NAG

DAVINCI'S CODE IS UNRAVELLED
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TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND HANDS ON
WORLD OF WARCRAFT IN SA
GAMING IN THE FIRST WORLD
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24

THE GAME

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STAR WARS: EMPIRE AT WAR

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Zero Bright Dot and Intelligent Video Enhancement Deliver Image as Good as the Best TV

ASUS Introduces MM17 and PM17 LCD Monitor Series

ASUS PM17 Series

Best panels and compatibility in the business

The mainstream MM17 Series and flagship PM17 Series incorporated bright-dot-free 17-inch panels, SPLENDID Video Intelligence Technology that provides five modes for various graphics applications and 1280x1024 resolution to deliver clear and vivid images that are unmatched by competing display solutions. As the leading brand for motherboards and graphics cards, ASUS has the resource and expertise to subject its LCD monitors through a series of stringent compatibility tests with the latest boards and cards

MM17 Series - The choice for mainstream users

The MM17 Series consists of two models, the MM17T and MM17D. They take on a curved concept that represents simplicity at its best. ASUS' award-winning industrial design team also took ergonomics into consideration, including tilt angles for easy viewing, removable base for wall mounting and display lock for data security.

The MM17T comes equipped with multimedia speaker, headphone jack and DVI input, making it especially suitable for gamers and graphics designers. For those who have a limited budget, the MM17D, with its excellent performance and affordable price, is a great choice.

ASUS MM17 Series

MM17 Series offers 400nits brightness, 600:1 contrast and 8ms response time

Created by ASUS' award-winning Industrial Design Team

PM17 Series · The flagship of ASUS displays

Both models of the series, PM17TU and PM17TE, adopted superb panels with ASUS Crystal Shine and Color Shine technologies. Color Shine is a glare-type panel technology that provides exceptional visual quality with enhanced color density and saturation by utilizing multiple coating color film. Crystal Shine improves panel brightness to 500nits for everything from games and movies to animations and graphics designs.

The PM17TU also leveraged the unique Trace-Free Technology, which implemented the innovative anti-double-edge overdriving method with noise reduction circuits to reduce response time to 3ms in all gray-to-gray levels, eliminating annoying ghosting and tracers.

The PM17TU and PM17TE provide D-sub and DVI output interface and complete cable bundles to support both standards. Two stereo speakers located beneath the panel deliver quality audio performance without the extra cost and tangling cables of standalone speakers.

The flagship PM17 Series

Removable base for wall mounting

Stereo speaker provides quality audio enjoyment

ASUS SPLENDID Video Intelligence Technology

SPLENDID evaluates each pixel in every frame and adjusts them in smaller regions without affecting the whole picture. Colors, brightness, contrast and sharpness in each region are dynamically optimized according to conditions most favorable to the human eye. It offers five application modes and three skin tones for different graphics utilization.

SPLENDID Skin-tone Selections

Reddish Skin-tone *Natural Skin-tone* *Yellowish Skin-tone*

Three skin tones for the most realistic visual quality

SPLENDID 5 Video Preset Modes
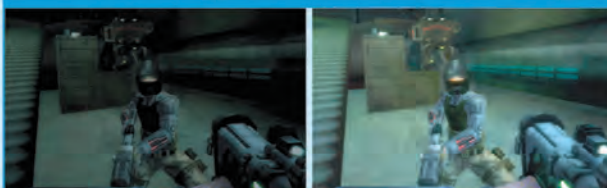
Automatic and intelligent video enhancement through Splendid's 5 special modes (Standard, Scenery, Gaming, Night View and Theater)

ZBD (0 bright dot) Policy and 3-year Warranty

All ASUS LCD monitors are protected under ZBD. Even if one bright dot is found, users can exchange for a new panel within one year of purchase. They also offer 3-year system and panel warranties, clear demonstrations of ASUS confidence in its quality management and dedication to provide unrivaled display solutions.

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THERE YOU HAVE IT – there's a big 24 on the cover. NAG, which can be considered an enthusiast gamer's magazine, placed a licensed game on its cover. We've done this before with series like Lord of the Rings, but there is a difference. 24: The Game is a direct spin-off from a TV show and is thus the enemy of normal gaming. But we have our reasons here. There's the obvious one: 24 on the cover will move a lot of magazines. But covers aren't given lightly; else we'd just make every third one a Final Fantasy one. 24 turned out to be a competent game. Not brilliant, but it's a very nice companion to the show and a decent game on its own. Maybe we're a bit early or late here, but consider the cover as NAG declaring a gaming ceasefire on licensed titles. They aren't all bad, and a lot of unlicensed titles are also complete rubbish. But this wasn't our decision. The game did the talking.

Since this is my first Editor's Note in the magazine, let me thank all the people who worked on this issue. We have two new designers [for Chris to lord over] who replace Kirsten, who has ventured abroad after a great year here. Emma Gernetzky and Chris Savides joined the team and did a smashing job. Well, page ahead and go see for yourself. Russell Bennett also joined us as NAG's new Hardware Editor and Editor of Custom PC South Africa, NAG and SACM's new sister magazine. You should have a copy of Custom PC South Africa bundled with this issue.

The last announcement for this sermon is to ask you to please complete the NAG Survey. Firstly, Michael used his spare time since leaving the Editor's chair to round up some serious prizes worth winning. Secondly, it'll help us make a great magazine, because we learn what you like and don't like. With that, a special thanks to the four NAG forum members who sat with us and answered our questions. We'll definitely be doing more of that in the future.

My personal philosophy while being Editor is discussion and an interest in games. Gaming has changed a lot since I first got interested in it, and that means that magazines have to evolve as well. NAG has been doing a great job so far, so the idea is to see if we can do MORE. Lucky for you guys I have one of the best teams who all know what the hell they are doing. Lucky for us, you keep buying the magazine. Be sure to tell us what you enjoy!

James Francis [Editor]

CUSTOM PC SA IS HERE!

Launching this issue and bundled with your favourite gaming mag (for this launch issue only), Custom PC SA is a whole new chapter in our evolution and a thrilling addition to our repertoire. Read through it yourself, and we're sure you'll agree that it is going to be the only SA mag for hardcore, enthusiastic and sometimes slightly loopy SA PC users to go to for all the meaty, technical details of the hardware we love, every single month.

INBOX

LETTER OF THE MOMENT

FROM: Hayden
SUBJECT: Under 3 game rating

Hey, NAG.

I just want to start off like a lot of people by saying thanks for the magazine. I get it every month like any other one of your readers. Now, to why I am e-mailing you. Don't you think that it is odd that the ratings on some of the games are +3? I think that it is odd for this reason: Children that are younger than the age of three might not understand the game dynamics needed to play these games, and there is the factor that they might be more interested in balls, you know, that sort of thing. That is if you don't count Barney games etc. Also their reflexes might not be fast enough, so they will get frustrated and throw tantrums and scream and so on. Then the +3 rating also applies to children up to the age of six. The thing to consider here is that they will usually get bored of the +3 games, but they can't play the +7 games because they are too mature for them. Need for Speed: Underground 1 is rated like this too. Why, instead of rating the games so low, don't they just start rating games at the age of six, or just start on the +7 rating?

Get them young, said the Jesuit priest. Thanks to millions of years of evolution, young children are hardwired to be sponges – to not question [initially] and accept what they are being told as truth. This makes sure, for instance, that when you tell a two year old not to walk off the edge of a cliff he doesn't test your theory. So there is a difference between how a very young child and someone who is only somewhat older sees and interprets games. I don't know if that's the reasoning behind the 3+ restriction, but one assumes some research went into the number. The same goes for a six year old. That age divider is there to keep kids out of harm's way. Sure, not every kid sees things the same way at the same age. In Japan, age restrictions aren't as enforced. Instead, it is seen as whether someone is mature enough to play a game. Still, those ratings exist for a reason and unless a parent thinks the game is safe for his/her kid, he/she should pay attention to that rating. Maybe then so many gamers won't think Mario is real.

NEXT MONTH'S TOPIC
What do you really think of licensed games?

The 'Letter of the Moment' prize is sponsored by EA South Africa. The winner receives two games for coming up with the most eclectic chicken scratch.

IMPORTANT STUFF! PAY ATTENTION!
Land Mail: P.O. Box 237, Olivedale, 2158
Cyber mail: letters@nag.co.za
Important: Include your details when mailing us or how will you ever get your prize if you win. . .

FROM THE EDITOR

SINCE THERE'S A NEW Editor in town, I want to take up a bit of the usual letter space to get some of my thoughts down. This won't be the usual course of events – the Letters section belongs more to you, the reader, than anything else in the magazine. You buy NAG to read the opinions and writing of others, but in the Letters section you get to see what other NAG readers are thinking about. It also means that this is a platform for you to discuss what is going on in gaming. So I'm going to make a new rule...

Every month in the Letter of the Moment box there will be a suggested topic of discussion. To be eligibile for the prize, you can send us your feedback or thoughts on the topic. Or you can write to us about topics found in the Ed's Note or any of the columns in the magazine. You can even take a big chance and write about something unrelated – but current and interesting. There are some topics though which I feel we have covered too many times. For instance, gaming being under-valued or misunderstood. You're preaching to the choir. Gaming has been misunderstood since it started. We don't need to keep bringing it up. Gamers are also too eager to pick a fight over something stupid. There will always be people complaining about violence in games or something that offended them. Now, if violence in games offends you, you should write in – that's an opinion we'd like to read. But going on

about people who go on about violence in games – yawn.

So what is there to talk about? Well, topics that are interesting get preference in the Letters section, so take a leaf from the guys who got published here. You're doing it already, so I'm really just stressing that if you want a stab at the prize every month, you'd have to make us and other readers think about the topic at hand. Keep sending the silly and strange stuff or questions as well. We read everything you guys send in and reply to all the ones we can, and we will still publish stuff like that. In fact, I've been told to answer every single one.

James Francis

FROM: munkychunks
SUBJECT: Plagiarism!

Do mine eyes deceive me? Plagiarism? In your fair publication? Of course I must be referring to Anton Lines' opinion page, Domain of The_Basilisk. The offending line?

"The_Basilisk's tears cure cancer. Too bad he has never cried."

How is Anton doing? Has Chuck Norris come and roundhouse kicked his thinly veiled thievery into eternity? Because let me tell you, he's not safe there either. Oh no. Chuck Norris is waiting there too.

So I must ask; what is next if NAG is allowing recycled Chuck Norris humour e-mails to be allowed onto its pages? I say, enHoff is enHoff!

[I can spot plagiarism a mile away, but where the hell is that badger?]

