PCZONE.CO.UK

Steve

PCZONE

GEARS OF WAR VS

Unreal
TOURNAMENT III

Two Epic shooters. One PC crown...

GEARS OF WAR Vs TOURNAMENT III

COVER STORY

44 Two huge games from the action masters at Epic – exclusive double playtest!

NEVERQUEST 123

"Bendah is lurking around the corner, waiting for me."

TEAM FORTRESS 2 **64**
AT LAST! VALVE'S ONLINE SHOOTER ARRIVES – IS IT THE BEST THING EVER?

Too busy? *PC ZONE* in 62 words... Steve plays *The Orange Box*, and having recently learned the word triptych, writes the review using only that word. *STALKER*'s prequel and *Company of Heroes* expansion get checked out. Will finds Clive Barker's twisted visions a bit more meh than expected. Log gets lumbered with the traditional nuggets of gaming bob. While Suzy laughs at women gamers in their pants.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

IT WAS YOURS truly who pulled rank and nabbed the trip to skip across the Atlantic and see *Gears of War* and *Unreal Tournament III* for this month's cover. As well as having hands-on with these two gaming giants, I had the chance to check out Epic's gaff in Raleigh, North Carolina, which is to be frank, a geek's paradise (see page 44).

Their common room had arcade machines, table football, a basketball court just outside, and more importantly, fridges and cupboards filled with frozen pizzas, fizzy pop, ice cream, cookies, crisps and every brand of American candy bar. Not only that, but on the day I was there, Chinese food was delivered at 5pm to dish out to the hungry employees, all currently working all hours to get *Gears* and *UT* out of the door.

Compare that to the current line-up in *Zone* towers – a couple of drinks machines that chug out hot, brown liquid purporting to be coffee, and a vending machine that's mostly empty, apart from a year-old rock-solid lemon cake and a whole row of east European flapjacks called "Braschekt".

Wouldn't our country be a happier place if we could just grab a Twinkie in the office whenever our stomachs demanded it? No hope in hell....

Oh yeah, and DO NOT miss next month's *PC Zone* – we have the exclusive review and playable demo of *Crysis*.

Jamie Sefton, editor

CONTENTS

REVIEW

The saga continues as Gordon and Alyx take to the woods – but is the crown starting to slip?

LOOKINGBACKCOMMENTARY

DEVELOPER'S COMMENTARY
PEGGLE

How could firing balls at pegs be so good? *Jon Blyth* talks to the men behind the pegs.

"Renfield was originally meant to be a ghost, but we realised that he just looked like a Klansman"

CONTENTS

ESET

Swift. Nimble. Relentless.

Can you describe your antivirus software with the same certainty?

NOD32
antivirus system

"Best Antivirus Product of 2006"
— AV Comparatives

Install it. Forget it. That's the beauty and the power of NOD32's ThreatSense® technology. NOD32 proactively protects against viruses, spyware, rootkits and other malware. And, its high-performance engine won't slow your system down. Take a free NOD32 30-day test drive. Call 0845 838 0832 or download at ESET.co.uk.

MEET THE TEAM

Team Fortress 2? Meet the Team? This just writes itself...

STEVE HOGARTY
Medic
AGE: 20
LIKES: Making Heavies invulnerable
DISLIKES: Accidentally healing enemy spies
FANCIES: The score woman
FAVE GAME: *Team Fortress 2*
PLAYING NOW: *The Orange Box*

Kind-hearted Steve likes to follow his friends around on the off-chance one of them gets wounded. Armed with Elastoplast and a furrowed brow of concern, if he sees a burly man go past he can't help but fall into his wake and obediently trot after him to keep his health topped up. In fact, when Steve didn't turn up for work on time last week (which isn't like him at all) we phoned him and it turned out he was tailing Geoff Capes up the M1 and was absolutely convinced he and his strongman prey were temporarily impervious to injury.

SUZY WALLACE
Demo Woman
The only team member whose TF2 alter-ego reflects their real-world job, Suze manages both reviews and the demos burnt onto your free DVD. And sometimes she likes to blow shit up.
NOW PLAYING:
Team Fortress 2

JAMES ROFF
Engineer
After his recent ascent to Deputy Art Editor James was relatively confused to find himself asked to repeatedly hit our 'health dispenser' with a wrench while we took photos. Welcome to the gang...
NOW PLAYING:
Catch up

WILL PORTER
Spy
Zone's Deputy Editor has taken to wearing the clothes of writers on a rival magazine before standing in the corner of their office and doing his best to look busy. No fatal stabbings just yet though.
NOW PLAYING:
Team Fortress 2

JAMIE SEFTON
Pyro
Sefton doesn't like to burn things in real life. But he's a bit crap, and apart from Valve few people understand his appeal or his continued presence in the setup. We think they're just being polite...
NOW PLAYING:
Team Fortress 2

JON 'LOG' BLYTH
Heavy Weapons Guy
Powerful, first to the fight and with men falling at his feet wheresoever he does roam – Log is so powerful that we hide behind him when we're in trouble and watch our persecutors flee in fear.
NOW PLAYING:
Team Fortress 2

WANDY
Sniper
Wandy hasn't actually started moaning about *Team Fortress 2* and slinking back to *TFC*, but it's inevitable. We still love you though, you sour-faced change-hating grumpenpuss! Hug!
NOW PLAYING:
TF of some description

STUFF THAT'S HELPED US THIS MONTH... *World in Conflict* tracksuit tops that turn us into Russian gymnasts and Log's award nomination.
STUFF THAT HASN'T HELPED US THIS MONTH... People not answering their emails, that stupid *Chocolate Rain* song and not being able to finish scuba diving courses due to ear pressure.

WHAT WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT...

"HOMEBASE? WHY HOMEBASE?"	**13 mins**	Confusion between Log being in a Red Team base in *TF2* or a DIY store causes communication failures.
NEW PRODUCTION EDITOR!	**41 mins**	Pray bid welcome to Richard Cosgrove. Sadly, not related to *DangerMouse's* creators.
TINKER AND TAILOR	**3 mins**	Classes sadly missing from *Team Fortress 2* alongside the soldiers and spies. A disappointment.
"LADDER NARROWLY MISSES MOTORIST"	**24 mins**	Crap yokel newspaper billboards near Will's house. Also seen: "Fun had at church fete!"
COLIN MCRAE	**71 mins**	He was nothing short of a gentleman, and will be sadly missed.
SOMETHING GIGGLY THIS WAY COMES	**36 mins**	Suze's aversion to alcohol suddenly reversed through the discovery of wine.
DARK MESSIAH PLAYED ON HARD	**8 mins**	So difficult that it's a joyless slog. But will that stop the intrepid Will Porter? It won't stop him moaning...
STEVE THE CIV IV NOOB	**2 mins**	"A cottage becomes a hamlet then it produces more gold? This is just dull." Heathen!
THE FINAL COUNTDOWN	**23 mins**	It'll take a week before we're official warned for shouting and swearing when playing *TF2*.
THE ENDING OF PORTAL	**1 mins**	A secret that Hogarty will take to his grave. But that didn't stop him blithely ruining *BioShock* for Suze.

LETTERS

Will Porter for once discovers some letters that aren't about cutting off his electricity...

KING OF LETTERS

"And THAT'S for not warning us about PS 2.0!"

IN THE SHADE

When your October mag arrived in the post, I immediately turned to the *BioShock* review, and saw the 96% award and that my PC met the minimum specs. I was about to buy the game from Steam, but noticed a forum post that said the game didn't support Pixel Shader 2.0!

There are a lot of people affected by this, and though nothing has been promised from the developers, a couple of unofficial patches are available. But they won't allow you to play the game as Irrational intended.

I checked your review and you make no mention of this, and neither do the retail copies of the game. Nothing was mentioned by the developer prior to release and many people now have a shiny, useless disk until they can afford to upgrade their systems. So where does the responsibility lie to inform us of this?

Should the responsibility to inform about the requirement of PS 3.0 lay with the developer, the publisher, or the reviewers?

Stuart Wheatley

The Pixel Shader issue is one that we've been stung by before with games like *Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Colin McRae DiRT*.

There's no doubt that it's the reviewer's responsibility to inform readers about what kit they'll need, and we'll do our utmost to avoid this in the future.

The problem arises, as can be seen with the lack of warning on the *BioShock* box, with a lack of communication on the part of publishers – both to us and to you.

Ultimately you'll have to upgrade I guess, but for now I feel your pain. (Actually, don't upgrade – have a new card on us.)

Bar fights in *STALKER* are a touch bloody.

WHITHER WOMENFOLK?

So, I'm playing *STALKER*: finding magic glowing objects while shooting mutant dogs and pigs: all super-fun. But when I was hanging out at the local Stalker bar I realised that there was something missing: the fairer sex. I was standing with a bunch of sweaty gun-toting men, with no female talent in sight! This is wrong: I'm a man, I have needs.

Jim Runnalls

You're right Jim – the exclusion zone is bereft of girls we can ogle at and impress with our artefact collections.

I was so concerned at this that I got in touch with the guys at GSC Gameworld to see where all the ladies had gone. The answer? "They are waiting for their stalkers to return from the Zone – making dinner, cooking and chilling vodka in the fridge. The Zone isn't a very cosy

It's a fearsome master until it starts licking itself.

I didn't know a powerful narcotic had been bundled onto the cover disk. This drug was the *World of Warcraft* 14-day trial!

Paul Wolfkitch Kitchen accusing *PC Zone* of turning him to a MMO addict.

place for such a tender part of mankind. On top of that, just consider the number of animations we'd have to create for lipstick applying and make-up! Bah!"

The developer shall remain anonymous – Germaine Greer clearly doesn't have a foothold in Kiev yet.

WORLD GONE MOD

Is it just me or does adding mods ruin games? I'm not talking about full conversion mods like *Garry's Mod* or *Counter-Strike*, but little mods that "enhance" the single player: you lads have already seen the thousands available for games like *Oblivion* or *STALKER*. It just feels like we're being given too much control over the game instead of it sucking us in and having us start off on a clean slate.

Is it the game makers fault we need to tweak our games so much or is it us just being too picky?

Jamie Anderson

What your saying is true enough Jamie, some of the *Oblivion* mods are game-breakers. To be honest though, it's this variety of pedantic fiddling that gives me proud to be a PC gamer – people making stuff more realistic, removing crosshairs, taking away torches... It's the sort of stuff that console boys can only dream of.

INTERESTING DRUG

I once was an avid reader of your magazine, and back in August of last

year I walked into my local Tesco to pick up an issue. At the time I didn't know a powerful narcotic had been bundled onto the cover disk. A drug so strong it would even overpower my need for a half-hourly nicotine fix.

This drug was the *World of Warcraft* 14-day trial! Days blend into nights blend into days. My body can now survive with only two hours sleep. My skin tone is now pale and my eyes slightly wider than before. What have I become? It courses through my veins every waking hour! Real life blends into fantasy and fantasy becomes real!

Is there a cure or have you damned me to a life of a lowly mage slaying an ever-respawning horde?

WHY WASN'T I WARNED!!

Paul "Wolfkitch" Kitchen

Poor, poor Wolfkitch. Personally I find the best way to wean yourself off is with a regimented dosage of a similar, less addictive, product. One that satisfies the craving, yet delivers none of the pleasure. (Yes kids, I'm bitching about *Lord of the Rings Online*.)

BIOSHAKEN

I read your review of *BioShock* and as your reviews are something I can

ASK THE TXTPERTS

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

We can only install/activate *BioShock* TWICE? Don't 2K Games want people to play the game?

ITSONLYDANNY

A good gripe. Although now you get five installs for your cash – so it isn't so bad.

After ordering *BioShock* from Amazon UK and choosing express delivery they sent it four days too early. Long live techy mix-ups!

John Dixon

Man, you could have spoilt the plot line from day one. I applaud your restraint.

What's the release date for Football Manager 2008? I want to waste away several more hours of my life.....

Lee

Only hours? Steve Hill has preview code and we haven't seen him in weeks... 30 November.
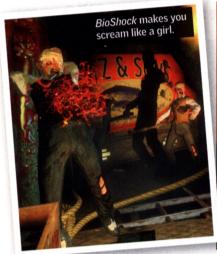
BioShock makes you scream like a girl.

Might playing as a sexy modded elf ruin *Oblivion*? Unlikely – but possible.

rely on, I took the plunge and purchased the game. I've been playing it for about a half-hour and had to exit to email: THANK YOU!

Not for what seems like ages have I played a game of such quality: including *Half-Life 2*. The introduction scenes had me cooing like a star-struck child, which soon escalated into sheer wonder at the art work and detail of the game. Then about 15 minutes into the game, came something that I've not experienced for years – I full-on screamed at my PC in horror!

I half-expect the police to come knocking to see if a murder has been committed. This was due to a splicer mother, looking into a baby's pram until she came running at me screaming.

This is a kind of horror that only a game like *Resident Evil* could, a long time ago, have reproduced. I'm off to calm down now. It's 18.21 and I can't risk playing this game any later or I'll wet the bed.

Phil Yockney

BioShock is, indeed, a triumph. Its opening is perhaps the greatest

moment in gaming history to boot. Personally, I found the ending didn't quite match the exhilaration you felt at the beginning – but I certainly can't remember playing something of such quality for a long time either. 'Get up Mr Bubbles!'

FRAK ATTACK

Now, I'm not sure in which issue it first happened but I have just noticed that *FreeSpace 2* is no longer in the Top 5 Simulations in the Buyer's Guide. Well, you can just bloody well put it back right now!

Jesus, don't know you're born, you lot. It may be old but it is still a fantastic ride. Go on, install it again and then tell me it's not so; just so I can call you a liar. Oh, and some people have updated the *FS 2* engine and made a mod based on the new *Battlestar Galactica* called *Beyond the Red Line* – my socks were so rocked I may have to give up looking for them and actually buy some new ones.

If they ever manage a Cylon Basestar vs Battlestar level with players in fighters then I may actually

die from pleasure or some kind of embarrassing joystick RSI madness.

Mark Parry

And I'd be right there with you Mark. Don't get your hopes about that *Battlestar* **game they're doing for Xbox LIVE though – it's really, REALLY shit. PCZ**

"I'm not a bad girl. I'm just programmed that way..."

WHAT'S ON THE PCZ HARD DRIVE?

DARK MESSIAH: MIGHT & MAGIC
www.darkmessiahgame.com
"It's just so hard!" Will whines, before taking his frustration out by chopping an orc's head off.

TRACKMANIA UNITED
www.tm-united.com
Absurd loops and jumps give you brilliant driving nonsense. Pure arcade fun that almost stops being about cars altogether.

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2008
www.pesfan.com
It's here and looks great – it even has a "diving" feature for cheating penalties out of the ref. Just like the pros do.

WHAT'S ON YOUR HARD DRIVE?

THIS MONTH: MUSICALGIBBON (AKA IAIN WORKMAN)

STALKER: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL
I've always been a sucker for sandbox games (or pseudo-sandbox), and this certainly had its moments (mostly around the middle). The upcoming free mode promised in the next patch certainly sounds interesting.

PSYCHONAUTS
Most impressive game I've played in a long time. Fantastical gameplay, beautiful art and incredibly funny to top it all off. This is my game of whatever year it came out. And good job to Steam as well – might of taken 12 hours to download, but it was still quicker than waiting on Amazon.

ULTIMA VII PARTS 1 & 2
I always end up playing them backwards for some reason. There's nothing to depress a man like playing Ultima VII. Not only do you know there's nothing else out there like it, but if you do want closure on the story you have to go about playing VIII and IX.

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

GEARS OF WAR

Vs

Unreal TOURNAMENT III

The heavyweight developer of PC gaming has
come back to the fray. Epic is not the word...

The development giants at Epic – they who created the original and mighty *Unreal* and the rest of the franchise – haven't released anything on PC in three long years, but now they're about to drop the motherload. With what's shaping up to be the best multiplayer package released in years with *Unreal Tournament III*, and enough extra *Gears of War* content to make console gamers scream and cry, one of the giants of US gaming has well and truly come back to the fold. We've been over to visit them in their palatial abode, played their wares and quizzed them on their history – so sit back and enjoy the ride. Many monster kills lie ahead...

UPFRONT

Everything that matters in the world of PC gaming

Feeling orange

I **MAY BE** the Upfront editor, continually streaming ticker-tapes of news from my ears and shirt sleeves, but this month my heart is in the Reviews section. Not only because I despise the future and am pained by every passing minute as we tumble interminably into it, but because I've only gone and reviewed *The Orange Box*, and loved it.

I've taken each part of the box individually, as to do otherwise, knowing that they will eventually be available separately, would be barmy. I've also ignored the supposed issue of Valve including *Half-Life 2* and *Episode One* in the collection, because at this price-point we view them as mostly unnecessary bonuses more than anything else – and also because we enjoy saying triptych.

I've also done some maths. The average review score of the games in *The Orange Box* is a hefty 88 (discounting *HL2* and *Ep1* – which would make it 90), a number bingo commentators comically refer to as 'two fat ladies'. Here's a one sentence review too, which might work as a quote on the front of the box: "We knew Valve would have to convince us to buy *Episode Two* somehow, but not like this – never like this!"

And in amongst this flurry of activity, Steam has reached puberty. It's gone all community driven and stats based, and works like a much more efficient version of Xfire. It's brilliant, and Games for Windows Live can honestly go jump in a lake for all I care. There I said it.

Steve Hogarty

Steve Hogarty, section editor

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

We catch up with the man charged with bringing the past to life in the newly delayed *Assassin's Creed*

AS HAS BEEN endlessly foretold in these pages, the PC version of Ubisoft's medieval romp has hit the skids till early next year. Who saw that coming? This did, however, give us a chance to catch up with David Chateauneuf, *Assassin's Creed*'s chief level designer. Proudly sporting a *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* tattoo, and later rebuffing praise for its famed Farah 'Jacuzzi' scene with the explanation that she was a real pain in the arse to program, he's tasked with recreating the Holy Land in video-game form.

Q So what kinds of research did you do to nail the vibe of the period?

A We got a lot of books, we went to the library a lot – we didn't really have crumbling maps and scrolls! Like for Damascus – at first we didn't have anything, just something by an illustrator, then we found a real map and looked at how the streets worked. We didn't go over there though... we were going to go over but at that time there was a bit of a mess politically where we wanted to go, so we decided to do our work from home. We also hooked up with a University professor who gave us some lectures on weapons, the way they used to live, all the stuff we needed to make the game.

Is it tricky to get the crowds moving?
We had to create a living breathing world by creating NPCs, just walking around as an obstacle for the player. So we were working on crowd-flow, taking what you see in real life with people walking and putting it in the game. We were looking at crowds in parties and parades in cities to see what would happen at ceremonies and events. For example you often see people walking along on the righthand side, while others coming towards you walk to their right – things like that had to be put into each street and back alley.

The horse-riding open area stuff in The Kingdom is probably one of the bigger departures from *Prince of Persia*. Why did you put it in?
We wanted to give a different aspect to the game, there's a feeling of constraint in the cities – a lot of people, a lot of big walls. We wanted something to let the player breath a bit more. It isn't just a game with a big map and the player somewhere in it – it's like in *Shadow of the Colossus* when you're having fun riding your horse from place to place. When you've been climbing ledges, mixing in the crowds for one or two hours – it's fun but you need to something to make it feel epic. It's a big world – it's the Holy Land.

And with that, are you expecting any backlash – what with the Middle East being such a troubled area?
We're expecting a few people to make some comments about it – but in the game, the first thing you see, is something saying that there's something saying that we're a team of many different backgrounds and beliefs.

That must be a genuine kick-ass assassin.

STOP PRESS!

HIGHWAY DELAY
Another much-anticipated delay that we saw from a mile off can be seen in the form of *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*. Expect it early next year.

FEAR SEQUEL NAMED
Project Origin is the dashing new title for Monolith's official (but not really official) follow-up to the horror shooter *F.E.A.R.*

RENEGADE RETURNS
The rumour mill suggests that EA might be about to have another crack at a *C&C* FPS after wholly shite-some farrago that was *Renegade*.

Racing towards the January sales.

"Hah! I will use my invisible trampoline to defeat you!"

At first we were told never to make any reference to religion – never putting a cross anywhere. Now though policy has changed, we go into churches – although we do think hard about whether, for example, we can put archers on the top of religious buildings. There's no bad intentions in the game though – it's made in a way that we respect everything.
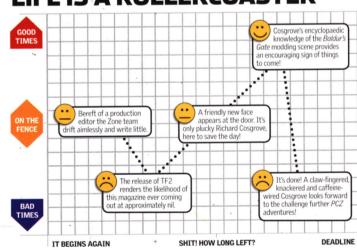
If Kingdom of Heaven can do it, why can't a game?

STUFF It's now dangerously close to the date upon which votes are counted for this year's Golden Joystick awards – in fact if it's gone past 19 October you've sadly missed both the chance of shaping the winners list and the chance to win a shed-load of games and an Xbox 360 if you get one of your mates to vote as well. These are very much the people's awards – so head over to www.goldenjoystick.com and get your voice heard.

LIFE IS A ROLLERCOASTER

GOOD TIMES

ON THE FENCE

BAD TIMES

Cosgrove's encyclopaedic knowledge of the *Baldur's Gate* modding scene provides an encouraging sign of things to come!

Bereft of a production editor the Zone team drift aimlessly and write little.

A friendly new face appears at the door. It's only plucky Richard Cosgrove, here to save the day!

The release of TF2 renders the likelihood of this magazine ever coming out at approximately nil.

It's done! A claw-fingered, knackered and caffeine-wired Cosgrove looks forward to the challenge further *PCZ* adventures!

IT BEGINS AGAIN   SHIT! HOW LONG LEFT?   DEADLINE

RAGS TO RICHES

Kicking a lump or two out of ragdolls, the fall-guys of gaming

Reporter
Pavel Barter

YOU'VE GOT TO admire those flippy-floppy folk known as ragdolls. When we're not shooting them in the skull, we're piling them on top of each other like prisoners in Abu Ghraib, or throwing them down staircases in exquisite slo-mo. PC gamers often add to their mental anguish by stripping them and leaving them to rot with their heads in their crotches. Like pulling the wings off flies or reading *Heat* magazine, this is morally dubious, but it's also part and parcel of playing PC games. Isn't it about time we gave these living dolls their dues?

Dr Steve Collins, co-founder of Havok (the physics boffins whose engines have powered countless PC games, from *Company of Heroes* to *BioShock*), reckons so. "If you want a convincing portrayal of a character that interacts realistically with other characters or with the world around them, then ragdoll technology is a critical component," says Collins, who left Havok in 2005 to teach game technology at Trinity College, Dublin.

IT'S A DOLL'S LIFE

The proof is in the interactive pudding. Some of the greatest PC games of modern times – *Hitman, UT, Max Payne 2, Half-Life 2, Far Cry* and *STALKER* – use ragdoll physics to fantastic effect. *Half-Life 2's* Source engine made bad-guy death throes all the more convincing. *Counter-Strike: Source* wouldn't be half the game it is without ragdoll physics, while *Garry's Mod* is some kind of Newtonian wet dream.

And yet, like Britney Spears, there's something not quite right about ragdolls. More often than not, the instant a game character 'dies', it transforms into a flaccid amoeba, flopping about on the floor and folding into origami shapes without even a nod to human anatomy.

Then again, even fully animated characters in games are fraught with problems, as Dave Gargan, principal engineer at Havok, points out: "Game characters continue to run as they face walls. They don't have any subtlety. They don't bang their shoulders on doorposts and they don't place their hand on a wall to support themselves as they peek around corners." With such issues to address in the living, it's hardly surprising that the dead in games adhere so loosely to reality.

But while ragdolls are still in the early stages of their evolution, they're actually celebrating their 10th year of existence.

Mark Healey, creator of *Rag Doll Kung Fu*, recalls seeing a piece of software around 1997 where players push dummies down staircases. "Completely pointless, but hours of fun," he muses.

A year later, the Spielberg-endorsed PC game *Jurassic Park: Trespasser* brought ragdoll physics kicking and flailing into the mainstream. The dinosaurs in *Trespasser* were made up of rigid-body systems and used inverse kinematics to move, as well as pushing away from one another when they collided. Although the ideas were advanced for the time, the game was slagged off for being way too buggy. "Many people now see *Trespasser* as an example of how not to do physics, but frankly this was probably the single biggest leap in physics technology in games to date," reckons Steve Collins.

Collins notes that the idea of linking rigid bodies to create dynamic systems – this is what a ragdoll is, essentially – wasn't all that new, even in the late '90s. In the 1982 Atari game *Gravitar* (later remade into *Thrust* for the BBC Micro and Commodore 64), you navigate a lunar-lander craft, pick up pods with a

Painkiller was one of few FPSs to make new gameplay out of ragdolls.

Unreal Engine 3 has noticeably improved ragdoll behaviour.

Another jelly-jointed ragdoll falls to an unlikely death.

Living dolls
Everybody and their mother enjoys torturing ragdolls online these days...

Falling Georgie
www.planetdan.net/pics/misc/georgie.htm
The US president falls down an infinite chasm, bouncing off giant orbs and appearing even less dignified than usual, which isn't an easy feat. Strangely hypnotic and presumably popular with al-Qaeda.

A president in freefall.

Floppy fists of fury.

Rag Doll Kung Fu
www.ragdollkungfu.com
This innovative game, available on Steam, is like a punch-up at a puppet show. The characters are controlled solely by the mouse, so you can play it even if you've lost an arm in a horrible industrial accident. Hurrah!

Sumotori Dreams
web.t-online.hu/archee83/sumotori
Like two fat blokes having a go at each other at closing time, *Sumotori Dreams* is hilarious and pathetic in equal doses. The physics-powered sumos are seriously shaky on their feet, so expect to fall over a lot.

Sumo a-go-go.

Bloodiest ragdolls ever.

Toribash
www.toribash.com
The Matrix meets *Driller Killer*. Ragdolls buy it in a more horrible fashion than usual, as you kick their heads across a washed-out limbo-land, treating gravity like some kind of mythical joke.

> ## "I think that game more than any other made ragdoll technology a required feature for many genres"
> Dr Steve Collins, co-founder of Havok, on *Max Payne 2*

grappling device and negotiate a cave system. "This involved a simple dynamic system of two rigid bodies – the ship and the pod – connected by a single constraint. The pod acted as a heavy pendulum connected to your ship, which made movement very tricky. In terms of simulation, this was the 2D equivalent of a single limb (like an arm)."

DRAG AND DROP
Conceptually, ragdoll physics might have fluttered around since the days of polygon bird droppings, but it wasn't until 2000 that gaming's favourite thumb-in-a-suit, *Hitman*, made ragdolls cool and neat-o. Thomas Jakobsen, head of 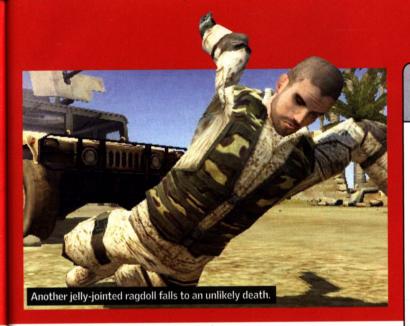R&D at Io Interactive, introduced a form of ragdoll physics known as Verlet Integration, which connected thigh bones to knee bones, and so forth. Bingo! You could drag around dead people just like Jeffrey Dahmer.

When Havok showed its first demos at GDC 2002, the games industry was on the brink of ragdoll frenzy. At the time, movies were using similar effects and technology – *The Matrix* being a prime example. "*Painkiller* had some great effects, like the ragdolls that you could pin to the geometry with special guns and stakes," says Dave Gargan.

Steve Collins's fave is Remedy's detective noir. "*Max Payne 2* is still a fantastic example of what you can do cinematically," he says. "I think that game more than any other made ragdoll technology a required feature for many genres. I also think that Midway's *Psi-Ops* was technically very clever – it demonstrated some fantastic character interactions with the environment. Anyone for some crate surfing?"

So why are ragdolls still prone to causing unintentional hilarity? "In most games, ragdolls are like scarecrows made from sandbags – their limbs are tied together with pieces of string. It looks extremely unnatural," says Gargan. "It's like these characters have had their spinal chords severed."

FLACCID FUN
Ragdoll floppiness can, however, offer its own kind of fun. Mark Healey, one-time artist at Lionhead Studios, had always fancied making a small *Street Fighter*-type game that used the mouse; he'd also made a short kung fu movie with some mates. Once he'd combined these ingredients with a piece of code that simulated virtual rope, *Rag Doll Kung Fu* was born. "There is no animation in that game whatsoever," says Healey. "When the AI characters move, they're controlled in the same way that you control your character – by picking up limbs."

For Healey, it was the very stupidity of ragdolls that made them so much fun. "In my opinion," he says, "the best thing about using ragdoll physics in *Rag Doll Kung Fu* was that it allowed players to act with the character. I remember crying with laughter many times as someone showed me a new silly walk

they'd invented. It let players add their own personality to the game."

Despite such departures, however, ragdolls are destined to become less funny as they evolve. Increasingly, developers are likely to use ragdoll physics in concert with animation. For example, a character on a moving platform will be able to automatically compute their centre of balance. They'll lean forward or backwards as they run up or downhill, and 'recover' when punched, switching between user and game control as appropriate. "We're just scratching the surface at the moment," says Collins. "We'll know we're there when no-one notices ragdoll technology any more – just a convincingly realistic portrayal of a game character." **PCZ**

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

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

The ability to drag and hide bodies proved key to games like *Hitman*.

Trespasser: ahead of its time...

...though we wouldn't play it in a blue fit now.

"This shirt has *breasts*. What are you trying to say, pal?"

"Oh hi, yeah. Some Healthy Boots of the Tourmaline Owl, please."

At this stage, I didn't realise my shield was shit.

TUBEWAY ARMY...

HELLGATE: LONDON

Jon Blyth fires a grappling hook through a hell-portal, just to see what happens

DEVELOPER Flagship Studios   PUBLISHER EA   WEBSITE www.hellgatelondon.com   PREVIOUSLY IN... 184

ETA
**NOV
2007**

THE LOWDOWN

Diablo! In 3D!	✓
London! In 3D!	✓
Immediately fun to play	✓
Not long to sort out the many remaining glitches	✗
Naughty pets...	✗

HELLGATE: *LONDON'S BEEN* a long time in development, but it's finally gone into a closed pre-release testing stage that appears to be hovering somewhere between alpha and beta. Having secured a place on the trial, we cheerfully clicked all the boxes and playfully set up our accounts, before jumping into the action and splashing around like idiots.

What this whole pre-release thing means is that the servers are up and down like a bride's yo-yo, and any talk of glitches is best left for the review. Which, for the developers, must feel alarmingly close. Rather than let this hamstring this whole piece into a sodden mess of apology and conjecture, I'll just describe what happened in my first few hours in the game. What I'm interested in is this: does *Hellgate* feel, in my bones, like the reinvention of the 2D dungeon trawl that I've hoped it would be? Is this, in other words, the 3D *Diablo* we've all been waiting for?

A quick recap, so everyone's up to speed. *Hellgate: London* is set in 2038, in a world under assault by the demons of hell. To fight them you have six classes to choose from, split across three factions. The paladin-esque faction of the Templars contains the attack-happy Blademaster and the defensive Guardian. The hand-wringing witches are represented by the Cabalist faction. Here you'll find the Evoker – the template weedy dude with big spells – and the Summoner, who'd be wise to stand back and let his uncanny menagerie do the work.

IN THE HUNT

Finally, there's the Hunters faction. The Marksman plays the game most like an FPS, while the Engineer is essentially a Summoner who deals with robots instead of infernal imps. All factions are on the same side – it's no Alliance vs Horde scenario. At this stage, *Hellgate* definitely isn't

What's the armour class of being virtually nude?

geared towards PVP play, apart from the odd duel.

I chose the Summoner. I like pets, and I like my pets to be on fire. The tutorial zone whisked me through a steampunk Russell Square, more Victoriana than *Futurama*, that serves as your basic WASD tutorial. Populated with a dozen fodder zombies to get you used to your weapon, and a guy called Murmur who guides you to your first Tube station. Sealed by the Freemasons, these underground sanctuaries act as hubs

It feels right – the content of *Diablo* with the presentation of *WOW*

Dude, your polygons are showing.

Portals to hell: cheaper and more reliable than London buses.

In an ironic twist on reality, Tube stations are safe zones.

www.whatistheorangebox.com

Team Fortress® 2

▶ **Team Fortress® 2**: One of 2007's most anticipated multiplayer games.*

for progressively more difficult batches of (sometimes) randomly-generated mission areas.

First impressions were that it instantly felt smooth, and right – the content of *Diablo* with the presentation of *WOW*. The graphics, in particular, have come a long way, and it's far more satisfying to see loot burst from a dead body than it is to ransack the poor sods. The first-person perspective is a token option – you'll end up settling on the third-person zoom level that gives you most view of the playing field.

The Summoner starts with a shin-high flaming imp. He died more than I like my pets to die, so I spent my first skill point on a new pet. With my new rune-infested, erm… zergling, I realised I was invincible until about level 4-5, an hour later. This isn't

Hey, kids – when you kill people, money flies out!

More yellow exclamation marks than ever.

a problematic balance issue at such an early stage, but I suddenly felt a little redundant.

What was far more frustrating was the lack of control over my pets. It was like walking a particularly randy dog, only when he humped someone's poodle, I'd shoot the poodle with an explosive bullet instead of apologising to its owner. Then, I'd shoot the owner. Often my pets would run off completely.

At higher levels of combat – and especially in groups – the last thing you want is your pets acting like a freelance Leeroy Jenkins. If Flagship don't want this class to be underused, they'd do well to sort this out.

Meanwhile, items you find are typical adventuring fare. You can dismantle loot to produce raw

engineering materials, and use those to upgrade other items at hub stations. Rare weapons will often feature upgrade slots, depending on the type of damage they deal. Get something good that you can't use? Sell, trade, or dismantle. I'd be stupid to suggest that any of this is original, but it's 3D and you're running around in it. See?

BLADEMASTER WINS

I thought I'd better get a more rounded view of the game before my slim umbilical cord of server time was severed. My usual role-playing preference is to be that insipid 'please like me' class, the priest. No priests here, though – even the tank seems responsible for his own hit points in London. So I grew a pair, and went for the Blademaster.

This is the class I had imagined from reading and talking about *Hellgate*. This is the guy who approaches a bunch of enemies, slings his grapple-hook into the mob, drags one of them out and chops him up quick smart before dealing with the rush of his mates. The one-hit killer. The dual-wielding sod. The bald dude with a goatee. We've been told that the game wouldn't rely on the twitch skills of the traditional FPS, but sometimes – in particular where the enemies are flying – you'll be forced to act quickly, and with some precision, to drag your hovering foes into close range combat. Easier to use a gun, maybe – but the grappling hook feels cooler.

It was all a walkover, until I found my first Hellgate. After about 90 minutes, I found myself in Covent Garden. This is one of the non-random areas, and it looks unexpectedly like the real thing – I tentatively stepped through an 'anomaly', and found myself instantly pummelled upside my helmeted head by a creature twice my height and five times my width.

Kill everyone, *then* take a screenshot. Stupid Log…

> **I'd be stupid to suggest that any of this is original, but it's 3D and you're running around in it. See?**

Condor Studios
Max and Erich Schaefer and David Brevik get together to make games about dungeons.

Blizzard North
Condor is bought by Blizzard and renamed before the release of their first game, *Diablo*.

Flagship
After a mass walkout from Blizzard, the core *Diablo* team begin a new venture.

Mythos
After *Hellgate*, they're making this – another *Diablo*-alike! They frickin' LOVE *Diablo*.

1993   1996   2003   2007

Love, peace and harmony
Very nice, very nice, very nice

It's always nice when developers let you into their world a little bit, and it's always nice to see an in-game homage. In one of *Hellgate's* hub stations, an NPC called Steven Patrick is hanging around, spouting phrases like, "There's panic on the streets of London!" Anyone born since 1980 may have missed out on the Morrissey reference (Steven Patrick being Morrissey's first names), but for this clapped-out Smiths fan, it was a welcome change from little Timmy wittering on about his prosthetic leg.

You're such a homage...

Now *this* is something worth striking over.

The interface, like the locations, will be familiar to many.

I responded with a panic and a swear, but the demon was too clever for my tactic-free flailing. Luckily for me, there's no real penalty for death, unless you want to pay money to be resurrected on the spot. This demon guy was too tough for me; I was going to have to make some friends.

Luckily, everyone's happy to be playing, and are forgiving of the numerous glitches and moments of confusion in this early code. Bits of your avatar disappearing, inventory items duplicating, the limited availability of the server – everything's forgiven because we all felt special. For the same reason, everyone's pretty friendly

and helpful. The nature of the classes mean it's more 'every man for himself' than a fully-fledged MMORPG, but I was lucky enough to team up with people who weren't morons, and it made the game five times more entertaining. Until I dropped down a staircase in the Kingsway Sewers, and aggroed three floors of monsters at once. Needless to say, they had the last laugh.

THE GATE CLOSES
Then, the server stopped. I've tried logging on for three days since, but no luck. I'm left genuinely intrigued – I definitely want to get my characters out of their early stages, and find out how the game develops. Basically, what I'm saying is that I can't wait to review *Hellgate: London*, because I think, despite a good few worries about the overall gameplay and pricing structure, that I'm really going to enjoy it. **PCZ**

WILL PORTER PRESENTS

THIS MONTH:
A BRIGHT NEW DAY

When I was a child I had a dream. Not in the Martin Luther King way. I mean a sleeping-type dream (and for all those cynics out there, I swear I'm not making this up). At the time I was obsessed with my 'educational' BBC Master Compact. *Repton, Imogen, Stryker's Run, Exile,* the compilation discs known among a certain band of ageing gamers as the 'Play It Again Sam' range – all were scattered as floppy disks around my despairing parents' lounge. And then, one dark and starry night, I woke up having *genuinely* dreamt of a concept we now know of as the hard disk drive (although, unbeknownst to me, some sod had invented it 20 years earlier).

