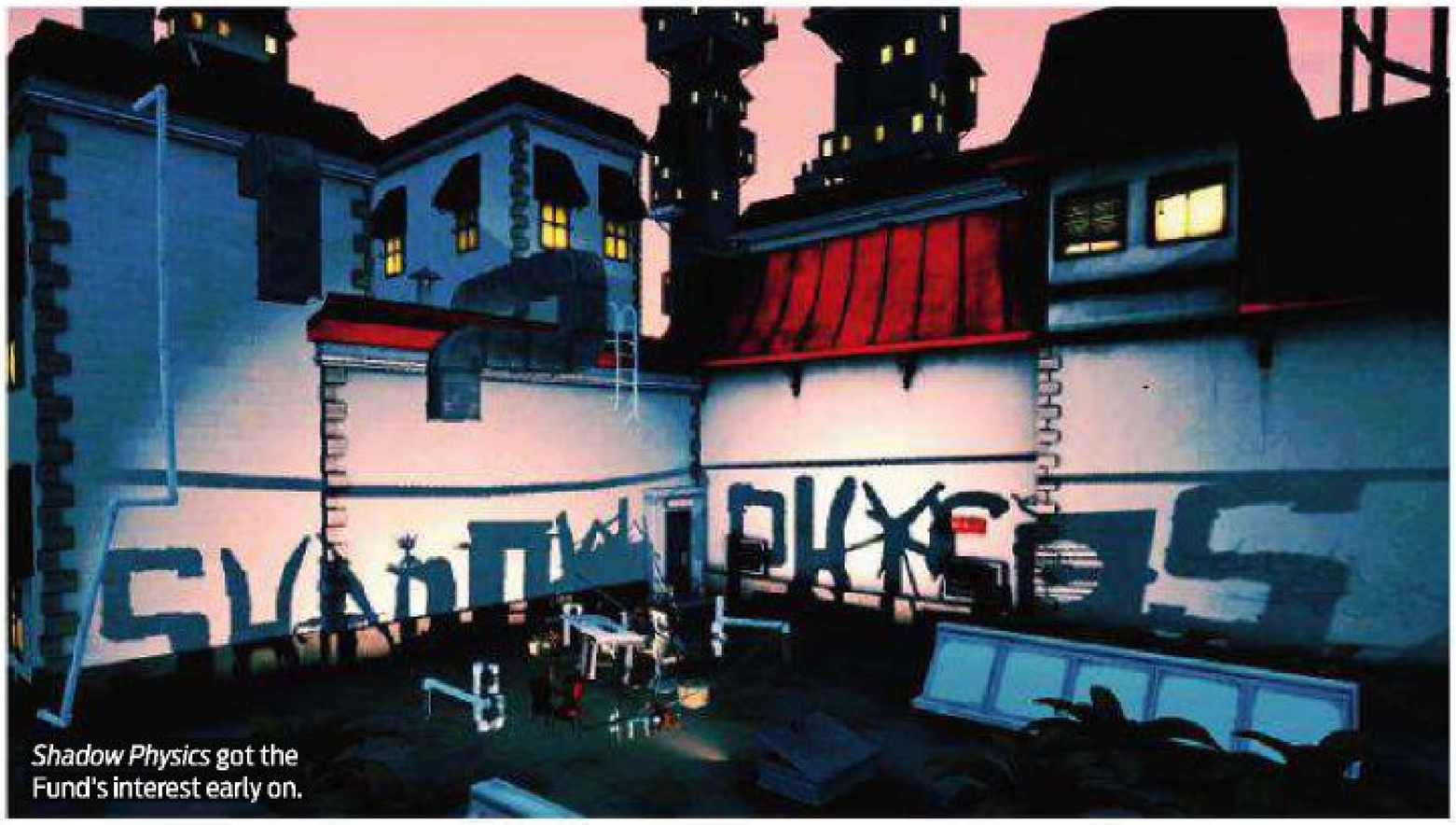
Instead of getting ridiculed, the Indie Fund is giving the developers the support to make the best game they can. Up to $150,000 per game, and according to Kellee Santiago, they're free to spend the money as they choose. They can: "Pay rent, get whatever equipment and software they need, feed themselves, and support some level of promoting themselves and their project, such as travelling to and attending conferences."

Andy Schatz is now taking advantage of the money. His thief-sim *Monaco* won the Independent Games Festival Grand Prize in 2010, a win that gave him $20,000, but even that wasn't enough. If the fund hadn't stepped in, the game would probably have been put out in a state Schatz would have regretted.

Avoiding early release

He explains: "I probably would have released the game shortly after winning the 2010 IGF. It's very possible that the game would have remained under the radar because back then it was still a bit slight. And I would be eating shoe leather while *Minecraft* soaked up all of the press in the world like a Katamari wearing neon. Or it could be what it is now, which is quite possibly the best game you've ever played, ever. Indie Fund has allowed me to keep chugging away on the game without a publisher, without some jackass suit breathing down my neck to make the game characters all eat Doritos."

Not that Doritos aren't delicious, but the other indies had similar fears about retaining control of their game, and dealing with the Fund removes those pressures. Steve Swink's *Shadow Physics* probably could have gotten a publishing deal



Shadow Physics got the Fund's interest early on.

but the terms would have been terrible. He explains: "The deals they would have offered were standard first-time publishing deals, very unfavourable terms. Terrible royalties, wanting to own our IP so they could sequelise it, milestone deliverables where they could withhold payment, stuff like this.

"You'll know the game is what it's meant to be, not what circumstances forced it to be"

You get what you negotiate for, of course, but being an unproven indie developer creating a risky experimental game that will take 'as long as necessary to be outstanding' is rather shaky ground to start negotiating from."

It's a big worry lifted from their shoulders, and has turned the development into a day job for the developers. *Q.U.B.E.*'s Daniel Da Rocha explains the difference it made: "[Before,] we would have scrounged together every penny we had and thrown it into the game project while working part-time jobs in a grocery store or something. Without the financial support of Indie Fund, we would not be able to continue to work on the game full-time – this would possibly be a part-time project spanning over a few years, with the time frame of development being doubled."

Creating change

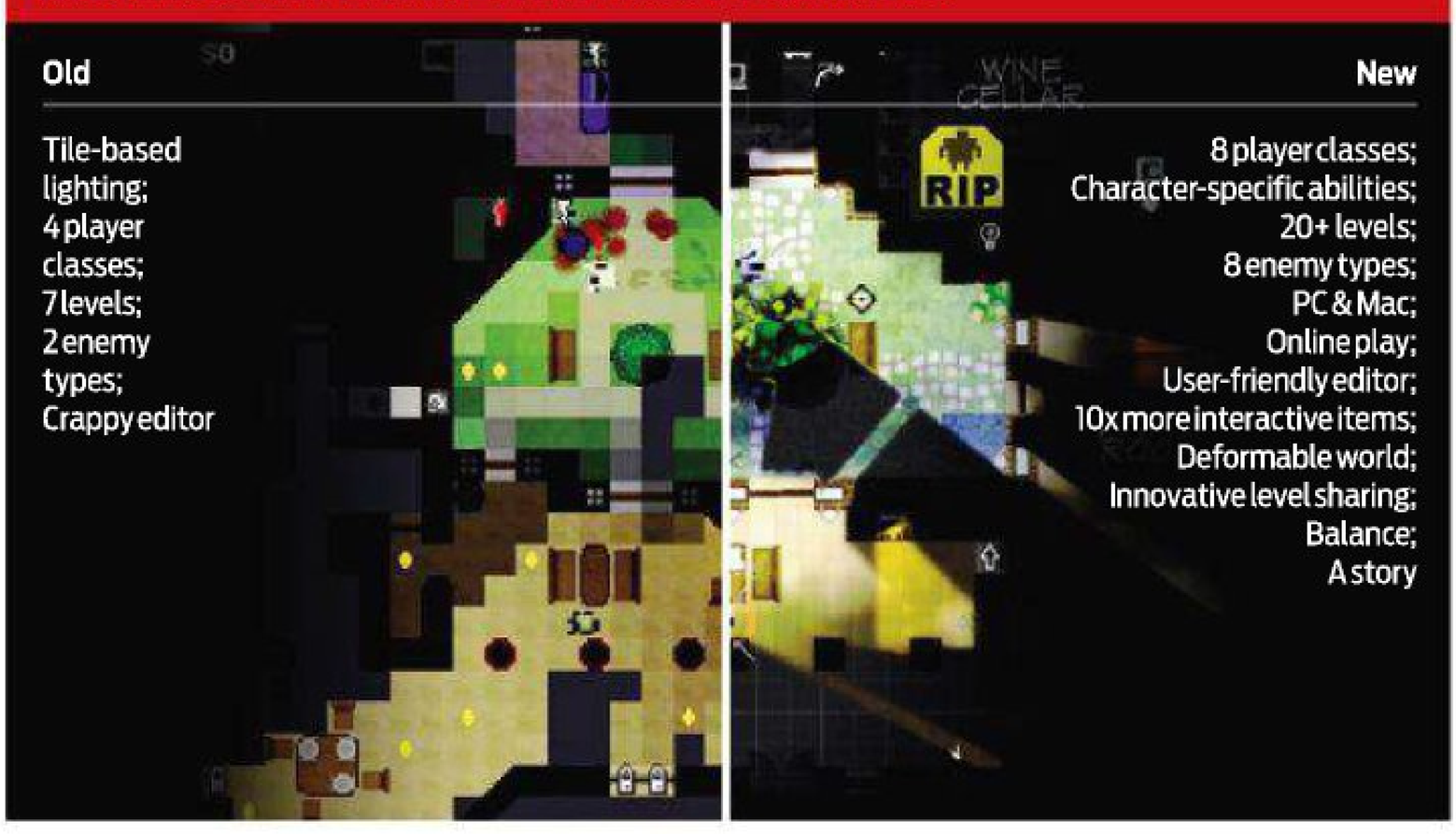
And the reward for the Indie Fund? The structure of the loan means that they don't own the IP of the game, but they'll recoup what they put into it plus 1% for every $10,000 they invested. But for Kellee Santiago, it's more important to challenge how the industry funds games: "For me, I get to actually try to change some of the problems I've been griping about in our industry. It's one thing to get up on stage and rant about the problems we see for 15 minutes; it's another to put real money on the line and attempt to demonstrate how it could be different."

Which is a brave move. After all there's no guarantee that the games will recoup enough money, no matter how innovative they are, and if the money hasn't been paid back within three years, the debt is cancelled. But the Fund's confidence in what they're doing is clear: they have more money in place for a second round of games; this is only the first instance.

The developer's rewards are more concrete, allowing them to fulfil the potential. Andy Schatz: "I've been able to make a fantastic game without have to sacrifice quality or creative control. When you eventually play *Monaco*, you will know that it is what it's meant to be, not what circumstances forced it to be." ■

Craig Pearson

MONACO: WITH AND WITHOUT FUNDING

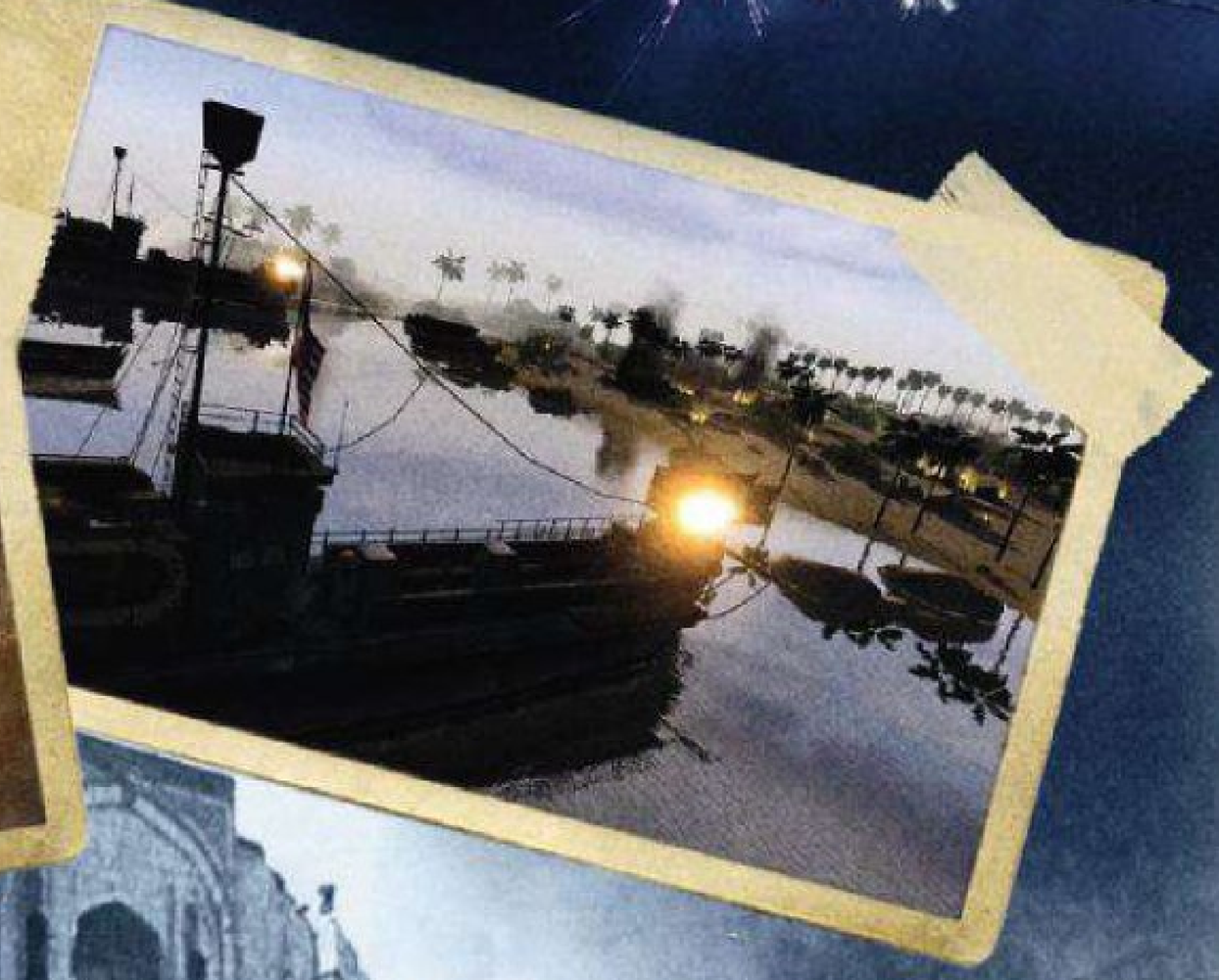


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LACE MAMBA GLOBAL

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I always wanted to be a Thundercat.

GUILD WARS 2

PLAYED IT It's the most innovative MMO yet made. But what's it like to play?

Art director Daniel Dociu is talking me through a flyby of a new prototype area in *Guild Wars 2*. We're hunched around the monitor of an artist as he drives the camera across a stunning azure port. Merchants, tables, chairs and bunting line the wooden walkways. The water beneath the jetties ripples and gleams. Above it all is a giant brass globe, across which sheets of electrical energy crackle. It is gorgeous.

"This is where we let our novice artists learn our methods."

It's hard to tear my eyes away from the screen. This prototype port is one of the most beautiful fake places I've ever seen. My eyes settle on an animator quietly working away at the far side of the room. He's working on a flag, ensuring that it ripples and flaps in the wind. This prototype flag is one of the most beautiful pieces of fake heraldry I've ever seen. I look away again, and my gaze settles on a texture artist who is carefully scratching and damaging a chest of drawers, ensuring the grain in the wood is *just so*. This fake chest of drawers is...

You get the picture.

If nothing else, *Guild Wars 2* will be a beautiful fantasy MMORPG. Better than that, having played it, I can say that I think it's a step forward for MMO games. *Guild Wars 2* is advancing the very fundamentals of the genre. It is bravely ditching the fetch, carry, kill and collect style of questing that has kept us entertained/sedated for years. It is pinning its second-by-second interactions on a combat style that is fast, frantic and unpredictable. Oh: and there's no subscription fee to pay. Once you've bought *Guild Wars 2*, you'll be able to play it forever.

"This prototype port is one of the most beautiful fake places I've ever seen"

Ruh roh. *Guild Wars 2* is taking huge risks. With those risks come potentially huge pratfalls.

Let's talk quests.

Quests don't exist in *Guild Wars* as we know them. In *Guild Wars*, you don't bounce from exclamation mark to exclamation mark, ferrying llama skins. You explore, and as you explore, you stumble across events.

I was exploring a low-level forest when I came across a small village of trolls. The troll village was a problem, because they'd started to arm themselves with machinegun towers. An event started: disable the machineguns, and get this many reward points. Around me were four, maybe five other players, and they'd already pitched in. An elementalist was laying down fireballs and firewalls. A warrior was slicing and dicing trolls with his axe. At the back, I, as a ranger, swapped between bow and gun, firing and then retreating, weaving in and out of range.

The players fighting the machinegunners and trolls weren't formally grouped, but that didn't really matter. All of us gained credit for our kills

READ ME

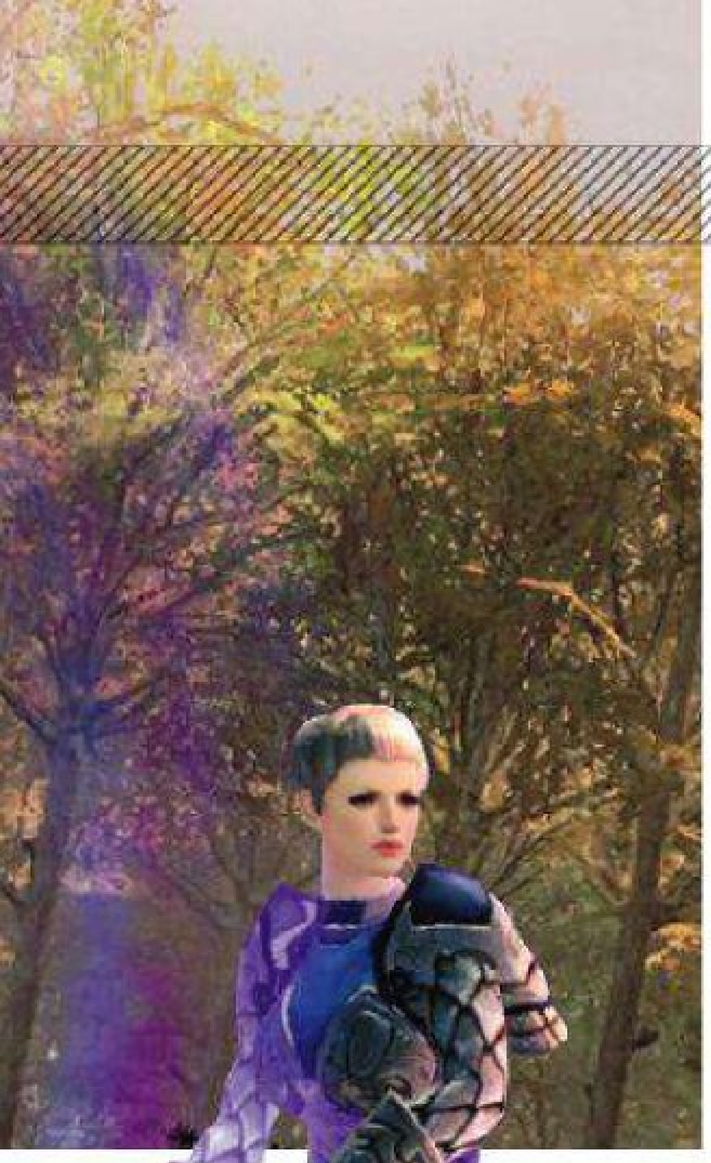
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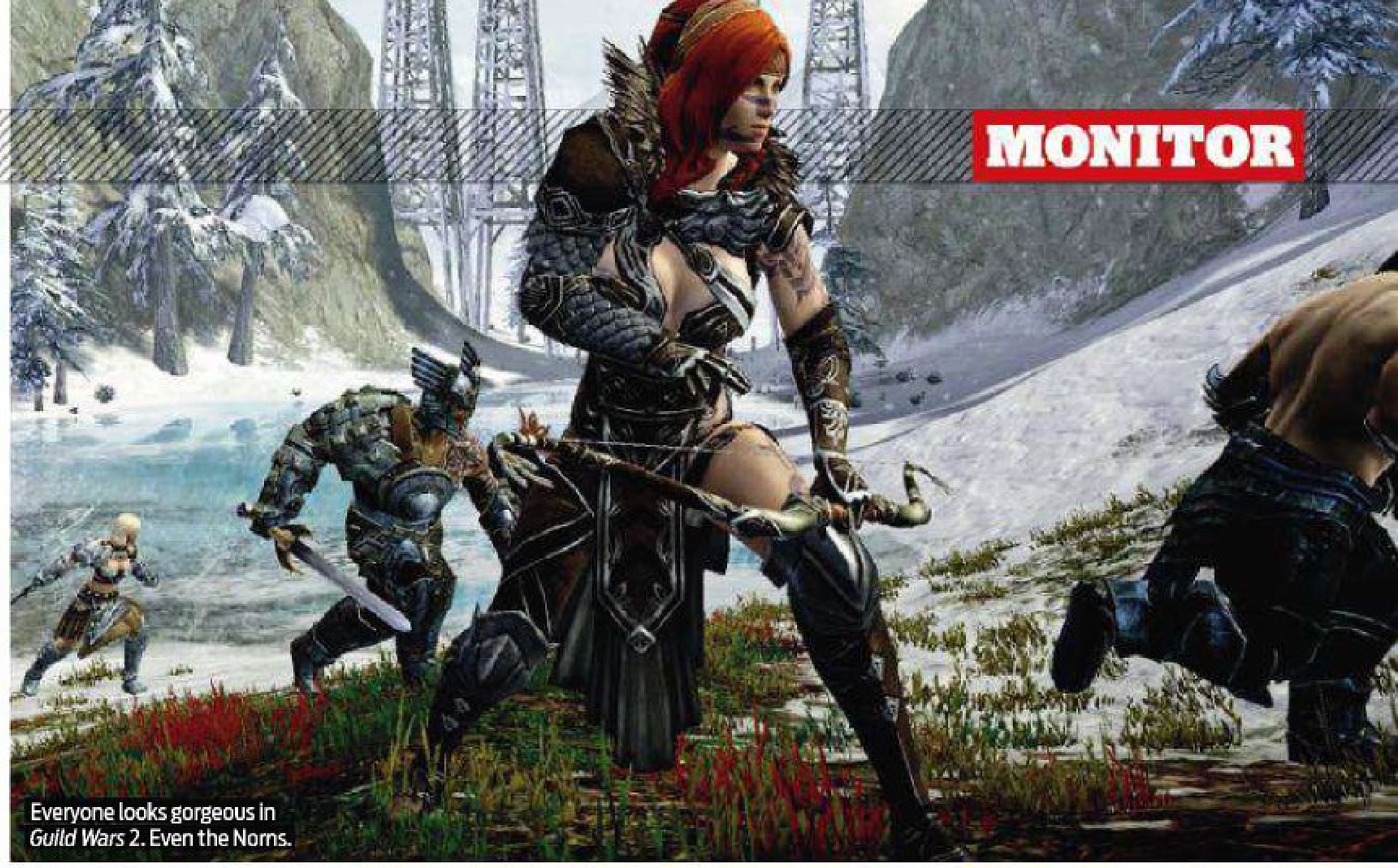
DEVELOPER
ArenaNet

LINK
www.guildwars2.com

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Everyone looks gorgeous in *Guild Wars* 2. Even the Norns.



"And that's why teal does go with copper."



Here is a lion throwing a fireball. Games are brilliant.

and accomplishments, all of us received fair recompense for holding the line. By the time we'd disabled the three main towers, we'd started to develop tactics. Elementalists laying down walls of flame to light my arrows. Warriors spotting the incoming big hits and ducking behind their shield walls. The necromancer raising corpse after corpse to throw back at the attackers. It worked.

Group quests, public quests, rifts... what *Guild Wars 2* is attempting with this event-based play isn't strictly new. *Warhammer Online* experimented with public quests years ago. In the recently released *Rift*, the rifts themselves offer the same smart ad-hoc grouping.

But none of these games commit so heavily to public shared events as *Guild Wars 2*. They're *everywhere*, cascading from one objective to the other. Arrive at a castle and you'll need to chase away occupying forces. Rout them, and you've got a minute to prepare for a counter-attack – a timed event that sees you defending wave after wave of increasingly powerful invaders. Complete that, and it's off to attack the bads at the source, sneaking into their camps and demolishing siege engines and catapults, all with the same loose band of friends you made when you arrived.

The pace at which you get through objectives is surprising. As is the reward you feel from exploring, and then achieving. When playing *Guild Wars*, I

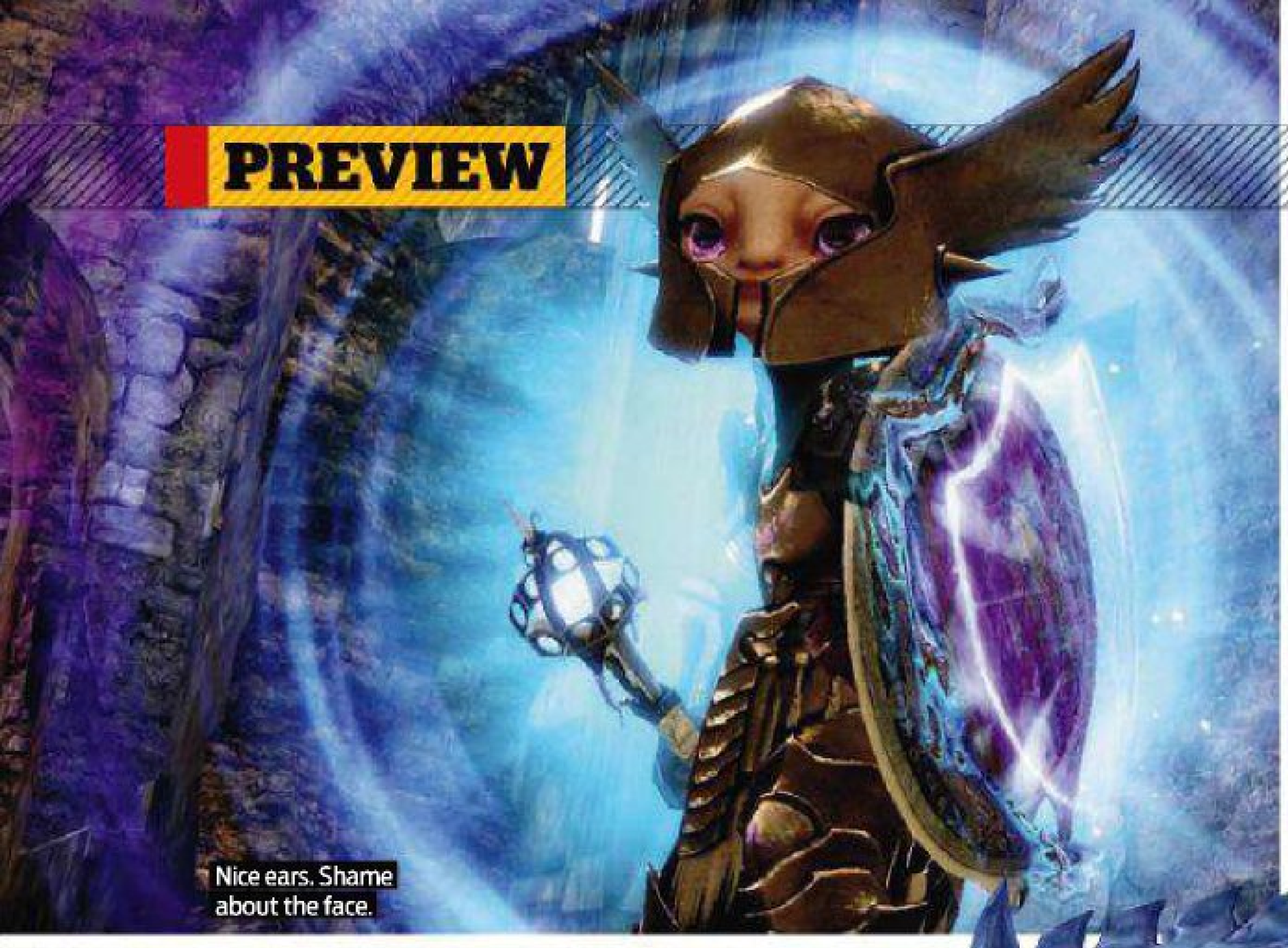
"*Guild Wars 2* is ditching the kind of questing that has kept us entertained and sedated for years"

never really felt breadcrumbed – I explored the world, and had experiences. I didn't bounce from exclam to exclam, searching for the next objective.

Sometimes that exploration landed me in trouble. Eventually I found myself facing a troublesome pirate, way out of the level range of the impromptu group I had formed to fight him. He smashed our faces off, again and again, and it took a developer to step in and help before we could progress any further.

ArenaNet's founder, Mike O'Brien, knows that devoting their overworld entirely to these events, rather than quests, is a risk. But, he says, it's a risk worth taking. "Starting this project, we spent some time thinking back to the dawn of MMO gaming, back to what we were all hoping MMOs would be. What we all hoped, and what everyone hopes today, is that MMOs are really a world, and that the things you do in that world have an impact. If you come across a town and the people are running around screaming 'the centaurs are attacking,' you want to see the centaurs attacking. You want to drive them back. You want to put out the fires. And then you want to help them rebuild the town. That's the starting vision for *Guild Wars 2*: let's make a world we all inhabit together."

The payoff for this approach, Mike points out, is in making other games look stupid. "MMOs are supposed to be social games, yet too often everybody in an MMO is doing their own thing. There are the NPCs who you have to cure from ▸


Nice ears. Shame about the face.


Skills come with violent visual effects.


Hero crafting! That's how you make a copper hook.


This rockworm gets a kicking early on.

being poisoned, but right after curing them, they lie back down to wait for someone else to bring them the antidote. There's the basics of kills: players not having the same motivation to cooperate, maybe stealing a kill and the associated loot and XP."

Mike talks a good talk. But one of the strange things about playing and enjoying games is that good arguments and strong design doesn't necessarily translate into fun. Our brains are rarely logical when it comes to how they are entertained. My chief objection to the original *Guild Wars* was that the game felt over-designed; that the combat, progression and social systems made sense for a designer, but rarely captured the imagination of players. Combat in *Guild Wars 1* was about changing the rate in which your enemy's health decayed or recharged, distorting how quickly they refilled, killing through calculus. The combat system let players pick, mix and match 1,100 skills – but all of those skills relied on tedious text descriptions rather than letting players instinctively *feel* the impact they were having. And with free respecs and little gear progression, your character felt throwaway.

Guild Wars 2 fixes some of this. The combat system is interesting in itself – it's immediately far more physical, with animations that convey impact, knock-backs flying all over the place, and sound effects that carry a deeper bass crunch.

"We want *Guild Wars 2* to be a really good RPG in addition to being an MMO"

There's no auto-attack, and combat is far more dynamic: most classes can swap weapon sets on the fly.

Each weapon set carries its own abilities. As a thief, I charged into fights with two swords, slicing and dicing, before landing a stun. Then I'd swap to two pistols and dance out of range, constantly shooting as they chased after me. It felt closer to a third-person action game than an *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft* clone. Not quite *Devil May Cry* with persistent characters, but pretty close.

Character progression still relies on skills, but it's allied to the concept of a 'personal story'. When you create a character, you're offered roleplaying choices: do you pick the Ferocious trait, or Peaceful? These choices play into the dialogue and quests that you'll experience.

"We want *Guild Wars 2* to be a really good RPG," Mike says. "A great RPG in addition to being an MMO. We want your character to feel like they had a past, that they have aspirations. That they were more than just a profession and a race."

As a Norn, for example, [*shapeshifting warrior people* – Lore Ed] what's most important is not your birth or societal class, but how much of a hero you are. The game asks you: "What qualities should a hero possess? Is it strength, cunning, or instinct? What animal do you most identify with? Bears? Leopards? Ravens?" Mike assures me that each choice will have a direct impact on your character's experiences. (The answer, by the way, is a cunning bear.)

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She has exceptionally big pockets.



Watching the spell flares is key to effective fighting


It's just so damned heroic.

The final risk ArenaNet are taking is financial. There's no doubt that they could charge a monthly subscription for *Guild Wars 2* – this is as fully featured an MMO as *World of Warcraft*, *Rift* or *The Old Republic*. But they have chosen not to. Instead, ArenaNet are placing all their faith on players enjoying the game so much that they'll be willing to buy in-game items. And, I speculate, on them buying sidegrade expansion packs such as *Guild Wars: Factions* or *Guild Wars: Prophecies* released at a rapid pace.

"We sold around seven million copies of *Guild Wars 1*," Mike says, "and have been really successful. You see a lot of people launch as a subscription MMO and discover that it's really hard to compete with *WoW* as a second subscription. We've seen it time and time again – you get to the end of your 30-day trial period and 'PSHOOOM'... your playerbase drops through the floor."

ArenaNet have still to show how their endgame will work, nor have they shown the PvP systems that will keep competitive players entertained (although it's easy to spot half the developers scrapping in *GW2* arenas on a beta server during their lunchbreak). There's still a lot to come. A lot of risk. A lot of innovation. But *GW2* already plays extremely well and I can't wait to come back to play more.

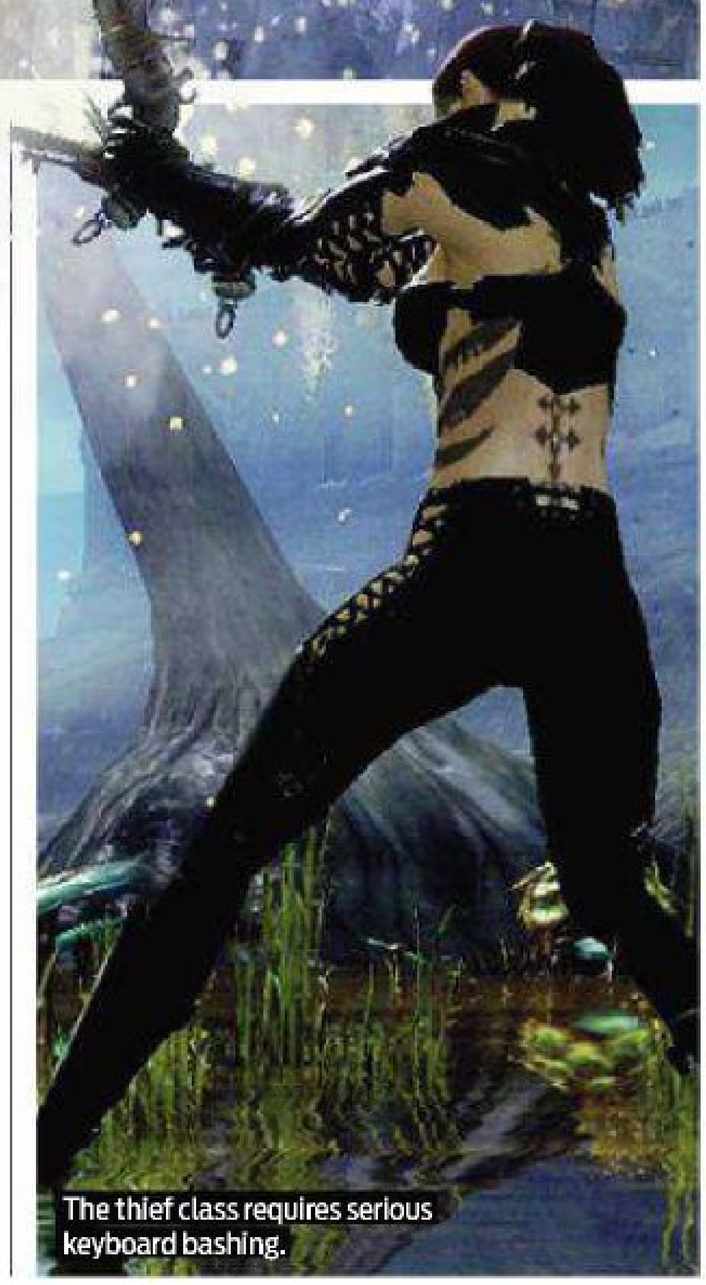
There's simply a lot to like.

Even if it all goes to pot, there's always the sheer beauty of *Guild Wars 2*'s world. I take a moment to take in the gorgeous grasslands we've been fighting across. It is the most beautiful meadow I've ever battled in. Seriously.

"There's no doubt they could charge a monthly subscription... but they've chosen not to"

Mike is bullish on the potential of his game. "We can make the highest quality MMO ever released. We can be the number one MMO in the world. We don't have to settle. And we're not going to release this until it's done." ■

Tim Edwards


The thief class requires serious keyboard bashing.

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PREVIEW



"'The moon's crashing into the Earth'? What kind of bullshit is that?"

BATMAN ARKHAM CITY

LATEST INFO The lunatics have taken over more than the asylum.

Back in 2009, Rocksteady got Batman right. They got his big punching fists right, they got his flappy cape and pointy cowl right, and they got his brooding, mirthless menace bang-on right. But there was one thing they never did with the man-bat, on his long adventure around the wards and grounds of Arkham Asylum. He never got to stand on top of a big building, looking philosophical at the scum infesting his beloved Gotham city. In my mental image, he's got his hands on his hips. Your Bat-fantasy may vary.

Arkham City brings us that Batman. A rapid-fire recap on the setup: one year after the events at the Asylum, Batman's role in dealing with the outbreak has been downplayed, and woven to political advantage by the dubious Quincy Sharp. Riding a wave of popularity, newly-elected Mayor Sharp enacts bold measures to deal with the overflow of thugs and insane supervillains. Give them a slice of Gotham – a walled area within which criminal anarchy reigns. The only rule? Try to escape, and you'll be killed by the armed forces of Hugo Strange.

Hugo is one of Batman's oldest adversaries, first introduced as a mad scientist in 1940. Over the story's complicated set of continuities and multiple universes, he's reliably done what no other villain has: figured out Bats' secret identity. This is the world you're dealing with: Strange in control, the Joker seemingly relegated to a gang leader with a stubborn cough, and Two-Face trying to establish a new regime of fear. These charismatic villains lead gangs of thugs who dress in homage to their leaders – but their influence spreads to the fabric of city itself, in turf wars.

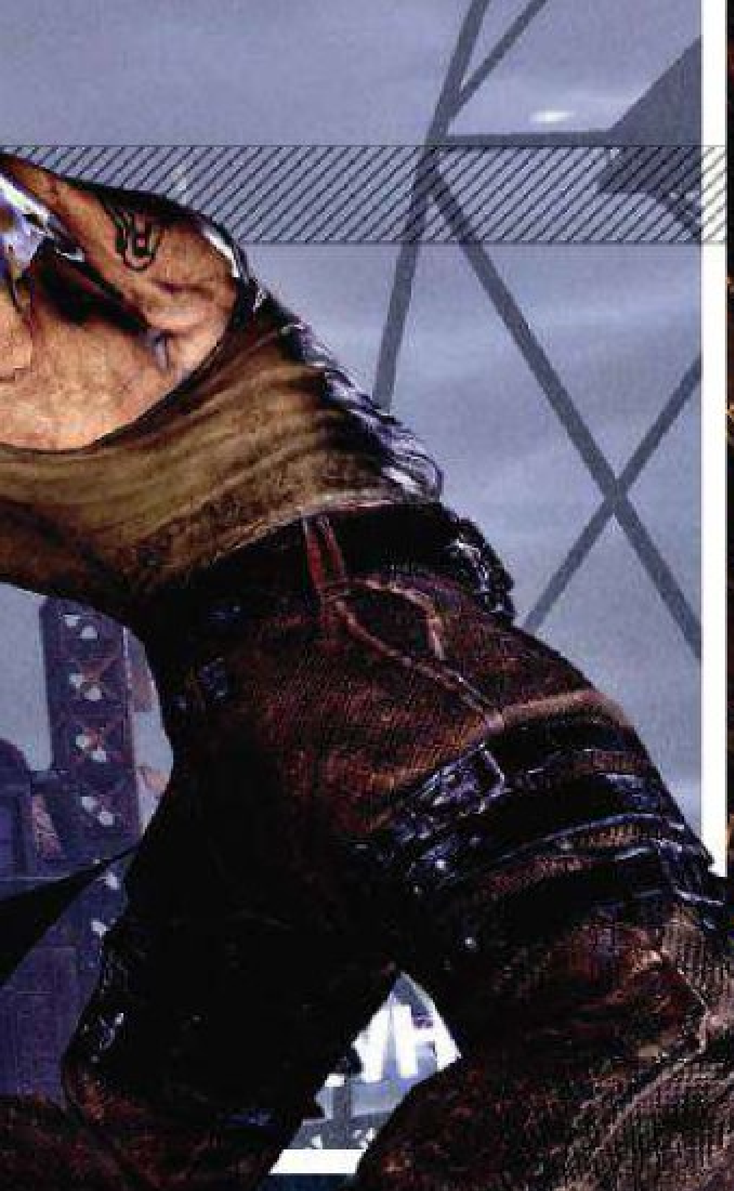
"We visit Gotham Courthouse under Two-Face's control, and it's scarred across one side"

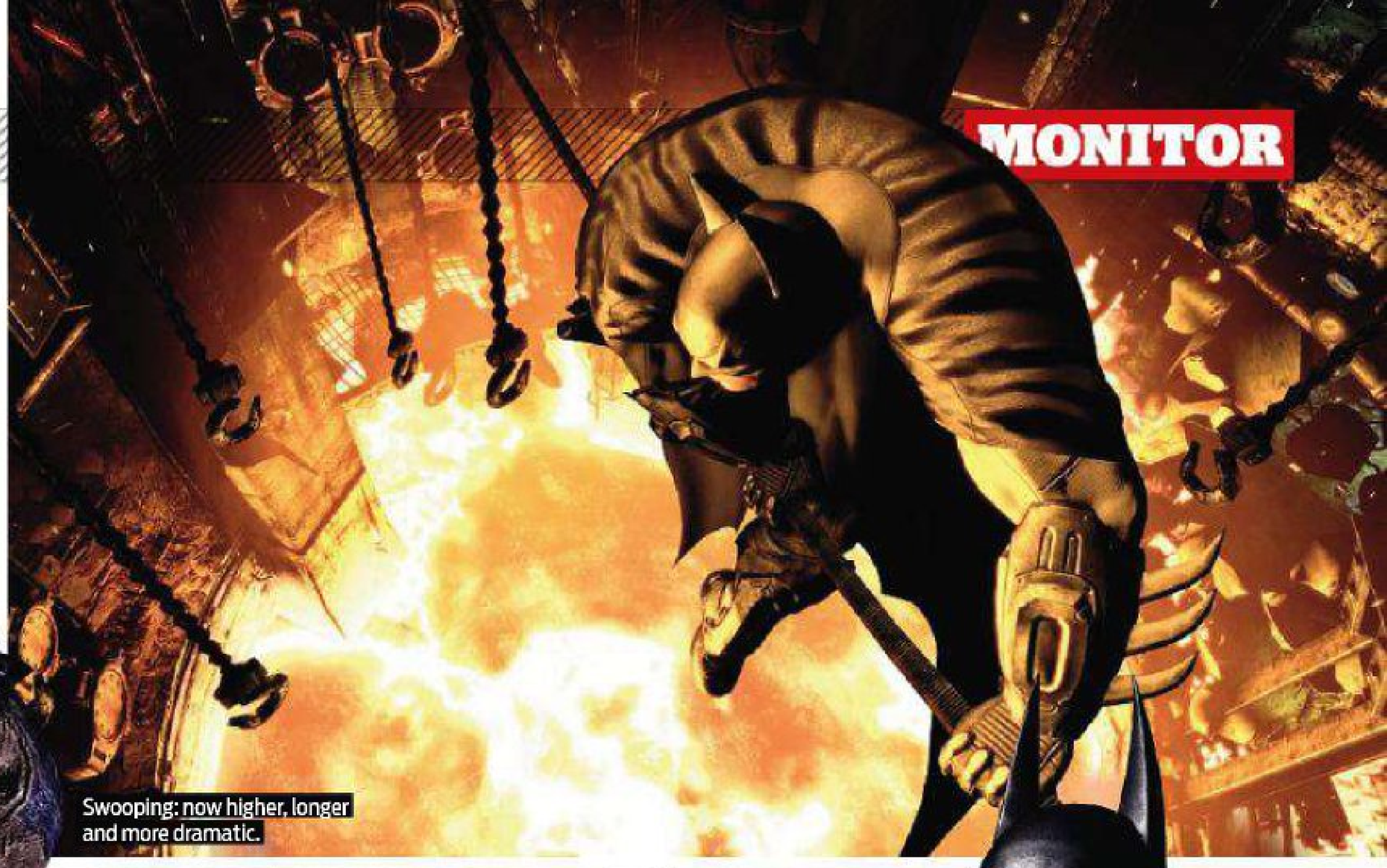
These power struggles change the flavour of an area. When one gang owns a section of the city, it warps the buildings. So when you revisit some den you've been to before – I'm told – it'll be completely different. An example? In the opening half hour, we visit Gotham Courthouse while it's under Two-Face's control, and the building is scarred across one side.

No one's using the word sandbox. *Arkham City*'s madhouse might be more open, but sandbox carries connotations of arsing about. And the Batman can be accused of many things, but arsing about isn't one of them. There's openness, but this is designed to be a tightly told story, and the optional stuff isn't going to be collection quests. Everything flows from the characters. Well, the Riddler's side mission is a collection quest, but that's because he's the Riddler.

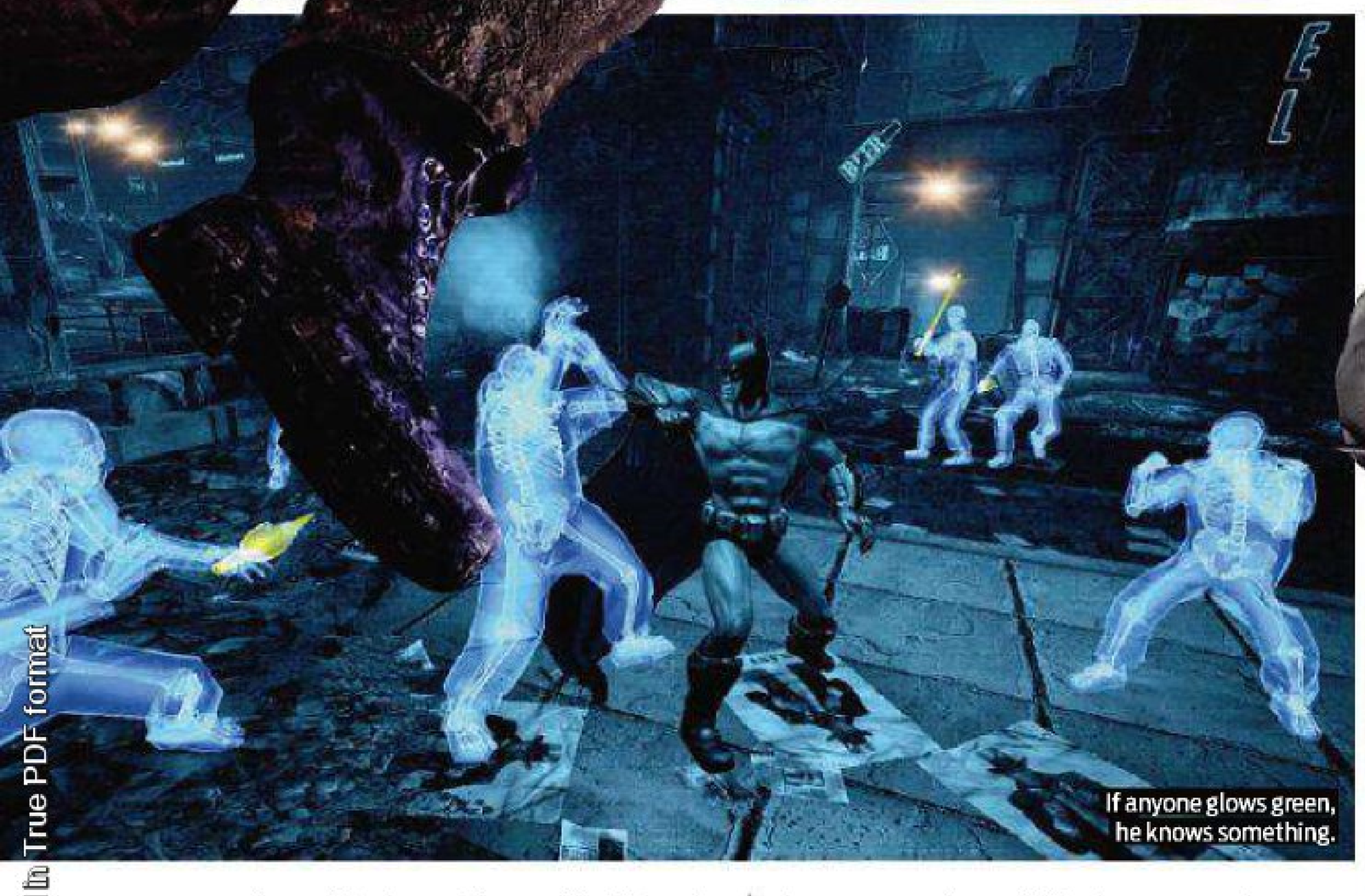
Paul Dini's writing skills have been retained for the sequel. This is a very good thing – his expert knowledge of Batman's world is clear in the game. Take the appearance of the basement-dwelling Calendar Man, who bases his crimes

READ ME
PUBLISHER Warner Interactive
DEVELOPER Rocksteady Studios
LINK *bit.ly/fNyCWh*





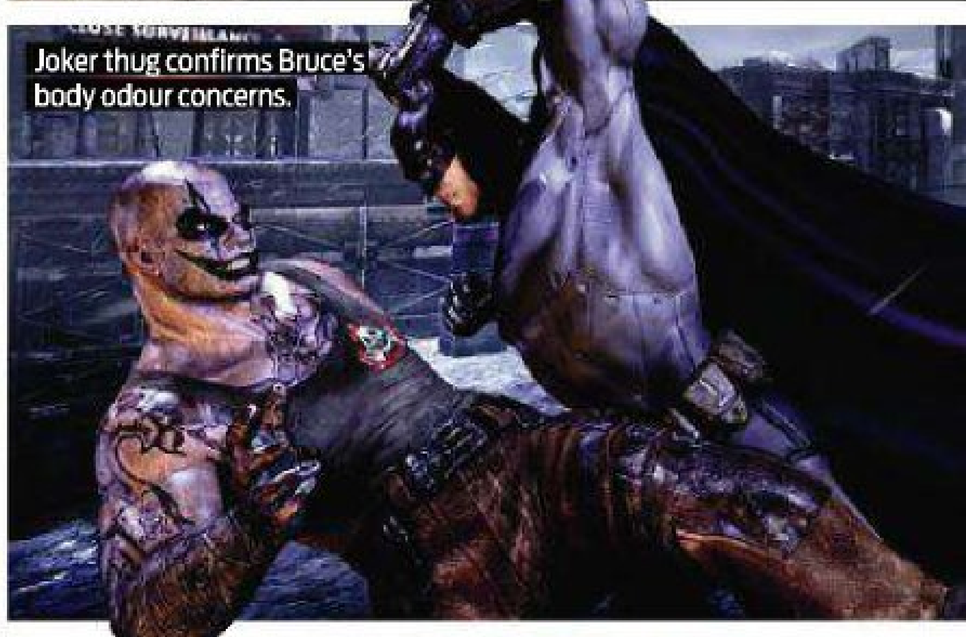
Swooping: now higher, longer and more dramatic.



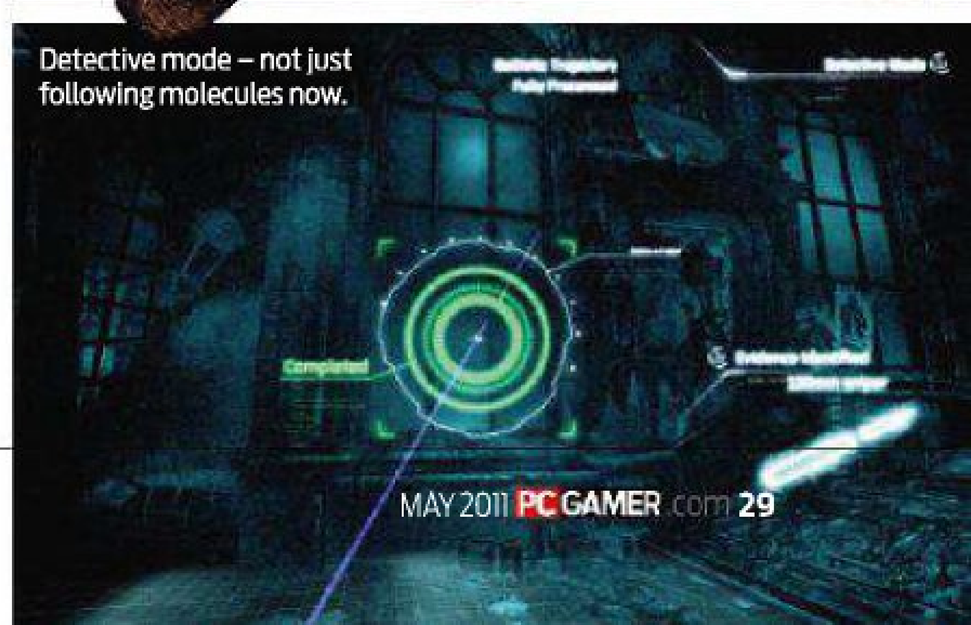
If anyone glows green, he knows something.



Twice as many animations, same simple combat.



Joker thug confirms Bruce's body odour concerns.



Detective mode – not just following molecules now.

around specific dates. If you visit Calendar Man in the game when it's St Patrick's Day in the real world, he'll tell you the story of someone he killed on that day. Bats never gets a holiday.

This was made possible by Dini's almost needlessly prolific output, along with comical exchanges with thugs that toy with the player's desire to hear more. When Harley Quinn leaves you in the care of her underlings, their conversation tests your nerve at the same time as being funny. "What's he going to do, drop a smoke bomb?" asks one of them, as you're being told by an on-screen prompt which button to press to drop a smoke bomb.

Arkham City retains the same simple but oddly satisfying punch-counter combat of *Arkham Asylum*. It's a system that couldn't carry an entire game, but that's the point: punching is just for unarmed thugs. Armed enemies and hostage-takers need to be dealt with using a more subtle approach. By punching through walls and knocking them out.

Perhaps that was a bad example of subtlety, but it's a good example of how the weapons have shifted purpose: the explosive spray-gel of the first game isn't just for specially-marked weak walls now, as Batman is beefed up enough to barge through them. You can, however, work it into your combat moves, flipping through a crowd of thugs, spraying gel on the floor, and remotely detonating it.

Then, there's the enhanced detective work, which feels a little... well, cleverer. You're not just following particles of smell around – one of *Arkham Asylum*'s less convincing moments. From the short demo I was shown, you're discovering real evidence and tying it together. Spot the point of entry of a sniper bullet, then find where it hit the floor, and you can draw a line from the two and extrapolate to the location of the gunshot. Detective vision also lets you plan your attacks, by drawing your attention to the gun-toting red thugs, who need to be despatched first.

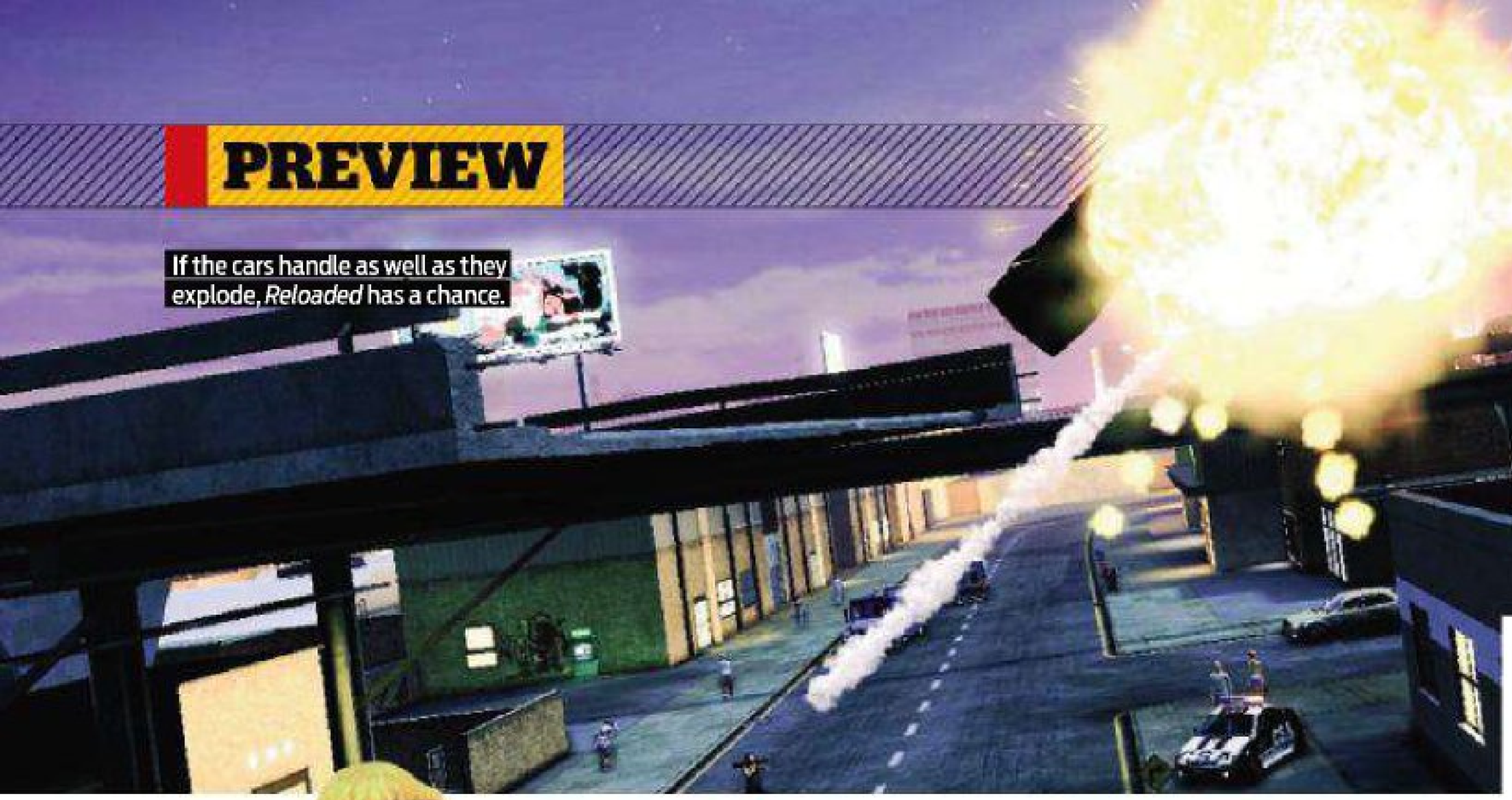
Rocksteady got Batman right. They got the villains right. And now, it feels like they're getting Gotham City right. That's pretty much all there is to get right. ■

Jon Blyth

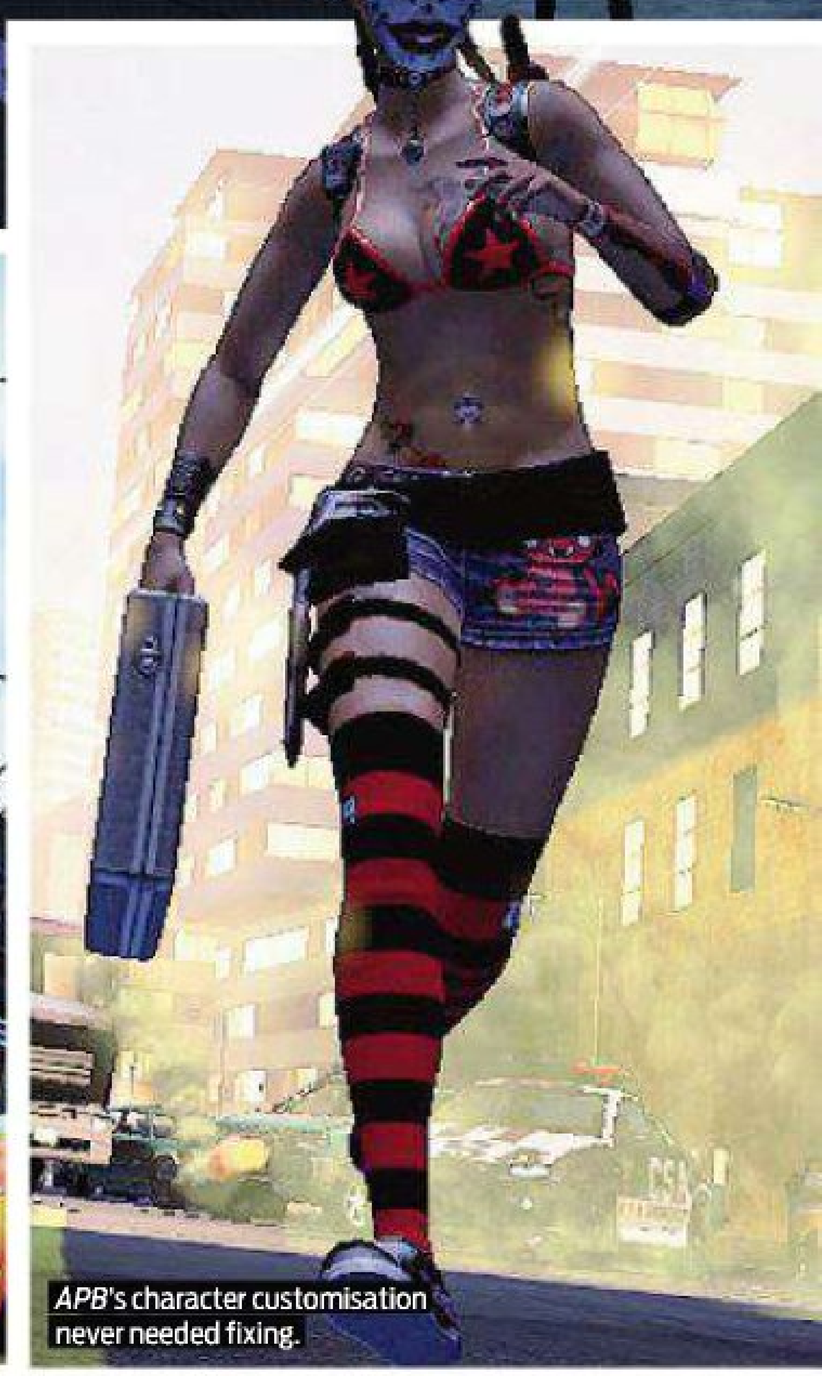
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If the cars handle as well as they explode, *Reloaded* has a chance.



APB's character customisation never needed fixing.



Cops and robbers online was always a great concept.

APB RELOADED

FIRST LOOK Is there a spark of life in *APB*'s broken corpse?

"The biggest issues were balance, progression, missions, shooting and driving." For a game almost exclusively about shooting, driving, missions and progression, that's a fairly damning statement. I'd only asked *APB Reloaded*'s Jon-Enee Merriex to name one problem with Realtime Worlds' game, the bones of which GamersFirst are resurrecting as a free-to-play title.

Jon-Enee qualifies his words: "Those parts weren't *terrible*. They just didn't add up. The 'feel' of the game wasn't right." As producer on *APB Reloaded*, it's these floaty concepts that he and his team are focusing on. "We have no interest in creating a new game from scratch, or a direct copy of some other game. Old players will log back in and find the game they loved, just spruced up a *lot*."