Remember: When Chuck Norris holds your hand, it hurts

Hmmm, do you really want to admit in print that you are a Hoff fan? You're not one of the people creating all those pictures, are you? Yes, you've got us – we love all this online nonsense going around. In fact, the line you mention wasn't from a Chuck list, but one for Vin Diesel. They tend to steal a lot from each other. We're trying to start a Bruce Campbell one. In fact, if you want more blatant copying from snarky Web lists, go read the set of Jack Bauer facts in the 24 review. We spread a few more of them around the magazine margins as well, because Jack wills it. Now if only The Hoff would make a game...

FROM: Hyslop
SUBJECT: Screenshots

So, how do you guys take those screenshots for your reviews? I can understand those PC screenshots, but what about those DS and PSP and mobile game shots? I realise this might be common knowledge, but if it is not, please tell.

Most are from press kits and press sites. There are ways to take screenshots from consoles, but the images tend to blur and lose quality – not good for print. Some magazines do take screenshots, but you need special hardware for every specific console, and not a lot of those are available across the world.

FROM: The Dutchman
SUBJECT: Future consoles

I am a hopelessly addicted console player, so to me the coming PlayStation 3's computer-like performance is nothing short of biblical! But I have two questions which I hope you'll answer in your kick-ass magazine...

1. Will UT 2007 for the PS3 be available to the South African public later this year?

2. Are the Xbox 360 and its games available somewhere in South Africa? If not, is there some way I can order it from overseas?

It's in the Bytes section this issue, but Sony has pretty much admitted the PlayStation 3 won't be out this year. As such, any game announcements for it also stand waiting until more information is available. Maybe we'll finally see some running code at the Tokyo Game Show this year or definitely at GDC or E3 next year. We could sit here a while and fume about that – especially the fact that Sony probably knew this was going to happen [everyone else did] – but what's the use? Instead, there's better news for the Xbox 360. What we do know is that it is coming to SA, probably somewhere in the last six months of this year. There's a benefit to the delay, because local gamers will have a lot of titles to pick and choose from. There's also the matter of the shortages everywhere, so when it gets here we won't have the long waiting periods the US is experiencing.

But if you are not patient, you can always try and get someone to bring you a console from the US. Or you can order it from some of the online retail sites. But this is expensive, especially since you shouldn't bother with

the HDD-less Core edition, plus all the games available locally are grey imports and thus really expensive (R700+).

So there is light at the end of the tunnel for struggling console players, except it's green instead of blue.

FROM: Imbarming Fluid
SUBJECT: The best gamer in the world...

A few weeks ago I found out that a guy called Fatal1ty became the best gamer in the world. I think this guy is not the best gamer in the world because he is only the best gamer in the game Pain-Killer and not other games. Maybe if he was good in Counter-Strike I would say he is the best gamer, because C.S is much more realistic than Pain-Killer... Come on, guys, this is a joke...

What's a joke – your e-mail or Fatal1ty's laurels? You're a bit behind the times, since Fatal1ty has been kicking ass and taking names in the pro gaming arena for a few years now. Or maybe you just want to make it easy to reply, since you mention Counter-Strike. Look, the whole 'best gamer in the world' thing is an overblown statement. Johnathan Wendel is the world's best pro gamer and has been world champion in at least four games. So even in the CS universe, he's your ruler. Beyond that, asking who the best gamer in the world is becomes sticky. What about the guys who beat Mario, Metroid or other games in clock runs? Should we consider that guy who finished the entire Packman [256 screens] on one character, getting all the bonus fruit? Or perhaps that guy who isn't great at games, but he's played everything he can get his hands on?

Incidentally, Operation Flashpoint,

Taking screenshots involves highly technical hardware like this

Contrary to popular belief, you can look this smug without playing Counter-Strike

Vietcong, America's Army... there are quite a few shooters far more realistic than Counter-Strike's fuzzy fun game environment. If CS was realistic, all you'd need to do is shoot for the knees.

FROM: CaSua!tY
SUBJECT: PC vs. PlayStation

I have been reading a lot of magazines about how PlayStation games are better than computer games or the other way round. But why doesn't someone actually run a survey to see which one is better. You know, ask around and then add it all up to make a final decision. That would tell people what to buy and what not. And that reminds me of one of the other questions in last month's issue. They are all saying that computer games are destroying the youth, but why don't they mention PlayStation games?

They do, actually. The majority of the GTA scandal is based on the console version. Hot Coffee started on the PC, but just because it's easier to hack a game there. Once console owners could do it with their Xploder kits, it was a console issue again. Basically, the people complaining about games are complaining about ALL games. They just say 'computer' because to them any piece of gaming hardware – a PC, console, handheld, calculator or sufficiently advanced rubber band and paperclip – is a new technology thing that obviously is a computer then.

For the same reason [vagueness] you can't really poll which platform is 'better'. They all have nice games and some have more supporters than others. Everyone will have a different opinion. So just go for the one you like – or go for both. Go for all of them if you can afford it.

BYTES

THE NEW LARA CROFT

20-YEAR-OLD BRIT MODEL BECOMES THE NEXT TOMB RAIDER

IT HAS FINALLY HAPPENED! The seventh live action Lara Croft model has been unveiled by Eidos. Karima Adebibe, a 20-year-old store clerk and part-time model from London, beat thousands of hopefuls to become the new Lara that we'll see on trade floors and at promotional events. It comes aptly timed for the release of Legends, due out soon, and Miss Adebibe certainly reflects the new-look Lara. Eidos has a lot riding on the success of Legends, and it remains to be seen if the Tomb Raider saga has done too much damage that a lot of fans won't care anymore. But that's not the case with Karima, who has become the centre of gaming attention since her new job was announced.

"This is an incredible opportunity for me and one which I plan to grasp with both hands," said Karima. "It's a huge challenge to follow in the footsteps of people like Nell McAndrew and Angelina Jolie, but life is all about challenges and this is perhaps the biggest one for a model and actress."

To get her ready for the role, Eidos sent her to lessons in the handling of firearms, unarmed combat, elocution, archaeology, and SAS survival training, not to mention a bike license.

Gamespy also had a long chat with her about the new role. Karima says she is a proper gamer, citing Pandemonium, Crash Bandicoot and currently The Warriors as what she is fond of. "I used to love Doom, too. As for Tomb Raider, I had the first one and the second one, but I didn't have the rest. I was ten years old when the first one came out, and I was really into it. I loved it." Turning on the charm in her interviews, she even explained that she liked gamers and was eager to meet them at E3, where a live-action Lara will be returning after a few years of absence. At one point, seeing Lara there became synonymous with the event, but the tradition stopped after the increasingly dismal line of games the series produced.

If you think this is a gratuitous breast shot, you're right

The role has had its share of controversy as well, especially when British glamour model Nell McAndrew posed in Playboy during her Croft tenure. This got her fired on the spot and Eidos has since taken care not to let that happen again. "That was one of the questions they asked me, if I had any skeletons in my closet. But to be honest with you, I do not. I'm so kosher. They asked me if, when I was working as a model, I had ever posed naked, if I'd ever gotten my assets out for a picture. But I've never gotten my boobs out, I've never gotten naked for any pictures, and, for the first time, it's benefited me."

Karima will spend the next year or so travelling the world, giving interviews and posing with her dual handguns for photos. Meanwhile, Eidos also revealed the voice behind Lara in the game series: British actress Keeley Hawes, known for her roles in Spooks and Cock and Bull Story.

Finally, Eidos also revealed who Lara's adversary in the upcoming game will be. Amanda Evert, an expert in mysticism and theology, worked with Lara while at university. But she was thought to have drowned at a dig in Peru, one which Lara barely escaped after the excavation unleashed a dangerous deity. Amanda survived as well, but sprung a trap that caused her death – it appears she isn't that dead after all. As a bonus, once players complete the game they can play the game again using Amanda's model.

Be sure to catch our hands-on Legends preview on page 56

New 'bad chick' gives Lara some juxtaposition

SNIPPETS

YOUR ESSENTIAL INFO, NOW IN BITE-SIZED PORTIONS!

Exanimus is a planned online MMORPG in which players either take on the role of survivors in a zombie-filled world or as one of the walking dead. Nothing else has been mentioned except to expect something gory. www.exanimusthegame.com

2K Games have announced a deal with Twentieth Century Fox for a **Family Guy** game. The developers plan to work closely with series creator Seth McFarlane. The series has become very popular in the US after high DVD sales resurrected the show to a fourth season.

Cedega 5.1 has been released for Linux. This commercial emulator will run most Windows games, including the latest ones, on Linux. Head to www.transgaming.com for more info.

Peter Jackson recently told Yahoo! Games that there might be a **King Kong 2**, playing off the game's happier ending. "I have been in discussions with Michel Ancel and the Montpellier team, but there is nothing to share at this point in time" he said in an interview with the site.

Tecmo has announced its first Revolution title - **Sukatto Golf Pangya Revolution**. It's based on the popular Korean PC golf game Pangya. The game will feature free online play against other golfers, but players will have to pay for extra accessories.

NEXT WOLFENSTEIN ON THE 360

ID CEO TALKS ABOUT WHAT'S COOKING

ID SOFTWARE CEO TODD Hollenshead revealed in a recent interview that the developer is making the Xbox 360 the primary platform for the next Wolfenstein game. "The next Wolf game is using the 360 as its primary development platform, but will be released on the PC as well," he told Worthplaying.com. "We're looking at PS3, 360 and PC for our internal project, but it's too early to guess on whether we'll have all of those ready to go at the same time." Hollenshead added that Enemy Territories: Quake Wars is still a PC-only title, though both Quake 4 and Doom 3 have been ported to the Xbox. Last year id's lead developer, John Carmack, voiced his support for Microsoft's 360. So, thus far the main platform for the next id game remains unclear, though Hollenshead said that the game "… is the main focus of the development team at id... I'm not sure when we'll begin discussing details of the new IP, but it will be the next game developed entirely by id, and it will be cool."

The interview also covered the release of Quake 4. "There have been a few issues on the multiplayer side we've been working on with Raven since the game was released. The game worked well in general, but there were a few issues that were discovered after the release that needed to get fixed." Fans of the game can also expect some extra content in the near future. "We have even more stuff in store for Quake 4 over the next few months with new free maps and even some new game modes we've been playing at id but aren't quite ready to go just yet."

The other question of interest was which other games are being developed using the Doom 3 engine. Hollenshead pointed to licensees Activision and Take 2. Take 2 will publish Prey, which uses the engine, while Activision has used id engines for numerous games such as Soldier of Fortune and Star Trek: Elite Force.