I dreamt of storing all my games in one place on a glowing blue screen, and never having a 'clunk, clunk, clunk' disk-read error ever again. I'm telling you this because this is one of two moments when I truly believe I saw into the future. (The other is even more mundane; I won't bore you with it.) I'm also telling you this, though, because it's a (not particularly) neat way of moving on to expressing my sheer, outright joy at having a new games machine with a virgin hard disk drive.

Is there anything more refreshing and invigorating than installing *all* your games on to a fresh, shiny expanse untouched by spyware, malware, broken short-cuts and random .tmp files? It just feels so complete, so clean, so bright and so breezy. It's what I imagine you must feel like the day after a colonic irrigation – light on your feet in the knowledge that you've been given a brief period of outright purity before the inevitable deluge of shit begins to clog everything up once more. And all my games are there: fully patched up, drivers updated and ready to flood my screen with the best graphics money can buy. The only way from here, sadly, is down.

> It just feels so clean… It's what I imagine you must feel like after a colonic irrigation

Will with his virgin PC, just waiting to be despoiled.

"Damn this is boaring Herc. GEDDIT? BOARING?! I kill me…"

I'm all for girl power, love, but you really need to get yourself a razor.

GREEK LOVE

Mythology meets *KOTOR* meets decapitation in *Rise of the Argonauts*

www.codemasters.com/argonauts | ETA: 2008

DO YOU REMEMBER the only good bit in *Troy*? Where Brad Pitt's Achilles comes up against a gigantic Trojan warrior, runs at him, leaps to his side and deftly plunges a dagger into his neck in slow motion? That's exactly the sort of skill and finesse they want to reproduce in *Rise of the Argonauts* – fast-paced, skilful, decapitation-heavy and gritty combat that provides a stark contrast to the luscious primary colours of the fantastical Greek islands on the tour list.

The game is essentially *Knights of the Old Republic* transplanted into a classical setting and with its quasi-turn-based combat removed, and sees you island-hopping around 15 separate locations in the Argo, a ship that'll become more pimped and more crowded the more Grecian problems you sort out. Ultimately, you're after the Golden Fleece to raise your deceased wife from the underworld (Classics

teachers will be harrumphing and sighing righteously at that one), and a selected twosome of mythical heroes will trail around after you (again, *KOTOR*-style) and help you stick pointy metal objects into dryads, minotaurs and gorgons alike. Hercules pulls arms off and shouts a lot, for example; Atalanta stands at a distance and picks off enemies with a bow and arrow; and you happily button-tap your way into brutality.

With a levelling-up system that revolves around your adherence to the ways of the gods and some truly stunning (and extremely gory) boss battles, *Rise of the Argonauts* is well worth keeping an eye on. Our one current caveat is that the vibrant art style and body-ripping violence may go a few slices of juxtaposition too far – but anything that so consciously apes the oft-ignored *KOTOR* model demands attention.

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THIS MONTH:
QUAKE VS UNREAL TOURNAMENT

Dear Andy,
I write to you (as a guardian of pczone.co.uk) in outright desperation. Every single solitary lunch-time you persist in playing *Quake III: Arena* – you giggle, you laugh, you call each other rude names. But my problem is this: *Quake* is shit when compared to *Unreal Tournament*.
Will Porter

Dear Will,
Quake III might not be as pretty or indeed have the variety of *UT*, but its perfectly balanced gameplay is superior in every way. In *Quake III* every weapon can be used to fight to the top (unless there's a BFG around), where as *UT*'s got plenty of guns that are just plain useless. Who uses that stupid bio-rifle? And the rockets are too slow as well.
Andy Robinson

Andy,
Playing deathmatch isn't all about teeth-grinding and adrenaline – I don't like getting pissed off with a game and tearing my hair out. *UT* lets you have a laugh – it's funny, silly and far more open to hijinks. *Quake* is just so po-faced and serious. If it's so good then why has it practically fallen off the gaming radar?
WP

Will,
Because id haven't been supporting it, a mistake they've realised and are correcting with *Quake Zero*. So what you're saying is, you don't like *Quake III* because you're rubbish? That extends to any competitive shooter – and don't pretend *UT* is intended for the mums and casual gamer audience either. Although having said that, it is slower than *Quake*...
AR

Andy,
I am not rubbish – I just don't like having to concentrate so hard that I dribble when I play. *Unreal* is versatile, the universe is engaging, it's more open to mods and it's simply a joy to play. *Quake III* could be entirely rendered in wireframe and no bugger would notice – it's a shell of a game that's waited to be fleshed out for a decade.
WP

Will,
You've just proved me right there; you could put *Quake III* in wireframe graphics and nobody would moan – because it's all about the near-damn-perfect deathmatch gameplay, and not *UT*'s "ker-razy" weapons and spaceship arenas.
AR

Andy,
Bollocks. Did I just totally lose this argument?
WP

FLY MY PRETTIES

Your *Guild Wars* pet and you, and us, *PC ZONE*, the magazine www.guildwars.com

ZHED SHADOWHOOF

VIZU

LONGHAIR YETI

IF YOU ARE extraordinarily lucky, one of a mere thousand readers, then right now you could be clutching in your hand a ticket entitling you to a free *Guild Wars* mini pet. Or, you could be clutching nothing but molecules of air which doesn't entitle you to anything (unless you live in space, where air is currency).

The ultimate goal is gold (the golden goal), which will bag you Vizu, one of the rarest pets ever to have been committed to subroutines in the wonderful world of Guild Wars.

After that comes a special silver, which will net you one of a plethora of other uncommon pets, and finally the slightly more baleful bronze, which will leave you with one of 650 Grawls. They may be more common, these Grawls, but they'll love you till the end.

The instructions for pet retrieval are written on the back of the card, so just follow them to receive your new friend.

THE METAL WILL LIVE ON

Guitar Hero III is coming www.guitarhero.com | ETA: November-ish

WE SOMETIMES LIKE to pretend that we only play PC games, and that if we were to touch an analogue stick we would instantly age and die, leaving nothing but a pile of ashes next to a DualShock pad. Well that's a meaningless, corporate façade – we love PlayStations, and sometimes late at night, we think of the reasons why. *Guitar Hero* is one of those reasons – or at least is used to be, because now it's coming to PC!

Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock should be here shortly, hopefully around the same time as the console release. We should also be seeing the debut of a real-life USB guitar peripheral, although it hasn't been confirmed yet. If those spoons at Activision make us play on our keyboards we'll hate them.

Rock that keyboard!

Be a rock god in your mind.

GO AND GET YOURSELF LOST

And other great *Lost*-related puns
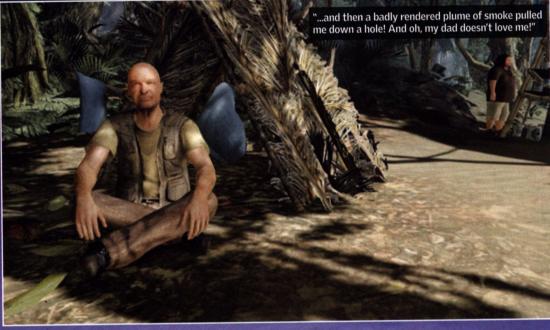
lostgame.com | ETA: Q1 2008

YOU KNOW WHAT the biggest mystery about *Lost* is? How Hurley's stayed so fat. Yeah, we went there. Some information about *Lost: The Video Game* has finally surfaced, and rather surprisingly it's looking like it might not be the steaming pile of polar bear poop one would naturally assume it to be (oh, we're an optimistic bunch here at *Zone*).

You play a survivor of the plane crash that stranded the cast of *Lost* on a mysterious tropical island, and stricken with amnesia, you must uncover the details of your past through a series of flashbacks, which in turn help you to solve problems on the island. It's the same format the TV show takes, and it'll work along the same timeline too – half the fun (but hopefully less) is in seeing where the game and the show match up, well, if you're continuity fans like us.

Lost is all about clever twists, such as random people arbitrarily knowing one other, so no doubt familiar characters and locations will feature in your past too, as well as on the island (Hurley, Jack, Locke, Sawyer, are all milling about, as well as The Others, the Smoke Monster and the Black Rock).
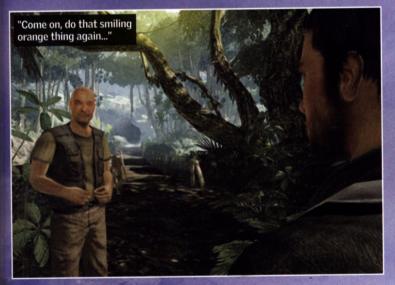
The developers have promised that the game won't reveal any big *Lost* secrets, but instead add new layers to the *Lost* universe, as it's plotted by two of the shows executive producers (the guys who come up with the plot). But for a series which thrives so much on canon, pedantry, and devoted nerds slaving over still frames, we worry that a 'video game' might just be too clumsy a vehicle in which to deliver the subtle narrative of *Lost*. It might, however, explain the Hurley phenomenon.
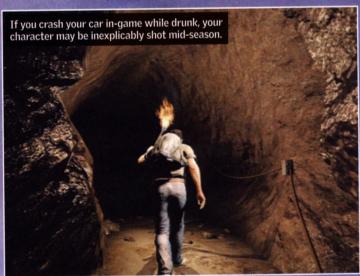
"...and then a badly rendered plume of smoke pulled me down a hole! And oh, my dad doesn't love me!"

These are machines brother.

The number input game may feature.

"Come on, do that smiling orange thing again..."

If you crash your car in-game while drunk, your character may be inexplicably shot mid-season.

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COOK!
WHAT'S YOUR GAME?

Jamie "It's Mr Pants" Sefton grabs the man who stuffs the colourful goodies inside Rare's *Viva Piñata*

Who are ya?

NAME Justin Cook
POSITION Designer
AGE 36
GAMES WORKED ON BEFORE *It's Mr Pants*, *Conker's Bad Fur Day* and *Banjo-Tooie*
FAVOURITE GAMES *Myst*, *American McGee's Alice* and *Medal Of Honor*
FIRST GAME WORKED ON *Perfect Dark*

Q How do you feel about *Viva Piñata* being Rare's first PC release?

A I think it's quite exciting. When we were developing *Viva Piñata* originally, we thought about putting it on the PC, as it's the type of game that suits it, being a sandbox-type game. *Viva Piñata* actually started out as a project on the Pocket PC, and the mobile phone, using the communication aspect – the social side that's so important to the game.

What was the most difficult design aspect of *Viva Piñata*?
I think it was trying to make a game for everyone – we wanted to make it as broad a title as we could, getting new people and the hardcore to play it, and we've had mixed success.

When you're designing a game, you don't have to make it easy for one set of people and exclude others – you can put more stuff into the game, and more levels and hidden treasures that the experts will pick up on. There are also a few nods to our previous games in there – because we do like blowing our own trumpet!

Plus a bit of toilet humour...
Oh yes, almost essential I'd say. If we can get away with it...

Are you including any new content for the PC version?
It's been done on a very short time scale, so the main thing that Climax

are involved in is changing the controls for PC players using a mouse and keyboard.

Why piñatas?
It really came from our concept artists, who wanted to mark our animals out as unique and different from other games with animals in them – something that had never really been seen before.

That then fed back into the gameplay, so we could do certain things because they were piñatas – it was a really organic process.

What's your favourite piñata?
Mine is the Newtgat – it's a vanity thing because I did the voice for it! We try and do as many voices as we can in-house, and all the piñata voices are done by the developing team or the music department.
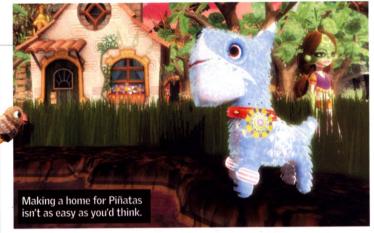
Do you think you can hold on to the traditional British humour that's such a part of Rare games now you're owned by Microsoft?
We try our hardest to do that. One interesting thing is that I think we're the first Microsoft Game Studio to insist on keeping the localisation in UK English – normally it's US English, but we didn't want to change the spellings! Microsoft were happy to do that.

That's great, because there was a lot of criticism in the UK about Joanna in *Perfect Dark Zero* gaining an American accent for example...

Making a home for Piñatas isn't as easy as you'd think.

"We're carrying on that British tradition of pantomime"

Piñatas are flower-phobic.

Dread Pirate Froggie rules this pond.
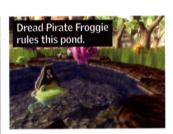
Yeah, er, I'd agree with that. The thing is, when you're working on a game, you're working on it for a long amount of time, so a lot of the humour and the language that we use is just keeping us sane. As far as I see it, we're carrying on that British tradition of pantomime, where you don't have to get all the jokes to enjoy it.

Actually the thing that caused me most trouble near the end – I wrote all the animal descriptions for the journal, including, I suppose you would call it "explicit" description of the beaver character Sweetooth. Right near the end of crunch time I had to change it quite a bit of it, even though we didn't actually use the word "beaver" anywhere at all.

I said I thought I was being quite innocent, but Microsoft said, "No you were quite specific"!

Finally, has the *Viva Piñata* team now moved onto the new *Banjo-Kazooie* game. Will it come to PC?
Some have swapped over – it hasn't been a wholesale move, but quite a few of the team.

As for being a PC game, it would obviously have to fit the platform, which is why *Viva Piñata* moved over: it's so perfect for PC.

We'll probably make a decision when *Banjo-Kazooie* is finished about moving it to PC – the team is pretty much full-on with designing it at the moment, and the last thing on their minds is whether it'll make it to other platforms.

The question you should ask is whether the first two *Banjo* games would've mapped well to PC controls – we found they were a natural fit for consoles really. **PCZ**

No drugs were used in the making of this game. Really.

This poor guy saw his parents hung from a tree and beaten by sticks

JUSTIN COOK
Where he turns for inspiration...

BEDROOM CODERS
Justin is inspired by these designers who made great games with no resources.

COMICS
Justin just loves comics and buys a stack when he visits his local shop.

LIFE
Such as a family beach trip which inspired him to put sandcastles in a game.

PIE AND BOVRIL AT THE READY...

CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER

2008

DEVELOPER Beautiful Game Studios **PUBLISHER** Eidos
WEBSITE www.championshipmanager.co.uk

ETA NOV 2007

Martin Korda hooks up with Beautiful Game Studios for a behind-the-scenes look into the development of *CM08*

THE LOWDOWN

Improved match engine	✓
More accessible *ProZone* tool	✓
Player tendencies	✓
Fun transfer market	✓
Could still be playing catch-up to *FM*	✗

Oldham 2 91 0

View Tactics | Stats | Stats | View Tactics | Ratings
Pitch View | Overview | Match Stats | Action Zones | ProZone

Match Screen - Isometric South West

Overview

5	Attempts On Target	3
3	Attempts Off Target	2
54%	Possession	46%
73%	Pass Completion	78%
84%	Tackle Completion	85%
3	Corners	4
1	Free Kicks	2

OVR | ATT | PAS | SET | DEF | FOU

Match Options

Camera Views

Highlights Filter

Highlight Speed

Match Speed

Pause | Fast

Balance Of Play And Commentary

Mark Crossley couldn't gather the ball cleanly

19:45 Wed 05-09-07

The match engine has received a major under-the-bonnet makeover.

BRACE YOURSELF! IT'S almost time for the annual footy management sim clash between *Championship Manager* and *Football Manager*, which for the past few years has been a pretty one-sided affair thanks to *FM*'s continued dominance of the genre. But for Richard Green, studio manager at Beautiful Game Studios, hope springs eternal with the belief that this year's contest will be far harder to call thanks to *CM08*'s host of new features and improvements.

At the heart of any football management sim is its match engine, an area in which *CM* has always struggled to compete with its illustrious rival. Erratic player behaviour, unconvincing build-up play and top squads playing like the Dog and Duck's pub team were just three of its many shortfalls. So why should this year be any different?

"We've had a lot more people working on the match engine tool and I think it's one of the biggest improvements of *CM08*," explains Richard. "Everything that happens emerges from the stats of each player. That's why previous *CM* games have had some erratic behaviour. It's taken us two or three versions to understand how players move off the ball or do the more intelligent things that a footballer can do."

ProZone is promising to be far more accessible this time around.

CM08, it's in the zone
ProZone, the place to find out where it's all going wrong

CM07 saw the debut of the ProZone match analysis tool. Originally a development debug tool, ProZone morphed into a key gameplay feature that gave you a tactical overview of each match and every player's performance. The only problem was, it was so inaccessible that you usually couldn't be arsed to wade through its ugly reams of data.

This is a problem that BGS has been feverishly working to rectify for CM08 and the developer firmly believes that ProZone will now be a far more streamlined and helpful tool. After every game it'll provide you with the salient match details, such as identifying your midfield's inability to maintain possession as a key factor behind a loss. It's also set to be far more intuitive and informative, allowing you to quickly jump to key match moments, view them and even read clear, concise text descriptions of what went right and what failed.

The ProZone summary gives you a gist of how a match went.

You'll be able to see when the opposition changes its formation.

Icons next to player names show when they've taken a knock.

> ## BGS is so utterly dedicated to footy that it entered two teams into its local five-a-side footy tournament

With ex-footy goalkeeping pro, and West Ham Assistant Manager, Mervyn Day working closely with the team to ensure realism is kept at the forefront of the match engine. And with a new Player Tendencies feature helping players to act in a more realistic manner (some will tend to cut inside more; others drop deep or attack the byline; and still others may even get into compromising situations in Mayfair hotels), Richard is confident that CM08 will provide CM's most realistic match day experience to date.

Throw in revamped player icons that lean, slide and jump and a greater emphasis on in-match tactical changes, and it certainly sounds as though CM08 is heading in the right direction.

ALL OVER THE WORLD
Over the past year, BGS has been busily setting up a revolutionary online tool with which to gather detailed player information from across the globe. Called CMK (Championship Manager Knowledge), this utility allows BGS's ever-expanding legion of statistical compilers to quickly and easily report on every player they watch, whether they're based in Barnsley or Brazil.

"We've got volunteers from all around the world who watch their local teams and then go home to update each player's properties and attributes on CMK," states Richard. "We have dozens of volunteers in dozens of countries and we're always looking to recruit more."

But not just anyone can jump onto CMK and have their say. "You have to be an official volunteer in order to submit stats," explains Richard. "We're strict about who we take on and they have to meet certain criteria, be a certain age and sign a contract with us. We vet how often they watch matches, where they are and which teams they watch."

Of course non-volunteers can have their say. Disagree with a stat, and all you have to do is jump onto the CM website and have your say.

As well as tweaks to the match engine and player stats, BGS – a team so utterly dedicated to football that it's had to enter two teams into its local five-a-side footy tournament – has also been feverishly revamping other areas of the game. The Club Benefactor option remains and is now complemented by a

Player models now lean, lunge, leap and dive

Training has been completely revamped.

refined transfer negotiation system that will have you battling with other teams for player signatures and squabbling over contract minutiae. New training options and a wealth of extra leagues are also set to bolster the number of options at your disposal.

TITLE CONTENDER?
"We want to be trendsetters, we don't want to copy FM or anyone else," states Richard. "We offer something different and it's great for people to have a choice. We see CM08 as being a

thoroughly enjoyable game that anyone who's interested in football can pick up and play, while still being a hardcore simulation of football. I think that makes us unique."
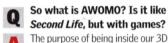
BGS is certainly talking a good game and if CM08's refinements can truly deliver on these claims, we'll be in for the closest CM vs FM contest of all time. The battle for the footy sim championship could be about to be blown wide open. **PCZ**

IN THE SPOTLIGHT:

The man who's in a world of his own

TIM PONTING – THE SMILING FACE OF *A WORLD OF MY OWN*

IN TIMES GONE past Tim Ponting was *PC Zone*'s very first publisher, and he did the hardware pages for a while as well. The circle is now complete though since, after a stint at Activision, he's back in our pages as a part of the *A World of My Own* conglomerate. A virtual world and digital download service combined, it's an ambitious proposition.

AWOMO could become an 3D online gaming society.

Q So what is AWOMO? Is it like *Second Life*, but with games?

A The purpose of being inside our 3D world is to play games with your friends rather than buy virtual genitalia. *AWOMO* is a platform for delivering great games to your PC, that are playable in minutes over a broadband connection – unlike other services, that require the whole thing to be downloaded before playing. You'll be able to visit AWOMO.com, download a free client and begin playing games minutes later – on a subscription basis, pay-as-you-play or a straight purchase. We've licensed the tech to partners to offer their own-branded downloads (Game.co.uk and Virgin Game Store being two examples) and of course, you'll also be able to access games and network with your friends within the 3D virtual world *AWOMO*.

What do you reckon the attraction of having a 3D world surrounding your games is? Will it not be like having to load something twice when you want to play?

Not at all. If you know exactly what you want to play, just dive in using the 2D client. If on the other hand you fire up your PC, spot a friend you want to play head-to-head with – or even just chat with him about whether you're going to get a new game to play together – just dive into *AWOMO 3D* and talk using your headset avatar-to-avatar. Maybe someone else will come and join you and you'll decide to hop into a multiplayer server together by walking into a themed game district. It's up to you.

Are the games the sort of titles that you can get off the shelf or buy on Steam?

Everything from the latest and greatest to casual games your mum would play. And we see a fantastic opportunity for back catalogue titles, especially stuff you can't find in the shops. At the end of the day it depends on licensing agreements with game publishers, but there are 20 of them signed up for the beta so we're confident *AWOMO* will have the widest selection of titles.

What other stuff can you do in *AWOMO* other than play games? Will anything be user-created?

There will be plenty to keep you busy in *AWOMO*. Your avatar will be fully customisable, and there'll be virtual items you can get – stuff like trophies for completing games or winning tournaments, that kind of thing. There will also be plenty to see and do – certain places in the world will have gaming news streamed in for example. Over time, we intend to introduce lots of user generated content, player apartments and so forth.

What would you say to cynics who simply don't see the point in entering a 3D world to play a game?

Don't want to? Don't need to. You can access *AWOMO* in the way that suits you, not us.

tat ZonE

Taking unwanted shit and turning it into multicoloured happy-times for the needy

Some magazine offices smell bad. Huge mounds of unwanted waste pile up beneath desks and on window ledges – sunlight may do its damnedest to reach their depths but, quite frankly, it rarely happens. What luck then that we offload all our crap on our good friends at eBay. Whenever new issues appear at the newsagents we stick four items up on eBay under the tag PCZoners – and we'll put a link up at www.pczone.co.uk too. We just love charity that much.

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

THIS MONTH'S TAT

WORLD IN CONFLICT TRACKSUIT TOP
Large. Makes you look like a Russian gymnast.

WORLD IN CONFLICT FLUFFY HAT
Makes you look like a Russian Alcoholic.

WORLD IN CONFLICT MOUSE MAT
Makes you look like a Russian PC technician.

WORLD IN CONFLICT BAG AND STRAP
Makes you look like a Russian with a bag.

THE TAT BOARD

COMPARE	ITEM TITLE	SOLD FOR	BIDS
	NEWSPAPER REPRINT No bids. Not a sausage. To think we even spent a valuable minute pasting a top hat onto Log's head. Thanks guys.	£0.00	0
	STRANGE BOX A bargain, if this strange box contains a secret that leads you to have a magical adventure. Otherwise, it's not.	£2.20	2
	THE COMPUTER BOOK It looks dull, but is presumably useful. Could have probably done with a photos of sexy ladies holding graphics cards.	£6.00	8
	E3 CAP A valuable family heirloom in the making if ever we've seen one. Even if it is a part of the worst tatzone line-up ever...	£4.70	2

THE GREAT OUTDOORS...
STALKER:
CLEAR SKY

ETA Q1 2008

Will Porter straps a few glowing rocks to his belt and prepares to bullet the blue sky

DEVELOPER GSC Game World **PUBLISHER** TBA **WEBSITE** www.stalker-game.com/clearsky

THE LOWDOWN

Faction war erupts in the Exclusion Zone	✓
Enticing new areas opened up	✓
Advanced A-Life	✓
Dazzling tweaks made to the engine	✓
Potentially a mite less free-form than original?	✗

THE SUN IS setting on the vast, open marshland that constitutes *Clear Sky's* opening stages. It's a huge boggy mess, flooded long ago by a Soviet government far more interested in hydroelectricity than land management. And there you are, crouching in the windswept reeds, taking cover from a military helicopter sweeping overhead, when you spot a bandit patrol coming straight towards you down one of the bog's many narrow gullies – their brains powered by an updated version of *STALKER's* astounding A-Life system.

One is mere feet from your hiding place when, suddenly, an almost invisible creature leaps 10 feet in the air from the growth opposite, grabs the bandit before again leaping away into the rushes to feast on its prey. This might sound fanciful, but anyone who's played *STALKER* knows the unexpected goodness its AI can conjure – this event can and will happen to the fortunate as they play.

When it comes to free-form FPS action, *Far Cry 2* may have stolen the limelight from GSC Game World a smidge, but, while that game promises astounding things, it certainly isn't as brave. The Ubisoft guys are creating a wilderness in *Far Cry 2*, but they can't be arsed with the ecosystem.

Sure, they 'could' program in some lions, cheetahs, tigers and dinosaurs to hunt down those sprightly gazelles, but it isn't the focus of the game, so they're not bothering. *STALKER* though, *STALKER* is all about the interaction – the AI factions battling it out over the map, the creatures fighting each other and dragging carcasses into food stockpiles: the whole mess coming together in an unhealthy splurge of bullets, flesh and teeth.

RAY OF LIGHT

Clear Sky is also a shadow of its former self – but in a good way. Noticeable progress has been made on the original *STALKER*, with some lovely volumetric lighting beaming down through clouds, being separated by foliage, refracted by window panes and generally looking utterly gorgeous in motion. Pedants, meanwhile, will be relieved to discover that the sun will pull a full rotation through the sky now (rather than its former rise to its apex and ensuing unlikely fall back to its morning position).

But it isn't just light that GSC are in hot pursuit of perfecting – darkness is also on the menu. The idea is that as dusk settles and camps of Stalkers light fires, get their guitars out and dig in for the night, the darkness will be far more lifelike, and less easy to dissipate with traditional battery power. It'll be a proper inky blackness, far more frightening than the usual 'gradual dropping of brightness bar'. In fact, wheels are in motion to let you saunter around with a flickering, burning torch held in your left hand and a pistol in your right – with wild animals circling you and backing off from the flames.

A MERC'S LIFE

As we've written previously, *Clear Sky* will allow you to join one of five (out of a total of nine) warring factions and aid them on their ascent to greatness in a forbidden area where an unexpected blowout has essentially redrawn the map, causing no end of territorial bickering. The game's opening will have you (if you choose to) helping out the Clear Sky group – a relatively peaceful bunch suddenly drawn into the fray – to reclaim their marshland digs. Squads of Stalkers can follow your lead as you reclaim scaffold towers poking through the murk, then aid you as you lie atop them with your trusty sniper rifle and attempt to hold off the inevitable AI counter-assaults. Because, remember, this whole thing will be playing out as a part of the revamped A-Life system – if you leave or ignore the conflict, the battle will be endlessly fought to and fro in your absence.

With a less cluttered interface, revamped PDA, rethought gun system and entirely friendlier front-end, GSC are clearly planning on making the new forbidden zone, well... a little less forbidding. Which is honestly no bad thing. I just hope that the way the game is currently being shown off (with a

Bloodsports *Flying high: birds are prey*

Those of a rural bent will be overjoyed to hear that what was previously a hobbyist pursuit – shooting radioactive birds out of the sky – is being encouraged to a far greater extent in *STALKER: Clear Sky*. In fact, eyeing a bird in flight through your iron sights and pulling the trigger will be entirely encouraged through one of the faction's HQ mini-quests.

While we're on the topic, there will be many such mini-quests available at faction hubs, which, on top of the 25 storyline quests, means that the game's 20-hour run-time can once again be joyfully extended by solo adventuring and simple buggering about.

Mmm, gamma particles.

Each faction has its own HQ.

Expect some platforming elements (arf!).

Oblivion Lost
A new squad-based FPS, possibly involving portals to other planets, is announced.

STALKER: Oblivion Lost
Winner of *PCZ*'s worst presentation at E3. What the frig are "animoles"?

STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl
Six years later and GSC Game World's finest creation is here.

STALKER: Clear Sky
GSC say the new *STALKER* will be ready early next year. Fingers and toes crossed...

2001   2003   2007   2008

The colour palette is still set to 'grim'.

"It may be an inhospitable radioactive swamp, but it's *our* inhospitable radioactive swamp."

Anyone remember the 1981 film *Southern Comfort*?

notable helicopter 'boss' battle) isn't indicative of GSC taking a few more steps away from their free-form dream of yesteryear. I sincerely doubt that this will be an issue, as the developers are more than aware that their game's greatest moments came in moments of fearful, unscripted solitude. Still, it's a concern worth noting.

Either way, *STALKER: Clear Sky* is shaping up to top its predecessor with both looks and smarts, which is no mean achievement in itself. **PCZ**

The lighting system is noticeably improved.

"The beauty of living in a toilet is you can go anywhere..."

PCZONE CHARTS

②

MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE

An impressive return to the higher echelons of the charts for this series. Planes seem the way to go...

③

MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR – KINGDOMS

There's enough gameplay in this RTS expansion to replay most of recorded history itself.

④

BIOSHOCK

A bit of a slip down the charts for the Irrational barnstormer. It did better on 360, which is odd since the PC version is heftily tastier.

⑧

TWO WORLDS

It's not awful, but we don't know anyone who would go into a shop and buy it. We're hoping the sequel will be called *Three Worlds*.

"OK guys, I'll just stand guard while you lot get slaughtered."

One crashed spaceship + many aliens = lots of trouble for super-powered folk.

BACK TO THE FRAY

Rikti mean trouble.

City of Heroes continues being heroic in Issue 10. Villains lend a hand.

www.cityofheroes.com | ETA: Out now

IT'S ALWAYS INTERESTING to follow the end-game of MMOs – stretching out the high-end content to reward loyal avatars who've stuck with the game since it was naught but noob-based. So we thought it could well be high-time to don spandex once more and revisit *City of Heroes* – currently following a trick *Anarchy Online* once pulled through a nasty dose of alien infestation with its 10th issue.

There's no doubt that the UK servers aren't as packed as they once were (thus, perhaps, the forced union of hero and villain forces against the common intergalactic enemy) but those still fighting the good fight are being well treated. We, sadly, missed the Rikti's grand bombship entrance or any of their random zone invasions (they'll never

take Atlas Park! Never!) – but got in all manner of scrapes fighting alongside a force called The Vanguard within the Rikti War Zone. It all feels a little like classic Nick Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D.

Building up to an assault on the Rikti mother ship (which is like a large-scale MMO assault on a BF2142 dropship with shields that need knocking out and weak spots that need exploding) and consequent über-monster battle it's proof that the best raids aren't necessarily exclusive to Azeroth.

In the long run up to discovering exactly what Cryptic Studios are conjuring up with Marvel MMO-wise it's gratifying to see such good stuff being pumped into CoH (and CoV), even if the edges of the game have long-since started to wear thin. For justice!

1

HOT SHOTS

KANE & LYNCH: DEAD MEN

DEVELOPER Io Interactive **PUBLISHER** Eidos
WEB www.kaneandlynch.com **ETA** November

KANE & LYNCH continues to impress, and Io Interactive's feverish work on their gritty Freedom Fighters follow-up may well have eased earlier worries *PC ZONE* have with controlling the travelling circus of maniacs that make up Kane and Lynch's entourage. With the developers recently showing off the game's opening level to us – a break-out from the prison van escorting Kane to death row masterminded by his former employers and facilitated by the psychotic Lynch – it's difficult to remain unimpressed by the bodycount and the first tendrils of its deep-running story. It'll be a short game, but the intensity should make up for it.

7

The bigger picture

1 PRETTY BOY
Kane's bust nose is a hint to the fact that his 'rescuers' aren't new best friends – but Io admit that its also a reference to the movie *Chinatown*. So they're don't just rip off Michael Mann.

2 BANK WITHDRAWAL
Having pumped gas into a bank to knock out its occupants, this level has every hallmark you'd expect from a 'bank job gone wrong'. Although Lynch does murder all the hostages.

3 NEED BACK-UP
Levels in *K&L* tend to begin stealthy, before police reinforcements start to turn up at an exponential rate, penning into buildings and surrounded by fuzz...

4 DIMINISHED RESPONSIBILITY
Lynch has episodes of psychosis while you play, and should you be playing over a LAN whoever's playing him will sometimes see innocent pedestrians as gun-toting law enforcers. Charming.

5 HIDING FROM BULLETS
K&L's cover system sees Kane automatically duck behind columns, such as these examples of soon-to-be powdered concrete. This has the potential to irk.

6 UNEXPECTED EX-CON
The game begins with Kane dazed, injured and handcuffed and 20 or hoodlums firing automatic weapons in every direction. It's probably one of the most gun-blazing tutorials we've seen to date.

7 FRESH AIR = BAD
The 'bad men inside' and 'cops outside' dynamic is one you'll come across often, prompting many and varied hopeful charges into areas packed with flying bullets. A well-placed tear gas canister works wonders here.

BLAC

The Epic Tradition

Will Porter wanders through the halls of Epic Games, recounting its history to anyone who looks vaguely interested

INSIDE AN OFFICE the size of my grandparents' bungalow in sunny Raleigh, North Carolina, Epic vice president Mark Rein settles back into a comfy seat. "It all started way back in the stone age," he begins. "You know, Tim Sweeney started the company in his parents' basement in Maryland."

Outside, staff members play on the Epic basketball court, others help themselves to a mountain of saturated fat in a snacking area that would make Elvis blush, and a dummy sits in the echoing halls of a super hi-tech motion capture suite just waiting to be hurled off a ledge for the fiftieth time. Others still beaver away on *Unreal Tournament III*, presumed further iterations of *Gears of War* and engine tech that will have an inordinate number of games we've barely dreamt of plugged into its guts. There's no disputing it, Epic Games have come a long, long way since their original birth as Potomac Computer Systems back in 1991.

JAZZ AND JILL

It began in the days of shareware – a concept that readers of more tender years will be surprised to learn involved giving away a quarter of a game for free on bulletin boards before taking payment for the full game in said parent's basement, before personally boxing everything up and shipping it. Rein himself joined up with Sweeney a year after *ZZT* (see Timeline, right), during work on sexy-dagger lady romp *Jill of the Jungle*, and on his first day snapped up foul-mouthed boy genius Cliff 'CliffyB' Bleszinski – soon-to-be creator of *Jazz Jackrabbit*. Then, borrowing a concept from a group of chaps on the Swedish demo scene who, despite Rein's exhortations, were reluctant to become millionaires, *Epic Pinball* was born in the halls of Epic collaborators Digital Extremes– and the cash really started to roll in.

UT3 – a long way away from ZZT.

Not so much the house that Jack built as the one made by Jill, Jazz and Malcolm.

Epic have come a long way since their birth as Potomac Computer Systems in 1991

The beginnings of *Unreal*, however, were about to take shape. "Around 1995 the game industry was growing a lot and the simple, smaller games we were making then weren't as big sellers as they had been in the past," picks up Epic founder Tim Sweeney. "So we tried to take on a really big project, and started on *Unreal*. It took three and a half long, painful years of learning." It all began with a demo made by Digital Extremes man James Schmaltz, described by Rein as "a cool flying dragon over a *Magic Carpet*-style landscape", and progressed into the sci-fi romp that gamers would love and become lost in from time to time – very much the anti-*Quake* of its day.

For the most part, *Unreal's* development was a disjointed one, with its creators scattered all over the shop – Steve Polge, creator of the famed AI-laden Reaperbot, was famously hired over the phone from a Scottish hotel room after a conversation Rein had with *Grand Theft Auto* creator and

Crackdown supremo Dave Jones. The general policy at the time was that Epic did most of the programming, while DE were kings of content – and the Epic side of things soon led to the acquisition of actual office space in Raleigh, North Carolina. (A town your correspondent once lived in too, and can report is a lot like Milton Keynes but with a greater variety of fried chicken outlets.)

DOUBLE KILLED

Then came the *Unreal Tournament* juggernaut. "*UT* was originally supposed to be an add-on pack for *Unreal*, and when it all started coming together we were saying, 'Y'know? This is too good to be an add-on'," explains Rein before delving into the machinations of changing the publishing deal with GT Interactive (later part of Infogrames, now possibly a morsel of undigested goodness in the withering duodenum of Atari) that meant its announcement came after that of *Quake III: Arena*, amid much eyebrow-raising from the game community. Tim Sweeney goes on to describe

"No said. NO PHOTOS! Damn paparazzi."

What's the bet these are free to play? Those lucky, talented bastards...

Epic's pantry beats Valve's by two types of E-number and five cans of Mountain Dew.

"I guess he's spotted me after all."

1999 UNREAL TOURNAMENT
Given the impact of *UT* on the minds of gamers worldwide, it's hard to imagine a time when it didn't exist. 1999 saw the birth of something special.

2002 UT 2003
The same – only faster, stronger and more productive. A few issues niggled the fans, but still a fine stepping stone to the awe-mongering *UT2004*.

2003 UNREAL II: THE AWAKENING
A drop of the ball, but one fumbled by Legend Entertainment rather than at Epic HQ. Not a terrible game, but a disappointment if ever there was one.