READ ME

PUBLISHER
K2

DEVELOPER
GamersFirst

LINK
www.gamersfirst.com/apb

APB's all-important driving and shooting were wheezy – how will GamersFirst spruce that? Zak Littwin – ex-QA lead for Realtime Worlds and now lead designer on the reboot: "Now when you turn, your vehicle turns instantly, instead of taking a second for the wheels to move before the car does. We've also given each vehicle its own unique handling."

Jon-Enee doesn't miss a chance to lambast the original *APB*. "Various basic decisions simply didn't make sense to us, like giving players a crap starter car."

"Old players will log back in and find the game they loved, just spruced up a *lot*"

Players now get the keys to a two-door coupe. "They have some of the best handling in the game," says Zak.

As for shooting, both aim and camera positioning have been wiggled, bringing the game closer to a standard shooter in weight. "We've also adjusted recoil and weapon balance, as well as changed the upgrade system so both guns and vehicles can only have one upgrade of a certain category at a time." This could potentially prevent top level players wielding weaponry orders of magnitude better than their noobish peers, but whether that'll work when players pay for item rental remains to be seen.

Next on Zak's laundry list of overhauls: missions – originally just a case of driving to a place and pressing F on a thing. "Instead of adding hundreds of new missions, we're focusing on adding a few interesting ones. There are also new game modes, like Bank Heist, Turf War, and DJ Battle." Completing missions will create meaningful progression: *Reloaded*'s aim is 'purposeful end-game PvP'. Players will be split into districts, with sectors that Jon-Enee describes as 'buckets' home to different skill levels. Lower-skill players can jump up a level to join their chums, but predatory monsters can't dip into lower buckets to have their fill of noobs.

I'm not sure whether they'll be able to lure back players burnt by the game the first time around, but at least they've identified the biggest problems and are launching themselves at them, face-first. ■

Rich McCormick

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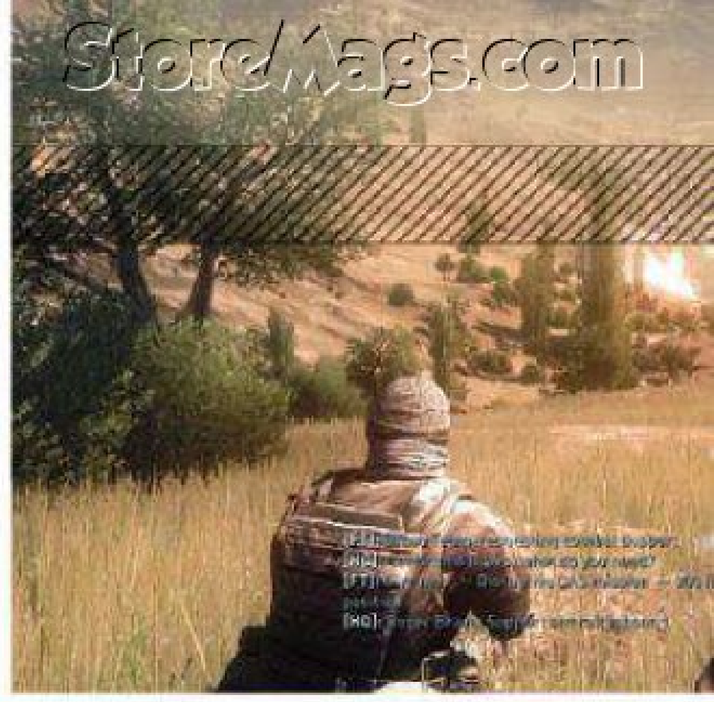
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OPERATION FLASHPOINT RED RIVER

NEW INFO Delicately balancing between simulation and blockbuster.

The phrase 'war through a webcam' is one that's been thrown around in the direction of *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* a good deal. It's about providing a view of modern warfare that's more akin to what you see on 24-hour news networks, rather than in Hollywood blockbusters.

That doesn't mean that you need to start thinking of *Kane & Lynch 2*, where you could barely see the game through the dirty smear of digital artefacts and lens flare. While there are similar visual flourishes in this game, usually following a particularly thunderous explosion, it's more about the tone and feel behind the amateur photography coming out of today's hot zones.

Red River is attempting to play both fields. It's trying to have enough simulation to give you a real sense of the frailty and power of firearms, while at the same time not being a slave to it, where the wrong move can get you court marshalled faster than the immaculately crafted physics can account for bullet drop.

That's something Sion Lenton, the creative director at Codemasters, wants to get across: "We want to steer away from the idea that it's a simulation. Authentic is fine, as it gives you some leeway to be creative, and that's what we are. We're making an entertainment product, and it should be fun. I don't really get much fun out of military simulations. They're immersive, they're realistic, but I wouldn't call them fun."

"Get shot in the leg and you're disorientated, then unable to run, or do anything but lurch"

And when you play the game, that's something that quickly becomes apparent. While the main campaign is fully four-player co-op, there's also a variety of completely separate co-op missions. When I played Combat Sweep, the mission was to work our way through a hostile area, destroying caches of weapons and killing anyone covering their face with a scarf. So far, so *OpFlash*.

Orders are given using a radial menu, each of the four directions branching out into more specific orders, so that upwards contains movement commands, right holds offensive, and so on. Get the team to cover one another, check your corners – all the standard army stuff that you hear shouted out over gunfire as it all goes horribly wrong. Except, for the moment, there wasn't any gunfire. Just glaring sunset directly in our eyes, and a dozen mud-brick houses. It was quiet enough for someone to say, "It's too quiet," at which point they jinxed it and shooting started.

Bullets *hurt*. It's not something you can shrug off. Not even something you can walk off, if a surly enough coach told you to. Get shot in the leg and you're disoriented for a second, then unable to run or do anything but lurch. If you don't get to cover in the next few seconds, you're going to bleed out, and that means dead. You can use a medpack to stop the

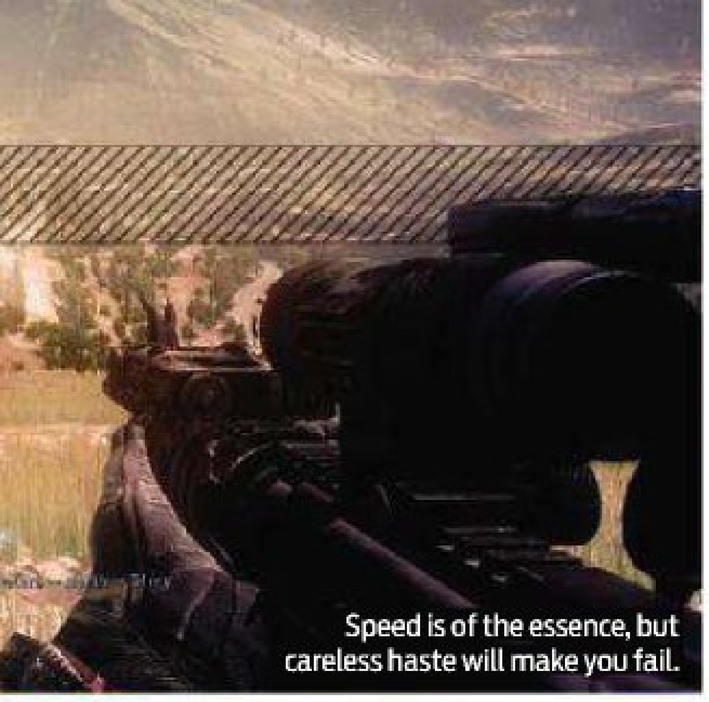
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PUBLISHER
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Speed is of the essence, but careless haste will make you fail.



You really need a buddy to cover your back.



"Exploding stuff? Think I'll stay out of the way, ta."



Your enemy: popping up like Where's Wally?

bleeding, but you're still going to be injured. It's going to require twice the time to patch that wound up.

This happens every single time you get shot, whether it's in the arm, the body, or the head. So when one of our grenadiers went around a corner, a half formed "Oh shi-" coming out before he got gunned down, things were relatively serious.

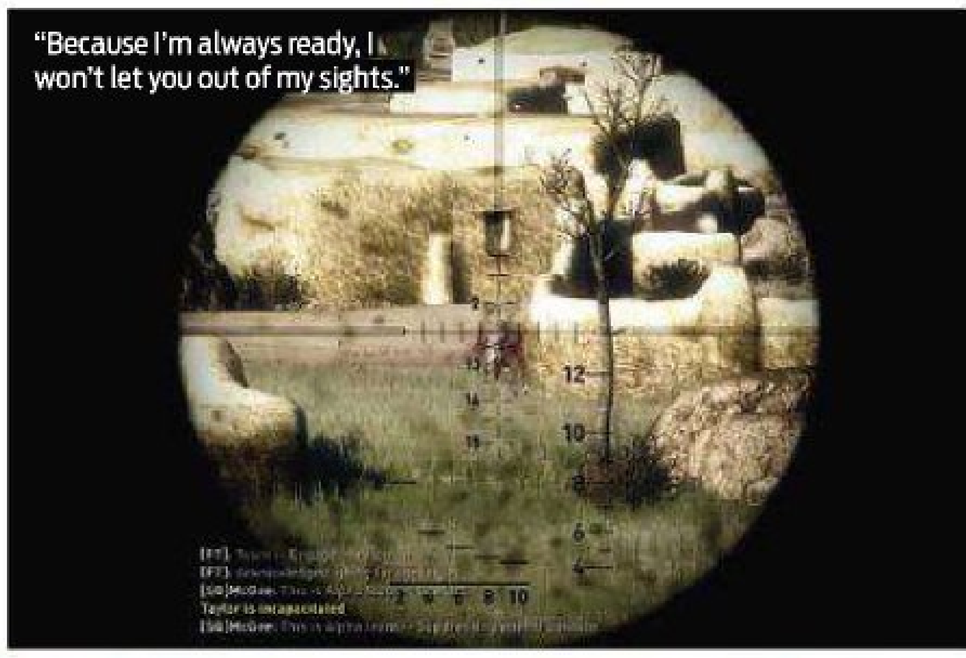
Doubly so, because these co-op missions are scored. It's not enough to just nail it; as a whole team, your score is published up on leaderboards, and it's a mixture of how well you performed. Except instead of a timer, you've got a score multiplier, slowly ticking down to one. The faster you get through the mission, the bigger your multiplier – and the more points. *Red River* isn't an easy game to rush through; fail to check your corners and you're going to end up like our grenadier – moaning and whimpering on the ground while the rest of your team gets dizzy, whirling around to try to find who shot you.

The chances of getting shot to hell the instant you turn a corner are relatively high, and the chances of being able to return fire and take out your assailant are relatively low. This necessitates team work, to a degree not even required by *Left 4 Dead*; in that game you can usually survive on your own against the zombie hordes for at least a minute or two.

Here, you need someone backing you up whenever possible. Alone, you can only face in one direction, and your enemies can come from any one of 360 degrees. Better to rope in someone else, and double your chances of spotting your attackers before you start losing blood - or men.

Red River is looking like a game that's learnt from *Dragon Rising*'s mistakes. The pace seems measured, where before it was plodding. The levels make sense, rather than the scattershot design of the last game. And the whole thing looks considerably better, thanks to Codemasters sharing tech between games, so the post-processing of games such as *Dirt* and *GRID* is making a welcome appearance. The intention isn't to make a new *Arma*, or a new *Call of Duty*, but something in its own space. I hope they pull it off. ■

Phill Cameron



"Because I'm always ready, I won't let you out of my sights."



Moaning, whimpering grenadier just out of shot.

Release APRIL 21

PREVIEW



Chris Moyles prepares for another busy day at Radio 1.



"Bloody Network Rail."



Yes, you're in an invisible box being blown by the wind. Well done.



Ridicule is nothing to be scared of.

FABLE III

PLAYED IT Become the hero of the realm. Or belch at starving children.

In a freezing village on the side of a mountain, a tiny girl shivers. She's called Wendy, and she begs for food. I'm playing as *Fable 3*'s princess and my royal dress is wide enough for little Wendy to climb right in and shelter from the snow. I've got a pocket full of gold. I engage Wendy in conversation. She asks for food, or gold. I do what anyone would do, given the situation. I burp in her face.

It's not very princess-like behaviour, but then the princess I'm playing isn't much of a princess any more. Kicked out of her castle home by her power-mad brother, she's off to start a revolution. To win friends and influence people, *Fable* leads you across the kingdom of Albion, raising a groundswell of popular opinion to install yourself as hero-queen (or king – you can play a male too).

Get down to the dungeons, and there's more unprincess-like behaviour to be found. *Fable 3*'s fighting is split into three disciplines: melee, magic, and firearms. The mousewheel flips you between modes, and each feels immediately obvious in application: ranged to pick off stronger enemies from the herd, magic to thin the oncoming ranks, then melee to knock the remainder out of action. Combat is Lionhead's best excuse for delaying the PC release: lead designer Josh Atkins says it took them a long time to get the controls right.

"It isn't very princess-like behaviour, but then the princess I'm playing isn't much of a princess"

They've also added a new 'challenging' mode, ostensibly at odds with the series' populist appeal. Enemies are tougher, and health won't regenerate. My first few fights in this mode were punctuated by evasive rolls and repeat weapon switches: the system feels tactical and fluid.

Fable 3 is a forced pairing of total freedom and tight constriction. A magic glowing line always leads directly to the next objective, but it's never a nag. Your options are generally either good or evil, without the shades of grey of other RPGs.

I took the Henry VIII, insane-mood-swings approach to monarchy, lambasting my staff for a sub-par lunch, then later saving them from execution at the cost of my handsome consort's life. Freedom to manoeuvre within a prescribed path made my choices feel personal.

It's tough to compare *Fable 3* with its RPG peers, given that it's deliberately drawn in bolder colours. It lacks their nuance and subtlety, but regains ground with its polish and confidence.

But then, so did the Xbox 360 version. Despite the welcome graphical upgrade and new difficulty mode, and despite Josh's obvious understanding of the PC market, it's still a little worrying that *Fable 3* took so long to reach us. At least – unlike *Fable 2* – we're actually getting this one (via Steam, hilariously enough), which suggests Microsoft have reconsidered the PC's importance. Based on what I saw, it'll be the best version yet. ■

Rich McCormick

READ ME

PUBLISHER
Lionhead

DEVELOPER
Microsoft

LINK
lionhead.com/Fable/FableIII

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PREVIEW

THE DARKNESS 2

Two tentacles *and* a gun? Some might call that an unfair advantage.

FIRST LOOK Quad-wield demonic limbs and big guns.

The Darkness 2 is a sequel to a game that was never on the PC to begin with. Context, then: in the first game, you were Jackie Estacado, member of a Mafia family, possessed by 'The Darkness'. It manifested as tentacles spilling out from your body: powerful, heart-eating twin snake-things.

As console first-person shooters go, it was one of the few that we actually missed on the PC. The bonkers game let you watch movies in their entirety, had incidental missions in what felt like a linear shooter, and little demonic minions to order around. So the sequel is a truly welcome visitor to our lands.

My demonstration begins with Jackie being crucified. Through his eyes, I watch as nails are pounded into each hand. It's explained that the demonic form inhabiting him is weakened by the light. It's not dark, so with his hands pinned he's helpless. A torturer wanders around the scene's edge, prompted by his limping boss. He's attempting to siphon off Jackie's powers. To do so, he needs Jackie to give them up willingly, and triggers a flashback to get what he wants.

Jackie's stock in the criminal fraternity has risen since the first game. An elaborate Scorsese-inspired restaurant walkthrough has the diners praising his presence. Everything is cel-shaded, which the developers believe gives it a "graphic noir style". Even the two girls sat waiting for Jackie are cel-shaded, right up to the point that the head of one of them explodes, her eyeball popped by a bullet meant for Jackie. A car follows the bullet through the window behind their table, crushing the table and the second woman.

"The two tentacles work together, complementing your guns nicely, rather than taking over"

Again, it's too bright to use the Darkness powers, and Jackie's leg has been stripped of flesh by the crash, so he's dragged on his ass through the eatery, dual-firing his guns at the suddenly swarming goons. It looks and sounds like a meaty shooter. The guns work independently of one another; Jackie's hand adjusts his aim according to what's in his way. It's a small detail, but it gives a nice feeling to the gunplay in an otherwise script-heavy opening. It ends in the kitchen, where an explosion from a gas leak blasts Jackie out of the building.

It's dark outside, so we finally get to meet the monsters. Developers Digital Extremes intend to give the twin terrors some personality. I swear this is true: the tentacle on the left is called 'Grabby'. He grabs. The one on the right is named 'Slashy'. Guess what he does.

Jackie's demonic form quickly heals him, and Grabby and Slashy get to work. Grabby is used to pick stuff up and throw it, which I discovered by tossing a pole through the mouth of an attacker, pinning him mid-scream to a wall. Slashy is a melee weapon.

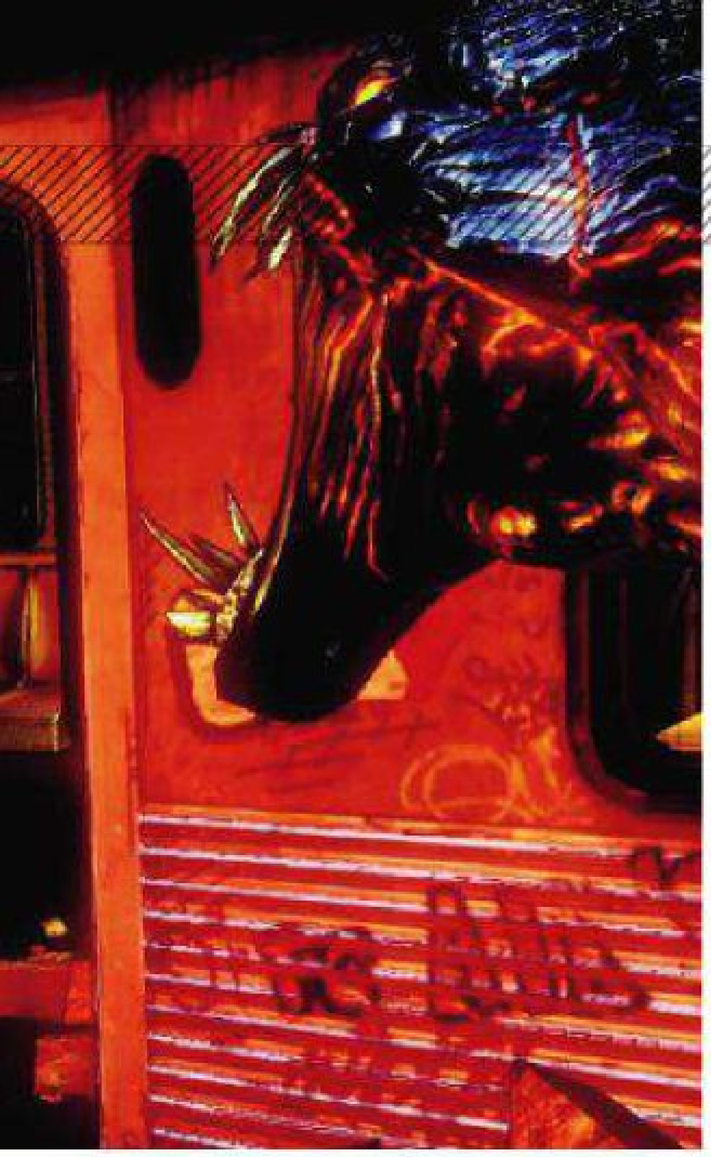
The two work together: they can pick people up and rip them to shreds (or right down the middle) in violent executions.

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PUBLISHER
2K

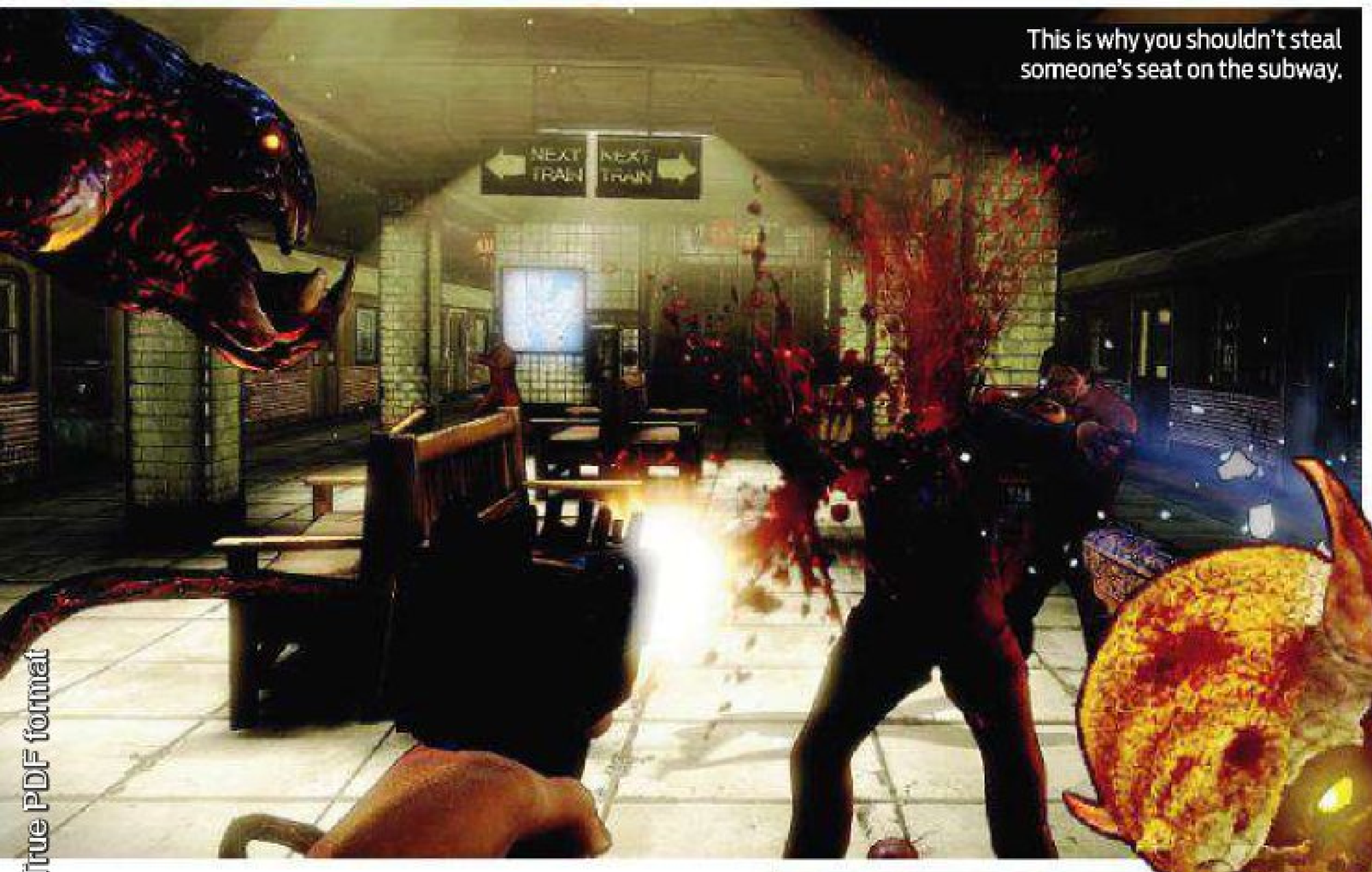
DEVELOPER
Digital Extremes

LINK
www.embracethedarkness.com





Grabby grabs and Slashy slashes. Imaginative naming, no?



This is why you shouldn't steal someone's seat on the subway.



"I think I'll pass on dessert, thanks..."



Time hadn't been kind to Ginger Spice.

They complement your guns nicely, rather than taking over.

Jackie doesn't get it all his own way: not only do the monsters hide in the light, but Jackie suffers as well. He's slightly blinded and sluggish under striplights, but they form breakable environmental puzzles. Shooting ahead takes out potential light traps, and is an important tactic.

There's another demon about, as well – a wacky minion, summoned by Jackie in a sort of helper monkey role. He wears a Union Jack dress, sports a dead cat on his head and wees on corpses. This little goblin yanks away enemies' guns for you to mow them down, and even wades in on fights.

The flashback ends as Jackie wakes on the cross. He jerks the spike from one of his hands, ramming it into the torturer's skull. The boss escapes.

The Darkness 2 is an interesting hybrid: having all the demonic elements on screen at the same time as your FPS guns means that you're effectively quad-wielding. There's a lot of potential here for an exciting and original shooter. ■

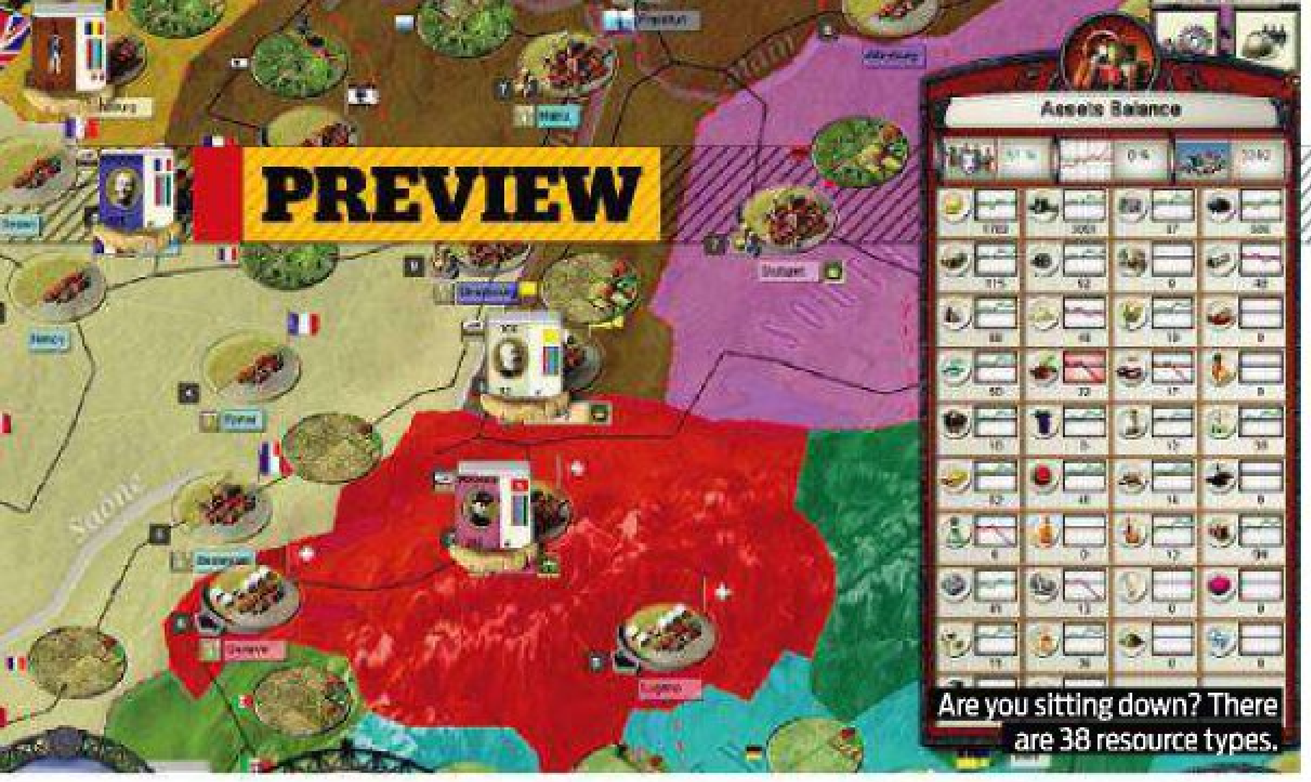
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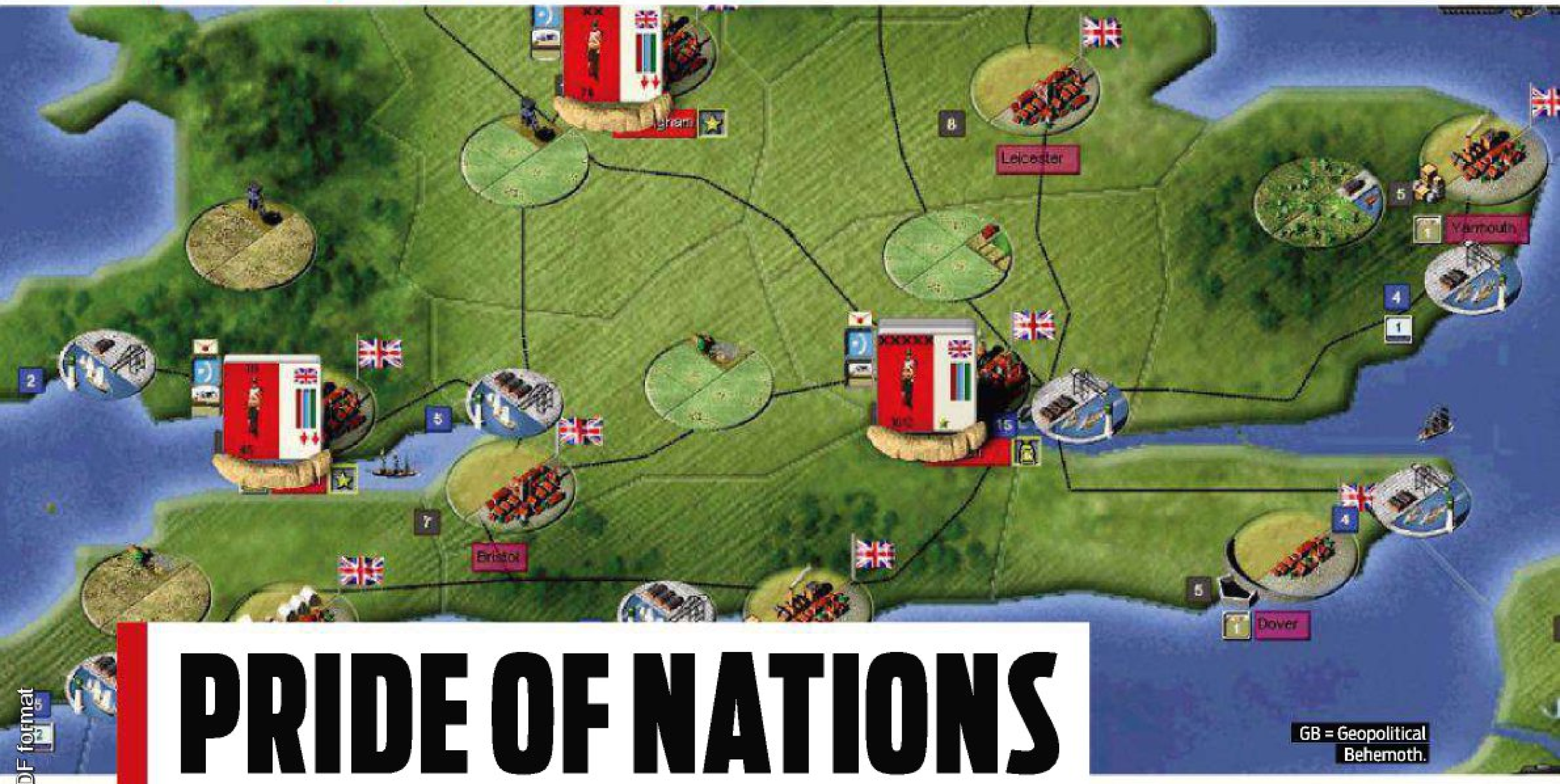
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PREVIEW



Are you sitting down? There are 38 resource types.


The military AI seems to know its onions.



GB = Geopolitical Behemoth.

PRIDE OF NATIONS

PLAYED IT Putting the pith into pith helmet.

Stock up on moustache wax and Gatling Gun ammo, AGEOD are about to unleash an extraordinary colonial-era strategy game. *Pride of Nations* has the boldness of a young General Gordon and the bulk of an elderly Queen Victoria. It could capture the character of the 1850-1920 period better than any turn-based strategy yet.

The danger with such globe-spanning romps is that the empire-building ends up feeling generic, the timeframe irrelevant. *PoN* avoids this with clever, historically-sensitive play twists. This isn't one of those titles where you paint the world pink by marching armies across every inch of it. Even giants like Britain don't have the manpower and materiel to support massive wars. No, to win you must use military might like a scalpel, not a steamroller.

Scattered across the cellular map are a plethora of potential colonies. Bringing these under your wing is the key to victory. It's a gloriously subtle process. Every 15-day turn you can influence target territories by playing 'decision cards'. Not all of the 30 types are available in every situation, but in the same fortnight you could find yourself, say, organising an anthropological expedition in New Guinea, building a mission station in Burma, and bribing a chieftain in the Congo. Some actions are riskier than others. Act clumsily and you can end up nudging a region into the arms of a rival.

"To win you must use military might like a scalpel, not a steamroller"

Colony cultivation will be a crucial aspect of the 1680-turn Grand Campaign, but will take a backseat in the shorter scenarios. The preview code includes a compact Russo-Japanese War challenge that reveals the AGE engine for what it is: a tried-and-tested conflict simulator. As in earlier outings such as *Birth of America 2*, martial operations are as simple as picking up an army, choosing a combat stance, and dumping it at a destination. However, the simplicity hides a wealth of detail. Supply chains, weather, terrain, fatigue, leadership quality... it all impacts combat outcomes. Though you never get to see the fiery belches of cannons or the glint of sunlight on bayonets, the drama is there, if you look for it, in the rows of narrative icons on battle reports.

In the blizzard-blasted battle of Wonsan (my last run-in with the Russians) General Nogi's army won an unlikely victory against a force twice its size. Scanning the icons I see the reasons. The Ruskies were exhausted and poorly led. Faced by Nogi's do-or-die aggression, they attempted to retreat twice, failing both times. In the chaos of melee even Cossack regiments lost their nerve and fled.

Whether you want to explore neglected 19th century conflicts, or shoulder the full 'White Man's Burden' [*Please don't write in* – Period Flavour Ed] *Pride of Nations* is looking unmissable. ■

Tim Stone

READ ME

PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive

DEVELOPER AGEOD

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RAGE

PLAYED IT A tour of id's off-roading shooter shows some dazzling sights.

Playing *Rage* feels less like the lightning-fast *Doom* and *Quake* series than I'd anticipated. Set in a dusty, post-meteor-impact Earth of mutants and merchants, it's a little slower, and more grounded in reality – there's not a lot of rocket-jumping going on. There's also a fully featured arcade driving game built in, and a large, open game world to accommodate it – a big deviation from id Software's classic series full of linear, interconnected corridors and locked doors. It's a wild ride.

My hands-on session was a rapid-fire tour of a big game – id's creative director Tim Willits promises around 16 hours of singleplayer time – and there's a lot of variety to keep us busy.

My first stop was a small town. Unlike the *Borderlands* 'towns' of one guy and a vending machine, *Rage*'s communities are full of life. This world has more context to the action than any prior id game – it's more complex than the 'Oh no, alien demons!' they're known for. NPCs chattered at me as I passed by, offering information on Feltrite (a powerful element found in meteor fragments), the oppressive and technologically advanced Authority, courier jobs and minigames. While in town, I learned how to throw razor-sharp boomerangs called Wingsticks and

"Rather than wait to reload, I quick-tossed a Wingstick at his face, removing it"

bought a promising pack of Killburst ammo for my pistol from a local shop.

I hopped into my buggy and hit the turbo, powering through a series of tight canyon roads. A few stunt jumps and a minigame of picking up Feltrite meteorites as they crashed down in front of me kept the drive from feeling like a chore. Willits directed me to a raider hideout occupied by car enthusiasts known as the Ghost Clan.

I entered the camp on foot. Holding Control to bring up a menu, I loaded the Killburst ammo into my pistol. The ammo chamber bulged outward, telling me at a glance what I'm packing. And it lived up to its name, sounding like a string of fireworks going off at once as it made a terrible mess of the first pair of Ghost clansman I met. A third Ghost took advantage of the two-shot capacity of the Killburst clip and charged. Rather than wait to reload, I hit Q to quick-toss a Wingstick at his face, removing it.

Next, I was warped ahead to another raider hideout – this one more industrial than the Ghost's cave-like dwelling. These guys, the Shrouded Clan, are straightforward fighters, packing axes, shotguns, assault rifles and the occasional heavy weapon, but there are a lot of them. To thin out their ranks, I crafted a remote-controlled car bomb from the junk I'd picked up along the way and, hitting Q to take control of the mini bomb on wheels from a third-person perspective, wheeled it into the room ahead. As I was scoping out their

READ ME
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DEVELOPER id Software
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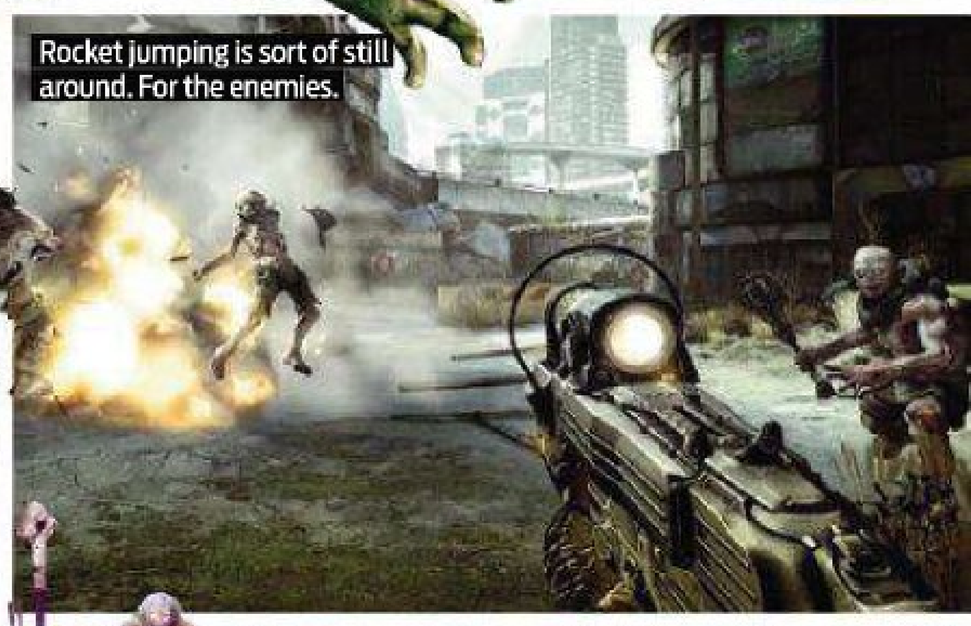
This chap's head tattoo makes for a handy 'Cut here' guide.



If you aren't airborne, it's not a cool escape.



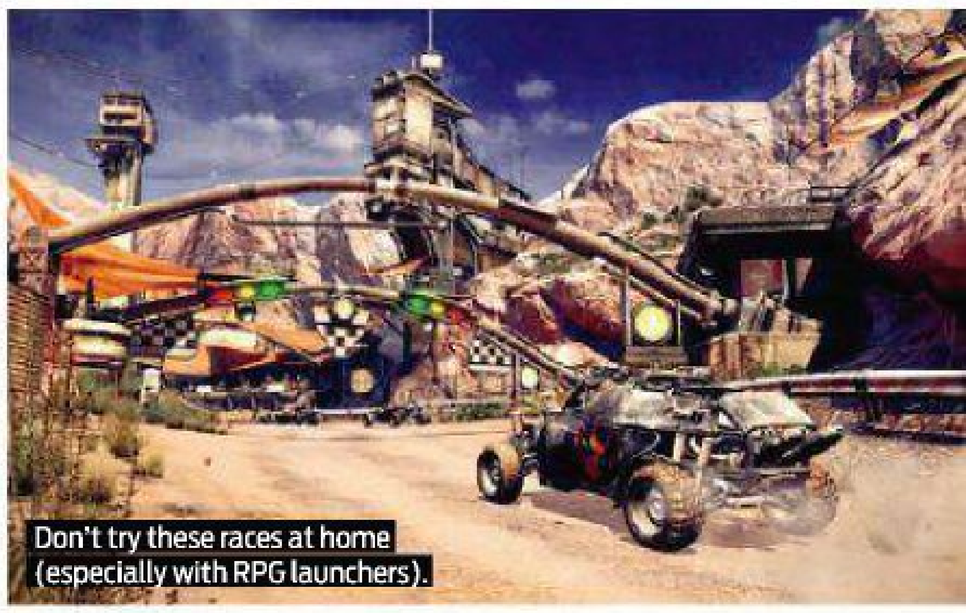
Once you notice his giant middle toes, it's hard to look away.



Rocket jumping is sort of still around. For the enemies.



If they weren't afraid of spiders before, they will be after this.



Don't try these races at home (especially with RPG launchers).



The towns are full of life. Not this one, obviously. Other ones.

positions, one of the guards spotted me and started shooting. With my cover blown, I drove straight at him and detonated the car. Back in control of my body, I ran around the corner and opened fire with my SMG, mopping up the disoriented survivors. The very basic crafting system also let me bypass locked doors by building lock grinders, and insta-heal myself (if the regenerating health was taking too long) with bandages.

Then I was whisked to another town, this one big enough to have its own race track. You can't miss it, it's the one under the giant angry purple gorilla billboard. I signed up for a few of the super-arcadey off-roading races – some regular and some with weapons. Like most of what I played, the racing is more about spectacle than a reinvention of the wheel. The explosions I made by blasting buggies with my rocket launcher are some of the most fiery and violent I've ever seen in a game.

To finish up, I'm directed to the Bash TV studio, where a gladiatorial game show is run by the sleazy JK Stiles. I sign up, and soon find myself in an arena, getting attacked from all sides by small, acrobatic mutants. I fend them off with an Authority assault rifle, filling the gaps in gunfire while I reload with Wingsticks and melee bashes. The following rounds escalated the threat each time. A big, plastic version of the angry purple gorilla, complete with blades on its arms, spun around, chopping up anything in its path. This was followed by a slot machine minigame where missing a shot meant mutant attacks and flames shooting up through the floor. The grand finale was a fight with a beefy 15-foot-tall mutant that was kind of a pushover, although I'm sure he'd have been tougher if I hadn't had the hard-hitting Fatboy ammo in my gun.

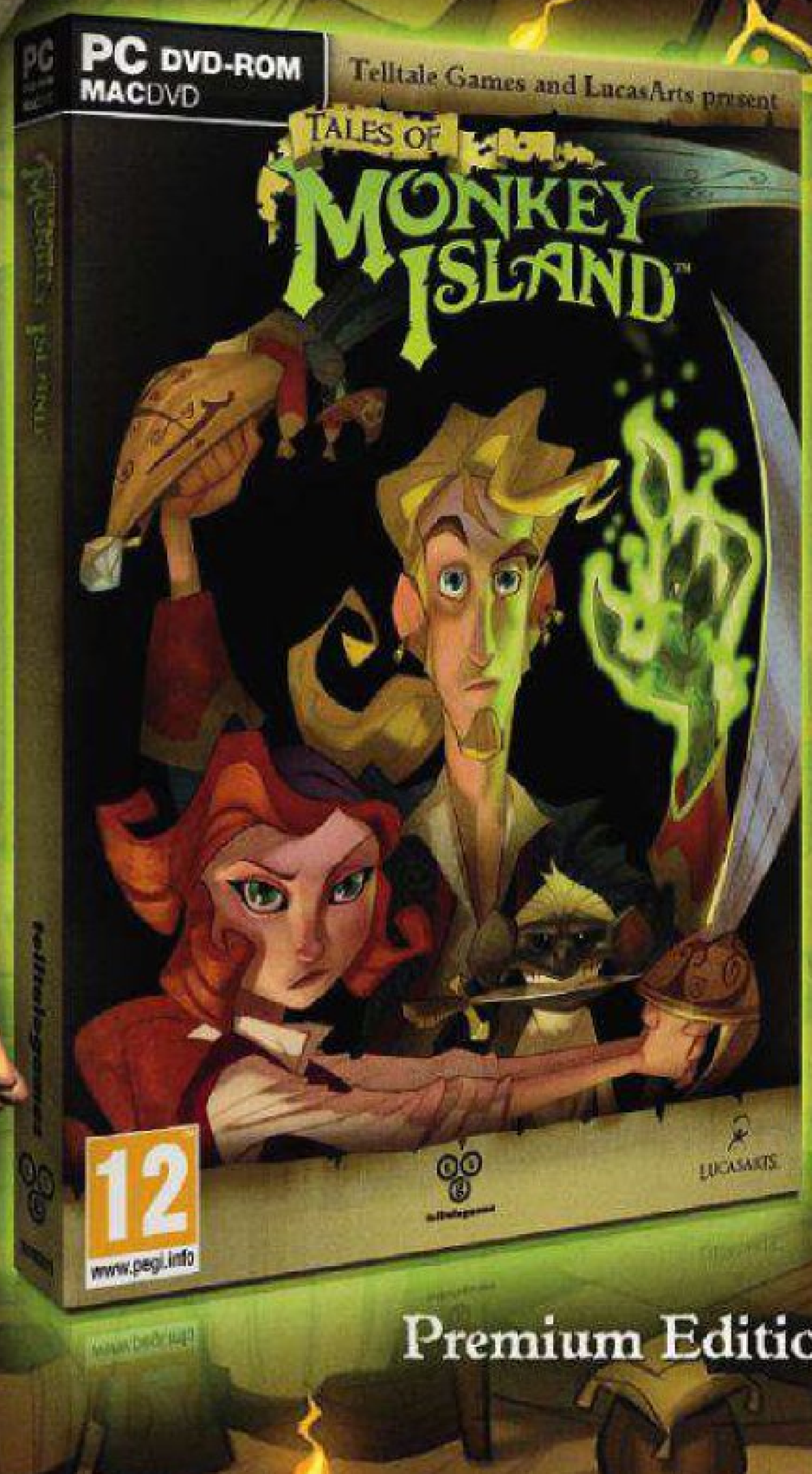
There's been much ado made about *Rage* being optimised to run at 60fps on consoles, but the PC's not been neglected. I saw the PC version running side-by-side with the Xbox version, and the difference is striking. Between *Rage* and *Battlefield 3*, 2011 is becoming a great year for seeing exactly why the PC is the better way to experience a cross-platform game. ■

Dan Stapleton

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WORLDS

A 17-hour session with **THE OLD REPUBLIC** reveals a conflicted game. ***By Tom Francis***

RELEASE AUTUMN 2011



Imagine a version of the Star Wars universe where you can become almost any kind of character, explore dozens of worlds, even acquire your own spaceship and recruit a crew. Now try not to imagine *Star Wars: Galaxies* – the first awkward take on that vision, which drove itself into the ground trying to attract new players with endless unsuccessful redesigns.

The Old Republic won't have that problem: it's a BioWare game, and BioWare already have an audience. *Mass Effect* is becoming this generation's Star Wars. Everyone already knows they love its story-driven structure, the way it builds a cast of interesting companion characters, and the freedom it offers to play an asshole or a saint.

The Old Republic has all of that, and it actually *is* Star Wars – albeit 3,500 years before the films. But it's also a massively multiplayer game: thousands upon thousands of players will all be playing through these stories together in the same world. 'Story' means major developments, unique to your character, with permanent consequences. How on Earth do you make that work for 5,000 people in the same place? Aren't the consequences going to conflict? Won't they realise their personal moments are the same as those of hundreds of others?

A lot hinges on those questions. Big singleplayer RPGs are expensive to make, but gamers don't pay more for them than the next five-hour shooter. BioWare's games thrive on being huge, while financial pressure is shrinking other mainstream games around them. About the only thing gamers are happy to pay more than £30 for is a massively multiplayer game.

If BioWare are at all nervous about their approach to making story work in an MMO, it's not showing. They invited me to play it not for an hour, or an afternoon, but for two days.

As it turns out, the answer to the big question is easy. How do they make personal stories coherent for thousands of people at once? They don't.

Let's split up

You choose from eight classes when creating a character in *The Old Republic*: The Republic Trooper, Jedi Knight, Jedi Consular and Smuggler are the good guys, and the Imperial Agent, Sith Warrior, Sith Inquisitor and Bounty Hunter are the Empire's. Writing director Daniel Erickson says the faction you belong to "is very much about where were you born, more than anything else." Virtuous people on both sides try to save lives in their line

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COLLIDE



of work, and cruel people everywhere are never short of excuses to kill.

Your choice of class, however, is crucial. Your main quest, your occupation, your reason for being, the people you'll meet, the ship you can get and the overall story of your character from start to finish are all specific to your class. It even influences your voice and your personality. To that extent, *The Old Republic* does give different players different stories. But of course, thousands and thousands divided by eight is still hundreds and hundreds, so it doesn't solve the underlying problem of people playing through the same content in the same world.

Bounty Hutta

I picked Bounty Hunter, because I liked the wrap-them-in-string ability shown off in the class trailer. Josh, playing alongside me, chose the other class available to us: Imperial Agent.

That put us both on Hutta, a wretched swamp of scum and villainy run by things with names ending in 'the Hutt'. And yet we scarcely crossed paths. Since class determines your main story, players of different classes are playing different games. There are plenty of sidequests scattered around that we could have done arranged to do together, but your class story is always the focus.

As a Bounty Hunter, my class story was all about The Great Hunt. It's an interplanetary contest for mercs like me to make a name for themselves by going after the most elusive targets in the galaxy. But it's exclusive: I needed a powerful sponsor to put me forward. I needed Nemro the Hutt, and he is not a good space slug to need.

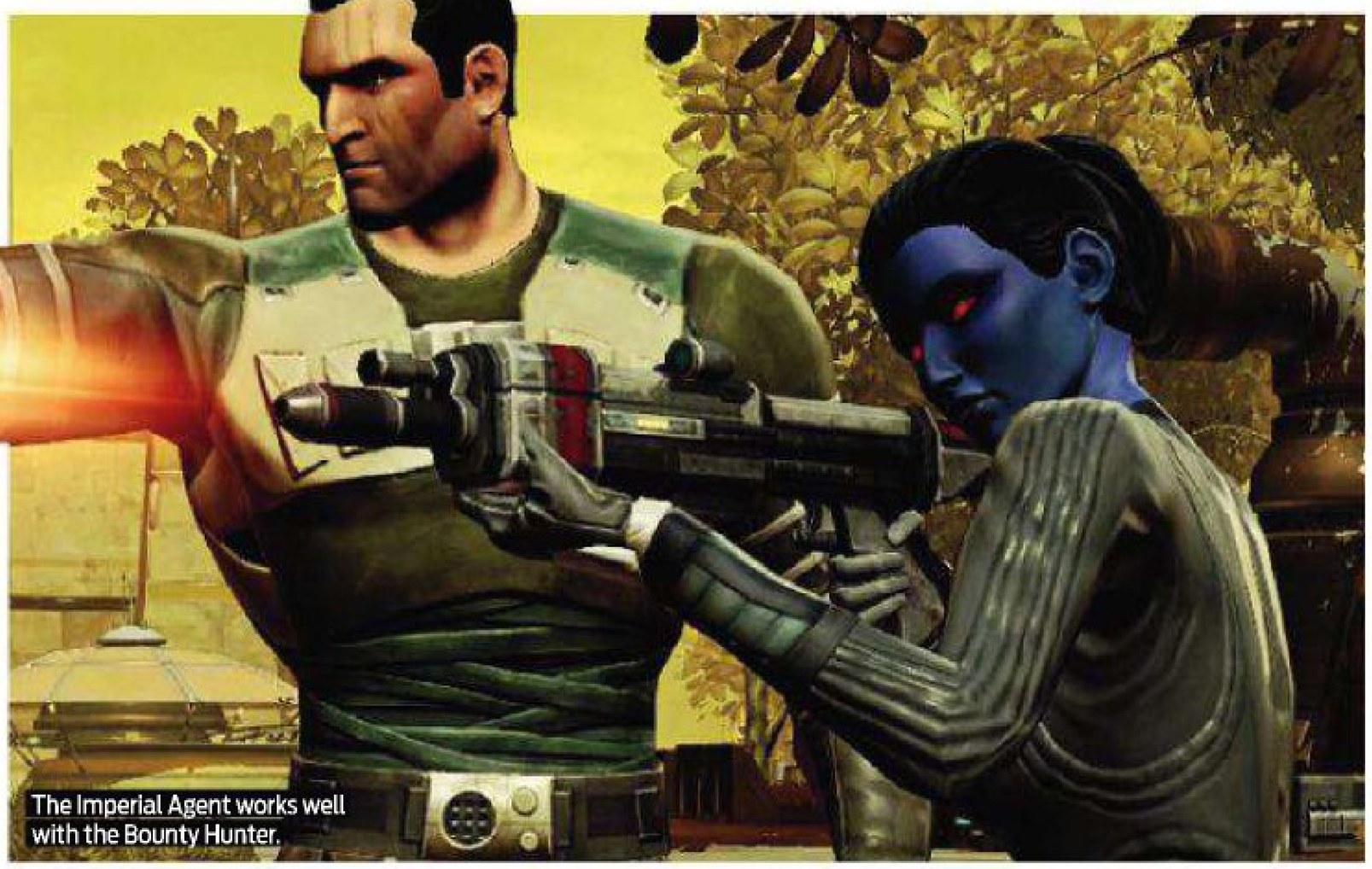
Rather than run between my story and Josh's Imperial Agent one, it made more sense to team up with a fellow Bounty Hunter. I say it made sense, it made no sense. The plot hinges on the fact that Nemro can only endorse one aspiring hunter in this competition, so the idea that we'd help each other earn his favour is a complete contradiction of our characters.

That's what I mean when I say *TOR* doesn't attempt to reconcile players' stories to each other. But in game terms it was convenient: we were always heading to the same place so we could fight side by side.

Bounty Hunters can only use blaster pistols, small weapons that fire in quick bursts, so the real damage is done by gadgets like your wrist-mounted rocket launcher. Many Bounty Hunter abilities have no significant cooldown time, and there's no energy cost to worry about, but they do generate heat. Once you hit your heat limit, you're ▸

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The Imperial Agent works well with the Bounty Hunter.


Pureblood Sith rarely go into accounting.


Control the turrets, control the... turret fire.


Player vs player scraps get chaotic.


And Palpatine was all, 'lol'.

stuck with your basic blaster-burst ability until you cool off.

Early on, it's painful. *The Old Republic* has a cover system, but oddly it's restricted to certain classes. The Bounty Hunter isn't one of them, so when you've only got a few abilities you're really just standing there in a large open area hitting number keys. I've heard BioWare call this 'heroic combat', but I wasn't really feeling it. When I hid behind a nearby wall to cool off during a boss fight, the boss couldn't figure out how to get to me and immediately went into 'Evade' mode, rendering him invincible and healing all the damage I'd dealt so far.

Rocket science

Around level 8 your abilities round out. It's still awkward to be out in the open, but the combinations you can pull off are fun. For a tough mob, I'd start by hitting the most dangerous enemy with my missile launcher. That knocks him and the surrounding enemies to the floor, giving me a chance to close the distance while blasting them.

If the threat has got back to his feet by the time I'm there, I hit him with a stun dart to immobilise him, then Rail Shot him – a sniper blast that does extra damage to stunned targets. Then I move to the edge of the mob, target the nearest enemy, and let off the flamethrower. It catches everyone in its cone of effect, first hurting then immobilising them as they thrash around in the fire. If anyone's left alive, I can use my jetpack to deliver a thruster-powered uppercut.

"I've heard BioWare call this 'heroic combat', but I wasn't really feeling it"


Even Jedi like to wear comedy breasts.

Playing with another Bounty Hunter is just the same formula multiplied. Our favourite tag-team move was to both open with Death from Above: we launch into the air on our jetpacks and rain missiles down in tandem. It knocks everyone to the ground and deals damage over a wide area – not much, but significant when doubled.

Working for Nemro the Hutt tends to involve quest dialogues that end with "...his head on my floor!" Some of the quests are interesting, some are straightforward, and most of them feel very BioWare. It's a lot like playing *Knights of the Old Republic* in co-op – not like playing a specially made co-op version of that game, just literally having another player there in the singleplayer story.

Once we'd secured Nemro's endorsement for the Great Hunt, we were done with Hutta and headed to the spaceport. Every class eventually gets their own ship in *The Old Republic*, but not just yet: you're told to leave the first planet by public transport. But a droid informed us that an Imperial vessel was on its way to our destination, Dromund Kaas, and we might like to hitch a lift.

Moff to a flame

That led to a Flashpoint, a very action-driven longer quest that takes place entirely in an instance. An Imperial Grand Moff contacted us to say that the captain of the vessel we were on had disobeyed a direct order, and we were to kill him. You're probably supposed to relent and spare him once you discover his reasons, but I like friends in high places, so I kicked him to the floor and shot him.

Soon after the ship is boarded by Republic forces, which you fight as their transports punch in through the hull. We then took a shuttle to the Republic capital ship and fought our way through it from the inside, defeating an Admiral Ackbar-type commander, a giant defence droid and ultimately a Jedi.

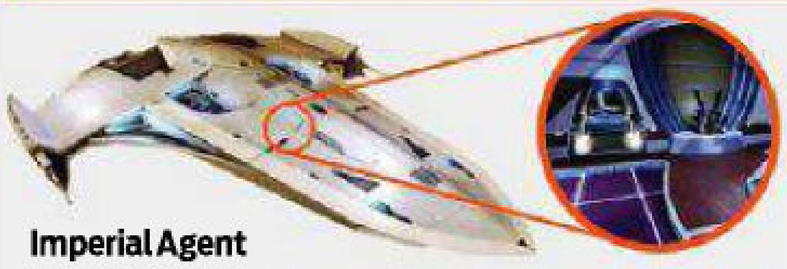
It's an excitingly swashbuckling adventure, though with an exhausting amount of combat. Some journalists playing on their own struggled with it for a long, long time. It was easier with two, but I'd still plan on getting an even

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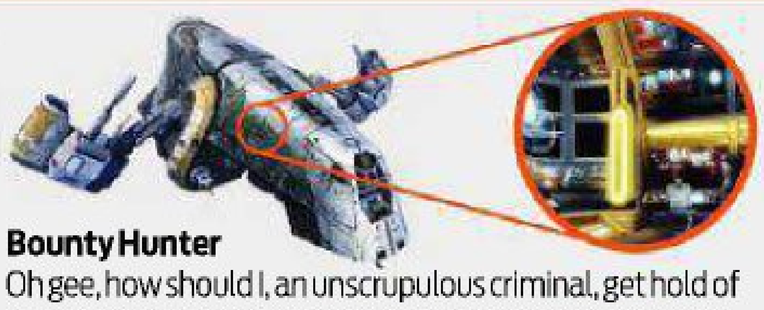
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The Bounty Hunter's Stun Dart: Tazety.

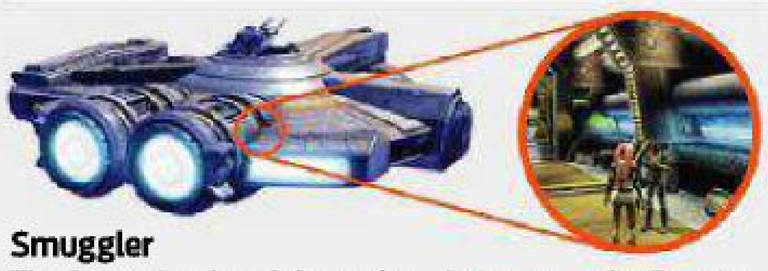
OWN-A-SHIP Each class gets their own space ship – these are the best



Imperial Agent
He gets an Imperial shuttle, right? No. He's trying not to look like an Imperial Agent, so his superiors issue him a luxury space-yacht. It has hardwood interiors, and we want it.



Bounty Hunter
Oh gee, how should I, an unscrupulous criminal, get hold of a ship? I know: steal it. The ship you nick is designed to be a cross between Boba Fett's and Serenity from Firefly. Yes.



Smuggler
The Smuggler already has a ship – he's a smuggler. But it's captured in the first few minutes, and he spends the first act of his story trying to get it back.



Sith Warrior
When you're a Sith, you don't hide your Imperial ties. You fly what is basically a goddamn TIE Interceptor. Inside it's all cold steel, red lights and holograms of your enemies.

larger group together for these in the final game. Although it was part of our class story as Bounty Hunters, the Imperial Agent story includes the same section. Josh spared the captain, which apparently saved him the whole ordeal on the Republic ship.

Most of the rest of the game takes place in public spaces, where you might run into any of the thousands of other people playing on the same server. When you're approaching a key moment in your plot, you go through a green barrier that puts you in your own instance. If you're in a group with other classes, they can come through with you and join in. If you're grouped with others of the same class, as I was, they each go into their own instance of the event, and rejoin when they come out.

My fellow Bounty Hunter Andy and I, for example, were asked by an admiral to kill his daughter – for reasons I won't spoil. We fought through the compound to get to her together, but once we reached the room itself, we each went into our own separate versions of that encounter alone. Andy froze the daughter in carbonite instead, as any reasonable person would, while I shot her as instructed. We each came out and fought our way back to the admiral with completely different stories to tell.

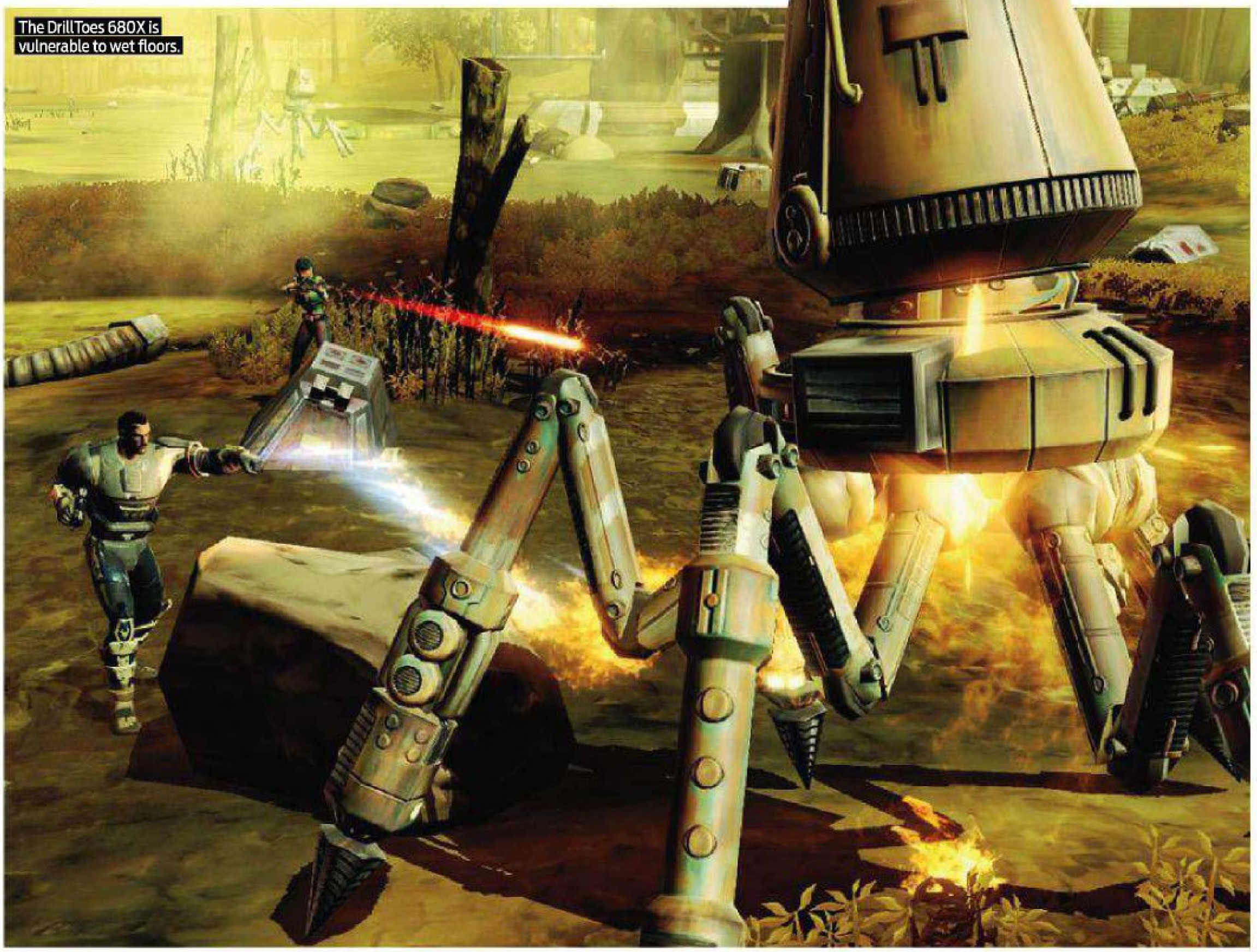
Group chat

Where it gets slightly awkward is the combat: that room has three extremely tough bosses in it, ones who completely trounced me on my own. I needed help. You can choose to join someone's instance even if you can't join in with their plot, which Andy did to help me with the fight. It meant he went through the whole emotional confrontation with the daughter all over again, the daughter he also had as an inventory item frozen in carbonite. BioWare would be wise to avoid putting challenging fights in plot instances, because grouping up to defeat them makes for some awkward story moments.