GRAND THEFT TABLE TENNIS

IT SEEMS THAT ROCKSTAR is trying something new. It has announced its next-generation game. This one won't include hookers, violence or cars.

Table Tennis, tentatively titled, is Rockstar's next game. And it's exclusively for the Xbox 360.

"Our goal was to create a game that is perfectly addictive in its focused simplicity, a game that showcases the true possibilities of a next-gen experience, not just in looks, but in feel and pace," said Rockstar founder Sam Houser.

"We wanted to use the power of the new hardware and the resolution of new televisions to give the game an immediacy, an intensity and a sense of physicality and reality, resulting in a purer, more visceral experience that simply was not possible previously."

"It is a distillation of game design philosophy, focusing on removing the traditional areas of compromise inherent in managing size and scope and concentrating the hardware's entire power on one activity, with the aim of doing that better than it's ever been done before."

GOD OF WAR DOMINATES DICE AWARDS

KRATOS RULED SUPREME AT the 9th Annual Interactive Achievement Awards, hosted by the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences. The event was hosted at the 2006 DICE summit in February, where Sony's killer-title, God of War, ruled the nominations. The game walked away with seven awards, including Game of the Year and Console Game of the Year, plus awards for Music Composition, Animation Lead Character, Sound Design and Best Action/Adventure title. Second in line was the peripheral rhythm game Guitar Heroe. It garnered the Outstanding Innovation in Gaming award, as well as four more wins for Soundtrack, Gameplay Engineering [a tie with Nintendogs], Game Design and Family Game of the year.

Other notable wins were Battlefield 2 for PC Game of the Year, FPS of the Year and Online Game Play, while Shadow of the Colossus won the Art Direction and Visual Engineering awards. Need for Speed: Most Wanted was chosen as Racing Game of the Year, and We Love Katamari got the award for Children's Game. MMOs were a tie between Guild Wars and City of Villains, while Nintendogs also won Handheld Game of the Year. WIK: Fable of Souls won Downloadable Game of the Year. Ultima creator Richard Garriott was also inducted into the Academy Hall of Fame at the ceremony.

The awards are determined by Academy members, who come from across the spectrum of the industry, who each had one vote.

David Jaffe's game is also aiming to grab a few awards at the G.A.N.G. Awards. God of War was nominated eleven times in nine categories, though it has serious competition from games like King Kong, Psychonauts and Jade Empire.
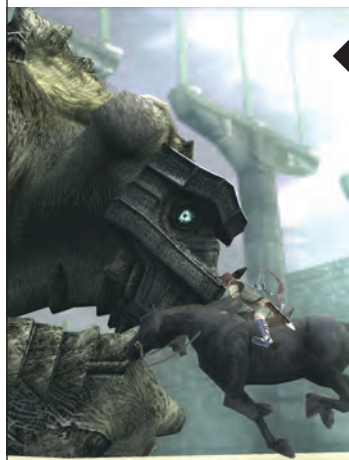
It looks as good as it plays, plays as good as it looks

Online site Internet Reports spotted retailers listing a new **Star Wars** title. It seems they were on the money – Ubisoft plans to release a new title called **Star Wars Shadow Strike** for the DS and PSP in May.

Atari has been issued with a notice that it could face delisting from the **NASDAQ**. The struggling publisher hasn't gotten its fortunes out of the rest yet and is planning to sell several of its studios.

Veterans from **Bungie**, **Microsoft** and **Valve** have formed a new studio called **Big Bite Games**. No title has been announced yet, but the team's collective experience includes working on Half-Life, Halo and Counter-Strike as well as developing DirectX technologies.

Sony has stated that the **PlayStation 3** won't have a world-wide launch, meaning the console is likely to launch in Japan, and then the U.S.

BOMBERMAN: ACT ZERO

FACELIFT FOR AN OLD FRIEND

IN ADDITION TO LOOKING like no Bomberman before, the new upcoming next-generation Bomberman: Act Zero will also play like no Bomberman before. Gone is the little white bobble-head Bomberman, replaced instead by a new, mean, sleek, very anime Bomberman.

Hudson has revealed that it will be including a new First-Person Bomber mode of play, giving the player a first-person perspective of the traditional Bomberman gameplay. You still face off in a maze and must strategically place bombs, and use items to turn the tide. But now, you're also in the action. A life gauge depletes when the player is engulfed in fire.

Bomberman purists don't fret! The more traditional Bomberman mode is also included. The standard overhead mode is tentatively called 'Standard Bomberman' and lacks a life gauge. The visual change remains however. The cold, science-fiction anime angles and colours are a stark contrast to the original rainbow-coloured Bomberman. Perhaps Hudson might include an original Bomberman version on the

disc, but this is unconfirmed.

This radical change in the Bomberman look and feel may pave the way for other 'upgrades' to classics. Dig Dug may be next in line for a style change to match a more modern gaming market.

With its primary platform being the Xbox 360, it's no surprise to hear that Bomberman: Act Zero will include full Xbox Live support. Players will face off in points-based battles as well as full-on battle royals.

Bomberman: Act Zero is set for a Japanese release on the 25th of May. US and European versions have yet to be announced.

Famitsa scans reveal a little old, mixed in with the new

FREE GAME OF THE MONTH

SPACE MERCHANTS: CONQUERORS

URL: www.dataweb.sk/projektsm/index.htm
GENRE: Space Trading/Exploration
SIZE: 50MB [on the cover DVD]

OLD GAME GENRES NEVER quite die; they just get reborn into indie-developed offerings. The space combat/trading genre that Elite so meticulously cultivated was never quite redone. Games such as Freelancer and X3 do their best, but have a slightly different approach.

Enter Space Merchants: Conquerors, a free game by Slovakian indie-game developers. It's a space combat/trading game in the same vein as Elite, but without the ability to go down to the surface of the planets [something Elite was famous for]. Regardless, for a free game, Space Merchants: Conquerors manages to hold its own.

The control scheme is the same as Freelancer: holding down the right mouse button and dragging your mouse will set your direction. Standard 'WASD' keys control throttle and strafe. The game itself is rather beautiful in a 3rd rate kind of way. The planets and stars are

stunningly rendered in real-time, but the ships themselves and UI graphics leave a lot to be desired. The music that plays throughout the game is decent enough and the sound rather basic - mostly clicks and minor effects.

Space Merchants runs you through a tutorial to get you into the game. The English is quite terrible - it's obvious that the developers don't quite grasp the language. If you can overlook that, the story and quests are quite charming. There is no overarching storyline. Basically you're on your own solving quests for various people while trading and getting into fights. The core gameplay revolves around receiving quests from merchants and trading commodities between planets. The more you trade/battle the more money you have to upgrade your ship with.

It's the type of game that starts off painfully slow: your ship is awful and enemies seem all too eager to kick your ass. Persevere, and you're rewarded with copious upgrades and new/interesting ways to defeat your opponents.

Proof that free doesn't always mean ugly

Katamari 塊魂 Blockacy

GAME SCENES BUILT WITH LEGO

OLD MEETS NEW IN this project from a bunch of online gamers. The people behind Brickflick. com constructed various classic gaming scenes with Lego blocks. Nintendo fans are treated with Excitebike, the original Metal Gear and the addictive Duck Hunt. Our favourite is the Katamari Damacy scene, complete with people running away and an assortment of citizens, flowers, trees and wildlife. These and more can be seen on the Brickflick site or the Flickr photo set [www.flickr.com/photos/skinnycoder/sets/]. While on BrickFlick, be sure to download the parody GTA trailer called GTA: Lego City.

Katamari Damacy, Metal Gear and Excite Bike, in Lego! It just doesn't get much cooler than this!
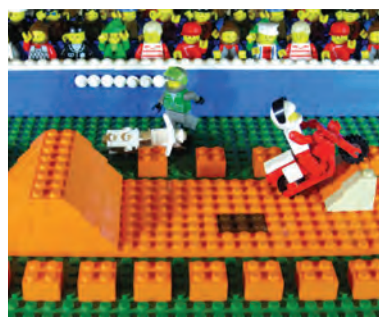
SUICIDE-PROMOTING PSP ADS REMOVED

SONY CERTAINLY SEEMS TO have a knack for being in the news of late with its PSP advertising campaigns. First it was the horrible graffiti sprayed over New York, now it's posters on the subway promoting suicide.

The PSP ad in question that read "TAKE A RUNNING JUMP HERE" was only a few feet from the subway tracks of the bustling Piccadilly Station. According to Manchester Online, there has been an increase in passengers getting hit by trains in recent months. An employee of the Metro noticed the ad, thought it was inappropriate and had it covered with tape. The ad has now been taken down.

Sony is refusing to comment.

Thus far, Sony's UK PSP ad campaign has not gone well. An earlier ad with reference to a Paris Hilton porn tape, plastered across a large double-decker bus, was not received well. So far, reports indicate that Sony is alienating its UK consumers with its advertising campaign, which has included promoting strong language and scenes of a sexual nature.

LIONHEAD DOWNSIZES

LIONHEAD IS WELL-KNOWN AND much-loved by the gaming community on the whole. Being a British developer, it's not surprising to see the company downsizing its headcount from 250 to 200 in the wake of poor performances by recent PC titles.

The cutbacks are also believed to mark the end of several projects at Lionhead. Studio founder Peter Molyneux told the staff recently that only two projects, both for next-generation platforms, will continue development.

It is believed that one of those titles is a sequel to the well-received Xbox game, Fable. The other title is unknown, but has been in development for some time.

The future of the Black & White franchise also seems uncertain. Black & White 2 failed to impress at retail.

BIG LEAGUE GAMING COMPETITION WINNERS

1. PSP
- Yu-Jung Tsai, *Roodepoort*

2. APPLE IPOD NANO
- Ross Charnock, *Walmer, P.E.*

3. BATTLEFIELD 2 SPECIAL FORCES
- Ricky Abell, *Howick, KZN*
- Mornay Heydenrych, *Durbanville, Cape Town*
- Chris Rooney, *Constantia, Cape Town*
- Jason Barnham, *Somerset West*
- Piet Louw, *Vereeniging*

MOBILE ENTERTAINMENT SOON THE PC WAY?

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH the mobile gaming craze has taken off in such a big way that the PC space will be following the lead of consumer electronics giants like Sony. The newest range of notebook systems from leading manufacturers Dell and Toshiba certainly point to a new generation of gaming-ready mobile computers.

Although custom system-builder Savrow was the first from whom we've seen a dual-7800 GTX setup in a mobile platform, Dell's new Latitude D-Series, announced at the end of March, make some exciting reading for corporate gamers. First is the news that widescreen is in, across the range in fact. Dell's entire Latitude line-up is now available almost exclusively as 16:9 WXGA widescreens, capable of native resolutions of 1,440 x 900 – in preparation for Vista, of course, which already has revealed its best side on these displays.