2004 UT 2004
Vehicles, the tremendous Onslaught mode and piles of multi-kill giggles made *UT2004* the best multiplayer package on earth. Silly, stupid endless fun.

2006 GEARS OF WAR
New franchise, new format – *Gears of War* on Xbox 360 was great fun. Would have been nice to get it earlier, but at least we get extra stuff...

2007 UNREAL TOURNAMENT III
Not so much raising the bar as hurling it into the stratosphere – if the whole of *UT3* is half as good as what we've played, you'll be a happy camper indeed.

the "credible job" they did in combating the might of id, but the fact that *UT* vs *Quake* arguments STILL occasionally flare up in the halls of *PC ZONE* is testament to what a clash of the titans took place. For what it's worth my two cents are as follows: *UT* ftw.

Away from the burgeoning *UT* franchise, lessons were soon learnt with *Unreal II: The Awakening* – a sequel developed at far distant Legend Entertainment that was heavy on the boobs 'n' bullets but light on gameplay (whatever certain reviewers said at the time *cough*). A long and troubled development (it was originally supposed to be on the first-gen *Unreal* tech rather than the second) today leaves Mark Rein with a shrug and a shake of the head. "We learnt that we're not that good at managing off-site resources. It's difficult for us to manage and be involved in a project – making sure that

it's the sort of game we'd release ourselves," he explains. "It wasn't a bad game, it just turned out that if we want to do justice to our IP we have to build the game ourselves. We can't just pawn it off on somebody else."

CONSOLIDATION

Rather than have distant development pals beavering away on their games then, Epic brought the mountain to Mohammed. They took the fledgling Scion Studios (led by *America's Army* mastermind Mike Capps) under their wing and set them to work on *Unreal Championship 2* for Xbox, with the intention of rearing them till they could fly the nest, but eventually absorbing them into a glorious whole. More importantly, this was the point at which Epic first had a dedicated team working on the Unreal Engine – helping turn an already ubiquitous engine into

something approaching an industry standard. The reason given by Epic for their success is simple – they approach things with an eye on the long-term as a company like AMD or Intel do – not sitting around until a new generation of machines turns up and then wondering what to do. "For the past couple of years I've been working on early research and development work – prototyping for Unreal Engine 4," explains Tim Sweeney as he describes a leap that he expects to boost both graphical and computing power by the established pattern of a power of 30. "It's a long way off – something that will be tied to the next console generation. Ones shipping around 2011 or 2012."

Epic are important not only because their tech is everywhere and they presumably have a morning ritual where they meet up by their arcade machines and rub each others faces with unused 50 dollar bills, but also because they've been there from the very start. To watch their progress up the ladder is, more than any other company, pretty much to watch PC gaming evolve: from shareware, to a centralised development team and on into the tech-wielding blockbusting giant they are in today's curious world of gaming. With 3D Realms and id in relative hibernation, they're a hoary bear of US games development whose roar has never faded. And whose games are still pretty badass to boot. **PCZ**

Putting the jizz into Jazz
CliffyB explains a brand new correlation between rabbits and shagging

Here's a good anecdote. "A friend of mine went to a furry convention. You know, those people who like to dress up as animals and have sex," explains a wide-eyed Cliff Bleszinski. "It turned out that someone had Jazz and Spaz outfits [Spaz being Jazz's crazy red brother] that they'd made themselves. It occurred to me then that you can make a game that enthrals an entire PC generation, launches your career and helps Epic become the great company that it is – but at the end of the day someone is still going to dress up and have sex as the characters." In that case bring out the Marcus Fenix shoulder-pads and let's get it on then, eh?

He *is* strangely alluring...

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FENIX RISING...

Gears of War

Jamie Sefton's barmy COG army take on the bruising Brumak beast and live to tell the tale of chains of death, and theatre invasions...

DEVELOPER Epic **PUBLISHER** Microsoft **WEBSITE** www.gearsofwar.com **PREVIOUSLY IN** issue 186

THE LOWDOWN

- PC version of the Xbox 360 smash hit ✓
- Brand new single-player mission against the Brumak beast ✓
- Mouse/keyboard and 360 pad support ✓
- New ace King of the Hill multiplayer mode and maps ✓
- Multiplayer is locked into Games For Windows Live ✗

I REEL BACK in my chair, chuckling, as a group LOL breaks the silence in Epic's dimly-lit testing room, twinkling with the LEDs of 14 state-of-the-art games machines. We're playing the *Gears of War* PC's new King of the Hill mode, which has just seen myself and four other players kill each other viciously from behind one after another in a hilarious cartoon chain of death. As the legendary lead designer CliffyB said to me earlier in the day, the new multiplayer game is indeed, "fucking hilarious."

Gears of War has shifted over four million copies on Xbox 360 alone, won countless Game of the Year awards and become one of the most popular online shooters of all time. Until *Gears'* console release this time last year, developer Epic was more famous for *Unreal Tournament* and the all-conquering Unreal Engine 3, used as the de facto modern game engine to build titles such as *BioShock*.

Now the company is preparing to unleash on PC not only the hugely entertaining violent blaster *Unreal Tournament 3* (see page 52) but also *Gears of War* – a massive game event that we're marking with a studio visit and hands-on feature of both games, as well as unique cover art specially created for us lucky buggers here at *PC Zone*.

MONSTER MASH-UP

OK, I'm assuming here that you know what *Gears of War* is about – that it's a third-person action shooter starring Marcus Fenix and his three Coalition of Ordered Governments cohorts taking on the evil Locust menace yada yada yada. So no faffing about here – I wouldn't be the bluff Yorkshire chap that tells it like it is if I continued to blather on round the edges like xa News 24 reporter filling between bulletins. *Gears of War*, a game that was built

My first experience of *Gears* on PC was built around the infamous Brumak beast... "four storeys of teeth and guns" according to CliffyB

Mouse aiming is so much better than the 360 controller.

Gears For Windows Live

Epic speak out on being locked into Games For Windows Live

The fact is that if you want to play *Gears of War*'s juicy co-op and multiplayer modes you'll have to do it through Games For Windows Live. The good news is that you can do it for free using the service's Silver membership (which has no subs fee) and with a *Windows XP* machine, with access to, love or hate 'em, achievement points and Gamertags. "Co-op play for *GOW* is a fundamental feature – we almost think of *Gears* as a co-op game first, so we wanted Silver members to have access to it," confirmed senior producer Rod Fergusson. "But having a simplified platform like Games For Windows Live I think will help with broadening the audience to more mainstream players." However, anybody wanting cross-platform play will remain disappointed: "Under the covers it's Unreal Engine 3, but it's actually a very different version with no interoperability between the two platforms."

Multiplayer is free, but only on Games for Windows Live.

for the Xbox 360 from the ground up, is enormous amounts of fun to play on PC, with a host of new single-player missions, mouse/keyboard support, a new multiplayer mode, three brand new maps and co-op play over Games For Windows Live.

My first experience of *Gears* on PC had to be the new five single-player missions built around the Act V encounter with the infamous Brumak beast, which CliffyB succinctly described as "four storeys of teeth and guns," and was only previously viewed in a brief cutscene on the Xbox 360 game. The new level is unlocked from the beginning, so if you want to jump in and experience the Brumak battle

There's enough gravel in the voices for a large driveway.

immediately from the off, you can. Although be warned, it appears near the end of the game, so if you're new to *Gears*, you will be pwned...

"The Timgad level was always an idea early in development, but ultimately you have to decide how much to bite off and still keep the quality you want," said senior producer Rod Fergusson. "Also you get the biggest bang for the buck with the Brumak. No-one was really asking for new weapons or a new character, they were all like, "I want to fight that thing!"

You begin the level at a drawbridge (apparently based on London Bridge) that shorts out, meaning you and the team have to get power to the sector, just as hordes of Locust enemies descend on the area – including the Brumak – kicking off a manic shootout that eventually splits the four-man COG team in two, taking you and partner Dom into the grim nether-regions below the structure. The Brumak is a

dominating presence throughout the levels, so even though you don't get to take it on until the fifth chapter, the hefty beast will never be too far away, trying to smash its way down through the girders of the bridge to your position below, or cutting off your escape route with collapsing concrete. The new sections have some memorable set-pieces, including my personal favourite – a shootout in an old theatre overrun with sniping enemies in the balcony, scuttling Wretches on the stairs, and an insect-like behemoth Seeder in the main stalls. Still, I'd rather face all that than a Royal Variety Performance.

After a further series of intense firefights with the Locust, you and your team eventually come face-to-face – well, face-to-ankle – with the Brumak, the frightening Rancor-like monster, loaded with multiple gun/rocket launcher installations and controlled by a grunt atop its

"No monsters. Time for a fag break..."

head. I won't reveal any spoilers here how you see off the lumbering piece of alien filth, but suffice to say that taking the Brumak down was an immensely satisfying boss battle, and I felt like the tearful, sobbing Rancor-keeper in *Return of the Jedi* when I walked away from its massive, lifeless corpse.

MOUSE IN THE HOUSE

Gears looks fantastic on PC – crisp, hi-res visuals with great scalability, from mid-range cards to DirectX 10-compatible behemoths that'll

4 vs 4 multiplayer happens through Games for Windows Live.

"The 'don't move and it can't see you' thing is for a T-Rex moron!"

Softly, softly catchee beastie.

Brumak breath. Not nice.

run 1920 x 1200 pixel resolutions and above, for life-like facial animation, smooth movement (caught in the Epic mo-cap studio just around the corner) and beautiful-but-war-torn architecture of a civilisation torn to shreds by a brutal alien invasion.

Epic have also succeeded in making the transition from controller pad to mouse/keyboard really smooth too, giving you the option of traditional keyboard mapping, with the space bar used for the action button for going into cover and running, or using a nifty double-tap Advanced mode – hit W twice quickly and hold down, for example, and Marcus will run forward using that trademark over-the-shoulder

'war reporter' shaky-cam. After a few minutes of the latter combined with mouse-look, I'm confident you'll never need that Xbox 360 pad for Windows. Although the dynamic context-sensitive on-screen prompts will cleverly change from mapped keys to buttons automatically if you do prefer to plug one in. You big girl.

Onto multiplayer, and it was here that I had a thorough thrash of the aforementioned new King of the Hill mode on the three brand new maps specially created for *Gears* on PC by People Can Fly, the Polish developers responsible for the Stakegun-powered shooter Painkiller (see *Painkiller* vs *Gears* box). They are: Courtyard, a city

park with some great high areas to use the awesome Hammer of Dawn orbital laser weapon; Gold Rush, an industrial level set on an emulsion drilling platform at the bottom of a massive crater; and Sanctuary, a very gothic 'non-denominational religious building', with atmospheric, creepy lighting.

"King of the Hill is sort of a spin-off from Annex, where you're taking over territory, but instead of it constantly changing, there's only one bit of territory per round and one team member has to be in that circle to score points," said Fergusson.

"Also you play 'execution rules', so if you snipe someone in the circle from afar, and he goes down injured, he's still in there getting points! You have to move in there and finish him off." This, combined with the fact that Epic have also added instant breaks, so that any opposing team member making a suicide run into the circle can drain it to a neutral status immediately, means you get some hectic, thrilling and very funny matches that can be won or lost right up until the final few nail-biting seconds.

Multiplayer is locked into Games For Windows Live, but before you begin to ready those fingers for forum flaming, it'll be completely free to play. All you have to do is sign up for the Silver package, and the *Gears of War* multiplayer modes are also compatible with *Windows XP* as well as *Vista* – no-one will miss out as with the *Halo 2* and *Shadowrun* debacles (see the Gears For Windows Live box).

All of the new maps are fantastic with King of the Hill four versus four, but Fergusson assured me that every multiplayer map featured in *Gears of War* PC (that include the additional Map Packs 1 & 2) are compatible with other modes – and of course, you'll be able to play with a friend through the entire single-player missions co-operatively. *Gears of War* will also ship with an editor, although don't expect to completely overhaul the game with a new mod, as the utility has been tailored for creating your own multiplayer maps – the PC-from-the-ground-up title *Unreal Tournament III* is Epic's flagship mod-maker.

TOP GEAR

Gears of War is not your typical PC blaster – being a third-person action game described by CliffyB as "the iambic pentameter of shooting" and built specifically for the Xbox 360, the game wears its console heritage on its bloody sleeve.

However, Epic have looked to have created an excellent PC version of *Gears*, complete with new single-player content, new maps, better mouse/keyboard control and free integrated Games For Windows Live co-op and multiplayer across as many different PC configurations as possible. As Epic gear up for development on the game's inevitable sequel, it's great to know that PC owners will finally get to play this killer series, and face-off against the Brumak beast – a fight that Xbox players can only wet dream about. **PCZ**

Marcus Fenix – butch.

DOMINATING...

Unreal Tournament III

The greatest shooter ever to have a hero called Malcolm is back
Jamie Sefton takes on the mighty *UT* bots, and, er, loses...

DEVELOPER Epic PUBLISHER Midway WEBSITE www.unrealtournament3.com PREVIOUSLY IN issue 185

ETA
WHEN IT'S DONE

THE LOWDOWN

It's the new *Unreal Tournament*!	✔
Branching single-player campaign.	✔
Enormous variety of weapons and vehicles.	✔
Unbelievable graphics.	✔
We're still waiting for its release...	✘

GULPING DOWN A cherry vanilla Dr Pepper I snaffled from the gigantic fridge in the Epic common room, I temporarily forget the taste of fizzy Benylin while chatting to producer Jeff Morris.

"Favourite vehicle and weapon? Recently it's been the Axon Hellbender because of the instant shock combo weapon the driver has. It's pretty addictive spewing out this string of shock balls that you can trigger one after another like firecrackers, obliterating any pedestrians in the way!"

When you chat to everyone at Epic involved with *Unreal Tournament III*, one thing is apparent – apart from their love of fizzy American pop – their passion and belief in the game they're making. While I'm here to play the latest build of *UT3*, it's clear that the development team are working like Tarydium miners to get the game done as soon as possible – and while as we go to press this looks like being November, Epic's ebullient vice president Mark Rein reiterated to me once again that it'll only be released "when it's done."

NECRIS RISING

Unreal Tournament III is set on the planet Taryd, a distant planet from Earth ruled by three competing corporations: the cyberpunk Liandri, who actually created the tournament; the military Axon who specialize in beefy hardware; and the oriental Izanagi, who nab bits of technology from the Axon to continue their war effort.

In the new single-player Campaign mode, you start out playing on behalf of the latter, along with three AI-controlled team-mates (or co-op with a multiplayer drop in/drop out ability) to take revenge on the person/s who killed your dear old dad.

You use a cool 3D globe map to choose which branching missions you take on next, à la *Command & Conquer*,

"I've got your fla-a-ag, nah-nah-na-nah-naa!"

"Oi! Move your arm. You're ruining our photo!"

and your choices will affect how the story arc progresses.

"Your choices can have huge ramifications down the line in who and where your future fights take place," says Morris. "The special abilities bestowed by completing optional objectives really helps flesh out the universe, and it's great fun to pull these rule breakers out when confronted with near impossible odds." So, for example, you could find yourself taking part in a mission to steal a rival faction's vehicle – if you succeed, that vehicle will be unlocked for future missions.

Partway through the campaign, the game's fourth faction – the alien Necris – invade the planet, intent on stealing precious Tarydium, infecting everywhere with the goopy nanoblack substance that runs through their veins, unleashing the reptilian race the Krall, and basically turning the human race into an exciting new kind of pie filling. This is where the choices really do have a major impact – do you stem the Necris invasion, or perhaps use it as an opportunity to increase your faction's territory at the expense of the others?

KILL OR BE KILLED

These Machiavellian machinations are all well and good, but let's face it, however good the single-player mode is, *UT* has always been about the multiplayer – the

▶

"Hey! Your momma is a rusty Skoda, ya metal freak!"

> **The first match resulted in an artificial intelligence 10-kill win in under two minutes**

You don't need a pilot's licence in *UT3*.

"Lush" doesn't describe *UT3*'s graphics.

Mod For It

Unreal Tournament III to ship with full mod editor

Budding level designers will be chomping at the bit to get their hands on Epic's forthcoming mod editor for *UT3* – a fully-blown product that as well as allowing you to make new maps, lets you have full creative freedom to make your own complete mod. Previous incarnations of the *UT* mod editor have created everything from side-scrolling platformers, to racing games, machinima movies, football simulations and beyond. Mark Rein confirmed that Epic are currently preparing another Make Something Unreal contest that last time spawned numerous winners, including *Red Orchestra*, that has now gone onto enjoy a full commercial release through Steam. Start preparing your ideas for the next blockbuster mod now...

UT3 will be heaven for modders.

first time I sniped someone's face off and heard the guttural tones of "Headshot!", accompanied by a screen awash with bloody bouncing gibs back in 1999, I was hooked. *UT3* has six types of slaughter: Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch, Capture The Flag, Vehicle CTF, Duel (one on one!), and Warfare: the brand new mode that's a hectic mix of Onslaught and Assault.

I immediately hurled myself into a Deathmatch against five other bots on Average difficulty – one up from easy and five away from the frightening Inhuman setting – on an Izanagi Corporation map known as Shangri La, complete with pagodas, statues, lanterns, waterfalls and atmospheric cobwebs strewn across indoor levels.

While Morris assured me that there was still balancing to do on the bots, the first match resulted in an artificial intelligence 10-kill win in under two minutes, with me languishing in fourth place. Programming legend Steve Polge, he of the *Quake* "Reaperbot" back in the mid-90s, is again the man behind the bot tech in *UT3* and it really shows – these are some of the best, most realistic AI opponents I've fought.

In one memorable encounter, I was about to gain a point from a sneaky

New games, new frags.

I've always preferred *Unreal Tournament*'s weapons to *Quake*'s – the variety available and the fact that each has an inventive alternative fire, means that just one weapon at any time can give you a handful of satisfying kills. *UT3* has added new weapons and tweaked others, with a list that includes the Stinger Minigun, Link Gun, AVRiL, Impact Hammer, Enforcers and Redeemer.

However, *UT3* has also introduced some deployables, such as the much-talked-about Statis Field. This is a block of slowed-down time that you can place on an area, fire a rocket into it, walk around the other side and watch as it ever-so slowly launches towards you.

Useless you think? Well, if you deployed it on top of an enemy attempting to grab your flag in a team CTF match, for example, it slows them down allowing you and any teammates to riddle the bullet-time cube with bullets, and laugh as the unfortunate soul inside fails to outrun them...

"Fifty alien warships. One gun. Even odds."

There isn't any other shooter on the radar that has UT3's breadth of weapons, vehicles and level design

"Things like the hoverboard and the Necris Darkwalker really shook up our vehicle-focused gametypes," chips in Morris, as I hitch my hoverboard onto a fast-moving Manta hover-vehicle, "which is precisely what we wanted to do."

The huge variety of vehicles in *UT3* is staggering – every time I get hands-on with a new build of the game, I manage to get behind the wheel of something new, alien and very, very dangerous.

This time I managed to have a blast with the Scavenger – a spider vehicle that can roll itself into a ball, or spin its razor-sharp legs around dicing any nearby enemies into thin moussaka-style slices – and the Nightshade, a cloaking mini-tank with a link beam weapon.

You'll have heard about the Necris Dark Walker before – a terrifying *War of the Worlds* tripod that fires a devastating death ray that incinerates all in its path – but another equally awesome vehicle is the Axon Leviathan, a monster tank that can actually hold up to five players, with each on a different weapon, or when deployed, launch a very powerful cannon blast that can destroy other vehicles with one hit.

WAR AT THE MALL

Suddenly, a gaggle of games testers (or is that a geek of games testers?) pours into the Epic games room and I'm joined for an *Unreal Tournament III* multiplayer session with the new Warfare mode on the Market District map, made up of tight urban areas, multi-leveled walkways and wide-open areas ideal for sniping.

Warfare involves two teams battling for the domination of a number of nodes on a map, by either destroying them or by grabbing and delivering a glowing orb into their shimmering faces. Link a few nodes together and you can then destroy the enemy's core, winning the match.

With two nodes active at any time, the result is a fast and incredibly frantic team game, with action concentrated around certain areas, and blood, gibs, plasma and body parts scattering in every direction.

As a new multiplayer mode, Warfare works incredibly well – the balancing of the weapons and vehicles makes for some tight matches, and there are tons of useful tips that you discover as you play, such as the fact you can heal your team's nodes with the Link Gun's alternate fire. If the timer ticks down to zero and no-one has destroyed the other team's core, the game goes into Overtime, and it becomes a tense fight to the death – with much angry smashing of a mouse into the desk if you're eliminated (or maybe that's just me...)

We can't be more excited about *Unreal Tournament III* – there really isn't any other shooter on the radar that has the game's breadth and depth of weapons, vehicles and level design, all enveloped in truly mesmerizing 60fps graphics that ache to be displayed on a giant monitor.

If Epic's long-awaited new formula *Unreal Tournament* continues to fizz and delight the tastebuds (unlike the new Dr Pepper) as much as this playtest, we're all in for a rather satisfying and loud gaming burp. **PCZ**
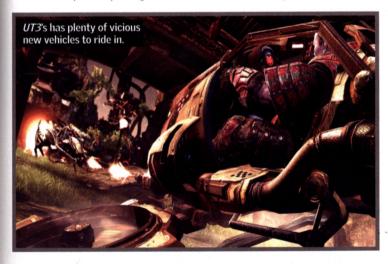
"from behind" frag of a weak opponent, when a rival bot came from a side corridor and blatantly stole my kill.

In team games, you can also issue voice commands to bots using a microphone headset, which means that the more socially-inept can still enjoy pure multiplayer deathmatches without having to interact with other humans.

Other levels I briefly skirmished included an ice level called Biohazard, a classic UT indoor techno level named Sentinel packed with industrial pipes and enclosed spaces screaming for

the Flak Cannon, and a level set on the Necris home planet of Absalom, with ominous religious buildings and nanoblack pumping through the outskirts.

On the larger levels, the newly-added hoverboard (yes that's right – bits of *UT3* have been inspired by *Back to the Future II!)* becomes essential to zip about when there are no vehicles to commandeer, although it's worth remembering that you can't fire weapons while riding, and you take considerable damage if hit.

UT3's has plenty of vicious new vehicles to ride in.

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REVIEWS

Our verdict on the latest PC games

In deep water
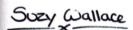
IT'S BEEN A relaxing month for me. A trip to Cyprus pulled me away from work at the beginning of the month and whilst I was out there I decided to do my scuba diving qualification. Idling about beneath the waves was like a breath of fresh air (or a lungful of salty water to be correct) and to top it off, I still had four days when I got home before returning to work.

Keeping in the spirit of all things fishy, I used that time to dive into *BioShock*. Luckily, it was one of the few games that I managed to avoid watching too much of in the office so I experienced the whole glut of emotions on my journey to the bottom of the ocean: wonder, amazement and awe. Then my scuba diving training kicked in and I began devising technically correct plasmids. Thankfully, I only came up with the bends and nitrogen narcosis before the game sucked me back in. Though, lobbing a nitrogen narcosis plasmid at a Big Daddy and watching him stumble about as if pissed before boogying in the corner could prove quite amusing. Do you hear me Irrational/2K Boston?

Suzy Wallace
x

Suzy Wallace, reviews editor

Must Buys! ✓

PC ZONE Classics are our highest award, with only the best games deemed worthy of the honour. These are our personal top tips for sheer gaming excellence...

BioShock   World in Conflict   Oblivion

62 ▶ TEAM FORTRESS 2

Was Valve's team shooter worth the wait?

The PC ZONE Awards

CLASSIC · CLASSIC
PCZONE
CLASSIC · CLASSIC

RECOMMENDED
PCZONE
RECOMMENDED

DUMP

CLASSIC (90%+)
The best games ever. If you're lucky enough to see one, stop and buy it.

RECOMMENDED (75-89%)
Pretty, pretty, pretty. Any game that turns *ZONE*'s head is worthy of your love.

DUMP (0-19%)
Don't shirk your duty – it's the only responsible thing to do to a game like this.

AND THE REST

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

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

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

The PC ZONE gaming machine

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

ALSO REVIEWED

PCZONE SWEARS...

- To only review code signed off by the publishers AND the developers
- To give you our honest opinion. We're gamers. We love games. And we hate bad ones. Just like you
- To tell you if a company refuses to send a game to us before it's on sale. There's always a reason
- To hang up on companies who say that 79% isn't a good score. What do they know?
- To listen to you if you think we've got something wrong. Email us at letters@pczone.co.uk

Zombies still crawl out of cess pools.

As usual, you're going to need a bigger gun.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO

Risking foot and mouth and other horrors of nature, *Steve Hogarty* goes rural in Dr Freeman's latest jaunt

DEVELOPER Valve
PUBLISHER Valve/EA
WEBSITE orange.half-life2.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £26.99 (as part of *The Orange Box*)

RECOMMENDED PCZONE RECOMMENDED

SO WHO LIKES antlions? And I mean really likes antlions, enough to marry one. If this sounds like you, and you'd marry an antlion, then you'll love the first section of *Episode Two*.

If you're like anybody else, and had had enough of the limitless, hive-minded cannon fodder by the end of *Half-Life 2*, then you won't. Valve have decided to have the mute Gordon Freeman spelunk a giant antlion cave, full of not just antlions, but a new sort of antlion. A wholly more annoying sort of antlion which vomits acid on you, not unlike the original game's bullsquids. It's not an entirely bad section of the game, but it whiffs of Xen, and leaves you feeling deflated – especially after the stunning intro showing off the Source engine's newfound ability to explode really large things.

For the game to be touted as taking a new direction towards grand, open vistas and rolling, beforested hills, only to send you almost immediately down a mine shaft, is disappointing. To have you fighting old enemies and arbitrarily picking up all your old weapons (which you somehow lost again, and were somehow scattered along the first level again), well, it feels like we're retreading old ground, fighting fights we fought in *Half-Life 2* and *Episode One*. The polish is beginning to dull, and with minimal plot progression throughout the whole game, the appeal of episodic instalments of *Half-Life 2* is waning.

One more paragraph of moaning before I start to explain the 82% at the end of the review. Take *Far Cry*'s beach, *Oblivion*'s sewer exit, *Half-Life 2*'s town square – each of these are moments in which the visual spectacle of a large area impresses the player. *Episode Two* just doesn't seem to have that single moment of impact, despite having the perfect environment for it. The Source engine, despite a whole host of tweaks and upgrades, occasionally looks tired (especially indoors), and it's becoming harder and harder to avoid a seen-it-all-before sense of cynicism. An expansion is still an expansion, even if you call it an episode – and there's not much expansion happening here.

BUT WAIT

That said, I should mention that this is still *Half-Life 2*, and *Half-Life 2* is incurably fantastic. This episode will undoubtedly end up in your collection anyway (rendering moot this entire review), being tied to both *Team Fortress 2* and *Portal* (reviewed elsewhere in this issue), and it does pick up after the antlion caves. Gordon and Alyx find themselves en route to White Forest, the last homely house this side of City 17, and temporary residence of all of our old scientist pals. Kleiner and Vance are working on a method of sending Alyx's code (the one she stole from the exploding Citadel) in order to close the super-portal above the ruined city and prevent Combine reinforcements from arriving.

With them is a new Black Mesa alumnus, Dr. Magnusson, whose

AT A GLANCE...

The *Half-Life* saga rages onwards towards White Forest, a countryside haven where science lives.

Minimum system requirements:
1.7GHz processor, 512MB RAM, a DirectX 8-compatible graphics card and 5GB of hard drive space.

HOW IT STACKS

HALF-LIFE 2	97%
HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE	91%
HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO	82%

It's becoming harder to avoid a seen-it-all-before sense of cynicism

Skimming stones with the grav gun just doesn't have the same romance...

Of all the things to take cover behind...

Alyx got the looks, but her sister got the glowing red eye.

> The hunter is easily the coolest enemy ever to have graced the *Half-Life* universe – not counting that giant crab with the ball-sack

High achiever

Steam takes another cue from our console friends

Xbox Live Achievements, those meaningless trophies signifying some hilarious or improbable feat achieved in a game, is something that we PC enjoyers have always been slightly jealous of. "Why is it," we murmur to our friends in the middle of the night, when we're having sleepovers, "that Johnny Xbox over there gets a nice note on his profile saying he's killed 50 zombies with lawnmower, when we get nothing?"

The awards are just for fun, but they do add some replayability.

Well, using the power of Steam, Valve has rolled out its own Achievements service for *Episode Two* (as well as *Team Fortress 2* and *Portal*), which gives you kudos for things like running down enemies in you car. We're hoping this gets added retrospectively to old Valve games (and *Peggle*) too – we can't see any reason why not.

Truly mind-expanding stuff.

HEALTH 96   SUIT 30   AMMO 5   26

hard-nosed attitude, ego-driven personality, and innate dislike and thinly veiled jealousy of Gordon Freeman provides the best lines in the episode. The addition of the abrasive character adds a nice sense of balance to the cast, which was becoming a bit too 'Super Best Friend Scientists', as well as injecting some humour into proceedings. Watching how characters look at you with a sense of apologetic despair as Magnusson derides you is what Valve's facial animation technology was built for. And who could've predicted we'd finally capture an expression of reluctant gratitude in a collection of emotionless polygons?

HELP, I NEED SOMEBODY

One of the best tricks of *Episode One* was its Alyx/Gordon personal relationship-driven co-operative play (you know, when she'd make zombie noises at you in the dark). This returns in *Episode Two*, with the bulk of the game, post-caves, resembling a coming-of-age road trip across the landscape. Not only are you teamed up with Alyx in this adrenaline- (and petrol) fuelled race across

"Keep your filthy hands *off* my daughter, Freeman!"

the countryside, encountering various Combine and rebel forces along the way, but for some of the pre-cave japes you're accompanied by none other than a friendly vortigaunt chum. He intones monotonously, occasionally joking about Freeman's various traits (such as his knack for falling down holes, about which the vortigaunt notes, "no pit would be complete without a Freeman climbing out of it."). He also shoots lightning out of his hands, which is useful.

It's a lessened sense of camaraderie than in *Episode One*, as there's no feeling of impending doom (whereas in the previous instalment you were inside the soon-to-be-exploding Citadel), but companions continue to be extremely useful – if not in a practical sense then in some atmospheric, social sense. It might be stretching Gordon's bleak muteness to breaking point, but it's refreshing, and informative (given our host's dislike of soliloquies), to have Alyx narrating next to you too.

On the road to White City you'll come across the face of *Episode Two* – the hunter. Tripedal killing machines, carrying that

Nothing worse than a hunter with a head cold.

Your vortigaunt friend packs a punch.

Another reason why we love Valve (let us count the ways) is their increasingly brilliant developers' commentary. Upon beating the game, *Episode Two* becomes infested by commentary nodes, each one a beacon of intellect in a world of wondrous enjoyment. You'll sprint towards these spinning Valve-orange speech bubbles, oases of insight they are, to uncover previously unknown facts about the universe, the engine, and the characters. We love hearing the voice actors talk about their characters, and we love hearing the designers talk about their designs. You'll want to play through the game again, immediately after finishing it. It's a brilliant feature that proves once again Valve's ability to lead the industry. More developer commentaries please.

Why hasn't anyone thought of this before?

The Source engine's done wonders for Alyx's complexion.

If we're going to go down this route of episodic gaming, we need snappier releases and far stronger plotlines

distinctly cyber-organic Combine style, they take some beating before they finally fall down. You'll meet them in a variety of situations – while under siege in a house, or during later sections where they accompany their older, ganglier brothers, the striders. The muscle car, which is in your possession for the majority of the game, can be used to great effect here: with enough velocity you'll snap their legs and send their funny faces slamming into the bonnet with a sickening thud and a terrified whimper. Their own needles stick into surfaces shortly before exploding, giving you that one crucial moment to dodge away. It's easily the coolest enemy ever to have graced the *Half-Life* universe – not counting that giant crab with the ball-sack.

If reprogrammed, he'd make a great playmate for DØg.

"Hmm, your chicken dance still needs work, Izzy."

FREE RANGE
The closing sections of the episode, which will take you about seven hours to reach, present something that many were expecting to feature throughout – a truly open area, with no specific route to take. True, the rest of the game is a shade less linear than levels of old, but this final arena allows you to take part in a colossal battle between rebels and striders, who are being accompanied by squads of hunters. You've got to locate these striders, pick up a Strider Buster, take care of the hunters (ideally by driving over them, but miss and crash and they'll be all over you with their spikes and lean, muscular bodies), before finally gravity gunning the sticky bomb onto the strider's body. Then it takes a single shot to blow the thing to gloopy shreds. It's one of the greatest parts of the *Half-Life* saga so far, and there's more to it than I'd care to ruin for you right now.

UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES
The mysteries of "that bloke in the suit who keeps following you" also begin to unravel ever so slightly in *Episode Two* (something that pleases me immensely), but at the same time more questions are created than answered. Links to *Portal* are made (similarly, links to *Half-Life* are made in *Portal*), and then followed by imaginary ellipses and question marks. Main characters constantly get interrupted as they try to reveal plot secrets too; what we wouldn't give for an "Excuse me Alyx, can't you see we were in the middle of a conversation?" button. Honestly.

If *Episode Two* was meant to recapture our imaginations and make us fall madly in love with the *Half-Life* universe again after a frankly brand-damaging hiatus, it's failed. If it was meant to extend the experience of *Half-Life 2* and *Episode One* with a bit more of the same good stuff, then it's quite naturally succeeded. I can't overstate that *Episode Two* contains some of the series' greatest moments, and that it's still every bit as charming as its predecessors, but it's so similar to *Half-Life 2* that despite what Valve might believe, we're really left wanting something a bit fresher. If Valve are going to go down this route of episodic gaming (something that seems increasingly unlikely) we need snappier releases and far stronger plotlines too. *Episode Three* won't have *TF2* and *Portal* to keep it afloat.

Saying that, *Episode Two* ends, unexpectedly, with one of *Half-Life's* most thrilling scenes, setting up wonderfully for the next act, which promises to be a good 'un. Let's just hope we won't have to wait another year and a half to play it. **PCZ**

Your healer (or 'healee') is displayed on screen.

Healer: [EED]DaggerPanda
ÜberCharge: 27%

Don't put a turret there!

A corridor o' gibs.

DEVELOPER Valve
PUBLISHER Valve/EA
WEBSITE orange.half-life2.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £26.99 (as part of *The Orange Box*)

TEAM FORTRESS 2

Steve Hogarty sheds no tears for concussion grenades, and neither should you

IF THERE EVER was a game that looks like it could pipe up and dance around your desktop, this is it. *Team Fortress 2* is bright, colourful, animated, and populated by wonderful caricatures of men who wouldn't look out of place in a Pixar movie. Its sumptuous, vibrant visuals are so pleasing to the eye, that we wish our eyes had tiny mouths so that we could eat *Team Fortress 2* like a cake. These screenshots are a testament to beauty.

And it's a functional sort of beauty too. Valve have been patting themselves on the back about their character design, how every class is immediately identifiable by their outline, and how teams colours are instantly recognisable in any situation. Every back-pat is deserved – it just works.

Ten years in the making, *Team Fortress 2* shows its pedigree in every ounce of content. We absolutely adore this game and haven't had as much fun in an online shooter for as long as we can remember.

CLASSES IN SESSION

Two teams, nine classes, and six maps. The two teams are the Red (Reliable Excavation Demolition) team, and the Blu (Builders League United) team. The six maps are a mixture of re-envisioned, adapted versions of classic maps, and entirely new ones – mainly control point capturing affairs, with 2Fort providing a Capture The Flag scenario. The nine classes are what make the game so appealing. Through their wildly differing methods of play, the classes cast wide the net of accessibility – there's something for everyone here, of all skill levels.

Let's start with the Medic, one of the easiest characters to get to grips with. This rubber-gloved German is armed with a syringe gun, a bone saw, and a medi-gun. The path to becoming a successful Medic comes not only through healing hurt friends, but by forming a symbiotic relationship with another player. This is achieved using your medi-gun, which fires a constant and unending stream of health into whomever it remains pointed at. Find a Heavy (ideally),

I never forget a face, SteveK.

Stayed zoomed in for increased damage.

CLASSIC · CLASSIC
PCZONE

AT A GLANCE...
Online shooters meet Warner Bros' cartoons in an old school epic, 10 years in the making.

Minimum system requirements:
1.7GHz processor, 512MB RAM, and a DirectX 8 video card.

HOW IT STACKS

TEAM FORTRESS 2	93%
ET: QUAKE WARS	87%
DOD: SOURCE	79%

2Fort's bridge now sports a roof, which Scouts can run across.

Taunting at the gates – a national pastime.

Now that's a well-placed turret.

and follow him around, providing him with an shield of extra health. While he protects you with his giant mini-gun.

Your medi-gun charges as it heals, reaching, in a matter of minutes, a state in which right-clicking turns yourself and your partner invulnerable for 10 seconds – as long as you maintain a line-of-sight link with to him with your medi-gun. Using this 'übercharge', you become an unstoppable force, causing immovable objects (and the enemy team) to tremble with fear'. Over the course of rounds, the ties of medi-guns

create a deep and unbreakable bond between two players. Onlookers may ask "Why are you always healing VonStilton? Why don't you just marry him?" To which one might respond, "It's a Medic thing."

ROLE CALL

So that's just one example of how *Team Fortress 2*'s classes amplify,

Agent 47 eat your heart out.

Sadly, straw isn't flammable.

(Voice) 55-Hellfirelnc: MEDICI

+ driller

CONTR

200

The screen looks far less cluttered in widescreen.

Suze just can't stop dispensing. She's a dispense maniac.

Dispenser built by PCZ_Sooze

Shiny red = never be dead.