Less important plot points can be played through together, in 'multiplayer conversations'. The mechanic is pretty rudimentary: everyone picks the dialogue option they want to say in response to the

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RACE VS CLASS

When creating a character, some races only have access to certain classes. These are the combinations that work in the build I played. They may change before release, and more races may be added.

	Republic Trooper	Jedi Knight	Jedi Consular	Smuggler	Imperial Agent	Sith Warrior	Sith Inquisitor	Bounty Hunter
Human	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Cyborg	✔			✔	✔	✔		✔
Rattataki					✔		✔	✔
Chiss					✔			✔
Mirialan	✔	✔	✔	✔				
Twi'lek		✔	✔	✔			✔	
Zabrak	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Sith Pureblood						✔	✔	
Miraluka		✔	✔					

line you all just heard, and a die is rolled for each player: highest number is the one whose line gets said. If you agreed, you get some mysterious party points that don't seem to do anything yet.

If you're not near the NPC a teammate is talking to, you can appear as a hologram proxy and join in anyway. BioWare realise they still need to disable options like "[Kill him]" for holograms – we had some funny moments with those.

Dating twins

Even if you play alone, your character always has company. You acquire companion characters throughout the game, your first after just a few levels, and you always have one with you from then on. Mine was Mako, an Asian-looking human tech expert. Andy's was Mako, an Asian-looking human tech expert. You can see where this gets weird – same class, same plot, same companions. Since we didn't get to create our own characters, Andy and I looked almost identical ourselves, so the four of us trundling around together started to freak people out.

Companions flesh out the plot, and generally seem to round out the class: Bounty Hunters are damage dealers, so Mako is a healer. Josh's Imperial Agent had heals of his own, and his companion was essentially a Bounty Hunter. In both cases, within three words of meeting them, anyone who's played a BioWare game can tell your first companion's going to be a love interest. I asked Daniel if that would develop as far as the romances in, say, *Mass Effect*.

"Oh, far beyond. The more romances you have in the game, the less typical the romance has to be, does that make sense? We have literally *dozens* of romances, fully fleshed out. Which means we have the train wreck romances, we have the intimacy problem romances, we have the slightly strange power-play romances..."

One of these love interests, Daniel says, immediately sleeps with someone else when she starts to fall for you. You just find a shirtless man walking out of her quarters on your ship. You can also lose companions, kill companions, make them hate you to the point of never speaking to you again, and even turn them to the dark or light side depending on your actions.

The only problem with companions is that you can only have four people in a group, and they count. So when Andy, Josh and I did manage to team up, both of them had to give up their companions to do so. For Josh, it wasn't worth it, and he ended up leaving our group and fighting alongside us separately. It's a bizarre restriction.

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He was a cold-blooded killer. She was a warm-hearted waitress.


"Hey, I'm just the stims vendor. Racist."


Anyone's guess what the Smuggler's ship is based on.

If you're tempted to play Bounty Hunter to live out that Boba Fett fantasy, I advise against it. When my character walked into the first room, Mako and my new boss greeted him. I chose the least dickish response, "Hello all", and what I actually said was "Cute girls and big guns! I like it!" Oh God. This must be what it's like to be an asshole – you try to say something normal and that comes out. I wanted

"Oh God. This must be what it's like to be an asshole"

the unspeaking, relentless badass from the movies, and I got a sort of inept Duke Nukem.

Later, when I tried an Imperial Agent, that aspect of the game turned around completely. He's quiet, to-the-point and professional. He's also British, but only when talking to his superiors. As Daniel puts it, "the Imperial Agent is very often spending his time trying to pretend he is not an Imperial Agent," and nothing says 'evil' like an English accent.

The Agent also has a cooler story – while I was fiddling around trying to qualify for a Bounty Hunter competition, Josh was sleeping with a girl to sway her into betraying her father. The Imperial Agent's objectives are clear and make sense for the Empire, whereas the Bounty Hunter is always working for an unspecified quantity of credits. A big part of the Agent arc is working to protect a society of largely innocent people, however cruel their rulers – it's a muddier war than the easy dichotomy of the films.

Plot figures

Each class's story arc is huge. They're divided into three stories, each as long as the entirety of the original *Knights of the Old Republic* RPG. That makes *The Old Republic* 24 times as big, for anyone who's not keeping count. And since every class and gender combination has a different voice actor, it features 16 lead performances. The scale is mind-blowing.

More interestingly, you can steer each story towards a light or dark side ending. Regardless of your class or faction, you always have the option of trying to help people or going purely for personal gain.

Before my time was up I also got to play a player-versus-player Warzone: the Alderaan civil war. Two teams scrap over three control points, each being a gun turret that shoots at the enemy capital ship while you hold it. The visual effects of combat between eight players are fast, flashy and tough to read, but the actual business of killing people is slow. That means it may have some tactical depth at the higher levels of skill and coordination, but it isn't hugely satisfying to play.

A lot of the compromises and oddities of *The Old Republic* come from BioWare's determination not to let anything get in the way of them telling a traditional, singleplayer RPG story. Despite everything, it's the right call.

It makes grouping up awkward – if you play different classes, you can't both make story progress together. If you play the same class, the story makes less sense and you have clone companions. But if BioWare had sacrificed the story-driven aspect of their game, there wouldn't be much reason to play *The Old Republic*. Other MMOs have better combat models and more impressive worlds.

Instead, they've gone with an awkward fit, but one I do want to play. I want to see that Imperial Agent story through, and I think everyone's going to have at least one class whose character and story clicks with them well enough to make this a great BioWare adventure.

Oh, and you have to play a female Republic Trooper at some point. Why? She's played by Jennifer Hale, voice of *Mass Effect*'s female Shepard. ■


She's basically Commander Shepard.

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REIGN IN BLOOD

Can one man hold back the tide? The **SPACE MARINE** is no mere man. ***By Rich McCormick***

RELEASE AUTUMN

"Of course, that's not the only race you'll be fighting. As well as Orks, you'll also be facing off against the forces of Chaos."

Involuntarily, I hear myself quietly say a word. It is "yay."

I cough quickly, trying to mask my slip but I think it's too late. A few guys in the room turn to look at me. I've just admitted I have engaged in the dark art of Warhammer 40,000 to a room full of people I've never met. In most places, this is social suicide. I meet their gaze, and every single one is smiling. "Yay!" they say back.

I'm excited because – as much as I love Games Workshop's sci-fi opera of manly men beating up Orks, the green mushroom-men lack the sustained threat that would drag me through a campaign of third-person violence against them. Chaos have that threat in bucket-loads: one of their gods sits on a throne of skulls. Another was made from too many orgies. They're the epitome of 40K evil, and as a foe, they make 40K fans say things like "yay!"

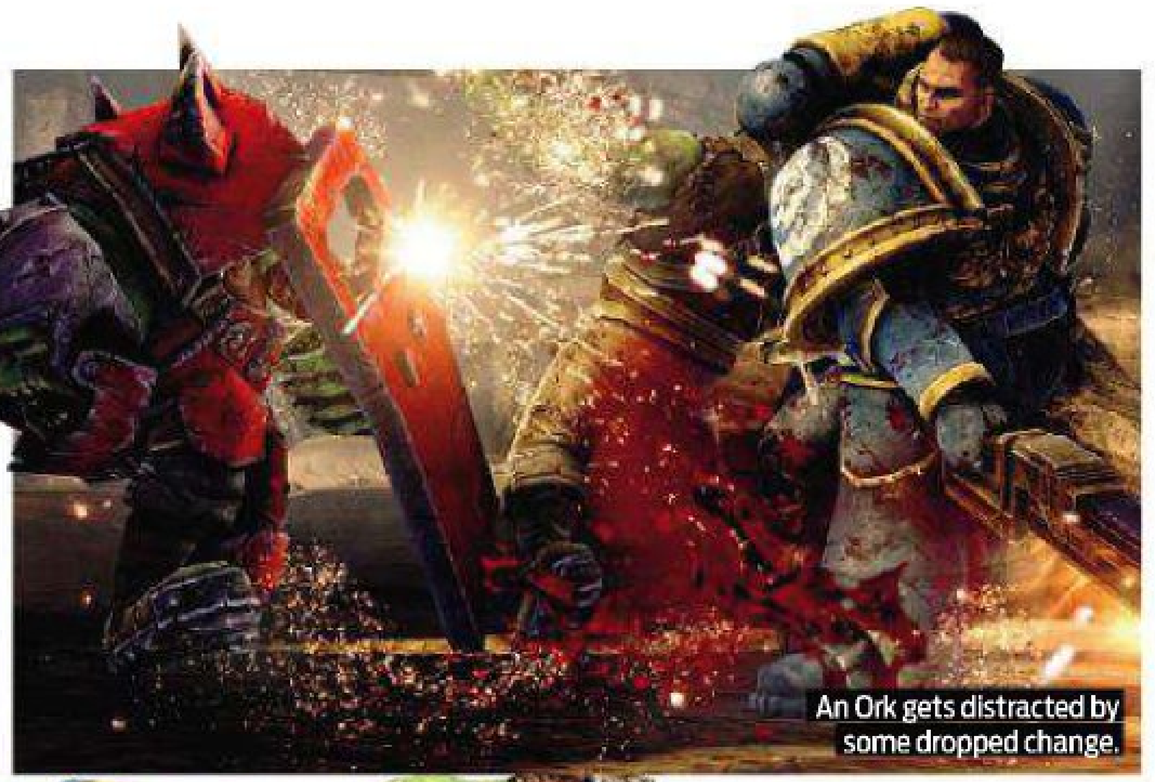
We're in a safe place. Sitting in this room in Vancouver, home city of *Space Marine* developers Relic, we can talk about 40K without lowering our voices or obsessively checking behind our shoulders for girls. Later on, I speak to Matthew Berger, *Space Marine*'s singleplayer campaign designer. I've got a short time to interview Matthew about his game – four vignettes of which I've just played – but like all 40K players, both lapsed and active, first we have to exchange our details.

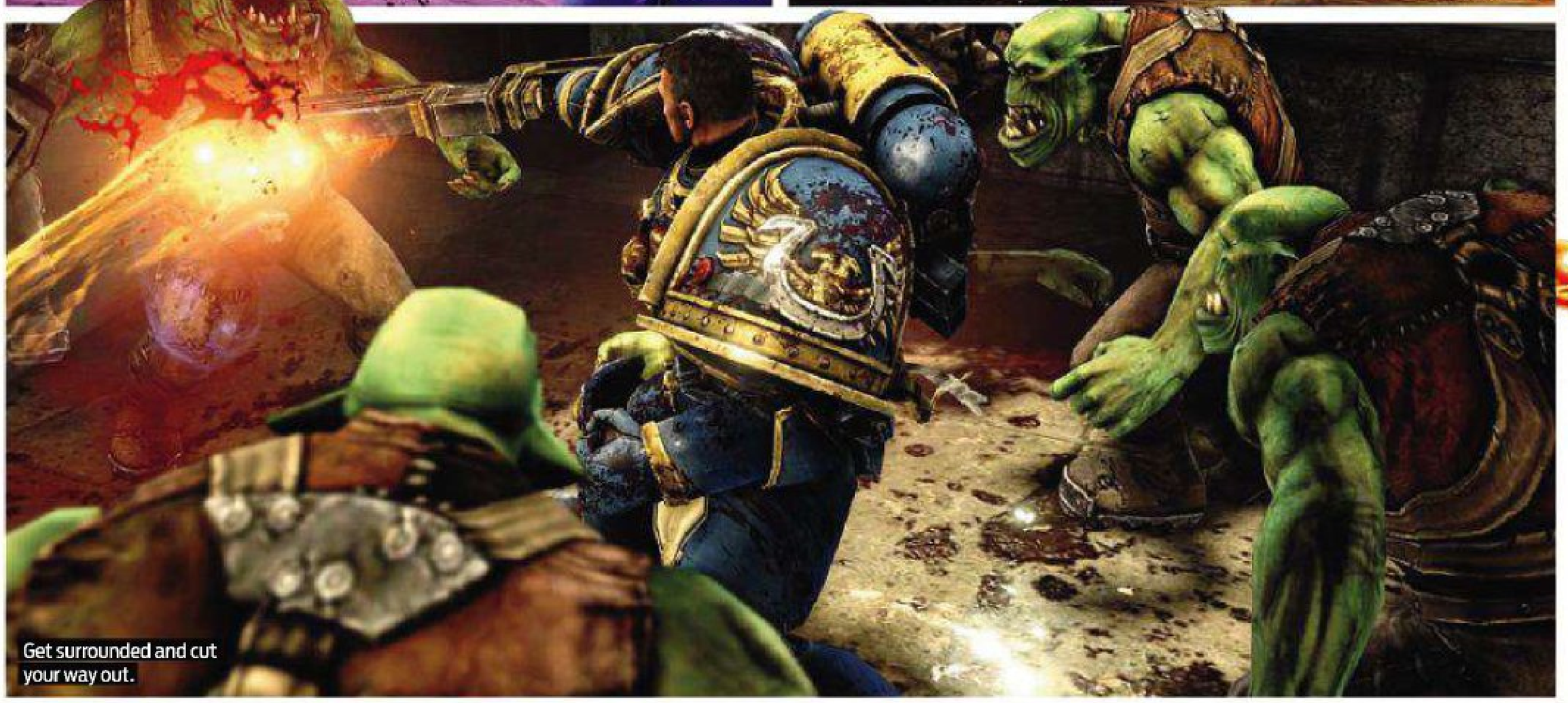
"Who did you collect?" Matthew asks. I tell him I was always an Eldar guy. "My first army was Orks. Then Chaos Daemons, now I'm working on a Dark Eldar force." A pause, then a nod. That short blurt of sound, verbal static to anyone not acquainted with Games Workshop's sci-fi universe, and we've seen deep into each others' nerdy souls.

I glance outside, onto Vancouver's snowy streets. People shuffle past. Normal people. These people wouldn't know a Tyranid Carnifex if it came up and bit them on the face, and Carnifexes – with their four attacks and strength of nine – are likely to do just that. Yet *Space Marine* is consciously targeting a wider audience than Relic's lovingly detailed *Dawn of War* games: how will they communicate 40,000 years of history and little plastic men to ▸

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It's only a flesh wound.


An Ork gets distracted by some dropped change.


Get surrounded and cut your way out.

players who just want to shoot shit? In two ways. The first is to avoid too much duplicitous intrigue, and dodge the underlying subtext of 40K – that Space Marines are technically cruel fascists among the stars. Here, Ultramarine Captain Titus is a morally superb hero, making him easy to get behind. The second solution is simpler: by having a lot of shit to shoot.

Throngs of meat

The Space Marine is always outnumbered. In 40K's gloriously gruesome artwork, and in the tabletop battles themselves, the hyper-men inside the power armour seem to thrive on having throngs of meat around them into which they can insert bullets, chainsaws, and special axes that go "whir-ner-ner." *Space Marine* makes this clear right out of the gate.

Despite the Chaos reveal, my first interactions in the game are with Orks. *Space Marine* is set on the Forge World of Gaia. An aside for non-geeks: Forge Worlds are giant, globe-wide factories, producing the machines necessary for the Imperium of Man's constant, grinding war effort. Gaia's specific remit is Titans. They're the biggest of the big in a big universe that engages in a war so big it eclipses all else. But there's a problem.



The problem is green and likes to eat people. The Ork invasion of Gaia has brought the planet to a standstill, halting Titan production and buggering up operations in other parts of space. To break the deadlock, a chapter of Space Marines is en route, but they're taking their sweet time. Enter Ultramarine captain Titus and his band of blue-armoured buddies – dropping down planetside to fry a few mushrooms. (That line only works if you know Orks are technically sentient mushrooms. Non-geeks, you may laugh now.)

Space Marine's Orks aren't clever, but they are numerous. Rolling into one of Relic's prepared fights, I was quickly mobbed. The combat is two-tone: both melee and ranged attacks have their specific applications, and can be near-instantly flipped between. At this early stage in development, I was reduced to using a gamepad. The ranged toggle sits up on the left trigger. Holding it down sends Titus into a familiar third-person shooter view, the camera tugging close to his shoulder. But I was more interested in *Space Marine*'s close-quarter battles. Once I was sufficiently encircled by a snarling ring of green, I picked a direction and started cleaving my way out.

The first Ork I swung my chainsword into fell back, clutching a stump. A second took his place in the circle, only to find four foot of whirring death embedded in his shoulder. As I hammered the X button to continue the four-stage combo, my Titus yanked his sword from Ork number-two's torso, leaving him collapsed on his friend's armless corpse.

I was still wildly outnumbered. Gretchen had joined the fray. Shorter than Orks by a few feet, they're little more than cannon fodder in the 40K universe: here they were little more

"There's a problem. The problem is green and likes to eat people"

than globs of blood on the wind, the final slice of my chainsword disintegrating one of the over-enthusiastic creatures who'd dared to step into my range.

Bolt action

When I turned back, the ring of Orks around me had turned into a queue. I brought up my bolter pistol and took aim, squeezing off five, six shots, popping five, six heads. The bolter itself is a standard machinegun, but – like everything in 40K – beefed up to king-size and decorated with more





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skulls than a goth's pencilcase. The pistol version trades rate of fire for accuracy; I was assured the heavy version – which I didn't get to see but appears in the game occasionally – is a monster, trading nothing for jesus-christ-look-at-the-blood.

As one of 40K's stupidest species, Orks don't need to have particularly complex AI routines. Most threw themselves on my chainsword. Some, though, were a little brighter, and forced a change in tactics. Nobs are the biggest Orks, and always your primary concern in a fight. The standard chainsword attack isn't enough to break through their armour, which forces you to use Titus's heavy melee swing.

At present, there's not enough fluidity between the two core melee skills: I would have liked to chain crushing sword swings into lighter sweeps, then back again, but the pre-alpha version I was playing didn't allow it. That being said, a previous build had a kick built into Titus' repertoire that may well worm its way back into future versions, making for smoother and more reflexive fights.

The Orks are joined on the planet by Chaos forces, let loose into the material world by the insalubrious research the previous inhabitants of the planet were involved in. That means mad, hooded cultists, lightning fast bloodletter daemons, and toughest of all, your dark mirror image: Chaos Space Marines. My Ork battles were generally fun: the simple formula of cleave, shoot, cleave more remained satisfying with repetition. I had less fun against Chaos's tougher foes.

Chaos theory

During a battle in a valley, I was jumped by Bloodletters. Thanks to their connection with the warp, they could phase quickly about the battlefield, dodging my swings and – worse – delivering some of their own without retaliation. Titus's simple control scheme is a blessing when surrounded, but without any specific combos or any way to knock the daemons off their attack patterns, I was repeatedly eviscerated. The only way past the section was to stand farther back and take potshots: an approach at odds with the developer's exhortation that "Space Marines don't take cover."

That means no cover system, even if Gaia looks like it was previously inhabited by a race of sentient three-foot-high walls. Despite the developers' best efforts, it's tough to break routine: I repeatedly found myself running to hide when close to death. Space Marines use a recharging health bar, with a layer of armour protecting a layer of hit points. But when attacks start to chip away at the underlying health bar, instead of finding one of the game's abundant low walls and surreptitiously ducking your seven foot frame behind it, Relic want players to hurl themselves back into the action and earn their survival. This is done with executions: long, slow animations cribbed from *Dawn of War*'s 'sync kills' (think a Dreadnought squishing the guts out of a Tyranid). A successful execution – throwing an Ork to the floor and stamping on his head, or bisecting him with a chainsword – nets you health points, as well as 'fury'. Save up enough of this and you can either slow time to pick off long range enemies, or unleash a vast sword sweep that pops anyone in a forward arc.



These fury kills are the embodiment of 40K's rampant imagination. They're what I dreamt was happening when I played the tabletop game, what players across the world dream about when they dab paints all over small figurines.

In trying to bring *Space Marine* to an audience scared of dice, they might lose some of the nuance and depth of 40,000 years of war – but if any developer knows, respects, and loves Warhammer 40K, it's Relic. ■

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What do you do with the money you save? You buy more games! Take some risks! Try more genres! Maybe there was something that caught your eye back in the day, but you didn't have £30 to gamble on actually liking turn-based strategy games, or not being put off by a score of 70%. Maybe classics such as *Psychonauts* or *Sacrifice* simply slipped your attention at release, and you just never got around to catching up. Maybe you're simply attracted by a screenshot or a funny description. For £5, it doesn't really matter whether a game is an unsung gem, or just something to pass the time on a dark, rainy evening.

Of course, we've set our sights a little higher, tracking down the best games that you can buy online for under £15, £10 and £5, as well as a selection of formerly commercial games that have officially been re-released as freeware. We've avoided a few, such as *Deus Ex*, in the name of giving some less-recognised games a turn in the spotlight, and of course, there'll be sales on now that there weren't at the time of writing. If the game you want isn't cheap enough yet, just hold fire. With digital distribution, you'll rarely wait very long. ■

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TORCHLIGHT
£12.99 store.steampowered.com/app/41500
While it may only be a snack compared to the banquet promised by *Diablo 3*, we all enjoy a Mars bar now and again. *Torchlight* understood like few others what makes action-RPGs fun, with satisfying combat and simple but effective tweaks to the format – such as being able to send your pet back to town to sell unwanted kit instead of wasting your time walking. The sequel arrives later this year, but the first game is still perfect popcorn entertainment.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES
£14.99 store.steampowered.com/app/2600
Only one game has earned the right to be seen as a potential successor to *Deus Ex* – and it's not *Invisible War*. *Bloodlines*' shooting side is piss-weak, but the RPG elements more than make up for it. Install the fan patches, though: the official version lags far behind what it can be.



BIOSHOCK 2
£13.99 store.steampowered.com/app/8850
Pity poor *BioShock 2*. Cursed with having to try and continue a game that most people agreed was already finished off quite nicely, thanks, then almost immediately overshadowed by *BioShock Infinite*, it's no wonder it sank with fewer traces than its own underwater city setting. But here's the thing: it's an excellent sequel, with some terrific storytelling and better level design than the first game. While it may look like the first game, it ends up as a complete thematic inversion, with some achingly wonderful emotional scenes.

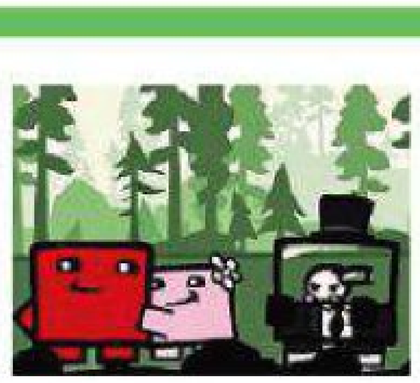
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Two of the most beloved adventure games ever, updated and in one package. The *Secret of Monkey Island* remake was slightly underwhelming, but remains worth playing for the series' place in history. *Monkey Island 2*, on the other hand, was a phenomenal upgrade to a far better game, with excellent voices, great repainted artwork, and a (sadly short) in-game commentary from its original creators. Both are available individually for £7 apiece if you only need one. The episodic continuation, *Tales of Monkey Island*, is still £25.



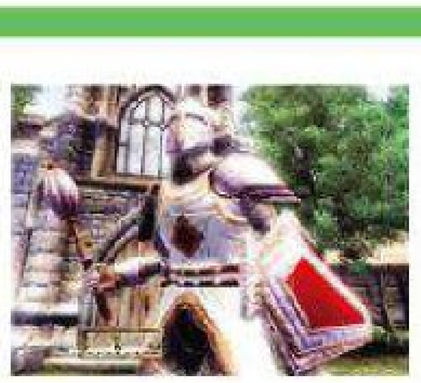
It's all fun and games until someone falls overboard.



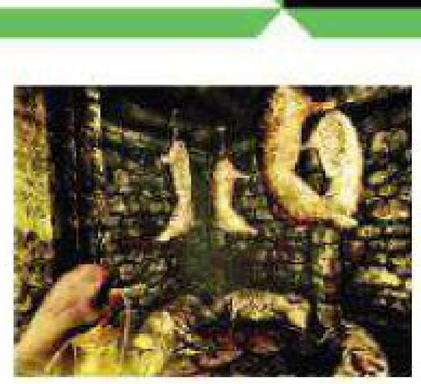
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Not only one of the best RPGs in recent years, but the perfect way to get ready for *Skyrim*. This includes the standard game, plus both expansions – the dull *Knights of the Nine*, and the far more interesting *Shivering Isles*. For another £5, you can get the Deluxe edition, which comes with all the *Oblivion* DLC – but don't worry too much about missing out.



AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT
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Prepare to enter a world of survival horror that's as good at frightening you with silence as monsters. *Amnesia* is a masterpiece, turning one of gaming's most generic premises into an unforgettably scary experience. At this price, it's worth turning the lights off, your speakers up, and taking the gamble that you'll still be able to play after a few levels.



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All three of the original *Fallout* games in one pack. *Fallout* remains the fan-favourite, with its dark humour but serious setting. *Fallout 2* eased back a little, with more overt parodies and the best city in any *Fallout* so far – New Reno, where you can do anything from take out trash to become a porn star. The third, *Tactics*, is a combat-focused spin-off that can safely be ignored.

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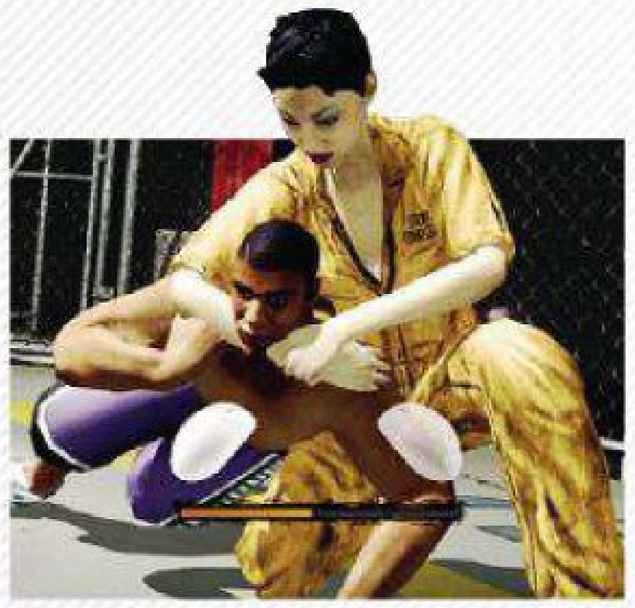
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Guerrilla is about smashing stuff. It pretends that it's about saving Mars from tyranny or some such nonsense, but you can happily forget that right now. It's about hammers and bombs and explosions and the satisfaction of seeing big buildings come toppling down. Slip the difficulty down to avoid a few annoyances with the AI and combat systems getting in your way, and it's a satisfaction that lasts right to the end of the game. So many games hand out powerful weapons; this is one of the few where they really do damage.



SAINTS ROW 2

£6.95 www.gamersgate.co.uk/DD-SAINTS2/saints-row-2

Saints Row 2 is *Grand Theft Auto* before it cut its own balls off. *GTA* might pretend to be anarchic, but it's only here that you can drive a septic truck on a mission to splatter hookers and johns alike with effluent. This game doesn't cross the line: it plays hopscotch with it. And God, it's brilliant.



ANOTHER WORLD

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Another World is arty and... er... not as much fun as people remember. But! It's more than simply a game; it's a piece of gaming archeology. Few other games have ever created a world so alien with so little.



BROKEN SWORD TRILOGY

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Revolution remains one of the UK's most beloved adventure gaming houses, and the first three *Broken Sword* games are easily their masterpieces. They're beautiful games, weaving interesting historical stories – the Knights Templar, Mayan mythology and Voynich Manuscript, respectively – that send you around the world. All three are excellent and largely unblemished by age.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS: DIAMOND EDITION

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Pop quiz: name the biggest RPG ever. *WoW*? Not even close. *Daggerfall*? Probably, you smart-arse. In a solid second place however, there's *Neverwinter Nights*. The original campaign is pure crap, but what you're really buying is access to all the great fan-made content out there.



PSYCHONAUTS

£5.99 store.steampowered.com/app/3830

Do you like fun? Do you long to see games that play by their own rules? Did you play *Psychonauts*? If not, you're a hypocrite. But you can atone. It's not the greatest platformer ever, but you'll find few games as bursting with leaps of 'how the hell did they come up with this?' logic. Also, you get to set people on fire with the power of your mind.





THE VOID

£7.99 store.steampowered.com/app/37000

Trying to describe *The Void* is largely futile, but here goes: it's a game about life and death, colour and blood. You're trapped between states, harvesting colour to survive and feeding the bizarre (usually naked) denizens trapped with you. Got that? You don't know the half of it. If you ever feel that games are getting a bit samey, and crave a challenge that's as unusual as it is epic, this is for you. You may love it. You may hate it. You'll definitely find it an original, unforgettable experience.



BALDUR'S GATE 2

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Baldur's Gate 2 is the only RPG that gives *Planescape* a run for its money, serving up something much more traditional, but far more epic. The sweeping plot stumbles a bit in the original story, but picks up with a vengeance for the included expansion, *Throne of Bhaal*, which levels your main character up to literally god-like levels of power.



PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

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Most RPGs give you a quest. *Torment* simply gives you a question: what can change the nature of a man? To find the answer, you'll need to travel between dimensions and unravel arguably the greatest, most intelligent game ever written. Treating both philosophy and standard RPG tropes as its playthings, it's not just a great game: it's an absolute must-play.



AGE OF WONDERS 2: SHADOW MAGIC

£6.99 www.gamersgate.co.uk/DD-AOWSM/age-of-wonders-shadow-magic

Turn-based strategy in the fine tradition of *Heroes of Might and Magic*, with some excellent visuals. The AI isn't incredible but it serves its purpose, with a random map generator to keep things more interesting. It's a good intro to the style, and a great example of it if you've simply lost touch with the genre of late.

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Gold doors? Anyone would think a king... oh. Of course.

KING'S BOUNTY: THE LEGEND

£9.99 www.gamersgate.co.uk/DD-KB/kings-bounty-the-legend

Alternatively to *Shadow Magic*, there's *King's Bounty*. It's also a stack-based, turn-by-turn strategy game, but with one very important twist: it's insane. The follow-ups improved the core action, but at the expense of some of the original's individualism – such as the shock at realising that you can shrink down and have fights in your own equipment to improve it. The only downside is that it's far from a welcoming game, and will happily beat you round the face and neck with your own incompetence the first few times you play. Set aside some time if you've never played a game like this before.



SPACE RANGERS 2

£9.19 www.impulsedriven.com/sr2x

Space, as a wise man once said, is big. In *Space Rangers*, it's also ridiculously free-form, starting you out with a small ship and some vague murmurs about saving the universe, then cutting you loose to do whatever the heck you feel like. Adventure-style dialogues. RPG development. A little light conquest. It's your ship; it's your choice. Who knows, you might even take care of the robots threatening to destroy randomly-generated civilisation as we know it.

LARA CROFT AND THE GUARDIAN OF LIGHT

£9.99 store.steampowered.com/app/35130

The best *Tomb Raider* of recent years... isn't really a *Tomb Raider* game at all. *Guardian of Light* pulls the camera back, replacing the usual 3D platforming with a new, simpler version geared purely around fun and challenge. The story is bilge, but the puzzles are fantastic, regardless of whether you're playing through on your own or teaming up with a friend. You can blitz through the story in no time, but working your way through the optional challenges takes a good while longer.




Bang bang: you're dead. And so am I, quite possibly.

THE PANDORA DIRECTIVE

£6.20 www.gog.com/en/gamecard/tex_murphy_the_pandora_directive

Full motion video. Shudder. The days when it ruled the world were... dark. Even in complete darkness, though, you occasionally see a spark of light – and few shone brighter than the Tex Murphy interactive movies. This was by far the best, mixing a 3D world with surprisingly good video to tell a captivating story of an old-school PI in the future, deep in a conspiracy stretching back to the Roswell incident.



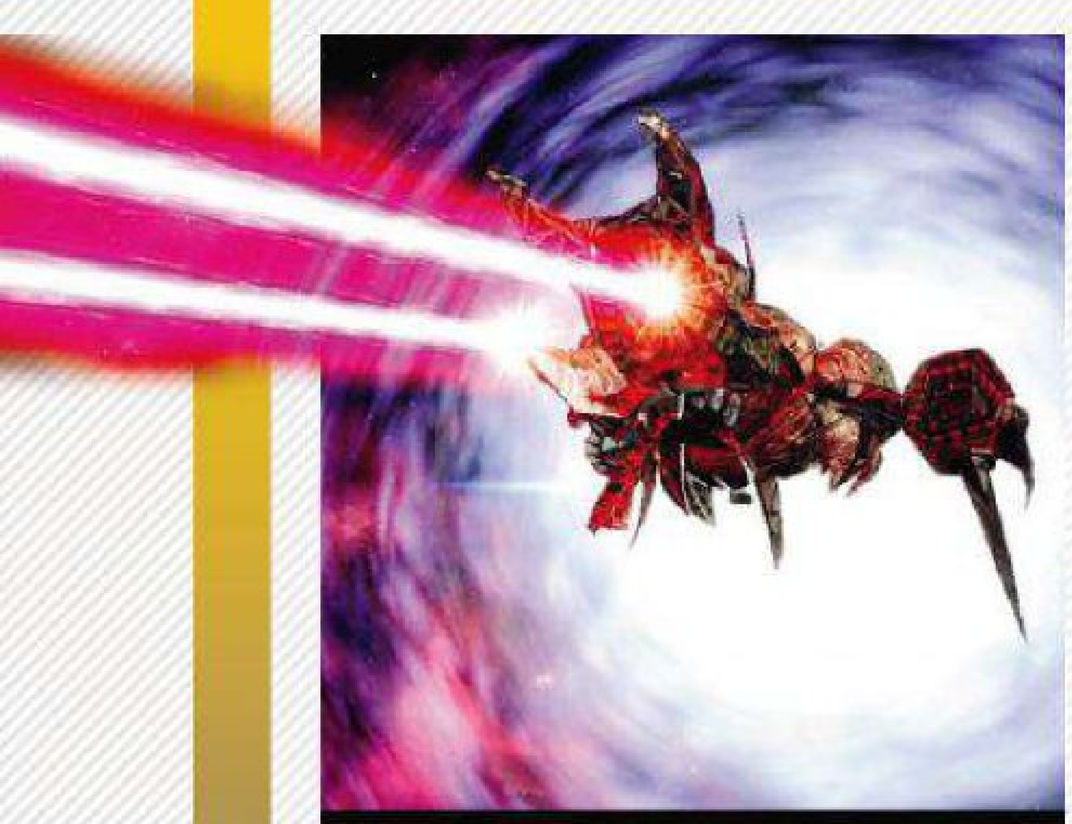
FAR CRY 2

£9.99 store.steampowered.com/app/19900

Far Cry 2 landed to much acclaim, then somewhat fizzled out. It's still one of the more successful open-world shooters, though – not just for its more hardcore approach to combat, but for the moral questions and unusual themes it plays with. You're the worst mercenary ever, heading into Africa without preparing for malaria, then stuck in a situation where all you can really hope to do is make the situation slightly less bad for all concerned without collapsing to your death.

filefactory.com

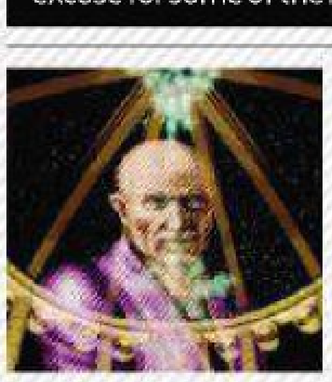
LESS THAN £5



FREESPACE 2

£3.70 www.gog.com/en/gamecard/freespace_2

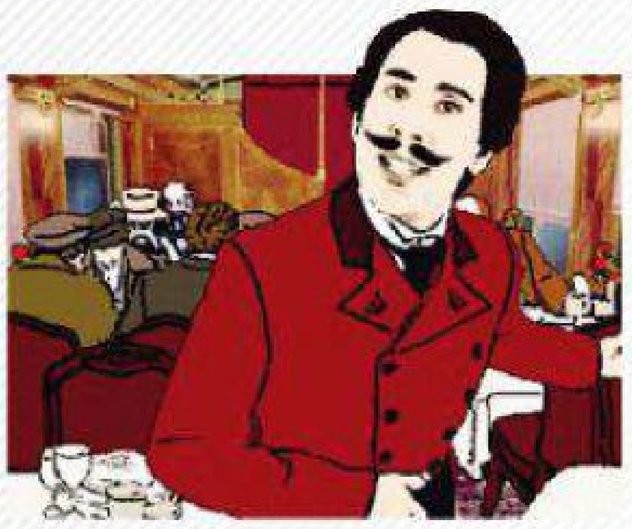
The tragedy of *Freespace 2* is that over a decade later, it's still the best space-shooter ever made. To play it is to curse the industry for letting the genre simply fade away. On the plus side, to finish it is to have the perfect excuse for some of the many fan-made campaigns.



MASTER OF ORION 1 + 2

£3.70 www.gog.com/en/gamecard/master_of_orion_1_2

Ask a hundred 4X fans to name their favourite game of the genre, and *Master of Orion 2* will almost certainly end up the winner. (Just don't ask about *3* if you want to get out alive – that game still has many bad memories attached to it). An epic game of strategy, diplomacy and discovery, and one whose age has done little to diminish its charms. Very few games have even come close to replicating its success, with the possible exception of *Galactic Civilizations II*. Which costs more.



THE LAST EXPRESS

£3.50 www.dotemu.com/en/download-game/608/the-last-express-collectors-edition

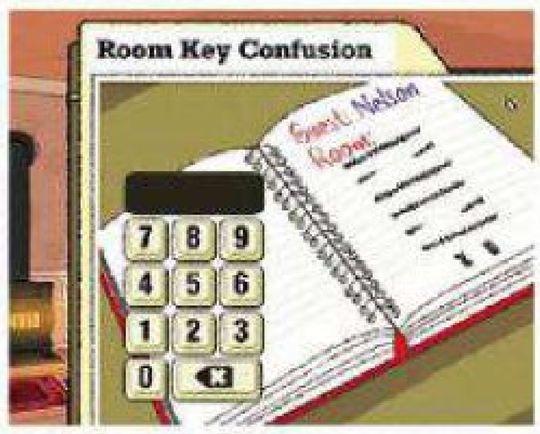
It's the eve of World War 1, and the Orient Express is unknowingly making its final journey across Europe before hostilities break out. This real-time adventure is a true classic, with no expense spared on atmosphere – from getting native speakers to play characters from across Europe, to meticulously recreating the cars on board the train itself. It's a magical, if occasionally slow, journey, and one guaranteed to stick with you long after the Orient Express reaches its final destination.



PUZZLE AGENT

£3.99 store.steampowered.com/app/31270

Puzzle Agent is the closest we have to a series like *Professor Layton*, with its quirky charm already netting a sequel later this year. The puzzles are tied together with a simple, surreal story, and while they're not always inspired, they hit a good balance between being simple enough to avoid frustration, and complex enough to feel satisfying when cracked.



GABRIEL KNIGHT

£3.70 www.gog.com/en/gamecard/gabriel_knight_sins_of_the_fathers

With Gabriel Knight, Jane Jensen created one of the best adventure game heroes around – a failed horror author who suddenly finds himself the heir to a monster-hunting legacy. At this price, the first two are terrific if you want a genuinely absorbing story, from a genuinely great adventure designer.





OUTCAST

£3.70 www.gog.com/en/gamecard/outcast

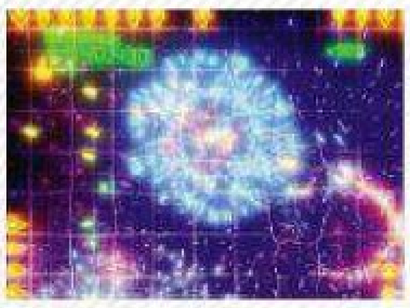
In another universe, *Outcast* was a platform-defining game. In ours, its high system-requirements and lack of support for 3D accelerator cards made it a cult classic, but nothing more. But wait! Now, we all have computers that can chew up this amazing RPG shooter hybrid. Give it enough time, and it'll reward you with an adventure that just keeps on giving.



FREEDOM FORCE VS THE THIRD REICH

£2.95 www.gamersgate.co.uk/DD-FFVSTTR/freedom-force-vs-the-third-reich

Freedom Force is a game about love – not in the sense that the characters defeat Hitler by kissing, but for its devotion to the excesses of Silver Age comics. The cast can't get enough of bellowing catchphrases in shiny spandex, and you can also make your own underwear-confused heroes to send out instead.



GEOMETRY WARS

£2.99 store.steampowered.com/app/8400

You'll learn to fear simple squares, circles and diamonds, even as you master the arts of blowing them away on the constantly fluctuating board of shimmering plasma. Your only goal is to survive long enough to set a high score – ultimate defeat is guaranteed. The trick is in building up a big score multiplier, and then staying alive long enough to actually make use of it.



X-COM: UFO DEFENCE

£2.99 store.steampowered.com/app/7760

The original *X-Com*, and still the best. It's not the easiest strategy game to get into – we advise watching some Let's Plays on YouTube – but it's one of the most satisfying. From the world map, you build bases to fight back against an endless stream of aliens. On the ground, a turn-based isometric combat system will have you biting your nails every time you step out into battle.



HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

£4.95 www.gamersgate.co.uk/DD-HBM/hitman-blood-money

Any old murderer can kill someone by emptying a clip of bullets into his face, but *Hitman* has little tolerance for such amateurism. It's about the joy of a plan coming together – dressing up as an actor to take out another with a real gun instead of the intended prop. It took IO several attempts, but *Blood Money* finally got it right. It's the ultimate murder sim, in desperate need of a sequel.

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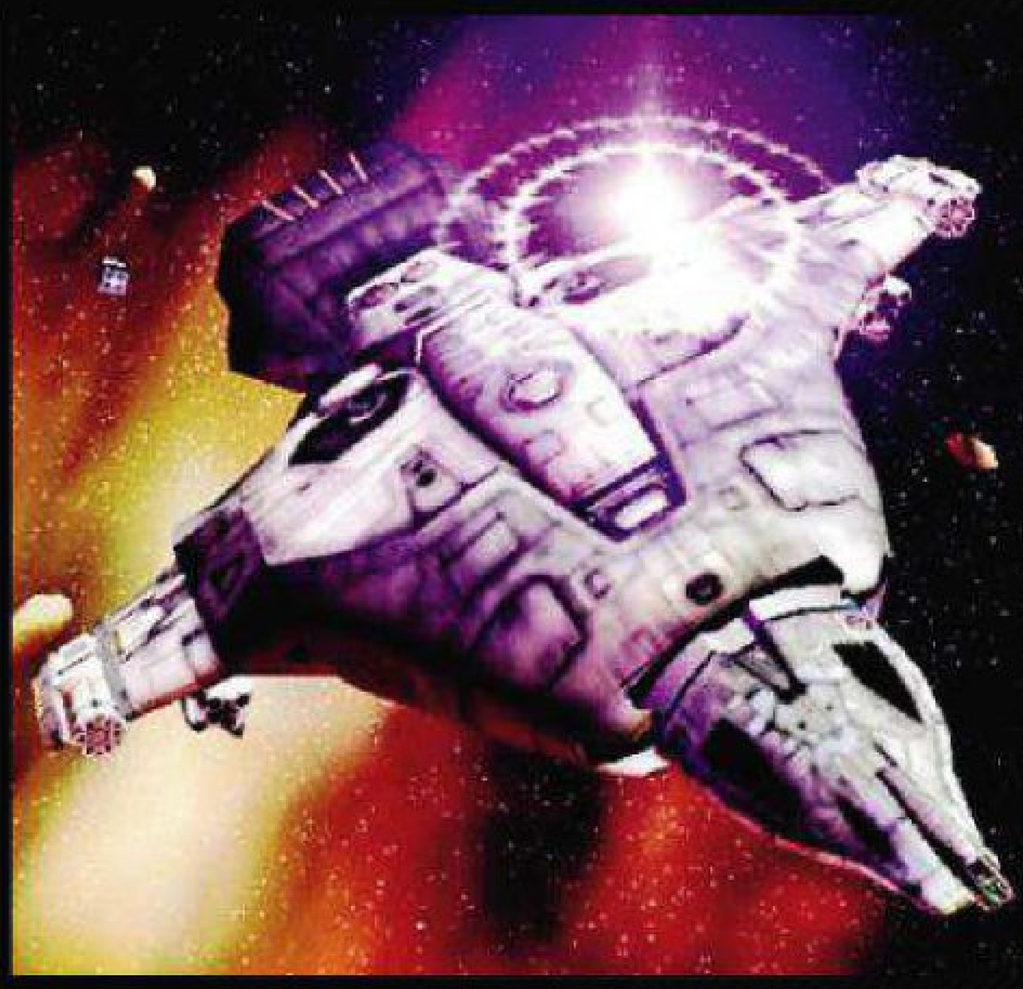
CHEAP AND CHEERFUL



THE MISADVENTURES OF PB WINTERBOTTOM

£3.99 store.steampowered.com/app/40930

He's an evil, pie-stealing, self-cloning machine! And he's hungry. PB Winterbottom is a clever-gimmick platformer along the lines of *Braid*, but with far less pretension. The specific gimmick is being able to record actions, then continue playing the level while your previous incarnations carry them out – pressing buttons, flipping see-saws and carefully timing dashes to retrieve delicious pie from the most inconvenient places. The retro monochrome look adds to the charm, and the puzzling itself is satisfying, but never too hard.



INDEPENDENCE WAR DELUXE

£3.70 www.gog.com/en/gamecard/independence_war_deluxe

If you've already played *Freespace*, or find regular space-shooters a little too primitive for your liking, there's the *Independence War* series, which brings real physics to space combat. The first instalment is the most hardcore. The second tones the difficulty down a lot, adding some *Elite*-style trading and *Privateer*-esque plot advancement. If you only pick one, go with that – but prepare to give it quite a bit of time before you feel entirely comfortable getting into fights and successfully pulling off stunts in zero-gravity.



SACRIFICE

£3.70 www.gog.com/en/gamecard/sacrifice

This cult strategy classic never got the attention it deserved at launch, but even today, it's worth taking a punt. Its up-close-and-personal approach to strategy kept things fast and furious, giving you access to game-changing powers in the middle of combat, as well as an army of loyal minions to do your bidding. It was a funny game too, though: full of bickering gods and great one-liners. Unlike many strategy games of the time, the tech and AI remain good enough for it to still be playable, and there still are no modern successors to make it feel as old as it otherwise might.





BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

£4.99 store.steampowered.com/app/15130

Very few people who played *Beyond Good and Evil* didn't end up loving it. Unfortunately, thanks to bad marketing and a meaningless name, very few people actually played it, full stop. It's an amazing game – an epic quest, a beautiful world, a superb heroine and a soundtrack to die for. By the point that most games start to feel old, *Beyond Good and Evil* has yet to even unfold everything it has to offer. There's supposedly a sequel on the way, but nobody's heard anything about it for years. To play the original game is to know precisely why you should care about this.

DIVINE DIVINITY

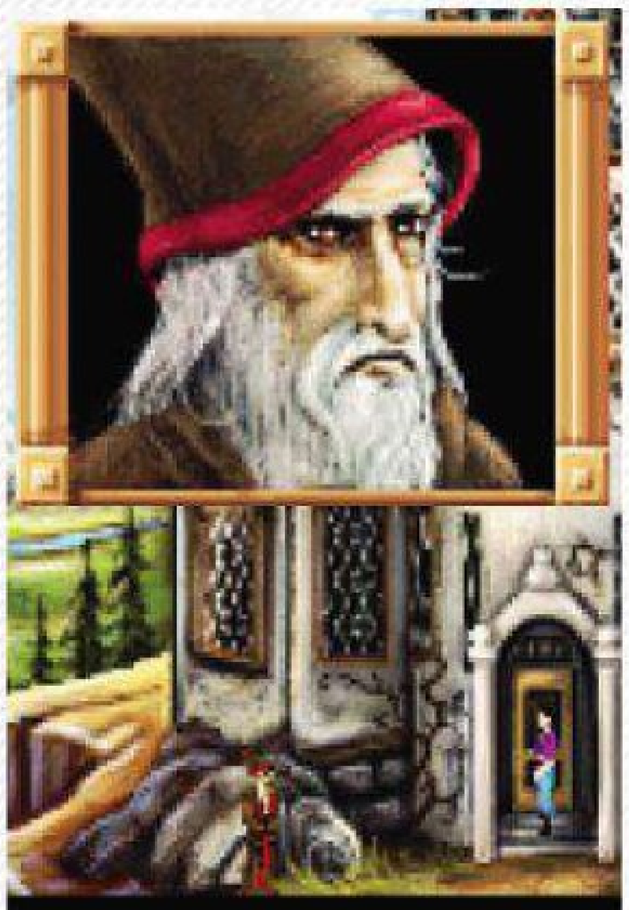
£3.70 www.gog.com/en/gamecard/divine_divinity

One of the few modern RPGs to even be mentioned in the same breath as games such as *Ultima VII*, and easily big and complex enough to fight in the same arena. If anything, it's slightly too big, but that's absolutely fine if you want a quest that you can settle into and play for the long haul. Skip the sequel, *Beyond Divinity*, though. Even fans of the series will usually agree that it wasn't very good, and that you'd be better off rejoining the action in the actual *Divinity 2*, though that's yet to have a big price cut.

FREE FOR ALL

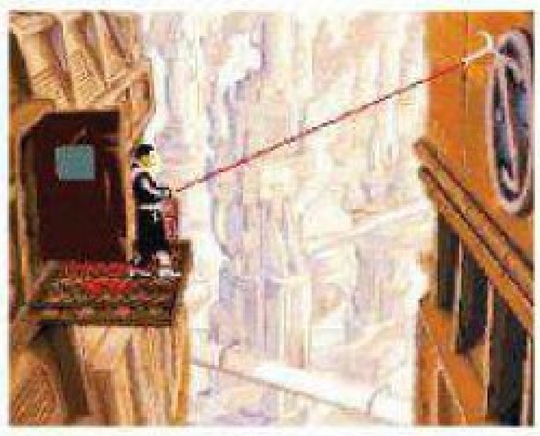


GRAND THEFT AUTO
www.rockstargames.com/classics
Nobody would have predicted that this simple top-down shooter – fun though it was – would one day be a billion-dollar franchise. It was a pure arcade game, right down to the fact that missions were simply a way of earning the points that you needed to unlock other cities. The sequel moved the action into the future and added a faction system, but for our money, the first was the better of the two games. You can download both of them for free, though, and find out for yourself. Be warned, however: they're rat-bastard hard.



KING'S QUEST III
www.agdinteractive.com/games/kq3
King's Quest III is either one of the oldest adventures around, or the newest. The original is from 1986, but this complete remake comes from just a little earlier this year. It keeps most of the game as it was in the original, but boosts the graphics to snazzy 256-colour VGA, tweaks some of the puzzles (the original featured a couple of very long sections where nothing much happened) and performs other important tweaks. You don't need to know the first two *King's Quest* games to follow it, but they've also been remade.

BENEATH A STEEL SKY
www.scummvm.org/downloads/#extras
Ever since it became freeware, *BASS* has become the adventure equivalent of an old Doctor Who episode – a comfortable, nostalgic and unmistakably British bit of sci-fi you can just slip into and enjoy. It's not a desperately long game, nor particularly tricky, but thanks to some fantastic world-building, it's very entertaining to pick your way through.



TYRIAN 2000
www.gog.com/en/gamecard/tyrian_2000
Top-down shooters have never really been the PC's thing, but this former shareware gave it a damn good go. The levels themselves are much as you'd expect, sending you against wave after wave of enemies to be blown up. The extras are impressive, too – from the story told in emails between missions, to the number of ships you can upgrade to.





STAR CONTROL 2
sc2.sourceforge.net
The problem with many 4X games is that they can be a little dull. *Star Control 2* is anything but. It's more adventurous than many adventure games, and there's real enjoyment in building the perfect fleet. Keep a walkthrough to hand, though – *SC2* is firmly from an era when letting you get into unwinnable situations was acceptable, and it's easy to find yourself snookered.



SARIEN.NET
www.sarien.net
If you'd rather play free Sierra games the old-fashioned way, try out Sarien.net. Thanks to an agreement with Activision, you don't need to feel guilty about it, and they're almost exactly the same as the originals. The only addition is the multiplayer support for chatting with other people in their single-player adventures. It tends to be a low-traffic site though, so usually you're still going to be on your own.



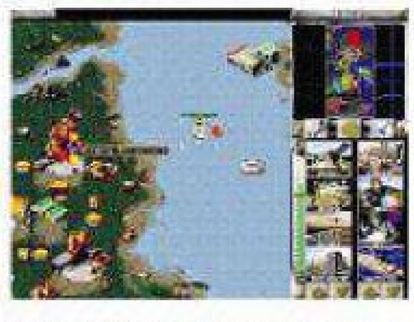
QUEST FOR GLORY II
www.agdinteractive.com
Another Sierra remake, but a very different game to *King's Quest*. *Quest for Glory II* is an adventure/RPG hybrid, often held up as the best of a very popular series. Set in the desert land of Shapeir, you can be a Fighter, Magic User or Thief, each with a customised main quest. This remade version switches the parser-based interface for point-and-click, and replaces many of the more frustrating moments.



THE HITCH-HIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY
www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/hitchhikers/game_nolan.shtml
Whether you enjoy this will depend on your tolerance for an adventure that doesn't merely hate you, but actively wants you to fail. The puzzles make little sense, and the unwinnable situations are cruel. If it didn't have the licence attached, it would likely be referred to as crap. But it does have the license, and on its own terms it can be fun.



ONE MUST FALL 2097
www.reloaded.org//download/One-Must-Fall-2097/136
It's sad, but this is the closest that the PC has ever had to a commercial *Street Fighter*-type game it could be proud of. Don't let its simple looks fool you: it's still an extremely entertaining game, with an excellent main campaign and plenty of robots to aspire to owning and upgrading. There was a fancy 3D sequel, but it bit off more than it could chew and vanished without a trace.



COMMAND AND CONQUER: RED ALERT
forums.commandandconquer.com/jforum/posts/list/6967.page
When playing an older game, it doesn't hurt to choose one that already relied on retro charm. This clash between Soviets and Allies takes place after Einstein had the wicked wheeze of going back in time to assassinate Hitler. The chunky graphics still hold their appeal, even if the AI now has all the power of a particularly stupid potato.

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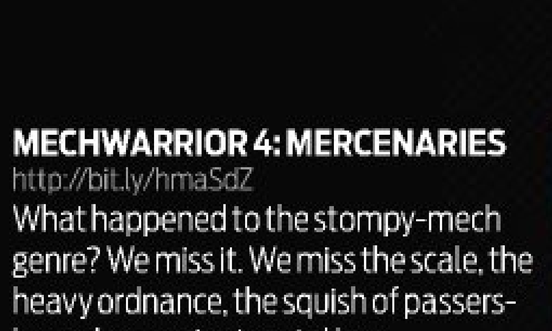
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CHEAP AND CHEERFUL



THE ELDER SCROLLS: DAGGERFALL
www.uesp.net/wiki/Daggerfall
How big do you want your games? A couple of towns? An overworld map pretending to be a continent? *Daggerfall* is 487,000 square kilometres, containing 15,000 towns, and you can walk over every last inch of it if you're crazy enough to actually want to. Most of it is unsurprisingly quite empty, but there's a seriously impressive collection of guilds, factions, quests and more to get involved with beyond the main quest. It's an odd game, but an immersive one – and one you won't be done with any time soon if it gets its hooks in.

MECHWARRIOR 4: MERCENARIES
http://bit.ly/hmaSdZ
What happened to the stompy-mech genre? We miss it. We miss the scale, the heavy ordnance, the squish of passers-by under our giant metal legs. *MechWarrior 4* was one of the last games to offer this kind of action, but there's some consolation: it's free, and it's had several expansions since becoming so. Download it here, complete with the extra MekPaks, and relive the experience of towering over the battlefield. And, quite likely, the experience of tumbling down towards the battlefield, walking tanks being Very Silly Indeed.







ELITE
www.iancgbell.clara.net/elite/pc/index.htm
Some games need no introduction, and *Elite* is on that list. The original space trading simulator may no longer be a technical showpiece, but it's where the whole genre started. Of course, that's just a cover for the real reason to hit the site. Three words: Elite: The Musical. Not many audio files, sadly, but your mind can fill in the blanks.

GROUND CONTROL
www.fileplanet.com/217370/210000/fileinfo/Ground-Control-(Free-Game)
Ground Control put the tactics back into real time strategy, making the bold decision to throw out bases and resources to simply focus on set units. A bit like real war, where the first part of the battle is very rarely 'build a functional, economically viable city'. You need to sign up to FilePlanet to get a key, but the download is free. Don't expect to find many other players, but there's still a small active community if you look around.





MARATHON TRILOGY
trilogyrelease.bungie.org
To PC gamers, this is best known as 'those smelly Mac games Bungie did before finally making *Halo*'. To Mac gamers, they're 'those amazing Mac games Bungie did before selling out with *Halo*'. Either way, they're an interesting slice of history – a series of very story-driven *Doom*-style shooters, fully playable on PC thanks to an open-source version of the engine. Just download the player, AlephOne, and drop it into a directory of data files to play the games.