More importantly, Dell will be delivering its Latitudes with 128MB, 256MB or 512MB of video RAM to feed the GeForce 7800 GT GPUs they will employ.

Toshiba, meanwhile, revealed its latest Qosmio range to some pretty excited journalists last month. To this global notebook leader, HD-DVD is the current big drive. The Toshiba Qosmio will be the first HD-equipped system to hit the market, and features more innovation than merely the new DVD media.

The HD-DVD standard itself ushers in some of these advantages. For instance, a lot more running time, or much higher-quality DVD movies. Then there's the ability to browse the chapters on the HD-DVD without interrupting the current playback, and unique to Qosmio, the company will be adding software to their machines to make DVDs play more instantly - more like a consumer electronics DVD player than a PC in fact.

For further details on Qosmio, check out Toshiba's global homepage, and for the latest Latitudes contact Dell SA directly anytime after the 29th of March - the official worldwide release date. [www.toshiba.com] [www.dell.co.za]

DCC BRINGS IN ULTRA-LIGHT ZLING CLIPPY

BEEN TO THE GYM with your bulky MP3 player and tried to 'attach' it somewhere inconspicuous where it didn't hinder your workout? Need to go places but you have to carry your MP3 player if you want to listen to your favourite songs? If this sounds familiar, distributor Drive Control Corporation (DCC) has the perfect solution – Z-Cyber's Zling Clippy super light MP3 player with a USB flash storage device and built-in FM radio.

Said Jenny Rex, sales director at DCC: "MP3 players are not only to be enjoyed sitting at home in your bedroom or on your couch. Why be restricted to using to your MP3 player because it is awkward to carry around? Zling's Clippy player is feather light, weighing as much as, and sizing up to, a pack of chewing gum. It is designed to clip onto your clothing and offers the option of two colours of cover plates, allowing you to coordinate your MP3 player with your clothes and mood."

The Lyric Display feature allows you to view the words of the song playing, so you can sing along, while the Music Folder Navigation function stores your songs in customisable folders. Songs can, for example, be categorised under rock, pop or even the artist's name. The ID3 Tag feature highlights the artist and the title of the song rather than the traditional 'track 1, 2 or 3'.

QUICK FEATURE GUIDE:

256MB or 512MB flash memory
Two-colour OLED display
Alloy clip design
Changeable cover plates
Built-in FM radio
Music Folder Navigation
Lyric display
ID3 Tag
Phone book

CAPTION OF THE MONTH

EVERY MONTH WE'LL CHOOSE a boring, odd or peculiar screenshot from any random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better [funny] caption. The winner will get a free game from Vivendi Universal Games. Send your captions to [ed@nag.co.za] with the subject [April Caption].

RULES: (1) If you don't use the correct subject line, your mail will be automatically filtered by our spam software and deleted. (2) If you think sending in 20 captions for the same screenshot is how you want to play the system, then put them all in the same mail or we'll keep the top one and delete the rest. You probably won't win anyway because you can't follow simple instructions. And people who can't follow simple instructions don't deserve to win things. (3) Obey all posted speed limits. (4) Never run with scissors. (5) There is no spoon.

Sponsored by
VIVENDI UNIVERSAL games

SMART USB

SANDISK, WHICH MANUFACTURES AND distributes by far the largest amount of solid-state, removable storage devices in the world today, is about to take the market forward with the introduction of its U3 model of 'smart' USB devices.

U3-enabled USB memory sticks will allow the user complete application portability at last. Using this technology, the owner of a USB stick can install applications, starting with the basic necessities like Skype and IM clients complete with their own home profile, onto a special sector of the removable storage. Plugging this key into another machine's USB port will automatically initiate the U3 application launch platform, from which the user will be able to run the software, using his/her profiles, no matter what system he/she is sitting in front of at the time.

Once U3 hits the streets, scheduled for the first half of this year, expect the way we see our USB mobile storage to change forever. No longer will it merely be your data that is made personal, but your entire system instead. www.sandisk.com

ATI ANNOUNCES DUAL 16X PEG CHIPSET FOR AMD CPUS

Although Canadian GPU manufacturer ATI has been the established leader in single-GPU graphics for some time now, except for the brief interlude during which the 7800 GTX went mostly unanswered, the company is desperately playing catch-up in the multi-GPU range-topping stakes. SLI is already a mature technology while CrossFire is still considered fledgling.

In its race to catch up in this segment, ATI has once more done an X1800, it seems. Like the ill-fated GPU, which was replaced almost as quickly as it launched, it seems that the first-generation CrossFire-capable motherboards, hitting the market right now, are doomed to the same fate.

That's because ATI has announced its latest CrossFire chipset, the CrossFire Xpress 3200. And in a move to horn on in the enthusiast space, the company has created the 3200 specifically for AMD processors. It seems that the close relationship with Intel and the 975X CrossFire-capable chipset may have distanced ATI from exactly the market its GPUs address.

Naturally, that alone wouldn't be enough to replace the Intel-based CrossFire solutions, the ATI Radeon Xpress 200P and Intel 975X. However, the 3200 also sports a total of 40 PCI-E lanes, so that the two installed CrossFire cards each get their own full-speed 16x PEG slot, like the newest nForce4 32 chipsets. The company also promises that the 3200 will feature an extensive raft of overclocking options in the BIOS.

With the 32-lane SLI chipset very much proving to the marketplace that NVIDIA was spot-on when it said 8x was more than enough bandwidth for a single graphics card to run at its top performance, this move by ATI suggests that the near future is likely to bring cards that will require a full 16-lanes (8GB/s) apiece to communicate effectively with the platform.

One further point of interest on the latest offering is the support for both connected and unconnected CrossFire cards, which should mean that the clunky [yet effective] dongle which connects existing CrossFire boards will soon be extinct. See the Hardcor3 Roundup for further details of the first X3200 board we received for review.

NVIDIA RELEASES 3D ACCELERATOR FOR MOBILE PHONES

THIS LEADING GPU MANUFACTURER has revealed the first fruits of its recent labours in the mobility division, the GeForce 5500 chipset. This solution claims to deliver a measure of the power we currently enjoy in high-end desktops, to your mobile phone!

The 5500 should dramatically up the ante in mobile phone displays by supporting better quality, more fluid video playback thanks to built-in support for all the popular media formats. There's an MPEG-4 and H.263 hardware decode function on the GPU, as well as decoders for WMV, RM and H.264, capable of playing back a 720 x 400 video file at 30fps. There's also a JPEG hardware codec for the crispest display of digital images, complete with a fully-featured ISP [Image Signal Processor].

NVIDIA has not forgotten its core competency however, and the 5500 will massively accelerate both 2D and 3D graphics. If the marketing blurb is anything to go by, this ought to deliver "… console levels of graphical beauty to the mobile phone."

This handheld GPU will come with 2MB or 8MB of stacked video RAM, as well as support for using add-in memory modules like SD cards as extra memory for the video controller. The company has even built audio capabilities into this latest GPU with a programmable core and support for 64 polyphonic voices.

This solution can display its images at up to 1,024 x 768 at a colour depth of 24-bits [16 million colours].

The GeForce 5500 handheld GPU represents an entirely new era for mobile gaming. This market space has until now been solely the domain of high-end handheld games devices, like the Sony PSP for instance, but a new-breed mobile phone with a larger, higher-quality screen and NVIDIA 5500 GPU could become a strong contender here, complete with the ability to easily view broadcast media without jitters while on the move.

MORE NINTENDO REVOLUTION

ATI CLARIFIES ITS ROLE

DETAILS REMAIN SKETCHY REGARDING Nintendo's next console. Among the few known facts is that ATI will be supplying the graphics hardware, currently codenamed "Hollywood"; the company recently stated that the chip will not be based on PC architecture, rather being designed from the ground up to specifically suit the requirements of the next-generation console.

"ATI is focused, as is Nintendo, in making Revolution a great, gaming entertainment platform. I know that a lot of journalists are very focused on specs. The key thing to keep in mind is that Nintendo, with ATI's help, is trying to create a game console where you don't have to look at specs," ATI's John Swiminer said.

"From a broader perspective, we share in Nintendo's position that this console will be devoted to the general gamer. When you have a game developer developing for this, the goal is to ensure that they don't have to worry about the complexity that is required to develop the games by making them 'jump through hoops.'"

ALIENWARE EXPANDS LAPTOP RANGE

ALIENWARE'S AREA-51 PRODUCT LINE is being joined by the m5500 and m5700 Centrino-based laptops. The former boasts a 15.4" display powered by a GeForce Go 6600 graphics chip, while the pricier m5700 has a GeForce Go 6800 driving a 17" screen. Both systems are powered by Intel Pentium M chips, and can communicate via Wi-Fi. The company's Aurora line has also been expanded, with the addition of the m7700 laptop, which is powered by an AMD Athlon 64 CPU, and has a 17" widescreen display driven by no less than a GeForce Go 7800 GTX graphics power plant, and space for up to two hard drives – in short, a gamer's mobile computer! [www.alienware.com]

Look & Listen
DVD • CD • GAMES — MP3 • ACCESSORIES

CHARTS

PC GAMES

#	Title
1	Need for Speed: Most Wanted
2	F.E.A.R.
3	Sims 2
4	Age Of Empires 3
5	Guild Wars
6	Silent Hill 3
7	Sims 2 Nightlife
8	Serious Sam 2
9	Rugby 2006
10	Sims 2 University
11	CSI Miami Exclusive
12	Brian Lara Cricket 2005
13	Call Of Duty 2
14	Civilization 4
15	Battlefield 2 Special Forces

PLAYSTATION 2

#	Title
1	Need for Speed: Most Wanted Black Edition
2	Sims 2
3	Need for Speed Most Wanted
4	WWE Smackdown vs Raw 2006
5	Grand Theft Auto San Andreas Platinum
6	Burnout 3 Takedown Platinum
7	50cent Bulletproof
8	Tiger Woods 2006
9	SSX3 Platinum
10	Ratchet Gladiator
11	Singstar Pop With Microphone
12	Torino Winter Olympics 2006
13	SSX4 On Tour
14	Singstar 80's With Microphone
15	Battlefield 2 Modern Combat

PSP

#	Title
1	Need for Speed: Most Wanted
2	Grand Theft Auto Liberty City Stories
3	Sims 2
4	Pink Paradise Strip Tease & Table Dance
5	WWE Smackdown vs Raw 2006
6	King Kong
7	Medievil Resurrection
8	Prince Of Persia Revelations
9	FIFA 2006
10	Pro Evolution Soccer 5
11	Kylie Minogue Showgirl Greatest Hits Tour
12	Coldplay Live 2003
13	Need for Speed Underground Rivals
14	Ridge Racer
15	SSX4 On Tour

THE X-PAD

XtremeGaming is about to launch their new gaming mouse pad – the X-Pad. Using the same fabric surface and sponge rubber base as the Xtremepad, the X-Pad comes in three different shapes and colour variations. In addition you also get a matching colour coded aluminum tube to transport your pad around in. [www.xtremegaming.co.za]

STEELSERIES HEADSET BATCHES SUFFER PROBLEMS

Two batches of SteelSound 5H [regular and USB] headsets from SteelSeries have been determined to be suffering from defects. The company has offered an apology, as well as a means to return and have these units replaced, which is already in circulation. Should you be an affected user, you can visit www.steelseries.com/5H-RMA for instructions on sorting out the problem. Specifically, the problem involves connections and wiring inside the ear cups, resulting in poor sound.