Turrets are a gem of animation.

Persistence is futile
No not 'futile', what's that word... oh yes, 'brilliant'

Persistent stats aren't a radical feature of online shooters – they've been cropping up in games since *Battlefield 2* and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* – but up until now they've been plastered on to some obscure stats website far away from everything you care about. Steam, if you haven't noticed, has taken on many changes lately, becoming more personal and community-driven than ever before. *Team Fortress 2* plays to this new ideology, by placing all of your stats and achievements on your Steam page, making it easy to see who's good and who's proper balls. It's just like Xbox Live, but on *Windows*! Like some sort of Live service on *Windows*!

We hate Seregrail.

supplement and counteract one another. The Heavy himself is a straightforward slow tank class with a huge gun. The Scout meanwhile is an extremely nimble outrunner with a nifty double-jump ability, making him difficult to shoot, impossible to chase and almost impervious to backstabbing Spies. The Pyro has a flamethrower (and is, as far as we can tell, a bit pants), the Sniper can charge his shot by staying zoomed in, and the Demoman can lob pipe bombs over walls and protect control points with remotely detonated sticky bombs. The Soldier is the basic class, armed with a rocket launcher best aimed at the floor to inflict splash damage upon enemies. But the remaining classes are considerably more thought-out.

The Engineer is an old favourite, and returns in much the same capacity as ever. He can build a defensive sentry gun, which attacks any enemies who come within range. He can build a dispenser, which dishes out health and ammo to your teammates. And he can build a teleporter, to move slow players such as Heavies to the frontline quickly. The placement of such things is crucial, and a good Engineer will know the

ideal locations in which to position sentries. By picking up ammo and prying guns from the icy grips of corpses, you can procure material with which to upgrade your turret, from a piddly peashooter to a rocket-launching behemoth. Stats in the corner of the screen let you know the status of your deployables. Getting word of your meticulously built and upgraded sentry killing three enemies in a row while you're scavenging for material is a great feeling – and one that no other class provides.
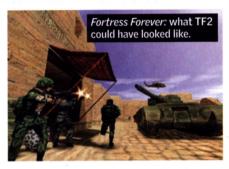
SPYING GAME

Countering the Engineer is the Spy, who can turn invisible for a few moments at a time, as well as disguise himself as the enemy.

"Medic, you are behind me. Right?"

Humble beginnings

Thank God this didn't come out seven years ago

Team Fortress 2 has had a wild and meandering development, occasionally not being what it was, and then being what it was going to be, before finally becoming what it is (although that didn't happen until after they said it wasn't what it originally was about to become). At one point, before the game disappeared for six years, we were told to expect *Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms*, a far more militaristic jobbie, with large open maps and airdrops and all sorts of things that to just think of them makes us laugh and scoff and love *Team Fortress 2* all the more. Thank you Valve for not releasing *Brotherhood of Arms*, and thank you for keeping *Team Fortress 2* in the oven for so long. It is toasty and warm, and it smells delicious.

Fortress Forever: what TF2 could have looked like.

Yes it's dramatic, but flamethrowers are still crap.

Team Fortress 2 succeeds in creating a sense of community (albeit one built on hate and disgust)

Snipers are unforgiving bastards.

This allows Spies access to enemy deployables, and using his Electro-Sapper he can easily wreck them, as long as no Engineer spots him do it. Spies can also backstab enemies, killing them instantly, and earning them rude nicknames. All of this treachery throws a wonderful sense of paranoia into every map, especially as Spies take on the name of a random member of the enemy team when disguised. So if you spot somebody disguised as you, or two folks with the same name, then the Spy's game is up. Similarly, as Spies lose their disguise by firing their weapon, so your suspicion should be aroused by a teammate not firing on the enemy, or if he runs the wrong way. Shoot that bastard.
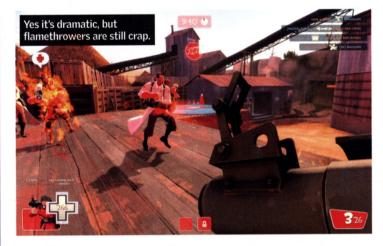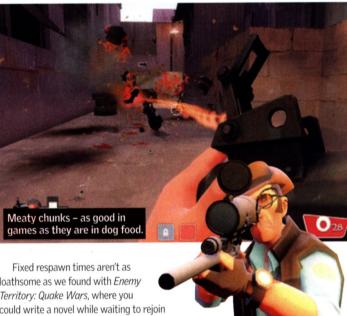
Team Fortress 2 succeeds in creating meaningful relationships between players, initially through its death cam, which pans, Tarantino-style, to freeze-frame on the person who killed you. Past this, the game announces to all when you're being dominated by a certain player, and conversely when you're dominating a player (which not only marks you out as a rival, but affords you extra points for continuing your vendetta). It generates a sense of community (albeit one built on hate and distrust), as do the game's persistent stats and achievements, which can be viewed on a player's Steam Community profile.

CRY SOME MORE

All of these things come together to create something innately enjoyable: the perfect integration of classes, the character and level design, the visuals, and the level of accessibility. There are some issues we expect to be smoothed out in the future.

Meaty chunks – as good in games as they are in dog food.

Fixed respawn times aren't as loathsome as we found with *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, where you could write a novel while waiting to rejoin the game, but they're restrictive when there are only a handful of players on a server. The limited number of maps might perturb some, but the six arenas on offer are more than enough to last. Besides, Valve will be releasing more maps in time, for free.

Fans who've been playing *Team Fortress* for a decade will no doubt find something else they think is wrong, but there's no denying the greatness here. *Team Fortress 2* is comparatively simple, in terms of its peers, while all of its complexity is kept within the parameters of the easily understandable and distinct classes. And the graphics are proper good. Also, it's funny – rack up a certain number of consecutive kills, or achieve something extraordinary, and your character will bleat out a snap of uncommon dialogue. And you can taunt your enemy, with unique animations for every weapon in every class. This game is stylish.

Team Fortress 2 has managed to meet our expectations and then do a bit more. It's the best third of *The Orange Box*, next to *Portal*. Now if you don't mind, we're off to "cry some more". That's a quote from the game. Go play it, so that you may appreciate my forced referential humour. **PCZ**

If only the rocket said ACME on it.

mattwood
Healing: driller

PCZONE

Graphics **Lovely – this is what pretty is**
Sound **So many voices, so well done**
Multiplayer **Of course, but no bots!**

✔ Really, really fun
✔ Not intimidating or confusing
✔ The changes to the Medic class
✔ The style and look of the thing
✖ Pyro still 'meh'

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Fortress forever

Let's see what's thro[ugh] the round window.

The most intriguing, original, and brilliant part of *The Orange Box*

It's all about the boxes.

PORTAL

Steve Hogarty hops through a door in the floor

DEVELOPER Valve
PUBLISHER Valve /EA
WEBSITE www.
aperturescience.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £26.99
(as part of The Orange Box)

RECOMMENDED PC ZONE RECOMMENDED

AT A GLANCE...

Genius first-person puzzler, utilising portals to fall through things and then fall out of things, and make things fall on other things.

Minimum system requirements:
1.7GHz processor, 512MB RAM, DirectX 8 graphics card, and 5GB of hard drive space

HOW IT STACKS

PORTAL	**89%**	
NARBACULAR DROP	**N/A**	
PREY	**86%**	

WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT that the runt of *The Orange Box* litter, having been pecked half to death by it's more established and anticipated franchise siblings, would have fallen from the nest not into the waiting jaws of a metaphor, but into a glowing hole in the ground, popping out of a nearby wall, and into our hearts. *Portal* is anything but just a pleasing bonus for *The Orange Box*, and is instead the most intriguing, original, and surprisingly brilliant part of the triptych.

The game is made up of a series of unexplained tests through the clinical confines of the Aperture Science Enrichment Centre, each one a puzzle to be solved using the eponymous portals. Throughout, the sarcastic, disembodied voice of GLaDOS – an experiment-controlling AI routine - guides you methodically from test to test, with promises of eventual cake should you be victorious.

A sea of holes...

Is this cake a devious and imaginary incentive? Is it chocolate? These are just two of the questions you'll no doubt be asking. I already know the answers, and as silly as it sounds, *Portal* is a game just as much about its story and narrative structure as its puzzle aspects. It's far more interesting than *Episode Two*, and as it all sits in one easily digestible four-hour long lump of gaming, you'll beat it in one gloriously fun sitting.

MOMENTOUS

The portals work thusly. You can have two open at any given time, one blue and one red. These portals are fired from your portal gun using either the left or right-mouse button, and are placed against walls, floors and ceilings. As you enter one, you exit the other. If you fall through one, you'll fly out the other with the same momentum. If you slap a portal high up on a wall, leap into a deep pit, and place one underneath your feet just before you hit the ground, you'll come screaming out of the wall at high speed, propelling yourself across the room. That, as you might have guessed, is the solution to one of the tests. One of the simpler tests.

The genius of *Portal*'s level design means that every test serves a function, educating you about the initially non-intuitive portals. It's like learning to juggle. The first tests are short, and don't allow you access to the

Padded walls means no portals for you.

Holes dug by little moles.

The military carelessly left some gun turrets behind to add to your woes.

Looks dull. Actually hilarious.

Spherical toilet bowl? This must be the future!

Frickin' laser beams

portal gun at all (in essence having you tossing a ball between your hands) and only when you've got a basic understanding of the concepts of portals will it let you go on.

Later, this is helped by the obscurity of some of the puzzles – they'll keep you on the brink of realising the solution for just long enough. You're never frustrated by a test, and equally you're never immediately aware of what you should be doing – a brilliant piece of design work.

Beating the game gives you access to the deeply insightful developer's commentary – easily the best and most enjoyable

implementation of Valve's dev-com tech so far – along with a timed Challenge mode, and six Advanced tests (which are re-jigged versions of previous tests, somewhat disappointingly). Having just spent four hours in *Portal* heaven, this extra content feels somewhat lacking. You'll work your way through the Advanced levels, but there's an overbearing feeling that there should be a massive series of extra puzzles to play about with. *Narbacular Drop*, the developer's previous title, was fed a constant stream of extra content by modders, and we can only hope that *Portal* generates the same.

LOL

And it's hilarious. Perhaps the funniest and most well-written (and well-voiced) dialogue you'll come across in a game. You wouldn't think to look at it, with its sobering minimalist design and cold, almost medical atmosphere, but it has more laugh-out-loud

moments than anything else I've played. GLaDOS's sassy personality makes every line a delight, and the brief appearance of a silent, yet reassuringly weighty companion halfway through (no, not Gordon Freeman) provides just a touch of emotional drama.

Once you reach the game's inarguably joyous ending, *Portal*'s tagline suddenly rings true. It might be short, but it's a wonderful learning experience, forcing you to rethink rather base concepts of the first-person genre. Also, it makes *Prey*'s static wormholes look really shit. Now, it seems, we're thinking with portals. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics	Source Engine's always a pleasure
Sound	A beefy feast for the ears
Multiplayer	No, sadly

✓ Very clever
✓ Very funny
✓ Amazing fun
✓ The ending
✗ Leaves you wanting more

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But I still want my cake

The German AA guns claim another victim.

COMPANY OF HEROES: OPPOSING FRONTS

Martin Korda gets tanked up in this stand-alone expansion for Relic's epic WWII RTS

RECOMMENDED PCZONE RECOMMENDED

Too often your troops refuse to take cover when you order them to.

An experimental weapon or a ruptured fuel tank?

DEVELOPER Relic
PUBLISHER THQ
WEBSITE www.companyofheroesgame.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £29.99

COMPANY OF HEROES was one of those games that utterly exceeded our expectations. Not only did it manage to recreate the visceral brutality of warfare, it also succeeded in striking that ever-elusive balance between accessibility and strategy.

Few other RTS games have ever managed to pull off this tricky equilibrium with such aplomb, let alone managed to also seamlessly integrate a moving plot that explores the human element of war: the fears, the hopes and the insecurities of man. So, a tall order to follow, I'm sure you'll agree. Which brings us nicely onto this stand-alone expansion pack that despite its best efforts, never quite manages to scale the same lofty heights as its predecessor.

JOLLY GOOD

Opposing Fronts introduces two new factions into the WWII meat grinder, each starring in its own campaign. First up are

the plucky Brits, a defensively stout faction specialising in anti-tank weapons and artillery, and possessing some of the game's most versatile foot soldiers. These grunts have the ability to build battlefield emplacements (such as machine-gun nests and mortar emplacements) and call in additional support, which is spewed onto the war zone from passing gliders. Brit officers are also no slouches, possessing valiant abilities such as Heroic Charge, which counters suppression and maximises the amount of damage nearby troops inflict on the enemy.

The Brit campaign revolves around the liberation of Caen and the push towards Berlin that took place after the D-Day landings. While I could spend hours boring you with copious historical nuggets about the operation, I'll spare you the blurb and just say that this battle saw the clash between two giant tank regiments, which roughly translates to loads of explosions, carnage and debris. However, rather than degenerating into a predictable slug fest, the Caen campaign requires careful use of combined arms and all the tricks you learnt from the original game if you're going to

Heavy armour plays a prominent role in the game.

Take out clumps of infantry with mortar barrages.

AT A GLANCE...

A stand-alone expansion pack for *Company of Heroes* featuring two new factions (German and British), each with its own campaign.

Minimum system requirements:
2GHz processor, 512MB RAM (1GB for Vista), and a 64MB graphics card (with Pixel Shader 1.1 support).

HOW IT STACKS

COMPANY OF HEROES	93%
COMPANY OF HEROES: OPPOSING FRONTS	82%
THEATRE OF WAR	71%

> **The German campaign's story is thoughtful and convincing, revolving around two brothers battling as part of the Panzer Elite**

make the push towards Berlin anything more than a limp shove.

TALLY HO!

Sadly the compelling plot and clever character development of *Company of Heroes'* cut scenes seem to have been replaced here by hackneyed stereotypes. Brit grunts sound like a bunch of cockney twats whose sole purpose in life appears to be to blurt out as many expletives as possible before getting killed. Meanwhile, the mustachioed generals are wet-lipped toffs whose main participation in the war seems to revolve around staring down binoculars while watching the proletariat getting their noses blown off, then retiring to their tents for cream tea and Etonian reacharounds.

Luckily, the German campaign's story is rather more thoughtful and convincing, revolving around two brothers battling as part of the Panzer Elite against the allies during Operation Market Garden. The German faction is quite simply the most awesome faction yet seen in the *Company of Heroes* series. A wrecking ball on caterpillar tracks, a division of Nazi armour can trounce almost any enemy force in a head-on

confrontation, while staying highly mobile. This is offset by the German's relatively small infantry squads, which can be easily overpowered by the larger Allied platoons.

EXPANDING

But what are these two campaigns actually like to play, hmm? Well, here's the thing. You see while *Opposing Fronts* clearly likes to make a big fanfare about not being an expansion pack, it has that distinctive, unmistakable whiff associated with an add-on. While many of its missions are brutal, tactical and fairly entertaining (especially the larger tank battles) they're also all too often overly linear and predictably designed, leading to a lack of freedom that reduces potential replayability.

Attack German tanks from behind to stand any chance against them.

The Brit campaign focuses on the liberation of Caen.

The Brits are experts in building battlefield emplacements.

Overkill perhaps?

Once the big guns roll out, levels turn into brutal, armoured cauldrons of destruction

Literally everything can be blown to pieces.

Gridlock.

Another quibble lies with the lack of proactive attacks from the opposition, which often feels somewhat stagnant: a problem given that *Opposing Fronts* is a territory-based game. With your foes rarely venturing out of their comfort zones to retake the territory you've just prized out of their grasp, victory can sometimes feel rather inevitable.

Conversely, some other missions are too taxing. Throw in some suspect pathfinding and the fact that troops often ignore your commands to take cover, instead opting to run into the open and get pumped full of lead, and you're left with an unbalanced and unpolished experience.

DRY YOUR EYES, MATE
Now, before you get depressed, let me assure you that there's still more than

enough here to recommend. The two factions are adequately varied and require their own unique style of play, with the Brits often bunkering down and pounding the enemy from a distance and the Germans employing Blitzkrieg tactics as they roll incessantly towards their foes in heavy, yet mobile armour divisions.

Also the sheer number of heavy weapons at your disposal is almost worth the entry fee alone. Once the big guns roll out, levels turn into brutal, armoured cauldrons of destruction in which men, debris and dirt fill the air in a thick blanket of death.

There is also an abundance of desperate defensive missions, during which you must fend off seemingly impossible odds and experience more tension-filled buttock-clenching moments than having a bout of

Music to our ears
And the nominations for best musical score are...

It's often an overlooked area of game reviews, but it's incredible how much a rousing and well-composed musical score can help elevate a game's atmosphere. *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts* picks up where its predecessor left off, massaging your eardrums with the type of orchestral tunes that would have John 'Star Wars' Williams purring in delight. Throw in some brutal sound effects that'll dislodge your earwax and some top quality (though somewhat stereotypical for the Brits) acting and you're left with a hugely cinematic experience that pulls your emotions in more directions than a lump of warm putty in the hands of a fidgety toddler.

This musical score would make John Williams proud.

That'll teach you to get pissed while on duty.

The physics are exceptional.

"You wouldn't happen to know the way to Düsseldorf?"

We're going to need more men. Lots more men.

diarrhoea on an express train that lacks a working toilet.

Some of *Opposing Front*'s missions are persistent, meaning that the destruction you inflict on the scenery carries over to the next mission (if it's based on the same patch of land), although admittedly these can sometimes feel like developmental short cuts rather than masterstrokes of innovation (eg just another section of the previous level getting opened up).

Opposing Fronts provides a decent, frenetic and entertaining stopgap between the original game and the inevitable sequel. While it has its fair share of hiccups, the game's fundamental quality manages to shine through and ensure that there's plenty of entertainment to be had.
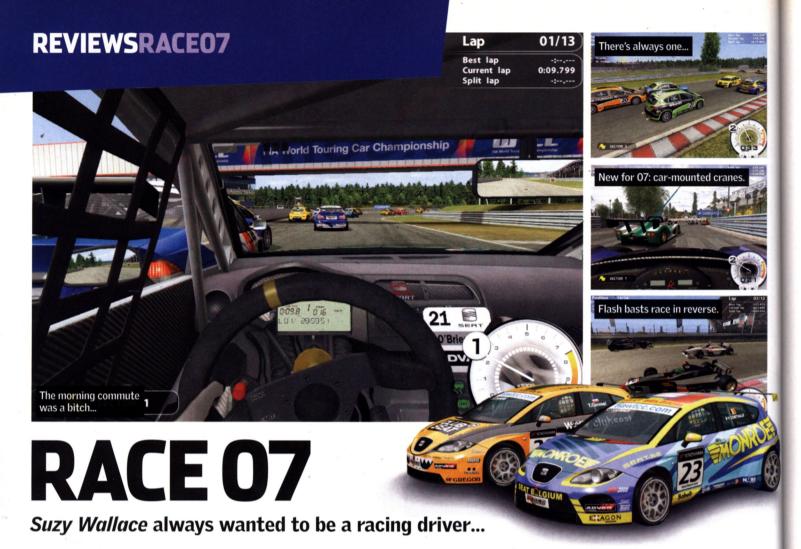
If you approach it with eyes wide open and take it for what it is – a stand-alone expansion pack rather than the next step forward for the series – you'll find two solid campaigns, a host of new units and some fun multiplayer sessions lying in wait to ambush your spare time.

If you approach it with eyes closed however, you'll never get the thing installed in the first place. And that really would be a bloody silly thing to do. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics	Hugely detailed, especially with DirectX 10
Sound	John Williams-esque
Multiplayer	Territory-based skirmish

✅ Core gameplay mechanics make for great RTS experience
✅ Two new, distinctly different factions
✅ Two new campaigns
✅ Stunning soundtrack
❌ Somewhat unpolished
❌ Weak plot and some clichéd characters

82

Dutiful if not quite heroic

There is no good...

Lap 01/13
Best lap -:--.---
Current lap 0:09.799
Split lap -:--.---

There's always one...

New for 07: car-mounted cranes.

Flash basts race in reverse.

The morning commute was a bitch... 1

RACE 07

Suzy Wallace always wanted to be a racing driver...

DEVELOPER SimBin
PUBLISHER Atari
WEBSITE
www.race-game.org/race07
ETA Out now
PRICE £34.99

RECOMMENDED PCZONE RECOMMENDED

AT A GLANCE...

Good entry-point simulation racer offering two years of accurate WTCC racing, alongside a range of other vehicles.

Minimum system requirements:
1.7GHz processor, 512MB RAM and a 128MB graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

GTR 2	92%
RACE 07	79%
RACE	72%

Simbin's last effort, *RACE*, left me feeling a little underwhelmed. After the heady heights of *GTR 2*, the lesser-powered vehicles and lack of graphical polish felt like a bit of a step back for the developers.

But true to the World Touring Car Championship series which it emulates, SimBin are back with this year's version. Complete with the new drivers and tracks featured in this year's WTCC, there's also a whole garage of extra content bolted on. On top of last year's WTCC '87 and Mini racing, the recent Caterham expansion has been included and these are joined by brand new Formula 3000, Formula BMW and Radicals as well. Just think of SimBin as the motorsport version of the Borg.

The driving model is as solid as ever, providing a realistic simulation of the racing included. That means accurate understeer and oversteer, along with practice laps, the twin-race format and men at the side of the track waving flags to alert you of crashes up ahead.

The new cars bring a welcome dose of speed to matters, with the Radicals' great audio and rapid acceleration being especially worthy of a mention. The Formula cars, as expected, provide oodles of grip, as long as you're gentle with the throttle coming out of corners and as anyone who's driven an open-wheeled car can testify, they're also fragile, needing a gentle touch to make it to the finish line.

On the track front, the line-up's been supplemented by Zandvoort, Pau, Porto, Anderstorp and Vara, the latter being a fictional track based around SimBin's offices. Zandvoort offers some wonderfully curvy lines, Anderstorp features the mother of all straights and Pau is perhaps the best addition, offering some picturesque and excellent street racing action. However, Porto strangely proved to be a real system killer, with the frame rate slowing to pitiful levels and things like gear and speed indicators disappearing altogether. Improvements have been made to returning tracks too, with Macau and Brands Hatch looking noticeably better this time around.

NO CONSOLE RIVAL

Despite a general improvement in terms of graphics, there's still something lacking. Things sometimes feel a little flat thanks to the lighting effects, the cars throw really jagged shadows and when I got a puncture, the car just sunk into the ground on that side, rather than actually deflating the tyre. Of course, none of it's game-breaking stuff, but I still can't help but feel a smidgeon of disappointment that driving games on PC don't measure up to the lushness of the next-gen consoles yet.
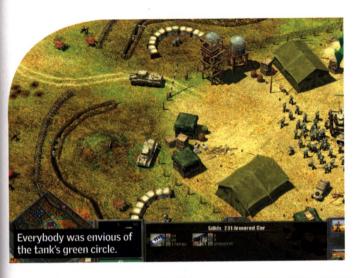
The bags of extra content mean that the game's a bargain for anyone who didn't pick up last year's offering. In fact, the Radicals are so much fun to drive,

they're nearly worth the entry price alone. There are plenty of nice touches such as a target frame rate value which can adjust your settings automatically, 3D crowds, a rather fantastic helmet camera and extra multiplayer options.

Unfortunately, things like the AI, graphics and crash damage, as well as the Porto track, still could do with some more tweaking. And in comparison to its big brother *GTR 2*, it's still most definitely a lap or two behind. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics	Sharp but a little flat
Sound	Well-implemented car sounds
Multiplayer	Up to 24 car carnage

✓ Varied selection of racing
✓ Radicals are great fun to drive
✓ Graphics and tracks are improved
✗ Porto track really badly optimised
✗ Needs a little more polish

79

Racing ahead

Everybody was envious of the tank's green circle.

BLITZKRIEG II: LIBERATION

The war, eet iz oveur!

DEVELOPER Nival / CDV
PUBLISHER Ascaron
WEBSITE www.blitzkrieg2.de
ETA Out now
PRICE £19.99

Min system req:
2GHz processor, 512MB RAM and a 128MB graphics card.

Demolish local council flats.

The tank toilet queue was always long.

BATTLEFIELD 1942 WAS a very good game. In some ways it still is a very good game, certainly worthy of a run-through on a rainy autumn night should you still own a copy and be after some low-spec WWII action.

You might even be tempted to download a mod or two, like *Desert Combat*, or *Battlefield 1918*. But would you be mad enough to buy an expansion pack, in this day and age? I guess that depends.

Good games live on long past their sell-by date because for a core group of people, underneath the dusty textures and worn mechanics, exists a very solid basis for future adventures. The *Blitzkrieg* games (purists still harp on about the first game being superior) have been expanded more than anyone thought possible, and whilst new features are hard to

discern when given *Supreme Commander* and *Company of Heroes* are the yardsticks, there's enough here to keep WWII buffs away from their Airfix kits and *Commando* comics.

For the rest, eager to get their mitts on add-ons for the above mentioned flavour-of-the-week RTS poster boys, this may as well be a review of a banana for all the evidence of innovation there is.

I might be tempted to download this on a quiet night, I might even play it for an hour or two – but pay for it? Nah mate!

Richie Shoemaker

This is the pinnacle of the action.

PCZONE 45

Please, let this be ended

Those crazy, crazy townspeople just love their marketplace.

The towns are remarkably detailed.

Buildings are seemingly inspired by Disney.

"So are you guys sextuplets, or is inbreeding just rampant in the town?"

THE SETTLERS: RISE OF AN EMPIRE

Jon Blyth holds a festival to celebrate his rise to Baroness

DEVELOPER Blue Byte
PUBLISHER Ubisoft
WEBSITE
thesettlers.uk.ubi.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £29.99

WE'VE ALL BUILT a few towns in our lives. Some of us build towns in order to test our resource management skills. Other people build towns called Bumland and drop Godzilla-esque monsters on the Fire Department. I'm one of the latter, but the sixth *Settlers* game coaxed me effortlessly into the first camp. Mostly because you can't name your towns – the best I got was to call my Queen Reg Grundy.

You'll know the score, because it's an old one; deal with two primary resources (wood and stone, for buildings) then place the right buildings in the right places and watch as an automated economy appears. Meanwhile, you send your knight (and soldiers) around like a boiled-down RTS, doing errands for friendly – but cheeky – neighbours and fighting off a few Vikings.

Hats off to the difficulty curve; the game has a great way of guiding you into,

rather than telling you to do things. I'm not suggesting that giving fewer hints as the game progresses is a thrilling new innovation in tutorial technology – just that *Rise of an Empire* balances respect for the player with a subtle guiding nudge in the back. It's like spooning with your teacher, without the ethical problems and the angry mobs.

There's an earnest mirthlessness that's positively Teutonic, but the game works all the better for it. *The Settlers* is a gentle, hypnotising affair that might break the spell with too much whimsical bluster.

As it stands, the game's main problem is that it's not really doing anything ground-breaking – although how you'd re-invent the town-building genre is beyond me – and that you're occasionally left with nothing much to do but click on your storeroom. The upside of idleness is that you're not bogged down in micro-management, or hundreds of sliders.

The line I like best from the press blurb is this. It demands to know "is your division of labour, and supply of goods efficient enough to be able to defeat your opponent?" If that sentence has you thumping the table and bellowing "Yes, yes my labour network is bloody efficient, and I'll manage you to the brink of madness," then this is the game for you. **PCZ**

AT A GLANCE...

The latest medieval town-builder from the series that's been managing its resources pretty well for over a decade.

Minimum system requirements:
1.8GHz processor, 512MB RAM and a 64MB graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

CIVCITY: ROME	81%
THE SETTLERS: R.O.A.E.	74%
THE SETTLERS V	65%

"Well I'm not going to step aside until you do. So there!"

"I really hate hide-and-seek."

PCZONE

Graphics	Pretty and functional
Sound	Decent voice acting, many lutes
Multiplayer	Definitely

- ✓ Perfect difficulty curve
- ✓ More calming than it is annoying
- ✓ Classic gameplay, brought up to date
- ✗ Not bringing much new to the banquet
- ✗ Could do with a fast-forward button at times

74

Good knight

Jericho gives you the chance to violate Marilyn Manson's rotting corpse.

CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO

Once he's seen one river of shit, blood and vomit
Will Porter **wonders if he's seen them all...**

DEVELOPER Mercury Steam
PUBLISHER Codemasters
WEBSITE
www.codemasters.com/jericho
ETA 26th October
PRICE £29.99

AT A GLANCE...

A team of strangely powered muscle-men and breast-ladies enter a hell vortex and shoot a whole ton of stuff into bloody chunks. If it bleeds, you can kill it.

Minimum system requirements:
2.4GHz processor, 1GB RAM and a 128MB graphics card with Pixel Shader 3.0 support.

HOW IT STACKS

GRAW 2	80%
REPUBLIC COMMANDO	80%
CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO	68%

A **STRANGE THING** happened to me today. I caught myself actually getting a bit bored by disembowelling a dripping, leather-clad corpse. Who, honestly, could ever tire of disembowelling dripping, leather-clad corpses? One of my few joys in life had become muted – suddenly rendered uncomfortably numb. The culprit (as you may have guessed) was *Jericho* – its novel setting and gameplay sadly overcast by the oft-bemoaned sins of the 'not quite there' first-person shooter.

At its base the game is undeniable fun to play – entering the torrid plains of the Pyxis and navigating its time slices with your team of seven gun-toting spectral specialists is pretty engaging. Each character is markedly different, and when you turn into a departed spirit with the ability to skip into willing brains (like Patrick Swayze does with Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*), running the gamut of their various abilities is like running

free in a Woolworths pick n' mix counter of carnage. Billie the sexy witch self-harms for example (all of the female cast are seemingly plucked from SuicideGirls.com) and can trap enemies in a tangly blood clot, and later a fiery blood clot; meanwhile, Abigail Black the sexy sniper can steer bullets through enemies and knock her way through rickety things with telekinesis.

Tabulate into this the dual-fire on each character and there's a lot of blood that can be spilt in many and varied different ways.

The fearsome Zippo demon.

There's bullet-time in there, an overpowered cobra fire-demon... all the fun of the fair.

START THE FANS

This, though, is where the variety fun bus grinds towards a halt. *Jericho* is built a little like the *Crystal Maze* – four time zones linked to each other containing a smattering of friendly characters and various moments of frustration in which you can't work out how you're supposed to get out of an enclosed space. Barker's effort has an intriguing, and slightly more shocking, build-up to its sudden close than everyone being awarded a corporate ballooning weekend – but the simile still stands. Problem is, whereas a game like *Painkiller* showed how traversing hellish timezones can provide various artistic avenues for a developer, *Jericho*'s World War II, Roman, Medieval and Sumerian zones are so similar, so linear and so repetitive you just want to scream. What's more the same creatures

Clowns are creepy enough when they aren't dead.

"I shall wave my sword at you until you go away!"

Despite the fleshy, goo-ey visuals it doesn't contain a considerable amount of material that genuinely shocks

crop up throughout the game again and again – and, bosses aside, new villains conjured up by the era create so similar to what has gone before that you barely notice the change. As for the squad commands – they're essentially window dressing. After a while I forgot they were even there.

Barker fans too will be disappointed to hear that the game isn't scary in the least, and despite the fleshy, goo-ey visuals it doesn't contain a considerable amount of material that genuinely shocks. There are a lot of references to shit, blood, piss and death (and I suppose you are re-massacring medieval children for a little while) but that skin-crawling feeling you get when watching a good horror movie is notable in its absence. Playing *Manhunt* genuinely unsettled me, watching the Stroggification process in *Quake IV*

WWII or Sumer? There's no way to tell.

made me wince – *Jericho* didn't cause me to blink. To be fair, the game tries very, very hard to be grown-up – one character is a lesbian, while the Catholic priest dabbles in sexual relations every now and then for example. Unfortunately a lot of this is

lost in sweary dialogue that lovingly rolls in cliché in the way that my dad's old sheepdog would with horse shit. Still, it can't be denied that the *Jericho* gang are an intriguing bunch.

"...20 paces, turn and fire!"

BEST IN SMALL DOSES
In the run-up to *Jericho*'s release I really enjoyed playing the odd levels drip-fed from Codemasters' mothership – because in limited doses the action is quite a laugh and oddly refreshing. But it repeats and repeats and repeats: the same action is stretched out over the entire eight-odd hours and it doesn't take long for you to realise exactly why everyone you meet in the Pyxis is so grumpy about being trapped there for eternity. It's a shame because the game does a lot of things right – for one not automatically feeling like the console port you originally suspect it to be.

On top of this an engaging health/ regeneration system, a rollicking musical score, decent voice-acting and an excellent range of weapons. All highly commendable, but simply lost in the ever undulating rolls of your eyes as familiar pustule-ridden explosive cultists rise from knee-deep blood for what seems like the hundredth-time. Which is a huge, huge shame. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics Icky, gooey, bloody, nice
Sound Great music, great sound effects
Multiplayer Surprisingly none

✓ Great concept, high production values
✓ Characters and powers varied and fun
✗ Not all that shocking
✗ 'Rinse and repeat' gameplay
✗ Charm doesn't last the whole game

68

Trapped in limbo

Especially not with your stunted, unnatural voice, pal.
I'd better not disturb him...

AURA 2: THE SACRED RINGS
Shaman you, if you buy it.

DEVELOPER Streko-Graphics
PUBLISHER The Adventure Company
WEBSITE www.aura2game.com
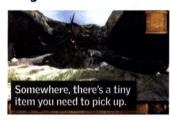**ETA** Out now
PRICE £19.99

Min system req:
1.2GHz processor, 128MB RAM and a 64MB graphics card.

Somewhere, there's a tiny item you need to pick up.

I **MUST HAVE** sat through *Aura 2*'s unskippable, geological epoch-spanning intro twenty times now, yet I'm positively none the wiser as to what it's all about. My theory is that between the four flickering frames of sub-*Lord of the Rings* imagery and its near-rhythmic warblings about 'artifacts', it's a cunning ploy by The Adventure Company to make buyers more suggestible by entrancing them in an hypnotic fugue.

"Pleeaseee", the voice offers. "Don't take our game back to the shops. OK, so this kind of first-person point-and-clicker is as in fashion as Gary Glitter these days. And we're really sorry about the offensively bad voice acting, but hey, budgets are a terrible mistress, right?"

"Hold up, bub", comes the reply.

"There aren't enough swinging watches in the world to make this turkey look like a peacock. Take the charade you're playing on our readers: for instance, the 3D environments might look good in pictures, but that's because that's all they are static pictures. Movement, therefore, is morbidly confusing and not helped by an unresponsive cursor that only highlights interactive items (of which there are few) when you're pressing your face into it."

"Ulp."

And even if we could remember the intro, it's doubtful it would help the game make sense. It's just a dull succession of (il)logic puzzles, stuck on an ugly, incomprehensible hub. For this interminable *Myst* knock-off, it's no sale.

Alex Dale

Look, the game's always this dull, alright?

PCZONE
31
Sacrificial

Yet another NHL simulator, yet more of the same.

RECOMMENDED PCZONE

NHL 08
Pucker up love

DEVELOPER EA
PUBLISHER EA Sports
WEBSITE www.easports.com/nhl08
ETA Out now
PRICE £34.99

Min system req:
1.0GHz processor, 256MB RAM and a 64MB graphics card.

"Right, I want a clean fight..."

As ever, players are based on the real thing.

BEFORE COMING TO *NHL 08*, I thought I'd make a little graph with a pen and paper. Lining up the 13 previous games (Powerplay '98 excluded), I noticed an obvious trend. Between '99 and 2001, the scores dropped from consistent 90s, to hovering around the 80 mark. Without reading the 2001 review, I'm fairly certain that this is the time that the jokes about EA's annual churning out of sports titles began.

So I'm going to avoid that subject, apart from maybe one snide comment at the end, and say that *NHL 08* is one of the better games from the consistently recommended franchise. Providing you're playing with a gamepad, the controls are intuitive and intelligent, with the right nubbin giving you some control over the hockey stick. With play geared towards that, using the keyboard is much less fun. There's a strong managerial element that you can happily ignore, there's simple online play, and best of all, the soundtrack features the brilliant Datarock.

Using my graph, I drew a line of best fit through the scatter diagram of NHL scores. It predicted that this year's game would score 77. Shows what maths knows, this is a full three percent better than that, marred mainly by a shitty menu system.

Maybe by the year 2040 my group sample will be big enough for more reliable predictions. Jesus, that's a depressing thought.

Jon Blyth

"The ref's not looking. Stick 'im!"

PCZONE
80
Get the puck out of here

Would you like some bizarre antediluvian sexism with that?

FAST FOOD EMPIRE

Bad taste...

DEVELOPER Fuzzyeyes Studio
PUBLISHER G2 Games
WEBSITE snipurl.com/1qnc2
ETA Out now
PRICE £29.99

Min system req:
800MHz processor, 1GB RAM and a 64MB graphics card (not that we suggest you play it)

It's true though. Seeing hot girls kill rats does make us hungry.

NEXT TIME YOU find yourself standing in line at a major fast food chain, take a second to wonder just what it is that makes these mammoth franchises so successful.

You may think of things like the taste or even how many artificial additives have been crammed into the burgers. But Fuzzyeyes Studio, creators of 'sexy management game' *Fast Food Empire*, have different ideas. According to them, it's all about employing attractive women and making them wear skimpy outfits.