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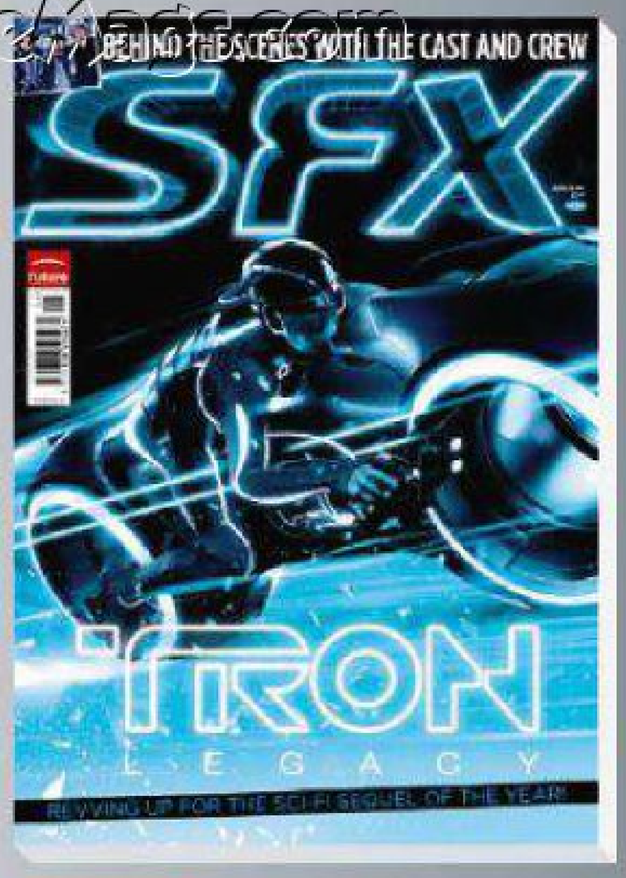
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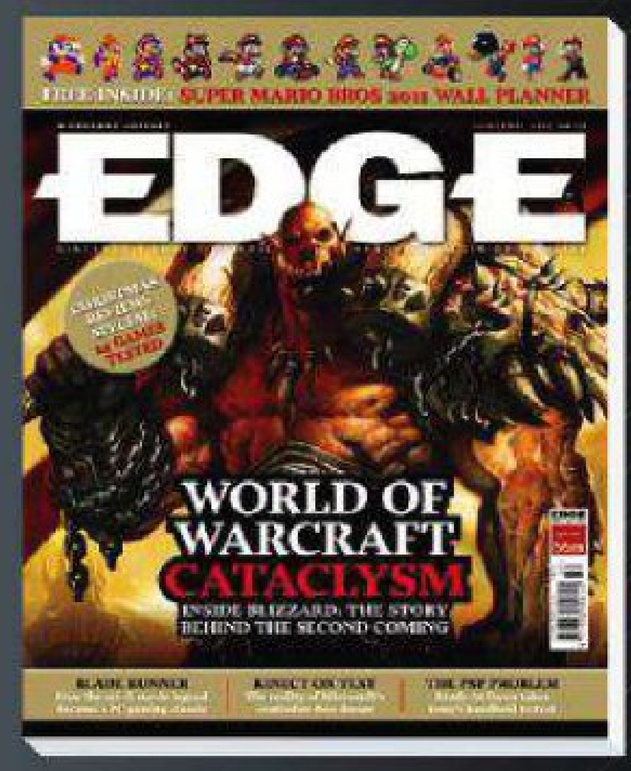
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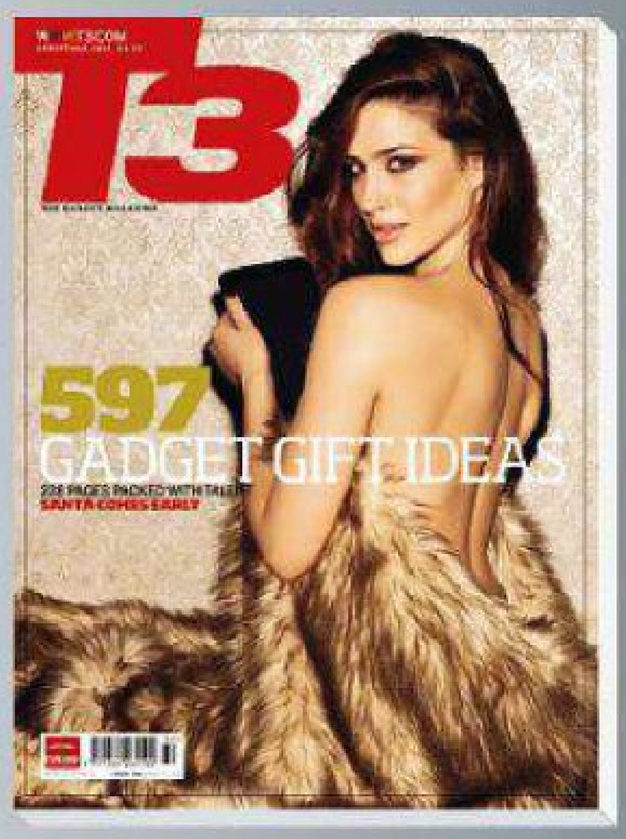
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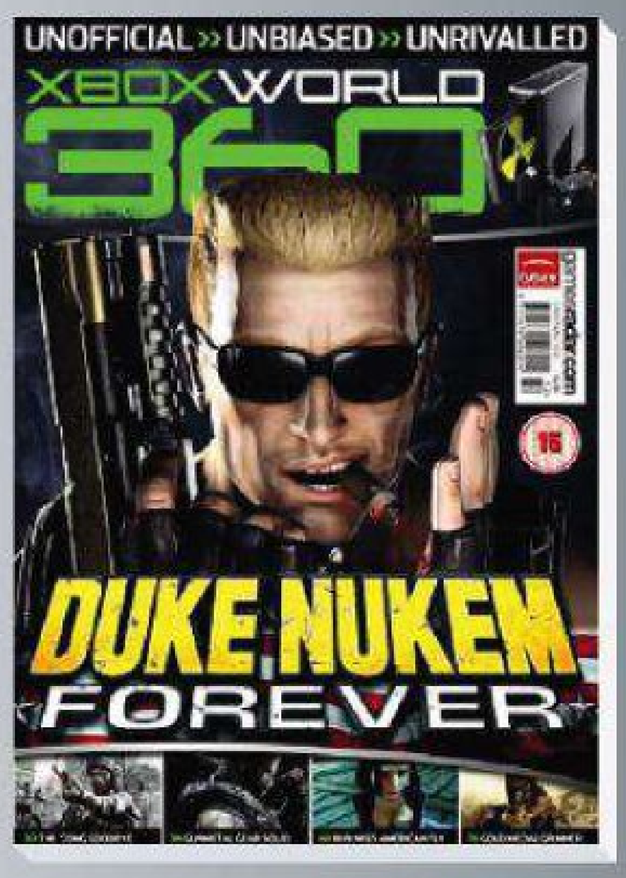




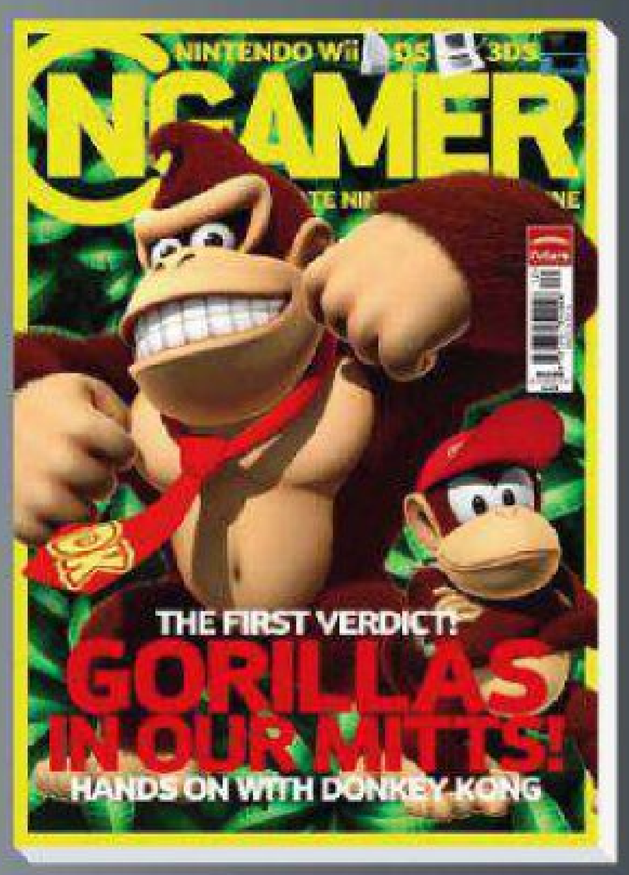


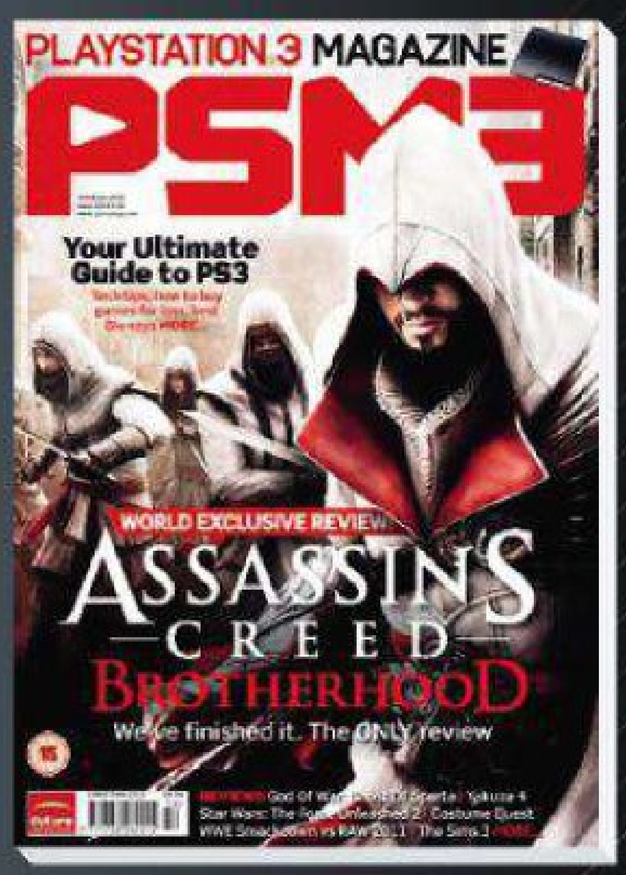




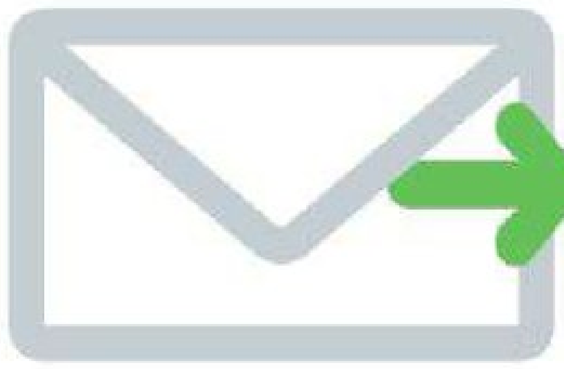








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SPK UR MND

■ **Cannot. Wait. For. *Dragon Age 2*. With that and Sky Atlantic HD I may as well quit my job!!**
Mark Gregson
Good idea. That probably won't have any bad long term consequences.

■ **There clearly aren't enough pseudonyms in your publication.**
Lee Thaxor
You don't really believe we have a writer called 'Graham Smith,' do you? Come come, Thaxor.

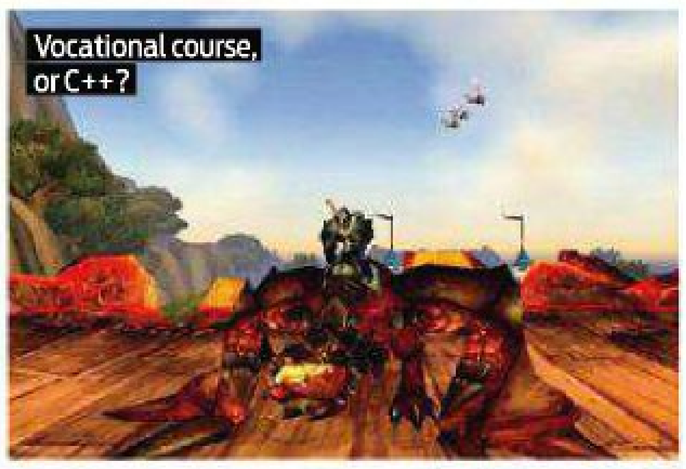
■ **Sings of a solar empire with a masters degree in economics, beat it with an ugly stick and times the scale by stupid.**
Samuel Aaron Whitehead
We think you mean songs. Or signs. Or singe. Hinge? Binge of a solar empire. Ginge? Fringe of a solar empire. No, we don't know what you're saying.

■ **How can this year's best 100 PC games of all time be completely different to last year's?**
JM
We've got a larger judging panel, and some of them have no doubt changed their minds. New games have come out, and old games have been changed forever by their developers and the communities who inhabit them.

■ **Which is better? A 990x or a sandy bridge???**
DENNIS Hiller
We recommend trying questions out on friends and family first, to see if they make any sense.

The ones that snap

Re: Kyle's letter in issue 224 [*asking how to get into game development* – Ed] I have several bits of advice for him. This evidence is largely from my own experience and talking to other people in creative industries, but my impression is that most vocational courses are a waste of time and money. In Kyle's case he would do much better to do a course in Computer Science at somewhere like Reading and in his spare time work on a kick-arse portfolio.



Vocational course, or C++?

While I'm sympathetic of his frustration at learning how to mod games, it is those kids that persevere with it that will become game designers. Learning the basics of any skill takes an initial push that not everyone can muster. Those kids that teach themselves C++ and have a huge portfolio of things they have programmed and designed will be the ones that snap up those game developer jobs – because from an employer perspective nothing is more impressive than someone who can self-motivate themselves to produce high quality work.
Jimmy Nicholls

Sure. And while you're at it, you could always just sell the games you make, start your own business, and be your own boss. That said, a computer science course will teach you how to talk to computers, but a good games design course will home in on the craft of making games. A computer science graduate won't necessarily be aware that games such as* Minecraft, WoW *and* Farmville *appeal to very different people, even though they're all online experiences where you spend hours doing repetitive tasks with friends. There's a definite craft to making a game, and learning it from scratch can take a lifetime – even Sid Meier's latest* Civilization *wasn't perfect.
PCG



"It's the kids who persevere who will become game designers"

THE HOT MAIL

The list goes on

My father is 72 years old, and plays a Level 85 Night Elf Hunter in *World of Warcraft*. I would like to ask all your readers just how many older PC players you know?

Since his retirement, he has the advantage of having time to go through a game properly. He enjoys the details most of us just plough through between work and family. Last week, he completed all the archaeology digs in the game.

And he's not just limited to *WoW*. He's completed *Diablo 2*, *Oblivion*, *Titan Quest*, *Sacred 1* and *2*, *Dungeon Siege 1* and *2*, *Lord of the Rings Online*, the list goes on.

I live in London, while he lives in Sydney (Australia). But distance doesn't stop us catching up over the weekend to trade some stuff, and when we find the time, we gather a few others to run through a dungeon or two. Gaming has bonded us over the years, and it's nice to have grown up with a father who shares the same interest.

Next time you meet a Level 85 Female Night Elf Hunter in *WoW*, just watch out: you might be playing with a 72-year-old retired psychiatrist – who just happens to be my dad!
Michael Lee

Positively heartwarming! We don't know a single WoW player who isn't looking forward to his or her retirement, as it happens. To think the rest of our elders are planning gardening, soaps and gossip. Thanks for sharing, Michael.
PCG

The best missive we receive every issue will win its sender a shock-proof 32GB USB drive worth £70, courtesy of our lovely friends at Corsair. Find out about these gadgets at www.corsair.com. See above for how to get in touch with PC Gamer!



Identifying a turtle

I've been sitting in my main base for about two minutes now, planning my next move. He has map-control, an expansion and a shitload of zealots. I have a few stalkers and sentries. He has turtled with a lot of cannons. I have been kettled into my resource-exhausted base.

StarCraft II makes you think quickly or die. A dozen strategies fly through my head. Carriers? Too expensive. Warp prisms? Not enough time. Dark Templar? Too many cannons... or are there? If I have one talent it's identifying a turtle's soft underbelly and I have just seen it. The back of his base. No

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cannons and no units, they're all outside my base.

So how do I get my motley army there? Break through his lines? Suicide. Warp prism transport? Too expensive. But that does give me an idea... Do I have a Stargate? Check. Fleet Beacon? Check. 400 minerals? Check. Oh fuck yeah.

The Mothership is at the back of his base now and the Mass Recall is primed. I activate it through my mini-map, aiming at the large blob that is my army. That is my army right? Oh shit no. That blob was my idle probe workforce. They are now all in my enemy's base. Great.

I wait for a recharge of the Mass Recall. Tense moments pass. My enemy is getting aggressive. He launches his all-out attack. This one my army won't survive. Forcefields go down but he is still breaking through. The Mass Recall is charged and WHOOSH! My army is in his base. I move quickly, destroying probes and pylons rendering his cannons useless. His army arrives at his own burning base. I'd love to be able to say that I held the line and achieved victory, that my opponent watched impotently as his base was blasted to dust. But no, he broke through, destroyed my army and attained victory.

He contacts me after: "Dude, you are crazy, gg though." I smile, knowing that my last move must have scared him deeply. I go and research what I did wrong, what counters I could have used and how I could have won the game. No videogame has ever done this to me before and that's why I love *SC2*. It makes a perfectionist out of you.

William Parsons

It certainly does, William. Unless it totally destroys you first, of course. On the whole,* StarCraft *is a great example of a game with a culture so strong that it informs the play, and even shaped the course of the sequel. There's such a great scope of playstyles that it even makes good TV.
PCG

Worth the price

John Morris (PCG 224) just left me in tears laughing. Writes a letter explaining how good his £300 SSD is before randomly ending with "you're magazine is too expensive. Regards."

Ah, the shift in tone is priceless, ignoring the wrong use of 'you're'. That was worth the price of admission alone. Thank you. Re-reading it I'm still laughing.

Your magazine IS too expensive.

Aaron

We think of it like bad game insurance. £5.99 a month to never buy a £40 stinker again isn't bad, surely?
PCG

Nodding my head

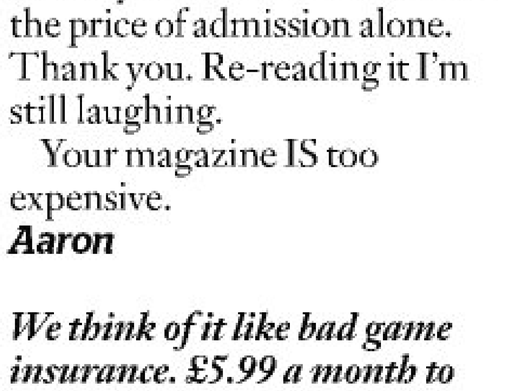
I loved your Ten Commandments piece in the March edition, it was the first time that I read an article that truly had me nodding my head in agreement. I have a discerning taste in games, I only buy what looks truly inspiring and I am willing to pay good money (my liking for flight simulation has led me to spend God knows how much on *FS 2000* to present). Am I a gaming snob? An elitist? An over-fussy never-pleased monster?

NO, I AM A CONSUMER AND I DON'T BUY LAZILY MADE/CONCEIVED GAMES.

I hope a lot of developers read that and take it in, because I'm sure most others won't part with their cash unless they up their game!!!

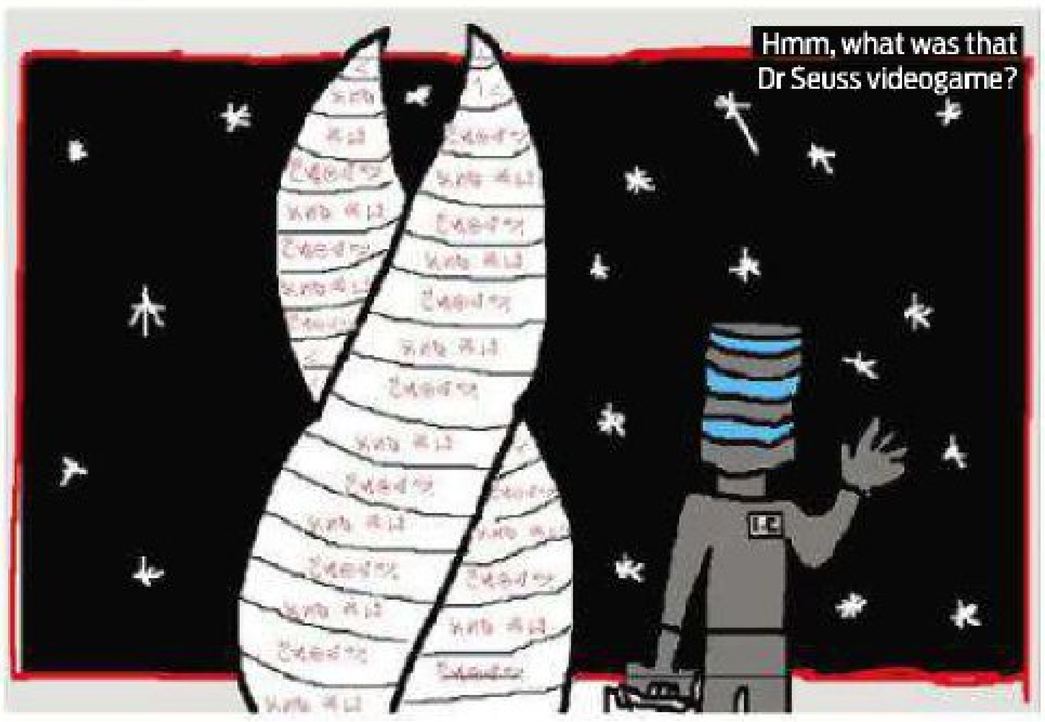
Charlie Fuller

Developers are mostly terrified of pouring money into new ideas that might not sell, so they've gone the other way, feeding us familiar tastes. Only small companies seem to feel comfortable taking risks with new ideas, so maybe we're entering an age where large companies are forced to innovate to compete. If we all vote with our money, though, we can't help but foster the kind of games we love.
PCG



"Am I snob? An elitist? An over-fussy never-pleased monster?"

TOP DRAW



Benjamin Worth just won £50 in Play vouchers for drawing the above picture of a game, using his favourite graphics program. While he was doing that, you were probably asleep, weren't you? The least you can do is guess what it is, like Thomas Buick did for Callum Norton's Boomer picture back in PCG 224, thereby winning fame. If you want those vouchers next month, get cracking on your own scrawl and sent it to pcgamer@futurenet.com.

Send your daubings to pcgamer@futurenet.com – the one we like the best wins the voucher. No prizes for guessing the game, but the first to guess correctly gets their name in print.

£50 voucher from PLAY.COM WIN!

SPK UR MND

■ **Dear PC Gamer, I'm very excited about the possibility of internship with Penny Arcade, please find attached my cover letter and a copy of my resume. Thank you for your time,**
James
Your first mistake was making A SINGLE MISTAKE.

■ **Please excuse the typo, I'm very sorry.**
James
Apologising for your mistakes? SECOND MISTAKE.

■ **So I just scanned through the review archive on the disc and... well: PCG 25: *Destruction Derby* – 86%? *Worms* – 40%!? I DEMAND NAMES!**
Urby
PCG 25? That was probably Rich's fault. You know what they're like when they're two.

■ **Sorry about the messy typing I'm having to do it one handed while reaching across something.**
Ben
We're going to file this under "things PC Gamer didn't need to hear."

■ ***Shogun 2* demo is lovely but after two years of muskets and triangle hats I forgot which end to hold a katana.**
Charming Hooligans
The most important thing is to pick an end, and stick with it for as long as you can.

■ ***BATTLEFIELD 3*? The graphics look a lot better than *Battlefield 2* :P The best part is looking at my legs :P**
Zachariah Chou
We get filth like this all the time. We've had enough of your smut, Mr Chou. Cover your legs up.

■ **'Get That Cat Out My Garden: The Awesome Adventures of the Damn Stray' – 0% - hampered by the fact it doesn't exist.**
Damn Stray
This didn't get reviewed because it's a stray cat reviewing its own imaginary adventures.

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TXT UR REVIEW

Text your review of around 20 words to 87474, using 'PCG' as the first word. Include your name, the game's name and a score.



Texts cost 25p plus your standard network charge

Dragon Age: Origins
How much free time does this game think I have?
89%
Richard Mault

Test Drive Unlimited 2
Massively online open racing massively broken at release. Foundation's there so fingers crossed for better things.
52%
Jacob Applewhite

Dead Space 2
More Violence, More Blood, More Weapons, More Enemies, More Everything!
95%
Spencer Cheshire

Civilization V
The only game where Gandhi can nuke Genghis Khan.
95%
Aaron Newton

Regularly, not solidly

Blood Bowl: LE is the game I've been playing regularly, albeit not solidly, for months on end now. Don't get me wrong, it was great to see it reviewed in PC Gamer, and I completely agree that this new edition has helped to flatten out the learning curve, but there's more to be said for this gem! Specifically the multiplayer area of the game. There's a great player-run set of leagues that really make the game that much more fun.

I've been playing in the Orca Cola Championship, which at last count had about 280 or so active coaches competing, and it's now entering its 8th season (second season for the Legendary Edition). If you've got the game and haven't heard of this league it definitely merits investigation. I'm damned excited to see how many skulls my Khemri team will crack this time around!

Eighty-two is a fair score, which gets my thumbs-up. But for me, a lot of the enjoyment comes out of the player-run organisations with all the camaraderie. The community is always what makes the game.
James Livett



"I'm damned excited to see how many skulls my team will crack"

***We agree that the community makes the game – even in singleplayer games where the community is just you and some idiot NPCs. This Orca Cola league sounds almost as good though – if any readers are interested in piling in with James and stomping his jewel-encrusted undead face into the dirt, you can check it out at* orca-cola.com/forum.**
PCG

A bit annoying

I start the game (*Dawn of War 2* in this case), it tells me to do all the usual stuff. I log in, accept the terms of usage agreement and it tells me there is an update available. Fair enough, no problems so far. It then closes the game to install the update and restarts, still fair enough if a bit annoying. However, after doing all the terms of usage crap again it then tells me there is another update available. So it restarts the game again and I fill in the stuff again and then... there is another update available! Fuck off Microsoft. *ALT+F4*. (PS: Don't think I'm not playing *DoW2* as a result of this, I will do it later and I have already clocked 50+ hours before having to re-install due to a reformat.)
Joe Bartram

Games for Windows Live, we meet again. There's always* Dawn of War: Retribution, *which doesn't use the bloody thing. You can also play as Orks in pirate hats.
PCG

YOU'RE PLAYING



Geoff Bridges
Currently playing:
Fallout 3



I am standing on the roof of Hank's Electrical Store. All is silent around me, a silence broken only by the quiet chirping of some small creature.

Around me are the ruins of what was once a bustling suburb and a highway that leads off into the distance, the street lamps that once gave light to travellers now standing shattered and lifeless.

In the far off distance I can just make out the decaying remains of what used to be America's great capital city. The Washington Monument, which has stood for the last four hundred years, still stabs defiantly into the sky, vigilant against the howling wind. Close by are the shells of buildings and museums and other famous landmarks, now lost forever.

As I look over this desolate land, the first rays of the sun creep over the horizon. The sun rises slowly, majestically, a vivid reminder that though the world may be reduced to a wasteland, life still goes on. The light from the sun bathes the scene in a golden hue. It is beautiful. I am filled with a sense of calm and utter peace.

I will never see everything this game has to offer. Its richness and depth are far more than any one person can fully experience and appreciate. I have been back here many times since and seen the same sunrise, but I have never been able to recapture the magic of that first time – the moment that, for me at least, cemented this game as one of the greatest games of the last decade, maybe of all time.

The moment passes and I climb down, drawing my weapon in anticipation of battles yet to come.

crucial

Tell us about the game you love, and why, in 300 words. Write to the usual place, and include your name and a photo. The best piece each month wins 2GB of Crucial Ballistix RAM carefully chosen for their PC by Crucial's experts – see *www.crucial.com/uk*.



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PC GAMER NETWORK

PLAY

JOIN OUR WORLD OF FRIENDLY FIRE



The heavens opened, and a voice said "let there be an awesome community of people who play games together!" Oh, here it is.

APR

14

Play among yourselves
Our *Minecraft* server is back to life! Join us for a block party.

22

Portal 2 released
Book your robo-buddy in our forum now for co-op on launch day.

24

Easter Sunday
Celebrate the resurrection by playing zombie games all day.

MAY

1

Play among yourselves
Pinch, punch, shotgun, stickybomb, first of the month with *TF2*.

11

PCG 227 on sale
It's been 227 issues since the entire world was invented? We should have a party.

THE PC GAMER STEAM COMMUNITY POPULATION 36,403

The internet is a tricky place. Our *Minecraft* server went rogue a little while ago, refusing to allow connections. A bit of poking, and we discovered it was refusing to turn itself off, and thus wouldn't allow itself to be updated.

We sent Rich into its inner core with a hammer to try and extract its brain, but it turned off all the air and he died. See what we do in service of our glorious community? Fortunately, elsewhere we keep ticking over, adding yet more soldiers to our PCG army in *Rift*, and consolidating our space in *EVE*. Help us in our fight against the sentient machines by joining one of our many guilds, clans and groups at *pcgamer.com/forum*.

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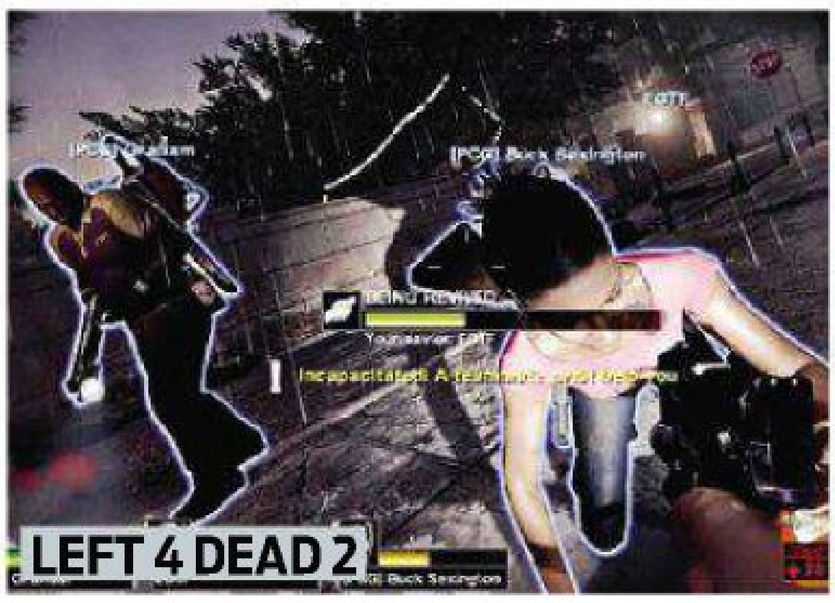
TEAM FORTRESS 2

IP: 85.236.100.18 **Port:** 27115
Craig hasn't been playing Spy on our server recently. It's all a ruse. Take his spot now, but don't ever trust him.



KILLING FLOOR

IP: 85.236.100.18 **Port:** 7957
Slooow moootion heaaadshots. We forgot how satisfying these were until a recent lunchtime session.



LEFT 4 DEAD 2

IP: 85.236.100.18 **Port:** 27615
Another resurgence in zombie games means we in the office get called back to the game that does the undead best. Join us.



MINECRAFT

IP: 83.222.240.186 **Port:** 28265
Our old server went rogue, so our new one is fresh. Come and carve out your own corner of paradise in our world.

HOW TO JOIN THE STEAM COMMUNITY

STEP 1
If you don't already have a Steam account, head to *www.steampowered.com*, download the client, run it and sign up.

STEP 2
Install your games from the Steam client. If you're having technical problems, hit the forums at the Steam site.

STEP 3
In the community tab of the Steam client, search for PC Gamer and join our group. Then chat, play and troll to your heart's content.

FileFactory.com

We need a hero

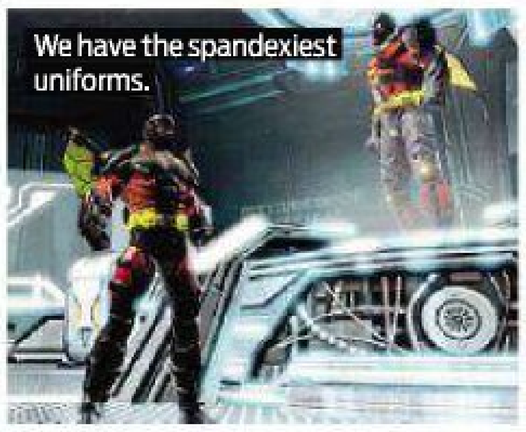
DC Universe Online is a land fit for PC Gamer's champions

Organisation is a must when you're fighting for justice, heroism and the freedom to wear your underpants outside your clothes.

The members of our *DC Universe Online* guild know this. They live on the EU PvE server 'In Brightest Day', and are frighteningly well-drilled. Raids are scheduled regularly, both in-game and via the part of the forum reserved for superheroes (*bit.ly/e8FBEt*). They've been ripping through the instances so far: we've sent in a nine-man squad to clear the Batcave of goons, and sprinted through the Khandaq raid.

DINNER
DINNER
BATMAN

Forum user Numlox has been helping some of the lower-level players in the game boost their stats. The helpful chap has been coordinating raids in lesser areas to disseminate the kind of loot necessary for some of the bigger, late-game jobs. It's a great place to start if you're new to the game, and DC Universe Online itself is a great MMO to kick off with if you're new to the genre. It's got actual man-punching, for one thing. Once again, our forum's the place to be for signups, and if you want to roll with us, you'll have to be a hero. But we know you all are anyway.


We have the spandexiest uniforms.


And the coolest parties.

PLAYER OF THE MONTH

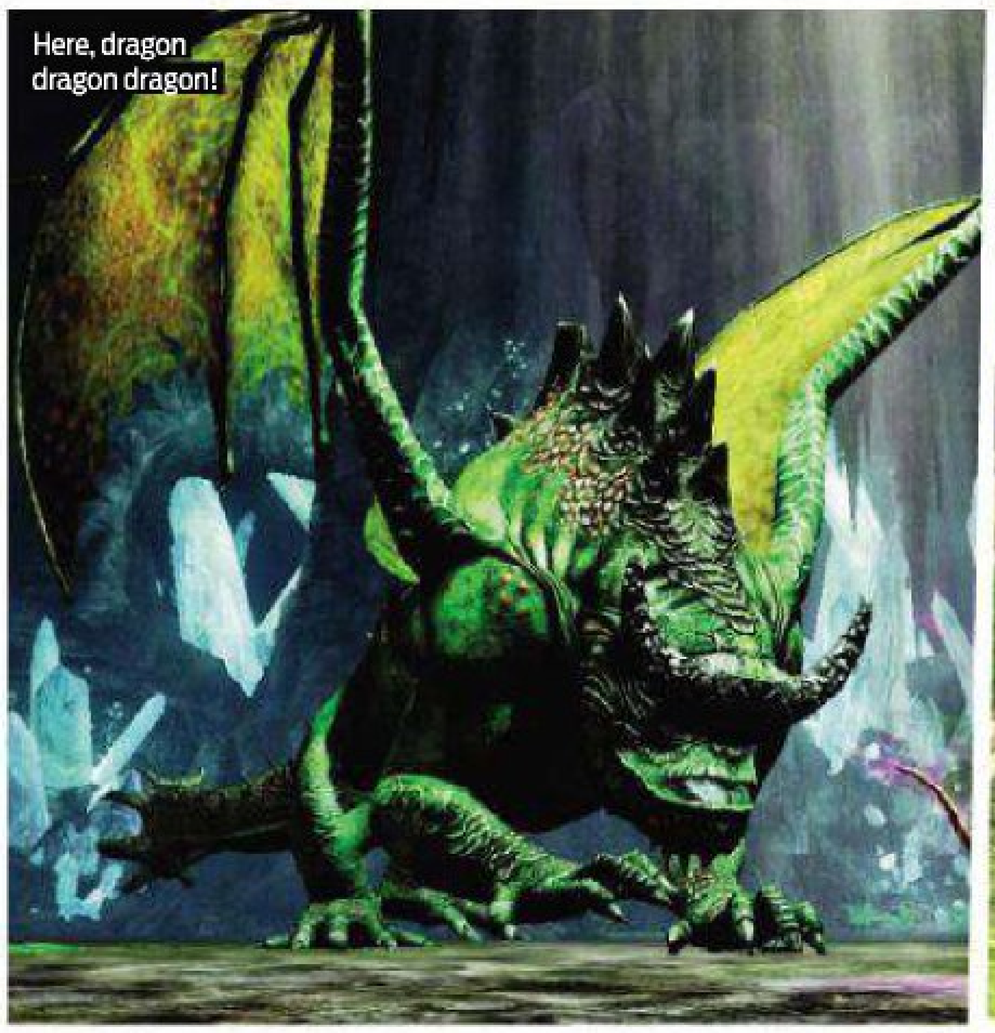
Who? Thunderchild82
Where? *Rift*
Why? TC (as we've affectionately just decided is his nickname) is one of the *Rift* guild's instigators.

PC GAMER'S NEW RIFT GUILD

We're so far ahead of the curve in the PC Gamer community that our *Rift* guild was up and operating before the game was even released. Kicked into gear by forumite Thunderchild82, our operations in this fantasy MMO are already in full swing.

The guild's first raids were an unparalleled success, with MMO veteran Rex gaining special honours as tank extraordinaire. *Rift*'s structure means new players don't need to fret too hard about how their skills slot into the guild: each character gets three sub-classes with which to specialise. So you can be a tank one raid, and follow it up with some DPS contribution in the next, making yourself useful when you'd be nothing but a terrible burden in other MMOs.

Details, for those of you who want to join up: we're playing on Steampike, an EU PvE server, and we chose to side with the Defiant. Will we tidy our rooms? NO! Our *Rift* forum – nestled in the Play With PC Gamer section – is the best place to make yourself known to the existing crew. Find a direct link at *bit.ly/ew3abP*. Guild boss Thunderchild's in-game name is Talizorah – track either he or Olgit down and they'll be able to welcome you into the fold.


Here, dragon dragon dragon!


You don't want to sit down too fast wearing that.

NOW PLAYING

Ventrilo
Server: 85.236.100.69
Port: 7764
Password: beard
Our 64-berth Ventrilo server is there for you if you enjoy the twin acts of playing games with people and talking to those people about playing games that you're playing. It's divided by game: the *EVE* guys have their own corner where they talk about spaceships, and the *WoW*ers live over in another portion. If you need to chat to fellow PCG guildies, hop on with the details above and get your mouth a-flapping. Be nice though, or else we'll seal it shut like that bit in the Matrix.

Guild Wars
Guild name: PC Gamer
Message: Falco Darkwind or Killjoy Assassin
The wait for *GW2* was too much for forum member Archernick, who – with our blessing – has kickstarted a PCG *Guild Wars* guild. There's a cheap beauty in NCsoft's MMO – the lack of a subscription fee means lapsed players who fancy some friendly action don't need to worry about their credit card statements at the end of the month. Hop over to *bit.ly/guildguild* to get involved before they make the leap to *Guild Wars 2* and are swamped with signups.

World of Warcraft
Server: Steamwheedle Cartel – EU
Guild name: PCG
Contact: Ieem (Tim Edwards)
Faction: Horde
The PCG guild has settled into *Cataclysm* now. We know the new zones like the backs of our collective mouse hands. We're a giant presence on Steamwheedle Cartel, with three guilds under our banner including one for Horde alts, and another for Alliance characters – not to mention the core PCG group, comfortably the largest on the server. Head to *bit.ly/bpF7AK* to join us.

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WIN!

The winner of PCG 223's 'If the cap fits' competition



We're pretty cool guys. On a night out on the town, we are models of sartorial excellence in all regards but one. We need headwear. So gigantic, hairy thanks to Wendy Costello, and her competition entry. We asked you to send us your best PopCap-themed hats, and Wendy did just t hat.

Wendy's base cap was already special – both pink *and* sparkly, it would look good on any fashionable head – but it's her modifications that make it pop.

On the brim, a miniature *Bejeweled* board, decorated with shiny jewels. On the back, a bobbly *Plants vs Zombies* sunflower. Best of all: the two papier mache peashooters on either side, painted to look exactly like their *PvZ* inspiration. We'd be happy just carting them round on our bonces, but Wendy's included an extra function in this already-excellent hat: A GUN.

Two guns, really. The peashooters *actually fire*, launching foam discs at anyone foolish enough to get within head-range. It's forced all of us in turn to pop the hat on, then run around the office, making laser noises and shooting people doing some actual work. It's the best hat we've ever shot each other with, and for that, Wendy deserves her new Asus netbook and excellent bundle of PopCap goodies. ■

WHAT WENDY WON...

- Asus Eee PC 1201NL
- Atom N270 CPU
- 1GB RAM
- 160GB
- 12.1" WXGA
- Windows XP Home Netbook
- A year's supply of games, including *Peggle*, *Plants vs Zombies* and *Bejeweled 3*
- Travel mug
- Peggle mug
- PopCap T-shirt
- PopCap mousemats
- Plants vs Zombies iPhone skin
- Plants vs Zombies figurine

www.popcap.com

The winning entry...

'POP CAP'

by Wendy Costello



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Now win this...

An enviable PC

It's all too easy to get class envy in most MMOs. You've levelled your magic dog or impractically clad lady priest to the midway point in their character progression, and now you start seeing your friends' characters doing things you wish you could do. Healing people, say, or twatting them with a big stick.

If you want to try a new style, other games force you to scrap Silverwing McMajesticspear and start again. Not *Rift*. Trion's MMO lets you choose up to three subclasses to your character via something called Soul Attunement. After choosing one of four archetypes, players pick their three specialisations early in the game. *Rift's* your game if you want your tank to also dabble in DPS.

The land of Telara, where *Rift* is set, looks amazing. It deserves a machine with enough grunt to keep raids stutter-free. Thanks to the game's makers, Trion Worlds, we've got such a beast to give away. To win it, you'll need to complete the task set out below. This Cyberpower PC is worth a grand, and will make your travels in Telara gorgeous. All you need to do is open a big swirly portal to the question below, and get creative. ■

RIFT

THE PRIZE

- Cyberpower Lan Party Evo Game Cube
- Silverstone SG07 Mini Itx Case
- Core i5 2500 CPU 3.3GHZ
- CPU watercooling
- 4GB 1333MHZ RAM
- 1TB HDD
- DVDRW
- GTX 560 Ti 1GB
- Windows 7 Home Premium

www.riftgame.com



HOW TO WIN

Shred our faces off

We want to hear a riff. (Like *Rift*, do you see?) Bust out your guitar, your trumpet, your violin, your kazoo-and-bongo combo and make us a wicked riff. The one that makes us go "whoah!" in the most Keanu-ly manner wins the PC. Use mp3 or a similar common format for ease of listening and sending.

Name

Address

Postcode

Email

Phone Number

Send your competition entry and this form to: **The 'No Riff-Raff Rift-Riff' competition, PC Gamer, 30 Monmouth St, Bath BA1 2BW.** The closing date for this competition is May 11, 2011.

Your contact details from this entry form will only be used for contacting you if you are a winner. For terms and conditions applying to PC Gamer competitions, point your eyes at the small print leftwards.



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PC GAMER

REVIEWS

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalising the review. We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

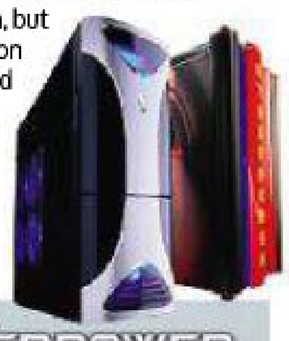
76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining – just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★
A game scoring 90% or more is the proud recipient of a PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

THE PC GAMER MACHINES

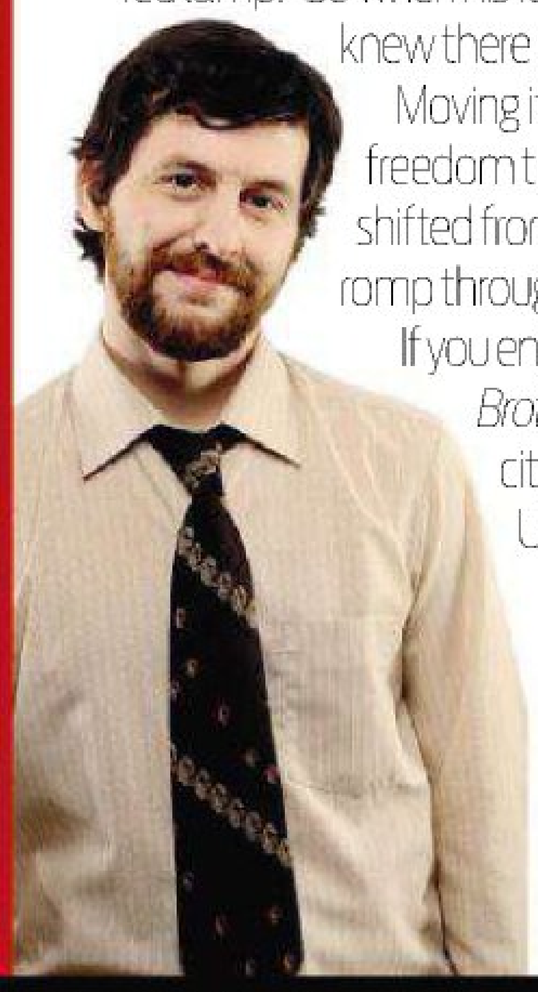
We aim to review games at their best, and this means playing them on our two Cyberpower PCs. The Gamer Infinity I7 Pro boasts a Core I7 920 CPU, 3Gb DDR3 RAM and a GTS250 graphics card. Coming from the AMD angle, our watercooled Gamer Ultra Perseus machine has a Phenom II CPU, 4Gb DDR3 RAM and an HD 4870 card. Powerful machines, both, but we also test new games on lower-spec machines, and we'll tell you if a game will make unreasonable demands. Go to *www.cyberpowersystem.co.uk* for more info on our top-spec machines.



CYBERPOWER

Boo hoo

You expect Rich to come back excited about things. His default state is "Squeeee, a red lamp!" So when his face fell when we asked him about his trip to see *Crysis 2*, we knew there were problems.



Moving it from the jungle to the city? Nice try, but it curtails the freedom the original revelled in. It's spectacular, but hollow, having shifted from a shooter with a genuine sense of tactical nuance to a romp through a city in an invisible suit with punchy aliens.

If you enjoy a sense of freedom, I'd point you towards *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. The Rome-set murder simulator knows what a city feels like, and gives you free rein to explore. It's great, and UbiSoft have even removed their loathsome DRM.

Craig Pearson

CRAIG PEARSON
NEWS EDITOR
craig.pearson@futurenet.com

Let us know what you think
Get in touch via our 'Send' section on page 68 or via our forum at *www.pcgamer.com/forum*.

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Need to know

What is it?
A shooter set in a strangely leafy ruined New York, with a high-tech nanosuit.

Influenced by
Halo, Crysis

Play it on
Quad Core CPU, 4GB RAM, Geforce 460

Alternatively
Bulletstorm, 80%

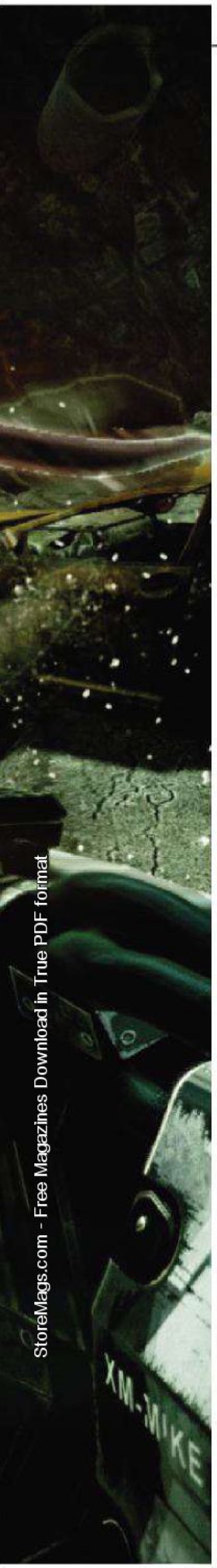
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"*Crysis 2* also makes me feel young in other ways. Bad ways."

Suggested quip: "I like my calamari FRIED!"

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UNSUITED

It's the best looking game on PC, but **CRYSIS 2**'s prescribed combat lacks the flair and charm of the original. ***By Rich McCormick***

We're all far too hip and suave to get excited about graphics. We want our games full of interesting ideas, unique gimmicks and holy metal shits stop talking for a second and look at *Crysis 2*.

I am so comfortable saying that Crytek's second nanosuit-sporting shooter has the best graffix evar, that I'll use capital letters to say it: *Crysis 2* Is The World's Most Beautiful Game. Turns out it's not football.

Even though it's multi-platform, even though it inexplicably lacks DirectX 11 support, *Crysis 2*, on a good machine, looks superlative-babblingly good. It makes me want to go back to being 15 and say to that teenage brain: "Jesus Christ look! This is what games will look like one day! They'll let you shoot men and aliens in New York and go invisible and have sunsets and water effects and dust particles so beautiful sometimes you'll stop and just stare!"

Crysis 2 also makes me feel young in other ways. Bad ways.

You play 'Alcatraz' – dropped into a ruined New York with his marine squad. Quite why it's ruined, why it's flooded with members of the CELL private army, why there's a mysterious flesh-eating plague, why squid-headed aliens called the Ceph are milling about, why the streets – despite being recently buggered by disaster – are engulfed in tropical greenery, the game's a bit shaky on.

At one point, a character shouts "THERE'S NO TIME TO EXPLAIN! I'LL TELL YOU LATER!" They never do. The single pertinent detail: people want the nanosuit, and they'll kill the occupant to get it. The muddled story, cramming too much into too little, made me feel confused, ignored, and talked down-to across six hours of singleplayer. So yes, *Crysis 2* has absolutely nailed the feeling of being a teenager.

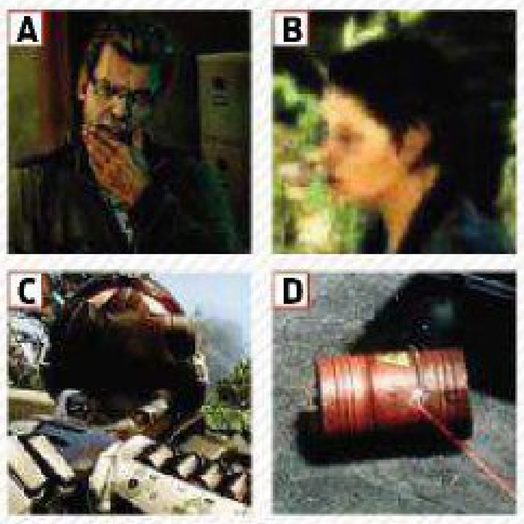
Standing on a precipice and looking out across a crumbling New York, I'm ready to explore. I'm ready to cleverly use my surroundings to my advantage. I can flip my magic super-suit between two magic super-modes, I can run as fast as

"People want the nanosuit, and they'll kill the occupant to get it"

an Olympic sprinter, I can punch as hard as an Olympic puncher. I should leap down there right now and begin my assault on the city, moving through the spacious environs with ease and agility, surprising my foes with my creativity and my gun and my bullets.

People say this stuff

Match the cliché phrase to the cliché character



1. **Yeah, well, my dad's dead.**
2. **I'm just a geek conspiracy nut, for Christ's sake!**
3. **Explosion!**
4. ***Anonymous blurt of static***

Answers: 1b, 2a, 3d, 4c.

I don't. Instead, I count the heads in front of me, sigh, and turn on my nanosuit's invisibility cloak. I plan a quick route to the exit, and sprint off. Halfway through my escape, my cloaks fizzles and I pop back into the visible spectrum.

Clearly, I should pick up an explosive barrel at this point, strap C4 to it, lob it toward a concentration of oblivious grunts, and laugh as it detonates – because *Crysis 2* lets me do that. But I don't. I hide behind a bin. After my cloak has recharged, I make the final leg of my journey. I slip through the exit leading from this arena of spacious concrete and foliage to the next. Unnoticed, unscathed, and – like a mopey teenager – unenthused.

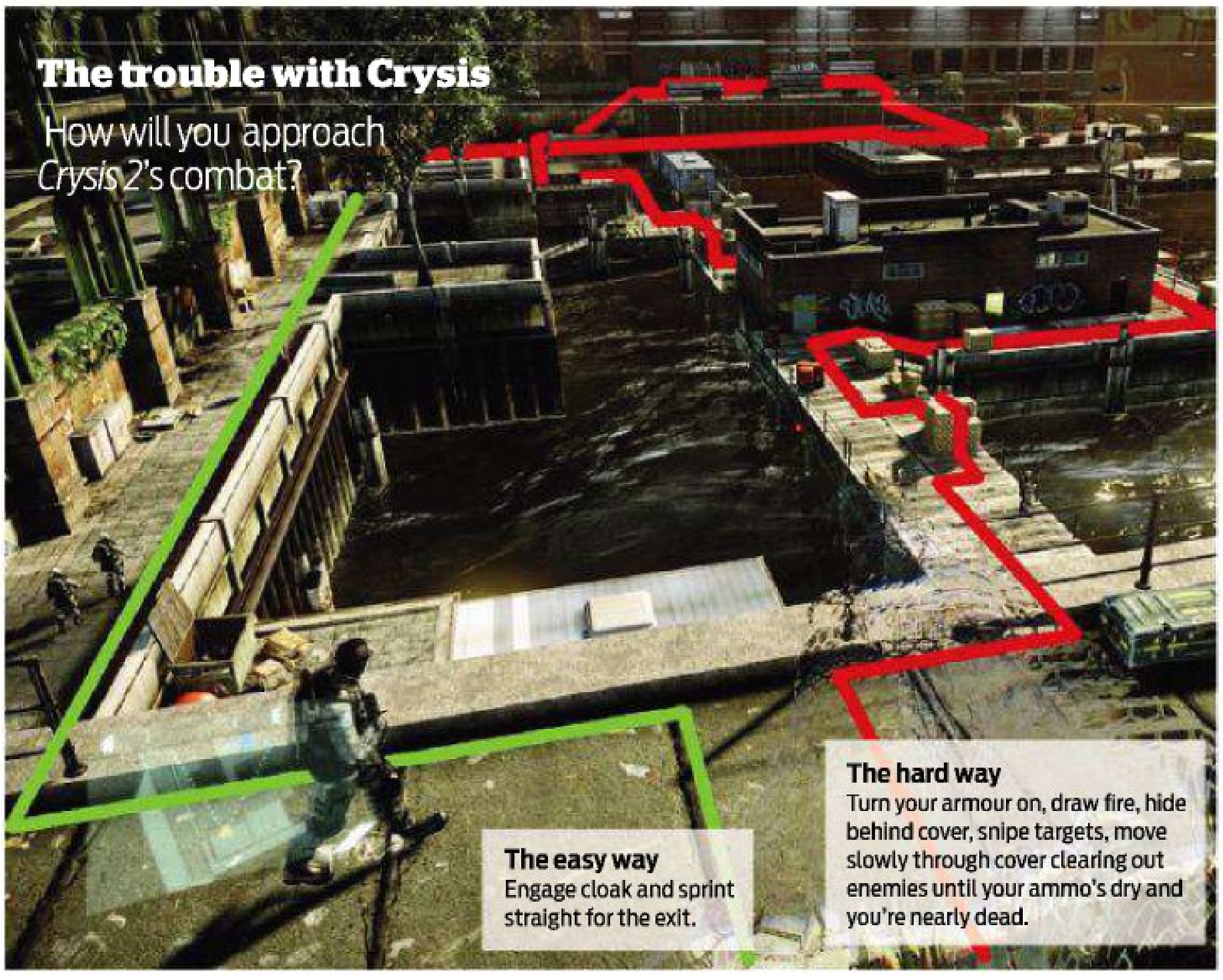
I should be feeling like a superman. But even with my wearable box-of-tricks and a gun strapped to every opposable thumb, I find it easier, faster, and more satisfying to avoid combat. That *Crysis 2* lets me do so is both to its credit and its shame.

Off the peg

Crysis 2 does *try* to give us the tools to have a great time. We PC people have played with the nanosuit before, and know full well the havoc it can wreak. While *Crysis 2*'s version of that buttock-enhancingly snug onesie feels defanged – what were once four powers are now condensed into two-and-a-bit – it still enables substantial tactical flexibility.

Armour mode should be your go-to in a tight spot, if that tight spot is also occupied by bullets. Press Q and you'll turn it on, the edges of your vision frosting with little translucent hexagons as your augmented clothes harden. In this form, you'll move more slowly, but gain terrific resistance to damage: take a bullet or shrapnel blast to the chest and you'll slough it off with nothing more than a slight drain in

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"Every enemy in the entire area was now looking right at me"

energy. It's not a solve-all cheat-button though: I found my confidence artificially buoyed by armour mode, and repeatedly waded into crossed streams of fire only to have my new threads ripped apart with me inside them.

Cloak is the suit's other selectable mode, and lets you do exactly what we'd all do if we could go invisible by pressing a button on our trousers: murder people without them knowing they're about to be murdered. Turn it on and you phase out of visibility, starting a countdown of your suit's remaining energy. Stand still and you'll drain it slowly; move around and it'll deplete faster. Employ the suit's final half-mode at the same time – a mega-speed power that acts more like the sprint key in other shooters, with the addition of a ten-foot leap if you hold jump – and your suit energy drops so fast that a mistimed jaunt will leave you with your overly defined arse hanging in the wind.

There are a handful of other goodies around the fringes of these core abilities. Nanovision highlights cloaked foes in bright blue-and-green for ease of killing, but remains of little use outside of the game's few artificially darkened sections. More applicable is the suit's built-in tactical assessment visor. Pressing B slides the visor over your eyes, overlaying the scene in front of you with helpful, hovering words. Select each in turn and you'll stake them out on the map, in the form of markers with words like 'stealth' and 'flank' that exist to nudge players along suggested paths. Some of these are obvious and uninspiring, pointing you to ammo dumps and grenade caches; others tease you into trying things you wouldn't normally do.

Cunning plan

Not that they always work out. Later in the game, I stood atop another precipice. My mission was to detonate a fuel dump, and my immediate impulse – turn invisible, run to fuel dump, blow it up, turn invisible again and run away – felt overused. I wanted to use the tools at my disposal. I flipped down the tactical visor and clocked a sniper vantage point. Mentally plotting my route, I scanned the ground in front of me. Between my location and my goal: a sewer pipe, the word 'stealth' picked out in the visor's yellow letters hanging over its entrance. My plan: engage cloak for long enough to gain entry to the pipe, creep along it undetected, exit at the other end and leap up in one fluid bounce to snatch a sniper rifle and start felling oblivious targets.

My first hop from ledge to street level was longer than I'd anticipated. The transition wasn't seen by my enemies, but the loud 'WHUMP' my invisible and likely broken-shinned Alcatraz made as he hit the ground attracted their attention nonetheless. With a group of suspicious, armed mentalists approaching my position, I did what any supersoldier would do. I panicked and leapt into the air.

The trouble was, my fall had knocked more than the wind out of me: my nanosuit had taken damage while in cloak mode, reducing my already depleted energy. The act of jumping had drained it right down to zero. As I hung for a millisecond, ten feet up in the air, I realised I had popped back into visibility. Every enemy in the entire area was looking directly at me. Rather than stealthily evading the attention of curious guardsmen, I'd turned myself into a human distress flare.

As I returned to Earth, I realised I had to rectify the situation. I decided to employ the butt of my rifle, a deceptively weighty move which, despite its ability to send opponents flying, sounds like someone passive-aggressively mopping a floor. To close the distance with the (incredibly confused) patrol closest to me, I used the little energy I had recouped to sprint toward them.

There, I began mopping: lightly prodding soldiers in the knees with my rifle – two times each – before hiding behind a skip. Remember: I am a futuristic supersoldier.

By the time I'd made it down the pipe and scrabbled up the scree to the high ground I'd been aiming for all along, my newly discovered sniper rifle was essentially useless: all my targets were now milling about beneath the very overhang I stood on, their soft fleshy bits hidden behind hard points of cover.

Hiding to nowhere

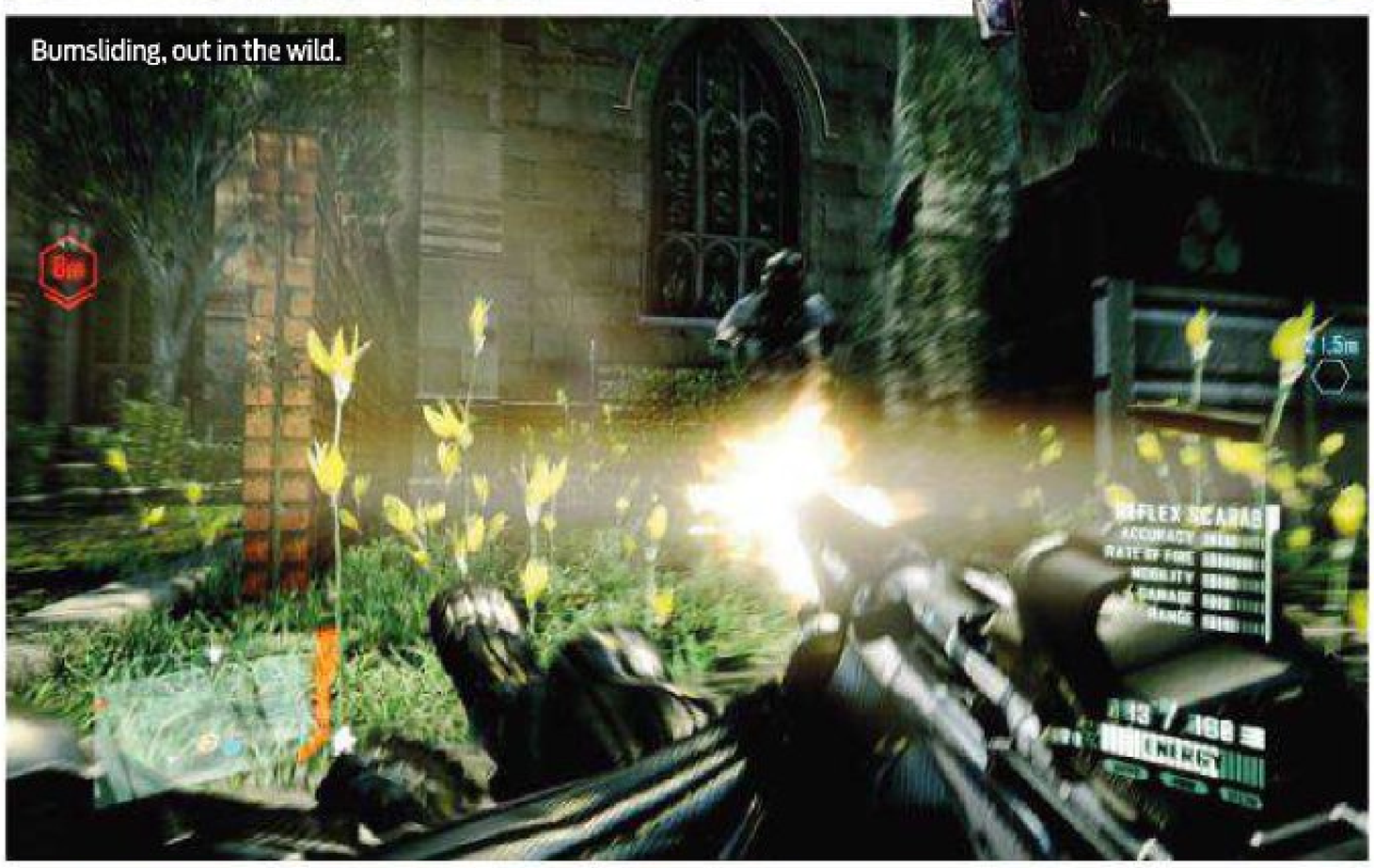
This vignette repeated itself all too often. In the first game, plans gone awry led to moments of murderous freeform celebration; here they turn the player from superman to bumbling ankle-biter. In my experience, the best way to fix a problem wasn't some emergent brilliance, it was to turn my cloak on and hide behind a wall until the bad men went away. With extremely limited suit energy, moments of advanced badassery are entirely

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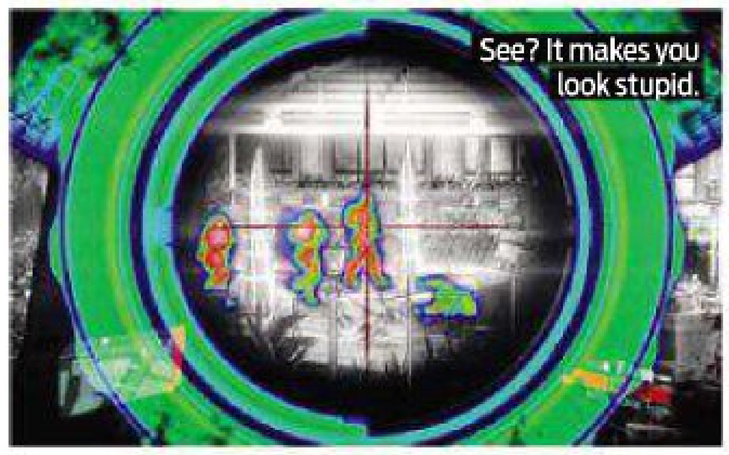

Shame your super-chuck is so feeble.


Wheeeeoh we'regoingtodie.


"I AM LOOKING FOR THE SET OF TRANSFORMERS."


Bumsliding, out in the wild.


Never wear Global Hypercolour during a war.


See? It makes you look stupid.

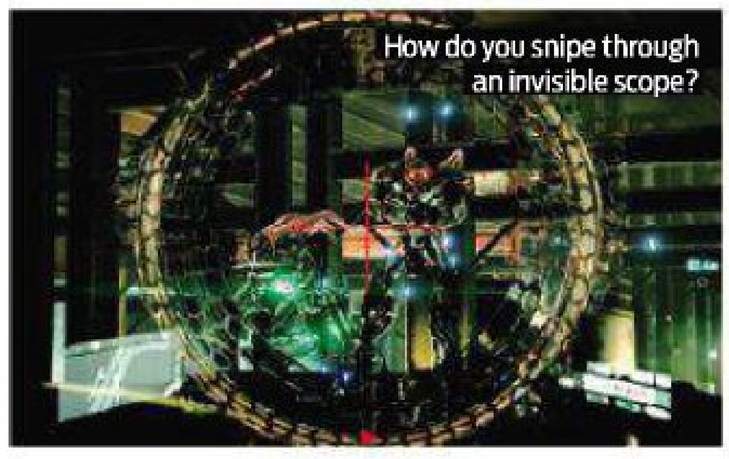

Time to find a quiet corner to cower in.


Hey, it's that famous bridge! I think? Is it?


Get to the chopper.