ULI DETONATES SLI

A small patch to the ForceWare/Detonator driver packages was released by electronics manufacturer Uli. This patches the UliExpress M1697 Northbridge making it an SLI-ready chipset.

Although, for the moment, the patch remains locked to Uli-manufactured Northbridges, it's surmised that getting it to work with other chipsets will be a simple case of rewriting registry entries. This closely-guarded enthusiast market could be just about to be cracked wide open for NVIDIA, although we shudder to think what some already low-end chipsets might do with this capability.

Interestingly, this patch comes just two weeks after NVIDIA completed its acquisition of ULi Electronics.

DELL INSPIRON 9400 MULTIMEDIA LAPTOP

Dell recently introduced a new laptop model, designed with high-performance multimedia processing in mind. It is powered by Intel Core Duo processors and a 256MB GeForce Go 7800 graphics card. Dell MediaDirect technology allows playback of media stored on the machine without having to boot it up. Other specs include 1GB of DDR2 memory, 8x DVD+/-RW drive and a 5-in-1 memory card reader. Pricing starts around R15,000. [www.dell.com]

MARCH

29

3

RELEASE: The Godfather [PC, PS2] ▲

RELEASE: The Sims 2: Open for Business Expansion Pack [PC]

RELEASE: FIFA Street 2 [PS2]

RELEASE: From Russia With Love [PSP]

4

RELEASE: Def Jam: Fight for New York [PSP]

5

RELEASE: NHL 2K6 [PS2]

RELEASE: NBA 2K6 [PS2]

RELEASE: Gauntlet : Seven Sorrows [PS2]

10

NEWS: Famitsu Magazine gives Final Fantasy XII a 40/40

The next instalment in the Final Fantasy series, Final Fantasy XII, is still a while off for gamers in the West. Its recent release in Japan, however, has won it the 40 out of 40 accolade from Famitsu Magazine, a feat which only a few games have achieved thus far. The game's localisation for other territories is well underway, though no release date has been set as yet.

12

RELEASE: The Elder Scross IV: Oblivion [PC] *Order before 30 April and save R50 on RRP from Kalahari.net*

RELEASE: The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion [PC]

RELEASE: Midnight Club 3 : Dub Edition Remix [PS2]

RELEASE: Full Spectrum Warrior : Ten Hammers [PS2]

RELEASE: Keys of Heaven [PSP]

RELEASE: MX vs ATV Unleashed: On the Edge [PSP]

RELEASE: Worms: Open Warfare [PSP] ▼

24

RELEASE: FIFA World Cup 2006 [PS2, PSP] *Free mini soccer ball with every pre-order (while stocks last) from Kalahari.net* ▶

31

RELEASE: Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 3: Advanced Warfighter [PS2]

RELEASE: Splinter Cell: Essentials [PSP]

APRIL

6

RELEASE: The Sims 2: Open for Business [PC] ▲

RELEASE: Fight Night Round 3 [PS2, PSP]

RELEASE: Tomb Raider: Legend [PS2, PC]

RELEASE: Rogue Trooper [PS2]

RELEASE: Aquanox: The Angel's Tears [PS2]

RELEASE: Football Manager 2006 [PSP]

RELEASE: Dragonball Z: Shin Budokai [PSP]

7

RELEASE: CSI 3: Dimensions of Murder [PC]

RELEASE: Street Riders [PSP]

RELEASE: Act of War: High Treason Expansion Pack [PC]

RELEASE: Championship Manager 06 [PC, PS2]

RELEASE: Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII [PC] ▼

8/9

13

RELEASE: Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers [PC]

RELEASE: Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth [PC]

22/23

NEWS: Family Guy game on the way

2K Games has signed a deal with 20th Century Fox to produce a game based on the hit animated TV series, Family Guy. 2K announced that it would work closely with Family Guy creator Seth MacFarlane on the game which is slated to be an action/adventure title. It will feature all the characters from the show plus locations from the TV show. "2K Games really understands the distinct humour and unique voice of Family Guy," said Fox head-honcho Elie Dekel. "We're confident that they will develop a hilarious and entertaining game for fans of the show as well as for gamers."

27

EVENT: Rectron ESWC 2006 - The Carousel (April 27-30)

Get your Warcraft III, Quake 4, Counter-Strike 1.6 and Gran Turismo 4 ready. It's almost time for the Rectron ESWC 2006 Carousel event! This year, there are various new services gamers can take advantage of if they wish to compete or attend the Open LAN. Check the Website for information on transportation to the event, accommodation and prices. Rectron ESWC 2006 is held at The Carousel Casino and includes a party at the Cheyenne Saloon on the Saturday nigh t where The Carousel dancers will show off their moves. [www.arena77.com]

28

RELEASE: Guild Wars Factions [PC] *Free Guild Wars mousepad with* ▲ *every pre-order (while stocks last) from Kalahari.net*

RELEASE: Devil May Cry 3 Special Edition [PC]

RELEASE: Resident Evil 4 [PC]

RELEASE: Rogue Trooper [PC]

29/30

RELEASE: Half-Life 2: Episode One [PC]

INTERVIEW

Q&A:

WORLD OF WARCRAFT LOCAL LAUNCH

VIVENDI AND LOCAL DISTRIBUTOR MiDigital are getting ready for the local retail launch of World of Warcraft, considered in some circles as the world's biggest and most popular MMO. But it has been a while since the original game was launched abroad, plus the massively multiplayer nature of the game could lead – and already has led – to a lot of speculation about local servers and deals with Telkom. So we had a quick chat to MiDigital's Bruce Goodwill about the upcoming launch and what players can expect.

Why did Vivendi decide to launch the game locally now, after it's been out overseas for a while?

Bruce Goodwill: "We have always planned on releasing locally, but Blizzard has had a very specific way of releasing this title around the globe, namely one region at a time."

Will there be time cards available for local players? What are the prices involved?

Bruce Goodwill: "Yes, there will be time cards available at the time of release, though prices haven't been confirmed yet."

Which edition will local players purchase: UK, US or Asia Pacific?

Bruce Goodwill: "That's unconfirmed at this stage, but it will probably be the US edition."

What are the plans in dealing with local grey shards and other illegal WoW servers?

Bruce Goodwill: "We have plans on combating these illegal servers, but at the end of the day the more information we receive from the gaming community the easier it will be for us to cut down on the number of illegal shards."

Do you plan to retail the expansion locally as well?

Bruce Goodwill: "Yes."

Is it true that Vivendi and Telkom have come to a business arrangement for WoW? Can you elaborate on it?

Bruce Goodwill: "No, not too my knowledge. But we will be and have been speaking to a number of ISPs."

Will there be a local server? If not, which region will local players be directed to?

Bruce Goodwill: "Unfortunately not; there's no local server due to the bandwidth and maintenance costs! I cannot confirm at this stage which region players will be directed to." **NAG**

World of Warcraft will be launched locally in April at a suggested retail price of R299.00

MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS
UP AND DOWN
By Miktar Dracon

WAIT, WAIT, WAIT! WAIT! Back up a bit. Let me just make sure I'm getting this right, so there is no confusion here. Electronic Arts just announced that it will be lowering its videogame prices from $49 to $39 in the US, starting with its newly released games, The Godfather and Black. EA's doing this to try and make up for lacklustre videogame sales. Pretty much every other publisher is following suit, so overall the prices of games in the US [not counting next-gen] is dropping by $10.

So, taking stock of the situation, we find that videogame prices in the US are going down. That's good, right? Of course it is. Cheaper videogames for all!

But what cooks my noodle is didn't we, South Africa, just raise our prices to be more in line with international prices? Instead of the subsidised R299 game price, it has been raised to R399 because we are now a healthy videogame market. We're an 'emerging market' now! This means that somewhere someone has noticed that South Africans are spending more and more on videogames, which means that this healthy, growing videogame market is ready for the big-time, big-boy pants and prices.

Oh yes. The videogame industry here in South Africa finally has 'hair down there' and might find hair growing in other odd places.

But, didn't America just lower its game prices? Will South Africa follow suit, or will game prices stay fixed where they are, with distributors pocketing the difference? Well, hang on a bit. South Africa is a PAL region, which means we're more in line with the UK than the US.

But America controls the gaming industry, make no mistake about that. What the Americans like, becomes popular. The popular games are worthy of finding their way into other regions more easily.

> BUT AMERICA CONTROLS THE GAMING INDUSTRY, MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT THAT. WHAT THE AMERICANS LIKE, BECOMES POPULAR. THE POPULAR GAMES ARE WORTHY OF FINDING THEIR WAY INTO OTHER REGIONS MORE EASILY.

Basically, the UK and thus, South Africa, are slaves to American popular vote. But that's not all bad, is it? How long have local and international [non-US] games been complaining about sequels in games? Quite some time, but nothing has come of it. Nothing happens, that is, until the US gets tired of sequels. US gamers have finally started saying that they're tired of sequels, which was met with an instant promise from developers to stop making sequels.

He who controls the spice controls the universe indeed!

So, we've established that the South African gaming market has hit an awkward puberty and might want to wear its mother's underwear. Hey, everyone goes through an experimental phase in their lives - it's natural.

Meanwhile, the US publishers [which are the publishers that matter] are lowering prices to boost gaming sales. That's cool, we can jive with that. If anything, it means that personally importing games will become cheaper. The import gamer is one I have infinite respect and time for. The 'Import Gamer' is someone who pursues gaming instead of waiting for it to just fall on his [or her] lap. The 'Import Gamer' is someone who has a firm grasp of the idea that gaming is not a right, but a luxury. This is a good viewpoint to have: it protects you from the stupid particles that constantly bombard the gaming universe. Intelligence is mankind's best defence against stupidity, and a healthy intelligence is one that regularly receives a good dosage of information.