I shit you not. *Fast Food Empire* revolves around employing gorgeous women and then forcing them to serve customers in tiny bikinis while they re-heat food in the microwave. Most of the game is played via a series of unintuitive menus, where you'll keep tabs on things like

advertising, buying foodstuffs at wholesale and purchasing outfits at prices that even Posh Spice would balk at. Although quite frankly, none of it seems to make much of a difference. Despite turning over $1,500 in a day, the game still ended because my reputation dropped to zero.
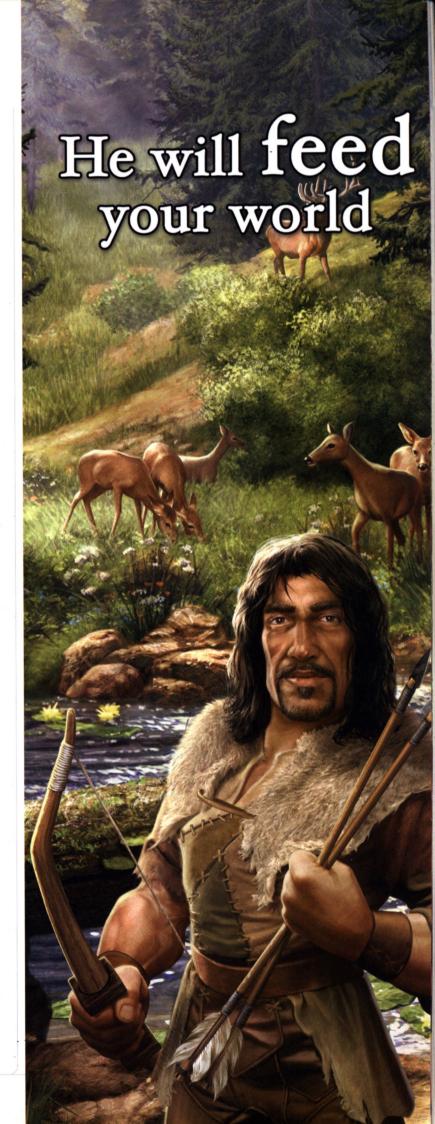
Things aren't helped along by the cringe-worthy mini-games either, from hitting rats with a ladle to hurling plates at robbers. These could have added some amusement to the game, but instead the clunky controls just serve to frustrate.

Fast Food Empire is quite possibly one of the strangest games I've played, mixing a clumsy tycoon game with a 'dress me Barbie' slant and throwing in a heavy dose of sexism for good measure. Now that's a recipe for disaster.

Suzy Wallace

It was originally called *HotDogs HotGals*. Again, we shit you not.

PCZONE
32
Food poisoning

He will feed your world

Total Time
00'18"57
Lap Time
00'18"57
Best Lap Time

Position
5/6
Lap
1/3

97 Mph

The AI-controlled cars always pull in front at a race's start.

Total Time
00'10"25
Lap Time
00'10"25
Best Lap Time

Lap
1/3

112 Mph

Colourful and exciting graphics are in order here.

SEGA RALLY

Suzy Wallace scrabbles for grip in this return to the arcade values of bright and simple fun

DEVELOPER Sega Racing Studio
PUBLISHER Sega
WEBSITE rally.sega-europe.com/en/
ETA Out now
PRICE £29.99

RECOMMENDED PCZONE RECOMMENDED

IF YOU'VE EVER spent time in an arcade, chances are you'll have donated a few pounds to Sega thanks to *Sega Rally Championship*. Its combination of car-shaped arcade machine, varied surfaces and multiplayer link-up meant that it sucked many a teenager dry of pocket money, and this latest version is a throwback to those heady days.

Forget tweaking handling settings. Forget a massive, in-depth career mode. Forget crash damage. In fact, forget everything apart from driving. Driving really fast around corners against other cars. It really is that simple.

There are five different styles of course on offer: Tropical, Alpine, Arctic, Safari and Canyon. Each track is an eye-searing example of vibrant design and gorgeous weather, ditching real-world locations in favour of fictional sleepy Alpine villages, exotic tropical temples, dusty canyons, animal-populated savannahs and geyser-surrounded power stations.

COSMETIC TOUCHES

There are plenty of great touches in each level too, such as helicopters and planes overhead, giraffes at the side of the road and flocks of birds heading for the

Multiple environments give challenging conditions

heavens when your vehicle shatters the peace and quiet.

But the differences between the tracks aren't just visual. This time round, Sega's big selling point is the deformable terrain. There are sand, mud, gravel, tarmac, snow and ice surfaces, with each offering its own different characteristics, and it's here that the game really excels.

CHANGING TRACKS

Drive through a water trap and the grooves left in the mud by your tyres will quickly fill with water. Slide through pristine snow and next lap, there'll be a clear path, offering you less hindrance. Lay down some rubber on a tarmac corner and next time round you'll be able to take it faster thanks to the increased grip. All of these effects mean that the track evolves as the race continues,

"At least straighten up will you?"

offering a slightly different experience in each lap.

There's a decent line-up of cars too, including classics such as the Lancia Delta Integrale, modern-day machinery such as the Subaru Impreza and even some more 'out there' offerings such as the Hummer. Gameplay is, as you'd expect from the series' pedigree, pure arcade enjoyment. Hurtling round the tracks at breakneck speeds, it's all about learning the nuances of each surface and track.

The AI-controlled cars are no racing slouches either, steaming off ahead at every start. Clocking the corners and correct lines to follow is the name of the game and if you get it right, you'll find yourself sailing past them in corners. Otherwise, you'll be eating their dust.

It's all a treat for the eyes too. Beyond the vivid landscapes at the side of the tracks, particles of mud are thrown up by cars in front, dirt and dust collects on your vehicle (only to be washed off by water) and the cars are crisp and gorgeously rendered.

ARCADE MACHINE

Whether the game's your cup of tea is dependent on how much you like arcade-style titles. It's all bright colours, vivid

AT A GLANCE...

Arcade-style rally action at its purest, featuring exotic and vivid locales and deformable terrain that has an effect on the racing.

Minimum system requirements:
2GHz processor, 1GB RAM and a 128MB graphics card with Pixel Shader 2.0 support.

HOW IT STACKS

COLIN MCRAE: DIRT	88%
SEGA RALLY	82%
FLATOUT 2	76%

Total Time
00'05"07

6
1/3

Pray the monkeys don't take your wipers off.

Total Time
00'16"35
00'16"35

5/6
1/3

Tracks are nicely designed, but short in number.

Head To Head

Fancy reliving those old arcade days sitting next to your mates?

Who needs realism?

To the uninitiated, *Sega Rally* might seem to be a direct contender with *Colin McRae: DiRT*. Of course, they're both about rallying but that's where the similarities end. In terms of multiplayer, *Sega Rally* looks to step neatly into the void left by *DiRT* by offering full online play with up to six players able to compete side by side. In which case, all of a sudden the absence of a damage model seems like a very good thing.

Compacted dirt is tough going.

All of the tracks are fictional... but who really cares?

"Admit it – we're lost."

locales, mud in your face and pure arcade handling that won't be to everyone's tastes.

That *Sega Rally* is more suited to console is a given but if you can live without a damage model, tweaking your toe-in values or competing over many different tracks (there's only 16 in total, with some playable in reverse) and you aren't frightened off by the idea of racing next to opponents whilst hurtling past elephants, then this is truly arcade action at its best. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics	Crisp and colourful
Sound	Adequate but not exemplary
Multiplayer	Oh yes

- ✔ Crisp, vibrant visuals
- ✔ Tracks feature nice little touches
- ✔ Excellent track deformation
- ✔ Pure arcade-style gameplay
- ✖ May prove a little too basic for some
- ✖ Needs more tracks
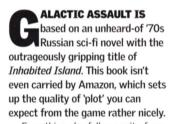
82

Muddy great fun

Improbable spaceships ahoy!

GALACTIC ASSAULT: PRISONER OF POWER

Yaaaay! Hexagons! We love hexagons!

DEVELOPER Wargaming.net
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive
WEBSITE www.galacticassault.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £29.99

Min system req:
2.4GHz processor, 1GB RAM,
and a 128MB graphics card

Clone Wars eat your heart out.

GALACTIC ASSAULT IS based on an unheard-of '70s Russian sci-fi novel with the outrageously gripping title of *Inhabited Island*. This book isn't even carried by Amazon, which sets up the quality of 'plot' you can expect from the game rather nicely.

Everything else follows suit - from the opening text scroll which whips past so fast you'll have trouble making any sense of the brutally complicated backstory whatsoever, to the hammy dialogue and stomach-churningly boring story.
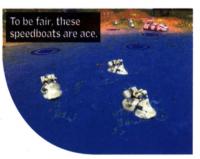
What we have here is one of those hex-based wait-your-turn-while-I-shoot-you strategy games set on a distant planet in which warring factions are blasting the crap out of each other under the pretence of a narrative.

Actually it's a nice enough example of hexagonal strategy antics with the usual bog-standard units bolstered by an interesting 'morale system' through which you can depress enemy units into submission. And who can blame them? While the tactics are meaty enough and there are stacks of multiplayer options, the whole package falls short due to ball-achingly bland battles and a particularly user-unfriendly learning curve.

So while those of you who simply can't get enough turn-based jollies these days will probably forgive the insanely drab low-res visuals, bummy storyline and dreary stand-offs between squads of soldiers 10 feet apart and failing to shoot straight, everyone else would probably be well advised to steer clear.

Dan Marshall

To be fair, these speedboats are ace.

PCZONE 62

Turd-based strategy

I know these screenshots all look the same...

AMERICAN CIVIL WAR 1861-1865

Who knew war could be this dull?

DEVELOPER AGEOD
PUBLISHER Ascaron Entertainment
WEBSITE www.a-acw.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £19.99

Min system req:
1.2GHz processor, 1GB RAM,
and a 64MB graphics card

Sometimes taking a gripping screenshot can be hard work.

AS IF YOU needed it, here comes solid proof that war isn't always "neeeeeawwww, rat-tat-tat, BOOMalaka!" and rag doll snipers tumbling gracefully from belfry windows.

Now, my knowledge of the American Civil War is admittedly somewhat lacking; but who needs Wikipedia when 'American Civil War' comes pre-packaged with enough dull, pidgin-English text to demoralise an entire infantry of pompously-dressed Republican buglers? From what I can gather from this somewhat-faithful digital recreation, the original war itself must have been a garbled mess of endless boxes, icons, statistics and clicking.

This is a *Civilization*-esque strategy game in which you shift infantry and their resplendent facial hair around various states in an attempt to either bump off the other side or bore them into submission.
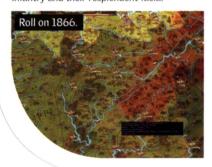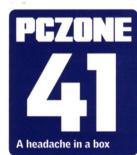
Visually, it's pretty and endearing in a clumsy farmer's daughter sort of way, it's extremely well put together, and there's shedloads of stuff to get through. The trouble is it's so bewilderingly unfriendly and over-complicated throughout, that multiple layers of stats and options siphon off any sense of fun, and you wind up feeling the need to be constantly chewing on a couple of ibuprofen simply to counter the perpetual pounding in your brain.

This game is clever, deep, multi-faceted and a strategy nerd's wet dream. It's just a shame that it all comes at the expense of being very, very boring as well.

Dan Marshall

Roll on 1866.

PCZONE 41

A headache in a box

Absolutely no cutting-edge gameplay here

PYRAHUNTERS

A bit of retro fun, with a joke of a price

DEVELOPER Sonicwarp Limited
PUBLISHER Sonicwarp Limited
WEBSITE shop.sonicwarp.
com/s.nl/it.A/id.105/.f
ETA Out now
PRICE £21.99

Min system req:
Just look at it. Do you think
your PC can handle it?

No, it's not *Donkey Kong*.
Unfortunately.

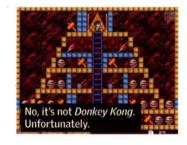**H**ERE ARE SOME examples of cheekiness: there's playful cheek, in which a man pinches a lady's bottom in the '70s. There's a ruddy cheek, in which someone shuffles forward in a wide queue, until they're too far in front of you to reclaim your position without looking aggressive. Then there's a jaw-dropping slap-in-the-face cheek.

That's what we have here; *Pyrahunters* is the kind of old-school, entertaining puzzle game that would be a great download for £3 on your mobile. If they'd made it in Flash, and chucked it onto a website, it might even make Web Game of the Month. But there it stands, hands on hips. Straddling a pyramid, tossing its '80s mullet in the wind, and laughing with the arrogance of Kurt Russell in *Big Trouble In Little China*.

"You want to play me?" he laughs. "Twenty-two pounds, baby. Twenty-two big ones, one after the other."

The supposed payoff for this collect-the-keys, get-to-the-goal puzzle is that completing the 70 levels will direct you to an "Award Zone" where the player "has the chance to win some fantastic prizes" such as "iPod shuffles and Nanos to LCD TVs".

Think of it as a web game and some raffle tickets then. *Pyrahunters* is a well-executed, classic puzzle game that'll distract the heavily casual gamer for good hours.

But if they put that last sentence on the box, without adding "But it has no place being sold for actual money", then my reputation in this industry is as dead as the market for over-priced retro puzzlers.

Jon Blyth

The graphics will take you back in time.

PCZONE 37

Pyramid Scheme

"Max? Nah, never heard of 'im. No sir-ree..."

"Say sorry for calling me shortarse, and I'll help."

GUILD WARS: EYE OF THE NORTH

EXPANSION PACK

"A bit like the bewinged, wooden fella outside Gateshead?" asked *Paul Presley*. Maybe we shouldn't have brought him back...

DEVELOPER ArenaNet
PUBLISHER NCsoft
WEBSITE eu.guildwars.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £24.99

RECOMMENDED PC ZONE

AT A GLANCE...

First 'proper' expansion pack containing new, high-level content, extra skills and more international online gaming rivalry.

Minimum system requirements:
1GHz processor, 512MB RAM, a 64MB graphics card and a broadband connection

HOW IT STACKS

GUILD WARS	94%
GUILD WARS: FACTIONS	89%
GUILD WARS: EYE OF THE NORTH	84%

WHEN *GUILD WARS* first burst into our lives, it gripped. It gripped with an unholy force, a combined power of relentless energy, refreshingly free-to-play financial models, and sheer, undiluted, unending waves of purest Game.

A refreshing release from *World of Warcraft*, launched mere months earlier and only just showing the first malevolent signs of its soon-to-be all-powerful dominance of everything online. *Guild Wars* – in some ways the spiritual bastard child of *Diablo*, *Magic: The Gathering* and *EverQuest* – fooled many right out of the trap with its traditional fantasy MMO trappings, a distracting sheepskin that cunningly masked attention from the true competitive gaming/e-sports underbelly that was waiting to pounce on us once our backs were turned and sink its addictive fangs into those skulls that weren't already in the thrall of the skill-

Sadly, snowball fights aren't a new feature.

juggling, constant progression, non-Korean pro-gaming clan-friendly PvE game.

It soon became most people's 'second' MMO behind *WOW*, and even to this day you'll often find a cry going up from the most hardened of *ZONE* forumites offering to 'put the band back together' and trot out for one last, final, this time we mean it, farewell tour of Tyria and its suburbs.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

There's something just so eminently likeable about *Guild Wars*. You want it to do well, even when common sense tells you that you'll never be able to compete in the PvP side as everyone online is infinitely better than you, and the high-level game does become one hell of a grind. At least this latter aspect is being addressed by *GW:EN*, the craftily abbreviated name for the new expansion pack. And before you all say, "What, another one?" this is actually the first 'true' *Guild Wars* expansion in the traditional sense of the phrase. Previous iterations (*Factions* and *Nightfall*) were separate, stand-alone campaigns, re-imaginings if you will that still allowed access to the original core but gave players a pick and choose mentality to the way they could approach this world.

Eye of the North differs in that it requires ownership of a previous version of *GW* and is only accessible to characters that have worked their way to the 20th, and ultimate, level of the game, not counting the insta-win PvP-only alts that litter the killing fields of the tournament game.

Walking. A favourite pastime in any MMO.

Party time for the little folk.

Guild Wars action involves incomprehensible button mashing followed by death.

"Right, we're heading back to get some waterproof boots."

Tyria has lost none of its graphical splendour.

Story is king for *GW:EN*, with a carefully plotted, three-pronged campaign to unite the forces of man in the north of the world and ally with the new Dwarves, Norn and Asura; the recruitment of each new race providing the three separate paths in the overall 'Kill the new über-beastie' story arc.

Well told they are too, with a new emphasis on in-game cut scenes topping and tailing most of the major quests, plenty of human drama provided by your new 'Hero' followers that can make up your party of eight (along with fellow players or much improved from an AI standpoint NPC henchmen), and a well thought out sense of progression that never leaves the player feeling at a loss.

THE FOURTH WALL

Negative points come in the usually rock-solid ArenaNet presentation. For all the enhanced playability, there's much here that seems to be lacking polish or care. Bugs abound (although these are forever being patched as is the review score-blighting way of MMO updating), odd immersion-breaking moments arise such as having Heroes that weren't in your party suddenly appear in a mid-mission cut scene because the writers didn't consider the possibility you'd choose someone else to fight alongside, some Heroes occurring twice in an instance (such as Ogden the Dwarf and Vekk the Asura in the new Hall of Monuments), but by and large this is forgivable, if disappointing, as this is a series that's always prided itself on getting these sorts of things just right.

The meat is really in providing the high-level toons with a reward for sticking with the game so far (albeit a reward you have to pay for), plenty of stunning new locations and dungeons to explore showing that what is essentially a five-year old graphics engine (if you include original development time) can still compete with the top-end boys, a wealth of new skills to provide plenty of sleepless 'build balancing' nights and *Pokémon*-style 'gotta catch 'em all' hunts for rabid PvP loons to go after, and the usual array of new armour, weapons, and shiny baubles to adorn yourself with. And still, at the heart of it all, just a damn fine, playable game, over-blessed with the 'one more go' factor and a joyful sense of reward vs effort put in.

Plus it stars the vocal talents of Maurice 'Brain from *Pinky and the Brain*' LaMarche, for which it should be carried shoulder-high and given all the vestal virgins it can eat. Truly the man is a god among cartoon-voicing men. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics	Lush landscaping, aging well
Sound	Stirring if repetitive Wagnerian themes
Multiplayer	Not as essential as you'd think

- ✓ Well-structured story arcs
- ✓ Addictive new skill acquisition and deck
- ✓ Gorgeous as it ever was
- ✗ More a reward for existing high-level players than a draw for the new
- ✗ Occasional lack of polish

84
Quite the sight

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

indieZone

PCZONE ON THE DVD

Martin Korda **finds himself in retro heaven and hell in this month's IndieZone**

ARCADIA REMIX

DEVELOPER Gamelab **WEBSITE** www.gamelab.com **PRICE** £12.99

INDIE ZONE GAME OF THE MONTH

DON'T LET ARCADIA REMIX's archaic visual style put you off, because what we have here is a very fun and ultimately fairly challenging arcade game, which sees you playing up to four different mini-games at once.

While the collection of games may be incredibly basic, they're just about varied enough to keep proceedings interesting for a couple of fun filled hours. Included in the line-up is a baseball game that tasks you with timing your swing to perfection, a rudimentary platform game, an *Asteroids* clone and a basic shooter in which you must cap pop-up enemies while avoiding civilians.

While the early levels will have you dislocating your arm and slapping yourself on the back in smug self-congratulation,

it's not long before the basic gameplay is superseded by mayhem as you desperately try to tend to four games at once. Matters are further complicated by a bonus system that sees you attempting to collect rainbow-coloured icons in order to bolster your points tally.

If you're looking for a lunchtime distraction that you can come back to over and over again, then this clever and deceptively challenging little game may be just the sustenance you're looking for.

A cornucopia of retro fun.

PCZONE 72

CHROMADROME 2

DEVELOPER Alpha72 Games **WEBSITE** www.alpha72.com **PRICE** $19.95 (£10)

A CROSS BETWEEN *Wipeout*, 10-pin bowling and *Space Invaders*, this high-speed racer/blaster is more fun than a pocket-sized clown. Well, at least for an hour or two anyway.

Far superior to the likes of Warlock Studios' lacklustre *Jet Jumper* (PCZ 177, 45%), *Chromadrome 2* sees you controlling a hurtling sphere through increasingly challenging levels, while blasting enemies and avoiding pits. The sheer sense of speed is exhilarating and you're soon mesmerised as you guide your high-speed ball through a succession of psychedelic courses.

If you've played the original, then expect more of the same, with countless colourful

Feel the need for speed?

arenas to race through, while the addition of dual-mouse multiplayer makes for some squeal-inducing mayhem.

This is great fun for a short while, so just make sure you enjoy it while the laughter lasts.

PCZONE 67

No, someone hasn't just spiked your tea.

HAP HAZARD

DEVELOPER Raptisoft **WEBSITE** www.raptisoft.com **PRICE** $14.99 (£7)

THIS PLATFORM PUZZLER stands out from the crowd thanks to an innovative approach to time limits. Rather than giving you a countdown to complete an individual level, you're given a set time limit in which to finish the entire game.

Controlling the eponymous and cutely animated hero, you must dash around your space station jumping over gaps, climbing ladders, shimmying up ropes and chains, and avoiding enemy attacks and traps while collecting bombs planted by invading aliens.

Pleasingly challenging without ever been irritatingly frustrating, *Hap*

No need to get steamed up about it.

Hazard's simplicity is compensated for by the ever-ticking timer that always has your backside slipping off your chair with nervous excitement, as you try to save your space station. Basic but fun.

One timer, loads of levels.

PCZONE 64

DONUTS IN DANGER

DEV Addictive 247 Games **WEB** www.addictive247.co.uk **PRICE** $12.95 (£6)

Donuts everywhere and not a cop in sight.

RAVENOUS MARTIANS ARE invading your planet and only you can stop them in this rudimentary *Space Invaders* clone. Visually basic with clunky sound effects and plinky music, there's nothing here you haven't seen before as you scroll left and right hammering the fire button while your descending foes let loose the occasional missile. Once the fighting stops, you must bolster your ship with an array of imaginative upgrades before repeating the whole sequence over and over and over again...

The plot – which revolves around Martians invading your planet for its

doughnut supplies – smacks of two stoned students stuffing their faces with cakes while marvelling at their own comedic genius, before waking up the next morning with the stark realisation that the previous night's hilarity has morphed into mild embarrassment.

If you're really desperate for some *Space Invaders* action you'll find some fun here, though if you're really that nostalgic, you'd probably be better off picking up a copy of the superior *Titan Attacks* instead.

PCZONE 42

PCZONE TOP 5 INDIE GAMES

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

1

2

NAKED WAR
www.zee-3.com | **Reviewed issue 177**
A highly addictive and visually bold turn-based strategy game played over email in which your team of four soldiers must kill off the opposition with guile, tactics and some serious firepower.

3

MORNING'S WRATH
www.morningswrath.com | **Reviewed issue 163**
A superbly written, beautifully crafted isometric RPG that leads you on an epic adventure to save your land from destruction. A must-buy for any self-respecting RPG fan.

4

NEW STAR SOCCER 3
www.newstarsoccer.com | **Reviewed issue 164**
This novel take on the beautiful game melds *Sensible Soccer* with *Football Manager* and *Goal* (the film) to provide the most complete indie-gaming footy experience available.

5

MR ROBOT
www.moonpod.com | **Reviewed issue 181**
Like an isometric *RoboBlitz* with zany RPG-style combat. You play a robot who must bring a malfunctioning starship back online. Packed with puzzles, great characters and humour.

BUDGET

Games that fell off the back of a lorry. And some that were thrown...

JUST CAUSE

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

WE MENTIONED THIS in budget a few issues back due to its cheap presence on Steam, but in a dual-pronged assault on hungry wallets it's now up for grabs for cheap in shelf-form too.

In all honesty, the freeform thing has been done more engagingly, and in a more PC-centric fashion in *STALKER* or even the bug-ridden (yet still oddly fascinating) carcass of *Boiling Point*. But where else can you jump from 5,000 feet, fire a grappling hook at a helicopter, reel yourself in, take it over then crash into a drug dealer's hideout? Not many places my friend. Admittedly, the game does get a mite samey – but, again, it isn't every day you visit a brothel in a volcano either. *Just Cause* won't be remembered as one of the highest points in gaming history, but what it does it does with an element of panache. Console panache, but panache nevertheless.

Will Porter

PCZONE 78

Silly, excessive, derivative, but not a bad laugh either.

You can hijack any vehicle in the game, *GTA* style.

THIS MONTH PCZONE SAVED MONEY BY...

Log being all healthy and cycling to work:
Saving: £10 (and a heart attack)

Jamie selling shit he doesn't want at a car-boot sale:
Profit: £50

Will drinking in a pub and forgetting to eat dinner:
Saving: A debatable £4

ONIMUSHA 3: DEMON SIEGE

PUBLISHER: Steam **WEBSITE:** www.steampowered.com **PRICE:** $19.95

OH DEAR. BEFORE the shoddy Capcom/Ubisoft conversions of *Resident Evil 4* and *Devil May Cry* emerged, *Onimusha 3* was released to a largely indifferent PC gaming public.

Fortunately a few patches have since fixed most of the glaring cock-ups (including a framerate that slowed the game down to a desperate crawl), but this third-person samurai battler is still very much more at home on a console than a PC. You need a decent gamepad if you don't seriously want to end up smashing your keyboard and mouse with your teeth.

The *Onimusha* series centres around hacking your way through a succession of monsters and demons in a fantasy-laced feudal Japan while solving rudimentary puzzles, and this third title drags you again down that well-worn,

scripted path. *Onimusha 3* has a half-decent storyline and the devil-vanquishing is satisfying enough, but seriously – low-res textures and no multiplayer? Buy a PS2 version on eBay for three quid and play that. Even the presence of Gallic charmer Jean Reno can't save this one...

Jamie Sefton

PCZONE 58

Hack, hack, twang, thwock.

Hack, chop, potion, thwack.

Chop, hack, fireball, yawn, yawn, yawn.

It's not bad work for a small, indie studio...

...and there's plenty of explosive action to be had...

...but ultimately, it's as bland as cardboard quiche.

SHADOWGROUNDS

PUBLISHER: Steam **WEBSITE:** www.steampowered.com **PRICE:** $9.95

REVIEWS ARE USUALLY really easy. It's a measure of how much money a thing costs versus how much good it makes you feel. Budget reviews should therefore be the easiest of all. You just use maths to make up a new score, right? If a game is one third the price it was before, it should be three times as much value. If something

is free, it is of infinitely good value. But value for what? Money? There's no money involved in free things. So what is the value of free things? That's a question for another day, because Shadowgrounds *does* cost money. It costs a bit over a fiver.

That's a third of what it once cost, but it's not three times as good. In fact,

Shadowgrounds is a little bit stale, with its cumbersome top-down shooter action, tired alien storyline, and vast plains of unimaginative mundanity really letting the side down. This will be pleasing only to the most forgiving fans of the genre.

Steve Hogarty

PCZONE 48

MAELSTROM

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

MAELSTROM, AN RTS from the makers of the excellent *Perimeter*, promised a lot and delivered a little. It boasts an epic storyline that sees two warring Earth factions slogging it out: a gritty marine team, and the Ascension – a corporate, evolved group who really want those grunts wiped out. They're all having a perfectly nice fighty time until their war gets crassly interrupted by a wild-card alien race who just want to cover everything in water.

The scene is set for some well-intentioned, but badly implemented action. On the plus side is the original terraforming aspect of the gameplay, in which water, earth and the weather play integral roles in the strategy. On the minus side, you've got a tits interface,

annoying camera controls, troops that talk shit and won't shut up, and a game that only reluctantly offers its finer points once you've hammered away to the limits of your patience.

At full price, *Maelstrom* felt a little out of its depth. At its thrilling budget price, it's more of a sensible purchase. If you decide to try, prepare to be patient.

Jon Blyth

PCZONE 69

After *Perimeter*, this sub-par RTS was a major let-down.

And the rest...

Old games + cheap prices = budget heaven (or hell)

CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 5
£4.99, SOLD OUT
Only mad people would either buy *Champ Man*, or indeed plump for team rosters that are now two years old. Really want to see if Leeds could have won the 05/06 play-off final? Then, Mr Sefton, we advise you to do it in *Football Manager* instead.

PCZONE 46

PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN
£4.99, SOLD OUT
Angry, nu-metal and obsessed with the derrieres and front-ieres of various nubile action ladies, *WW* was Ubisoft's rare dip into sweaty adolescence. Still, it had a decent fighting system and the puzzles were up to the usual *POP* quality.

PCZONE 64

RAILROAD TYCOON 3
£4.99, SOLD OUT
There's no point in buying this whatsoever, not when you can pick up the instantly engaging and rather wonderful *Sid Meier's Railroads!* for cheap from interweb suppliers. For pipe-smoking uncles and sippers of weak lemon drink only.

PCZONE 40

BUYER'S GUIDE

The bestest games your money can buy...

PCZONE TOP 5 GAMES BEGINNING WITH 'S'

1. **SYNDICATE WARS** (ISSUE 43)
2. **SYSTEM SHOCK 2** (ISSUE 80)
3. **SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR** (ISSUE 115)
4. **STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC** (ISSUE 137)
5. **SAM & MAX HIT THE ROAD** (ISSUE16)

PCZONE TOP 5 GAMING CURRENCIES

1. **BUCKAZOIDS** (SPACE QUEST SERIES)
2. **BOTTLE CAPS** (FALLOUT)
3. **SIMOLEANS** (THE SIMS)
4. **LINDEN DOLLARS** (SECOND LIFE)
5. **GOLD, SILVER, COPPER** (WORLD OF WARCRAFT)

PCZONE TOP 5 PLASMIDS WE WANT INVENTED

1. **UNCONTROLLABLE TRUMPING**
2. **MONKEY DECOY**
3. **CONDIMENT FINGERS**
4. **TRASH TALK**
5. **DISCO FEVER**

Shooters

Must buy!

HALF-LIFE 2
PCZ Issue: 148 – 97%
Everyone knew this would be good, but no-one quite expected the tour de force that Valve managed to deliver. Easily a contender for the best game of all time, *Half-Life 2* is just one stunning set-piece after another, and is guaranteed to leave you dribbling with awe. Be warned though, a (fast) online connection is needed for Valve's mandatory Steam delivery service.

BIOSHOCK
PCZ Issue: 185 – 96%
The spiritual sequel to *System Shock 2*, *BioShock* will suck you right into its intricate, art deco world. A destroyed utopia under the sea, terrifying characters and emergent combat makes this an unmissable experience.

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

BUDGET
FAR CRY
PCZ Issue: 140 – 93%
In many eyes, Crytek's shooter outweighs even the mighty *Half-Life 2* in its tension, tactics and expansive level design. It's a mighty achievement with seemingly freeform action and the best sniping money can buy.

BUDGET
HL2: EPISODE ONE
PCZ Issue: 170 – 91%
Suffering slightly from thematic overlap from *HL2, Ep. One* nevertheless contains the greatest moments from the entire series. It may be short, but it's also warm, funny and thrilling, and the first five minutes are pure gold.

CALL OF DUTY 2
PCZ Issue: 162 – 91%
Brutal, relentless and totally gripping, the WWII shooter sequel packs more action into a single level than most pack into an entire game. Epic scale battles and intense drama. World War II at its unforgiving best.

F.E.A.R.
PCZ Issue: 160 – 90%
With more shocks and scares than an episode of *Rentaghost* (and a much higher body count), *F.E.A.R.* pushes the shooter part of FPS to the limit. It might not be the scariest game ever, but it will make you jump.

Strategy

Must buy!

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

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

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

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

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

LOTR: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH
PCZ Issue: 149 – 91%
Although the *LOTR* RTS doesn't hold a candle to the *Total War* franchise, there's nothing quite like ordering a Balrog around for guaranteed strategy fun.

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

Action/Adventure

Must buy!

MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE
PCZ Issue: 136 – 93%
The chosen poison for certain *PCZ* staffers after a long hard day, Payne's second outing is perhaps the most pixel-perfect example of joy-through-excessive-destruction on the market. Slicker than slick, breathtaking and quite beautiful, *Max Payne 2* provides the greatest gaming kicks that money can buy. It's extremely short, but so tense, well designed and replayable that you just won't care.

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

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

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

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

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

BUDGET
PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE TWO THRONES
PCZ Issue: 164 – 86%
The shirtless wonder finally makes it into the Buyer's Guide. Not that any of his outings can be considered bad games, but *TTT* manages to get all the ingredients just right this time around.

MMOs

Must buy!

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
PCZ Issue: 152 – 95%

Blizzard's recreation of the classic strategy world in MMO form doesn't disappoint. Beautiful to look at, absorbing to play and with more content than you can shake a magic stick at.

EVERQUEST II
PCZ Issue: 150 – 95%

A *Star Trek* to *WOW*'s *Star Wars*, *EQII* gives the original a much needed lick of paint, a whole new world to play in and a greater sense of depth and immersion. A time-sink in the true, classic sense.

GUILD WARS
PCZ Issue: 156 – 94%

How to make a gaming genre accessible to the masses. It shines with polish, thought and lack of monthly subscription fees. Newbies can feel at home too, thanks to a totally skills-based set-up.

EVE ONLINE
PCZ Issue: 130 – 88%

Elite online has been a long-held fantasy and this space sim is the closest yet to making it a reality. Its slow pace belies the options on offer, from mining or trading to piracy – it's up to you.

LOTR ONLINE
PCZ Issue: 182 – 87%

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

Simulation

BUDGET

X3: REUNION
PCZ Issue: 162 – 92%

Finally, a space sim to better *X2: The Threat*, and it just happens to be the sequel. Possibly the best-looking game ever to appear on a PC. Oh, and it plays pretty well too.

IL-2 STURMOVIK: FORGOTTEN BATTLES
PCZ Issue: 128 – 92%

While flight sims are becoming rarer and rarer, at least the quality remains high. None more so than this ultra-classy WWII combat sim. Chocks away, comrade!

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR X
PCZ Issue: 175 – 89%

This latest iteration in the *Flight Sim* series is the biggest since they started using actual polygons. What's more, the visuals may just sear your eyeballs.

BUDGET

FREELANCER
PCZ Issue: 128 – 84%

If *X2* is too slow for you, *Freelancer* should fit the bill. Plenty of trading, bounty-hunting and space piracy, but with the emphasis on action rather than realism. Space has never been this much fun.

SILENT HUNTER 4: WOLVES OF THE PACIFIC
PCZ Issue: 181 – 82%

If a life beneath the waves tickles your fancy, then this submarine simulator fits the bill. Tactics, torpedos, sonar and sailors combine to make the ultimate ship sinker.

Driving/Racing

Must buy!

GTR2
PCZ Issue: 173 – 92%

Can't afford a Ferrari? Then pick up this scarily realistic driving sim and race the car of your dreams, complete with an improved driving model, new modes and many other improvements.

GT LEGENDS
PCZ Issue: 161 – 92%

While *GTR* takes care of modern-day racing, *GT Legends* does the business for historical driving. A natural successor to *Grand Prix Legends*, it's like the swinging '60s never ended.

LIVE FOR SPEED
PCZ Issue: 158 – 90%

Online racing at its best. Realistic handling, hilarious crashes and a racing community second to none. On the right servers that is. A remarkable achievement by such a small team.

COLIN MCRAE: DIRT
PCZ Issue: 183 – 88%

The rallying legend returns and this time he's joined by a host of other off-road events, an excitable Travis Pastrana and some of the best-looking graphics to grace any driving game on PC so far.

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED
PCZ Issue: 163 – 88%

Thrill-packed racer from EA, this time with the emphasis on high-speed police chases and notoriety factors. You can still make like Westwood with the car pimping though.

God games

BUDGET

THE MOVIES
PCZ Issue: 162 – 95%

Life as a movie mogul, games don't get better than this. Not only a god/management game par excellence, but also a complete home movie-making kit. Brilliant.

BLACK & WHITE 2
PCZ Issue: 161 – 93%

The original split opinion, and this sequel does the same. We love it though, and think it's erased all the problems as well as adding plenty of new options to boot. It's gorgeous too.

GARRY'S MOD
PCZ Issue: 179 – 88%

While it might not strictly be a god game, *Garry's Mod* gives you the tools to create almost anything you can think of in the Source engine, from functional robots to saucy ragdoll jpegs. Try it out and see for yourself.

BUDGET

EVIL GENIUS
PCZ Issue: 147 – 84%

Ever wanted to say "No Mr Bond, I expect you to die", or create giant evil lairs inside hollow volcanoes? Well now you can with this great megalomaniac sim. It's always fun being bad.

BUDGET

VEGA$: MAKE IT BIG
PCZ Issue: 135 – 84%

An in-depth tycoon game with all the 3D graphical glitz and glamour of Vegas itself. Provide hotels, casinos and over-priced magic shows that suck the money out of the punters.

Sport

Must buy!

FOOTBALL MANAGER 2007
PCZ Issue: 175 – 90%

Still reigning supreme as one of the most popular ways to fritter away the hours, the latest edition of *FM* has tons of improvements. The best footy management title.

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 6
PCZ Issue: 175 – 88%

Konami's arcade kickabout is the best yet, with improved AI, fantastic animation and enhanced multiplayer. Not the Xbox 360 version, but still better than *FIFA* – just.

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 2006
PCZ Issue: 161 – 85%

Not the most recent version but still our favourite, *Tiger 2006* has you time-travelling as Mr Woods. The best PC golf game yet, mainly thanks to the two career modes.

FIFA 07
PCZ Issue: 174 – 84%

EA's come up trumps with the latest *FIFA*. *PES*-style controls, great ball physics and a decent management option combine with EA's usual top presentation to make this the best *FIFA* yet.