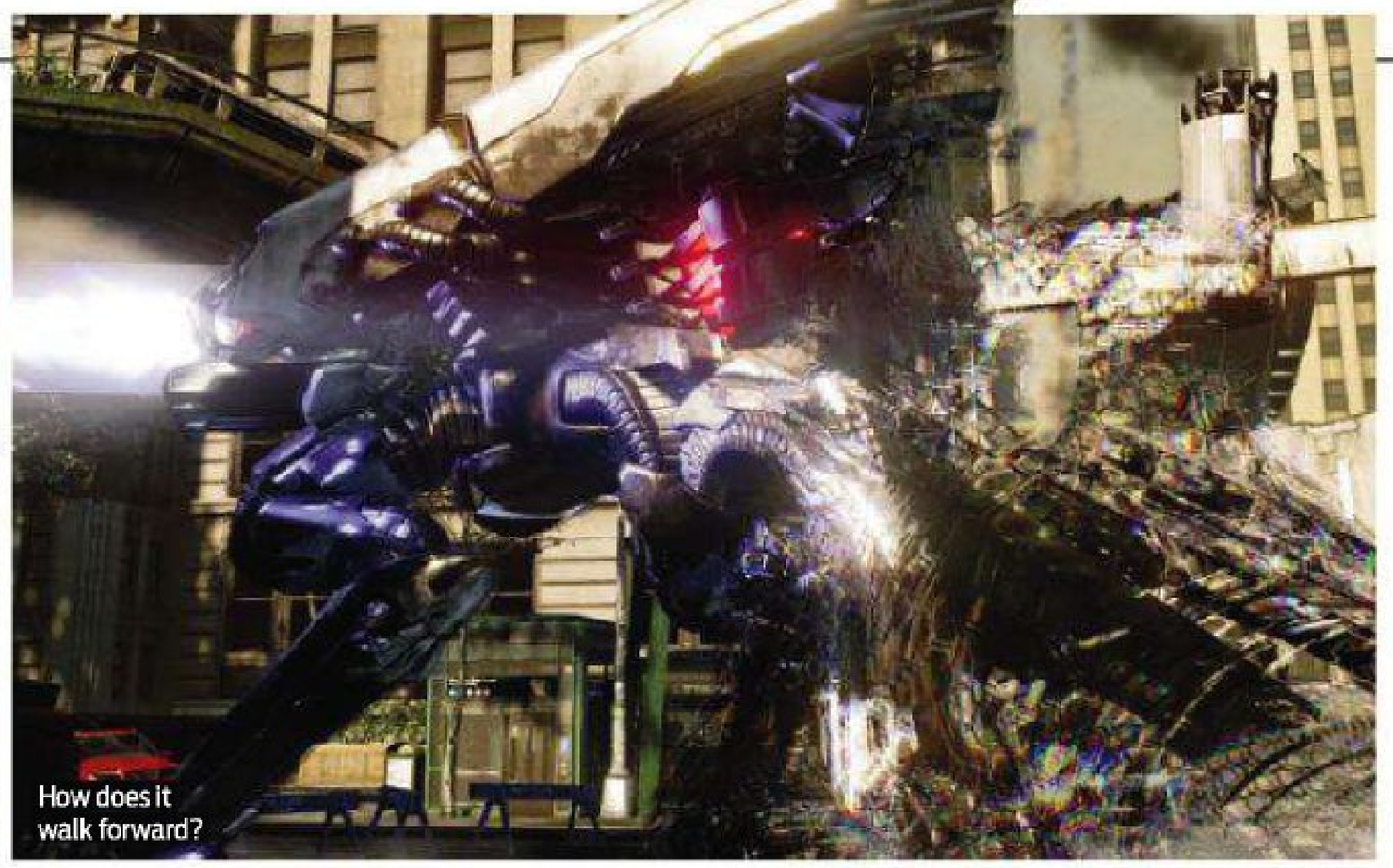

Seriously, it's beautiful.

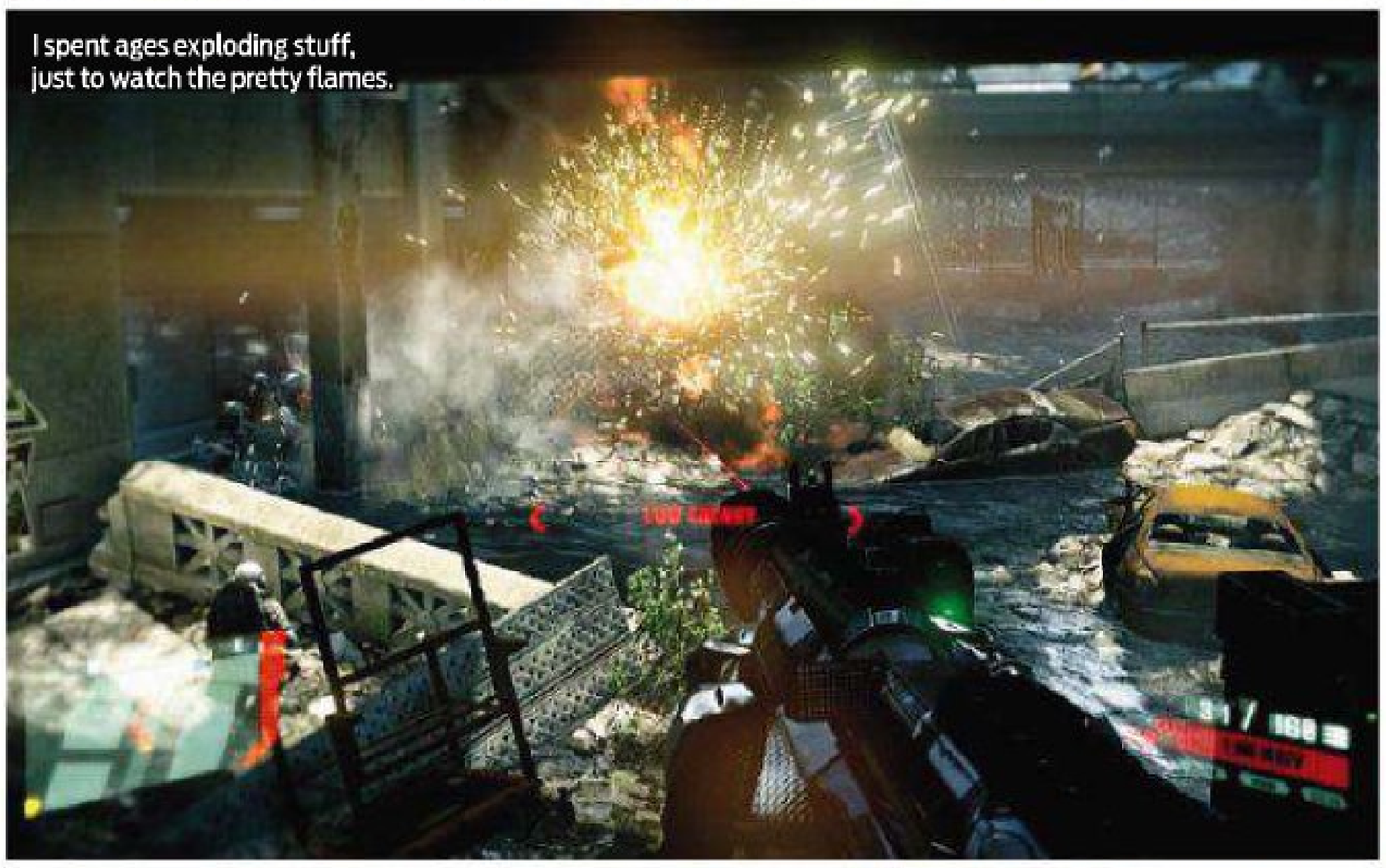

Ammo and crates. Best friends forever.


How do you snipe through an invisible scope?


Surprisingly, there's an evil corporation.

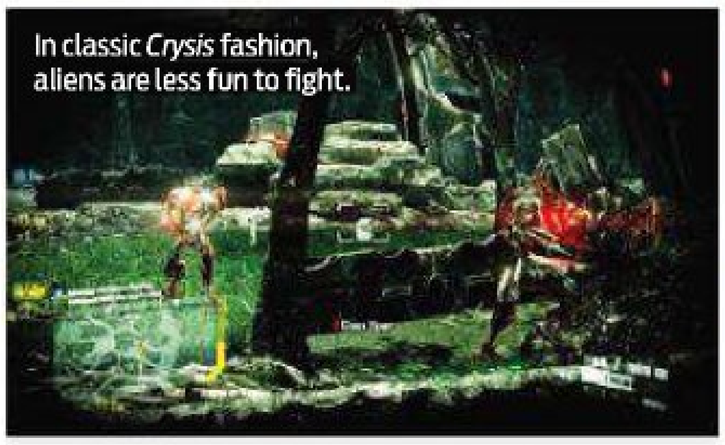

Red Barrel will never kill again.


How does it walk forward?


I spent ages exploding stuff, just to watch the pretty flames.


It was Earth, all along!


It looks open, but you're quite constrained.

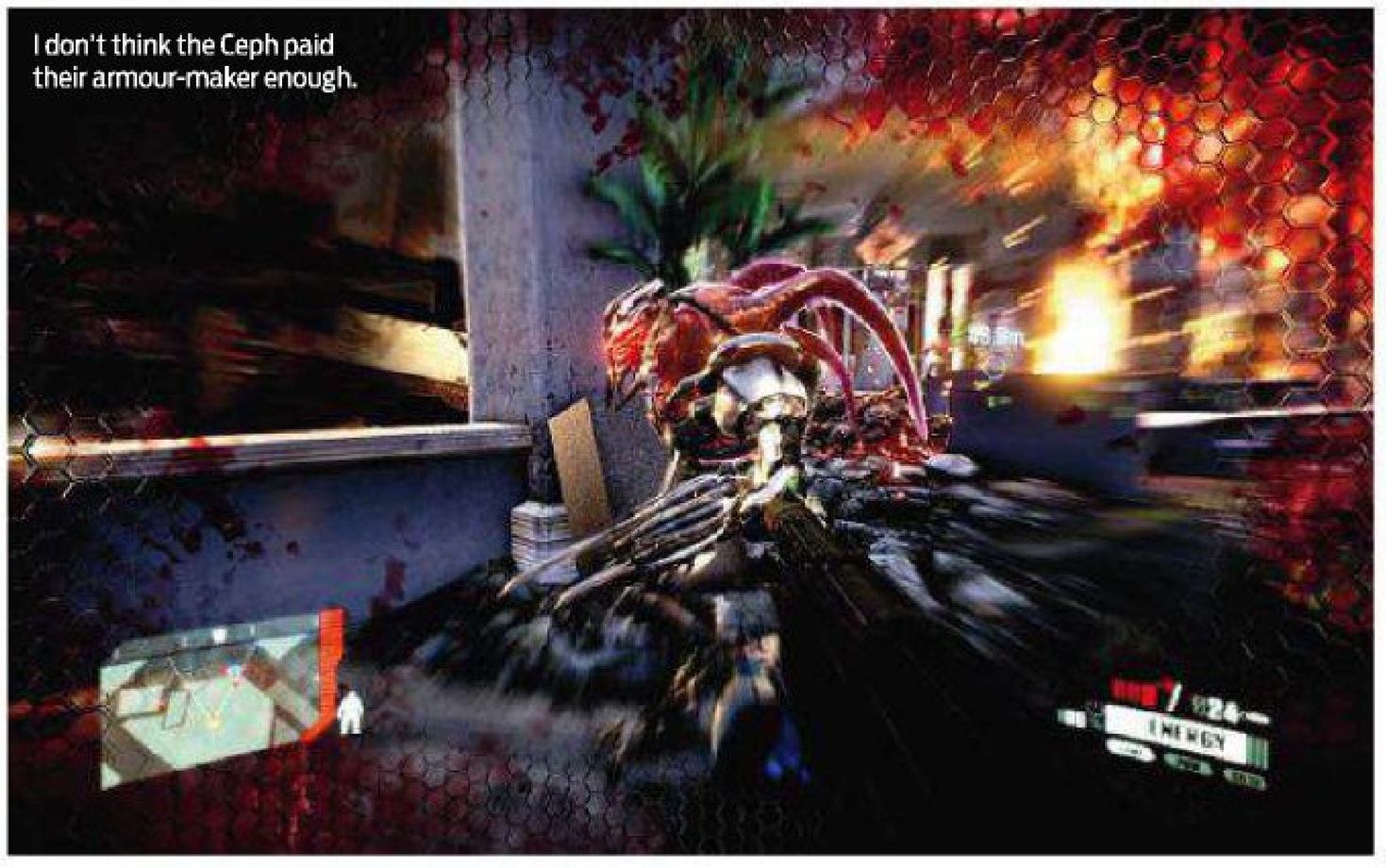

In classic *Crysis* fashion, aliens are less fun to fight.


These things vary wildly in toughness.


The game takes control to show you set-pieces.


This little upgrade went to market...


Explosions seem to spew out jam.


I don't think the Ceph paid their armour-maker enough.

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possible, but difficult to plan, let alone yank out of your nano-ass on the fly. I felt most clever when simply bypassing combat altogether: not entirely a good thing to say about a first-person shooter.

The level design plays into this problem. The freeform structure of the original *Crysis* enabled players to aim for a village if they fancied a fight. You chose to engage on your terms, and at your own pace. *Crysis 2*'s 'action bubbles', as Crytek call them, are repeat theatres, globs of space that quickly shrink back into standard corridors, before replicating themselves with a new backdrop. In the first game, reconnaissance was as much a part of the battle as the shooting. By forcing you to come at situations in a linear fashion from one prescribed angle, *Crysis 2* makes a full recon sweep – even with the visor – near impossible. That leads to screw-ups, which leads to advanced idiocy like the example above.



Squids in

The game's shooting model doesn't exactly entice you into protracted engagements either. *Crysis 2*'s full arsenal is hardly weak – the multi-missile-firing Swarmer is a particularly highlight – but the core weapons don't have enough fizz and pop to make drawn-out firefights feel dangerous. Assault rifles are bullet hoses with tight reticules. Point and hold long enough and enemies fall down, regardless of engagement distance. Magnums and rifles have some of the kick their automatic friends lack, but smack into targets without any discernible bite. It's particularly noticeable against alien foes. Sinking a sniper bullet into their squishy squid portions (head and back) will drop them quickly, but attack from the front and you might as well roll a dice for how many bullets it'll take.

Alien combat is frenetic – the little buggers can jump – but often stupid. I had foes leap out of attack range as I fiddled with my carbine's next magazine, leaving me completely open to assault. On the other hand, I managed to get in so close to a few of the larger aliens that they were unable to start their attack animation, leaving me free to politely tap their armoured stomachs until their internal organs ruptured from boredom. Human enemies provide a better challenge, usually flanking and attacking with menace and grenades. But other times, they're just morons. I walked into a cupboard with a conga line of enemies trailing me. I cloaked and awaited death – instead, the soldiers decided I'd dissipated through the walls and went back to their posts.

These AI inconsistencies melt away in the game's excellent multiplayer modes. Developed by Crytek UK – veterans of console multiplayer hit *TimeSplitters* – *Crysis 2*'s haul of online game-types is meaty. Standard team deathmatches are enlivened by every bastard in the game having the same opportunity to hide in plain sight, hop out behind you and shiv you in the kidneys. More exotic game-types include an asymmetrical attack-and-defend mode, where one team sports nanosuits and piddly pistols, while the other packs serious weaponry but dresses in non-magic clothes.

Your multiplayer progress is recorded, and rewarded with unlockable weapons and talents. It's yet another example of the best players getting the toys to lord it over the anaemic noobs, but the rewards are well tailored to advanced playing styles. At least they're less monstrously overpowered here than they are in *Call of Duty*'s vision of videogame Darwinism.

Those upgrades are cribbed from the singleplayer campaign, where killing aliens gives you special goo which can for some reason be poured into your suit. The upgrades follow standard paths: a quicker armour recharge, silent movement, etc.

I elected to buff my cloak and sprint powers, the two elements of the suit I used by far the most. But to focus on these facets of the game – the running and hiding – I was forced to get involved with their diametric opposites: the standing and the shooting. Letting players play their own way is a noble cause, but forcing them to play another way so that maybe they can eventually play their own way properly if they get enough alien goo is a cruel and unusual punishment.

Play *Crysis 2* Crytek's way and there's at least six hours of solid enjoyment to be squeezed from its challenges. But give in to your lazy inner teenager, take the simple routes through combat, past the game's limited innovations and restrictive mini-sandboxes, and you'll be left underwhelmed. ■

"I felt most clever when bypassing combat altogether"

◆ **Expect to pay** £27 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Electronic Arts ◆ **Developer** Crytek
◆ **Multiplayer** 12 players ◆ **Link** www.ea.com/crysis-2

VERDICT

Crysis 2 has shed its old skin. Played correctly, it's still fun, but never feels as important as its older brother did.

PC GAMER 70

filefactor.com

SPANDEXCHANGE

It's now free-to-play, but is **CHAMPIONS ONLINE** a hero or a zero? ***By Tom Senior***

Need to know

What is it?
A free-to-play superhero MMO partly reliant on microtransactions.

Influenced by
City of Heroes

Play it on
2.5GHZ CPU, GeForce 7600/ Radeon X700, 5GB HDD, 1GB RAM, broadband connection

Alternatively
Lord of the Rings Online, 79%

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Champions Online's move to free-to-play is very bad news for the criminals of Millennium City. My latest creation, Chill Valentine, is in the local park, icing top-hat-wearing goons with frost bolts. All around me, fellow heroes are unleashing their own brand of justice, in the form of fireballs, telekinetic powers and the occasional thrown car. With no subscription fee to put players off, the streets of this superhero MMO are rammed. It is a very bad day to be wearing a top hat and a striped shirt.

The cost of playing for free is choice. Full subscribers can pick and choose from *Champions Online*'s magical tombola of superhero abilities, but non-paying Silver members have to make do with a choice of archetypes that limit their character's progression to a preset template of themed superpowers. Extra archetypes can be bought in the game's item store for about £7.

Chill Valentine is a frosty Glacier archetype, so she unlocks predictable ice-themed abilities in a linear fashion as she levels. First there's the frost bolt, then the charged-up frost bolt, then the area-of effect frost bolt, and so on. Each archetype is designed to fulfil one of the three traditional tank, damage-dealing or healing MMO roles – which would make sense if there was much reason to group with other players, but aside from a few intermittent 2-5 group dungeons, there isn't.

As well as new archetypes, you can also buy costume pieces for your character. These come in themed packs at about £2 each, and offer the most outlandish equipment, from bear claws to massive robot jetpacks. There are still hundreds of items for Silver players to choose from, so the shift to free-to-play hasn't impacted the enormous visual variety of the heroes fighting around you. As I mop up the local evil Mime population, I spy a huge demon, complete with wings and devilish tail, and a tiny imp throwing around benches twice his size. From zombie ninjas to robot magicians, your fellow champions will look completely different, even if their abilities are the same.

Cash for items

For a subscription fee of £10 a month you can become a Gold member. This will pay for about £3 of item store points each month, open up more character slots, unlock special costume parts and, most importantly, allow you to customise your archetype. You can play with the old character creation system that lets you pick and choose your powers from any speciality, and create a superhero that actually feels like your own. In *Champions Online* there's little reason to fight for extra loot, and there's little in the way of end-game raids to look forward to, which means the powers are everything. While Silver players have complete run of the world, which is as colourful and over-the-top as ever, they will likely struggle to find reasons to stick around adventuring in it.

Little has changed since *Champions* was released two years ago. Once past the exciting tutorial, most of the quests are straightforward thug hunts that move you from zone to zone without much sense of purpose. Across the street from the park, members of another gang wander vacantly, waiting to be brought to justice. Farming these walking punchbags was satisfying for a while, but I never felt like a superhero.

Still, there's fun to be had in the first 20 levels, before the lack of character building and high level challenges start to grate. Millennium City is a great place to punch Mimes for a few hours, but not even the wastes of Canada or the exotic jungles of Monster Island can keep things interesting when your hero is stuck on rails. The character creator and explosive opening make *Champions* worth a download, but it's unlikely you'll be kicking crims around in a month's time. ■

Superhero chic

The stupidest things you can buy in the *CO* store



"It's a very bad day to be wearing a top hat and striped shirt"

◆ **Expect to pay** Free to play, item store for powers and costume parts ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Atari ◆ **Developer** Cryptic Studios ◆ **Multiplayer** Massively ◆ **Link** www.champions-online.com

VERDICT

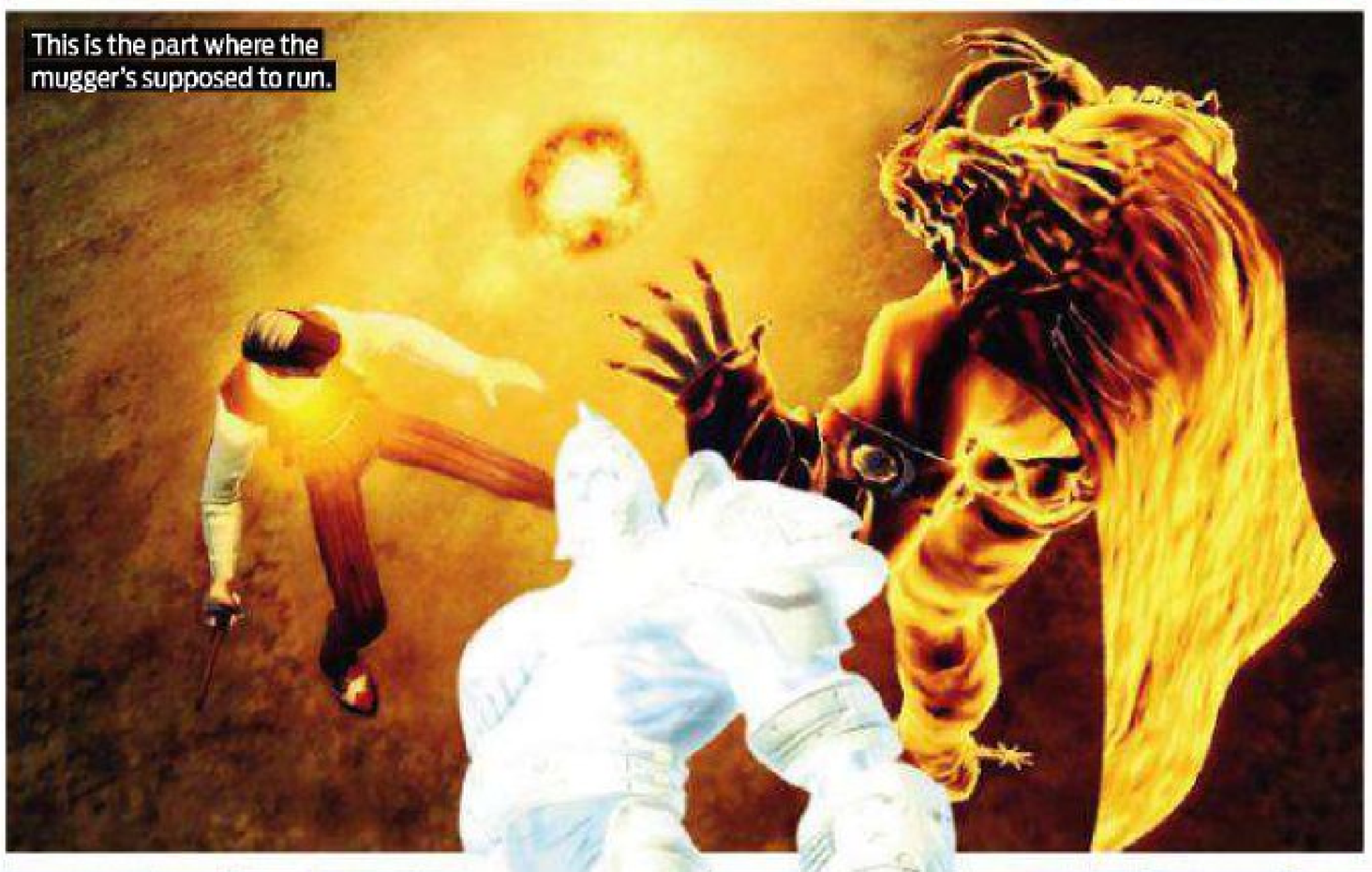
Free-to-play limits player choice and hurts the game's longevity, but *Champions* remains a pretty, if passable MMO.

PC GAMER 70

StoreKeys.com



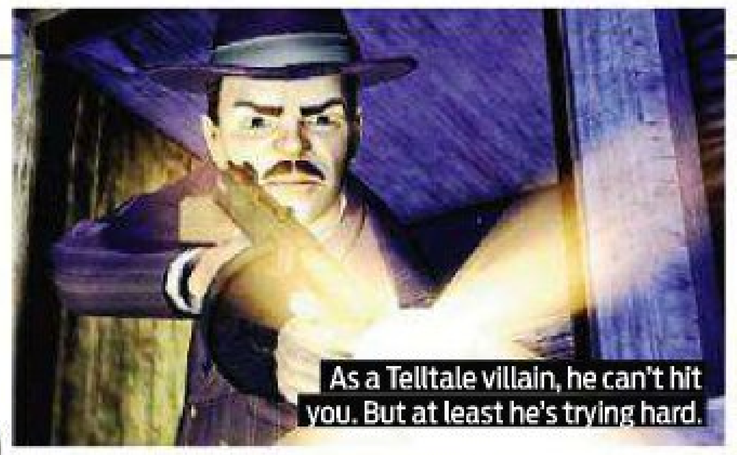








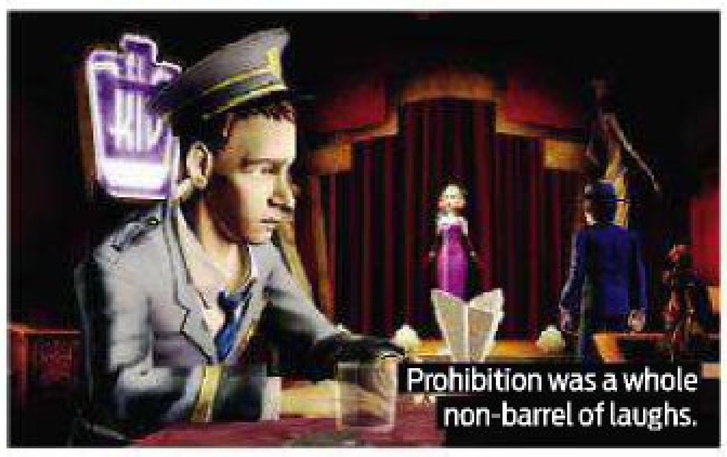












SPEAKEASIER

History repeats itself for the better in **BACK TO THE FUTURE: EPISODE 2**. ***By Richard Cobbett***

StoreMags.com - Free Magazines Download in True PDF format

Need to know

What is it?
The second chapter of the interactive Back to the Future point-and-click adventure.

Influenced by
Day of the Tentacle

Play it on
2GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB RAM

Alternatively
Tales of Monkey Island

Copy protection
Steam

After an underwhelming start, the best part of this second episode isn't that the puzzles are stronger, or the writing sharper, or that the characters and premise are more fun – although all these things are true. No, it's that Telltale seem to have made use of the two-month gap since their first *BttF* adventure to learn from their mistakes. That may just be my imagination at work, but it doesn't matter. This is a much improved second game, even if it's still a long way from being a classic adventure.

Continuing directly from the end of the first episode, we rejoin Marty and Doc as they discover that their careless meddling in Hill Valley circa 1930 has resulted in a 1986 in the pocket of an elderly Kid Tannen, Biff's gangster grandfather, along with Biff himself and his brand new buttheads-in-arms. Escaping, the duo head back to the '30s to find out how they accidentally prevented Kid getting arrested, and put history back on track. If you've already guessed that this involves working through three or so semi-linked subquests, congratulations, you win a cookie. Please don't get crumbs in your nice new magazine.

Mobster bunch

As journeys in the land of the Three Trials go though, this episode's quests – mostly revolving around getting a cop and a sexy lounge singer to fulfil their destinies – are a decent set. There's much more plot, the characters have much more personality, and the speakeasy location offers a decent amount of atmosphere even if it is incredibly silly. Most importantly, having Marty constantly surrounded by mobsters, even comedy ones, adds an edge to the action that was sorely missing from the last game. Kid Tannen especially was a complete embarrassment first time round. Here, he actually gets to be a little menacing at times. A little. Not much. But it's a start.

Similar tweaks run throughout the game, from the shorter, punchier dialogue exchanges that make it clear when you're solving puzzles and when you're just shooting the breeze, to the tighter direction on the action sequences and cinematics. The story actually flows throughout the whole episode this time, so while it's still very, very short as adventures go, it's a satisfying shortness you can blitz through in a single sitting without it feeling undercooked or overstaying its welcome.

Even with these improvements, the series remains hog-tied by Telltale's overly conservative design style, and a number of decisions that don't feel right. The cartoon puzzle logic still doesn't gel with the BttF lineage, and 1930s Hill Valley couldn't feel more like a film set if you kept tripping over the cameras. Ignoring these flaws, this is a definite step up in quality, and a solid couple of hours worth of game. Still no sign of any funky time-travel puzzles though. Boo. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £16.99 (all 5 episodes) ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Telltale Games
◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.telltalegames.com

VERDICT

Second time's a bit more of a charm, although the classic adventure style still isn't the perfect fit for Marty and Doc.

PC GAMER **68**

Release: StoreMags & FantaMag

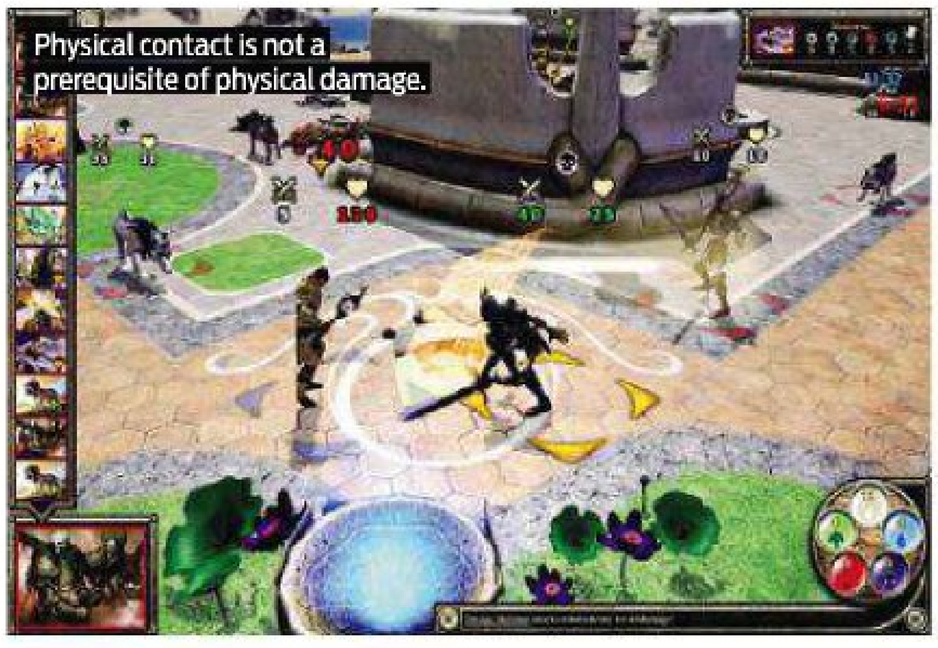
Steelkeg.com

TAPPED OUT

MAGIC: THE GATHERING – TACTICS

puts a price on free-to-play. ***By Robert Hathorne***


Even an Ent's gotta git krunk.


Physical contact is not a prerequisite of physical damage.

Despite the addition of range, line-of-sight and the third dimension to this free-to-play collectible card game, it sticks dishearteningly closely to the 'one more booster' business model. *Tactics* is the most expensive free game I've encountered. You get a 40-card starter deck for free, about two hours of passable singleplayer game and all the pickup games you can handle. Expanding your deck will run about £4 per ten-card booster. For around £5 each, you can pick up additional two-hour singleplayer campaigns that provide light diversions, although they're essential for levelling your Planeswalker for online battles.

Even so, it's a lot of fun. Applying movement speed and range to Magic's cards is revolutionary. I found myself thinking of cards I've known for years in brand-new ways. Pouncing Cheetah, a relative of the CCG's Pouncing Jaguar, isn't just early-game fodder; thanks to huge movement speed and attack power that increases with every step towards a target, it's a long-range precision warhead of feline death. The ability to outmanoeuvre, rather than overpower, introduces countless intoxicating layers of complexity to study and master.

The Booster Drafts quickly became my favourite *Tactics* component. Here, eight players buy in with three boosters each and take turns drawing cards until the packs are depleted. You get ten minutes to build a deck with your selections followed by a tournament.

If there were more multiplayer modes, *Tactics* could be really special. As it stands, you'll pay too much for too little. ■

PC GAMER 74

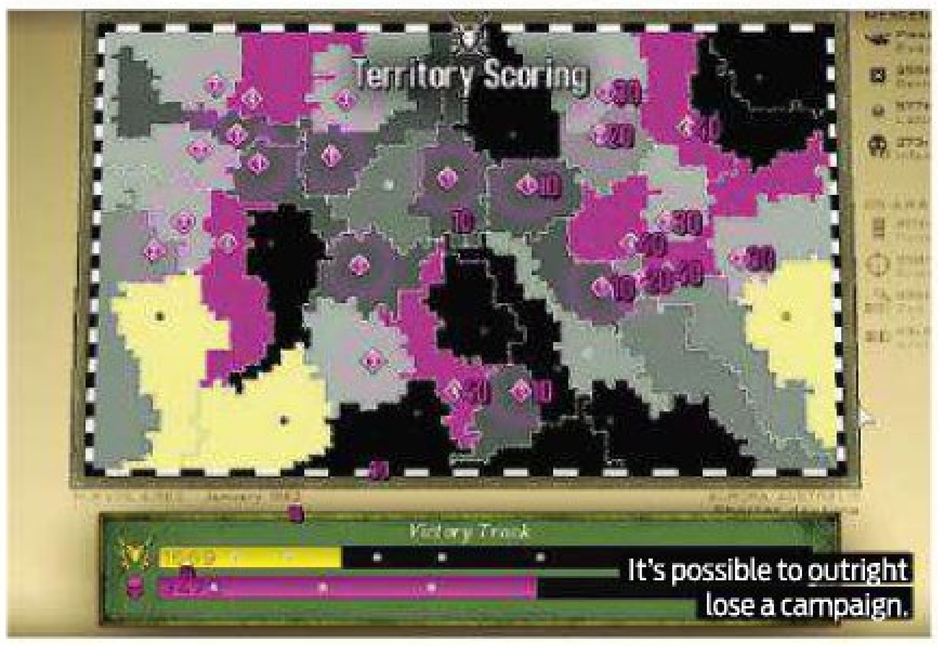
◆ **Expect to pay** Free ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Sony Online Entertainment
◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** 8 players ◆ **Link** bit.ly/icfp5k

BRAIN STRAIN

Unpredictable undead are the bane of

ATOM ZOMBIE SMASHER. *By Ryan Rigney*


Shortly after this hundreds died, but I saved a scientist!



It's possible to outright lose a campaign.

The mass of yellow civilians blindly flees around a corner, with a single purple zombie hot on their trail. From my god's-eye-view I can only watch, and wish I could directly intervene to stop the naïve masses before they charge headlong into the colossal pack of bloodthirsty infected. My helicopter is en-route for the pickup, but there are far too many trapped people to save in one trip. I frantically click to reposition my snipers, but they're too slow, and a single zombie slips through. The entire mob of citizens turns purple. So. Many. Casualties.

This sort of scenario was common during my frustrating first campaign in *Atom Zombie Smasher*, an undead RTS. Everything's represented by dots, a flowing, pixelly mass of humans fleeing from certain death around a cityscape, with you dispensing mercenaries and gadgets to enable their escape. It's tough: having to learn the game's complex mechanics on the job led to the fall of territory after territory, and before long I found myself staring at a city map nearly devoid of humanity.

I began to see more success as the subtleties were slowly exposed like a loop of infected gut. I picked up how best to utilise my various resources – land mines, artillery and so on – but the zombies' behaviour is so erratic and unpredictable that it was hard to come up with a winning strategy until after a couple of trial-and-error runs through each mission. Until then, all I could do was arbitrarily place the roadblocks and mercenaries at my disposal to see what would happen.

Still, being light, quick, tactical and tough, it's rewarding enough to keep me playing. ■

PC GAMER 64

◆ **Expect to pay** £12 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Blendo Games
◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 3 players ◆ **Link** bit.ly/hIRGPH

OCCUPIED

Singleplayer **HOMEFRONT** lacks punch, but the chaotic multiplayer saves the day. ***By Norman Chan***

Need to know

What is it?
An FPS set in a near future in which Korea has invaded America.

Influenced by
Red Dawn, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce GTX 265/ Radeon 4870

Alternatively
Modern Warfare 2, 91%

Copy protection
Steam

The best bits of the 1984 movie Red Dawn are when a band of small-town Colorado teenagers launch a series of guerrilla attacks against occupying Soviet forces. The scrappiness of their insurgency is exhilarating to watch. *Homefront*, with a story written by Red Dawn's director John Milius, makes every effort to recreate that feeling by putting us up against another hypothetical conqueror of America: a unified Korea.

It nails the atmosphere, but plays it too safe. *Homefront* is too busy trying to be *Call of Duty* to make you feel like a wide-eyed Lea Thompson mowing down Soviet soldiers with a heavy machinegun.

It's a tour of occupied America – from a hidden refugee community, to a locked-down metropolis with $20-per-gallon gas signs, starving suburbs with bodies hanging from the water towers, and horrific labour camps set in repurposed high schools. A few levels in and it's clear the seven missions are just an excuse for the developers to show off how well-realised their game world is.

The singleplayer combat doesn't match the intensity of the story. The action is a mix of sniping, assault and defence, but it all boils down to the ho-hum whack-a-mole smacking down of dozens of Korean troops as they pop up. It never made me feel like an outgunned underdog guerrilla. Ammo is plentiful and AI compatriots are invincible. The remote-controlled Goliath tank is fun to use, but only in that it's overpowered and quick to deliver explosions to the enemy.

Homefront's enduring appeal is in its multiplayer modes. It follows the trend of class-based team warfare and unlockable weaponry, but its combination of remote controlled drones and an in-match reward system ('Battle Points', which you spend to buy equipment and drones) is a smart one. The blend of fast showdowns and large, multi-tiered objective-based maps makes for enjoyably chaotic shooter action, especially on a full 32-person server.

Death from above

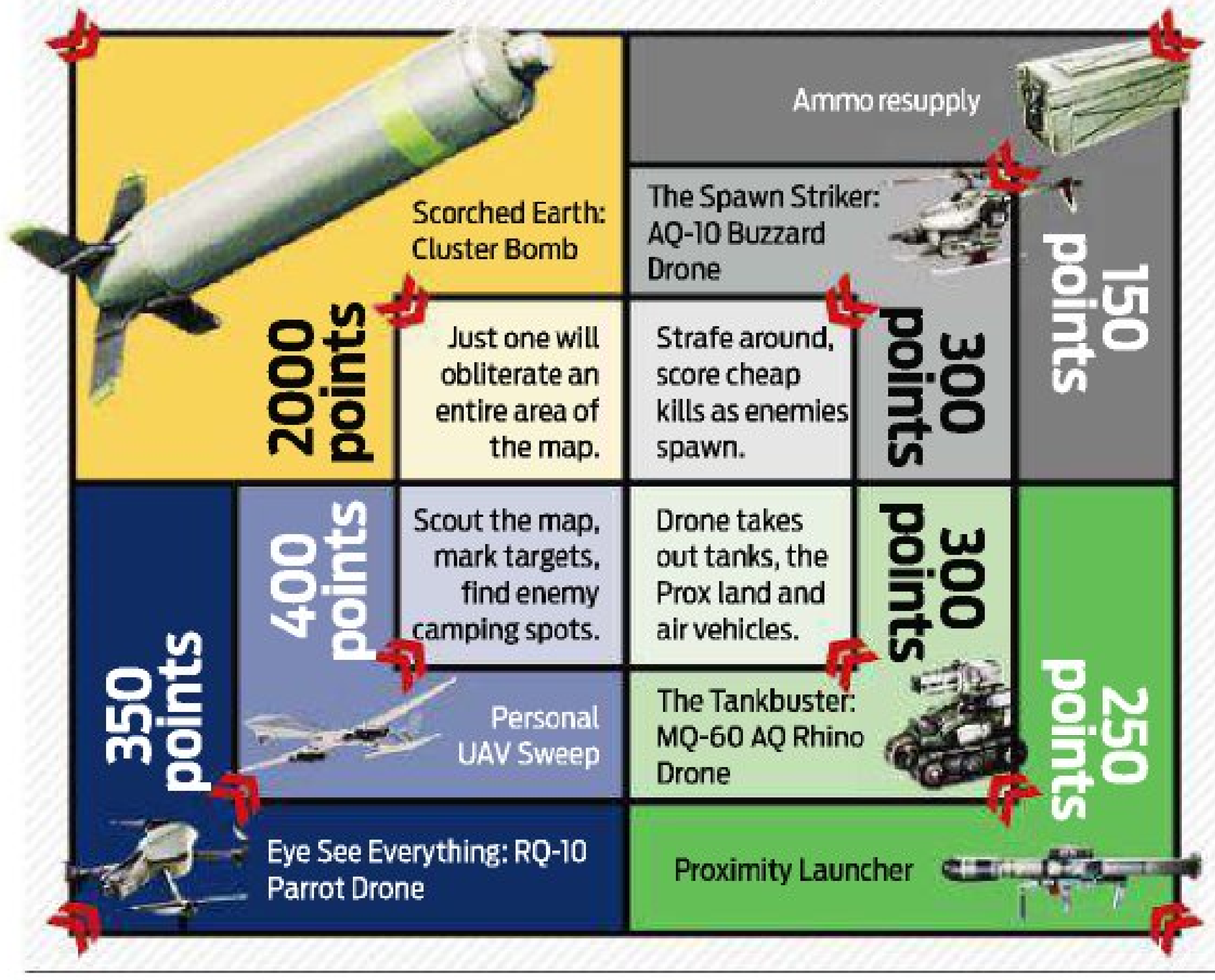
Headshots are rendered all the more satisfying by the hefty feel and sound of the rifles, and the potential to pilot remote-controlled aerial rocket drones adds suspense. It forced me to look not just left and right before running between cover, but also up. Additionally, I like how the Battle Points system adds enough persistence to reward players having a good day without making them overpowered in the next match.

Although the multiplayer maps vary in size, the smaller ones provided *Homefront*'s fiercest firefights, especially once drones came into play. My favourite was set in a suburban cul-de-sac, where I found refuge from the rain of rocket drone fire and assault choppers by sprinting into garages and ducking behind cars. Those nooks were also great places to deploy my own drones while remaining hidden.

I found myself really enjoying *Homefront*'s multiplayer for its polished mechanics and chaos on the battlefield. It's too bad that same level of ferocity isn't found in the singleplayer campaign. ■

Multiplayer investment plan

Four ways to make your Battle Points pay dividends



"Starving suburbs, with bodies hanging from the water towers"

◆ **Expect to pay** $50 ◆ **Release** March 8 ◆ **Publisher** THQ ◆ **Developer** Kaos Studios/Digital Extremes
◆ **Multiplayer** 32 players ◆ **Link** www.homefront-game.com

VERDICT

A competent shooter that never quite captures the sense of guerrilla warfare, but its multiplayer is a warzone worth fighting in.

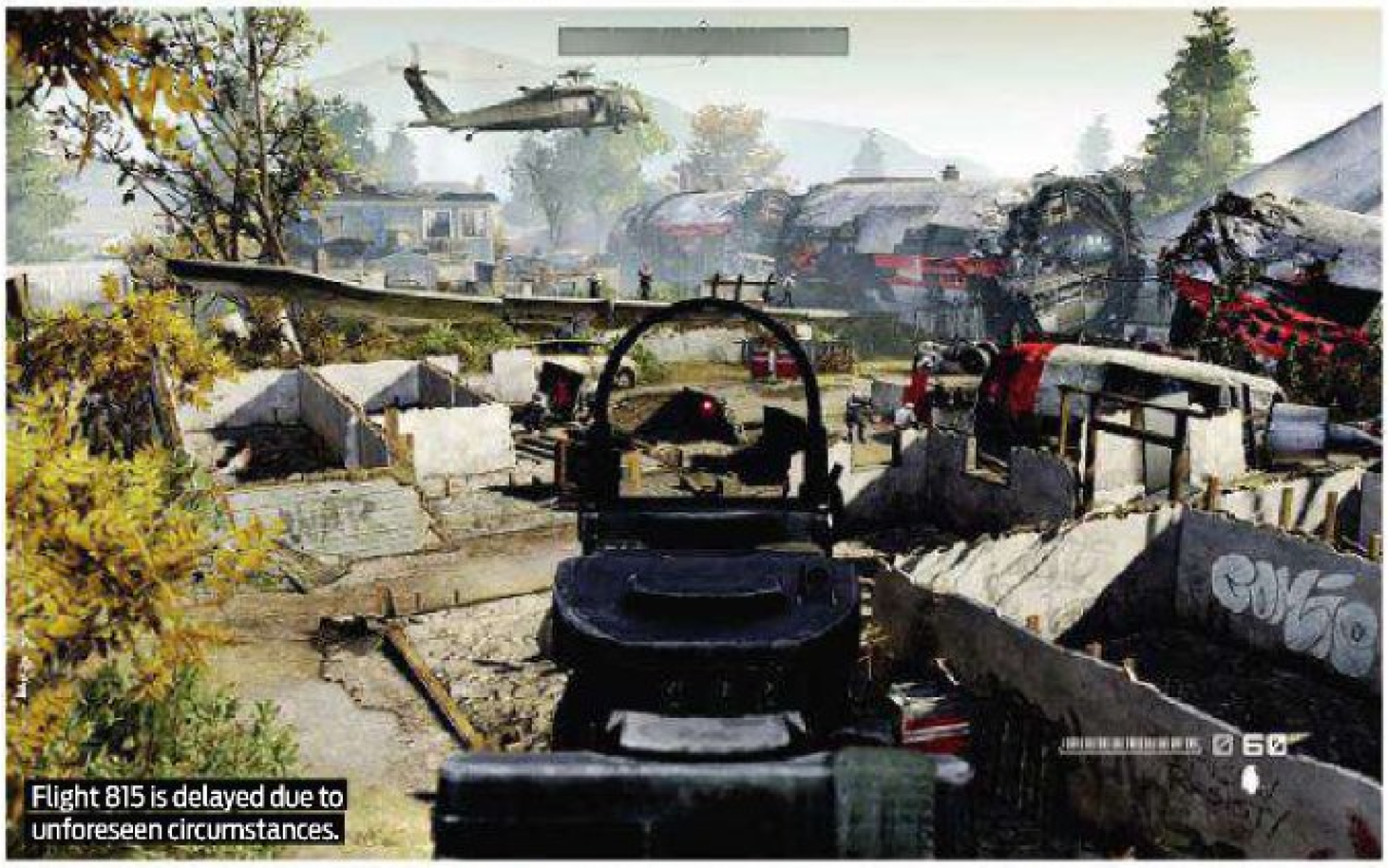
PC GAMER 79

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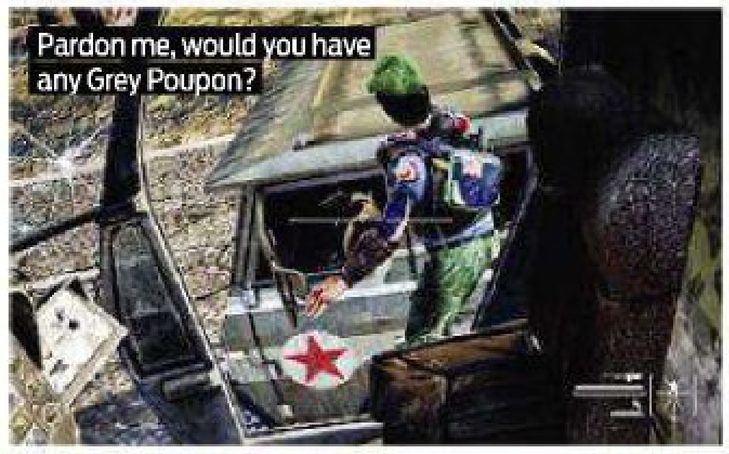
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America's remaining military forces are low on resources.



Flight 815 is delayed due to unforeseen circumstances.



Pardon me, would you have any Grey Poupon?



You don't want to get caught under that. You are.



Add a scope to any weapon and it's infinitely more accurate.



A drone's-eye-view of combat.



TEARS IT UP

Can **RIFT**'s inter-dimensional warfare bring anything new to the MMO? ***By Tom Senior***

Need to know

What is it?
Fantasy subscription MMO set in a world under attack from interdimensional forces.

Influenced by
World of Warcraft

Play it on
Dual Core 2.0GHZ, 2GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce 5900 Radeon X300, 8GB HDD

Alternatively
Warhammer: Age of Reckoning, 88%

Copy protection
Tied to Trion account

There's a thunderous crash and a flash of light at the top of the hill. A spiral of purple energy appears and black tentacles uncoil from a hole in the sky. The surrounding area turns black and a small army of undead minions appear. It's a rift: a portal to a dimension of beings who want to destroy the world. In this new MMO it happens all the time.

I've been playing for many hours now, and I still don't know exactly why rifts occur, but it's mostly a dragon's fault. The world of Telara is at breaking point, beset by global war between the game's two main playable factions, the angelic Guardians and steampunk machinists known as the Defiant. They're fighting because they disagree on how to combat the threat of Regulos, an evil dragon who wants to consume the world.

You're a warrior in the final throes of this apocalyptic Shade war. Choose your class (warrior, cleric, mage or rogue) and you're thrown into a dreary, embattled starting area and bossed down a narrow trail by your army commanders.

Everything will be immediately familiar if you've played an MMO before. Your abilities are arranged on a taskbar at the bottom of the screen, and can be recast every few seconds. Killing enemies nets you experience and levels you up. This earns you points that you spend on your skill tree to unlock new combat moves.

Ascendancy

Initially it felt so derivative I couldn't shake the sense of deja vu. From the monster-farming quests to the stream of ever-improving loot, there was little different or special about *Rift*. Even the keyboard shortcuts were identical to *World of Warcraft*.

Things quickly ramp up. At the climax of the opening quest arc you become a god-like Ascended, sent back in time to an age before the Shade war, with a mission to stop it from ever happening.

Being Ascended has some serious perks. As well as occasional time travel, and the ability to resurrect, you can also store three souls in your body at once. Aside from a serious split personality disorder, this gives you access to three different skill trees. A necromancer soul will let you raise the dead, for example, while a warlock soul will give you powerful attack spells. Eight starting souls are available for each class, and they can be equipped in any combination. In short: you gain access to a large number of skills, very quickly.

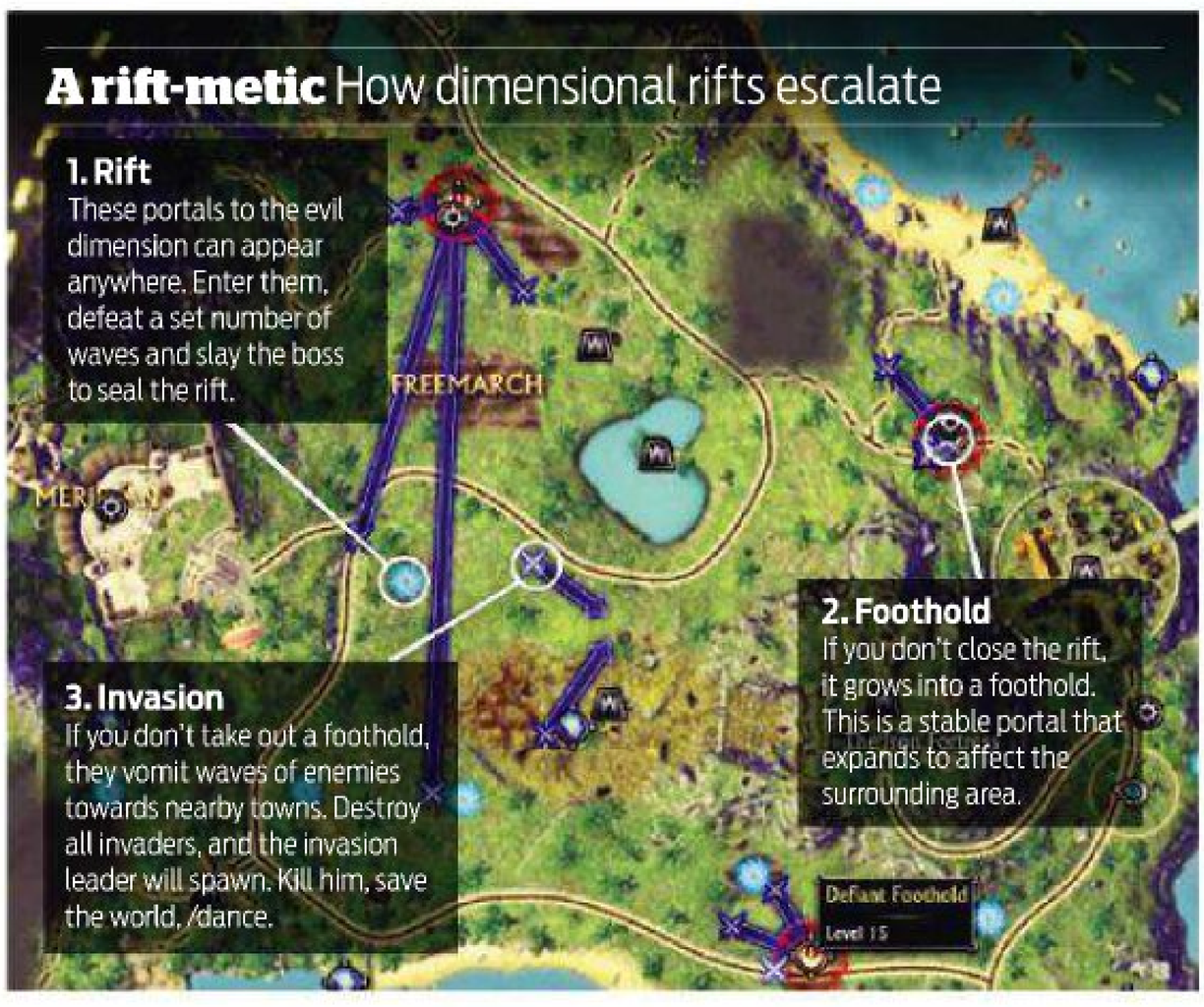
For a reasonable cost, souls can also be swapped out of your starting line-up and all of your skill points transferred to a new discipline. You can also buy extra sets of three souls with in-game currency, enabling you to create an alternative setup that you can switch to at will. This means you can have separate builds for dungeon crawling, player vs player combat or questing.

The souls system is a brave attempt to put character building into the hands of the players. It pays off beautifully, but initially it's daunting. I found it hard to confront the vast array of choices and skill trees without a sense of panic. It took an hour of squinting at ability descriptions before I felt confident that I knew what each soul in my class was for. If you deviate too far from the suggested combinations, you could find yourself with a dud character. Happily, *Rift*'s easygoing attitude to point switching means you'll never hit a dead end.

Where most MMOs dripfeed abilities to teach you your role on the battlefield, *Rift* presents its skills as a toybox, to be rummaged through and rearranged at will. The payoff for the initial confusion is a feeling of complete control over how your hero develops, and a character that already feels unique at level seven.

You'll be using your many abilities to progress through the consistently beautiful world of Telara, but for all the innovation of *Rift*'s soul system, ▸

A rift-metic How dimensional rifts escalate



"*Rift* presents its skills as a toybox to be rummaged through"



Water rifts spawn tiny lobster men.


"You take the left head, I'll take the right"


Today's weather: cloudy with a chance of otherwordly horror.


Don't bite his legs, they're on fire!


So we meet again, MMO boar.

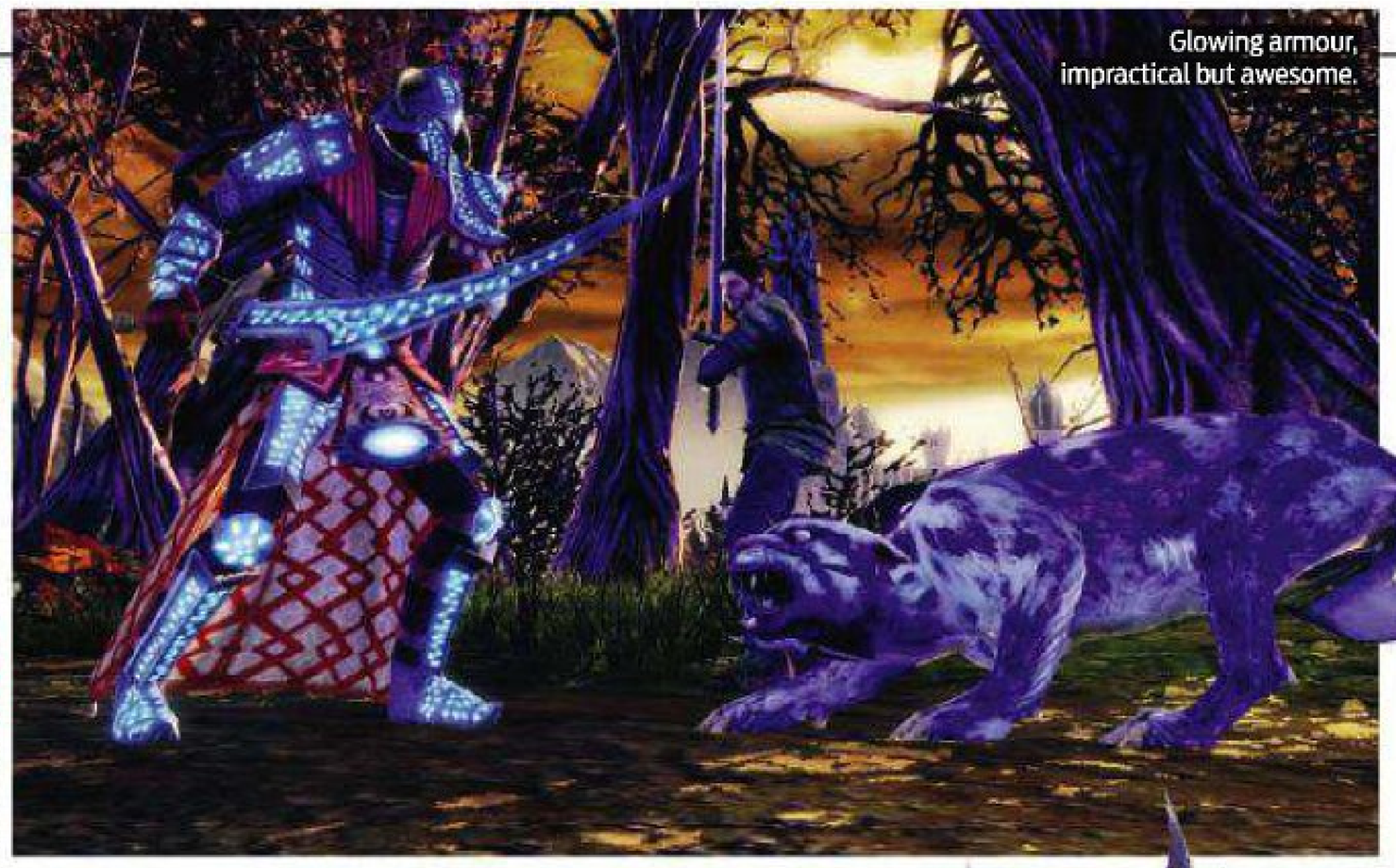

Levelling up can cause you to explode mid-conversation.

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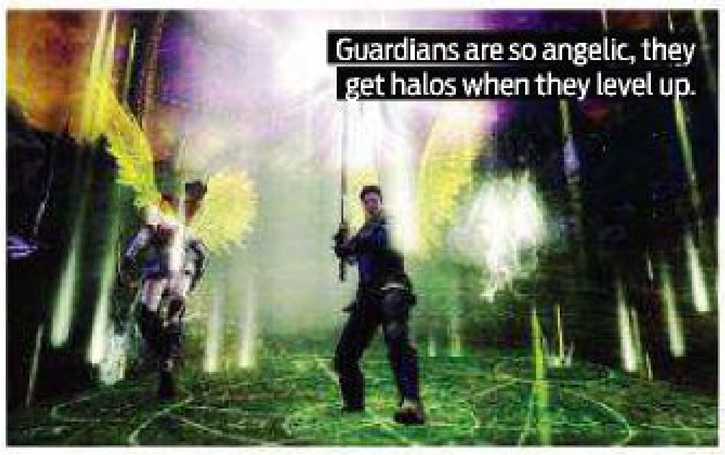
Steelkeg.com


Big demons need a bigger axe.


Glowing armour, impractical but awesome.


Talk to the hand, the dragon ain't listening.


Rift's spell effects are spectacular.


Guardians are so angelic, they get halos when they level up.


"Psst! That skeleton is totally checking you out."

the quests are standard fare. Missions invariably involve slaughtering a set number of indigenous nasties for loot. *Rift* keeps boredom at bay in two ways: a speedy progression from area to area, and the constant threat of invasion from the skies.

A rift in time

For many, the rifts will become the reason to keep logging in. The inter-dimensional portals can appear almost anywhere, at any time. If left unchecked, a rift will stabilise and become a foothold. These spawn NPC troops who will invade nearby towns. If these are taken, yet more forces will be spawned. Huge invasions can emerge dynamically within an hour, ending in massive assaults on a region's major cities. The six different types of rift spawn different enemies with different weaknesses. If creatures from alternative types of rift meet, they will fight each other.

The result is an exhilarating sense of chaos. Once I logged on to find my town overrun by undead. As I was fighting for my life a small army of nearby adventurers piled in. When taking on rifts and invasions, you can join a public group at the click of a button. Our group took the town and pushed back. After enough invading troops had been defeated, the demonic general emerged. *Rift*'s excellent map let everyone in the region know exactly where he was. The general was met by an army of Defiant warriors and crushed in seconds. The rifts closed and the world was safe for ten more minutes.

The drama of fighting rift invasions is reward enough, but doing so also nets you Planar stones, which can be used to power another set of special Ascended abilities. These let you open glowing cracks in reality to trigger rifts on purpose, and at later levels, give you the power to summon armies to your aid, letting you take on the invading demonic forces solo. At higher levels you can fight in five-to-ten-man raid rifts against much tougher enemies.

If you prefer more traditional group quests, there are a number of well crafted five- and ten-man instanced dungeons scattered across the world, with elite versions of each for those brushing up against the level 50 cap. These are full of unique loot and massive boss monsters. There's also a sizeable PvP element that pits the Guardian and Defiant factions against one another. The battle takes place across a series of tiered Warfront maps – instanced battlegrounds for capture-the-flag and zone control contests.

Capture-the-town

Dedicated player vs player servers offer open-world PvP. Here it's possible for one faction to take another's towns, gaining control of the traders, smiths, trainers and crafting stations and denying their services to the enemy. Plans are also in place to add high-level city raids that will let your guilds take out enemy strongholds, but for now *Rift*'s focus is mostly on small-scale group questing.

One of the most striking things about *Rift* is how complete it is at launch. The normal three month wait for a new MMO to get on its feet doesn't apply here. *Rift* is ready to go right now, and should serve as a benchmark for any company looking to launch their own massively multiplayer game. It's also the best-looking MMO in the world. At high graphics settings it beats such competitors as *Age of Conan*, while being scaleable enough to run on slower machines.

Rift stands confidently on the shoulders of the best MMOs of the last five years. It borrows plenty from *World of Warcraft*, but provides rock solid iterations of every feature you'd expect from a modern example of the genre. Its rift invasions take *Warhammer: Age of Reckoning*'s public quests and turn them into an exciting and constantly surprising form of dynamic, roving warfare that negates the drudgery of its repetitive kill quests. The story would fit on the back of a cigarette packet, but it hardly matters when a death rift is exploding into existence in front of you.