So, looking back at the winding road I've just taken you down, do you feel a little bit smarter? Did you learn something, even if it was only by accident? Don't worry. I won't tell anyone about your little accident. We can wash the sheets. **NAG**
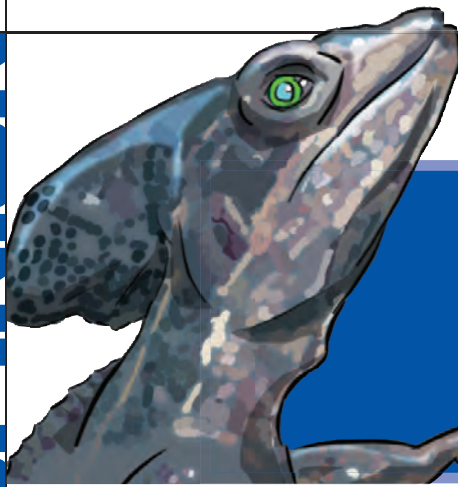
Twenty-three. That's the number of fools The_Basilisk has pitied in the time it has taken you to read this sentence.

THE DOMAIN OF THE_BASILISK
FORGET NORWAY!

By Anton Lines

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, this month marks the fifth anniversary of my contribution to NAG. That's right; you've been putting up with my megalomaniacal verbiage for five long, painful years. But you're all closet masochists, aren't you? You like pain. Anyway, I'm not usually prone to reminiscing about my own past – at least not in print – but with all the changes the magazine's going through this month, a little reflection seems oddly appropriate.

A PORTRAIT OF THE_BASILISK AS A YOUNG MAN

Like most writers [the honest ones, anyway] I look back on most of my old columns and wonder what the hell I was thinking. While this is always a sign of artistic growth, and therefore a good thing, I still feel pretty damn embarrassed when I come across people reading the stuff from 2001 and 2002. Of course, not everyone looks with such a critical eye – in many ways being a writer is like staring at yourself in the mirror [nobody likes their own ears] – but nevertheless, if I was the editor back then, I don't think I would've hired me.

That said, I'm thankful that the powers-that-be were either incompetent or inebriated at the time, because I've rather enjoyed the last five years. Among countless other perks, NAG was largely responsible for sending me to the World Cyber Games in South Korea [the most memorable week of my life]. However, the greatest benefit has simply been the experience of working in the publishing industry. I'm nearing completion of a Bachelor of Arts degree, and I can tell you university has taught me nothing that writing for NAG hasn't.

People are always asking me how I managed to get hired. It isn't an extraordinary tale in itself. I met

> LIKE MOST WRITERS [THE HONEST ONES, ANYWAY] I LOOK BACK ON MOST OF MY OLD COLUMNS AND WONDER WHAT THE HELL I WAS THINKING.

Len Nery, NAG's marketing and sales manager, at Worfaire 2000 and mentioned that I was interesting in writing. The only extraordinary thing about it was that I chose Worfaire over studying for my matric exams. At any rate, several months later, I got a call from the editor asking me to write a third-of-a-page filler, because Ramjet was running out of ideas.

Another thing I get asked a lot is how I came up with 'The_Basilisk' as a gaming nick. I'll put the rumours to rest right off the bat: it has nothing to do with everyone's favourite boy wizard. [In fact, J.K. Rowling destroyed my nick, and I'll never forgive her for it.] The name actually comes from the trading-card game Magic: The Gathering, of which I was an avid player at the age of thirteen. It's yet another source of embarrassment for me, as I'm a strong believer in originality and, well, 'The_Basilisk' is pretty banal. The difficulty, obviously, is that it carries my gaming identity and changing it would cause confusion. 'Fatal1ty' probably has the same problem, though I doubt he'd admit it.

Looking ahead, the only demand I make of myself is that I continue to grow. I don't believe people ever really change, so I'll probably always be the sceptic you've come to know and love/hate. I'll always scoff at James's console-worship and his failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of professional gaming. I'll always complain about the lack of story content and originality in games [if they're heading the way of the movies, God help us]. And I'll always frown at copy editors who love to 'incorrect' my grammar and style. But in the end, I'll always be proud to have been a part of the birth of the gaming industry. It's the future of entertainment, education, sport and literature – that is, if I have anything to say about it. **NAG**

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DAMMIT
WHAT EDUCATION?

By Megan Hughes

IN A THIRD/FIRST WORLD country it's expected that not everyone will have access to a computer at home. But, fortunately for us, our country is moving forward at a relatively quick pace with computers becoming readily available in our public libraries and such. This means that the industry in our country is growing steadily and we're progressing into more of a First World country when it comes to our technology.

So why are we still using such outdated text books in our schooling system? Our country is moving forward, yet our education system seems stuck when it comes to educating the younger generation in current and future trends in computer science. If the schools could, and some definitely can, provide enough computers for a class of interested learners, surely they would have the finances available for new text books? And not just new text books, but up-to-date text books with the most recent developments and products that are available.

It's common knowledge that technology is advancing and changing at such a fast rate that it's almost impossible to keep up - almost. But, even with that setback, teaching classes that graphics cards, manufactured almost ten years ago, are the latest and fastest is totally unacceptable. How are the students supposed to know what's actually going on within the industry when they can't apply the knowledge they have?

School text books, when it comes to Computer Science as a subject, need to be updated once every two years. Students taking this subject are struggling to learn a fact that is incorrect, but was correct at the time of printing and will be marked correct in the exams.

Generally, students who take this subject are people who have been exposed to computers from a young age, and are probably still involved with them [hence the subject choice]. These students, who are probably eager to learn about a topic that interests them, are being taught that, although what they know is right, they must learn inherently untrue statements.

While the new schooling system our beloved government is introducing into the schools has some gaping holes in it, it does have one thing that makes

OUR COUNTRY IS MOVING FORWARD, YET OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM SEEMS STUCK WHEN IT COMES TO EDUCATING THE YOUNGER GENERATION IN CURRENT AND FUTURE TRENDS IN COMPUTER SCIENCE.

this whole mess seem almost worth it - almost. The new system, which is essentially OBE, will benefit the education system because it ensures that students are at least learning a relatively popular and fairly modern computer language instead of one of the older languages. Most schools that offer the subject have been teaching an older language such as Turbo Pascal, which, although still stimulating, is not often used in the industry. Now schools are using a newer language like Java to bring their students something that they can possibly use outside of school.

Teaching students useful material, which enables them to go out into the world with some knowledge they can use, is what the system is designed for. Because not everyone living in South Africa can afford tertiary education, few will get the chance to advance their education and must survive on what Grade 12 taught them. Students who learn about old technology cannot use that information because it's outdated and pretty useless, but students who have the benefit of learning from new text books, about a modern language and recent advances in the industry, will have a better idea of what's happening in the industry, and where they fit into it all.

These students could go far because of their love and flair for the subject, but the education system needs to give them a chance if they're to go anywhere with it at all. **NAG**

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KINGPIN
MY NEW JOB... AND OTHER STUFF

By Micheal James

This feels like a downgrade or at best a bad sequel: a column in the magazine all the way over on page 36 instead of the front. But considering the kind of mundane rambling James will probably come up with for the Ed's Note, this is still pretty much going to be everyone's first stop before they start reading the rest of the magazine – much like the grooming section in a men's magazine. That said, there's probably some level of expectation that I'll fail to achieve anything with this, but then to be honest, I never spend time worrying about things I have no control over. If the next bit of text fails to move you, I'll try and be more engaging in the next issue. I'm dead tired after what must be the best business trip I've ever been on [see more below], and I'm writing this just before the magazine goes to print. So bear with me here.

BUT BACK TO ME

Rumours of my leaving the magazine have been greatly exaggerated. Look - see I'm still here! The problem is that people just don't read things properly. More importantly, do you think I'm mad? I'm not really good at doing anything except playing games and the writing part is easy – pay someone else to do it. Deep down however, I'd like nothing more than to find a nice simple job performing a nice simple task. I often dream of the kind of job where all I have to do is move boxes from one side of a warehouse to another. It's uncomplicated and I've reached that stage in the publishing business where I'm at peace with the prospect of seeing my mind slip a few gears down to the point where I'll be fulfilled doing monkey work. This job [lifestyle really] is madness. You never know what's coming next and everything is done at the last minute and under pressure. But I'm not complaining.

The extra time I'm freeing up by handing all the jobs I don't

INTEL AND BMW TOGETHER AT LAST! IT'S ALWAYS GOOD WHEN TWO OF YOUR FAVOURITE COMPANIES JOIN FORCES. WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN FOR GAMING?

like doing to James, is going to be used to grow the gaming industry and thereby the magazine as well. The plans for this are simple: know how to look like you know what you're doing at all times and wing it from there. This is the philosophical foundation NAG is built on. So to clarify for all you confused souls out there: I'm still here, doing what most Managing Editors and Publishers do best – allegedly making this whole thing come together so you essentially have a rag to flip through every month. I'm sure most people would be more comfortable and even impressed if I went on about a strictly planned timetable of events and strategies, but I prefer to take it one day at a time.