NHL 06
PCZ Issue: 160 – 84%

Ice hockey may not be the UK's number-one sporting pastime, but that doesn't make this 06 incarnation of it any less fun. Exciting, breathless and violent balls-out fun for the whole family.

Role-playing games

Must buy!

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION
PCZ Issue: 167 – 95%

Oblivion's sublime graphics, intuitive character-creation and massive freeform gameplay put paid to the myth that you have to own a beard to enjoy RPGs.

BUDGET

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC
PCZ Issue: 137 – 94%

KOTOR is the best *Star Wars* game of recent years. Moving, dramatic and fairly adult in tone, it also has a hefty dose of lightsabers to keep you happy.

BUDGET

THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND
PCZ Issue: 116 – 94%

Possibly the most intimidating, yet wonderful game we've played – the breadth and depth of *Morrowind* remains a remarkable achievement.

BUDGET

DEUS EX
PCZ Issue: 93 – 94%

This remains the benchmark in FPS RPGs. Twisting sci-fi plots, exciting freeform levels and some moments of pure exhilaration and drama help retain *Deus Ex* as the alpha male of the gaming world.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2
PCZ Issue: 176 – 86%

An identical twin to *NWN* but using modern technology, *NWN2* has all the gleeful D&D levelling we love, plus tons of modding opportunities. If you have a beard, this is for you.

INCOMING!

All approximate monthly dates are correct at the time of going to press

October

BLACKSITE	MIDWAY
FOOTBALL MANAGER 2008	SEGA
HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO/TEAM FORTRESS 2/PORTAL	VALVE/EA
CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO	CODEMASTERS
JUICED 2: HOT IMPORT NIGHTS	THQ
NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2: MASK OF THE BETRAYER	ATARI
PAINKILLER: OVERDOSE	DREAMCATCHER
SAM & MAX SEASON TWO	TELLTALE GAMES
TABULA RASA	NCSOFT
THE WITCHER	ATARI
THRILLVILLE: OFF THE RAILS	ACTIVISION
TIMESHIFT	VIVENDI GAMES
UNIVERSE AT WAR: EARTH ASSAULT	SEGA

November

ALONE IN THE DARK	ATARI
ASSASSIN'S CREED	UBISOFT
A VAMPYRE STORY	ASCARON
BEOWULF	UBISOFT
BROTHERS IN ARMS: HELL'S HIGHWAY	UBISOFT
CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE	ACTIVISION
COMPANY OF HEROES: OPPOSING FRONTS	THQ
CRYSIS	EA
EMPIRE EARTH III	VIVENDI GAMES
FEAR PERSEUS MANDATE	VIVENDI GAMES
HELLGATE: LONDON	EA
KANE & LYNCH: DEAD MEN	EIDOS
NEED FOR SPEED: PRO STREET	EA
PHANTASY STAR UNIVERSE: AMBITION OF THE ILLUMINUS	SEGA
SIMCITY SOCIETIES	EA
SUPREME COMMANDER: FORGED ALLIANCE	THQ
UNREAL TOURNAMENT III	MIDWAY

Sinclair story
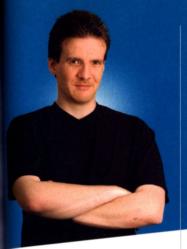
I 'VE JUST WASTED a day with an old school chum playing Sinclair games, drinking coke and seeing who could belch the loudest. It was wonderful.

Like all boys born in the late '60s and early '70s, we'd both convinced our parents to buy a Spectrum because it would 'help us revise' for our O levels. Our parents, having never been faced with anything more complicated than a VHS, shelled out the requisite £499 – equivalent back then to a new bathroom – in the hope we'd become computer geniuses and support them in their old age.

Of course, we spent the time pawing at mags and playing *Manic Miner* before flunking our exams – equivalent to today's A grades.

There has been one lasting benefit to Spectrum ownership, which is that we remain delighted by simplicity. While hunched over an emulator, my friend's daughter denounced *Chaos*, *Lords of Midnight* and *Underwurlde* as 'rubbish' before marching off to her console to play something more complex but less satisfying. She came back bored five minutes later.

You're probably thinking that all this is just an old fart reminiscing about schooldays, but I'm not so sure. One of the reasons I still play *Team Fortress Classic* is because it's a fundamentally simple game, and I'm getting to love *Team Fortress 2* for the same reason. If you're looking for simple, riotous fun, I urge you to go and buy it.

Phil Wand, hardware editor

PHENOMENON
More rumours about the next Athlon

WE'VE BEEN PROMISED at least one Phenom variant before Christmas, so it's time we took a longer look at what could be in store for speed-hungry gamers.
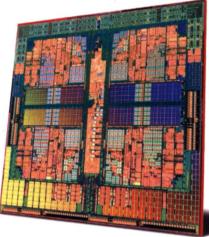
AMD's 10th-generation microprocessor range is designed to replace the ageing Athlon, and will most likely support DDR3 memory from the off. The new CPUs will be available in both dual- and quad-core formats, known as Phenom X2 and X4 respectively, and there's even talk of a unique triple-core variant, the X3.

Except for the flagship FX line, the X2 and X4 are all Socket AM2+ and a big draw of the Phenom is that existing owners of Socket AM2 products should be able to simply plug in the later technology by patching their motherboard's BIOS.

Of interest to we gamers is the fact AMD is now taking its gaming seriously. The company has recently launched game.amd.com, a web site aimed at grooming a whole community of AMD-equipped gamers with easy access to news, drivers and forums.

FAMILY	MODEL	CLOCK	SOCKET
Phenom FX	FX-90	2.8GHz	Socket F
	FX-91	2.6GHz	Socket AM2+
	FX-80	2.6GHz	
Phenom X4	GP-7100	2.4GHz	
	GP-7000	2.2GHz	
Phenom X2	GP-6800	2.8GHz	
	GP-6650	2.6GHz	
	GP-6650	2.4GHz	
	GP-6600	2.3GHz	
	GP-6500	2.1GHz	
	GP-6400	1.9GHz	

It bloody needs to be 'phenomenal' if it's to dethrone Intel.

Sadly, there are no benchmarks to share yet. As with its server products, AMD are making a big noise about efficiency and power consumption – we do hope they realise its the performance will make or break the Phenom. www.amd.com

HAVOK AT INTEL
Physics engine bought out by chip giant

INTEL HAVE BOUGHT Havok, the Irish development company behind the ubiquitous Havok physics and behavioural engines (see p018).

Today the engine is found in dozens of titles including *Company of Heroes, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and, most famously, *Half-Life 2*.

Add in other gaming platforms such as Wii and Xbox 360 and you're looking at almost 200 games using the technology.

The move allows Intel to optimise both the engine and their hardware for Core-based gaming. However,

distressingly, it puts every other hardware manufacturer at a distinct disadvantage, particularly as both NVIDIA and AMD were involved with Havok to shift physics calculations to their GPUs. Not good. intel.com

Gamers will soon be buying Intel whether they want to or not.

NEWS ROUND-UP

ViewSonic have just released their new 28in widescreen monster, the VX2835wm. It features a 3ms response time, built-in digital speakers, their ClearPicture technology, and a raft of inputs – HDMI (HDCP), PC VGA, component RCA set, S-video, and three audio inputs. The VX2835wm retails at £699 and is available now. viewsonic.co.uk

Intel are busy developing their new X48 chipset to partner the upcoming X38. While the X38 supports 1333MHz DDR3 (PC3-10600) chips, the X48 should bring a whopping 1.6GHz front-side bus speed together with the appropriate DDR3 1600MHz (PC3-12800) memory. intel.com

WARNING: THIS MONTH'S HARD WORDS
BY JON BLYTH

XFX 320MB GTS: The most letters and numbers you can say together before everyone assumes you're a malfunctioning robot. **ForceWare:** Traditionally, a policeman's helmet. **Fatal1ty:** abbreviation. Fatal One, Thank You. **SpyWareBlaster:** A device used by special agents to shoot the sunglasses and false moustaches off the faces of their enemies. **POP3:** An intimate game in which you and a loved one fill your jumpers with inflated balloons, and the first person to explode all the other's balloons gets to go on the top bunk.

SKINNING UP

Your modern Commodore comes in a variety of different guises known as C-Kins. The one you see here is called 'AZHQ Piece 1' from the Street Art category, and is really awesome – assuming if you want your PC reminding you of graffiti at your local bus depot. There are roughly 100 different designs, some of which are horrific and some of which are really rather good. My favourites are C64 Breadbox, Mouth Green and Colour Cube – and the neat thing is that the case panels are interchangeable meaning you can update them any time you fancy a change. The paint itself is baked on and the surface is smooth, the only downside being that the 30-day build time is between three and four times that of rivals.

> **Today's Commodore is truly just as capable of planting a smile on your face as any predecessor**

COMMODORE XX

PRICE £2,749 **MANUFACTURER** Commodore **WEBSITE** commodoregaming.com

DON'T WORRY, NOT all Commodores look like the north end of a southbound train – you can configure yours with a 'C-kin' paint job of your choosing. Assuming you want to spend almost £3,000 on a rig that does the same job as the one you have, only a bit faster.

Commodore's flagship XX is expensive. It's in the same park as rivals, the XPS 720 H2C is £2,599, Alienware's Area-51 ALX is an eye-watering £3,089, but that doesn't change the fact it's second-hand car money. Factor in the depreciation that eats at every new PC and you may as well be dropping piggy banks down a lift shaft.

The company does have several other models in its line-up, but the cheapest of those is still £300 more than Chillblast's Fusion Colossus (issue 186, 93%), and I find it sad that one of the more distinguished names in home computing – original motto, "Computers for the masses" – has been resurrected without a genuinely mass-market model.

DEEPLY RAPID

But your money does buy the cream of Intel hardware, making everything you do seem pleasingly brief. Applications no longer open and close but flick on and off like bedside lamps.

Every mundane task, from unpacking archives, patching games, working with audio or video, is dispatched in two shakes of a lamb's tail.

Striped drives send level load times tumbling, and pushing the resolution up from 1280 x 1024 pixels to 1680 x 1050 has virtually no effect on frame rates, meaning today's Commodore is truly just as capable of planting a smile on your face as any predecessor.

Only I'm not sure I could sleep at night knowing it's in my house. Aside from nightmares about the credit card bill, I'd quickly discover that the XX is long on noise, short on expansion, short on warranty and not manifestly faster than machines in the sub-grand bracket, unless you have a desire to run senselessly high levels of detail.

MISTER FREEZE

As some of the £1,500 systems we tested in issue 184 had proved just as rapid, and so I tried squeezing a little more from the Commodore in its BIOS. However, I ran into trouble with the ASUS board's automated 'AI' overclocking, where two of the tweaking presets left the machine unbootable.

Then there's the fact the Commodore website has no forum, no community, no knowledgebase, so no easy way to get some peer-to-peer support, and it makes no mention driver updates nor how to contact technical support. This lack of backup doesn't quite add up.

SPECIFICATION

ASUS P5N32-E nForce 680i SLI motherboard Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6800 2x 1GB Corsair DOMINATOR PC2-8500 2x GeForce 8800 ULTRA 768MB SLI Creative Sound Blaster X-Fi Xtreme Gamer 2x 500GB 10,000 RPM Raptor (RAID-0) DVDRW optical drive
Arctic Freezer 7 Pro Cooler 850W PSU with ICE Cube PSU Cooler 250mm panel fan
Windows Vista Ultimate Two year collect and return warranty

3D GRAPHICS TEST

	XX	INFINITY 870	COLOSSUS
Price	£2,749	£821	£699
Supreme Commander	17,000	17,071	16,560
Counter-Strike: Source	253	249	248
3DMark06	13,010	8,967	8,806

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GAMER INFINITY 870

PRICE £821 **MANUFACTURER** CyberPower **WEBSITE** cyberpowersystem.co.uk

CYBERPOWER'S GAMER Infinity 870 is an almost identical specification to our favourite Fusion Colossus, but with a more powerful Core 2 Duo bathed in blue light under the hood.

Like the Colossus, the Infinity 870 uses an ASUS P5K as the basis for a 3GHz overclock, with the bus set to 425MHz, OCZ's Gold memory sticks running 850MHz, and the Duey's multiplier dropped a notch to seven. It's a setup that's solid as a rock, and as you can see from benchmark results opposite it's a solid performer too.
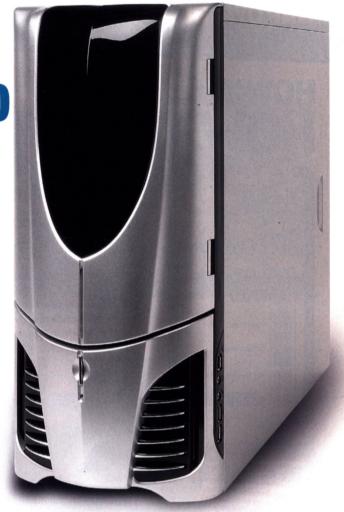
The machine particularly loved higher widescreen resolutions in Source engine games, including the beta version of upcoming mod *Fortress Forever*, though raising the screen size and all the detail options in *BioShock* and *Supreme Commander* did make its knees wobble. With twinned 8800 Ultras and a Core 2 Extreme, the Commodore XX is better suited to such punishing levels of detail, in some instances delivering more than double the frame rate. That's where your money goes.

SPECIFICATION

NZXT Apollo case 580W Hiper PSU ASUS P5K SE P35 motherboard Intel Core 2 Duo E6750 (overclocked to 3.0GHz) 2GB OCZ PC2-6400 memory GeForce 8800 GTS 320MB Sony Dual Format multi-writer 320GB Seagate Barracuda Windows Vista Home Premium 30-day money back guarantee Three year collect and return warranty

There's also CyberPower's three-year warranty to consider, and 30-day money back guarantee which allows you to get a refund on the price you paid. Take note though – should you decide to change your mind, you'll be charged a 15 per cent restocking fee, or in the case of this model, around £120. That's perhaps a bit steep.
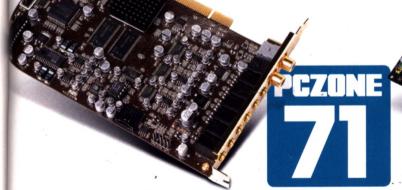
PCZONE 88

X-FI PRELUDE

PRICE £119 **MANUFACTURER** Auzentech **WEBSITE** auzentech.com

THE X-FI PRELUDE is the first card without a Creative badge to be built using Creative's hardware and (oh please God no) drivers.

When I first looked at the X-Fi Fatal1ty, I wasn't blown away by it, as it was a complex high-end product. But at £180 was more than twice the price it should be – most gamers with onboard sound would never buy one. As predicted, the X-Fi sank below £90, and everyone still uses the audio on their motherboard anyway. It's not the best, but it works.

To succeed, X-Fi needs to offer Dolby Digital Live, EAX on *Vista*, and be no more than the price of a game. But, Auzentech's £119 X-Fi Prelude smacks its face into all three hurdles: support for DDL is merely promised, as is an updated version of ALchemy, but then Creative have promised *Linux* drivers for years and never delivered. Don't hold your breath.

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P35 DIAMOND

PRICE £155 **MANUFACTURER** MSI **WEBSITE** msicomputer.co.uk

THE DIAMOND OFFERS support for DDR2, DDR3, a new 1333MHz bus speed and, coincidentally, X-Fi sound.

MSI's older P965-based Platinum (issue 179, 88%) was a fine board with a modest £80 price, and at £155 the P35-based Diamond needs to add something of value or be fast enough to put the rival nForce 680i in the shade. And I'm not sure it does either.

Aside from DDR3, the board still has the old problem of unbalanced x16/x4 PCIe slots, plus a looped heatpipe arrangement and raised Southbridge cooler that's sure to foul the edge of longer Radeons. It's a platform likely to frustrate the enthusiast owners who buy it.

With DDR3 double the cost of DDR2, you're better off waiting for the flagship X38 chipset – it adds balanced x16/x16 PCIe slots, Intel's Extreme Tuning Utility, and is likely to have been tweaked to reel in NVIDIA's runaway 680i.

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HOW TO...
HOW TO: RETURN STUFF YOU BOUGHT ONLINE

Been shopping online? Realised what you bought is not what you want? Phil Wand could get you your money back

Need:
Something you bought online

Time:
7 days... and counting

Difficulty level:

Phil Wand

Deep Blue

Medium doofus

Big Brother contestant

Jamie Sefton

REMEMBER:
The contents do not constitute legal advice and should not be relied upon as such. You should seek legal advice from a qualified person regarding your difficulties.

ACCORDING TO A recent report, British shoppers are spending record amounts online, with monthly sales figures surging past the £4billion mark – the equivalent of five new PCs every second.

It's an astonishing amount of money, especially when you consider that opening a browser instead of walking into a shop means you buy everything 'sight unseen'. Could what you've just paid for be a big mistake? What if that video card you bought turns out too noisy, or the external drive is too slow? And, bugger it, didn't you just buy DDR3 when your motherboard needs DDR2?

Luckily, legislation was put in place a few years ago to protect consumers who make their purchases online. Many of you will have heard of the Distance Selling Regulations, but few of you understand exactly what's involved. Read on to find out all you need to know.
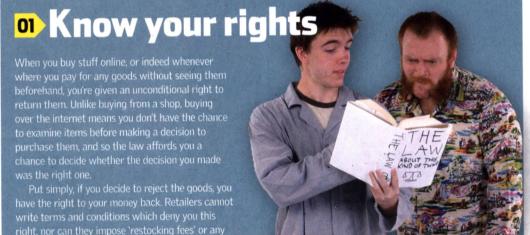
HUH?

The **Distance Selling Regulations** or **DSRs** were introduced in 2000.
Working day means every day except Saturday, Sunday and all public holidays. While the DSRs state that **consumers are unable to cancel the supply of goods made to the consumer's own specification**. This doesn't apply when you customise your purchase of a PC by choosing a particular case, peripheral or memory configuration. **In short, the likelihood is that you're covered**.

If a retailer attempts to charge you for items that you've returned opened, or with the packaging damaged, **they are acting illegally**.

If something you buy **develops a fault** within the first six months of being sold, the law presumes whatever fault caused the problem was present when the item was sold, unless the retailer can prove otherwise.

01 Know your rights

When you buy stuff online, or indeed whenever where you pay for any goods without seeing them beforehand, you're given an unconditional right to return them. Unlike buying from a shop, buying over the internet means you don't have the chance to examine items before making a decision to purchase them, and so the law affords you a chance to decide whether the decision you made was the right one.

Put simply, if you decide to reject the goods, you have the right to your money back. Retailers cannot write terms and conditions which deny you this right, nor can they impose 'restocking fees' or any other spurious charges.

Knowing how the law helps you makes you a smarter shopper.

02 Act promptly

If you've bought something you want to send back, act quickly. You have just seven working days in which to write to the retailer by fax, post or email, explaining that you wish to return the goods you paid for and receive a refund under the Distance Selling Regulations. You do not need to provide a reason. Many retailers ask that you request a returns merchandise authorisation (RMA) number, and in which case you should make use of their returns procedure instead.

Note that you can also cancel items not yet delivered, and in which case you are entitled to a full refund of the delivery charges as well as the cost of the goods.

Don't wait. Cancel if you're having second thoughts.

03 ▶ Put everything back

The law speaks of allowing consumers to take 'reasonable care' of items cancelled under the DSRs, meaning you're within your rights to rip open packaging and use your new purchase as much as you like.

But once you've contacted the retailer and cancelled your contract, put everything back in the box and seal it up. While the law does not demand you to do this, you have a legal duty to retain and look after what you bought – meaning that if you keep using the item, you open a number of avenues for the retailer to seek recompense in the event you break it.

Open packaging carefully and never throw anything away.

04 ▶ Returning the goods

As odd as it sounds, the DSRs do not require you to return the goods. You have a duty to look after your purchase while it remains in your possession, but it's actually up to the retailer to state how and when they want you to return cancelled items.

It may be that they arrange the collection from you, but it's more likely you'll have to send the item yourself. In which case, you should use a 'guaranteed' Royal Mail service that not only insures the goods in transit, but also provides proof of delivery. In addition, you should make sure that the goods are properly protected while in transit or you risk the retailer imposing a penalty.

Make sure you return items using a guaranteed service.

05 ▶ What happens next?

The DSRs mandate that the retailer in question refunds you within 30 days of cancellation. Normally you'll get your money back after you've returned the goods, but if you still have them in your possession (eg. you're waiting for the retailer to collect) you're still entitled to a refund.

If you don't get your money back in full, or you've been hit with a 'restocking fee' or other charges, contact the retailer and explain the situation. At the same time, alert your credit card merchant – they should be able to help you reclaim what's rightly yours.

You should get your money back within 30 days. If not, complain.

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Q Can I return stuff if I've broken it?

A If you are responsible for the damage, no.

Q The retailer claims I damaged the goods. How do I prove otherwise?

A When returning goods, take a photo of them and include a print out in the package you send back. And always send them using a guaranteed service.

Q I've not received my refund. What now?

A Contact the retailer. Explain that you want your money back or you will be contacted Trading Standards. If you paid by card, call your card issuer.

Q Do the DSRs apply to all goods?

A No. It doesn't apply to services such as the one you have in place with your ISP, nor to subscriptions, such as *World of Warcraft*. It also doesn't apply to audio or video recordings, or to any computer software.

Busted Some retailers will try and dodge the DSRs

A look at the terms and conditions of many of the larger online retailers shows how little some of them understand the DSRs. Ebuyer.com states that 'The item must not be used and must be as new when returned to us,' which the law would almost certainly view as an attempt to circumvent your rights. While the DSRs do allow retailers to describe what reasonable care entails, any stipulation cannot restrict your opportunity to inspect and evaluate what you bought. If in doubt, contact your local Trading Standards office, Citizens Advice Bureau or even your family's solicitor.

DEAR WANDY

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. If it ain't working, don't panic...

Problems?

We've all got them, you know... Mistook your wardrobe for the toilet again? Local shop stopped stocking your favourite green-flavoured Pringles? Been playing *WOW* so long your partner's left you? We can't help with those (no, not even the mighty Wandy), but we can solve all of your hardware hassles. Wandy knows everything and is willing to help if you email him at **wandy@dearwandy.com**, including as much info as you can and system specs where applicable.

Will this gag ever get old? We hope not.

DRIVER WATCH

GRAPHICS

MAKE	DESCRIPTION	RELEASED
ATI	CATALYST 7.8	13 AUG 07
NVIDIA	FORCEWARE 162.18	26 JULY 07
NVIDIA	FORCEWARE 162.22 FOR VISTA	26 JULY 07

SOUND

MAKE	DESCRIPTION	RELEASED
CREATIVE	X-FI 2.09.0007	30 OCT 06
CREATIVE	X-FI FOR VISTA 2.15.000	30 MAY 07
CREATIVE	AUDIGY, AUDIGY 2, AUDIGY 4 2.09.0016	9 OCT 06
CREATIVE	AUDIGY FOR VISTA 2.12.0002	16 MAR 07

SIX OR EIGHT?

Q I'm waiting for the release of *Gears of War* for the PC and I've decided I need a new graphics card. I just don't want to be stuck with old graphics. I've decided I'm going to get either an XFX GeForce 8800 GTS 320MB for £187, or an XFX GeForce 8600 GTS XXX for £141.

I don't know which one to get, and in addition I'm stuck with *XP*, because I didn't take advantage of Acer's discounted 'Express Upgrade to *Windows Vista*' program, which ended back in March. This also means I can't play *Lost Planet*. Can you help?

Sam Manning

A *You don't need Vista to run* Lost Planet, *as the game is designed to run on both DX9 and DX10 hardware. Having said that, the list of officially supported cards is depressingly small. If you're using* Vista, *you're restricted to NVIDIA's GeForce 8 Series, and if you're an ATI owner running XP, only the more recent Radeons will work. Not that I could get the demo to even load.*

As for your predicament with Gears of War, gamers should aim to buy the most powerful card their budget will allow, or be prepared to drop the detail levels to compensate. After all, it's one of the most graphically advanced games around right now. If you have a £200 budget, XFX's 320MB GTS will serve you admirably – it's a great card at a great price – but you won't be able to enjoy the DirectX 10 capabilities you crave until you spend a further £100 on an upgrade to Vista.

TROJAN WORSE

Q Help! I recently browsed to a website through search-engine results and I'm now receiving a *Windows* pop-up every minute warning me that my computer is making unauthorised files and that I should scan to remove and detect viruses. The pop-up doesn't look legitimate, and I'm worried about security on my PC.

I'm running *Windows Vista Home* and have run a virus checker. It found a Trojan, which I immediately quarantined, but the pop-up is still there and becoming annoying. I've tried to remove the infected file, but

Gears of War supports DX10. Point and laugh at console owners.

can't find it on my system. I hope you can point me in the direction of a solution!

Tracy Hall

A *There are three ways for non-techies to get shot of unwanted crap on their system. The first is to download, update and scan with a free anti-virus product such as Grisoft's AVG Free or the AOL edition of McAfee VirusScan Plus.*

The second way is to use a dedicated anti-spyware suite such as SpywareBlaster. The trouble with these utilities is that they work best when preventing infections rather than cleaning up afterwards, and there are now so many terrible products exploiting the market that many users are even more exposed than before.

The third method is to use a passive reporting application such as Trend Micro's HijackThis, which is a widely used anti-malware tool that generates an exhaustive list of processes and registry entries responsible for running programs behind your back when you start Windows. The list can be saved to a log file and subsequently copied and pasted to security forums.

In your case, the best course of action is to visit www.trendsecure.com to download and install HijackThis.

When running the program, click the 'Do a system scan and save a log file' button and upload the log contents to a new thread on the Dear Wandy forums.

Once we've worked out what's causing your pop-ups to appear, we can advise you of what changes you need to make to your system and I can let everyone here know what happened next month.

BT HOME SNUB

Q I've encountered an issue logging into Steam servers: when I access a game, it gets stuck at 'Sending Client Info'. A quick trawl of Google shows I'm not the only one, but nobody has a solution.

I use the BT Home Hub that comes with BT Total Broadband Option 3. Within the Home Hub, I've turned on and off a variety of game setups (which automatically set up port forwarding for you) and tried creating the port forwarding manually from settings suggested at portforward.com.

I had it all working when I first set it up, but I then turned it off before going away for a week. This lost all my settings, and I've had the connection error ever since. I had the same problem with a BT Voyager 205 router, which was solved when I found a hacks page telling me to increase some server-timeout value.

> ## "I'm telling you this to lead you gently into a rant about avoiding BT's home networking products"
> Wandy breaks the news to an unhappy Home Hub user

Uh-oh – it's Wandy's longest rant yet.

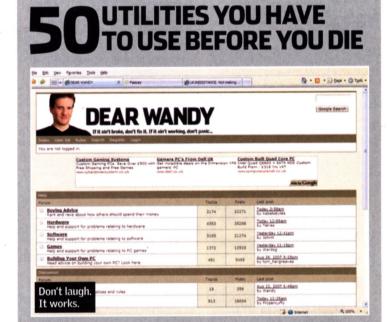impression that Steam had frozen.

I'm telling you this in the hope that I can help existing Voyager users fix a common issue, and also to lead you gently into a rant about avoiding BT's home networking products, even though you work for them.

I've always been a BT broadband user, but rather than switch to one of their overwrought new 'Option' packages, I chose to stick with what works best: no-frills DSL. I'm now paying a low monthly subscription and I'm enjoying trouble-free internet with all the machines on my network. OK, so I miss out on free WiFi minutes and I don't get great savings on travel, leisure, food and drink, but then I've never been a sucker for that crap.

In addition, I don't need to forward ports when playing games – not for Steam, not for Battlefield 2, not for anything. It all just works, and unless you're hosting servers it should work for you too.

If you've been sniffing around the web, you'll find a considerable number of BT Home Hub users are experiencing the issue you describe, which leads me to think it's no coincidence you're a Home Hub user too. It's not a problem with Steam, Steam games, Windows, the internet, global warming or the US sub-prime mortgage market. Whatever it is, it's exacerbated by the fact that your BT Home Hub upgrades itself automatically, which might explain why it was once working and now isn't. In short, you have little control over the damn thing.

In your shoes, I'd double-check that I wasn't running some super-excitable firewall software, then either wait for Valve to publish a workaround or buy a decent wireless modem/router such as DrayTek's Vigor2700G. I'm serious – this is a problem that's unlikely to go away, so you need to consider other options. **PCZ**

Outside of Steam, the only game that required me to change the router's configuration was *Battlefield 2*, where I needed to manually setup port forwarding before the server list would refresh.

As I work for BT and thus get the Home Hub for free, I would like to stick with it rather than buy a different router or reinstall my old one. Do you have any suggestions to get me playing online?

Name and address supplied

A The BT Voyager 205 problem was caused by the default maximum number of IP connections being too low, and the default TCP/UDP timeout values being too high. It meant that people running BitTorrent – or any other peer-to-peer program requiring a large number of open connections to work – suffered huge slowdowns. It also meant that when *Counter-Strike* players refreshed their long server lists in Steam, the router would make multiple connections and refuse to drop the dead ones. It gave the

50 UTILITIES YOU HAVE TO USE BEFORE YOU DIE

Don't laugh. It works.

29 WINDOWS INTERNET EXPLORER 7

COSTS FREE FROM www.microsoft.com/ie

Okay, so it feels a touch slower than *Firefox*, *Opera* or *Safari*, and many people report feeling slightly dirty after using it, but Windows *Internet Explorer 7* remains a very usable, refreshingly stable piece of software, and it's part of the family of browsers that almost everyone has.

Put simply, those sites which complain or behave strangely when you view them in *Firefox* – and we all have them in our bookmarks – are pretty much guaranteed to work in *IE*, because that's what almost everyone has and what the vast majority use every day.

Those of you with *Vista* will already have version 7, and most of you with *XP* will have had it forced down your pipe as part of an automated update. It's quite a big departure from any previous version of *Internet Explorer*, chiefly because it copies the look and feel of other products.

The biggest change of all is the ability to use tabs to view the web, enabling you to have many pages open, but within the one application. There's also an integrated feed reader, a customisable search box on the toolbar, anti-spoofing protection and a phishing filter, plus a wide array of improvements to the engine, which include proper support for alpha-transparent PNGs. Web developers everywhere breathed a sigh of relief as *IE* aligned itself with its rivals.

FORUMS: DIRECT FROM DEARWANDY.COM

(tornado) I've upgraded my computer and reinstalled *Outlook Express*. The problem is that only current emails are shown and I can't access any of my previous emails. I've been to the Virgin Media site to retrieve them, but I can't. **(Wandy)** The problem is that if you've been retrieving your mails using Virgin's POP3 service, the messages aren't stored on the mail server, but are transferred locally to your hard drive. It's like asking the Royal Mail for your old letters when a 747 lands on your house – they won't have them. This means that if you haven't backed up your old messages, they're lost. The alternative to POP is IMAP.

WATCHDOG

Bad companies need sorting – and good companies need praising...

Here to help!

Companies pissing you off? Don't feel your voice is strong enough to shout down the suits? Or, has a company done something so great you want to nominate them for a 'Saints Not Sinners' mention? Email Suzy at watchdog@pczone.co.uk with the subject heading 'Watchdog', or write to her at the address above. Remember to include your name, address and contact number, and all purchasing details such as reference and invoice numbers.

> **He started to experience that most dreaded of PC screens upon start-up: the blue screen of death**

The verdict on Rock Direct: must try harder.

THE ACCUSED: Rock Direct

PROBLEM: Missing laptop.

Back in October last year, reader David Reilly decided to buy a laptop. Rather than go for one of the big names like Dell, he instead chose a company called Rock Direct. A few months after receiving his laptop, he started to experience that most dreaded of PC screens upon start-up... the blue screen of death. Having figured that he could get round it for the moment and with his college year only halfway through, he decided not to send it back straight away.

When summer rolled round, David informed Rock Direct and they arranged to pick up the laptop. But when the laptop came back, the problem was still apparent, so David arranged another collection. Rock Direct repaired the machine and returned it but it never arrived at the other end.

David's now spent over €60 calling the Rock Direct office without so much as a call back and he's left wondering just where his machine has disappeared to.

PC ZONE INVESTIGATION: *PC Zone* investigation: Sympathising with David's PC woes, we got onto Rock Direct to see what they had to say. They responded by saying "the customer in question is being dealt with in a very timely and polite manner. If our courier loses a delivery, we must allow them seven days to conduct an investigation as part of our contract. Customers are always informed about this. This incident sounds like a case of frustration; it's very unfortunate that the customer experienced a hardware failure, and more so that our courier lost the unit. However, we always do our upmost to help our customers and always give honest feedback. Rock prides itself in a very high standard of after-sales support."

Very soon after their initial response, they got in contact to inform me that David had just received a refund.

FINAL VERDICT: Laptop still missing but money refunded

THE ACCUSED: ThermalTake

PROBLEM: Dead power supply.

Back in October 2004, Steve Shellard bought a ThermalTake power supply for his PC. It happily supplied power until the beginning of August when it decided it had enough and promptly stopped working.

Steve submitted a form on ThermalTake's website but didn't get a reply. So he got back in contact with the company he'd bought the power supply from, Novatech. They informed him that the power supply had a five-year warranty with the manufacturer and that if he filled out a tech support form on ThermalTake's site, then they should supply him with an RMA (Return Merchandise Authorisation) to send it back and have it replaced.

However, upon trying to submit the form to ThermalTake, he didn't exactly have much luck. In *Firefox*, the submit button didn't do anything while *Internet Explorer* just brought back an error message, which has left Steve a bit perplexed as to how to go about using that five-year warranty.

PC ZONE INVESTIGATION: I submitted my own form on ThermalTake's website but after six days and with no response and no

Website problems make returning ThermalTake PSUs troublesome.

contact number or email available, I tried Novatech instead. They helpfully offered to check with their supplier if they could offer the warranty. Unfortunately, when they phoned me back, they explained that their supplier could only offer a one-year warranty. In order to get the full five-year warranty, we'd have to contact ThermalTake. But thankfully, Novatech supplied me with a contact email address for them.

Later that day they replied stating that they were sorry Steve had been having problems and that they'd get in contact with him straight away, in order to send him out a replacement power supply.

FINAL VERDICT: Power supply winging its way to Steve. Everybody happy. **PCZ**

SAINTS NOT SINNERS

FREECOM In a world of telephone menu systems and being put through to wrong departments, reader Alan Schofield felt obliged to write in and tell us about the great experience he had with Freecom.

About 14 months ago, Alan bought a Freecom USB Freeview adaptor. Recently, it decided to give up the ghost but knowing it was out of warranty, Alan didn't even bother to contact the vendor. Instead he got on the phone to Freecom, wondering if they might be able to offer some advice on how to fix it. The person he spoke to was "polite, helpful and didn't read from a script" and once Alan had

explained he worked in IT, didn't bother with making him go through the usual 'turn the PC off and on again'. Getting straight down to the nitty gritty, they swiftly came to the conclusion that the stick was dead and Alan prepared to end the call.

But then those lovely chaps at Freecom pointed out that all their gear comes with a two-year warranty and arranged an RMA. A week after returning the faulty one, Alan received his new adaptor through the post.

He sums it up: "Freecom: great value for money, two-year warranty and refreshingly personal support. I'd like to thank Lee Burrage (the support guy) and the rest at Freecom."

HARDWARE DIVIDE

Here at *PC ZONE* we love many things: beer, kebabs, cake, nipples... Oh, and shiny new kit!

LOADED?

GRAPHICS
8800 GTX
EXPECT TO PAY £370
MANUFACTURER XFX
WEBSITE xfxforce.co.uk
AMD have arrived! And the Radeon they brought along is nice enough, but it's neither faster or slower than the 8800 GTS, so our favourite GTX keeps hogging the top spot. Yes, we could have put the Ultra here, but it's over £500 and not much faster. Even we're not that stupid.

PROCESSOR
CORE 2 EXTREME X6800
EXPECT TO PAY £630
MAN Intel
WEB intel.co.uk
Faster than its predecessor and any Athlon FX, Intel's new 2.93GHz Extreme CPU has 1066MHz FSB, 4MB cache, and LGA775 packaging. With a shorter pipeline, unique Smart Memory Access and Advanced Smart Cache technologies, it has people wondering what AMD can do to catch up.

MOTHERBOARD
D975XBX2
EXPECT TO PAY £155
MANUFACTURER Intel
WEB intel.co.uk
Everything that was good about our long-term favourite D975XBX, only with a thick coating of overclocking goodness. Intel's flagship desktop product represents all that's good about the company's products: solid, reliable, no-nonsense and fast. Saddle up with a Core 2 Duo and away you go!

HDD
RAPTOR 150GB
EXPECT TO PAY £149
MANUFACTURER Western Digital
WEB www.wdc.com
Travelling at 10,000rpm and with a 4.5ms seek time, the Raptor is billed as the world's fastest SATA drive. It's also now double the size, meaning you now need just one of them in your rig. But two in RAID-0 configuration will give you oodles of space and make *Battlefield 2* really fly.

SCREEN
SM226BW
EXPECT TO PAY £219
MANUFACTURER Samsung
WEBSITE samsung.com/uk
The Samsung SM226BW is handsome and fast – just 2ms grey to grey – and has no hint of the motion sickness that plagued LCDs a few years ago. It produces a bright, evenly lit image that's full of reverberant colours, sharp edges and dark blacks, making it ideal for any kind of game.

SOUNDCARD
SOUND BLASTER X-FI FATALITY FPS
EXPECT TO PAY £130
MANUFACTURER Creative Labs
WEBSITE uk.europe.creative.com
Slightly bonkers soundcard for audiophiles. Supports EAX 5.0, with 64MB X-RAM for top-quality sound effects. CMSS-3D works magic on a stereo signal and makes headphone gaming crystal. Sounds nicer than an Audigy, but still ultra pricey.