From PvE to Telara itself, *Rift* is polished and promising. It doesn't break the mould, but does easily enough to distinguish itself. With the rise of the free-to-play MMO, new games will have to be similarly well made to justify a subscription cost. What happens next is up to the devs, but with this as a starting point, *Rift* could raise the MMO gold standard to another dimension. ■

"The rift closed and the world was safe for ten more minutes"

Know your rifts A handy guide to Telara's portal problem



1 Death rift
Signs: Unholy tentacles
Monsters: Banshees, skeletons.
Side effects: Creeping sense of doom

2 Water rift
Signs: Wetness, coral structures
Monsters: Magical alligators, lobsters
Side effects: Sudden urge to wee

3 Fire rift
Signs: Volcanos, scorched earth
Monsters: Demons, Unmerciful Embers
Side effects: Hot flushes

4 Earth rift
Signs: Sudden mountains, dust
Monsters: Golems
Side effect: Earthquakes

5 Life rift
Signs: Giant carnivorous sky-plants
Monsters: Wolves, vine creatures
Side effect: Sets off allergies

6 Air rift
Signs: Hurricanes, tornadoes
Monsters: Harpies, angry birds
Side effects: Inside-out umbrella

◆ **Expect to pay** £30+ £10/month ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Trion Worlds ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** Massively ◆ **Link** bit.ly/gZeaJX

VERDICT

Standard quests and a throwaway story can't dent the thrill of *Rift*'s invasions, or the depth of its soul system.

PC GAMER **86**

STURMGRENADIER

Helmets and Helmuts go flying in **MEN OF WAR: ASSAULT SQUAD**. *By Tim Stone*

Need to know

What is it?
A story-less WWII tactics title that's as intricate as it is intense.

Influenced by
Company of Heroes

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB 3D card

Alternatively
Men of War: Red Tide, 75%

Copy protection
Disc check, GameSpy account for multiplayer

If *Assault Squad* was an MG 42 it would need a barrel change about every three minutes. 'Ferocious' doesn't begin to describe the bloody bullet ballets served-up by this semi-marvellous semi-sequel.

Instead of sending our favourite WWII tactics title in years (PCG 199, 85%) back to the front with a conventional campaign in its kit bag, Digitalmindsoft have equipped it with something called 'Skirmish'. There's still a heap of singleplayer missions (16), but now all scenarios rely on the same push-push-PUSH! play mechanism.

You start at one end of a long battlefield with a knot of infantry under your wing. By pushing forward and seizing the control flags that dot the terrain, reinforcement points are earned, and new force types unlocked. A gain might release a new armoured car or infantry flavour. It may also trigger a brutal counter-attack. These retaliatory thrusts, combined with the fact the AI is usually dug-in deeper than an agoraphobic tin miner, mean victories sometimes take hours to secure. Even on 'easy' you'll need stamina and skill to prevail.

What lovely war

Though the enemy never stops trying to regain lost flags, there are usually sufficient lulls in the lead storm to enjoy *MoW*'s trademark intricacy. A click here sends a sergeant scampering across a lane to pick up an abandoned anti-tank rifle. A click there sends a sniper slithering surreptitiously down the flank. Behind the church, two unhorsed tankers jog forward to begin repairs on a knocked out StuG. By the bridge, engineers start stringing barbed wire and laying mines, and grenadiers clamber back into a halftrack in readiness for the next nerve-shredding, pulse-propelling phase of the assault.

Whether it's Normandy or North Africa, Singapore or Smolensk, battlefields don't have to be conquered alone. You can share the burden of command with up to seven friends or strangers. More COs means more chance to focus on single units or particular area of the fronts. It means the smirks generated by the overblown physics and eyebrow-singeing pyrotechnics are mutual smirks. Thanks to the clever 'reinforcements go to the most under-strength player' rule, nobody gets excluded from the action for long. Inexperienced? Worry not. As long as you keep your men behind walls and hedges, and don't get too cocky with armour, you'll make a valuable contribution.

In a genre where communal play is often technical and cut-throat, *Assault Squad* stands out like a skylined Sherman. Though the three competitive MP modes are played by some wily veterans, defeats are almost always flecked with fun, and opponents and team-mates rarely triumph-at-all-costs tosspots. Whether you're battling for control of flags (Assault Zones), taking turns attacking and defending (Frontlines) or just out to grab as many scalps as possible (Combat) laughs and largesse are seldom far away.

I can only think of three decent reasons not to buy *Assault Squad*. (1) You fancy a break from the series. (2) You are a sucker for a story. Even with five factions, superbly wrought maps, and an absurd range of units, the Skirmish missions can feel a tad monotone: it might be worth hanging on for *Men of War: Vietnam* previewed the last issue. (3) Between you and your local games shop is an emplaced MG 42, two PaK 40s, and a dug-in Tiger tank. ■

Klaus the kleptomaniac

My hero's half-inched haul



Hothead
GI helmet still warm and sweaty from Klaus's last victim.

Gun Crime
.30 cal MG from the turret of an abandoned Sherman tank.

Free Lunch
Sausage/sauerkraut container. Wehrmacht standard issue.

Tank You
Panzerfaust taken from the corpse of Jan the Panzer Grenadier.

Hot Wheels
Willys Jeep found in a ditch then spannered back to life.

"'Ferocious' does not begin to describe the bloody bullet ballet"

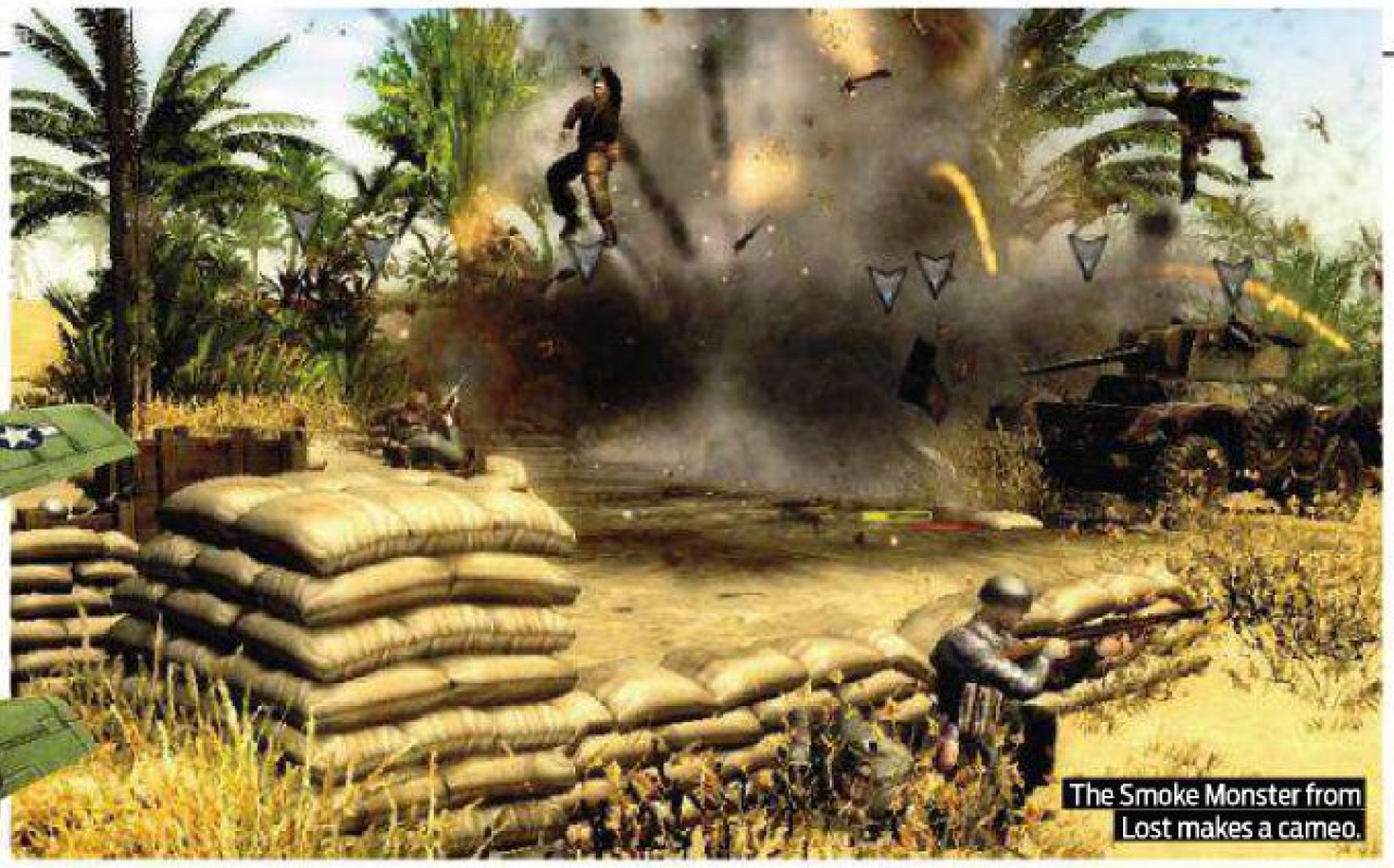
◆ **Expect to pay** £25 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 1C ◆ **Developer** Digitalmindsoft
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 8 ◆ **Link** www.menofwargame.com/assault

VERDICT

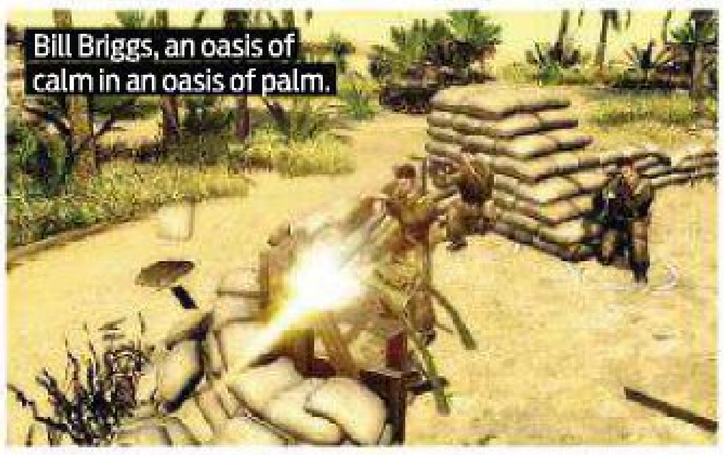
The old soldier shows his gregarious side. This is gruelling but great WWII action, spanning every theatre.

PC GAMER 81


Planes make short work of distant AT guns.


The Smoke Monster from Lost makes a cameo.


Combined arms tactics are essential.


Bill Briggs, an oasis of calm in an oasis of palm.


Tiger's growl > Wagner's Ring Cycle.


After 63 mins of mayhem the AI finally prevails.

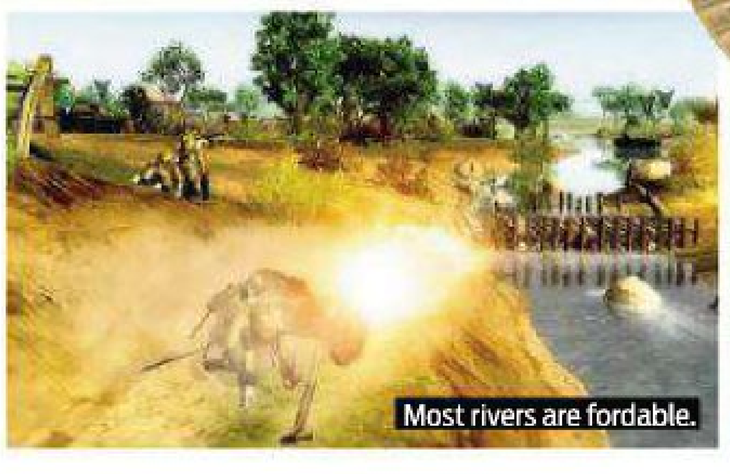

Reach out and torch someone you loathe.


Tanks, like incontinent water boxes.


Nothing worse than a burning sensation in your rear.

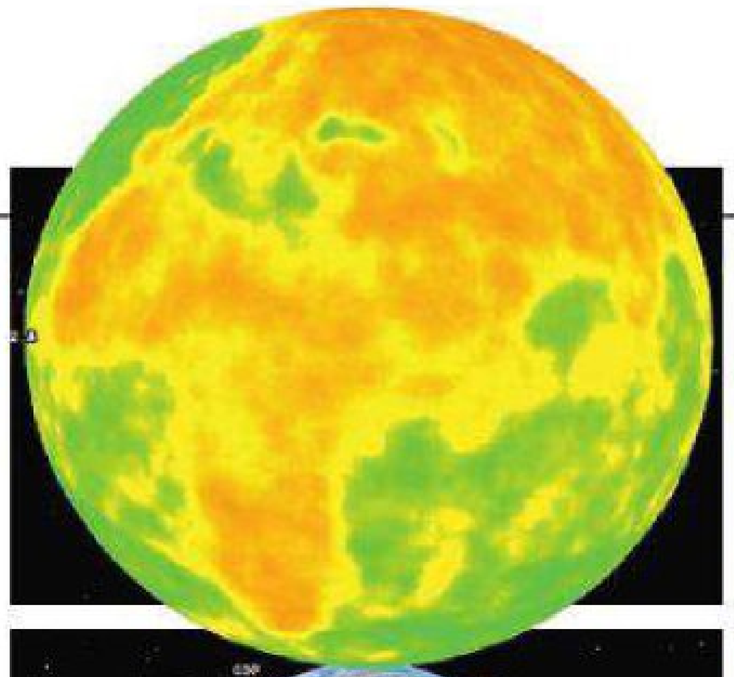


Trench need clearing? Call Mr Flame.


Most rivers are fordable.

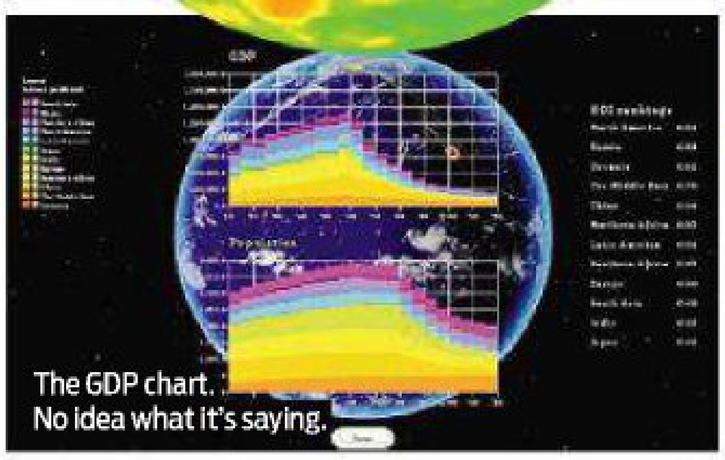
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FETED

FATE OF THE WORLD proves that it's pretty difficult to be in charge of the Earth. ***By Dan Griliopoulos***

Need to know

What is it?
A global-extinction prevention game.

Influenced by
Peacemaker, Evil Genius

Play it on
2.2GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB DX9 graphics card

Alternatively
X-Com, Democracy

Copy protection
Keycode

Fate of the World is a Serious Game that puts you in charge of an organisation trying to solve all the world's problems. It's a bit like the global map of *X-Com*, but the enemies are of our own creation: global warming, energy shortages, starvation and nuclear proliferation.

You establish agents in each of 12 regions to implement policies in the form of cards, each of which takes money from your budget (drawn from the countries' economies). Each turn takes five years and your ultimate aim is to keep the planet alive for as long as possible.

Amazingly, there are only four missions. Though each has different objectives, the challenge is mostly to keep the world alive. 'This should be quick', I thought. 'Economic sims are my speciality. The world'll be saved by teatime!' I twirled my moustache with arrogant delight as my internal narrator belatedly discovered foreshadowing... Three days later, I was still standing in front of my computer, tugging the frayed ends of my ragged 'tache in frustration. The beautifully designed, delightfully detailed world had starved twice, thrown me out for incompetence once, and hanged me for genocide twice. I even failed the first mission once, where you have to raise Africa's Human Development Index, due to a poor tutorial.

Worldly woes

This difficulty comes from several strands. Keeping the 12 regions happy is tough, especially since they all have different starting conditions, but a sim boffin should love that challenge. More tricky are the global problems. Global warming is just one, world starvation is another, and the most important is energy shortages. If you don't solve it, the world economy will collapse.

There are several routes to success: political, technological, social – a good solution will take advantage of them all. However, it's too easy to get into a downwards spiral, with a depressed economy reducing your income, or to lose a country totally. The information necessary for justified decision-making isn't easily available. It is there, in charts and flow diagrams, but it's obfuscated. There's no way of seeing feedback on your actions except crudely, through a headlines section in each region. Information is presented in an inconvenient way: when a card says "Local ban on first-gen biofuels", it would be nice to know if there's somewhere to look to see what effect that will have and if there are second- or third-gen biofuels available yet.

At root, *Fate of the World* may be well-intentioned and beautiful, but it's small, hard and depressing. While it draws attention to burgeoning world problems, it leaves you more dispirited than inspired, and the lack of accessible information to make decisions means you're often behaving randomly. Morally, it's a must-play, but for entertainment and the sake of your moustaches, it's a tough one to recommend. ■

VERDICT

It's a worthy and handsome effort, but frustratingly badly explained, making it hard to play.

PC GAMER 61

◆ **Expect to pay** £10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Red Redemption ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** fateoftheworld.net

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CRAZY UGLY

Toenails and tears with **EDNA AND HARVEY: THE BREAKOUT**. *By Rachel Weber*

I'm so desperate for a good point-and-click fix I've started poking furnishings looking for things to combine, so you think I'd be grateful for one featuring a crazy girl in knickers and mental issues. But holster your mouse finger.

It's classic stuff: via 'talk to' 'look at' 'pick up' and 'use', Edna explores the asylum, occasionally using talking toy rabbit Harvey to flashback in time and learn new skills. (Such as using bitten-off toenails as cheese scented screwdrivers.) There are 120 screens to endure, where you pick up items like a kleptomaniac and make painful, nonsensical small talk with other patients.

It's not just that this is uglier than a sea cucumber with acne, or that the voice acting is nuclear war bad; it's the witless puzzles and interactions that really murder the potential then pee on the corpse. Get a dinosaur-phobic professor to swap TV channels by spoiling his film telling him dinosaurs take over the world. Get a neurotic banker to give you a broken phone so you can collect a coin for a coffee machine. There's never any of that *Monkey Island* flavoured delight: no matter how many problems you solve you never quite feel that speedy rush these games are all about. An hour in, you want to lock Edna in a padded room and throw away the key.

This has been translated from German, and badly. What's just not funny becomes sandpaper pants irritating when delivered in broken English. Stick with it to experience the occasional but always ruinously timed crash and a sadomasochistic lack of any sort of hint system and it's obvious this is nothing more than euro trash. ■

PC GAMER 41





◆ **Expect to pay** £20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Lace Mamba Global
◆ **Developer** Daedalic ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** bit.ly/eepUNF

SHARPER IMAGE

Enjoy pixellated detective drama in **GEMINI RUE**. *By Robert Hathorne*

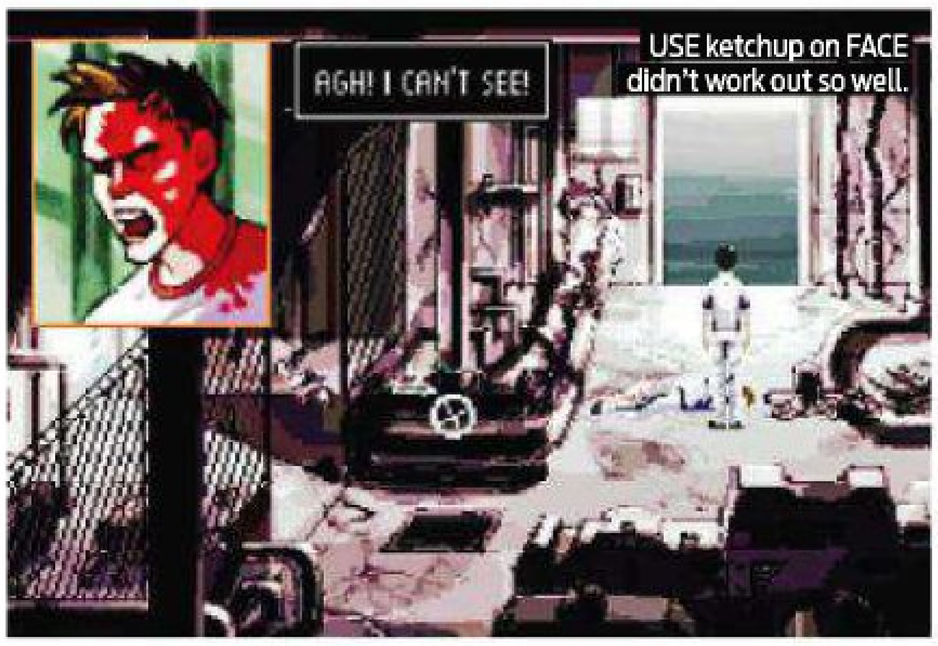
Syndicate agents watch my every move as I relinquish my weapon and enter the futuristic criminal lair. The mob boss smugly reclines behind his desk. "I know everybody in this city, and I don't know you," he begins. Over a series of carefully chosen dialogue options, I win his trust, convince him that I'm a crooked cop and agree to find the missing drug shipment in exchange for information on Centre 7, the off-world criminal reconditioning facility holding my brother.

Dead-set on fulfilling every detective fantasy you've ever had, *Gemini Rue* is a point-and-click adventure game full of hard-boiled drama. One moment I'm in a shootout, hopping fences and shooting locks to escape danger; the next, I'm reading strangers' mail to track down a lead. Soon after, I click a portrait in the corner and am instantly whisked halfway across the galaxy into the concurrent storyline of another character who must escape Centre 7. Switching characters at will is a blessing when a puzzle has you stumped.

Rue's low-res art style aggressively tugs on those nostalgic heartstrings, but occasionally those fat pixels obscure what should be easy solutions. Trapped, with my hands bound and feet dangling, I could use my feet to grab that tile shard I need to free myself... except I just can't distinguish it from the rest of the pixellated jumble that is the floor.

The mature story raises questions of human nature rather than dwelling on blood and boobs. *Gemini Rue* is a gem for treating us like adults, and an experience that any adventure gamer should be proud to add to their collection. ■

PC GAMER 81





◆ **Expect to pay** £10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Wadjet Eye Games
◆ **Developer** Joshua Nuernberger ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** bit.ly/elEbab

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SHARP

Recruit an army, liberate Rome and wear a hoodie in **ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD**. ***By Tyler Wilde***



Need to know

What is it?
Open-world stealth action and intrigue in Renaissance Rome. With a crazy sci-fi subplot.

Influenced by
Thief, Grand Theft Auto III

Play it on
2.6GHz dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800 GTX/ Radeon HD 4870

Alternatively
Splinter Cell: Conviction, 87%

Copy protection
Online activation

Brotherhood picks up where *Assassin's Creed II* left off, 15th century master assassin Ezio having just defeated the sickeningly corrupt Pope. He is inexplicably surprised the next day when the Pope's son interrupts his awkwardly animated sex scene with an army. Cue the cannons!

As in *AC2*, the story progresses through a series of Ezio's memories. The missions are varied sequences of stealth, combat and story-driving dialogue, and even the seemingly garden-variety escort missions are well done. It's hard to be bored when you're scrambling across the rooftops of Rome, tracking a stumbling target through the streets, then leaping and forcing a blade through their neck. Especially if they've just nicked my wallet.

The most important thing you need to know before starting is that, after the first hour, you're never forced to do anything you don't want to do. So don't be discouraged by the frustratingly pointless, heavily cinematic introduction, because everything after that is compelling. I couldn't stay angry at the game for long – not after nimbly scaling the Coliseum and flicking my blade into the necks of three hapless gunmen, all entirely without detection. Once you get there, *Brotherhood*'s massive, open-world Rome is an engrossing, blood-soaked playground.

Sore throat

The free-running and combat do take an effort to master, however. Early in the game I had to chase down and tackle a pickpocket, so I sprinted into a crowd, fell over, jumped into a pile of hay, and stuck my hidden blade through the throat of a woman carrying her groceries. But the more I played, the more impressive and less unintentionally amusing my acrobatics became.

They'd have been more impressive still, mind you, without the game's few irksome glitches – such as the pop-ins that once warped a hostile guard directly in front of me while I was being sneaky.

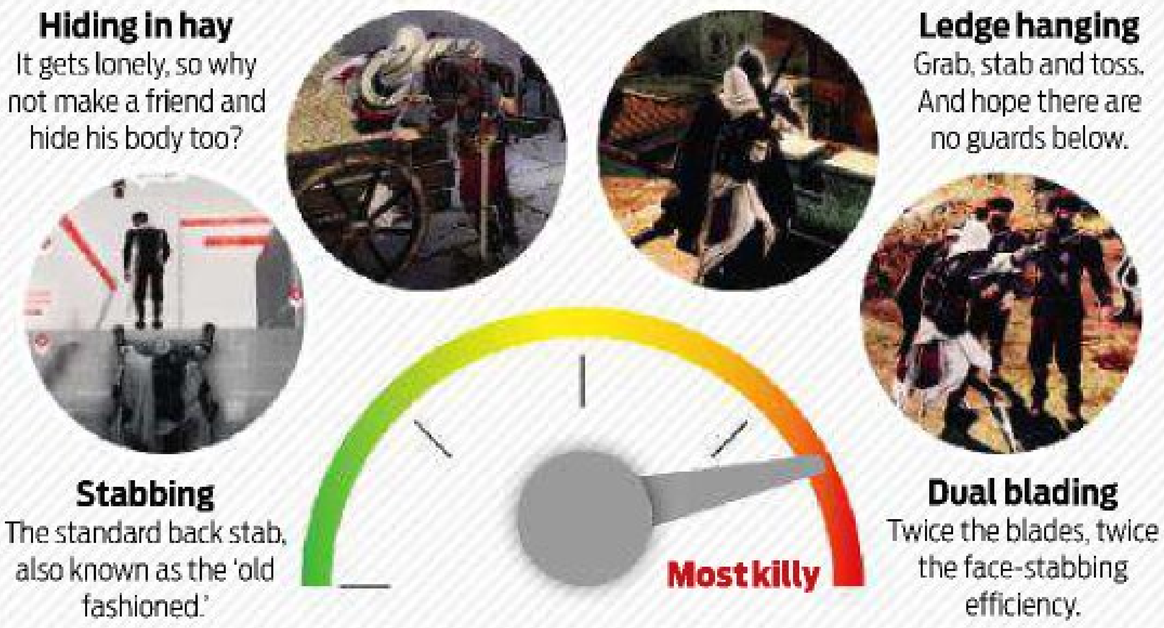
Aside from the story missions, *Brotherhood* builds on *AC2*'s huge list of optional things to do: violently overtaking enemy territory, recruiting and managing your ally assassins, investing in property – I got happily lost in its time-sink vortex for hours, and more hours still were spent amusing myself by free-running through Rome and beating up guards for no reason. The singleplayer offers at least 15 hours of quality assassination – and if you tire of that, there's also the new multiplayer mode.

Brotherhood's main multiplayer options are simple but challenging stealth manhunts, either as a lone-wolf assassin or as part of a team of killers. You're given a target to assassinate, while another player hunts you. You know what your target looks like and their general location; the catch is that the maps are populated with lookalike civilians controlled by the AI. The trick is to lose your pursuer by blending into the crowd, while at the same time watching for any unusual behaviour that could identify your own target. It makes this well-designed, paranoia-inducing cat-and-mouse game far more than just a bullet point on the box. I did experience occasional, inexplicable crashes, however.

Overshadowing even the multiplayer, *Brotherhood*'s biggest improvement is that it requires only one-time activation, as opposed to *AC2*'s evil 'always-online' DRM. It isn't notably superior to *AC2* (the story isn't quite as epic, for one thing), but it's at least on par, and a worthy, hugely entertaining sequel. ■

The assassin's handbook

Murderous ploys, on a scale of one to aiiieee



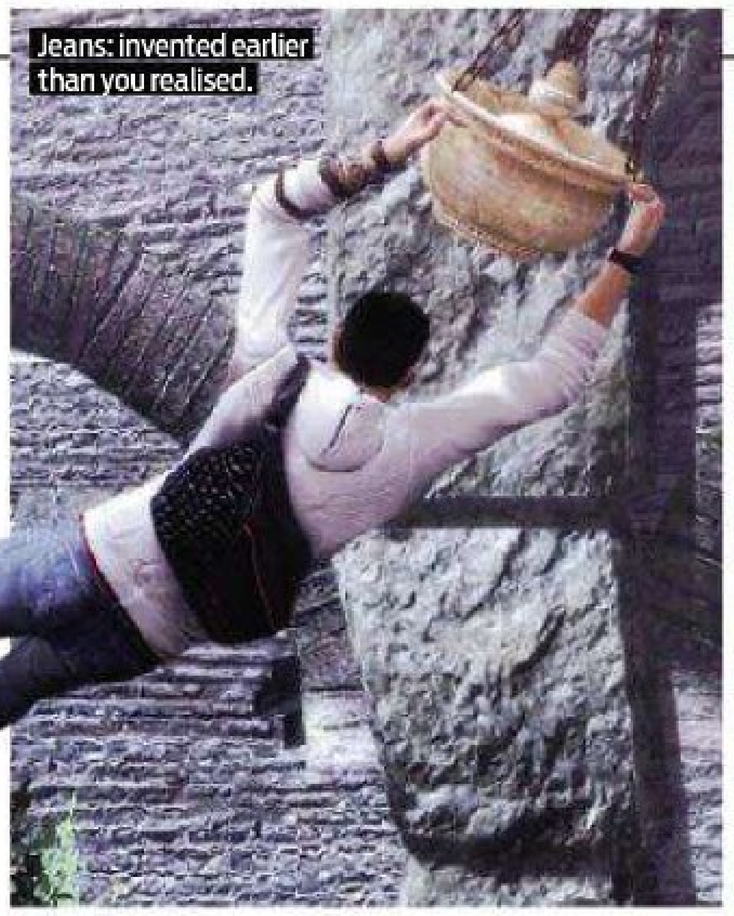
"Rome is an engrossing, blood-soaked playground"

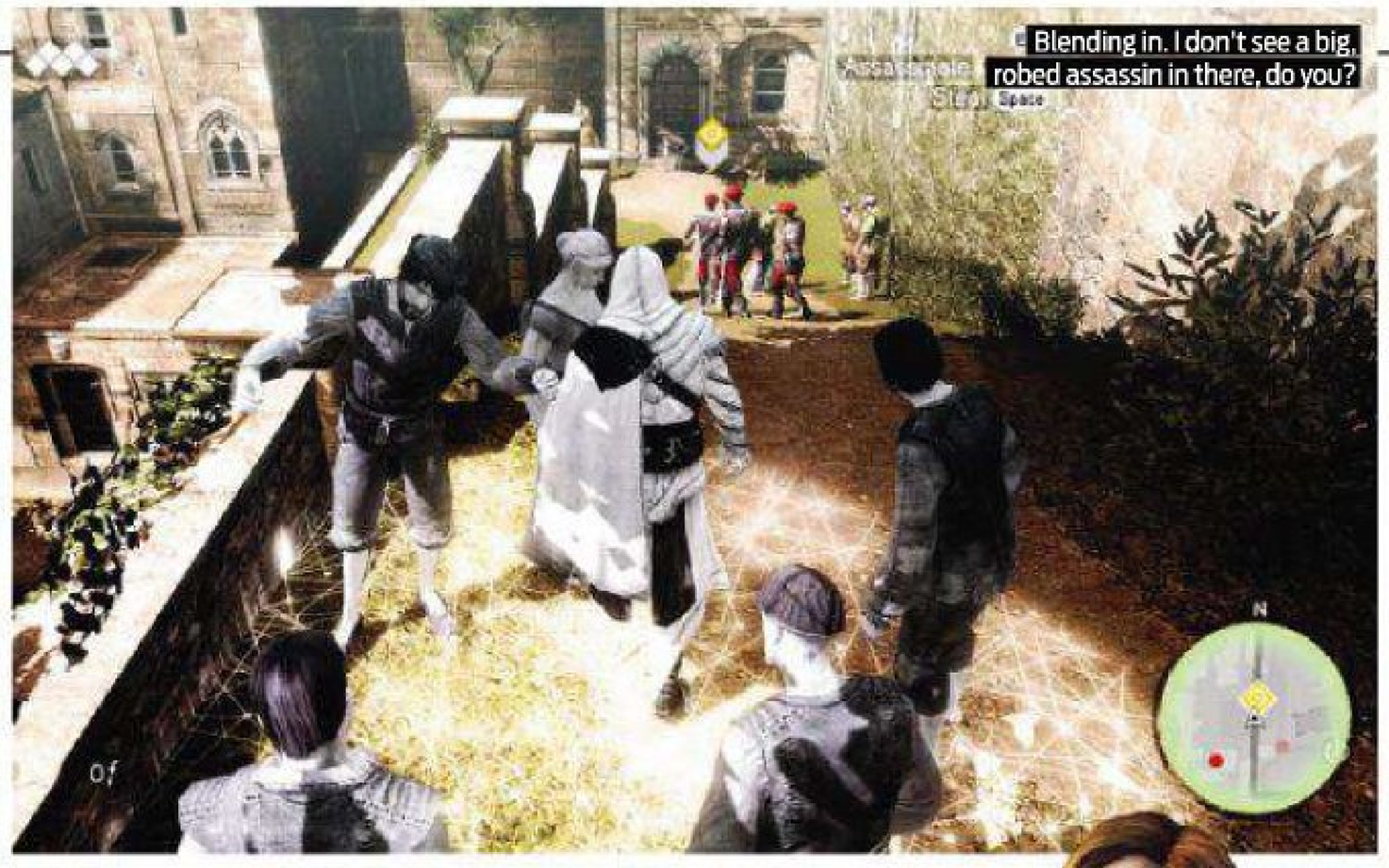
◆ **Expect to pay** £40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft Annecy ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 8 players ◆ **Link** assassinscreed.us.ubi.com/brotherhood

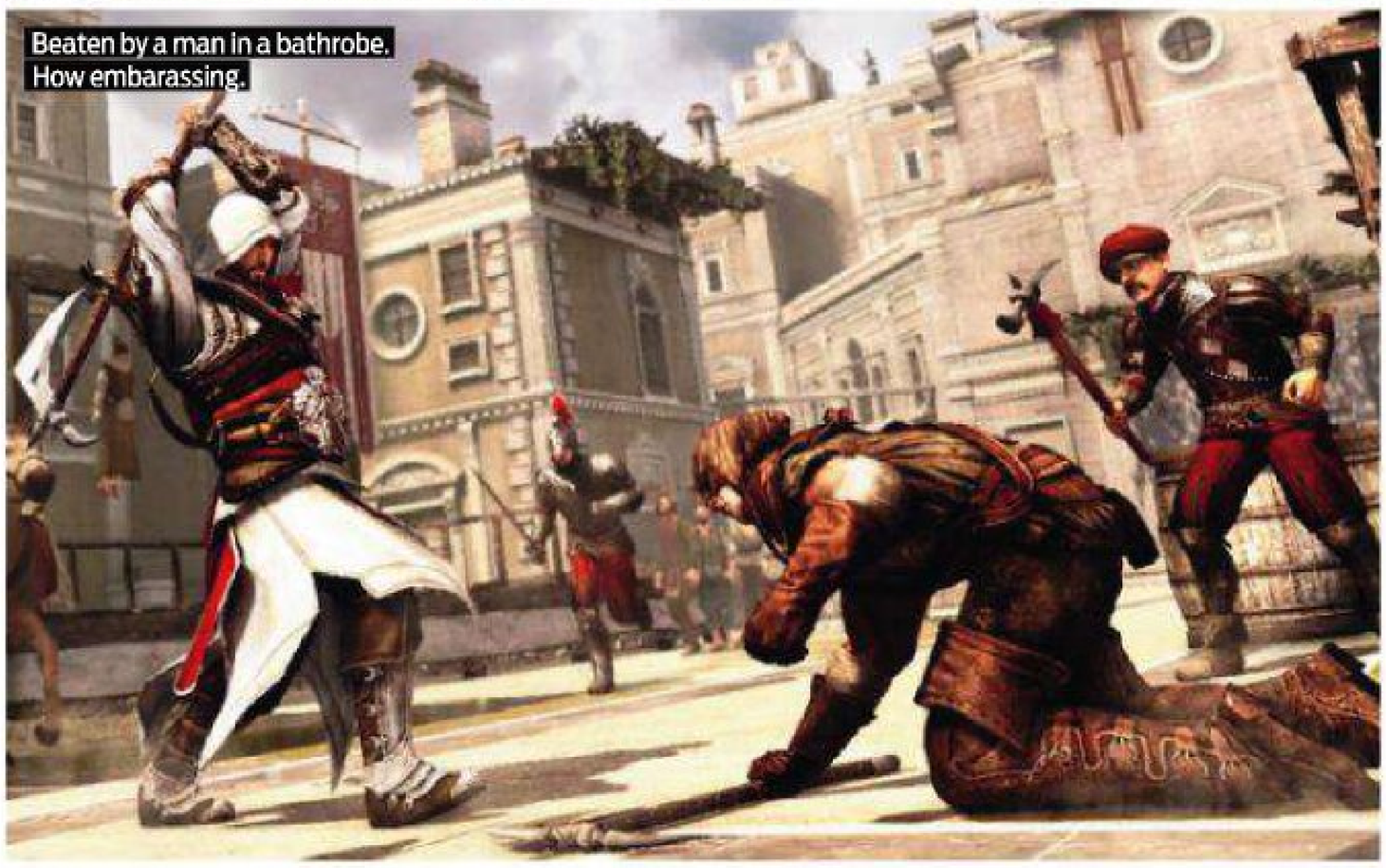
VERDICT

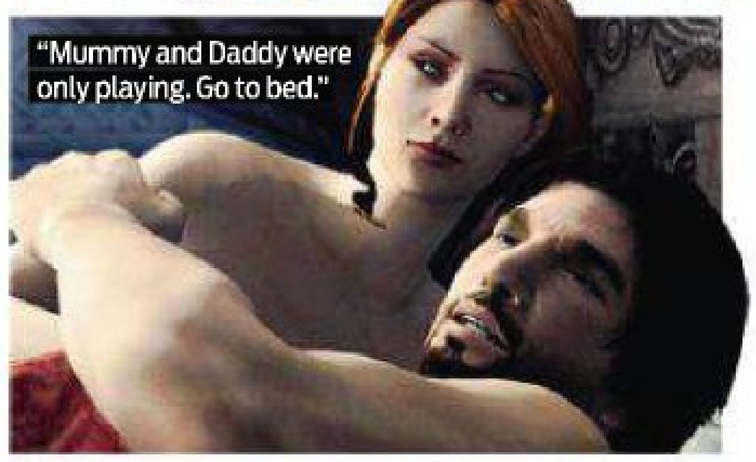
An exhilarating adventure, teeming with unique things to see and do, and most importantly, people to stab.

PC GAMER **86**













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DRIVEN

Real cars, courses and races make **SHIFT 2** a racer's dream. But it doesn't always handle like one. ***By Rich McCormick***

Need to know

What is it?
Largely serious racer that tries to straddle the gap between simulation and arcade.

Influenced by
iRacing, NFS: Hot Pursuit

Play it on
Quad Core CPU, 4GB memory, Radeon 4850

Alternatively
DiRT 2, 93%

Copy protection
Solid Shield

I am in favour of the RPG-ification of all things. I want points for successfully waking up in the morning, points for getting my legs through the right holes in my trousers, points for not falling over and voiding my bowels on the way to work. *Shift 2* has the right idea: it gives me points for everything.

I overtake another car and the invisible car god of the sky gives me 20 points. I stymie a rival's progression through the pack by weaving my multi-thousand dollar machine in front of his, and he gifts me another ten. All points from my benevolent driving lord go toward *Shift 2*'s career mode, and fuel a healthy and compulsive unlock schedule that makes me want to swear undying fealty to my new car god and kill all unbelievers.

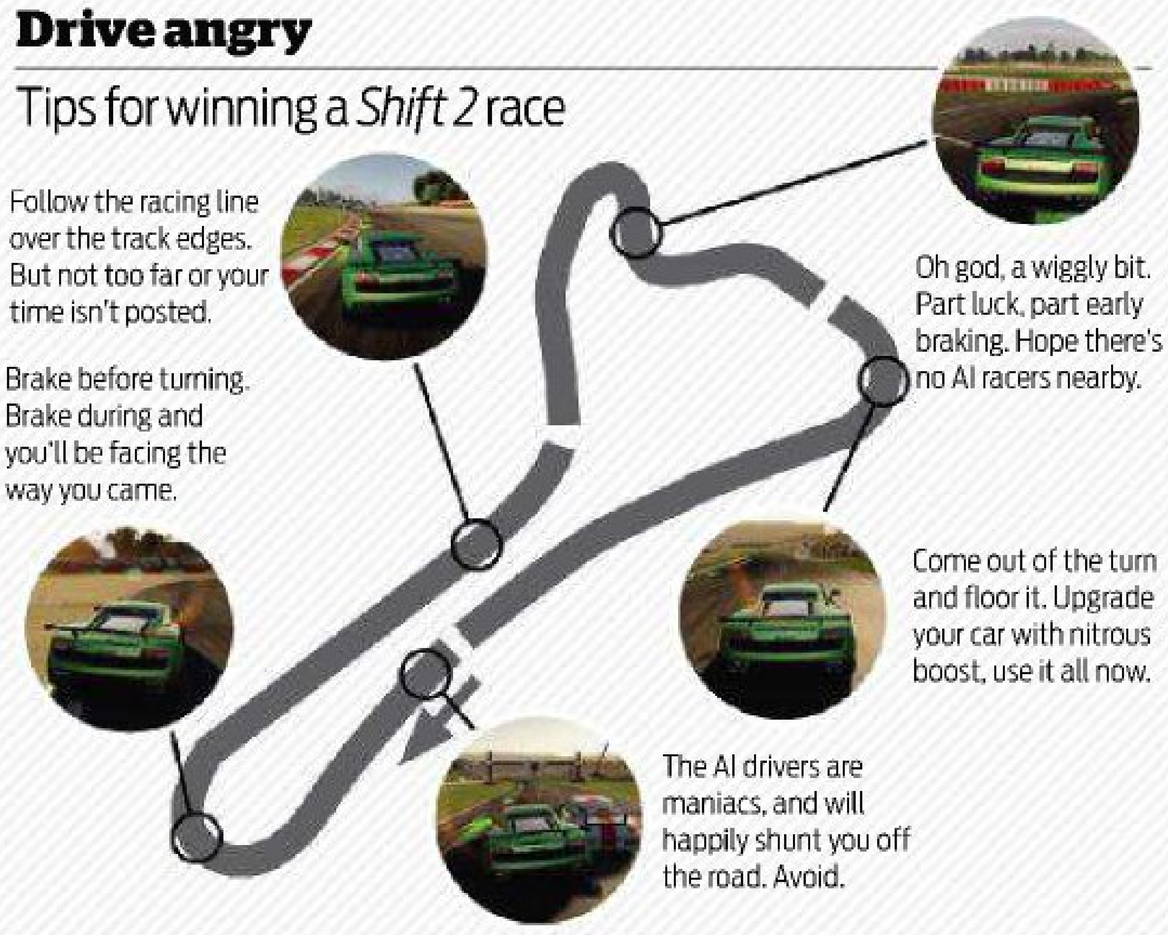
Points spill forth from all *Shift 2*'s orifices. Winning races or getting the fastest lap on a time attack session will typically give the largest rewards, but they don't satisfy quite like the mid-race prizes. On default settings, *Shift 2*'s tracks are lit up by a racing line of green chevrons: follow them perfectly and you'll tot up XP. Each course has mini achievements – leading for a lap, or following the line through every corner – and the points-haul is chunky.

Connecting solidly with the racing line and sticking to it adds an extra frisson to an already tense game, but the wayward handling model makes the process more complicated than it needs to be. *Shift 2*'s default camera mode is in the racer's helmet. Slightly Mad studios have artfully recreated the sense of climbing into a turbocharged tin can and getting knocked about so hard your vision swims, but in doing so, it feels like they've tied *Shift 2*'s cars too closely to your on-screen hand movements.

"As an experience, the helmet camera is breathtaking"

Drive angry

Tips for winning a *Shift 2* race



Let's take turning left as an example. On a Xbox 360 pad (and for the love of new magic sky god, do not attempt to play with a keyboard), pushing the stick slowly to the left has one of two outcomes: a yank on the wheel that realigns your car at least ten degrees, or nothing at all. As an experience, the helmet cam is breathtaking – being close to the tarmac with the noise and speed feels properly dangerous. But to win races, I had to switch to the behind-the-car camera, or suffer as my guesses about the way my car was facing were proved wrong.

Mastering a race

From further out, *Shift 2*'s all-or-nothing handling can be studied, judged, and reasoned with. Car type and quality make a huge difference, necessitating some minor grinding. I was having problems finishing on the podium in one of the game's early C-class races, using a cheapo front-wheel drive Nissan. Much swearing later, I hocked it and used some extra cash to pick up a four-wheel drive Impreza, adding a few technical-sounding tweaks from the garage along the way. Popping back into the same race, I slipped my competitors on the first corner and giggled all the way to the top spot.

Shift 2's sheer weight of stuff – from mud-ring circuits in a VW Golf to Bugatti duels at the Nurburgring – gives it a deep bag of appeal. There's an array of fiddly details for car geeks to poke at, and a range of control-difficulty settings that allow you to tailor races to your ability. The only downside to such a complete package is that it demands so many hours of acclimatisation before the cars start to make sense. ■

VERDICT

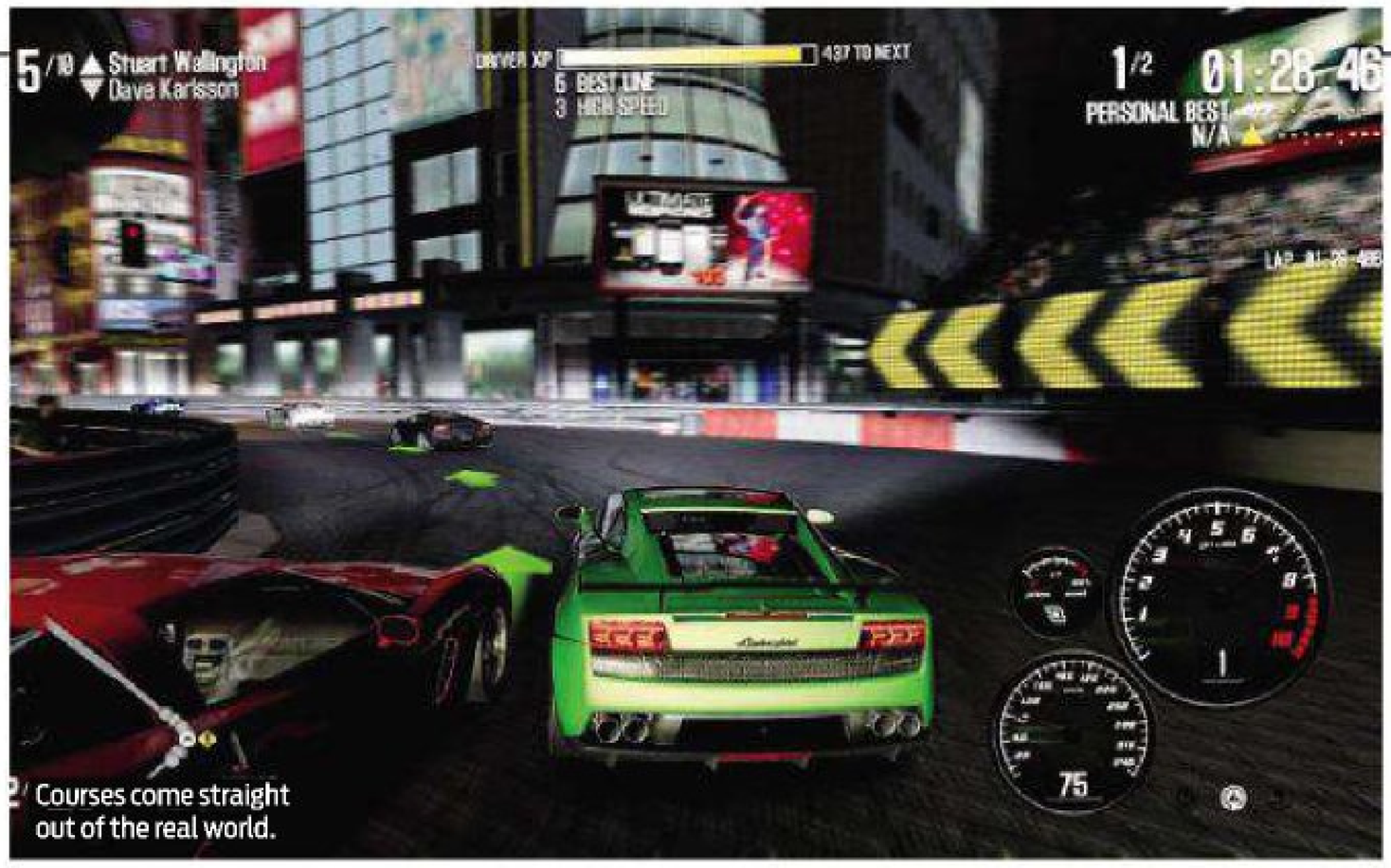
A bucket of road racing's best bits. Stick your hand in and you'll pull out something fun, if you can handle the handling.

PC GAMER 81

◆ **Expect to pay** £29 ◆ **Release** April 1 ◆ **Publisher** EA ◆ **Developer** Slightly Mad Studios
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 12 ◆ **Link** www.needforspeed.com/shift2unleashed

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2/ Courses come straight out of the real world.



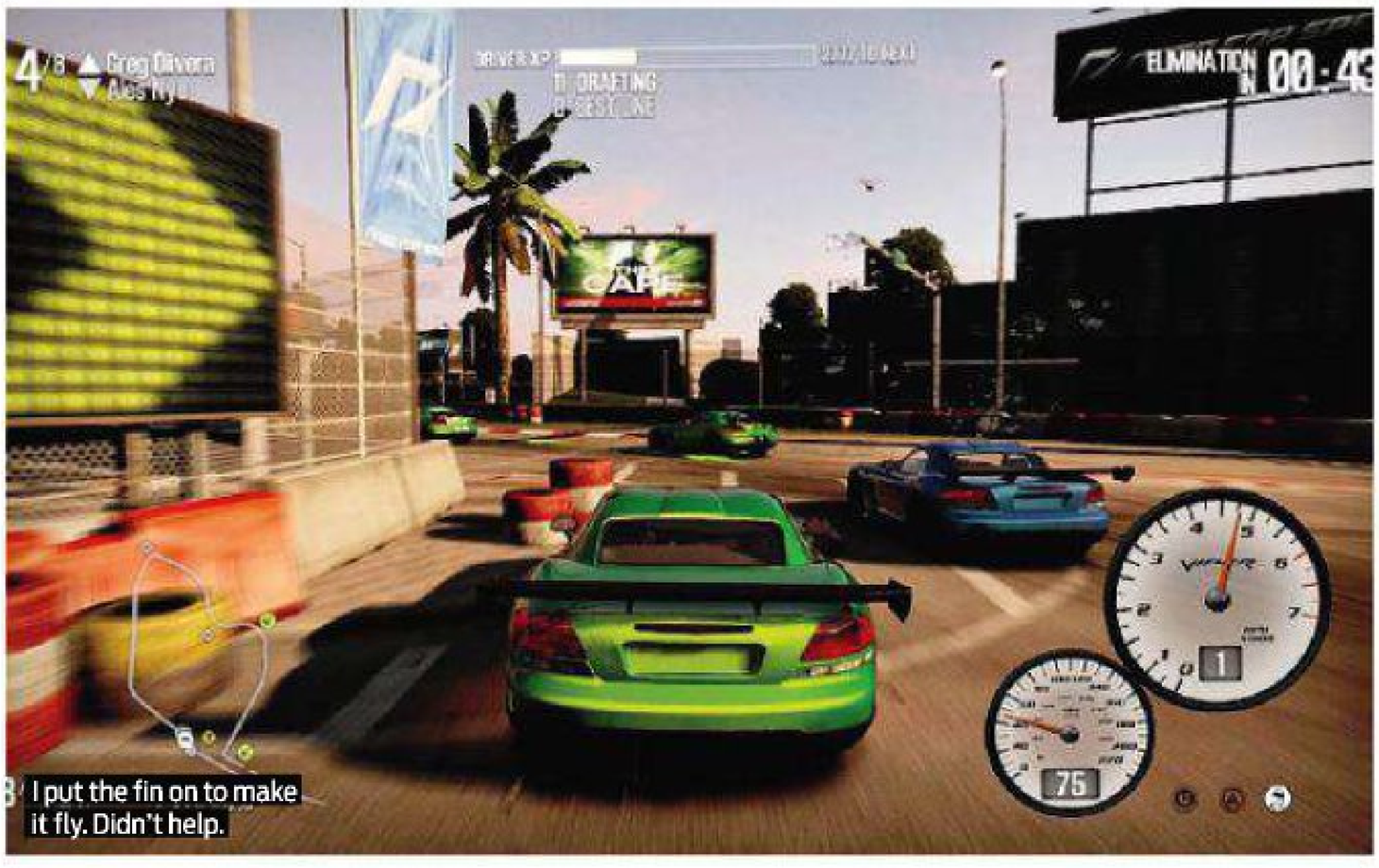
The wooden spoon of supercars.



The in-helmet view makes for a juddery ride.



A millisecond later, I was rammed off the road.



I put the fin on to make it fly. Didn't help.



Straight line, straight line, ooh, sunset!

Car was far too cool to acknowledge them.

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DCS: A-10C is a pixel-perfect combat sim.


Relaxed-realism mode doesn't really click.


'Active pause' freezes the action while you faff.


The subsonic Warthog: well-behaved and stable.


Targeting with the Litening II AT pod takes all the sport out of it.


Damage modelling is absolutely first-rate.

HOG HEAVEN

Authentic and endlessly intense, **DCS: A-10C WARTHOG** delivers a potent payload. ***By Andy Mahood***

Need to know

What is it?
A dauntingly realistic modern air combat sim.

Influenced by
Flanker 2.0

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, 512MB graphics card

Alternatively
DCS: Black Shark, 82%

Copy protection
Online activation

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A line of Russian T-72Bs tanks, teasingly stationary on the open Georgian plain, light up my A-10C's HUD. If I was playing almost any other combat flight game, I would press a key or two to lock on, then squeeze a joystick button to effortlessly deposit a 1,000-pound CBU-97 cluster bomb on the enemy armour.

But this is Eagle Dynamics' meticulously authentic DCS: A-10C Warthog simulation, and establishing a firing solution on those tanks is serious business. It can't be sugar-coated: I set the appropriate ordnance on the left multi-function display stores management page with a series of button presses; configure release parameters (ripple settings, time of fall, minimum altitude); cycle Master Mode Control to CCIP bombing; enter a shallow dive toward the tanks; and release the bomb when the CCIP pipper in the HUD hits the sweet spot. It's true: the kills you work for are the most satisfying.

All of this will be confusing and exhausting for flight sim neophytes, but for the perpetually demanding hardcore sim crowd, *DCS: A-10C* represents near perfection. Every single switch, gauge, button, and display in the fully clickable 6DOF virtual cockpit functions exactly like its real-world counterpart. Everything from the 100,000-polygon models and damage system to the HDR-enhanced Crimean Peninsula terrain graphics is absolutely gobsmackingly gorgeous.

Learning to fly

For those willing to learn, a terrific set of interactive, narrated training missions and animated control cues provide a great starting point. The 'active pause' cheat that lets you stop in mid-air to flip switches is another godsend – it gives you time to pore over the hefty, nearly 900-page PDF (*bit.ly/gPD4tY*) manual for hints. There's also a 'game mode' option with simple flight modelling and easy avionics to lighten the workload. Eventually, jet-jock wannabes can perform anything from cold engine start-ups to bitch-slapping Russian tanks with a laser-guided Paveway.

When you're ready to get serious, *DCS: A-10C* has 19 scripted missions and three linear – albeit randomised – Georgian-Russian campaigns boasting enough contiguous AI action (complete with frantic radio chatter) to seriously distract you en route to your own mission goals. Add to that a convenient random mission-generator, a full mission editor with its own precipitous learning curve, and a co-op multiplayer game for up to 32 players.

It's a sim that demands dedication to reveal its true worth. The Hog is a relatively easy aircraft to fly, but doing so while battling armed AI with this brutally realistic weapons delivery platform is one of the most challenging undertakings you'll ever face in PC flight simulation – and one of the most intensely satisfying when you prevail. ■

VERDICT

The most exhaustively detailed and realistic combat jet sim you'll find outside of classified US military sources.

PC GAMER **92**

◆ **Expect to pay** £38 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** The Fighter Collection ◆ **Developer** Eagle Dynamics ◆ **Multiplayer** 32 players ◆ **Link** www.digitalcombatsimulator.com

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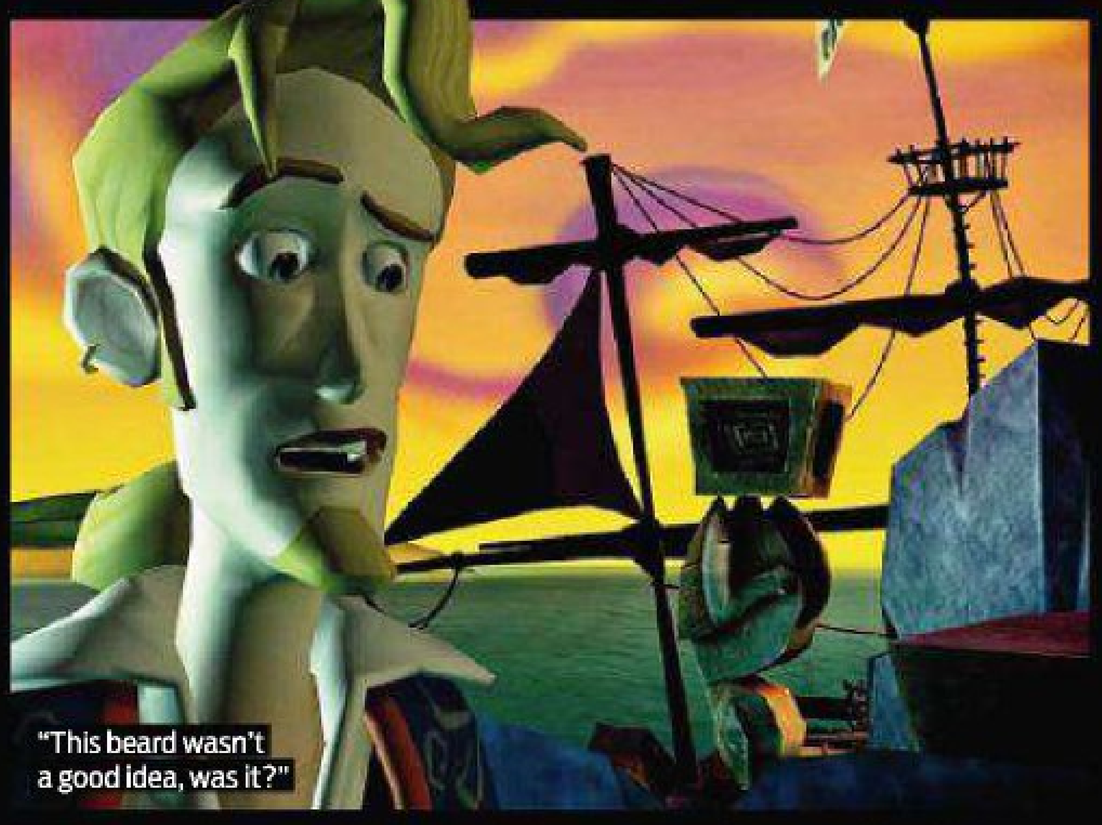
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"This beard wasn't a good idea, was it?"


Even though she's Guybrush's wife, she's still mostly furious.


Gull + hook + barrel + rope = puzzle


That's the sort of beard Guybrush should have gone for.


We're too big to include a 'blowing a horn' joke here.

APING THE BEST

TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND COLLECTOR'S EDITION is a treasure chest, but not priceless.

Need to know

What is it?
All five *Monkey Island* episodes in one box.

Influenced by
Ron Gilbert

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 128MB graphics card

Alternatively
The Dream Machine

There are two types of people who dare to remake, or continue, a classic. They've either got huge balls, or no shame. For instance, there was a person who watched The Shop Around The Corner and thought, "You know what?..." and made You've Got Mail. But then David Cronenberg saw Kurt Neumann's 1958 film The Fly, and made one of the masterpieces of modern horror. So into which camp do Telltale fall, having picked up the reins for *Monkey Island*?

It was certainly a bold move. This is one of the most adored gaming series of all time (despite the first one not being that great, and the fourth never being properly recognised as decent), its reputation and influence bigger than anything else in adventure gaming. But then this is the company who had no qualms about reinventing *Sam & Max*.

Tales of Monkey Island comes from a more mature Telltale. Those early series had vim, but they were weak. Having learned through practice, and having hired an awful lot of talent, by the time it came to the hefty task of taking on Guybrush Threepwood Telltale were in a much stronger position.

The results are mixed. Crucially, they've done a decent job of putting a story together. Unfortunately, they've also created a control mechanism that takes adventuring back about 30 years.

Point and flip

Having David Grossman and Mike Stemmle – two of LucasArts' key writers – makes a big difference, and what we have here are adventure games that feel solid and complete. And having the cast from *Monkey Island 3* onward continue to voice their roles adds authenticity.

The controls, however, are beyond belief. Where once you could click somewhere and your character would walk there, here Guybrush is supposed to be led by dragging the mouse. It doesn't work, leaving you spinning on the spot in frustration. Keyboard controls become your only option, and these often flip directions in an irritating fashion.

The Collector's Edition brings all five episodes together in one novelty-shaped box, and doesn't come cheap. You're getting an art gallery, some wallpapers, avatars, a map of Melange, a drink coaster from Club 41, a voodoo card, your own piece of eight, and a Trial of the Century badge. All in a pirate chest.

It's a nice bunch of treats, but at £50 – an extra £20 over the Premium Edition (which gives you just the gallery, wallpapers and avatars, in a boring regular box) – it seems a tad excessive. Especially when you can get all five episodes without the goodies for £22 direct from Telltale.

The mistake here is overpricing the Premium Edition at £30. Otherwise it's five solid adventures with some expensive treats on the side. (But they really should have released the disc in a fine leather jacket. Ithankyou.)

◆ **Expect to pay** £50 ◆ **Publisher** Lace Mamba ◆ **Developer** Telltale
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** goo.gl/TlrCh ◆ **First review** PCG 204, 85%

VERDICT

Overpriced treats and a solid five-part adventure game, all in a luxury box that won't fit on your shelf.

PC GAMER **80**

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RESTRICTIVE

Because all trees must be chopped, it's **SETTLERS 7: GOLD EDITION**.


Trees! Chop them down NOW!


It's a madly pretty game.

The process by which I decide which games get which slots in They're Back is a complicated one I've honed over the last 12 years (*12 years* of writing this shit – I am so old). And since the last redesign, 25 They're Backs ago, assignment to this second spot tends to be for re-releases that have so much in them they'd never fit in the slots below. So I'd better get started.

This gold edition comes with the following: The game, *Settlers 7: Path to a Kingdom*. Then there's DLC Pack 1, which contains three new multiplayer maps. Then there's DLC Pack 2 with four additional four-player maps, for Skirmish, Multiplayer and Empire mode. You've then got an additional Event Location, Towers of Tandria, additional Victory Points with Pacifist, Economist and Ascetic. And there are two additional Ecobuildings, Order of Knights and Infernal Mines.

Next comes DLC Pack 3, with a campaign expansion, *Rise of the Rebellion*, which offers you five new campaign maps, and a scenario expansion, *Shadow Over Tandria*, which brings you two new enormous scenario maps.