INTEL I LOVE YOU

All my blind and blatant support for Intel has finally paid off. I'm typing this paragraph in Bahrain, a day or two away from watching the opening race of the Formula 1 season, courtesy of Intel's new partnership with BMW. Intel and BMW together at last! It's always good when two of your favourite companies join forces. What does this all mean for gaming? Well to be honest, who cares? I use an Intel chip in my PC which I play games on, so there's a link there however tenuous it may be. The important thing is that this sort of trip strengthens relationships all around. Further to this, our magazines and the publishing company are the engines behind rAge. And now that the relationship has been strengthened, you can expect stronger support from Intel which will result in a better rAge for everyone. Intel's advertising also pays for a few pages in the magazines, which allows us to increase the size of each publication. And Intel's also sponsoring the E3 supplement in July, which is something that directly benefits you. So at the end of the day, flying off to watch the F1 is really benefiting all of you. And I'm happy to take one for the team! **NAG**

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VIDEOGAMING IN
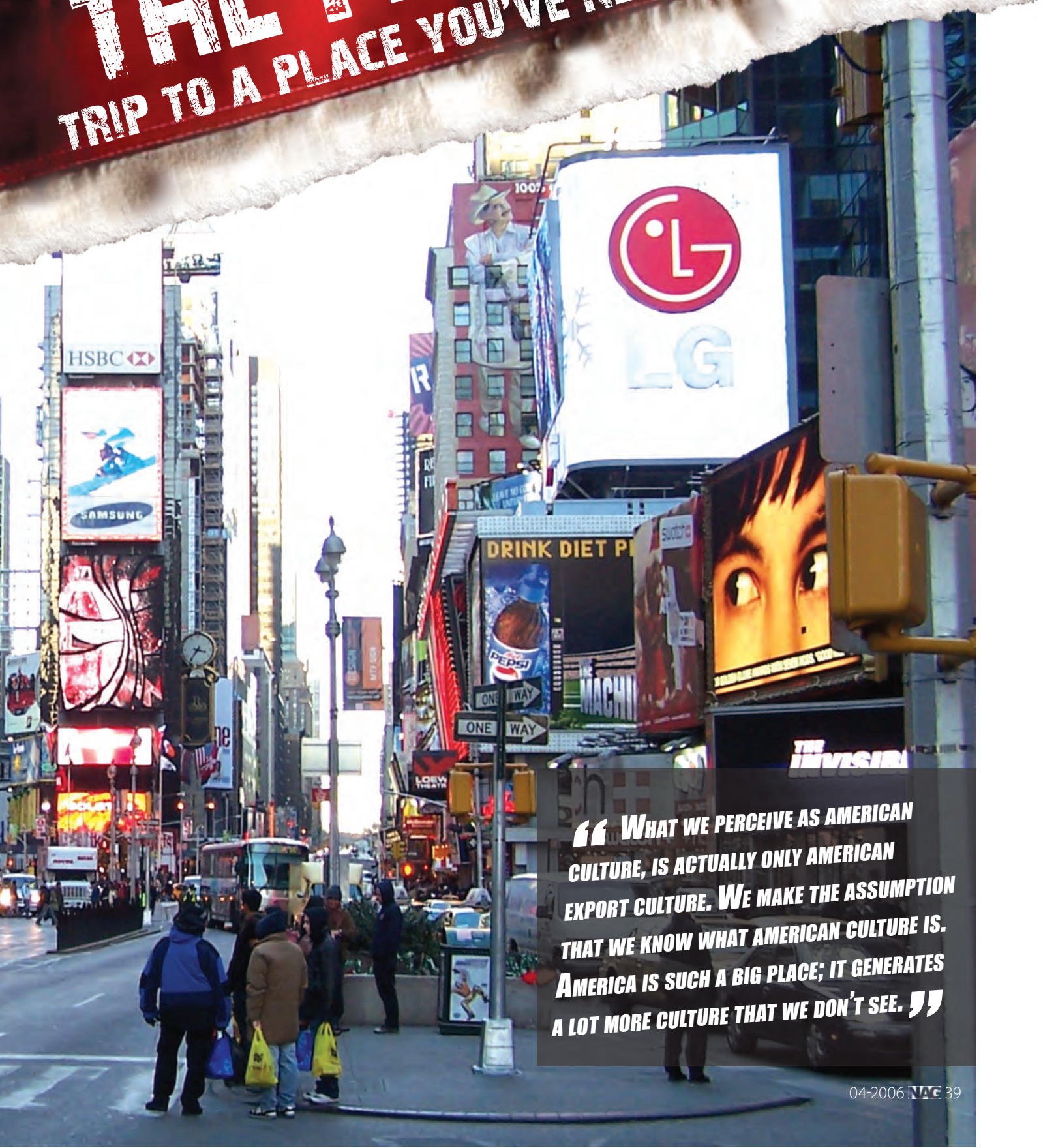
STEP BACK, JACK, WE'RE GOING FOR A LITTLE

THE FIRST WORLD

TRIP TO A PLACE YOU'VE NEVER IMAGINED

> " What we perceive as American culture, is actually only American export culture. We make the assumption that we know what American culture is. America is such a big place; it generates a lot more culture that we don't see. "

OH, YOU THINK YOU know America. You're damn sure that you've watched enough Jerry Springer, Judge Judy and South Park to form an accurate mental image of American society and culture. After all, television doesn't lie.

But the reality of it, as always, is a little different to that which you see on TV. Television doesn't lie, but it doesn't tell the whole truth either. A trite analogy to indicate how only getting half-truths can be detrimental to your health, is when your friend tells you there is a car coming, but neglects to tell you it's right behind you. A little more truth, perhaps the whole truth, can save you from becoming road kill.

You may be wondering why America is so important. What does America have to do with videogames? More precisely, what does it have to do with us, the videogamers here in South Africa? We're so far removed from the trailer parks, the Burger Kings and the overindulgent nature that is a hallmark of Americana. South Africa is about as far apart as you can get from the world's supposed economic [and videogame] superpower. And yet, the implications of what's hot or not in America quickly cascades around the gaming universe – massive waves of trend, hype and hyperbole splashing across the other nations of the world.

So buckle up and join us on a trip to the United States of America. On this journey, you might just find out a bit more to the 'truth' behind American culture and its videogame counterpart.

VIDEOGAMES ARE BIG IN THE USA, BECAUSE A BIG DEAL IS MADE ABOUT VIDEOGAMES

BIG BURGERS, BIG PEOPLE, BIG CULTURE

Initially, there is this wonderful sensation to arriving in the US. It's like stepping into 'Movie Land', especially if you touch down near Los Angeles or New York. Both cities look, sound and smell just like their silver screen representations. After all, places like LA and New York have been romanticised to generations of movie-goers, and one might start to believe that these locations are not actually real – just sets in a movie.

But, New York is very real and quite easily the diamond in the American rough. The reason for this is that New York is about as multi-cultural as it comes. People from all walks of life, from all races, colours and creed inhabit its massive spanning metropolis.

It is here that our journey into American videogame culture begins, and it starts with something as simple as the public transit.

To get anywhere in New York, you take the subway. Very few brave the New York roads, oozing to the brim with yellow New York cabs that congeal like custard. The main subway stations are the many hearts of New York, pumping their trains through the multitude of arteries that feed the various burrows. Everyone takes the subway, so everyone has time to spare. It is here where you find people casually playing on handheld videogame consoles – the perfect cure for boredom. It is not uncommon to see more than four people per train indulging in a little Mario Kart DS, and sometimes you may even find groups of friends happily battling away wirelessly while waiting for their stop. Nobody looks at these gamers funny. Nobody eyes the bleeping handhelds with suspicion or disdain. After all, everyone plays videogames. CNN said so, so it must be true.

The handheld consoles mostly find happy homes in the hands of idle people due to the technology uptake of the average New Yorker. No joke, one can easily spot people walking down the city streets checking their e-mails on their BlackBerries. These people naturally don't pay much attention to where they're going. Blowing your car horn at crossing pedestrians is actually against the law in New York: it seems that the law doesn't want motorists to startle people. The aforementioned BlackBerry person is by no means an exception. According to CNN, there are various groups pushing to have BlackBerry shut down. According to these groups, "too many people spend too much time checking their e-mails, instead of watching where they are going." Yes, people tend to check their e-mail even while driving. It's amazing that the accident rate in the US is so surprisingly low.

The videogame culture in the US is big. One doesn't quite get the whole picture from a distance. It is only when you're there, standing in the midst of videogame advertising as only the media-centric Americans can pull it off, that you really get an appreciation for how gaming has permeated mainstream media there.

Videogames are everywhere in the US. Posters on walls, massive billboards over highways and the newest games, the hottest gaming consoles, all advertised on major TV networks and in theatres. On each and every one of the 500 plus major cable-TV network channels you can easily find at least one advert related to videogames. You can even find channels wholly dedicated to videogames, as is the case with G4 Tech TV.

BOOBS ON THE TUBE

Television is very different in the US. In-between the popular shows such as Lost and Battlestar

Galactica, you find ads for medicine you simply must have, but aren't quite sure what it actually does. If you're quick, you may even catch the hilarious, yet disturbing disclaimers warning customers that said medicine may cause haemorrhaging, fainting or nausea. And this is for medicine that 'enhances and improves your life'.

G4 Tech TV, like Gamestop, is a symptom of a bigger, healthier videogame culture. The show has interviews with game designers, serious debates with developers about game balance as well as flashy, mostly in-depth previews and reviews of popular games. And like any mainstream media, it has its own share of 'forehead slap' moments, as is the case with the one G4 Tech TV presenter not knowing that World of Warcraft was a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. Regardless, there is an interesting phenomenon cultivated by this mass-media approach to videogames.

Videogames are big in the US, because a big deal is made about videogames.

Each time a major motion picture is made into a game, each time another major music label signs up to provide music for an upcoming game, every time other sectors acknowledge videogames as a worthwhile money-making market, the more commonplace videogames become in America.

LIFESTYLE OF THE RICH AND TECH-SAVVY

The more widespread something becomes, the easier it becomes for people to educate themselves about it. Either willingly through research or unknowingly through advertising or word-of-mouth, the general videogame knowledge in the US is actually quite high. Parents know what videogames are - they saw the show on Oprah about videogame addiction. Yet despite this, parents continue to buy their kids videogames, often even making a few choice purchases for themselves.

Consumer awareness lends itself to a more mature market. Stores can't easily bamboozle clients [though not for lack of trying]. Instead, retailers have become more participatory, involving themselves with their client base. To make purchasing decisions easier for customers, videogame stores tend to create their own bundle-packs – a collection of often genre-related games or console-bundles with the popular games of that system. Consumers appreciate this gesture. It saves them time and in the long term, money. Stores also tend to make 'family videogame' suggestions, dedicating shelves to titles that 'the whole family can enjoy'. These titles are by no means the childish Reader Rabbit variety, but rather titles that can appeal to both the older and younger generation without resorting to blatant violence.

EACH TIME A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE IS MADE INTO A GAME, EACH TIME ANOTHER MAJOR MUSIC LABEL SIGNS UP TO PROVIDE MUSIC FOR AN UPCOMING GAME, EVERY TIME OTHER SECTORS ACKNOWLEDGE VIDEOGAMES AS A WORTHWHILE MONEY-MAKING MARKET, THE MORE COMMONPLACE VIDEOGAMES BECOME IN AMERICA.

Parents like these shelves, a lot. Locally, those interested in videogames tend to go to stores with a specific purchase in mind. In contrast, US stores are filled with people simply browsing, looking around for something interesting to play. It's not that Americans have that much disposable income. In fact, the average American working-class 20-year-old has very little to waste on games. But, such people make provisions.

This is aided in part by the fact that Americans don't get paid in monthly intervals, but rather weekly. Americans on average don't know how to save money. So, the weekly pay cheques tend to get split between food for the week, rent or part of rent and then, of course, a wanton purchase to make life bearable. Such purchases are usually entertainment-related: videogames, DVDs and music. As such, most people want to buy something that will last, something that will give a fair dose of entertainment.