SPEAKERS
Z-5500
EXPECT TO PAY £195
MANUFACTURER Logitech
WEBSITE www.logitech.co.uk
The price has just dropped below £200 and these speakers are simply the best we've ever tested. They make both games and movies ravish your ears, and you'll soon find yourself blowing the dust from your old CDs and DVDs just so you can sit in the middle of the sound and revel in it.
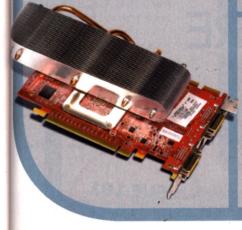
SKINT?

GRAPHICS
2600 XT
EXPECT TO PAY £99
MANUFACTURER MSI
WEBSITE msicomputer.co.uk
MSI's Radeon 2600 XT is a mainstream card that provides X1950 Pro-rivalling levels of power and DirectX 10 together with HDCP and HDMI output – all wrapped up in a genuinely silent waistcoat and with a double-digit price tag. Ideally suited to home-theatre fans and gamers alike.

PROCESSOR
CORE 2 DUO E6300
EXPECT TO PAY £105
MANUFACTURER Intel
WEBSITE intel.co.uk
The 1.86GHz Conroe E6300 might be a stripped-down version of its peers, but don't sneer: it clocks up like nothing else. A smaller die and lower temperatures mean that, with the right board and the right settings, it delivers amazing speed for the money. A great entry-level buy.

MOTHERBOARD
CONROEXFIRE-ESATA2
EXPECT TO PAY £60
MANUFACTURER ASRock
WEB asrock.com
Paired with an E6300, this ASRock board can help you wring high-end performance from a budget rig. It features a 1066/800/533 MHz FSB, SATA II with RAID, *Vista*-friendly 7.1 HD audio onboard, Gigabit LAN and ASRock's easy overclocking features. It even has CrossFire support.

HDD
CAVIAR 1600AAJS SATA-II
EXPECT TO PAY £30
MANUFACTURER Western Digital
WEBSITE www.wdc.com
It's not like a 160GB hard drive is unfeasibly huge any more, but it remains more than enough for the casual gamer to do a spot of casual gaming. A few good titles, Steam, a couple of thousand music files and the odd porn flick still leaves plenty of room for *Windows* to manoeuvre.

SCREEN
VA903M
EXPECT TO PAY £118
MANUFACTURER ViewSonic
WEBSITE www.viewsonic.co.uk
The VA903m ousts our favourite VE710s as it's cheaper and has a 19in screen. Plus, it's a better bet than any of the similarly-priced widescreen variants as there are more pixels on the screen: its 1280 x 1024 pixel panel offers greater depth than the 1440 x 900 panel of its VA1912w sibling.

SOUNDCARD
SOUND BLASTER AUDIGY 2 VALUE
EXPECT TO PAY £20
MANUFACTURER Creative Labs
WEBSITE uk.europe.creative.com
If you're a casual gamer, there's little point throwing half a mortgage payment at your soundcard because you'll not be able to tell the difference. The cheap Audigy features EAX 4.0 and Dolby Digital EX support, and makes an awful lot of sense.

SPEAKERS
INSPIRE P5800
EXPECT TO PAY £35
MANUFACTURER Creative Labs
WEBSITE uk.europe.creative.com
You can go cheaper, but to meet the quality of the P5800 you'll need spend a lot more, as there's no better set in this price range. The subwoofer is deep and creamy, the satellites crisp and clean. A wired remote, line-in and headphone jack complete a very decent little package.

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VS

HELLGATE LONDON ►

The Exclusive Reviews

PLUS

Starcraft 2 › Spore › Ultra-overclocking

FREEPLAY

Born free, as free as the wind blows

PCZONE ON THE DVD

WHAT'S FREE THIS MONTH

FREE GAMES!

I got my wheels

I **RECENTLY BOUGHT** a bicycle. It's brilliant – I've cancelled my neglected gym membership and stopped buying a Travelcard, saving me £170 a month. That's more than a two grand pay rise, is that. Should I live to 523, which happened all the time in the Bible, I'll have saved a million quid.

The only thing is, my bike's too small. I should have known this would happen, when the 5'6" shop assistant recommended a certain size of bike based on his estimation that we were "the same height".

I'm far too polite to say "hang on, munchkin, we're the same size in your helium-voiced dreams". So I managed to awkward my way through the transaction leaving his delusions intact. Having my knees hit my chest when I'm cycling is a small price to pay for maintaining the dignity of a near-dwarf.

What can I do? I can't go back to the shop and say "excuse me, it turns out I'm taller than you after all". This is how Derren Brown works – no-one actually believes what he's saying, they're just too bloody embarrassed to say anything.

So, if you see an oversized gentleman spilling over the sides of what is, in all honesty, a child's bike, learn my lesson well. In the quest for cheapness, the road to free is strewn with malevolent dwarves.

Finally – before any of you smart-arses suggest that I should raise the seat of my bike, I tried that. I'm just so fat that it went down again as I cycled. Are you happy now? Are you happy you bastards?

Jon Blyth

Jon Blyth, staff writer

Blow up.

106 **Demo pages**
It's like developers are throwing their mewling babies at you

Speed up.

108 **News**
A plum duff of news, from the ripest plums in the punnet

Pucker up.

110 **Developers' Webs**
Who gives you extra, in the form of bountiful free stuff on the internet?

Close up.

Fair weather to thee

112 **Freeware**
More gaming rope made from the no-strings world of full, free fun.

Gang up.

116 **Jackass**
Will Porter employs some advanced crowd control tactics.

Mess you up!

118 **Online Zone**
Is this where the emails are? On the internet? Is this the internet?

PCZONE FREE-O-METER

0 HOURS

295.3 HOURS*

*Approximate amount of completely free stuff this month

Demos

Jon Blyth rounds up our free DVD

BIOSHOCK

Seriously, why haven't you bought and finished this yet? www.bioshock.com

THE LONGER YOU don't play this demo, the greater the chances are that someone will come up to you and spoil the plot for you. You're engaged in a race against tactless, or just plain malicious, arseholes, who'll say "Oh didn't you know? It's all on a Holodeck".

Imagine if you're in a lift, and you hear people talking about their favourite bits. You can't ask a pair of absolute strangers to shut up, not in this day and age. Chances are they'll knife you in the tum-tum, and sit on you until you eat a handful of grass.

There's only one way around this; play the demo. Then you'll know if you care or not. If you're bitten by the best game of the year, then you'll retire to your room and not come out until you've finished. If you decide you don't like it... well, then feel free to look up the twists and endings on Wikipedia. Then go onto a 360 forum and post "OMG I just found out Andrew Ryan is your mum but he took man-plasmids" without putting **spoiler warnings** in the thread title.

They'd do it to you. Do it back first.

SUBMERGED
The bathysphere ride into Rapture beats ten shades of shit out of *Half-Life*'s monorail ride. With an introductory film bloated with revolutionary politic, and a giant squid and blue whale, it's got everything.

HACKITY HACK
The further you get through the game, the more willing you'll be to take the alternatives to this hacking sub-game, which is as much fun as having a woodpecker on your nipples.

RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE Clap, clap, clap, etcetera etcetera...

MY TINY ARSENAL
You'll get the electricity and incinerate plasmid, and a pistol and a machine gun. It's not a lot, but then again, you won't be taking on a Big Daddy for a while yet, will you? Anyway, the splicers will keep you busy.

ENVIRONMENTAL
Remember what you learned in science class – oil ignites. Water puts out fires. And firing an electric shotgun into the sea will kill all the holidaymakers, leaving plenty of empty deckchairs.

WORLD IN CONFLICT

Russians? We're fighting Russians again, now?

www.worldinconflict.com

YOU CAN'T JUDGE a game by its tutorial mode. *World in Conflict*'s tutorial not only describes the WASD keyboard controls, but makes you press each one, in turn, to prove that you have mastered this landmark of interaction. The Master Sergeant rewarded my ability to move my eyes with what I can only assume was a patronising compliment.

In the main game, however, *World in Conflict* is one of the most fun, action-packed RTS titles around, with an amazing multiplayer that will – using an intricate network of springs, claws and pulleys – literally rip your socks off. Play. Then buy. Then play some more.

Special School
That tutorial again, for idiots

CAMERA
The best thing to do with the flexible camera is to hold the middle button down, spin around and scream "for me the war is over Tommy".

MY TUTORIAL
Here I am learning about attacking. This tank can blow missiles out of its nose. Missiles are great for attack. Missiles are not great at defense.

ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

Strogg it up, long time www.enemyterritory.com

EUROPA IS PRETTY hot. I don't mean hot like the temperature hot, I mean hot like cool. And not cool like the temperature cool, cool like popular. But not like normal popular. Science popular.

It's the only place in the solar system theoretically capable of supporting life. So why invade Earth when Europa is an alright place too?

All the Strogg would have to do is melt the icy surface of Europa to make water, clouds and wind, and then live there. Not all this invading business, which is frankly verging on the rude.

① GUN
You class and your loadout options determine your gun. I've completely forgotten what gun this on is, though.

② TANK
You can shoot tanks with a regular hand weapon; it just takes longer. And they'll probably shoot you. With a biiiig bullet.

③ BULLET TRAILS
Looks like I'm getting shot from over there, too. Should have known this "shooting the tank" thing was a bad idea.

Help from above...
...and a tip for cowards

ENGINEERS
Engineers and Field Ops can summon stuff down from the sky. It's kinda like building things, only much better for showing off.

VEHICLES
I found a massive land vehicle, and decided to hide in it until our side had won. Unfortunately *ET* doesn't reward this kind of play.

PCZONE HOT DOWNLOADS

TWO WORLDS
www.gamershell.com/download_20686.shtml
It's not a groundmover or a bootyshaker, but it's an enjoyable free-roaming adventure in the style of *Oblivion*. If you don't mind listening to a lot of "prithee" and "mine eyes are blown uppe", then this game could subtract many hours from your life.

NUCLEAR BALL 2
www.gamershell.com/download_20791.shtml
It's easy to look back at *Arkanoid* and think that the gameplay's dead to you now; that we've all moved on enough to put that bat-and-ball bollocks firmly behind us. *Nuclear Ball 2* incinerates that pretentious notion without remorse...

MOVIE BLOWOUT... ON TOAST

KANE & LYNCH: DEAD MEN
www.kaneandlynch.com
"One is a psychopath, the other is under a death sentence from the company he worked for. Can they make it together? The hot new sitcom from the people who brought you *Heil Honey, I'm Home!*"

SAM & MAX: SEASON TWO
www.telltalegames.com/samandmax
The feel-good adventure puzzle series of earlier this year is back – with a new season that has promised to break the routine of the first. We can't wait...

TABULA RASA
www.ea.com/crysis
We're not quite sure what to make of Tabula Rasa yet, but with Lord – sorry – General British (aka Richard Garriott) behind the wheel, the heritage of *Ultima* and *BioForge* might make this a belter.

TEAM FORTRESS 2
www.valvesoftware.com
The *TF2* videos are a great advertisement for this excellent game, but they're also an amazing pitch for a new adult cartoon show about the amusing antics of gun toting maniacs. Somebody commission a series of this stuff, right now.

SNIPPETS

MISSING OUT
Ubisoft's free games are for US, not us

LAST ISSUE, WE reported that Codemasters are thinking about giving their forthcoming games away free of charge, in ad-sponsored packs. Ubisoft have slightly followed suit recently, by making three of their popular games free for download.

It's a slightly different deal with Ubisoft. Rather than talking about free versions of forthcoming titles, they're keeping up interest in their existing franchises by making the older games available for nowt. *Far Cry*, *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*, and the eyebrow-raisingly recent *Rayman: Raving Rabbids* are now available for free, ad-supported play.

Sounds too good to be true, right? Of course it is. They're only available for them freeloading Yanks. We tried – we downloaded the game, we set up a fake Ubi account registered to a US postcode we'd checked out in Google Maps, we tried surfing their site anonymously to prevent ubi.com defaulting to the UK site – basically we tried to find a way for you to steal these games, but we failed. If you find a way, post it without our consent or approval in the forums, please.

Of course, we understand the market influences behind this decision, but if there's one thing worse than starving to death in the gutter, it's having a bunch of Americans standing over you stuffing palmfuls of mince into their mouths and laughing while you do so. On the upside, at least you won't have to set up a FilePlanet account.

We're as mad as this guy about Ubi's decision.

SHADY BEHAVIOUR
snipurl.com/bioshock

One of the more annoying things about PC gaming is the corporate rivalries. ATI owners recently found that their Pixel Shader 2.0 cards weren't supported in *BioShock*, leaving NVIDIA owners with an unfair advantage. Well, hackers have now released a mod that makes the game run just dandy under 2.0. It's a kick in the nuts to back-door politics.

NEW DOUBLE FINE GAME
snipurl.com/doublefine

In a neat tie-in with our developer's websites article on the next page, Double Fine followed the industry trend and released a full, free game on their website. *Epic Saga: Extreme Fighter* is free, there's no in-game advertising, and there's four – maybe five – levels of hot, personal combat. Rock and Roll Heaven AWAITS.

Let's see how it handles in a crash situation...

HAVE YOU EVER TOUCHED A BMW?
Have a go, in *BMW M3 Challenge*. It's free...

PCZONE ON THE DVD

AFTER THAT DISAPPOINTING – and frankly racist – outburst of UK exclusion from Ubisoft, let's move on to 10Tacle, developers of the fantastically realistic racing classic *GTR2* and *GT Legends*. In conjunction with London-based Blimey! Games, they too have seen the benefits of passing the entire cost of the game onto the advertisers, and are releasing a totally free racing game. Rather than featuring an advert, the game actually *is* an advert, for the BMW M3 Coupé. There are worse cars to drive around in.

And even better, *BMW M3 Challenge* is on our cover disc. It's right there, sitting in a whole bunch of microscopic divots, waiting to be popped out by a cheeky laser. Admittedly, with the entire development sponsored mainly by BMW, they're not going to make the car look bad, but is that want you really want? A game where you drive a crap car around? If you're good at blanking out adverts, the future looks a lot cheaper than it is now.

As long as you don't buy one, you're the winner.

REPLAY

Choose from more than none exciting cars.

SUPERNANNY STATE

Celebrity infant tamer to review games censorship

IN AMERICA, IT'S fallen to Arnold Schwarzenegger to defend the nation's toddlers from the decisions of the Supreme Court, and the grisly carousel of slaughter that is modern gaming. In Britain, we've got TV shrink Tanya Byron, who has proved her skill with children over literally *dozens* of episodes of *The House Of Tiny Tearaways*.

The BBC reports that she'll talk to the gaming industry and parents, before making a report about the availability of violent games to children and the effectiveness of current laws.

As the industry already has a decent system of certification, we can hopefully assume that this study is more about the enforcement of current rules than the extension of censorship laws.

We say hopefully. When you consider Byron's second task, though – to discuss the free availability of pornography to children on the Internet – you have to wonder whether gaming will be found guilty by tenuous association. It's the rough equivalent of saying, "let's combine these two reports on gays and paedophiles, right? And let's have Graham Norton to front it up – he'll say anything for a few quid." Hooray for democracy.

We don't see the problem, frankly.

Yes, we know this isn't Tanya Byron. We're just showing mainstream media the same respect as they show us.

THE TEMPEST
typhoon.kuto.de/download.html
Jeff Minter's not the only guy plugging away at *Tempest* remakes. While his *Space Giraffe* is receiving mixed reviews, *Typhoon 2001* is a freer, slightly less oblique version of the super-twitch classic. And what does the developer ask in return for the game? A postcard. It's so lovely we almost coughed up some nougat.

ACE MOLYNEUX INTERVIEW
snipurl.com/lemmybinky
Indie developers and funny buggers Lemmy and Binky have only been podcasting for the last month, and they've already scored an exclusive interview with Peter Molyneux. Listen in surprised horror, as the king of understatement suffers from a rare moment of unjustifiable hyberbole...

DRIFT CITY
Free, cel-shaded and utterly arcaded
drift.ijji.com

THE LAST ATTEMPT at a driving MMO failed. For all its fast action, *Auto Assault* was just too gritty, too grey, and too post-apocalyptic to get enough people into the subs programme. *Drift City* isn't making the same mistakes. It's colourful as hell, with that interactive cartoon feel that comes from good cel-shaded graphics. Also, there's no subscription fee – it's free to play, with advertising in the form of sponsored trucks driving around. Y'know, like life.

The game is something like MMO *Crazy Taxi*. You'll spend a good time driving around like a horny witch and laughing when you crash into real people, before you settle down to doing some missions and getting some XP. Missions are what you'd expect – drive somewhere, drive somewhere fast, trail or destroy an evil car – but this is a shocking amount of good-looking fun for a free game. It's the closest we've had to *Jet Set Radio* since the launch of the Xbox.

Long stunt combos earn you stat boosts.

We insist on driving on the left.

Of course there's racing too.

Bug-Fix of the Month

THIS MONTH
AMERICA'S ARMY

"Startling Travers is now known as Discovery Travers, and cannot transform into Warhuts in the Nomad Zone."

Movie of the month

MAFIA 2
The first *Mafia* is now five years old, and we should count ourselves lucky there's a sequel at all. Despite its lacklustre sales performance, it was one of the best *GTA*-template games ever made. An excellent storyline, some great vintage cars and loads of cinematic action. We can't wait for the sequel.

This guy appears to be combing his moustache with a fork. The twisted genius.

I reckon he's just given us a mission, which most likely involves us offing someone.

Guns, guns, guns. These games so very rarely focus on the Mafia's sense of playful whimsy.

Now that's some depth of field. We can't even see what's in the other guy's hand. Probably a gun.

DEVELOPERS' WEBS

Which are the crafty developers who make you love them using the internet?

EVERY GAME HAS a website. Sometimes it's a page tucked away in EA's database-driven mothersite. More often, it's a moody Flash site with news, videos, screenshots, short-lived forums and "email a friend!" links in the header.

When developers have their own websites, it lets you know how they want to be seen – and when they do it right, they provide you with those goodwill top-ups that give you a reason to exist between their latest games releases.

Today, in these very pages here, let us sing the praises of the developers who are lovely (or at least, pretend to be lovely) and let use love them using the wonders of the Internet.

DOUBLE FINE

Riotous comedy from SCUMM

www.doublefine.com

DOUBLE FINE PRODUCTIONS is the home of former SCUMM maestro Tim Schafer, who gouged out a cavern in our hearts with *Day of the Tentacle*, and filled it with honey with their charming platformer *Psychonauts*. They're currently working on *Brutal Legends*, a still-secret rock 'n' roll-themed game, so the only thing to keep us interested for now is the website.

Luckily, their website provides plenty; well over 1,000 cartoons in four categories. Mark Hamer does a good line in slightly haunting paintings of Polaroid photos – with captions that drop the snapshot into a beguilingly senseless context. "And that, my friends, is why lefties make better lovers."
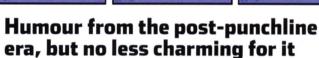
Raz (not the guy from *Psychonauts*) is 800 frames of ambient, go-slow friendliness with
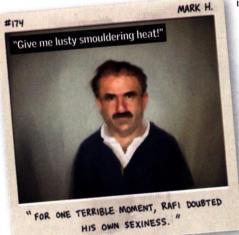
wizards, Mario, Odin, and some gnome who looks like the potion thief from *Golden Axe*.

This is humour from the post-punchline era, but no less charming for it. Scott C does the biggest strip, with nearly 500 episodes of black-and-white mirth.

Double Fine's website has all the sideshow charm you'd expect from a company whose mascot is a two-headed baby. It's not finished (the Projects sections still needs content) but Double Fine take humour seriously – even their jobs page is funnier than most sitcoms.

#109 — MARK H.

Never send Double Fine your photo.

" WANNA HEAR ME FART THE ALPHABET? TOO LATE, I ALREADY STARTED. "

holy crap! a two headed baby! I should probably slay this dude.

Humour from the post-punchline era, but no less charming for it

#174 — MARK H.

"Give me lusty smouldering heat!"

" FOR ONE TERRIBLE MOMENT, RAFI DOUBTED HIS OWN SEXINESS. "

TELLTALE GAMES

www.telltalegames.com

Just the thing for a quick hit of Sam & Max

Sam & Max: always welcome on *PCZ*'s PCs.
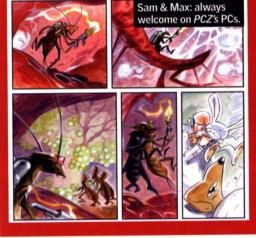
TELLTALE – LIKE DOUBLE Fine – are a company whose sense of fun is part of the branding. You can't imagine EA sidling up to you on a train, and sniggering at the wig of the man opposite, but that's exactly how TellTale come across.

Their web comics don't have such a depth of content as Double Fine's, but they've got *Sam & Max*, which has to count for something. Penned – as you'd hope – by Steve Purcell, they animate slightly with a mouseover effect, which makes you feel like you're pointing at the words you're reading, like a sub-moron. On top of that, there's a wealth of blogs for the more word-minded individual, which you can read by holding a ruler under the line you're on, if you like.

It's difficult to remember, sometimes, that these people aren't your real friends, and you shouldn't think about writing them love letters, or sending them expensive gifts. Or waiting for them to come home...

Bubblegum – circa 10,00,000BC.

3D REALMS

www.3drealms.com

A PC gaming time machine
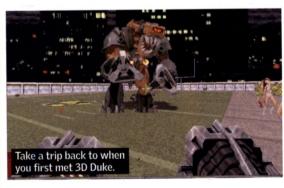
WHEREAS DOUBLE FINE and TellTale win you over by being your best buddy, 3DRealms are emotionally distant fathers who give you things as a substitute for love.

All their old shareware is there, and a fair few freeware titles from the company's history. For anyone with a younger brother who thinks 3DRealms have only done *Prey* and maybe that *Dukey Nukit* game, the download list is long enough to set your nostalgic heart a-flutter.

The lack of charm is embarrassing at times, especially when they're asserting their legal rights – but they didn't have to put all the stuff they have up, so kudos for that.

Take a trip back to when you first met 3D Duke.

BETHBLOG

www.bethblog.com

Blogging their way to *Oblivion*

THE BETHESDA BLOG has only been in action for four months, but it's regularly updated, more than once a day, with insights into the development process and interviews with the staff.

Of course, a big corporate venture like this is going to have to be vetted – if not written – by their PR teams, so you're not likely to get any shocking opinions or exclusive scoops, but the overall tone is friendly, engaging and well-written.

It's also broken up with the odd video, so if you're not that fond of words, there's always something shiny to look through while someone changes your bib.

Bethesda's staff cosplay event was a hit.

MISSED CHANCES

The websites that should be about games, but aren't...

WWW.OBLIVION.COM

Oblivion isn't just an epic game spread across the vast *Elder Scrolls* universe, offering you an engaging freeform style of play that. No, it's also a rollercoaster at Alton Towers, and they got there first. Suck on that, Bethesda.

WWW.FARCRY.COM

If you want to find screensavers relating to this classic shooter, you'll have to go to a subdomain in the Ubisoft website. Because FarCry.com is more where you'd want to go if you're going on holiday, and you need somewhere to put your horse.

WWW.X3.COM

Space-trading in a wonderfully intricate world, whose beauty is second only to *Eve Online*? Almost exactly right – this is the personal website of AJ and Kevin, two gay San Franciscans, one of whom has teeth that look like they operate mechanically.

WWW.STALKER.COM

Now you'd hope that someone sitting on this address would be sexy, a bit slinky. Something we'd have to close down quickly because it's impossibly illicit, and more than a second's exposure and we'd descend into a drug-caked orgy. It's actually communications software. Boooring.

Freeware

Steve Hogarty's saved so much dosh, he's given his butler a raise

A TALE OF TWO KINGDOMS
Well, there were these two kingdoms, right...

Dev: Crystal Shard | taleoftwokingdoms.com

FREEWARE GAME OF THE MONTH

This month, point and click your way through a medieval fairy tale, swing a ball around, play *Knytt* again because I don't think you did the first time, be punished and get knocked about by orbs, and finally become totally bemused and confused by a nutty Japanese fellow.

WE DON'T GIVE enough coverage to free point-and-click adventures on these pages, but that's because they're rarely much good. If you see me writing about a free point-and-click adventure, it's probably because I couldn't find anything more worthwhile to do.

But now I'm going to destroy this notion I've just created by telling you that *A Tale of Two Kingdoms* isn't the sweltering heap of mediocrity you might first believe it to be. It's a well-crafted game, evocative of those old point-and-clicks that weren't made by LucasArts but were still kind-of good.

The game starts off a little poker-faced, spinning a medieval yarn which sees you, an ambassador for one kingdom, staying at the castle of a king of another kingdom, walking the tightrope of diplomacy as an army of goblins worries your collective townsfolk. You're trapped in an ominous temporal pre-dinner timescape until you can find the king's sceptre (it's under a vase), but once you do so the game becomes a curiously appealing project.

The olden talke veers from nauseating to both funny and interesting, while the author remains modest enough to avoid over-writing the script – asking a character a question never throws you headfirst into a swamp of verbal spooge.
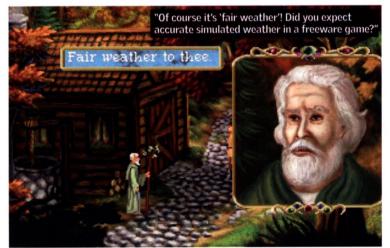
The puzzles are straightforward, with clues sticking out of dialogue like smashed thumbs (yes, faeries do accept cider in exchange for safe passage through the forest), and the main character looks like a big-haired version of Jon Stewart. It's long enough so that you're more likely to get bored and stop playing before you run out of game – which means the burden of failure falls upon you, and not this perfectly capable adventure title.

But how could you possibly become bored, when there are multiple solutions to the game's puzzles? Aha, I see that twinkle in your eye. The promise of multiple solutions is guaranteed to do that to you.

The settings are well-drawn, but hardly cutting edge.

"Of course it's 'fair weather'! Did you expect accurate simulated weather in a freeware game?"

Fair weather to thee.

The obligatory holy man.

"What dangers do thee hold for me, privy?"

KNYTT STORIES
Or How The Tiniest Sprite Saved Christmas
Dev: Nifflas | nifflas.ni2.se

WE'VE FEATURED *KNYTT* before, as well as *Within a Deep Forest*, and that's because we're in man-love with Nifflas, the creator of these meandering platform puzzlers with their other-worldly melodies and pixelated, dreamlike landscapes. Playing his games are like slipping your fingers into a single silken glove and punching the face of the most beautiful animal you can think of. A fawn, maybe.

Knytt Stories is the sequel to *Knytt*, and features the same concept of collecting a thing that gives you the ability to go somewhere else where you may collect another thing. The joy in this seemingly pointless task comes in simply observing the world in which you're travelling, which is littered with imaginative details and visually interesting locations. It's a gently pleasing adventure across a world broken up into a series of screens, each one changing incrementally in atmosphere from barren scrublands to fiery volcano peaks and lush plains. And the music's nice too.

Can't tell for the life of me what you're supposed to do though, as you wander through the screens.

Well it looks nice, but the gameplay is a bit of a mystery.
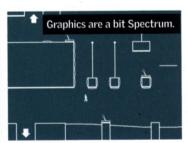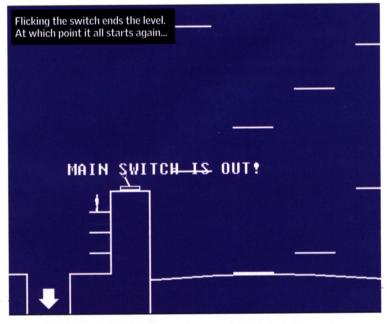
PUNISHMENT 2: THE PUNISHING
The return of the *Punisher* returns
Dev: Messhof Games | www.messhof.com/games
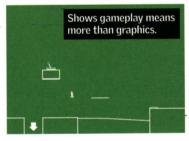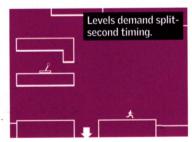
THIS PLATFORMER, THE sequel to *Punishment*, feels a bit like *N* to begin with, but then quickly stops feeling like that. Your little sprite of a character moves with the eerie motion-captured grace of the original *Prince of Persia*, and runs and jumps with satisfying velocity, but never quite reaches that level of agility found in *N*.

With the reminder that *N* is brilliant safely out of the way, let me tell you how *Punishment 2* is unique. In it, you have to backtrack to the first level each time you beat a level. You must drag yourself back over all the impossible jumps, perfectly timed moving platforms and ball-achingly wide pools of acid, just to flick a switch. That's why the game's called *Punishment*: because it's punishing you – like sticking razor blades under your fingernails. The fact that I enjoyed the game just goes to show what a masochistic moron I am.

Flicking the switch ends the level. At which point it all starts again...

MAIN SWITCH IS OUT!

Graphics are a bit Spectrum.

Shows gameplay means more than graphics.

Levels demand split-second timing.

WEBGAME OF THE MONTH
LEAST BEST ROOM

www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/flash/lbr/

OH KENTA CHO, what are you like, calling your new webgame *Least Best Room* like it's the most natural thing in the world. You sit there in your fluffy white dressing gown and hound's tooth-patterned socks with little calf suspenders, shouting drunkenly at your PC, making games that are so 'out there' that we cannot possibly comprehend the meaning behind them. You are the Jeff Minter of the Far East.

In *Least Best Room* you propel a tiny man up the screen, avoiding giant balls that tumble down, and some mines. Like an episode of *Takeshi's Castle*, only with less Japanese men hurting themselves. It's also like that flash animation of a limp George Bush falling through loads of spheres in reverse. That's two of the things it's like.

Retrofit brings new ways to massacre armies to *Medieval II*.

Play: MOD

MEDIEVAL II: RETROFIT

Use *Kingdoms* to revamp *M2:TW*

www.gamershell.com/download_20883.shtml | Mod for: Medieval II: Total War

THE *KINGDOMS* EXPANSION added a lot of new stuff to the already massive game, not least of which was boiling oil. Anyone having played the expansion will find it difficult to go back to the battles of the boiling oil-less original. That's the danger of upping the bar like that – once you give people new and revolting ways to kill each other, they just won't be happy with halberds.

Cease your fret and desist flapping – this mod takes the features of *Kingdoms* and applies them to the original game.

You'll need both games – it's not a way of stealing the expansion pack – but it'll gently transform the original in a way that might just make you want to play it through again, again.

The list of changes includes AI tweaks, and don't worry about messing up your existing files – your original game files are left unmolested in the process.

The v1.3 patch that's just been released by The Creative Assembly fixes a few bugs too, so we've put that on the cover disc.

TALON 1-5

Play: MOD

Next-gen mods arrive

www.bohicastudios.com | Mod for: UT3

AS THE NEW generation of games slowly leaks out, the first of the next-gen mods are well under way. As we mentioned a couple of issues back,

Talon 1-5's skins are faultless.

Obsidian Edge is set to be amongst the first of the *Crysis* mods out there, and *Talon 1-5* is looking interesting as one of the first offerings for *UT3*.

Talon 1-5 is a co-operative futuristic multiplayer affair, featuring a squad of marines who have to fight through a 22nd century landscape. Futuristic doesn't mean fantasy, and tactical doesn't necessarily mean slow – there's a functional feel to the mod so far, and the developers are keen to keep the game gripping.

So far, the concept art and character models produced have the stink of quality so pungent as to border on professional. On top of that, there's a real maturity on the part of the team, who seem to be pretty eloquent about what they want, and how to get it.

Talon 1-5 is at the very early stages of development at the moment – the developers guess at around six months after the release of *UT3* as a vague estimate – but this is definitely one we're looking out for.

FORTRESS FOREVER

The most ill-timed mod in history
www.fortress-forever.com | Mod for: Half-Life 2

Play: MOD

PCZONE ON THE DVD

A YEAR AGO, this would have been brilliant. A Source-engine re-invention of *Team Fortress* sounds like a winner. That finely balanced old-school gameplay, with a graphical makeover – is *such* a great idea.

The fact this mod became available within a whisper of Valve's own version going beta should have crushed *Fortress Forever* outright. Amazingly, it didn't – there are loads of servers, and although most are empty, there's a good number of well-populated games. And as most of them had a couple of spaces free, it wasn't hard to find a quick, fun game. The people we played against are fairly hardcore, but then they've probably been playing *Team Fortress* solidly for 10 years.

Will these people eventually move over to *TF2*? Or will *Fortress Forever* remain a stubborn outpost of resistance to Valve's *Orange Box* pricing strategy? Well, whatever. If you're not sold on the official Warner Bros. cartoony re-invention, then stick with this. Or get both – this one is, after all, free if you've got *Half-Life 2*, and everyone's got that, right?

"My word Larry, we haven't looked so good in years!"

One for hardcore *TF* fans.

ROCKET CROWBAR

One map, daft weapons, slightly fun: one for post-pub gunfights.

Play: MOD

PCZONE ON THE DVD

One dumb mod
www.rcrowbar.com | Mod for: Half-Life 2: Deathmatch

HALF-LIFE 2: *Deathmatch* is pleasingly stupid. The developers of *Rocket Crowbar Redux: Source* are out to make it stupider. Based on the original *Rocket Crowbar* mod for *Half-Life*, *RC:S* gives you weapons that are designed to build on that sense of heart-lifting chaos.

A gravity grenade will suck your enemy and a half-dozen exploding barrels onto the ceiling and the Scientist Shotgun hurls a flailing doctor at your enemy.

On the downside, the unreality does go a little too far, sailing past silly and into dream-like. Also, there's only one map, and no-one's playing. As it stands, this is just a novelty session for a few mates.

Play: MOD

PCZONE ON THE DVD

C&C RETARDED
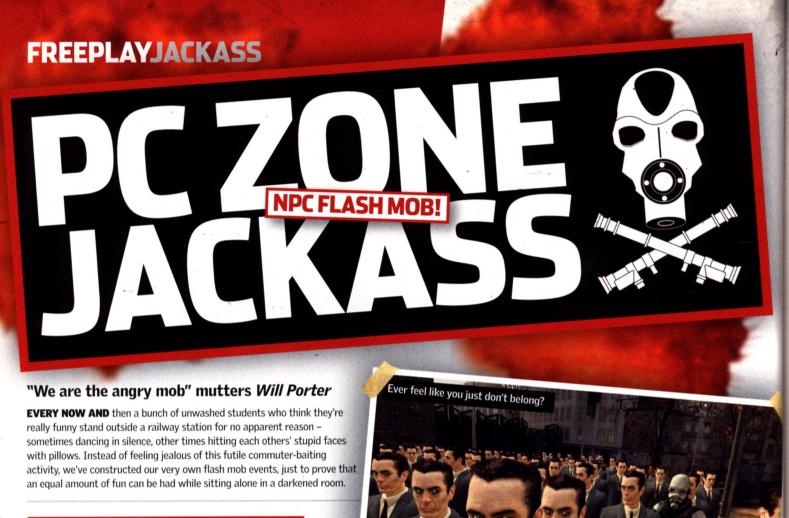
Recoded RTS
projectcrit.blogspot.com | Mod for: C&C3

THERE'S NO FALSE advertising here – the guy behind *C&C Retarded* isn't a designer, and doesn't pretend to be. So instead of making a bunch of shoddily put-together WW2 tanks with JPEGs of his pet cat for a texture, he's left the graphics alone. He's not a sound engineer, either – and he's not going to pretend he is. No, our guy just likes messing around with the numbers, and the hundreds of parameters available to modders, and seeing what effects that has on the gameplay.

It's undoing the months of balance that the developers put into their product, sure. But who's to say this guy's idea of action isn't closer to yours than those stuffy suits at EA? This is quick fix fun for the impatient and the caffeine-addled. And if you like it, check out his *Zero Hour: Retarded* mod, too.

Fun at any cost.

PC ZONE JACKASS

NPC FLASH MOB!

"We are the angry mob" mutters *Will Porter*

EVERY NOW AND then a bunch of unwashed students who think they're really funny stand outside a railway station for no apparent reason – sometimes dancing in silence, other times hitting each others' stupid faces with pillows. Instead of feeling jealous of this futile commuter-baiting activity, we've constructed our very own flash mob events, just to prove that an equal amount of fun can be had while sitting alone in a darkened room.

BEING G-MAN MALKOVICH (AND BEING BLOWN UP)

WHERE?

In the crumbling Eastern Bloc courtyard of *Half-Life 2's* opening train station, the plan was to create an en masse G-Man flash mob. Mysterious forces were united in their eyebrow-raising as a good 300 G-Men grimaced for the camera and looked shiftily at each other. Yes, it nearly made our machine explode. Yes, it was worth it.

HOW?

With the deft use of *Garry's Mod* and far, far too much time on our hands, a vast, vaguely pyramidal pattern of G-Men was produced with consummate ease. Yes our rig was puffing and panting by the end – but for sheer randomness this took the biscuit, ate it and replicated it on a massive scale.

CHAOS CAUSED

Brilliantly, not only did the funny picture-taking drones start going absolutely batshit mental at the presence of so many uninvited guests, but the confused combine guards decided to take action against the G-Man flash mob menace. How? By repeatedly hitting the G-Man at the front while he ran through his idle animations and looked thoroughly bemused. No, there was only one way to shift this demonstration of otherworldly mysteriousness: *Garry's Mod* own-brand dynamite, and plenty of it. The results were pretty much better than *The Matrix Reloaded* – even if our most powerful PC only managed to cough up a frame every ten seconds. If anyone ever asks why you prefer PC gaming to mucking around on a console: this is why.

Ever feel like you just don't belong?