Which barely gives me space to tell you that *Settlers 7* is a decent entry to the enormously long-running cutesy strategy series. The trouble is, at the time of writing Ubisoft *still* haven't released Settlers from their idiotic and downright spiteful 'always on' DRM, which makes it extremely hard to recommend. Should they ever decide to treat *Settlers* customers with dignity, then this will be worth getting hold of. ■

PC GAMER **70**

◆ **Expect to pay** £18 ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Bluebyte
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** goo.gl/BeMd ◆ **First review** PCG 213, 70%


I don't remember seeing this at Tintagel Castle.

KING ARTHUR COMPLETE

You really should know about this game. Knowing you, you're probably a fan of the *Total War* series. And you're always complaining that there aren't enough other games like it. Even Tim Stone was smitten by *King Arthur*'s mix of RTS battles and turn-based campaign maps, set in the Cornish world of Merlin and co.

This 'complete' pack gives you the main game, then the *Knights and Vassals* and *Legendary Artefacts* DLC, as well as *The Saxons* and *The Druids* add-ons, all for... oh wait. At the time of writing, Steam has this bundle boasting that individually the games would cost you £22.98, but getting them together makes it, er, £29.97. You should still get them, but perhaps separately. ■

PC GAMER **85**

◆ **Expect to pay** £23 ◆ **Publisher** Steam
◆ **Developer** NeoCore ◆ **First review** PCG 210, 86%


We never played this game on *our* playground.

KING'S BOUNTY: CROSSWORLDS

The utterly wonderful *King's Bounty* was a mad joy of strategy and roleplaying. It was wildly imaginative and everyone ever should play it. Then came *Armoured Princess*, a new campaign that was aces, but not *quite* as good.

Crossworlds is sort of *Armoured Princess Deluxe* – the same game at the core, but with another entire game's worth of content bolted around the outside.

And some of that content, odd minigames, side campaigns, and so on, is delightful.

It's the perfect way to get *Armoured Princess* if you haven't already, and while it's never as great/silly as the first game, it's still a marvellous eater of your time. And cheaper in a box than online. ■

PC GAMER **80**

◆ **Expect to pay** £10.20 ◆ **Publisher** Focus ◆ **Developer** Katauri Interactive ◆ **First review** PCG 220, 78%


Even looking at it makes me angry.

MYST: MASTERPIECE EDITION

Is there any more arrogant name for a game than the 'masterpiece' slapped on this 14-mile-high turd? It's like being sick on a bench and calling it a masterpiece. The sheer gall of it makes me want to travel back in time and stomp on the first fish showing signs of legs.

Myst is a horrible, terrible game. It's liked by approximately 40 billion people, all of whom are idiots. In it you must click at random on a bunch of awfully rendered static screens, before something happens somewhere else, and then at some merciful point it ends. This so-called 'masterpiece' edition updated it for PCs in 2000, which means it's all but useless on PCs in 2011. Which is by far for the best. ■

PC GAMER **08**

◆ **Expect to pay** £4 too much ◆ **Publisher** Cyan Worlds/Steam
◆ **Developer** Cyan Worlds ◆ **First review** PCG 109, 23%

NOW PLAYING

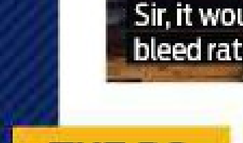


Sir, it would credit you to bleed rather less.

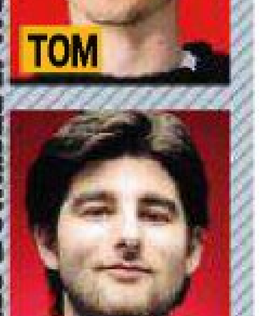
THE PC GAMER TEAM

TOM

TOM


RICH


GRAHAM


RICHARD

"And before you ask: yes, I have got to the robot dinosaur bit"

TOM WRITES TO THE MAGAZINE ABOUT RICH'S REVIEW OF **BULLETSTORM**



Tom Francis

Now Playing: *Bulletstorm*
This month: Grudgingly sort of ended up liking it.
Also played: *Supreme Commander, Dawn of War 2: Retribution*

Dear PC Gamer,

I am writing to complain about the *Bulletstorm* review published in your April issue (PCG 225). Its author, a Mr Richard McCormick, was apparently on some kind of delusional drug when he wrote it – be it Wrongoin, Wrongcaine, or Sweet Mary Wrong. He is wrong. The game is not, as he claims, good. On the contrary, it is bad.

In ten seconds I wanted to punch my character through the haircut and force feed the spray-fixed remains to that other character, I forget his name. Both establish themselves as grotesque and murderous boors of the lowest order, and were it not for Mr McCormick's 80% review I would have stopped playing then and there.

Unfortunately, I was deceived by your publication into playing further.

I was not impressed. The default weapon is a spluttering nonsense with no heft or pleasure to it, and long hours pass without alternatives. Tugging at enemies with the leash is somewhat novel, but only serves to afford a longer window in which to rattle your toothless rifle at them, or kick them almost harmlessly back to the place from which they were only recently extracted.

I am now being instructed to 'take cover' from a number of flying enemies, while standing on a flat, featureless platform during a lengthy train-ride set-piece. Dealing with these enemies efficiently requires me to play an insulting needle-swinging minigame under fire, a process I find only mildly more enjoyable than gargling quiche.

This train has now crashed, and while the view from the bridge we're dangling from is pretty, I do not appreciate being asked to click the left and right buttons in sequence to climb to safety. If I had wished to play a rhythm action game, sirs, I would have purchased Dumb Games for Jerks magazine – which I cannot, since Future Publishing acquired and subsequently closed it in 2003.

Granted, I finally have a less useless

"Had I wished to penetrate eggs, sirs, I would have visited Pregnancy360.com"

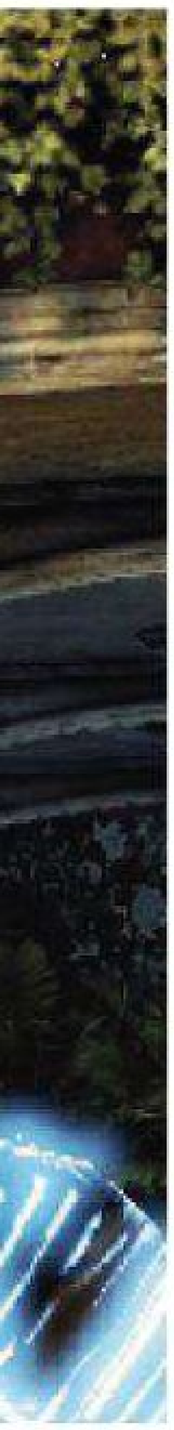
weapon, and yes, the Screamer does take limbs and heads off quite cleanly. But it's too little, too late. Even if I am now fighting on the brink of a gorge so deep that I can use the threshold as an ever-present deathtrap over which to pitch my enemies. Somewhat too little, somewhat too late.

And now I'm shooting the eggs of some huge creature. If I had wished to penetrate eggs, sirs, I would have visited Pregnancy360.com.

So what if the next scene features an amazing sci-fi cityscape? Have standards

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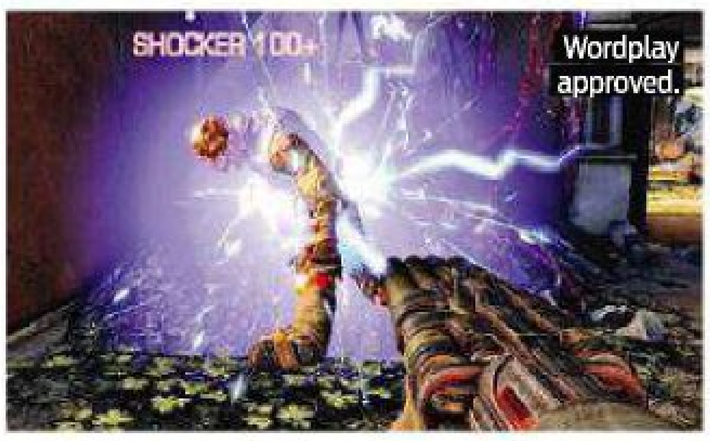
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sunk so low that a moderately fun game with beautiful scenery is now recommended? It's almost enough, almost in time.

Yes, the next good weapon comes shortly after that, and yes, wrapping enemies in an explosive bolass and kicking them into friends is appealing. It's also true that by carefully clipping the scenery with this device you can slice enemies in inventive ways. But are we to settle for merely 'inventive', 'appealing', 'beautiful' and 'fun'? I wonder.

And before you ask: yes, I have got to the robot dinosaur bit. I was not impressed. If I had wished to control robot dinosaurs that shoot beams when they roar, sirs, I would have played *Robot Dinosaurs That Shoot Beams When They Roar* (Kongregate, *bit.ly/RoboDino*).

The only thing I enjoyed about that section was fighting through the miniature city beforehand as if I were a giant monster, then facing the much bigger monster afterwards, then controlling that monster to shoot my enemies while singing, then the next bit with the steerable sniper rifle bullets, and also the quad-barrelled shotgun is excellent.

Please fire Richard McCormick immediately or consider my subscription cancelled.

Yours insightfully, Thomas Edward Francis Esq.



"They say evil doesn't pay. In Chaos Rising, it makes you invincible"

TAKING THE MORAL HIGH GROUND IN **CHAOS RISING**



Tom Senior

Now Playing: *Dawn of War 2: Chaos Rising*
This month: Very nearly turned evil, was saved only by his love of killing space-heretics.
Also played: *Bulletstorm*

The Space Marine Scouts are trapped up in a building, beset on all sides by Chaos warriors. My squads are on a nearby ridge, equipped with holy weaponry that could mince the enemy forces in seconds. Instead, they stand completely still. I'm trying my best to be evil.

In *Chaos Rising*, your squads can become corrupted by the horrors of Chaos they face in battle every day. This is represented by a points tally. According to *Chaos Rising*, morality in the Warhammer universe is a matter of fashion: wearing evil trousers into battle makes you +3 more evil, but failing certain objectives will also nudge you towards the dark side.

The more Scouts that die, the more evil points I get. Another Chaos wave charges them. My commander shuffles about, fascinated by his own powerfist.

Evil points win evil prizes. Gaining corruption moves you along the Progress Bar of Evil, unlocking insanely overpowered abilities such as Unholy Revival, which brings all of your men back to life, heals them, and also gives them corruption, moving them even closer to the ultimate power. This sends all of your squads into a blood frenzy and makes them immune to damage. They say evil doesn't pay. In *Dawn of War 2: Chaos Rising*, it makes you invincible.

Nevertheless, this is unbearable. Not because I care about the Scouts. Because I've just realised that something much worse is happening here.

I'm spending my free time watching a game play itself.

I hammer the attack button faster than you can say "for the Emperor!" Those evil superpowers can go back to the hell they came from. I came here to play. If that means sacrificing the most fun abilities in the game, so be it.

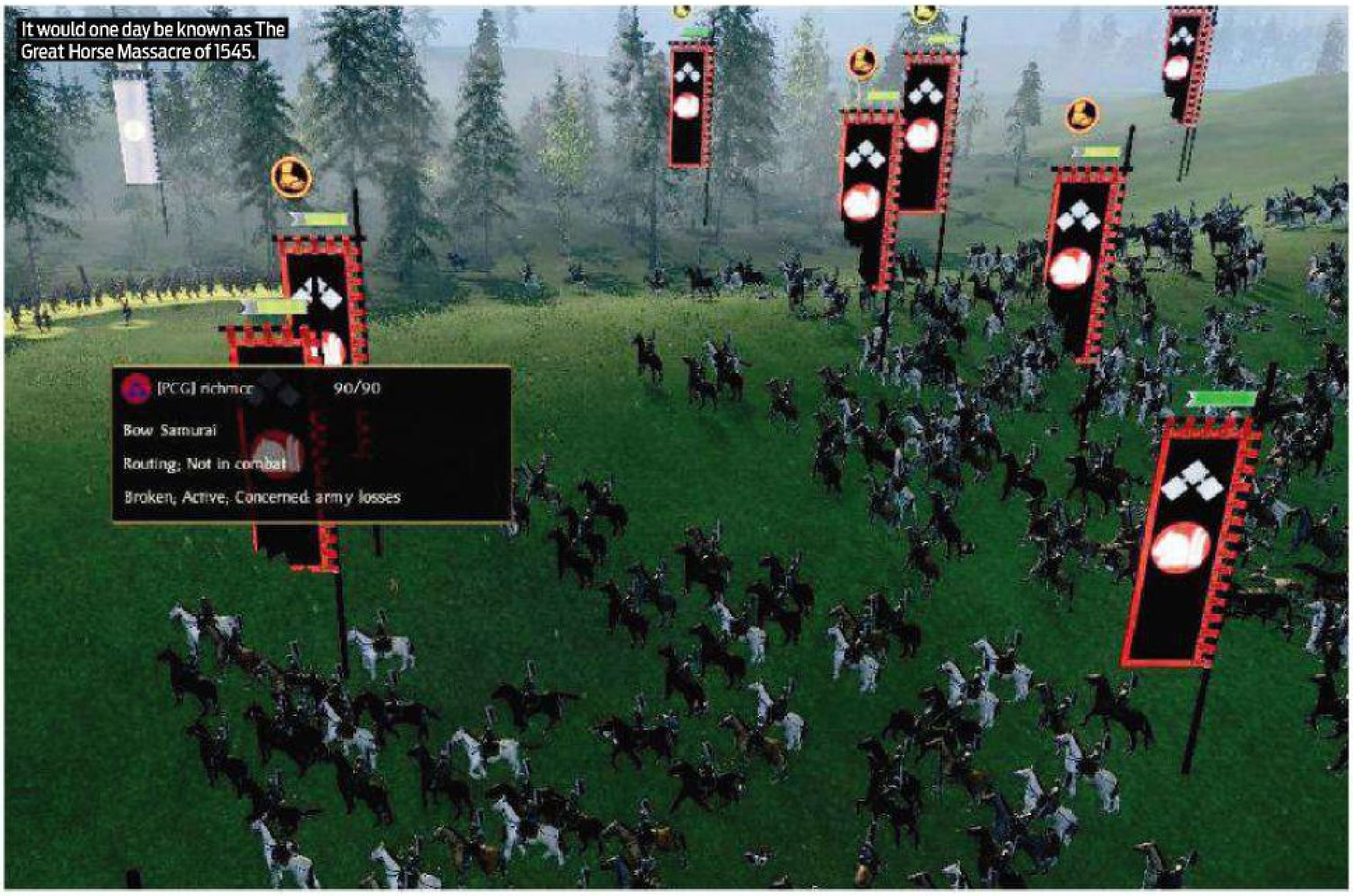
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"What's this I'm saying? Have I channelled the spirit of Sun Tzu?"

LEARNING FROM THE WORST IN **TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2**

Rich McCormick

Now Playing: *Total War: Shogun 2*
This month: Was exposed as a strategic fraud.
Also played: *StarCraft II, Dead Space 2*



I have never read Sun Tzu's Art of War. But I like to pretend I have.

Owen is new to PC Gamer, and he's also new to the *Total War* series. He's watching me play, watching me nod sagely as my units drive their foes from the field. He probably thinks I've won through deft battlefield control, my pincer movements and flanking manoeuvres combining to gut a superior force. He is wrong. I won by boxing all of my little Japanese men and right clicking on the nearest enemy. But for God's sake don't tell him that.

When I've right-clicked every last enemy until they fall down, all leaky, Owen starts up with the questions. "Wow. So how do you use cavalry to break archers?" I right-click on them, sprinting my horses directly up channels of pointy death and cross my fingers very hard that most of them miss, but I'm buggered if I'm telling him that. Better spool up the bullshit drives.

"Yeah, erm, I find it best to attack from the... rear?" He nods soberly. Accidentally, I've imparted some wisdom. This feels good. Shit, he's still going. "Yeah. But what if they've got spearmen guarding the flanks?" Oh man. What if they have? Quick, think.

"Ah. Well, then I'd use my archers to thin out the ranks and keep my cavalry loose to keep the infantry locked in position." Jesus, what is this I'm saying? Have I channelled the spirit of Sun Tzu? Does a two and a half thousand year old Chinese guy live in my mouth? He's helpful, if he does.

I'm getting confident. "I also think it's a good idea to set up a base of fire on an elevated position." That sounds about right. Being high up means you can see further. I don't need to read things to tell me that. I've been high up before.

Owen's nodding harder now. It's all making sense for him. I wish it would for me. "So, what you're saying, right, is that I should advance with my cavalry, keep my infantry back, and send my archers down the middle." Am I? Am I saying that? Sun Tzu's ghost, come back into my brain! Oh God, I've gone too far. "I... I think if you send your men to stab... the other men... then

"So you're saying I should keep my infantry back and send my archers down the middle?"

they'll all... die?" I'm getting ragged now. "Your... horsies. Your horsies go... quick. Horsey go quick and into other men. Men go dead!" For some reason, I finish with an involuntary flourish, waving my hands to indicate horsey make man go dead quick. I'm in too deep.

I look at Owen. His expression of understanding has turned to one of confusion. I think there's some pity in there, too. He smiles sadly, and pats me on the shoulder. "I'll work it out, Rich. I'll work it out."

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OUR REVIEW PCG 224, 92%
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"I named her Mount-Everest Acebomb and sent her to work in a restaurant"

DADDY KNOWS BEST IN **PRINCESS MAKER 2**



If only you could talk to the monsters. Oh wait.

Graham Smith



Now Playing: *Princess Maker 2*
This month: Found a little girl alone in a forest. Took her home and put her to work.
Also played: *Bulletstorm, Forged Alliance*

My daughter was delivered to me by a deity when she was ten. I named her Mount-Everest Acebomb and sent her to work in a restaurant.

Think football management is hard? Trying manipulating the statistics of a teenage girl in a fantasy medieval world. In *Princess Maker 2* you control every aspect of your daughter's life in creepy detail. You choose with whom she socialises, arrange her diet, buy her clothes and have only brief father-daughter chats. "I wonder what my mother was like?" she asks. I say nothing.

In month one, she did terribly at the restaurant. In month two I sent her for magic lessons for ten days, but the money ran out after four and she was sent back. After three months, food bills put us in debt. In month four, I ignored the warnings of my winged, horse-legged butler, and watched as Everest became a delinquent. By month five, she'd run away from home.

She came back, but the following years weren't any easier. I'd send her on adventures, hoping to shape my progeny into a strong, empowered woman. She'd get beaten up by a giant condor. She'd ask for pocket money, and when I couldn't afford the 100 gold she'd call me a cheapskate.

The only way to satisfy her need for money and food was to send her to work. I couldn't get a job: I was far too busy standing in her bedroom all day, staring at her.

After a year, Everest finally found her niche. She's 13 now, and her cooking skill is 103. A fortune teller predicts she'll grow up to be a housewife.

I still hold out hope for a more exciting life, pouring the money she earns into more magic lessons. When I ask about her studies, she responds "I'm pretty good at cleaning!"

I say nothing.

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OUR REVIEW n/a
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NOBODY SAID THERE WOULD BE PAIN!


Not nice? I'm evil. Suck it.

"Level 30! My invitation to the Society of Supervillains!"

CLIMBING THE RANKS OF EVIL IN **DC UNIVERSE ONLINE**

Richard Cobbett



Now Playing: *DC Universe Online*
This month: Wished there'd been an auction house at launch so that he could sell Batman's secret identity for a few quid.
Also played: *Gemini Rue*

When a game gives you the choice between Lex Luthor, Circe or The Joker as your villainous mentor, it's your duty as a wrong-thinking psychopath to choose The Joker. It's barely a choice. He has style, he has class, and he has Harley Quinn's cellphone number. What does Lex have? A shiny head. Circe? Not even that.

I'm not an endgame MMO player. I don't do raids. I don't want to do dungeons more than once. I can't be bothered with stats, or gearscore, or any of that other nonsense. In *DCUO*, I wanted to max out my level for the one thing that goes with it: access to your faction's sanctum, where you get to hang out with the real heroes and villains. Earning their respect became my goal. I killed. I stole. I de-evolved soldiers into monkeys, making a note to tell Richard Dawkins about it later. And finally I was there. Level 30! My invitation to the Society of Supervillains!

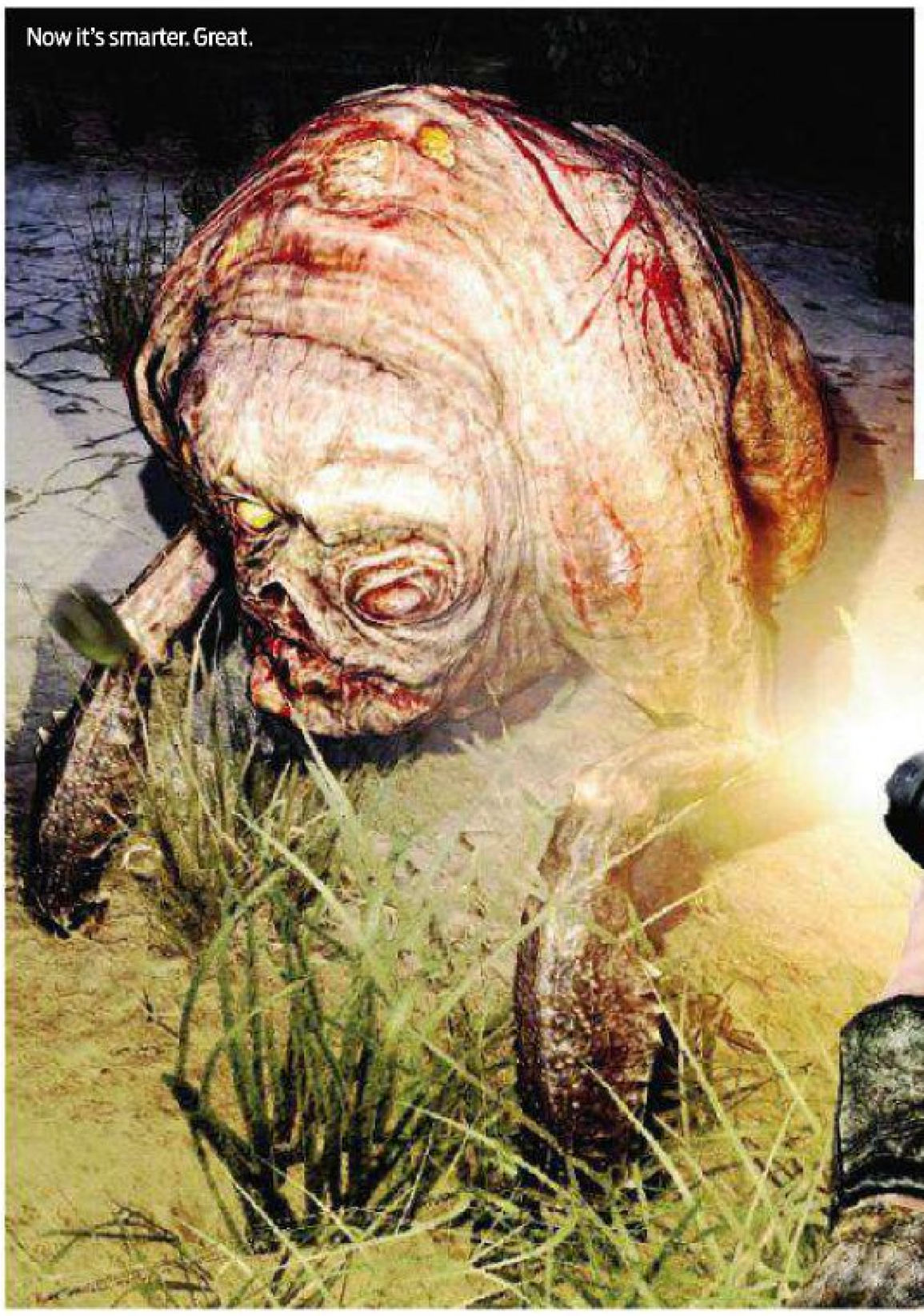
...and membership turned out to be nothing more than the opportunity to run more odd-jobs for the same set of lazy super-bums. No greater purpose. Nobody bows to your malevolence. You don't even get to take part in the Hall of Doom's Evil Biscuit Kitty – surely the least a Level 30 megalomaniac could ask for. Sigh. I knew you should never meet your heroes. I wish someone had told me the same went for your villains.

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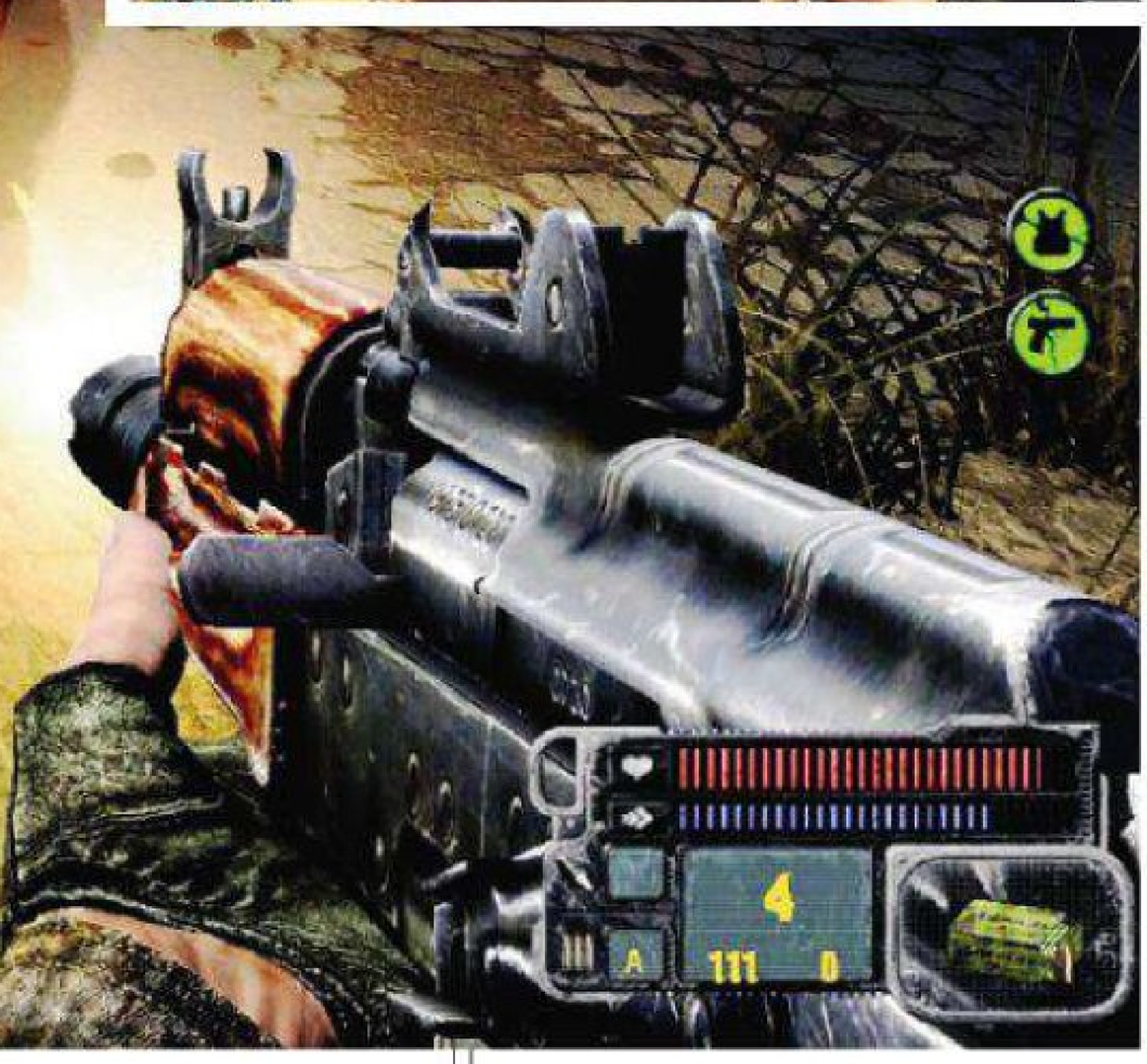
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TOP 10 DOWNLOADS

FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB







1 Smarter horrors

MOD UPGRADE YOUR NIGHTMARES WITH **STALKER: RELOADED**

This is something that happens to every great game eventually, like an Oscar. A huge mod that revamps textures, raises the limiters on graphical quality, improves the AI, and makes hundreds of little tweaks to items, weapons, creatures, other Stalkers, and the way the world itself works.

Without a single modification, *Stalker: Call of Pripyat* is a terrifying, enthralling adventure. It places you into a haunted Chernobyl exclusion zone that's so believable, you'll never want to go there on your holidays. *Reloaded* makes it worse. In a good way.

Now the Zone looks like how you *think* it looked the first time around: technology has caught up with our bad dreams. The sun is blindingly beautiful, spilling shafts of light through the gaps in trees and abandoned Soviet dredgers. Insects buzz in the long, waving grass. Snorks play gaily in the blood drenched caves. Emissions, brain-bursting psionic storms, are now an order of magnitude more trouser-threateningly frightening.

You'll have to start a new game to play, but it's just as well: the changes to the combat need getting used to. For a start, weapons are punchier – it was always a game where headshots were deadlier, but now it's the easiest way to kill.

Stalkers are smarter at picking weapons depending on the range they're fighting at, and also smarter with grenades, using cover, and even running away. After my first battle, I noticed that I was almost dead just from bleeding. Finally, a reason to dibble into that enormous stock of bandages you amass.

Stalkers and bandits also manage their own inventories when looting corpses, leaving unwanted crap instead of arbitrarily taking as many sausages and AK47s as they can, and even dumping their own stuff in favour of choice pieces of kit.

It's a big download, but there's a lot here. Go and rediscover Pripyat. And bring bandages. **JM**

SIZE 1.1GB **LINK** bit.ly/guMdAQ

2 WEBGAMES

MONEY MATTERS

FOUR GAMES WHERE YOU STRUGGLE TO MAKE A DIME

Here are four free games about business, from the dizzy heights of the stock market to the harrowing realities of homelessness.



American Dream
Buy and sell shares in people like Bill Cosby and Madonna, in this scary, satirical game. Make a million! Succeed! Buy! Sell! *Do not fail. bit.ly/f94bui*



Oiligarchy
No list of cynical money games would be complete without this classic about being a oil baron doing dodgy things to keep up the price per barrel. *bit.ly/N1VJ*



Spent
An amusingly depressing game that asks you to make a series of tough choices after you lose your job, home, and all but your last $1,000. *playspent.org*



MMORPG Tycoon
You've inherited an unpopular MMO, and must put it right. I called mine *Men of War Battle Online. bit.ly/9HTeQt*

3 Get crafty

MOD CRAZILY FUN ITEMS TO CREATE IN **MINECRAFT**

This mod adds crafting recipes small enough to fit in your 2x2 *Minecraft* crafting window. You can make a boomerang. It knocks monsters back, picks up loose items (perfect for shearing sheep at range), and comes straight back to you. You can also make tiny versions of the big tools: a trowel, a hand pick, a hatchet, a dagger.

You can throw the dagger. It bounces off creeper faces and sticks in the ground for you to pick up again. You can make powder bombs with wool and gunpowder, and use them with clay and string to craft grenades. You can use your bow to light fires. You can make a sling out of leather, and make shot for it.

To install, navigate to %appdata% and find .minecraft/bin/minecraft.jar. Open that up with something like WinRAR and install modloader (*bit.ly/fxqwSX*), and then this mod by dragging in the contents of the zip files. **JM**

SIZE 200KB LINK bit.ly/hZWn5Y


Now, I throw things at spiders to kill them.

4 Car-on-car combat

FREEWARE ENJOY MULTIPLAYER CAR SUMO IN **KARBOOM**

This is bumper cars, except your unspoken desire to bash and batter everyone else senseless has been legitimised. You can play against bots or make an account to battle other vrooms online.

A BOOSTED CAR
The game comes with a plethora of 'mutators', and so far Boost is one of the best. When you lock bumpers with your nemesis, hit Ctrl to defy Newton's third law and skite them out.

B DO IT FROM BEHIND
There's a lot to be said for the Weak Spot mutator. Ram a car in its butt and it'll explode, just like in the films! You can tell which end is the back from the purple paint job. Obscene.

C RIM = BAD
Push someone beyond this, and they explode. If you limit the number of lives and put on 'Thief' to steal lives when you make kills, it becomes a vampiric battle for supremacy.

SIZE 7MB LINK karboom.net



5 FREEWARE

UNDER PRESSURE

USE AIR, NOT SHELLS, IN *SUPER HOVER BLAST*

What started as an exercise to teach himself C++ has turned into a polished gaming morsel from Paul Jeffries. You control a tank that can hover, but doesn't have a gun. Instead, you use puffs of air.

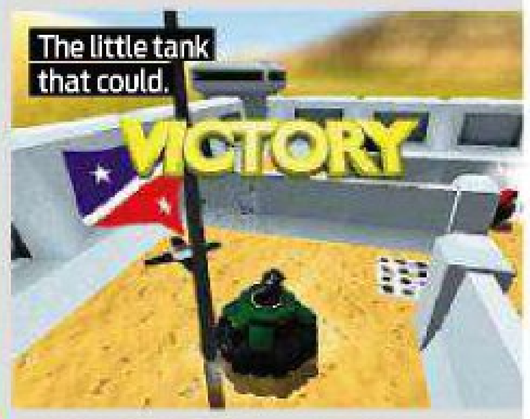
The 3D bases you infiltrate are puzzles speckled with combat arenas. When you come across an

"When you come across an enemy tank, blow its shells back at it to stun it"

enemy tank, blow its shells back at it to stun it, then blow it into environmental hazards, like the electrified tank-killing spikes they keep lying around for some reason.

Puff shipping containers and explosives around so that you can get to the flag pole and win. **JM**

SIZE 49MB LINK bit.ly/ijxQFD



The little tank that could.

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E-SPORTS

6

MIRROR MIRROR

WATCH THE SILLIEST *STARCRAFT II* LADDER MATCH EVER

In *StarCraft II*, when two players pick the same race, it's called a mirror match. In this one, TheLittleOne and ZeeRax both pick Protoss on Shakuras Plateau.

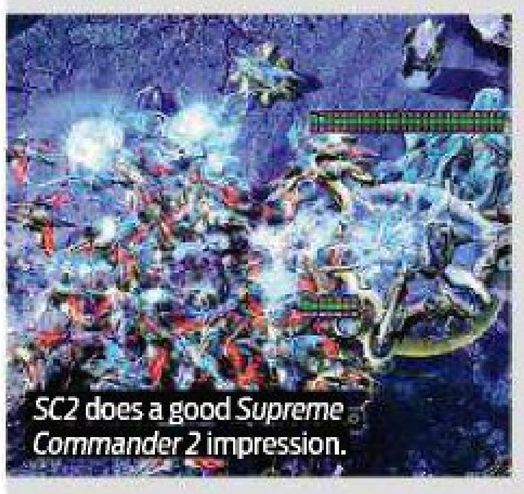
Usually, both players will do some heavy scouting and try to build a totally different force to their opponent. In fact, that's how every match should go. This time, though, these high level professional players happen to pursue identical routes.

"They're neck and neck the whole way, using almost identical tactics"

Both expand aggressively, and around the six-minute mark they're starting to clash. Then, out of the blue, they both start building giant Pheonix armies – flying units that can't attack buildings but can levitate certain ground units.

They're neck and neck the whole way, using almost identical tactics, and it's a close call at the end. Worth a few watches. **JM**

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/fsT4nO



SC2 does a good *Supreme Commander 2* impression.



That Spongebob has some weird friends.

7 Turn frowns upside-down

WEBGAME MAKE SHAPES SNIGGER IN **MOOPS: COMBOS OF JOY**

There are these falling shapes, see. They're falling past you, and scowling, and totally not laughing. Then you shoot them, and the shot bounces off of one and hits another and that one bumps into a third, and each time a shape gets hit, it gets a fit of the giggles. There's a wonderful moment where the cast iron grimace cracks into a smile, before exploding into full-on hurr hurrs.

You've got a set number of shots per stage, and each stage has a set number of shapes that fall in a continuous loop. Your goal is to create combos by ricocheting bullets between squares and boomerangs and star shapes, so that you get a big combo and extra ammunition for your chortle cannon.

The odd shapes really throw a spanner in the works if you're not mindful, but most stages have been designed as puzzles rather than arcade blasters. For example, you start with three shots and you need to down nine blocks without running out of giggles.

Moops will reward you for good combos with powerups. There's a sort of laughter nuke you can get, and a big laser that seems to tickle the shit out of all blocks at once, and a big happy face you can shoot to produce a falling 'aura of joy'. As you complete levels, you win medals based on the hierarchy of internet smiley faces. Also, I think your character is a scowling Clint Eastwood, but as a bunny rabbit. **RM**

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/fCQBXP

8 Cheer up heffalumps

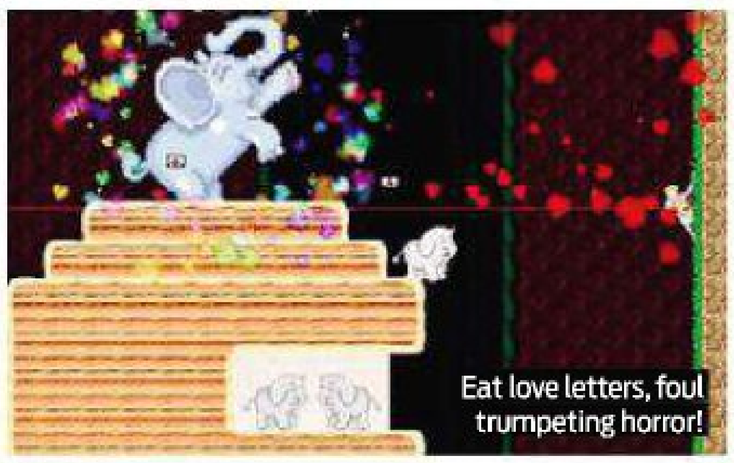
FREEWARE DELIVER **LOVE!** LETTERS TO LONELY ELEPHANTS

You are Maily McMailerson. Now that I think about it, *Love!* doesn't say anywhere that you're a postman, or explain why you only deliver love letters, or why you only deliver to elephants. Or why your delivery route is mostly a vertical descent through grassy caverns.

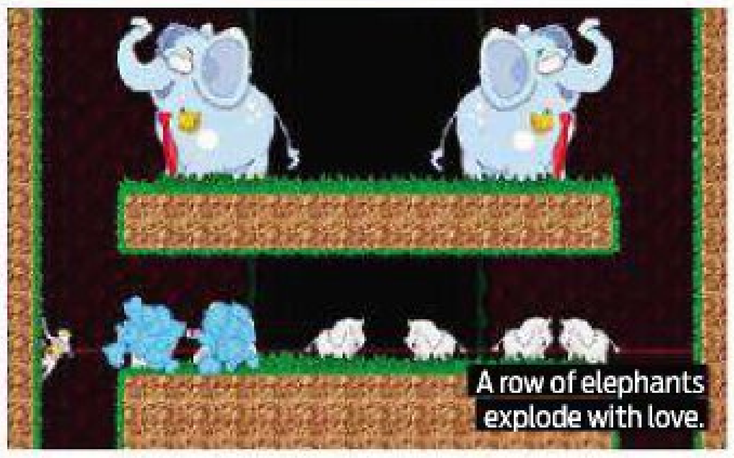
But I do know why this platform-puzzler looks so distinctive – it's because two different artists worked in isolation to produce the backgrounds and the characters. One made dirt blocks with grass on them, the other made sad elephants who explode with hearts when they get a letter and become blue, dancing, trunk-parping love fools.

You spend a lot of your time falling past things – mostly the elephants you have to deliver letters to – and you have to make snap decisions with limited resources. You've got a huge stack of pink envelopes to lob, but you've also got special blue envelopes that can penetrate several layers of pachyderm at once, like a high velocity round of love. Then there are the big, really dorky elephants with glasses who need about 15 love letters before they feel loved, the great nerds. And the bosses? They need even more. [*How true* – Ed] **JM**

SIZE 55MB LINK bit.ly/hCfmb5



Eat love letters, foul trumpeting horror!



A row of elephants explode with love.

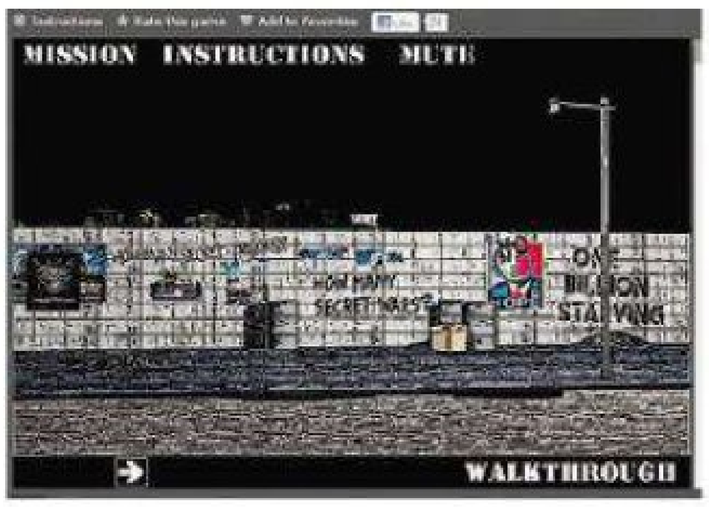
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9 Leaky links

WEBGAMES POLITICAL GAMES ARE LEAKING EVERYWHERE ON **WIKILEAK STORIES**

Wikileaks, the organisation that accepts and publishes anonymous submissions of classified or private media, has attracted a cabal of developers who'd love to make exciting political games about it. Only a few are currently playable, but they're all smart, fun, and informative. Apart from the one with lasers.

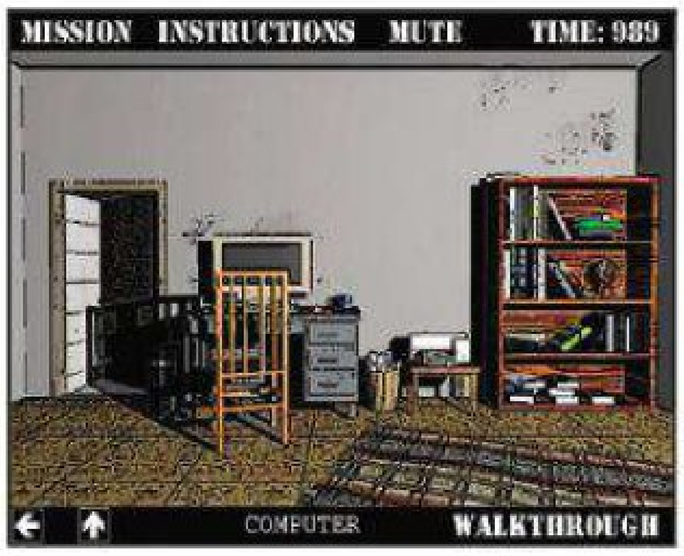
Some games satirise the drama surrounding the site's leadership, like the lighthearted *Wikileakers*, where you help a journalist dodge hazards while he leaves a trail of leaks. Others probe more thoughtfully at the philosophy behind the wiki with an abstract game of global domination, or ask you to rifle through a journalist's flat. They're being released all the time at *wikileaks-stories.com*, but here are links to three good ones. **JM**



You shall know the truth

As a sneaky secret agent, you have to break into someone's house and steal all the sensitive information they've uncovered. It's like a room escape game, but you're poking around looking for the tiniest objects that might hold data. It takes time to pore over the objects you seize, so work quickly.

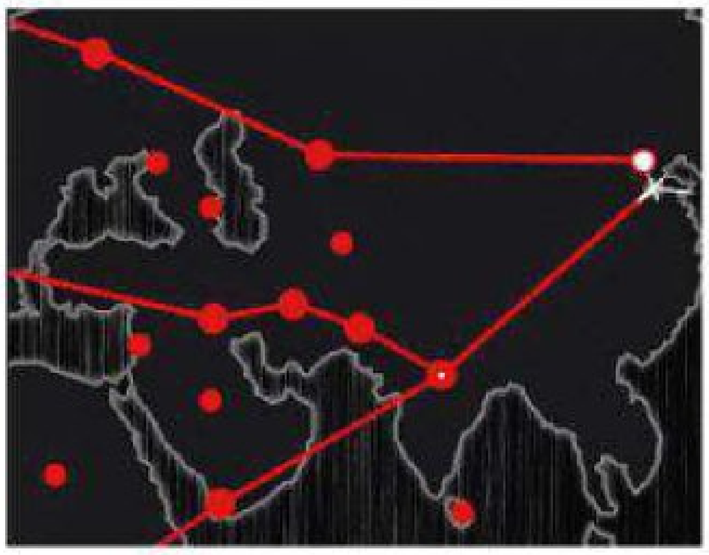
SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/gSOqFm



Wikileakers

This is a little less political. You're a journalist shaped a bit like Mario, and you need to jump over lasers and bombs leaving a trail of floppy discs. The idea is to leak as much information before you get turned into a zombie and the tabloids can discredit you.

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/i78zCx



Leaky World

This is an interactive interpretation of the essay 'Conspiracy as governance' by Julian Assange, the Wikileaks founder. Make connections between red dots on a world map. If a node starts to turn white and leak embarrassing headlines, cut those connections.

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/fAbDeW

10 **WEBGAME**

SECOND SHOOTER

BEHOLD THE DAWN OF THE *SECOND PERSON SHOOTER*

Or *Second Person Shooter Zato*, to give its full name. You play Zato, a character you can only observe through the eyes of sinister block people as they creep toward her to kill her. Kill them first. Zato is rooted to the spot to start with, but later you can slowly move her.

The screen periodically splits and recombines as new enemies appear and are killed. It's delightfully creepy – you can only see what you're

"You can only observe her through the eyes of the block people creeping up to kill her"

fighting by peering past yourself to peek at bad guys who you know are creeping up behind you from the other screens.

There's a phenomenal variety of enemies here, too. Some are fast, some slow. Some drop down from the sky and land behind you. Some gradually circle strafe you.

It can get difficult if you don't watch your laser ammo, which regenerates, but you have a small stock of missiles that kill in one hit for emergencies. **JM**

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/fJEvn0



MACHINIMA

IN **HEAVY BIRTHDAY**, *TF2*'S CUDDLIEST MERCENARY GETS A NEW TOY

You may not play him very often, but The Heavy has a winning personality. It's his birthday, and he rushes downstairs to see what the rest of the team have got him. This film comes in two parts, each lovingly animated by Dasmatze. **JM**
bit.ly/gY4HRz



Press Alt+F4

1 The Sniper peruses his bookshelf, browsing past '---' by Gordon Freeman and 'How to outsmart a bullet' by Saxton Hale, and flips open 'Heavy birthday'. It's a new day at RED's secret base.



Chest hair

2 Saxton Hale arrives and presents the Heavy with a package, then leaves to fight a white shark. After complaining that the box is tiny, the Heavy opens it to find Gmod's Toybox.



Move that gear

3 After pulling bombs, giant darts, and cardboard cutouts from his Toybox, the Heavy produces a machine that remotely sends the Engineer into a dancing fit.



Oh, crate

4 The Heavy finds a crate, and heads to the *TF2* store to buy a key to open it. When the Demoman accidentally sparks a war, the Heavy steals a key and escapes in a shopping cart.

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ONE MORE DAY

20 EXPANSIONS LATER, RICHARD COBBETT LOOKS AT HOW FAR **CITY OF HEROES** HAS COME

Right from the start, *City of Heroes* was one of the most inventive MMORPGs on the planet. It brought us true character customisation, in terms of both how your superhero looked and of the powers you could pick. It realised that an MMO doesn't need to span an entire world to create an interesting environment, and wove its own comicbook mythology that more than holds its own against any established universe.

Most importantly, it *understood*. It understood that we didn't simply want to play as superheroes, but to feel like them too. In *City of Heroes*, you're awesome right from Level 1. You jump at least small buildings with a single bound, have at least one incredible power at your command, and it only gets better from there. Not only do you get to feel like a hero, but the city is positively bursting with civilians happy to stroke your ego by casually referencing your recent adventures as you strut around in your ridiculous looking spandex pants, even after you get bored of saving them from thugs, robbers and low-level goons.

READ ME

FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 137, 84%

PUBLISHER
NCsoft

DEVELOPER
Paragon Studios

REQUIRES
1GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB 3D card

LINK
www.cityofheroes.com

COMMUNITY
wiki.cohtitan.com

Heroic effort

Since then, there have been 20 free expansions that have only made the game more interesting. One of the biggest myths in MMOs is that anything wrong at launch will end up being fixed. Sometimes that's true. Often it isn't. *City of Heroes* is one of the few games that has really bent over backwards to make it happen. Some of its problems are too deep to be fixable at this point, the most glaring being that its use of random interior locations means that you quickly start dreading the sight of yet another iteration of the same office block, caves, warehouse or whatever else, especially if you've come from a game like *World of Warcraft*, or even *Champions* or *DCUO*, where every area is hand-built. No matter how much new content gets added, the core missions are a grind, and *DCUO* in particular surpasses the core combat and storytelling elements – even if *CoH* does ultimately provide far more to do, a better city, and much more content.

Ignoring that for the moment though, development over the years has still been genuinely impressive. To pick just a few examples, 'Issues' 7 and 8 (as the expansions are known) gave heroes and villains Safeguard and Mayhem missions – randomly generated chances to protect and serve or smash stuff up respectively. Issue 13 added Day Jobs, which offered bonuses depending on where you logged off, as well as adding a secret identity subtext to your hero, if you wanted one. Issue 17 dramatically improved the graphics engine, and while it's still limited by its low-polygon design and 2004 origins, the improvement to shadows, water and reflection effects makes a massive difference to the visual quality. It doesn't look as good as *DCUO* or *Champions*, but it's not as far off as you'd think.



"The Mission Architect, released in Issue 14, is easily *City of Heroes* most innovative and most frustrating component"

The two most important recent additions are Architect and *Going Rogue* – the latest paid-for expansion pack. *Going Rogue* finally adds the opportunity to change sides, to let your Villain redeem themselves and become a Hero, or vice versa, if you agree that Villains have all the fun. You can also start in the middle, creating a hero in a sinister new dimension called Praetoria. Here you get direct moral choices to make (although of the straight-up 'do you want to save the police or the rebels' variety) which determine which alignment you end up on after working through 20 levels of new content. Existing players can change sides by completing Morality missions to become either a Vigilante or Rogue – who can play alongside players of either faction – and then a few more to finally step further into their comfy new alignment.

At the endgame level, there's also a boost to character development in the form of the 'Incarnate' system, which unlocks new abilities and boosts for maxed-out characters willing to take on the game's tougher challenges for the long haul. The Alpha slot, for instance, the first available, is a general boost to all of your abilities, if you can gather the pieces you need for the upgrade via raid content (taking on specific tough enemies, notably the Hamidon blob monster) or Strike Forces/Task Forces and Trials, which are expanded versions that play like the game's regular missions but are geared for more dedicated groups. There are another nine slots left to unlock, giving players plenty of reasons to keep developing their characters, instead of having to roll another alt.

Telling stories

The Mission Architect, released in Issue 14, is easily *City of Heroes*' most innovative and most frustrating component. It made it the first major MMORPG to let players create their own stories, and for that, it works great. You'll never run out of new content to play, and if you want to you can write new stories, dialogue, characters and more. However, you're heavily restricted by *CoH*'s design style. You can't place enemies, for instance, only set which ones you get, and while missions can have multiple stages, you're always kicked out of the map into the white halls of Architect Entertainment between them, which completely breaks the mood. It's still an impressive addition to the game though, especially as you can very quickly find the ideal piece of content for you and your group.

Despite its age and dated mission structure, *City of Heroes* is still arguably the best superhero MMO out there. It's certainly a more cohesive, enjoyable game than *Champions Online*, and while *DC Universe Online* has it licked in terms of licence and core combat, Sony's game doesn't have even close to the same scope or freedom in terms of character design or power selection. *City of Heroes* is the oldest of the three, but it's also the most mature. Try a free trial before buying. If you like what it does, you're not going to run out of things to do in a hurry. If you previously got bored, it's worth at least a second chance.

FURY OF THE FURRIES A very special kind of secret identity

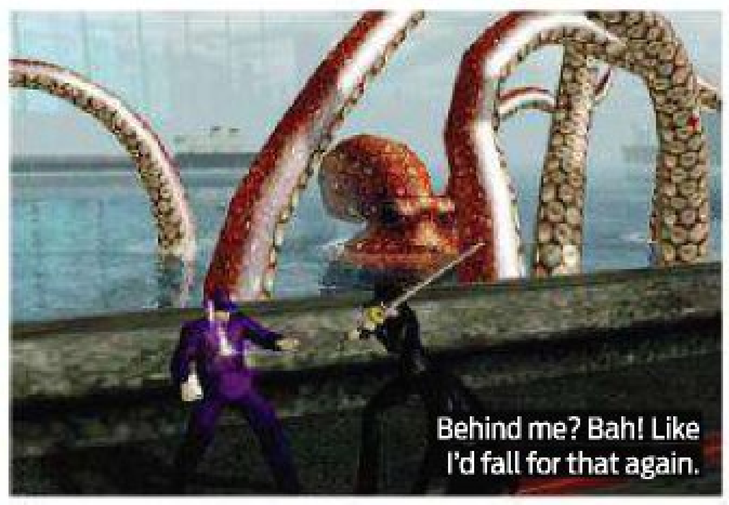
The latest *CoH* booster offers animal bits and a few beastly bonuses for £6. With it, you could create any of these handsome fursonas.

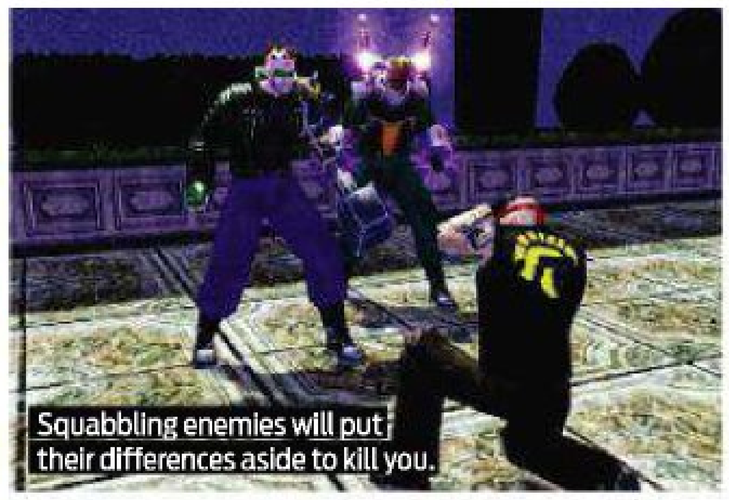


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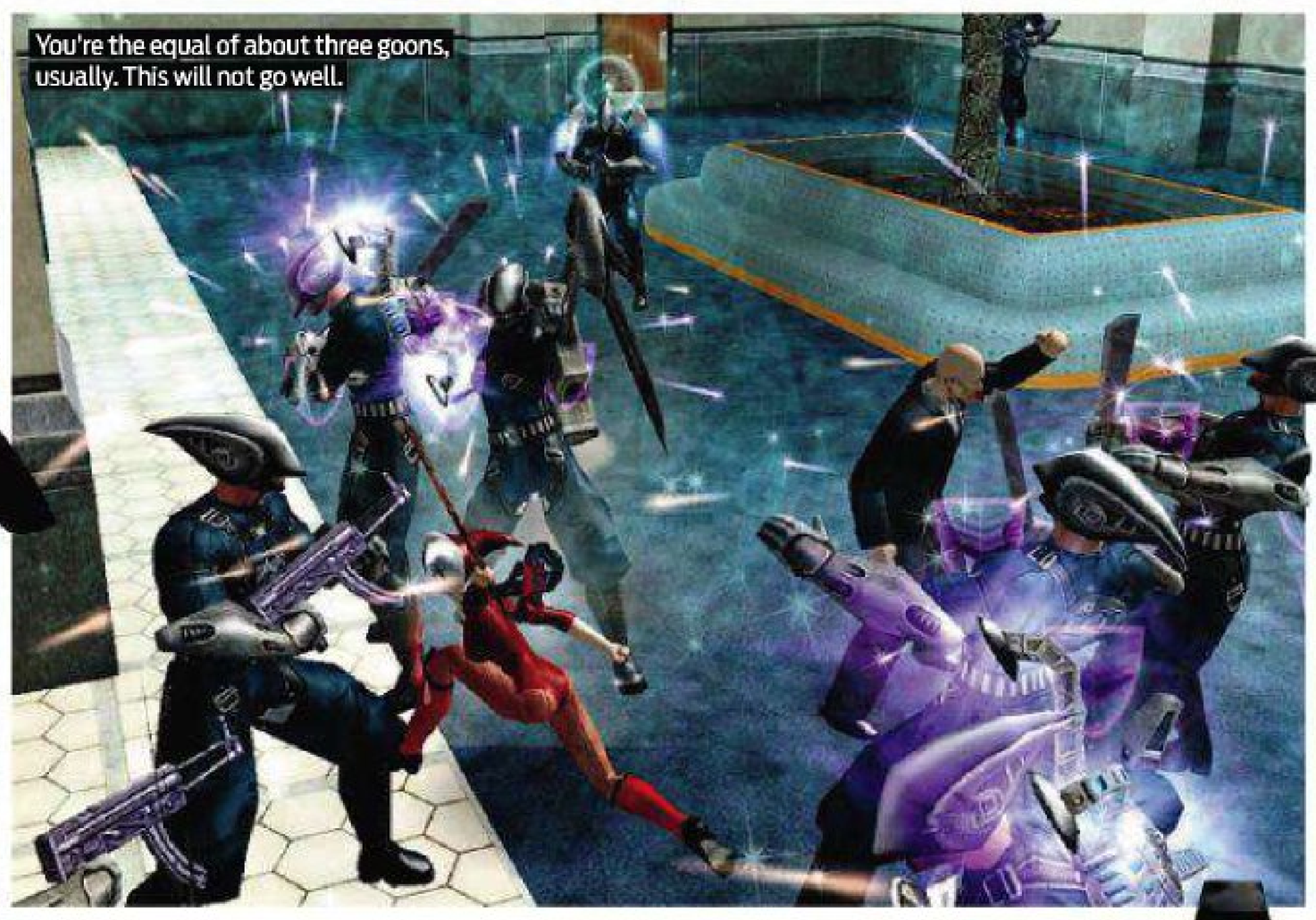
Steelseries.com















HOW TO...

HAVE MORE FUN WITH YOUR FAVOURITE GAMES

Master the dark art of weapon loadouts

WILL PORTER'S GUIDE TO **CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS**

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy
TIME Instant
VITAL LINKS

Great YouTube map walkthroughs:
bit.ly/blopthrough

Framerate and lag tips:
snipurl.com/1xej9j

Black Ops wiki:
bit.ly/blopwiki

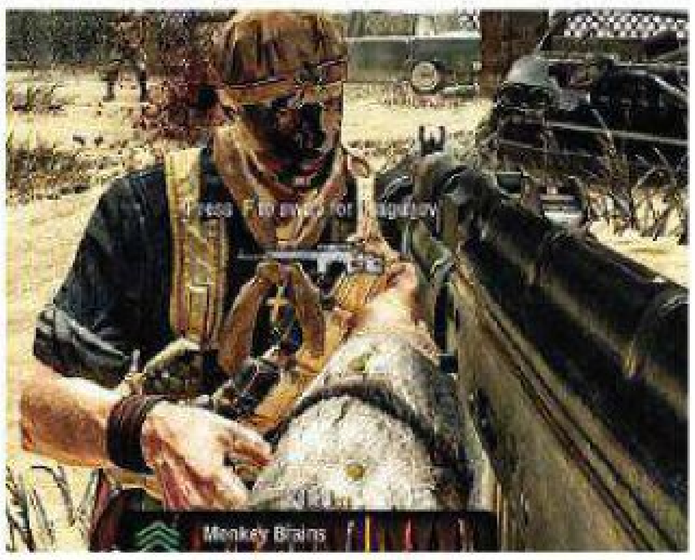
Murder mannequins, get Stones:
bit.ly/eWPLMZ

Its appearance on the PC might have been as graceful as a nosedive into concrete, but the game the cool kids insist on calling 'Blops' still holds a certain allure.

The basics of *CoD* multiplayer are clear: never let yourself get comfortable in habitual game modes carrying the same old equipment. But which guns do you use, where? How are those other cads getting the edge on you again and again?

The way to understand how your arse is being handed to you is to adopt for yourself the loadouts your killers use, and to learn the tricks of your equipment's murderous trade. A wide-ranging approach will also bless you with early Experience (XP) and Call of Duty Points (CP), as the first few challenges relating to each weapon are quick and easy to complete and carry a healthy payoff. It'll also help you tick off the shopping list of requirements for advancement to better versions of the game's perks.

We've only got seven months until the next exciting instalment of this popular videogame series, but if we all follow the strategies below we can prestige five times over by that point – when we'll all inevitably start all over again. Then we'll repeat the pattern every year for the rest of our lives, until none of us are standing. Forever. Hooray for Blops!



1 Art of war

The art of the customised loadout lies in balance: many perks and weapons are natural fits. The readiness of an SMG suits the Marathon perk, and those corners you'll sprint round will ensure that Steady Aim's improvement to firing from the hip comes in useful. Likewise, clearly, a sniper rifle is happiest when accompanied by Ninja (invisible to sensors), Ghost (invisible to radar) and Claymore (proximity mine) tucked just out of sight.



2 Heavy at the back

Match your loadout to your play-style. If you're playing defensively, take the Flak Jacket and Tactical Mask Pro perks. Grenades will be partly absorbed by the Flak Jacket, and the upgraded Tactical Mask ensures you won't be stunned either. Enemies will rarely realise you're protected, so you can surprise them with a few bullets to the cranium when they rush in. Hardened (flinch less), a Jammer (block radar) and a trusty FAL assault rifle all help.



3 One step forward, two steps back

It's instinct to keep moving towards a target once you have them in your sights, or sometimes to back away. Ultimately, both ploys are futile. You won't make yourself less of a target, and your accuracy will be compromised. When you engage out in the open, strafing, crouching or diving to prone will genuinely help you dodge bullets. Sauntering forward or furiously backpedaling won't.



4 Deploy it late on, Sam

Never, ever, doubt the power of the Surface to Air Missile. In patient hands the SAM, itself a reward for a relatively short killstreak, can prove decisive in objective game modes. Resist the temptation to place a missile turret as soon as you collect it (leaving it open to enemy attack) and hold onto it. Whipping out a SAM late in the game to take on a Chopper Gunner or Gunship takes the power back from the top-end players, and makes you a hero.



5 LMG love

Most offensive players will automatically plump for an Assault Rifle, which is why intelligent use of the Light Machine Gun can pull the bloodied rug from beneath the crippled limbs of many opponents. Not only are they generally deadlier, but the sustained fire of an LMG will invariably catch people out – doubly so when combined with extended clips or dual clips. Sleight of Hand is needed to shorten the LMG's extended reload, however.



6 Vault the furniture

Experimentation will reward you with many more paths through levels than are immediately obvious. In turn, you'll find perches where novice players won't think to look. Vault up to the gantry on Summit from the banks of computers and you'll get access to a dual-layer radio mast outside. Many of the windows and ledges on WMD, meanwhile, can be jumped up and through. Boot up Combat Training to make exploration easier.

filefactory.com



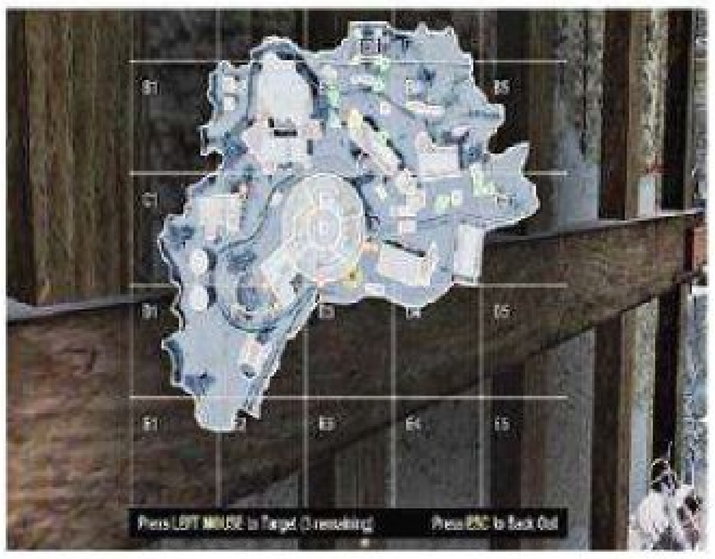
7 Remote threat

It's hard not to love the RC-XD. It's like a Death Star mouse droid with less of a whistle and more of a bang. What's more, the paths they can take through the maps are always a charm. The best, and least known, takes the remotely controlled bomb on a secret path that's outside the boundaries of NukeTown – over a jump and then straight into the enemy spawn area. This can prove a great tactic when thinning out fresh waves of enemies.



8 Invisible war

There's little more satisfying than sashaying across a map like a man of mystery. The PCG hot tip for stealth? Take the Spectre sub-machinegun, with a suppressor and wintery camouflage if you're on a snowy level. Slot Ghost into your Perk 1 slot (or Lightweight if you'd rather be pacey), Sleight of Hand into slot 2 and, most importantly, Ninja into the third. This is a great loadout for racking up kills without a fuss, so long as you're constantly moving.



9 Mortar slaughter

The Mortar is another attainable killstreak reward packing an impressive punch in the right hands. The perfect time for it isn't always when there's a friendly Blackbird overhead. When you're playing an objective-capture game mode such as Domination and the enemy has control of all three points, you can guarantee that they're in full defence-mode. By pasting your three mortar hits on each of the flags you stand to wipe out a fair lump of the enemy.



10 Who needs graphics?

If your game is stuttering, so are your kills. The remedy is brutal: shut down apps running in the background, then turn AA off, turn anisotropic filtering down, texture quality low, shadows off, sync every frame off... you know your PC, you know the drill. To further grapple with the game's less-than-graceful performance, having a tinker in the config_mp.cfg file in your Steam Apps folder also does wonders. See *snipurl.com/1xej9j* for what to tweak.



11 Murder is my radar

Forget the aiming, the shooting and the clouds of blood popping out of enemy heads – the real action is on the radar screen. You should not only be looking at this, but you need to think of how *you* look on it. Knifing and silenced kills won't flush you out, but if you're firing shots in a populated area or there's an enemy spyplane overhead, you're a target – so act like one. Run away after every engagement, back up to a wall when the other team has eyes in the sky.



12 No smilies. Serious business.

Every player will go through a stage when it seems a great idea to have an eccentric aiming reticule. It might give satisfaction to imagine people watching killcams of your pink loveheart or smiley face zeroing on their behind, but ultimately it's going to muck with your kill/death ratio. The best reticule is the common-or-garden red dot, best used when lovingly planted within a blue lens. Novelty sights get less funny with every hit.

SKILLS

ESCAPE THE DENTIST'S CHAIR

FUN WITH *COD*'S MENU SCREEN



1 "Mason, why are you looking down, then hammering the spacebar and the right mouse button? Mason!" ...is presumably what the disembodied interro-voice is screaming when you help our hero escape his torture chair.



2 With Mason's new freedom you can poke around and even have a play with a PC tucked in the corner. Experience with DOS will aid you in sifting through character emails. Tap 'DOA' to play a top-down zombie minigame.



3 Alternatively, tapping in 'Zork' will boot up the adventure that kickstarted all games in which you could go N, E, S or W before seeing what swear words it knew. Look out for those Grues: rumour has it they're a vicious bunch.

BONUS SKILL

GET A SONIC MEGA-GUN

Kill the goons with grenades after the Kowloon 'eat-glass' scene. Get the tape that pops out of the VCR. In the secret armoury, hold F on a similar machine for a secret weapon.



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Tim: "Is a robot zombie fighting a dinosaur on your screen?" Yes.

"The game is basically broken, but in a gloriously satisfying way"

TOM FRANCIS GETS UP AT THE DAWN OF WAR FOR ANOTHER **DARK CRUSADE**

Dark Crusade must have seemed like a hopelessly ambitious expansion pack for *Dawn of War*. It was standalone, and where the original game and first expansion were linear campaigns, it introduced a whole new strategic map that gave you a choice of territories to invade. And a choice of *seven* races to play. As it turned out, it was a huge success.

Recently, Relic have done it again. *DoW2: Retribution* is also standalone, also introduces a choice of races to a game that previously had none, and also gives you a choice of missions.

What's interesting about the two games is the shift. *Crusade* cut costs by making most of its missions generic skirmishes against the AI; scripted missions only occurred when invading special territories such as enemy headquarters.

Retribution insists on hand-scripting every one. It's Relic's attempt to fix *Crusade*. I know that because I asked them. *Retribution*'s lead designer, Dan Kading, was also a senior designer on *Dark Crusade*, and he told me the main thing wrong with the older game was these 'generic' missions.

He's a smart guy, and *Retribution* is superb, but I think he's wrong. The joy of both games is getting to play a weird race of your choice, and figuring out how to combine their most vicious units into perfect combinations that just *destroy*. And you can only really do that when the mission is generic: you have a base, they have a base, and you have to take it out any way you can.

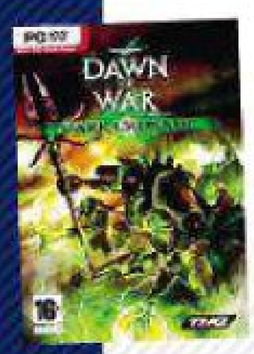
"Special territories litter the map. I find myself scouring the globe for the generic ones, where I'll get to choose how to play"

Whenever there's something unique about the mission – like the dismal one in *Dark Crusade* that gives you a huge pre-made army but prevents you from building a base of any kind – it becomes an unremarkable clickfest. You don't get to choose which units to build because the mission either prevents you or requires certain squads, so you just do what it tells you and grind through it. In other words, ironically, the *game* becomes generic.

Replaying *Dark Crusade*, the special territories and enemy headquarters litter the strategic map like landmines. Having to cross through one means an hour-long slog through someone else's idea of what a fun mission would be. I find myself scouring the globe for the generic ones: anything where I'll get to choose how to play.

The fact that the objective is always the same doesn't make it dull, any more than it does in multiplayer: destroying the enemy doesn't get old. Skirmish is the best way to play almost every RTS: multiplayer pressures you into brutally efficient rushes, campaigns constrict your unit choice. *Dark Crusade* doesn't. You can build everything right from the first mission. And with some of the new races, that lets you produce something obscene.

The Necrons are the covergirls: Egyptian-themed robot skeletons back from the robodead. Summon some Flayed Ones on the battlefield and they don't march out of a



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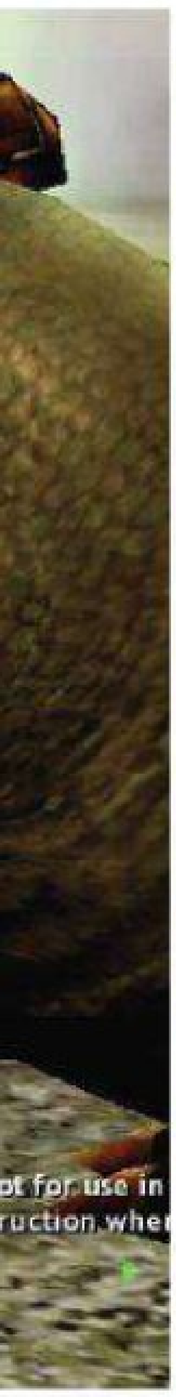
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barracks – they just get up. They've been lying dormant for eons, and they're everywhere.

They're ridiculous. They're about resilience and relentless force, and the way I play them, they're about speed. Playing so many skirmishes, I've got good at rushing: inside of a minute I can summon Flayed Ones anywhere I have vision. One place I have vision is around my commander, who by this point has usually found the enemy base. So before they can get any kind of army, suddenly robot skeletons are getting out of the ground all around them, wearing the flesh of the living as haberdashery.

Stalk like an Egyptian

The Necrons are terrifying, so the few units the enemy does have rapidly lose morale. And this early in the game, almost nothing can cut Necrons down faster than they reinforce. So I don't even fight: I just claw, endlessly, at the enemy's fortified HQ until it crumbles.

The game is basically broken, but in a gloriously satisfying way. If it really were just a generic skirmish, this cheese tactic would get dull. But because each fight is a territory on a grander map, and each grants you a new honour guard unit for future missions, every battle feels rewarding however you win.

Then there's the Tau. Extremely good at range, useless in melee. They're backed up by their feral Kroot friends, savage in close combat and numerous enough to be durable. Or, you could just ignore that delicately crafted balance and get Stealth Suits.

Stealth Suits are just scouts, in Stealth Suits. But like all Tau units, they have a crazy number of upgrades. Extra damage. Perfect accuracy. Double range. Add a sergeant with an anti-vehicle weapon. Add more anti-vehicle weapons. Add more members, and give them anti-vehicle weapons. Add a goddamn jetpack. Did I mention they're invisible? Did I mention they can fire while invisible? Did I mention they only cost 1 supply, so you can build 20 squads of 4 of them without expanding your population limit? Did I mention they're cheap?

Broken, in a gloriously satisfying way. The few enemy units who can spot Stealth Suits, allowing their friends to target you, are cut down in seconds. The enemy HQ buckles under a torrent of heavy weapons fire from nowhere. Whole armies stand bemused at their own destruction, only glimpsing your units when you brush a control point they own. Then the match is won, and the only sound is the roar of unseen jetpacks.

I don't think *Dark Crusade* is better than *Retribution* – but it has something *Retribution* doesn't: the freedom to approach missions your own way, and to exploit the living daylights out of any tactic that works.

GOOD MISSIONS ONLY

These are the best missions: the generic ones. Attack these territories first. The ones we've blacked out are custom missions that restrict how you can play: save them for after you've built up a huge honour guard.



The greatest games on PC



GO TO WAR...

Total War: Shogun 2

totalwar.com/shogun2

Use ninjas and samurai to conquer Japan in a more focused *Total War*, blessed with good AI, sumptuous visuals and clan-based multiplayer.

Also: *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty, Dawn of War II, Supreme Commander 2, Company of Heroes, Solium Infernum*



HAVE AN ADVENTURE...

Dragon Age II

dragonage.bioware.com

Betters the original in every way, with more interesting characters, a darker, sexier world, and super stabby combat. Essential.

Also: *KotOR, Mass Effect 2, Oblivion, Deus Ex, Fallout 3, Assassin's Creed II, Lego Harry Potter, Splinter Cell: Conviction*



SHOOT MEN...

Bulletstorm

www.bulletstorm.com

Boot enemies into the air, wrap them in bombs, and launch bullets through their ass-door. It's not about shooting. It's about shooting in *style*.

Also: *Half-Life 2, BioShock 2, Crysis, Far Cry 2, Bad Company 2, Just Cause 2, L4D2, Modern Warfare 2, Stalker: Call of Pripyat*



GET SOMETHING FOR NOTHING...

Dwarf Fortress

bay12games.com/dwarves

The eighth wonder of the world. An absurdly detailed management sim that constantly produces funny experiences. Plus, zombie carp!

Also: *Desktop Tower Defence, N, GTA 2, Freespace 2, Tribes 2, Anchorhead, Nethack, TrackMania Nations Forever, Spelunky*



LEAD A SECOND LIFE...

World of Warcraft

www.worldofwarcraft.com

With the launch of *Cataclysm*, there's never been a better time to get into *WoW*. It's prettier, funnier, and less grindy. The best just got better.

Also: *EVE Online, Warhammer: Age of Reckoning, Lord of the Rings Online, Guild Wars, Mount & Blade: Warband*



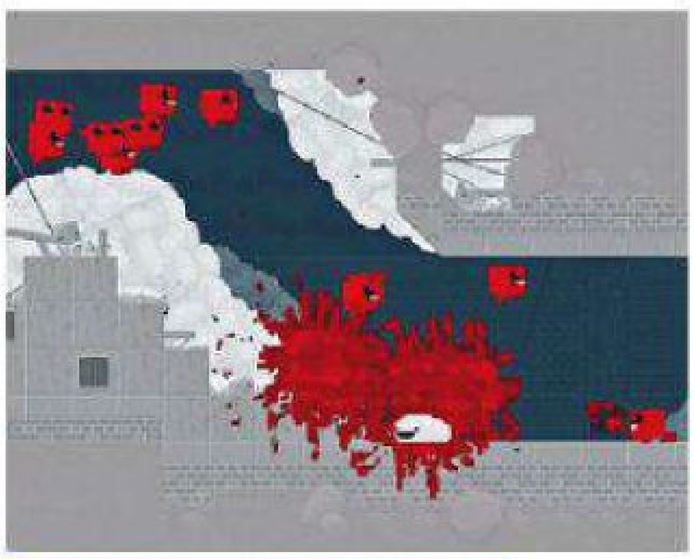
PLAY ON YOUR NETBOOK...

Bejeweled 3

bit.ly/ckpPvs

Match gems in rows of three, and in doing so play poker, save butterflies and cause huge explosions in this inventive sequel to the classic puzzle game.

Also: *Monkey Island 2 SE, Day of the Tentacle, Peggle, Bookworm Adventures, Uplink, World of Goo, Braid*



SWEAR YOURSELF TO DEATH...

Super Meat Boy

www.supermeatboy.com

Jump, run and die in the ultimate reaction-based platformer. By turns more frustrating and more rewarding than what we're used to.

Also: *Civilization V, Rollercoaster Tycoon 2, Sid Meier's Railroads!, FM2010, SimCity 2000, The Sims 3*



FLY, DRIVE AND RIDE...

F1 2010

www.formula1-game.com

It's a lightning-fast racer that strikes a balance between accessibility and detail, but Monte Carlo in the rain is all the reason you need to play it.

Also: *Flight Simulator X, TIE Fighter, Silent Hunter 4, Black Shark, Race Driver Grid, Colin McRae's Dirt 2, Burnout Paradise*



PWN SOME NOOBS...

Team Fortress 2

www.teamfortress.com

Cartoon styled it may be, but the retribution is real when your 'friend' is literally stabbing you in the back. Team shooters get no better than this.

Also: *Counter-Strike Source, Unreal Tournament III, Battlefield 2, Left 4 Dead, Battlefield Bad Company 2*

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WHAT MMO?

FERTILE GROUND

Going online with the most exciting multiplayer games.

There really is no blueprint for massively multiplayer games. It used to be that ganking rats for XP in a medieval world was all that was needed, but when people play together, games tend to evolve. Online games have grown into something nearly unrecognisable from their beginnings, because players want more.

Now there are farms to tend, galaxies to exert control over, and morals to explore. There's a seemingly infinite number of places for you to gather with other players, to band together to make a home, or fight among yourselves for every scrap of loot. The internet is massive, and every nook and cranny is filled with something to play, and a unique way to play it.

What's your poison? Looking for something free and complicated? There's *Runes of Magic*, a *World of Warcraft*-style free-to-play MMO. With eight classes, 70 levels, and over a million registered users, it's a packed world that's only getting bigger every time the developers update it.

What about free and immediate? *MicroVolts* is an online shooter game with toy-on-toy action. It's the wacky cousin to every overly shoulder-padded shooter with growly voices, about cute and silly toys fighting for control of the world's batteries. It's the sort of game to pop into when you're a bit tired of grinding for your supper, and an excellent action game for those looking for a blast without the buck. It's the perfect toy to divert boredom.

But if you do have the money, there's *Earthrise*. It's the only pay-tp-play game in this round-up, set in a grim world post-World War III, where players are asked to make their own mark. This is a place where order comes from the people that inhabit it, and not imposed by the developers. Personal choice as a game mechanic? That's seriously forward thinking game design.

If you're looking for something a little bit more strange, *Allods Online* is a free-to-play fantasy RPG with a twist. It leads you down a traditional MMO path, up until the point when it asks you to to build and crew your own spaceship to explore the galaxy's floating islands. Think about it: you could be travelling from space island to space island in your own space schooner, with friends manning the deck. Want to be the captain of your own space galleon?

Multiplayer games, whether vast RPGs or bonkers shooters, free or paid, traditional or wildly experimental, are probably the most exciting games to play right now.



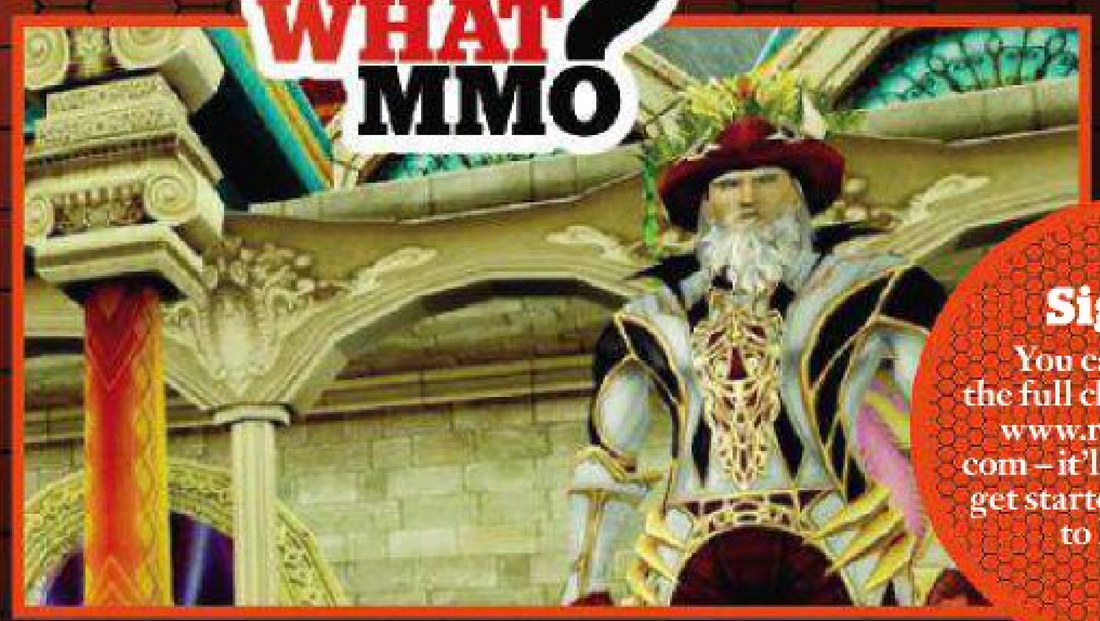
“Online games are nearly unrecognisable from their beginnings, because players want more”

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WHAT MMO?





Sign up

You can download the full client for free at www.runesofmagic.com – it'll be worth it to get started on the road to level 62.

RUNES OF MAGIC

Zombies and clowns: Runes of Magic's Land of Despair expansion is looking to scare the players.

There's no better time to jump into an MMO than during a content upgrade. Everything's been polished up like a relative's visiting, and players are throwing themselves into the new quests to figure out the treats the developers have come up with.

So now is the perfect time to explore Frogster's free-to-play MMO *Runes of Magic*. It's a vast, trad-fantasy world of humans and elves, featuring a "dual-class system" allows you to wield skills from two of the eight classes at a time. Bang on the game's second birthday, the fourth expansion, *Lands of Despair*, is *just* sneaking its way onto the beta servers, which should give new players plenty of time to learn the basics before the update goes live.

The content boost brings a new demonic threat to the world of Taborea by adding a new instance, the 'Land of Malevolence'. Its villages have been overrun by zombies, and the additional content caters to level 62 to level 64 players on their way to the heady high of the new level cap: 70.

To get there the player will have to unravel the secrets of Kampel. The town is under siege from the undead hoardes, and the only thing saving the people inside from the same plague that's creating the zombies is the 'Divine Fruit'. How this mysterious fruit works is something the player will need to discover to progress.

But beyond this area there's some pretty wild new content. The Moonlight Circus, formed by the ruler of this area to entertain his sick daughter, introduces clowns and juggler NPCs to the fantasy backdrop. Grafu's castle will host more adventurous players as a multi-boss instance, packed with riddles to solve, and enemy's like Cayus the Clown and the Beast Tamer. There are six bosses in total to contend with.

Frogster have a few more tricks for Runes players. They're currently working on integrating the game with Facebook,



making the full thing playable in your browser. And it's not even going to tax your computer: they're using cloud computing to power the client on their own servers. As long as your PC can access Facebook, it'll be able to access and play *Runes of Magic* no matter what the specs.

Runes of Magic: Lands of Despair should be out of beta in the summer, and the Facebook version will be launching sometime in 2011.



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MICROVOLTS

Create trouble in toy town in this cute, lively third-person shooter.

There aren't many games where you can cower behind a cake to hide from sniper fire. *MicroVolts* revels in its theme of toys battling it out in secret, like Toy Story played out in *Team Fortress 2* as a third-person shooter.

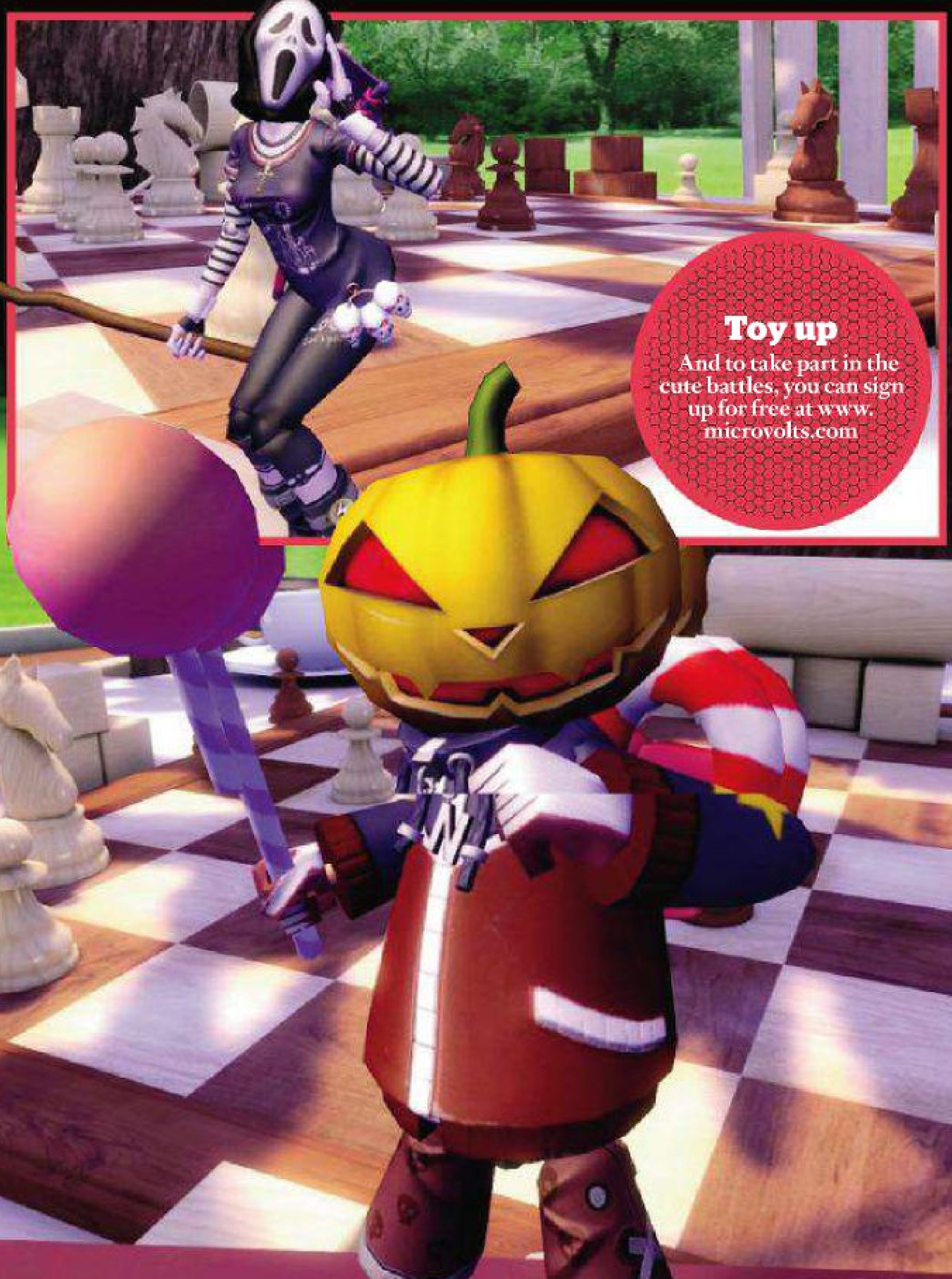
The slick, free-to-play shooter offers four characters and six game modes over nine maps. The toys have been brought to life by a mad professor, and are engaging in an age-old struggle to control the world's battery supplies.

While they look different, there are no classes, with your own proficiency dictating how you fight. Melee, sniper rifles, shotguns, heavy weapons, grenades and bazookas are all available for each character.

The toy theme helps the game stand out: the miniaturised characters are still delightfully detailed, ranging from overly plasticy looking boy toys, to anatomically accurate girl bots. There's a robot with interchangeable parts: his chest can resemble a Rubik's Cube, while has limbs are made up of Lego-style parts. It's in the chatacter customisation where you will want to spend some money: you can buy different body parts, clothes, accessories and weapons

Being small allows players to run around some gorgeous battle arenas. The full complement of maps is available in Team Deathmatch, with diverse locations like a table-top covered in dinner, to a just finished model ship. There's even a chess board to fight on. Sure, it's cartoony, but there's a pleasingly bizarre sense of brutality when you're bolting from kitchen pot to cake slice for cover as a half Lego bot, wielding a folding shovel and looking to beat a fleeing doll up.

There's a good range of game modes that take advantage of the backdrop. Team Deathmatch, Free For All and Close Combat are the standards where you shoot and hit everything. But there's the added bonus of Item Match, where each kill is rewarded with a random pick-up to boost things like health, speed and power. In Capture the Battery, you'll go after the enemy's power supply. Elimination is the newest mode: there's no respawning, and a radar sits in the middle of the map. Whoever is in control of it can see the positions of all the other players, providing an evil tactical advantage. And you always thought toys were all good.



Toy up

And to take part in the cute battles, you can sign up for free at www.microvolts.com

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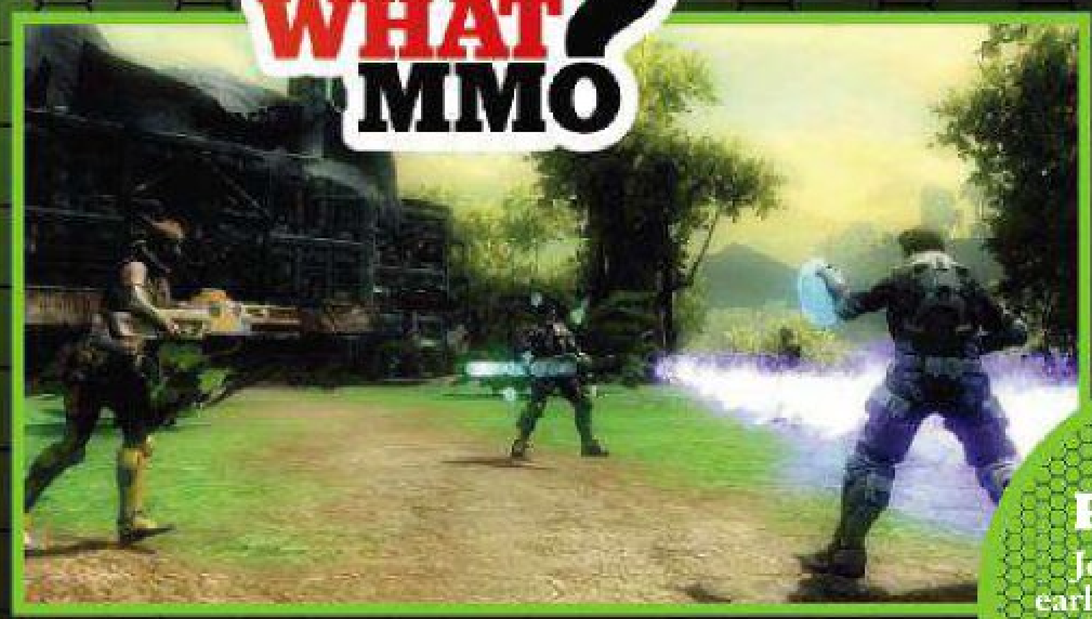
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WHAT MMO?





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EARTHRISE

Choose your own destiny in the post apocalyptic MMO.

What will you do after the apocalypse? What use will you be? If you want to practice, Masthead Studios's MMO *Earthrise* is the perfect place to start.

Post-World War III, humans are immortal. Cloning and nanotechnology have made death only a temporary setback, with spare bodies available for each person's consciousness. It's this technology that drives the game's two factions. The Continoma are the government of the wastelands and in charge of the technology. They're trying to use it to keep everyone under their strict control. They're opposed by the Noir, a rebel group not keen on authoritarian control. You can choose to remain neutral as well, but the world is defined by the animosity of the two factions.



The Continoma have been unable to keep control because the technology isn't reliable, so there are bitter conflicts, with most of the world enabled for Player vs Player fighting. It's your choice whether to join in, or to try to avoid combat as a neutral observer.

If you're not into fighting, there's the economy. It's based on supply and demand, so players have an impact on what's available where and for what cost. In addition, there are no defined character classes. Instead your abilities are tied to your equipment, allowing players to freely explore the limits of the character's abilities without being led down a cul-de-sac of skills.

But by far the most complex and exciting element is the territory control. More than half the world has been set aside for it: the end-game content will allow guilds to capture structures and set up military and administrative zones. Here they can create their own laws (or lack thereof), repel enemy guilds and reap the rewards of resources for the game's complex crafting system.

So there's a lawless, carve-your-own-destiny feel to the world, something akin to *EVE Online*, but with more trees and fewer space ships. *Earthrise* wants the world to evolve according the player's decisions, to react as it would if the players were flicking the switches on the server. If you want to be part of the fabric of an MMO world, not just following the path laid out by the developer, *Earthrise* is waiting.

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WHAT MMO?





Get involved

You can sign up to the game and download the free client here. allods.gpotato.com

ALLODS ONLINE

Sail space-boats between planetary debris? Yes.

Allods Online is just over a year old, now. gPotato's gorgeous, free-to-play blend of high-fantasy and light sci-fi is a rather traditional MMO, with two allied factions of three races apiece, warring over the allods, islands in space made up of pieces of the broken up planet of Sarnaut.

It's a comforting template to jump into – if you've dabbled in any MMO, you'll be familiar with the quest structure, the tech trees and factional PvP. There are zones full of missions that unravel the mystery of the cataclysmic shattering of Sarnaut. The world is split between two warring factions, the high-fantasy League and the cyberpunk Empire. Among others, you could be an Elven Priest, the League's healer, or an Xadaganian Defiler, the Empire's summoner class.

But even so, they haven't rested on their archetypes: it's gorgeous, probably the prettiest free-to-play MMO around, and it uses the allods in a fascinating way.

Not all the islands are accessible right away. The higher content islands, from level 35 and up, can only be accessed when you've built and crewed your own vast, space-faring ship. It takes five players to control, each with tasks like a Helmsman controlling where you go, a Gunner manning the cannons, and a Visor keeping an eye out for potential places to dock and raid. This is the where the game really opens up.

And it's in this space that the developers have focussed on creating a ton of upcoming content. Their Spring patch adds two new zones to the seven already there, as well as upping the number of allods from eight to fourteen and bumping the level cap from 42 to 47.

The allod's separation from the general world zones means they're afforded more personality than the main world: new islands will see an allod controlled by goblins, and a spooky allod complete with graveyards, zombies and curses.

There's further whimsy with the addition of the new 'marriage spell'. It's a binding spell that allows you to get married to another in-game character. The bonuses are that you'll be able to make your partner food, resurrect them on death and track wherever they are in the world.



All this new content drops in the coming months, giving you just enough time to pop into the servers, take a look around and decide whether it's for you. It's a big world, and building a ship will take at least 30 days of hard graft. Better get started now.





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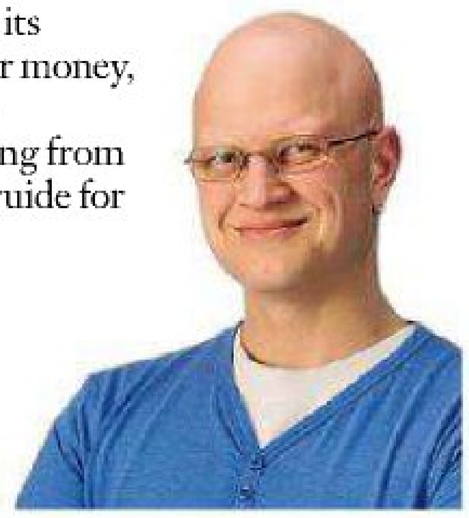
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Welcome to the hardware pages, that ghetto of technical information you skip past on your way to the funny bit at the end. Well you should make it your mission to come here every month, because without all this discussion of bits and bytes you wouldn't be able to play PC games at all.

Why not start off by taking a look at the makeup of the PC Gamer Rig below? It's the definitive way to build a games machine for less than £1,000. Every part has been chosen for its exceptional value for money, and whether you're upgrading or building from scratch, it's a good guide for what you need.

Adam

Adam Oxford
Hardware Editor

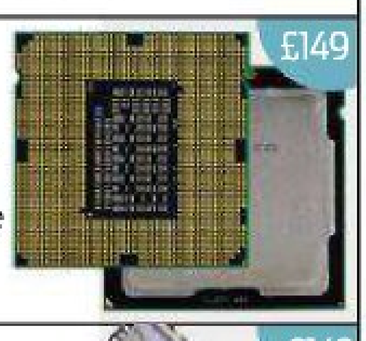


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POWER SUPPLY — £57
OCZ StealthXStream 600W
When it comes to PSUs, the mantra is buy cheap, pay twice.
FITTED March 09



MONITOR — £194
Viewsonic VP2365WB
A 23-inch IPS monitor for under £200, providing professional-quality graphics. Incredible.
FITTED September 10



MOUSE — £30
Logitech G500
A definitive design that is comfortable and fast. Five sensitivity settings and adjustable weights.
FITTED January 11



KEYBOARD — £36
Microsoft X4
Hardwearing and with enough macro keys to please all but the most obsessive gamer.
FITTED January 11



HEADSET — £20
SteelSeries 3H
A lightweight set of budget cans with closed ear cups and a good built-in mic.
FITTED January 10



Firebrand.com

StoreKeys.com



Case study

A minor facelift results in quieter gaming

Coated in the company's trademark 'Piano Black' smooth finish paint, the well fitted panels and grilled front of the Antec One Hundred give it an elegance usually lacking from cases at the budget end of the price scale.

The front panel connectors are easy to get to and the only gimmicky part of the build is a peculiar plastic tray on the top which looks practical, but has no immediately apparent use.

Like most sub-£50 cases, it's quite rudimentary inside and the basic steel cage isn't augmented with screwless fittings and quick release drive bays – a shame but ultimately bearable. More importantly there's enough room (just) to get a full length graphics card in, and that it features an efficient cable tidy system which involves looping wires up behind the motherboard tray.

2 hours

The best thing, and the reason it's the new Rig choice, is that the two case fans can be spun down to a very quiet setting and still move enough air to cool all but the hottest system. Compared to other cases at this price, it's virtually silent, and that counts for more in day to day use than shaving ten minutes off of the time it takes to put your PC together. ■

THE RESULT
Last month **RmmMMARRR**
This month **sssssssssssssss**
The sound of The Rig being cooled

Reclaim the living room

How to play PC games on an HDTV

If you're used to gaming on a pin-sharp computer monitor, plugging your PC's HDMI cable into the back of an HDTV can produce a blurry mess that hurts the eyes. You'll often find bright halos around objects, too, an effect which is particularly pronounced with text.

What's happening is that even though you seem to be playing in native resolution, with a 1920x1080 desktop on a 1080p screen, the TV is actually stretching the image it receives using a technique called 'overscan'. If you're lucky, you'll have an option in the TV settings to turn overscan off, or a separate port specifically for a computer. Turning down the amount of sharpening can help too.

Back on the desktop, you'll need to open the graphics driver and look for scaling options. With an AMD card, for example, click 'Desktops and Displays', then click the small triangle on the screen you want to configure. From this next set of tabs, choose 'Scaling Options' and adjust the size of the desktop until it fits the screen exactly. If that doesn't sort out the problems, there are more custom resolutions you can try in the 'HDTV Support' tab. ■



15 mins

THE RESULT
Last month **95%**
This month **100%**
Visible screen

PLAY FASTER

UPGRADING RAM

CAN MORE MEMORY SPEED UP YOUR GAMES?

How dependent are your games on the amount and speed of your PC's memory? The answer is 'surprisingly little'. Extremely fast RAM can help with stability when you're overclocking your motherboard's system bus, but for the most part the performance to be gained by upgrading to better rated DDR3 chips is small. More important is the amount of RAM in your machine. Aim for at least 4GB if you're using a 64bit version of Windows, and if you play a lot of MMOs or edit video clips, go even higher.



1 Most systems require 'dual channel' RAM for optimum performance. This sounds ominous but simply means that your CPU wants to read and write to two memory modules simultaneously. It's much faster that way. The only thing you need to bear in mind is that you'll need to upgrade with a similar stick in each slot.



2 Dual channel is great, but triple is, clearly, one better. Intel's highest performing Core i7 chips require the extreme bandwidth of triple channel RAM, and can read to three modules at once. As with dual channel systems, you'll need to get three similarly sized sticks for it to work.



3 Do you need to have identical speeds when adding new modules of RAM? It's certainly a good idea for stability's sake, but in most PCs you can mix memory timings without disaster. The real argument for getting identical-speed RAM is that all installed modules will run at the settings of the slowest.

Store.Kaga.com

ON TEST

CPUS

Adam Oxford puts Intel's new Sandy Bridge processors on trial

TESTING CRITERIA

Gaming performance > Our benchmarks were deliberately run at low graphics settings to exaggerate the difference between these CPUs as much as possible. In real life gaming, with all the details turned up, performance between the different chips is much closer together than shown here.

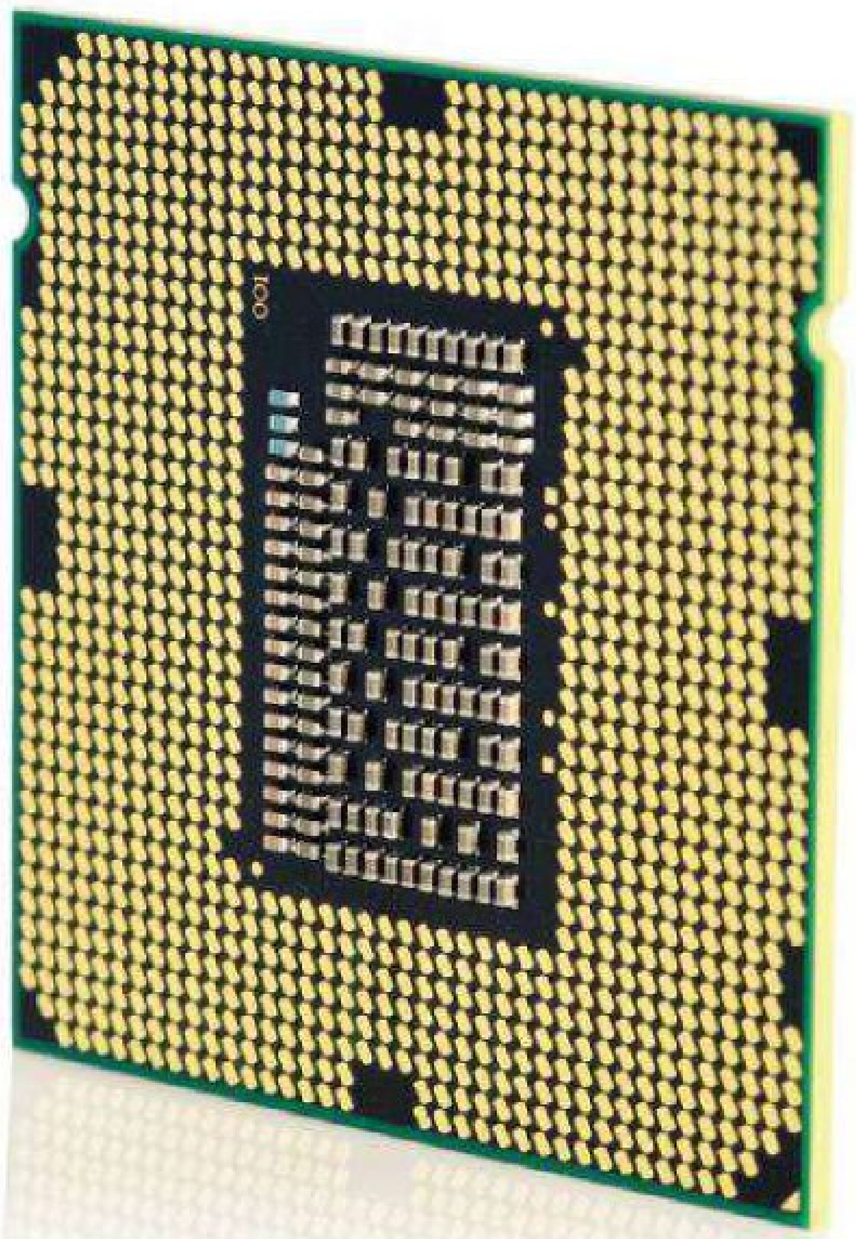
Encoding > Outside of gaming, editing and encoding 1080p video is the hardest task that we ask our CPUs to do today. These chips were set to work transcoding a 1080p movie clip to an iPhone-friendly resolution using the free and multithreaded HandBrake encoding app (*handbrake.fr*), and their performance timed.

Value for money > Performance is only one part of the equation. There's no point spending hundreds of pounds to get a few extra fps. Are these chips good value compared to the last generation and, indeed, to each other? Or should you stick with what you've got and go for an upgrade that doesn't require a new motherboard?

Core i7 2600K

£239 Intel

Visit the Tech folder at www.pcgamer.com for reviews, fixes and more.



In January, Intel unveiled their 'second generation Core processor' family – aka Sandy Bridge. These proved astonishingly good CPUs and received well-deserved accolades.

As far as the traditional CPU part of the chip goes, the technical differences between it and the outgoing Core i7/i5s aren't huge, but they do add up. It's a lot more efficient and quicker at similar clockspeeds, for example, and while it requires a new 1155-pin socket motherboard it is still very good value for money. This £239 four core processor, for example, is almost on a par with the older six core i7 980X in terms of gaming performance, and yet the latter processor costs an eyewatering £850.

"With the right cooler attached, you can try to accelerate this up to 5.7GHz"

If you can afford it, it's worth getting this, the fastest Sandy Bridge chip, over its stablemates. Like all Core i7s it supports hyperthreading, can automatically turn on a turbo boost mode if it decides it isn't working hard enough and, thanks to the 'K' suffix, it has an unlocked multiplier for overclocking. With the right cooler attached, you can try to accelerate this to 5.7GHz before you need to tweak a single other setting.

However, don't get too carried away by the hype: the most significant new feature of Sandy Bridge is irrelevant for desktop gamers. Intel have integrated an HD 3000 graphics core onto the processor die for the first time, which is all very clever but for gaming you'll still need a discrete GPU as well, as it isn't up to high def gaming. It *is* exceptionally good for video encoding, but only works in the cheaper H65 motherboards, while the more expensive P65s are the ones that offer better games performance.

To make things more confusing, if you add a discrete videocard to an H65 board, the HD 3000 is completely disabled anyway. A software fix to let you use the Sandy Bridge graphics core for video while using a GeForce or Radeon card for gaming is on the way, but it's not here at the time of writing.

All that said, the gaming performance on the H65 isn't terrible. Even newer games such as *Shogun 2* run at a respectable lick.

While the benchmarks for the Core i7 2600K are decisive, if you already have a recentish quad core you won't be under any pressure to upgrade just yet. But if you are building a new system and can afford it, this is the CPU to get.

Funny story: a few weeks after that January launch, Intel had to spend $1bn to recall every single compatible motherboard because of a tiny flaw in a hard drive control chip. Happily, that issue is already water under the Sandy Bridge, and we can upgrade with confidence again. ■

VERDICT

Exceptional performance, competitive with older six core chips that cost three times as much.

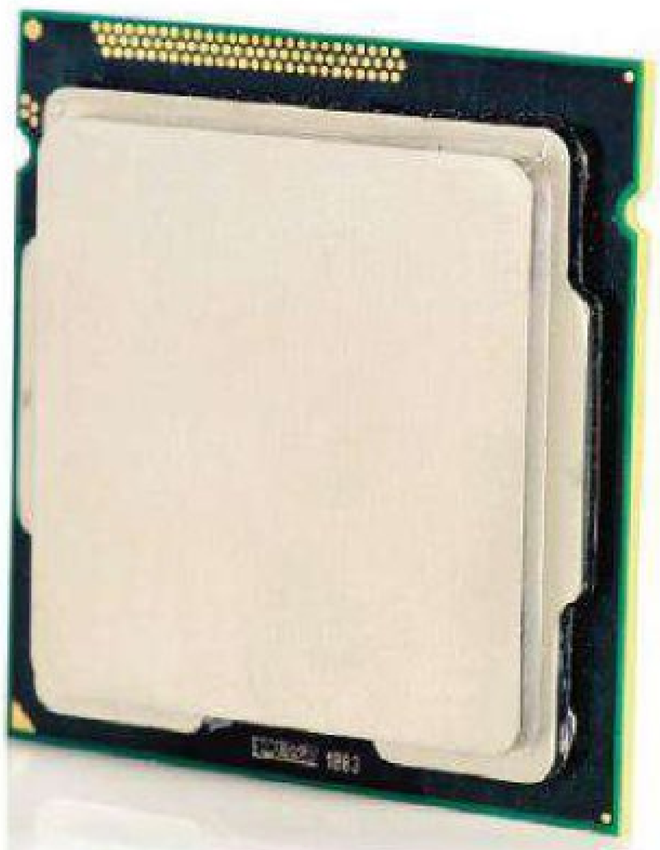
PC GAMER 92

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

SPEC ◆ **Number of cores** 4 ◆ **Number of threads** 8 ◆ **Core speed** 3.4GHz ◆ **Turbo speed** 3.8GHz ◆ **L3 cache** 8MB ◆ **Unlocked multiplier** Yes ◆ **Socket** 1155 ◆ **On-board graphics** Intel HD 3000 ◆ **Just Cause 2** 150fps ◆ **Far Cry 2** 280fps ◆ **HD video encoding** 1min 18secs

Core i5 2500K

£190 Intel



One tier below the Core i7 is the Core i5, and this is the fastest current processor to wear that tag. It does everything the Core i7 does with one exception: it doesn't support hyperthreading, Intel's clever scheduling technology that can run two threads simultaneously on one core.

The performance fall-off isn't as pronounced as that suggests, except for tasks that keep the CPU continuously loaded. If you're going to be editing a lot of HD video, for example, it's worth getting a Core i7, but multithreaded games are rarely capable of balancing an even load across eight target cores. You won't feel much difference between a Core i5 and a similarly clocked Core i7.

The 'K' means this has an unlocked multiplier, making overclocking in the BIOS ludicrously easy. On a stock air cooler, it's possible to break the 4GHz barrier and then some.

£190 is good value for money, but I'd argue that if you want to tweak and play, it's worth spending more for the i7, while if you don't you might as well go for the cheaper i5 2300 below. That handles games with equal aplomb and will save you £40.

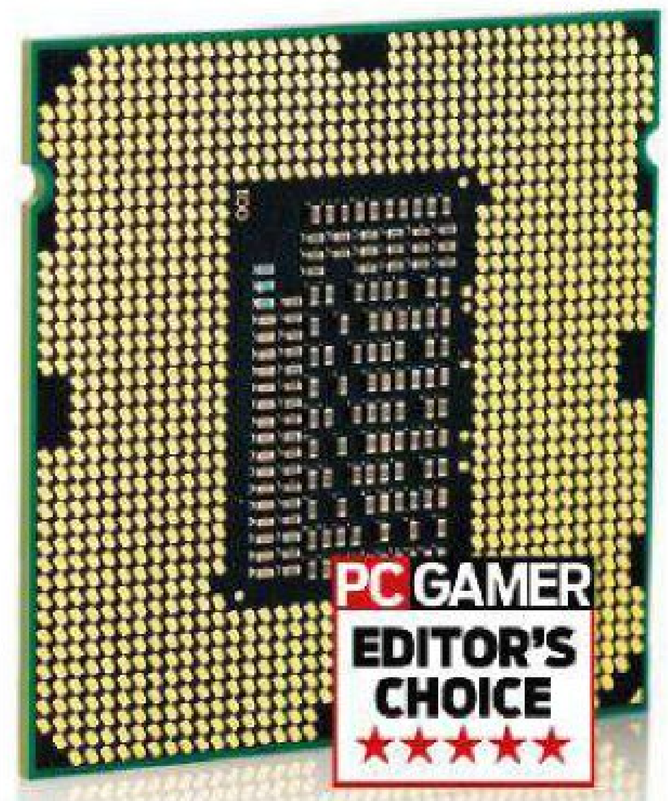
However, the Core i5 2500K has been spotted on special offer already for as little as £160. At that price, you'd be stupid not to buy it. ■

PC GAMER **88**

SPEC ◆ **No. cores** 4 ◆ **No. threads** 4 ◆ **Core speed** 3.3GHz ◆ **Turbo speed** 3.7GHz ◆ **L3 cache** 6MB ◆ **Unlocked multiplier** Yes ◆ **Socket** 1155 ◆ **On-board graphics** Intel HD 3000 ◆ **Just Cause 2** 132fps ◆ **Far Cry 2** 267fps ◆ **HD encoding** 1m 58s

Core i5 2300

£150 Intel



Also based on the Sandy Bridge architecture, the Core i5 2300 is the best value quad core chip Intel currently sell. That's a bit of a disappointment, as it leaves the dual Core i3s to go up against AMD's Phenom II quads, but if you are on a budget and can't find a 2500K for less than the £190 above, you won't be sorry with one of these.

Although the basic clockspeed is 400MHz slower than the 2500K, there's not a huge difference in gaming performance, and it's vastly superior to the older Core i5s it replaces. In the *Just Cause 2* test, it even managed to outperform the six-core i7 980X.

The graphics core is only half as powerful as the 2500K's, but for the reasons described opposite, that doesn't matter right now anyway.

What you don't get with this chip is the unlocked multiplier, but with a P65-based motherboard – rather than the slightly cheaper H65 – you can still tweak other settings to get a bit of a boost.

It's hard to get excited when its siblings have extra features for not a lot more money; another tenner or so off the price, and it could arguably have been the star of the Sandy Bridge series. All the same, it's the sensible choice to buy, and a worthy addition to the PC Gamer Rig. ■

PC GAMER **91**

SPEC ◆ **No. cores** 4 ◆ **No threads** 4 ◆ **Core speed** 2.8GHz ◆ **Turbo speed** 3.1GHz ◆ **L3 cache:** 6MB ◆ **Unlocked multiplier** No ◆ **Socket** 1155 ◆ **On-board graphics** Intel HD 2000 ◆ **Just Cause 2** 132fps ◆ **Far Cry 2** 186fps ◆ **HD encoding:** 2m 7s

KIT FILTER



Razer Spectre £61

This 5600DPI Blizzard-approved *StarCraft II* mouse has LEDs that change colour depending on the number of actions per minute (APM) you're achieving in the game. It's small, light, and not that comfortable, but the button action is incredibly quick, and highly suited to bashing away at 60 times a second. ■

www.razerzone.com

69



HP Envy 14 £1,000

The Core i5 here is complemented by an AMD 5650 graphics chip for reasonable gaming performance, so it'll run *WoW* with all detail settings up. It also has some of the best-sounding speakers on a laptop I've ever heard. Two critical shortcomings: it's heavy for a 14incher and battery life is rubbish, even in power saving mode. ■

www.hp.com

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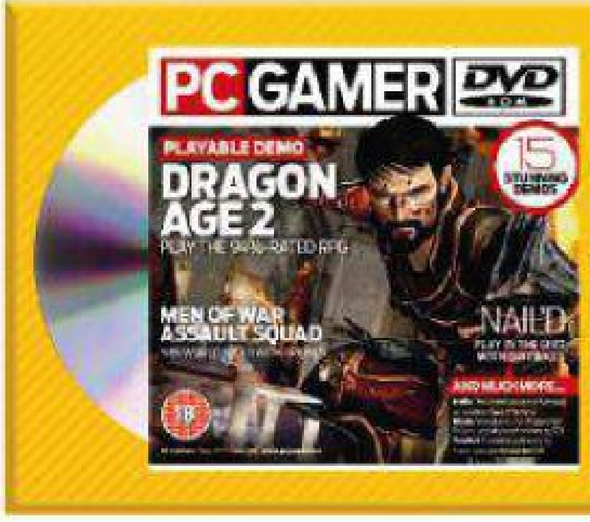
Asus Crosshair IV Extreme £200

Because of the price, this 890FX AMD motherboard isn't for everyone, but it does give exceptional control for overclocking and tuning, and comes with every kind of top end feature you could desire, including Hydra for SLI/Crossfire style doubling up of GPUs regardless of whether or not they're from the same manufacturer. ■

uk.asus.com

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ON THE DISC

The PC Gamer Promise

» We deliver the best content possible. If you can't find an item you were expecting, it probably just missed our deadline. You can bet we'll have it on next issue's disc.

» If something on your disc doesn't work, don't despair. See our Troubleshooter guide below to see what help we can offer.

» If there's something you think we should have on our disc, get in touch. Email graham.smith@futurenet.com

Need help?

Is your coverdisc playing up? Help is at hand

No menu?
If the menu program does not automatically start, the autorun feature may be disabled on your PC. Go to the START/RUN command on the task-bar and type D:\PCG.EXE (where D is the drive letter).

Crashes?
For problems with an individual demo or application, refer to the Help section on the disc. Also ensure your drivers and DirectX version are up to date.

Dud disc?
If your disc is defective then return it to the address below, along with a description of the fault and an SAE: Disc Department, Reader Support, Future Publishing Ltd, Bath, BA1 2BW.

Looked online?
If we discover issues with programs on the disc, we'll post solutions on the Disc Support forum. Check here to see if there's a quick fix: *www.pcgamer.com/forums*

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Last night, I dreamt some disturbing things. A dragon, pursued by a noir detective but in the midst of World War II. "No," I mumbled, "no, this cannot be! Who would dare cross such differing genres? It is an abomination!"



Shaking, I awoke, soothed by the fact it was all just a dream. Then I looked in my hand: a disc was clutched there. This disc did all those dark things, and, since it featured demos of *Dragon Age II*, *Men of War* and *Gemini Rue*, it was fun. So naturally I made it this month's coverdisc. Enjoy.

GRAHAM SMITH
DEPUTY EDITOR
graham.smith@futurenet.com



Darkspawn: beings of chaos with a surprisingly good dental plan.

DRAGON AGE II

DEMO It's the world's most eagerly awaited fantasy RPG. Try it for free.



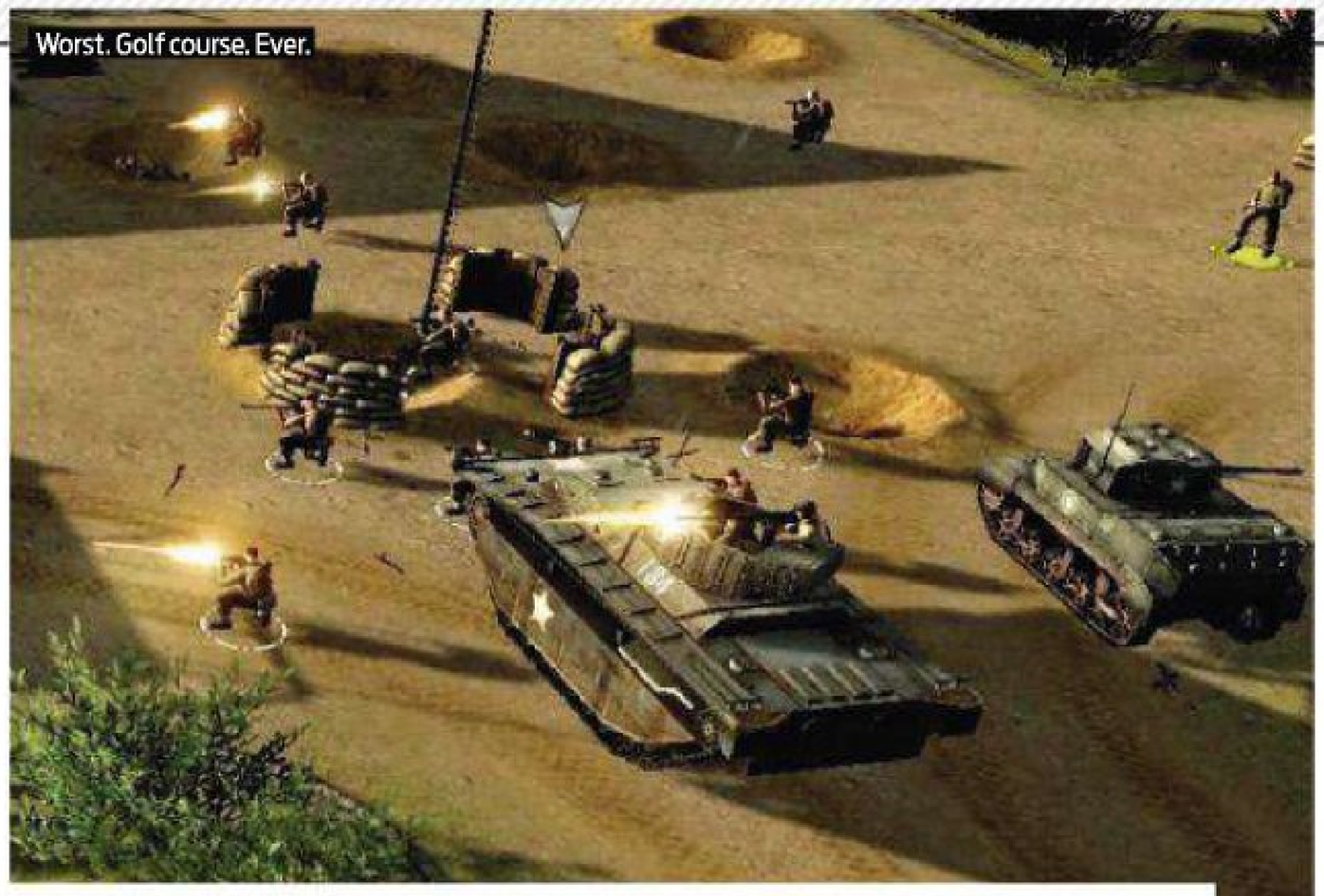
Never put a firework in a swan.

With the option to play as either a male or female version of protagonist Hawke, this demo enables you to explore the showier but still complex combat and new dialogue system of *Dragon Age II*.

At the start you might be surprised to find you are implausibly overpowered, exploding Darkspawn with relative ease. Fret not, this is just a false recollection of a 'legendary' Hawke that allows you to play out how your class will feel once levelled up. Yeah, you're in a flashback.

The inventory system is locked off, so it's pointless to pick up anything other than basic health potions. However, the skill trees are all opened up to play around with, so have a gawp at what there is to unlock later on.

As an added incentive to try this demo, upon completion it provides you with an exclusive weapon for use in the game proper, even if you already have the full version.


Worst. Golf course. Ever.

MEN OF WAR: ASSAULT SQUAD

DEMO Because there's room on my tank for two. Two full-length solo levels, that is.

Assault Squad expands the *Men of War* remit to focus more on skirmish and multiplayer. The first level takes place in the Pacific theatre, and introduces the game's new features: reinforcements and capture points.

Push forward and take the flags, thereby earning reinforcements to tailor your battle plan around. Why do these supporting troops need to see a flag flying before coming to the field? Americans are mysterious and patriotic.

The second level is more challenging, taking place on a wider map. Watch your flanks and man those guns to ensure victory. Hats optional.


"And you're sure we have to test this ejector seat indoors?"

GEMINI RUE

DEMO Talk your way in and out of tricky situations in this smart point-and-clicker.

Space-detective noir with a little bit of The Island thrown in. Aside from describing day to day life in the PC Gamer office, it's also an apt summary of point-and-click adventure *Gemini Rue*.

The demo allows you to soak up the atmosphere and try out *Gemini*'s own spin on the adventure game genre. Puzzles are open to multiple approaches, sometimes requiring nothing but decent bluffing skills. Fail to convince someone? You can gain what you need in other ways.

FULL DVD CONTENTS

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Serious Sam 3
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The Big Phat Online Games Glossary
The Good Grabbing Guide
The PC Gamer Dictionary
The PC Gamer PC Companion
The Reviews Database

THE GREAT PUNDEMIC OF WARHAMMER 40,000

In the grim future of the 41st millennium, the rise of the Ultramarines has triggered a plague of pun-based factions across the galaxy. They are Space Marines. They are blue. They are both ultramarine and ultra-marines. It is a perfect storm of raw naffness: a move that the other races are powerless to resist imitating.



The Blood Sporks
The first clan of Orks to fall under the sway of the punderstorm aimed too high with their wordplay. Their attempts to combine the bloodsport of Aurelian gigafox hunting, oversized spork-based weaponry *and* the fact that they're Orks resulted in over 600 deaths on the first day. The short-lived clan ended when their chief Weirdboy suddenly yelled "I gets it!" and exploded in a shower of snapped plastic prongs. There were no survivors.



Ivory Tauers
In an attempt to both get in on the punfight and class up their act, one caste of the high-tech Tau ruled that all their armour must be made of ivory. This had two unfortunate consequences. One, since the only source of ivory sufficient to equip the entire caste was the mighty Squiggoths, they attacked a herd of the deadliest beasts in the Ork ranks. Two, since they had not yet obtained the ivory, they were unarmoured. There were no survivors.



Sweetkhorne
One of the most unusual cultural clashes caused by the pun plague came in the form of these maize-themed Chaos warriors. While they claimed to remain loyal to the god of violence and murder, Khorne, the Sweetkhorne faction chose to show their devotion through peaceful grain-based agricultural projects. When a passing Bloodthirster heard their irrigation cry, "Flood for the flood crop!" there were no survivors.



Zergle
Outraged when the Great Unclean One failed to qualify for the Global StarCraft II League, one splinter faction of disease god Nurgle's followers decided to play their favourite race in real life. The daemon designated every follower under two metres in height a Zergling – some 384,000 in total – and ordered them all to attack the nearest Space Marine outpost before they "go 2-rax banshee and roflstomp us." There were no survivors.



Necronphiliacs
There were no survivors.

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Next month!

It's all over... until May 11.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE MAY 11

FEATURES...

» DUKE NUKEM FOREVER
» STARCRAFT 2'S PRO SCENE UNCOVERED
» DOES DEMOCRACY WORK?

PLUS...

» DWARF FORTRESS
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AND THE BEST REVIEWS » PORTAL 2 » BRINK » FEAR 3 » IL-2 STURMOVIK: CLIFFS OF DOVER » FEAR 3 » DUNGEON SIEGE 3 » THE WITCHER 2 » MORE...

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