Bloody train strikes...
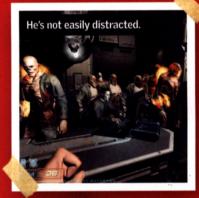
Eat THAT, The Matrix.

ZOMBIE SILENT DISCO!

WHERE?
It's another normal day at the *Doom 3* UAC headquarters on Mars – men grunt, scripted military types point in the direction you're expected to go and lights flicker ominously. But then, as if from nowhere, 50 zombies pile in and start standing on all the sideboards. What's more, some of them are on fire!

HOW?
With judicious use of *Doom 3* console commands, you can not only spawn an outright shitload of enemies in wholly inappropriate positions (e.g. 'spawn monster_zombie_fat2'), but also render yourself invisible to them ('no target').

Unless of course you accidentally thwack them with your torch while attempting to take screenshots.
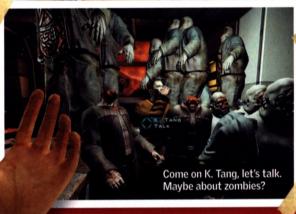
CHAOS CAUSED
The various NPCs were relatively unperturbed by the sudden presence of 50 members of the undead suddenly popping in at breakfast time. In fact K. Tang still sat sipping coffee and muttering about Mars workers seeing strange dark things in the tunnels, at the precise same time that two chaps with exposed rotting brains were invading his personal space.

The UAC receptionist, meanwhile, continued to berate me for not going over to see Sarge straight away – even though two flaming zombies, five fat sweaty reanimated corpses, a Mancubus and a few fly-baby hybrids were all craning over his neck to read whatever was on his screen. He didn't even complain when the chainsaw used to disperse the crowd nicked his spine.

What my mother would call "running amok".

He's not easily distracted.

Come on K. Tang, let's talk. Maybe about zombies?

SEND US YOURS!
Are you aware of a game with nifty spawning commands that we're not? Have you ever arranged *Far Cry* mercs in a vast island-cordoning circle-jerk? If so, you should ask yourself why – but not before sending us a screenshot or video. We'll stick the best up in a blog at www.pczone.co.uk. Email letters@pczone.co.uk with 'PCZ Jackass' in the title

We don't think George Lucas would regard this as canon...

MULTIPLE MON MOTHMA STAR WARS MASSACRE!

WHERE?
We were supposed to be hunting down irritating sidekick Rosh Penin on a floating platform in space. But then we thought, you know who we need to help us on this mission? Bowl-cut freedom fighter Mon Mothma, who doled out the missions back in the *Star Wars* films and books. And do you know how many of her we need? About 40...

HOW?
One of the best features of the unfairly maligned *Jedi Academy* was that by turning on the cheats ('helpusobi 1' on the console), you could spawn a whole ton of friendly or villainous NPCs at any point in the game. So for us that was tapping in 'NPC Spawn MonMothma' and spawning as many righteous rebellion leaders as the engine would allow before crashing to Windows.

CHAOS CAUSED
There's something somewhat off-putting about having 40 silent, identical women in robes staring at you. What Mon Mothma doesn't have, though, is a weapon, so a quick summoning of a rival dark jedi to help us out was deemed necessary. The ensuing slaughter of the accumulated doppelgangers was a grisly, saber-hacked and hilarious affair. **PCZ**

Eerily like a scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

Online Zone

www.pczone.co.uk

Can't wait for the next *PC ZONE*? Don't panic! Just hit www.pczone.co.uk now for up-to-the-minute news, exclusive features, forums, special competitions, pubcasts, Fight Club news, online chats and the *PC ZONE* blog!

ON THE BLOG

PCZONE 2007

What's been happening on *ZONE's* web diary this month...

HE'S ONLY JUST got back from E3, and now he's off to Leipzig. Will Porter gets all the fun. What's more, before he left, he threw some coffee onto the wall and sneered "get that cleaned up before I get back, you worthless louse-ridden drones".

Will had a lovely time, as you would – but the most lovely of the moments in his time sandwich was when he bumped into *Command & Conquer's* baldicoot villain Kane – just walking around like a normal kind of person. It turns out that he's lovely, and doesn't routinely engage in warfare. Kane – we can't think of any person we'd rather bump into in Leipzig. Perhaps that demonstrates a lack of imagination and ambition.

Most of the rest of the blog was trying to organise a *Team Fortress 2* Fight Club, because we couldn't wait to get started. Amazingly, it all went without hitch, and we had the best Fight Club ever – but more of that on the opposite page...

NOTES FROM THE FORUM
Some Valve-baiting to bring some journalistic balance

Tired of our worship of Valve's new orange container? Take heart, for the PC ZONE forum has many venomous attacks on Valve.

It's a travesty that we have to pay for something we own again. And be not allowed to sell it on. And they justify it by saying, 'Oh, but you can give it to a friend'. I'm a selfish bastard – I don't give gifts.

ArchieUK

If they want to fuck us for as much money as they can get out of us, good luck to them. Nobody's forcing us to buy their games, after all. If they create in us a high enough level of demand, we can just pirate their games, and nobody loses.

Let's instead concentrate on the real issue at hand, which is how Valve tricked me into playing Peggle.

SunScramble

I am now forcing a housemates to give me money so he can have my *HL1* and *Ep 1*... Moohahahaha

Funke_monke

I wanted *Ep2* with it's free *TF2* and *Portal*, but I don't need a box. I'm thinking outside the box. Fook the box with it's pointy corners.

peachFUZZ

Valve have said time and again they would offer *HL2* with *TF2* and *Portal* for FREE. They've not lived up to that, AND the price for *Ep 2* on it's own has also risen by $10. My opinion of Valve has gone downhill after this.

funkyjack

After playing the beta, I've gotta hold up my hands and admit I was wrong about *TF2*. It's definitely worth the extra. The good-old *Team Fortress* days are back.

SunScramble

"WOOF!"

POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE

WIN!

Send us your MMO character screenshots to win stuff...

You already know all about our '*PC ZONE* Around The World' bit in Letters, where we ask you to send in your photos of yourself holding your favourite mag all over the globe. Well now, you're cordially invited to send us screenshots of you or your clan in your favourite MMO with a brief, jolly explanation of what you're up to. The best two postcards sent to us every month at letters@pczone.co.uk will be printed here and win a PC game. Get snapping...

PCZONE PUBCAST!
Download Round 3 of the website-only pubcast NOW!

FIGHT CLUB

Best. Fight Club. Ever.

THIS MONTH'S *FIGHT* Club came a couple of days early, thanks to the beta of *Team Fortress 2* being released, and everyone in their right mind being desperate to play it. Once we'd kicked off a bunch of screaming French interlopers and passworded the server for our precious readers, the fun began.

And boy-bastard-howdy, was it fun. Vonstilton and Monkey formed a lethal Medic/Heavy combo, using the Medic's new überboost power to help the mini-gun weilding tank of a Heavy to plough through swatches of hapless opponents. Meanwhile Über Dan proved to be an effective spy, prompting such comments as "I fucking hate spies," and "I also hate Über Dan, although with less profanity".

An hour has never passed so quickly, and if we hadn't had to sod off to do the PubCast, we'd have been there all night. The *ZONE* servers have been full ever since, and long may it stay that way. We'll probably be playing

Getting dominated again...

TF2 again next month, so gird yourself for some non-beta action on Wednesday, 17 October at 6pm (BST).

This opportunity for cartoony gunplay be flagged, along with other, unofficial Fight Clubs, in the Steam Community, so join us right now at steamcommunity.com/groups/pcz

COME AND TAKE ON THE ZONE STAFF IN OUR MONTHLY ONLINE GAMING FREE-FOR-ALL!

Red and Blus in harmony.

[Tw]Scarlet_Pimp

Healer: PCZ_Sooze
UberCharge: 37%

450

ZONE

ZONE CHAT

Can I has prizeburger

FOR AN IRREGULARLY scheduled Zone Chat, this month's was lively – it's almost like you lot are in there chatting when we're not. It's almost like we're not the focus of your lives.

Vile monsters, evil seed.

Not afraid to be cutting edge we asked you to post us pictures of kittens. And oh! The kittens you sent. The cutest kitten won a game for Bogie. Now send us your address Bogie, and we'll send you the game. Bogie's a name we know from Fight Club too – hello, Bogie!

Before it becomes too obvious we keep saying Bogie to annoy any grown-ups reading, let's lay down the invitation to next month's *ZONE* Chat. Plug your IRC client into a random *Quake* server, join the #pcz channel, and get ready for Tuesday 16 October. Not Monday or Wednesday, right?

How to join in!

If you fancy joining the *ZONE* Chat, you need an IRC program and an internet connection. We recommend mIRC, and you can find it on side two of our DVD. Just install, set the options, devise an online identity, connect to a QuakeNet server nearest to you, type /join #pcz into the command line, and hey presto, you're there! Chatting with the friendliest bunch of online readers you could hope to find. Remember, play nice and don't be rude.

Can't make Fight Club?

If you can't make it to Fight Club – perhaps you're too busy fighting fires in Greece armed with a special hose – then join other *PCZ* readers on the following public servers. Who knows – some of us might even be there. The latest info can be found at www.pczone.co.uk.

WHO'S WHO

Jamie Sefton PCZ_NorthernScum
Will Porter PCZ_Batsphinx
Suzy Wallace PCZ_Uzibat
Steve Hogarty PCZ_escaped_monkey
Phil Wand PCZ_People's Front Of Judea
Jon Blyth PCZ_Log

1 COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE
cs.zonegames.co.uk:27015
cs.zonegames.co.uk:27025

2 HALF-LIFE 2 DEATHMATCH
hl2.zonegames.co.uk:27065

3 DAY OF DEFEAT: SOURCE
dod.zonegames.co.uk:27085

4 TEAM FORTRESS CLASSIC
tfc.zonegames.co.uk:27045

5 WOLFENSTEIN: ENEMY TERRITORY
et.zonegames.co.uk:27960

6 PREY
prey.zonegames.co.uk:27719

7 BATTLEFIELD 2142
bf2142.zonegames.co.uk:16567

8 JOINT OPERATIONS: TYPHOON RISING
Listed in NovaWorld

Holiday greetings!

Here's my Tauren Druid on his 23rd try at getting to the valve without dying. I've decided to wait for a higher level to get lost and come across me... better than making the count 24... DAMMIT! Just got owned whilst writing this ><.
Naturehoof / Falgur (Jon Hammond)

Wish You Were Here!

Wish you were beer!

On my wanders in the Domain of Anguish to ask the the Stygian monsters "HOW many beers?"

He didn't tell us his handle (Rich Eastor)

Retro**ZONE**

Jon Blyth takes a reluctant look at the saucy games of yesteryear

SMUT SPECIAL

EMULATION OF THE MONTH

BUT HOW?

Do you really want to see a pixellated version of Sam Fox, and spend the best part of an hour coaxing her out of a fur hat? Are you so confused and bizarre that you get off on a gilded tit? Do you bristle with so much sexual tension that a moment spent unaroused feels like a moment lost? If you answered yes to all these questions, you have no place in civilised society. However, these links might be of interest...

Links...

❶ **C64 Emulators**
www.zzap64.co.uk/c64/c64emulators.html
The C64 is just low-res enough to give you a truly unhappy sexual experience.

❷ **Your ROMs, sir**
www.doperoms.com
Of course we'd never link to a ROM site. But we can't stop you running doperoms past Google.

FIRST, AN APOLOGY to the ladies: if the sheer volume of pink, nippley pixels on these pages causes you to veil yourselves and retreat to a nunnery, then we're sorry. That said, though, the popularity of these primitive grumble-games arms you with important information. You now know that in the absence of fleshy boobs, streaming hardcore video websites and glossy magazines, this is what straight men will use for kicks. And you know that if you took away our 8-bit titillation, we'd revert to the Victorian practice of howling at a table leg and trying to dampen sexual ardour by eating cornflakes.

The way men's baser urges are usually manifested in modern life is in the form of 'gawping like paralysed fish at pictures of tits', and nowhere is this more transparently absurd than in the barely viewable world of 8-bit smut. Do you like *Pac-Man*? Just imagine if, between every level, you got a glimpse of an increasingly large tit! Can you imagine how much more entertaining *Sinistar* would be if, instead of a scary metal face, it was a winking lady? And a tit?

You'd think the free availability of internet porn would have diminished the desire to mix gaming and boobs, but that's to underestimate the global adoration of the unclothed bust. Why else would anyone sit through *Lula 3D* (an inferior gaming experience on almost every level), except to lurch, dumb-eyed and unaroused, from one lewd, breast-filled scene to the next?

So significant is the collision between gaming and cheap thrills that the titles featured here are just the amusing tip of a decidedly sordid iceberg. If we ever fold space and travel in ten dimensions, we'll still have their pixelated baps as a permanent blot on our history.

Gal's Panic: a classic game enhanced by nudity.

SAMANTHA FOX *Strip Poker*
Will you be able to tell if Sam is bluffing?
Will you be able to keep your cool when the stakes are high?
COMMODORE 64 at £9.95
Will you even be able to tell if she's naked?

Yeah, maths and robot chicks. That's what these 'gamer' weirdos are into.

SIX OF THE BREAST
Do you see what we did... oh, never mind

SAM FOX STRIP POKER
The all-time classic, with everyone's favourite pin-up and popstrel, and latterly breast-reduced lesbian.

SEXY DROIDS
An adaptation of the very old game *MaxIt*, with a sexy droid slowly revealed. The birth of slash fiction.

PDEMO II
The filthy *PDemo II* lets you change the colours of the cheeky participants to any of 4,096 hues.

AUTOMATION
On the Atari ST, some hackers were more than partial to Viking ladies in their cracked menus...

SEXY PARODIUS
Not all that sexy, to be honest. But probably the best game you'll find on this sorry page.

WET ATTACK
The short and comparatively charming name for the *Lula* sequel, subtitled *The Empire Cums Back*. Sigh...

NOW & THEN

Magna Cum Laude vs In The Land Of The Lounge Lizards

NOW

MAGNA CUM LAUDE

THEN

LOUNGE LIZARDS

The original *Leisure Suit Larry In The Land Of The Lounge Lizards* was a witty, adult adventure in which a virgin of advancing years decided he was going to do something mucky with his winkle by the end of the night. It wasn't easy, and the 'prove you're over 18' quiz featuring questions about American presidents was a little frustrating for a British child. Nonetheless, it was an old-school adventure classic, with an endearing, smutty feel that never – by virtue of the graphics, maybe – veered into pornography.

LEISURE SUIT-OFF

2004's *Magna Cum Laude* shits on all that. In spite of Larry's sub-Woody Allen ineptitude and irritating voice, if you just play the tedious mini-games, you'll have a Texan girl down to her shiniest parts in less than 20 minutes. Where's the anticipation, the fun? It was replaced by a nauseating cycle of tired chat-up lines and witless put-downs. If you somehow find yourself forced to choose between this and *Lula 3D* (by some sort of demented criminal mastermind, perhaps) go with *Lula*.

MAME FRAME
TARGET BALL (NUDE)
Developer: Yun Sung | Year: 1995

TARGET BALL
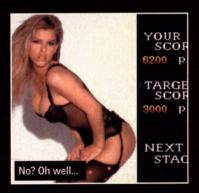
The manly pursuit of pool is full of sexual tension and innuendo. Two men, warily circling a table, with their slender shafts poised to nudge their balls through a soft, cushioned gateway into a welcoming pocket.

So when you reduce that game to a videogame version, effectively stripping the man of his oversized tool and replacing it with a stub of a joystick (or frankly ladylike mouse), you're going to cause widespread resentment. And, if my understanding of male psychology (acquired mainly from daytime television) is correct, that means an increase in domestic abuse. There's only one thing for it:

hypnotise the angry, emasculated male with a picture of a pretty lady. That can be the only rationale behind *Target Ball (Nude)*, a rudimentary 2D pool game interspersed with pictures of elaborately coiffured ladies in various states of undress. (We particularly like how the word 'nude' is in brackets, to give it that formal, impersonal feeling we find so alluring.)

So if you're skilled enough at this barely playable implementation of video pool, you'll be able to gather your mates around for a two-second glimpse of a badly digitised tit. Now can you begin to imagine how Hugh Hefner feels?

YOUR SCORE 5800 pts
TARGET SCORE 4000 pts
NEXT STAGE

Hair big enough for you?

WHAT IS MAME?

MAME is the Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator, currently emulating over 3,500 games. You can download it from www.mame.net – use Mame32 for a nice front-end. Then you can download *Robby Roto*, which is legal. You can play all the others too, but not legally. So stop it. Right now.

YOUR SCOR 6900 p
TARGE SCOR 2000 p
NEXT STAG

How about this?

YOUR SCOR 6200 p
TARGE SCOR 3000 p
NEXT STAC

No? Oh well…

SUPERTEST
PC GAMING'S FINEST YEAR

ON THE DVD

PC games have produced many a fine vintage, but which is the best of all?

ONCE UPON A time, four men assembled in a room. Each man had a favourite year. Log chose 1995, because he was sentimentally attached to a time when his body was agile, and every new game seemed to bring incredible, impossible new features. Parallax scrolling! 3D! Sprites that scaled up in size as you approached them! His sentimentality revolted Jamie Sefton, whose hedonistic spirit of carpe diem led him to thump the table in defence of 2007, a year when all the classic franchises and developers aligned to release great games. Even if most of them haven't come out yet.

Will Porter sported a similar nostalgia for 1998, the year when his addiction to PC gaming was a passionate hobby and constant source of pleasure, rather than a deeply-resented and underpaid career. Only joking! (These tears, they are tears of *laughter*.) Meanwhile, young Steve Hogarty chose 2002, because... well, when you're six years old like Steve is, your options are pretty limited.

Will parties like it's 1998.

Jamie: a man of the here and now.

We won't list the games that were bandied about in support of our arguments here, apart from an apology from Log, who made a rambling attempt to describe a half-forgotten but fondly half-remembered *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream*. It really was a great game, despite his ham-mouthed mangling of its powerful, dark themes.

What's your favourite year? Let's turn this into a Channel 4 nostalgia talking heads show. Log on to pczone.co.uk and head to the forums, where it's quite possible that people will be talking about this very subject, not to mention talking about *Bod* and space hoppers. **PCZ**

Log still holds a candle for 1995.

2002 won a few hearts.

2007 got off to a flying start with *STALKER*, and the best is yet to come.

Sefton's spirit of carpe diem led him to thump the table in defence of 2007

STEVE HILL'S
NeverQuest

Steve Hill takes a look at *Guild Wars: Eye of the North*. Sort of...

Earthquakes have revealed a hidden world beneath Tyria, where the Dwarves and Asura have been forced out by the Savage Destroyers. Source: the back of the box, where I'm also told that 'The land has erupted, spewing forth a race of beings with only one thought – DESTROY EVERYTHING. From the caverns below to the mountains above, Tyria cries out for her heroes...'

So it's a time for heroes, and I am one NeverQuest Hill, a dashing adventurer with a hoodie and a cape, ready to take on all that The Eye of the North can throw at me. I may have been wrapped in cotton wool for the best part of a year, but inactivity has not blunted my desire, nor my collection of ornamental scythes.

First though, there's a bit of decidedly un-heroic admin to contend with, and I find myself desperately scratching the Game Activation card like a Mayfair-smoking crone in a backstreet newsagent. It's a step above the usual scratch card though, adorned with a brace of sultry females: one a pasty dead-eyed Goth, the other a pouting pig-tailed temptress, each hinting at a magical word beyond the secret 25-digit alphanumeric code.

HIT THE NORTH
Following a strict entry procedure, involving clicking the word 'Next' a few times, I am magically transported to the expanded world of Tyria, although it has to be said it looks a bit familiar. Finding

myself in something called The Astralarium, I politely ask the first person I see, "Is this The Eye of the North?"

It seems a perfectly civil question, but it's enough to cause one Don't Trust A Smiter to laugh out loud.

"Arenas," spits Kido Crisis, by way of explanation.

"Eh?" I say, "Where's The Eye of the North."

None of them seem interested in helping me, although I've inadvertently joined their party, and spend a thankless few minutes in a training area, using one of my scythes to hack at a barrel with arms, that's meant to replicate a warrior.

"This is tedious," I wail. "How do I find The Eye of the North?"

Again, I am greeted by a wall of silence, and am about to give up when a distended voice whispers to me from the ether: "Hey, just to say – Big fan of the column," says Odessa Falcorn, for it is he. "Keep up the good work!"

DA BOAT COMES IN
Never meet your readers, the old adage maintains, but in this brutal world his friendly words are like a ray of light.

"Thanks," I say. "Can you help?"

"Sure," says Odessa. "What's up?"

"I've downloaded the new expansion but I don't know how to get there."

"Okay, which campaign are you in? *Nightfall*?" replies Odessa calmly.

"No idea," I reply, like a hapless berk.

"TWENTY! Thou hast to be level 20 to get in! Ye taking the piss!"

"Odessa, thee art my gallant, my saviour!"

Inactivity has not blunted my desire, nor my set of ornamental scythes

"Okay, what town are you in?" he asks soothingly.

"Isle of the Nameless?" I guess.

Meanwhile, Master of Paths announces "When your team stands alive on the battlefield and all your enemies are dead, you have won an annihilation match."

WAR BY ACCIDENT
While I've been chatting with Odessa, I've been conscripted into a battle, starting in 15 seconds. So as Odessa obliviously explains how to catch a boat to The Eye of the North, I come under attack from some vicious Enemy Warriors, who leave me face down in the dust. Hauling myself to my feet, I consult my map and somehow manage to find the aforementioned boat.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, the journey passes by in the blink of an eye, and I arrive at Kamadan, Jewel Of Istan. True to his word, Odessa is waiting,

waving at me from within a fancy suit of armour. Pleasantries out of the way, I ask how to find the cursed Eye of the North.

"You need to speak to a guy called Bendah," he says, in all seriousness. "He shows you how to get there."

Bendah is lurking around the corner, and appears to have been waiting for me.

"Ahai, NeverQuest Hill," he exclaims, "I am Bendah. My Sunspear duties are to map the underground caverns... blah blah blah... smuggling loot... blah blah blah..."

I've pretty much stopped listening, when he sternly announces "YOU MUST BE LEVEL 20 TO ACCESS GUILD WARS: EYE OF THE NORTH."

What the fuck? I've been dipping in and out for a couple of years, and am a mere level eight.

"How long will it take to level from eight to 20?" I urgently ask Odessa.

"About five or six days..." **PCZ**

"Thou braggarts, I just desire directions..."

"Thou gits. Thee hast ended my quest for the Eye."

DEVELOPER'S COMMENTARY
PEGGLE

How could firing balls at pegs be so good?
Jon Blyth talks to the men behind the pegs

POPCAP ARE THE kings of casual gaming. Their flagship game, *Bejeweled*, has been bought by over five million people, and played for free online by untold millions more, making it more popular than life itself (or at least, about as popular as *Half-Life 2*). Their PC offerings are slick, intuitive, generally not very original, but queerly compelling. Despite their popularity and strong sales, we never really took PopCap games too seriously – that is, until *Peggle*. Just original enough to make it stand out from the crowd, and so finely tuned as to demand a begrudging nod of respect from even non-casual gamers, *Peggle Deluxe* has kept us late after work, and even put back the development of *The Orange Box*, perhaps to include the last-minute *Half-Life*-themed extension, *Peggle Extreme*. We talked to Eric Tams, *Peggle's* senior engineer, and Sukhbir Sidhu, studio VP of PopCap, about the little game that briefly paralysed an industry...

GLOSSARY
For a simple game, *Peggle* is set in a peculiar world, so before you read this piece and wonder what the hell is happening, here's what it all means...

'All Three Trophies': Utterly completing the game. Takes months.
Bjorn: A soppy unicorn who cries when you quit the game.
Claude: A lobster whose claws come into view like he's standing behind you doing pottery like Patrick Swayze in *Ghost*.
Extreme Frenzy: What happens when you hit the last orange peg.
Kat Tut: An Egyptian cat with the power to enlarge buckets.
Lucky Spin: A random power-up with spinning wheels and suchlike.
Super Guide: A line that guides the ball in a vaguely super way.
Space Blast: A rude explosion that lights up the pegs around it.
Ultra Extreme Frenzy: An Extreme Frenzy with fat knobs on.
Warren: A leporine prestidigitator with a really lucky hat.

Just another day at the Peggle Institute...

01 **THE PITCH:** Sidhu: "We originally had the idea that we wanted to make a pachinko game, but as pachinko is purely luck-based, it doesn't make for a good game unless you have the gambling element to make it interesting. Still, we wanted something that had elements of pachinko, or even pinball. Even then, though, pinball was a little too *skill-based* in some ways, and doesn't lend itself to compulsive PC play."

Extreme peggling is only achievable through *Peggle*.

Now that's liquid *Peggle*.

02 DEVELOPMENT: Sidhu: "*Peggle* was two years in development. The first four months were just a prototyping stage – we didn't really know the kind of game we wanted to make, beyond something like pachinko and pinball. Brian Wellstein was the engineer who co-designed the game – he started off making a physics engine so we could just play around with a bunch of different concepts. We came up with pinball games, a few puzzle-y games, and some really twitchy games. Some were fun, some were too difficult, and others just didn't work. *Peggle's* a very simple concept, but we went through dozens of designs."

Tams: "After four months, we had the first level of Peggle, much as you see it now. We felt that it was pretty addictive – it was just a one- or two-minute game, but you could play it over and over again, and like we say, that was just the first level. That was when we started adding things here and there – like the Peggle Masters and their power-ups. And we started adding things to the end – like Extreme Fever, and the free ball bucket."

03 ADDICTION AND EXCUSES: Sidhu: "It's actually funny – I have a friend that works over at Valve, and he said that they actually delayed the shipping of *The Orange Box* by a whole week [because of *Peggle*]. They've got a couple of people over there who've got all three trophies. I've done everything in the game at some point, but I was working on development, so I'd lose my profile, stuff like that."

Tams: "Same here, over the course of two years, we did all the challenges and cleared everything, but never in one build. It is possible – it's not easy, but it's perfectly possible."

> "Renfield was originally meant to be a ghost, but we realised that he just looked like a Klansman"
>
> Eric Tams, senior engineer, *Peggle*

Can you feel the FEVER? It is EXTREME!

04 THEY NEVER MADE IT: Tams: "Our lead art guy had a huge amount to do with the characterisation of the Peggle Masters – we all had these ideas of what we wanted the characters to be, but he's the guy who brought them to life. Renfield, though, was originally meant to be a ghost. It was still going to be Spooky Ball, but he wasn't a pumpkin, he was going to be this ghost. So he was just this white sheet with holes in it, and we realised that he just looked like a Klansman. We thought that that wasn't what we really wanted, so we ended up replacing him with a pumpkin."
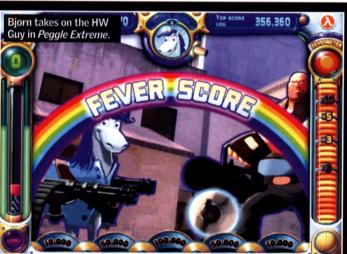
05 **ALL JOKES ARE A LITTLE BIT SERIOUS:** Tams: "A lot of our stuff at the beginning, in the prototype stage, were just jokes, but people seemed to like them, and they ended up making it through. For example, the way the camera dramatically zooms in when you're about to hit the last peg – we were thinking, 'how can we make ending a level more exciting?' The zooming-in idea seemed almost ridiculous at first, but we gave it a try. Then we thought maybe we'd gone too far, so we took it out again. After playing it for a while, we realised we really missed the zoom. It took a lot of tweaking to get all these effects to work well together."

Now we're peggling on all cylinders.

Bjorn takes on the HW Guy in *Peggle Extreme*.

Peg. Pegpegpeg. Peg!
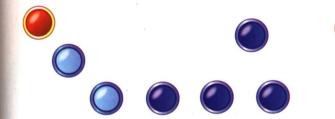
06 **ODE TO JOY:** Sidhu: "When we were prototyping for the first few months, we had the ability to just put in any file we wanted to go with Extreme Fever. I had *Ride Of The Valkyries* for a while. And then Ace (designer Brian Rothstein), who's a really good pianist, and really into Beethoven, put in *Ode To Joy*, and it worked so well that it survived the whole development. All these things we put in as a joke – we never really thought it'd be there at the end; but when we saw peoples' reactions to winning a level – throwing their hands in the air – we had to keep it, so we ended up licensing it."

Tams: "*Ode To Joy* sent us down the road of having a lot of over-the-top rewards. All the effects, and the whole pace of the game – the zoom-in, the drum-roll – it's just the absurdly over-the-top celebration of victory. It makes the game a lot more pleasurable. It's funny – such a simple game, but without these things it'd be so radically different."

07 **MY LITTLE PONY:** Sidhu: "My favourite character is Bjorn the Unicorn – with his Super Guide, you can really set up a few of the long shots and super long shots. There's nothing as satisfying as planning out a shot, and being able to execute it, and Bjorn is the only character where you can get these spectacular shots with the computer stepping in."
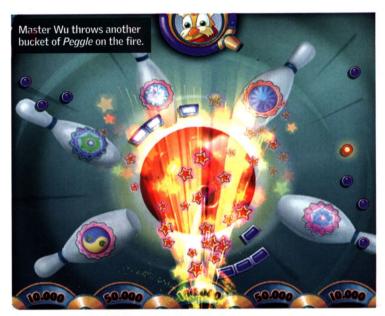
Tams: "Bjorn is my favourite character too. He's the default character, so whenever we were testing a level, he's the first character that comes up, so we ended up playing a lot with him. It sort of depends on the mode, though – in a duel mode, I'd probably go for Splork's Space Blast, or even Warren's Lucky Spin. Everyone has characters they absolutely despise, and insist are useless, but other people will be adamant that they're awesome."
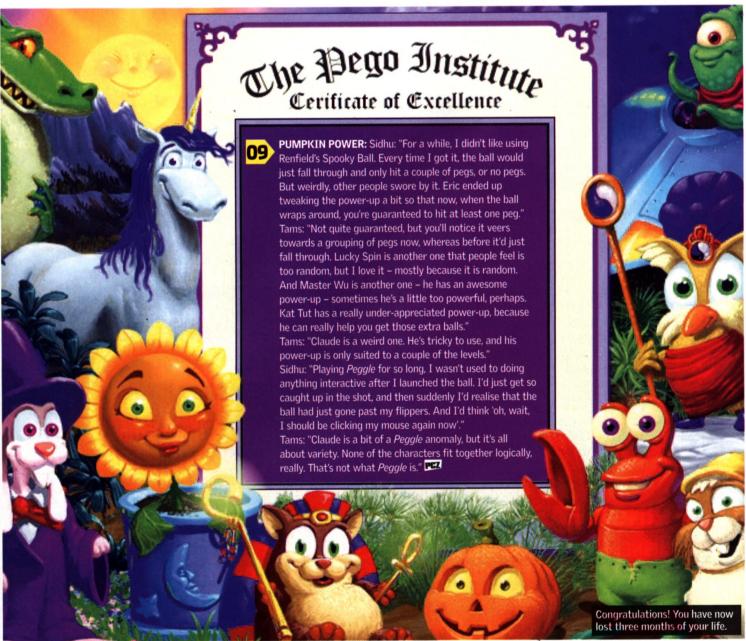
"We have started working on an expansion called *Peggle Nights*, named after *Baywatch Nights*"

Sukhbir Sidhu, co-designer, *Peggle*

Master Wu throws another bucket of *Peggle* on the fire.

08 **FAIR COMPETITION:** Sidhu: "Right now, we're not working on a *Peggle 2*, but *Peggle* is still doing really well. We're developing it for a couple of other high-profile platforms in the next six months or so, and one of those will feature multiplayer. There are no plans for a PC multiplayer at the moment. We have started working on an expansion for *Peggle*, though – called *Peggle Nights*, named after *Baywatch Nights*. It's basically the same rules and characters, but with around 65 new levels, and at least 75 new challenges. It shows the dreams of each character – their dream job, their dream locations, it should be funny."

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09 **PUMPKIN POWER:** Sidhu: "For a while, I didn't like using Renfield's Spooky Ball. Every time I got it, the ball would just fall through and only hit a couple of pegs, or no pegs. But weirdly, other people swore by it. Eric ended up tweaking the power-up a bit so that now, when the ball wraps around, you're guaranteed to hit at least one peg."
Tams: "Not quite guaranteed, but you'll notice it veers towards a grouping of pegs now, whereas before it'd just fall through. Lucky Spin is another one that people feel is too random, but I love it – mostly because it is random. And Master Wu is another one – he has an awesome power-up – sometimes he's a little too powerful, perhaps. Kat Tut has a really under-appreciated power-up, because he can really help you get those extra balls."
Tams: "Claude is a weird one. He's tricky to use, and his power-up is only suited to a couple of the levels."
Sidhu: "Playing *Peggle* for so long, I wasn't used to doing anything interactive after I launched the ball. I'd just get so caught up in the shot, and then suddenly I'd realise that the ball had just gone past my flippers. And I'd think 'oh, wait, I should be clicking my mouse again now'."
Tams: "Claude is a bit of a *Peggle* anomaly, but it's all about variety. None of the characters fit together logically, really. That's not what *Peggle* is." **PCZ**

Congratulations! You have now lost three months of your life.

All details correct at the time of going to press. But they might change. PC ZONE is a fickle mistress, much like the sea or lady luck.

NEXT MONTH...

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Xenbook   Profile   edit   friends   network   inbox

G-Man
is hanging around in a barn, waiting for someone to walk past

Interested in:	Men, Vortigaunts
Relationship Status:	In a relationship with J-Lady
Looking For:	Anything I Can Get
Religious Views:	Can't see a church lol
Political Views:	Can't see a politics lol
Hometown:	My home's a house not a town lol

View photos of G-Man **(12)**

Draw Graffiti on G-Man's wall

Ask G-Man what he's up to

Hold G-Man in place using unexplained powers

Make G-Man burn a scientist in Garry's Mod

Turn G-Man into a zombie

Fight G-Man on top of a train

Mini-Feed
Displaying **7** stories   See All

Scanner tagged G-Man in four photos.

Friends
25 friends   See All

H from Steps   Mr T   Q

Eel's E   M   Y

Your Groups
15 Groups   See All

- My washing machine sounds like a bloody jet engine
- If this group reaches 10,000 people I'll name my first child Gonarch
- I suspend people in train carriages that lie between time and space – and I love it!
- Big bottomed girls – they make the rocking world go round
- I'm not convinced episodic delivery is best suited to the FPS genre either!

September 30
J-Lady commented on G-Man's photos
"omg you were so pointy back then if you ever get that pointy again you are so dumped"

September 29
Wallace Breen wrote on G-Man's Wall
"OMG don't write on your own wall you total n00b"

September 28
G-Man wrote on G-Man's Wall
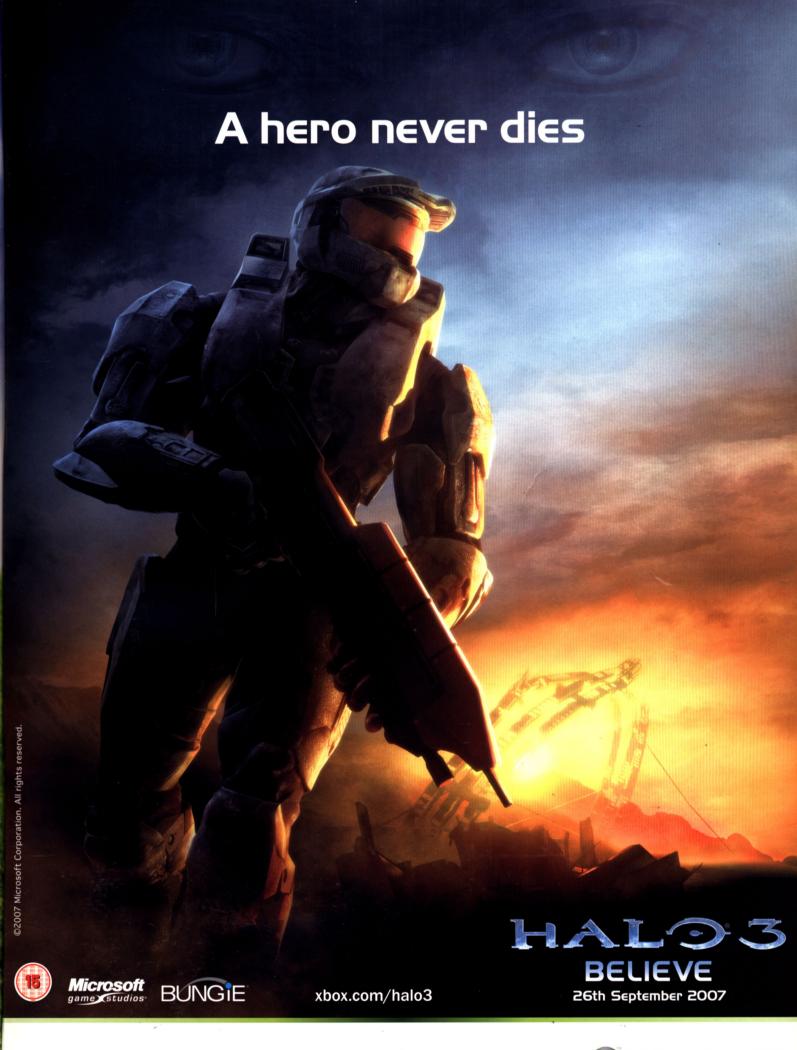"Hey Wallace, how's it going?"

September 27
Wallace Breen wrote on G-Man's Wall
"You finally made it, welcome to the freakin' century,"

September 26
G-Man is waking up to smell the ashes lol
G-Man joined Xenbook