It's no wonder consoles and console gaming has become so big in the US.

LIVING LARGE ON LIVE

Slowly but surely, the US PC game market is becoming smaller [at least, in terms of retail presence]. It is very difficult to find computer games in stores in the US. Computer gaming, due to cheap and easily accessible broadband, has evolved. Boxed games on store shelves seem almost quaint to the average American computer game consumer, for they purchase their games online. Not just via delivery methods such as Steam, but also via online retailers, that ship direct to your door, as well as sites such as GameDrive, which allow you to download the entire game for a nominal fee.

Such systems can, naturally, only function in a society where high-speed Internet access is part and parcel of a house, much like water and electricity. In New York especially, where high-speed broadband is at its fastest and cheapest, it is neigh impossible to find PC games in sturdy cardboard boxes or DVD cases.

Instead, it's Microsoft's Xbox leading the charge for gaming in the United States. Make no mistake; PlayStation 2 is a strong, solid brand in the US with millions of gamers. But the sheer growth of the Xbox makes it a force to be reckoned with. It's not the Xbox that's causing this growth, but rather Microsoft's real product – Xbox Live.

People don't go to LAN [Local Area Network] parties in the US anymore. Yes, the occasional mega-LAN is held, but usually people will drive very far to participate in these 1,000+ escapades.

Why take a heavy, easily-damaged PC and trek hundreds of miles for gaming pleasure, when you can simply plug an affordable Xbox into a broadband router and play against millions of other gamers at any time? Xbox Live is big, in a way only the US could make it. Player counts to rival that of Counter-Strike constantly deathmatch on Halo 2 servers, the built-in voice chat used for team management and opponent abuse.

But it's not gaming, it's entertainment. When the average East Coast US consumer sits down and has a quick game of Madden on Xbox Live against his friend from the West Coast, he's not thinking about gaming. He doesn't consider himself a gamer. He's

simply having some fun and Xbox plus Live is a tool to facilitate that.

Now, with the release of the Xbox 360, Live is growing in leaps and bounds. The 360 sits comfortably in an American living room as easily as a VCR – simply a way to be entertained either singularly, or by involving your friends. Much like World of Warcraft, Live's success is in part due to its consumer base. Like World of Warcraft, more people play on Live because their friends are all on Live, which in turn makes sure more people join up to Live to be with their friends.

SHOPPING FOR SHOPPING'S SAKE

It won't be long before Microsoft opens up Live-enabled gaming lounges, places where gamers can go to quickly sign in with their Live accounts to play some online multiplayer. This idea isn't a new one, but it's set to replace the quickly fading arcade market. Arcades are all but a part of the past in the US, long since having lost their glory days of the mega-über-arcade where gamers once flocked. The occasional fast-food joint has the odd arcade cabinet, while the more out-of-the-way towns cling to their small arcades as a place to be entertained. The decline of the arcade culture is due simply to the rise of consoles. Once upon a time, gamers clamoured for 'arcade perfect' translations of Mortal Kombat and Street Fighter. Now arcades battle to try and out-innovate the hyperactive console market.

On the flip side of the coin, stores such as the Nintendo Store [see box] continue to provide everything fans could want, cashing in on a very

The Nintendo Store

Newly opened, the Nintendo Store may have gathered ridicule from the more 'serious' online gamers who think that Nintendo is only suited for children – the reality though, is a lot more impressive.

Standing two stories high just a little off Times Square in the centre of New York, the Nintendo Store is a building of sheet glass and chrome. The outside and inside have been designed to look professional and appealing. In fact, the Nintendo Store has thus far won multiple awards for store design.

Inside, every conceivable Nintendo-related game and product is sold. Sitting side-by-side neatly upon shelves, everything from Nintendo DS carry cases to Mario paraphernalia such as Bowser plush dolls happily get flogged to consumers who really want these things. Downstairs, videogames and consoles are sold by store clerks trying to get you to sign up to the Nintendo consumer loyalty programme where you earn points per purchase.

Upstairs, free Wi-Fi lets Nintendo DS owners battle online while a variety of GameCubes are set up with the latest games to play. Special tables for Pokémon CCG tournaments line the sides, offering weekly tournaments with big cash prizes. All the while, happy remixes of favourite Mario tunes play over the in-store music system, a testament to how much fans love the whole thing, the whole Nintendo legacy.

successful brand and franchise. Once again, Nintendo is very big in the US, much bigger than anyone from South Africa could imagine. The GameCube was by no means under-represented, while the Nintendo DS continues to beat its contemporary in terms of market penetration.

The US doesn't even realise just how much of an impact it has on the videogame industry. Videogames are just so damn commonplace there it doesn't even enter the mind of the average American that not all gaming markets were created equal.

Ironically, some videogame concepts seem uniquely American – concepts and products that just don't seem to filter through to the rest of the world. One such product line is that of console 'skins', decals you can stick on your PlayStation 2 or Xbox that are essentially borderline case-mods. Another such product line is that of NFL team-branded controllers.

People will go out of their way to purchase third-party PlayStation 2 or Xbox controllers themed and branded after their favourite [usually regional] sports teams. The integration between sports and videogames in the US is something another six pages could be written about.

He, who controls America, could control videogames as we know it. The ups and downs, the scandals and successes, all are just another facet to the consumer-centric, demanding nature of the American public which has become so evolved that it actually seems retarded from afar, yet is perfectly honed to keep consumerism healthy, which in turn keeps videogames an important human pastime. **NAG**

Gamestop, the place to start

What happens when videogames become commonplace? Simple; specialist stores dedicated to videogames actually become so common that they're regarded as a retail necessity. Just like a pharmacy, or a video rental store.

Leading the charge in massive franchise videogame stores is Gamestop, followed only by EB Games. Americans themselves often joke about how you can find a Gamestop almost anywhere, even in the really far-out places. A quick two hour flight out of New York and into Chicago proves this. Even in the little town called Lafayette [four hours' drive from Chicago] several Gamestops happily provide the local population with videogame merchandise. It's not that there is such a demand for them, it's just that they're built there in case there is ever someone who might need to purchase a PlayStation 2 and some games.

Almost every shopping centre is guaranteed to have a Starbucks coffee shop, a McDonald's and a Gamestop.

Gamestop itself is by no means an amazing store. In fact, the blasé nature of the store makes it susceptible to the usual retail nightmares – store clerks who think they know everything, and sales attendants who try to sell you whatever game isn't selling well that week.

What makes Gamestop so appealing to a South African however, is that it represents the penultimate gaming store [the ultimate being one without the annoying store clerks]. Gamestop not only stocks every conceivable game out there [with the exception of PC games, which are becoming a fading retail market in the US], but strategy guides, second-hand discounted copies, refurbished consoles and even toys. The Halo action figures are still a hot item. It's not uncommon to see a dad walk in and buy one for his daughter, and it's **not** just a ruse to get himself one.

The refurbished console and console peripheral side of Gamestop, along with its videogame trade-in system, is the main reason Gamestop rose from a mediocre gaming store to the popular and commonplace store it is today.

You can take any game to Gamestop and trade it in for credits. Such credits can then be used towards purchases at any Gamestop store. In America, where games are not bought as single items, people often find themselves with more games than they're playing or wish to keep. The trade-in system at Gamestop has facilitated a healthy market for second-hand games. These not only get sold to those who wish to pick up the games at a cheaper price, but most rare trade-ins are actually auctioned on eBay where collectors can try to out-bid each other for that tasty piece of videogame history.

Several Gamestop employees admitted that they themselves keep an eye out for lucrative business opportunities, namely in the form of 'hard to find' titles that may get returned. These employees will then purchase the games themselves and resell them at a much higher price to collectors.

Gamestop is a symptom of a healthy videogame market and culture, a store that provides anything a gamer could want, but doesn't necessarily need.

Hindsight becomes Foresight

South Africa is in the unique position to actually benefit from being behind in global terms. Numerically, South Africa only represents a tiny part of the European videogames sector, and even less of the North American one. But that's not a problem.

We are an emerging market, one that may seem diminutive, but actually has a wonderful capacity for growth. It is exactly due to this that South Africa stands to benefit the most from being behind.

The local retailers, distributors, vendors and even consumers can stand to learn a lot from the North American videogame [and computer-related hardware] sectors. It's like looking into the future, spotting trends and then pre-emptively applying them to the local market with adjustments made for local colloquialisms and needs. As was mentioned before, what floats or sinks in America has an implication around the world. America is a wonderful test bed for concepts, ideas and culture. What makes the cut in America quickly spreads to the other sectors. If local distributors pay heed to the American trends in videogames, they can avoid costly mistakes such as shipping and selling a flop, not capitalising on games that made a splash internationally [such as Katamari Damacy for PlayStation 2], etc.

Consumers should also educate themselves by paying attention to what's happening in the American videogames market. The more aware SA consumers are of American trends, the more they can shape and grow the local market. By appealing to distributors for certain games or just generally raising the overall videogame knowledge of the country, the more seriously it can be taken.

The fastest way to grow a market is, after all, by being proactive.

ALMOST EVERY SHOPPING CENTRE IS GUARANTEED TO HAVE A STARBUCKS COFFEE SHOP, A MCDONALD'S AND A GAMESTOP

VIDEOGAMING IN THE FIRST WORLD

NEARLY DEPARTED

THE OLD-SCHOOL POINT-AND-CLICK
ADVENTURE GENRE ISN'T DEAD.
IT'S JUST NEARLY DEAD.

CHARISMATIC INDIE-DEVELOPER JOHN GREEN, noted for his work on various Disney-based comic books, recently announced his own foray into game development: a reluctant zombie adventure, Nearly Departed. What makes John's story so interesting isn't the fact that he's approaching a much-loved and under-appreciate genre, but rather that he's going it alone - just him, buckets of talent and a happy-looking living-challenged zombie.

Created using the free adventure game authoring studio LASSIE [www.gmacwill.com/lassie], Nearly Departed is every bit as charming as its lead protagonist. We caught up with John and asked him a few questions.

Explain a bit about Nearly Departed. You play a reluctant zombie, in a SCUMM-style adventure?

It's very much a story of 'missing identity', something that's of course very common in adventure games, but the whole 'being a zombie' aspect adds a new twist to it. The game begins with you as a zombie, and you need to figure out who you are and how you became what you are, and in the meantime try not to zombify the entire city. It's not a violent game, though there is some dark humour and cartoon gore. It's also very tongue-in-cheek, full of puns, and generally wacky. It's very much inspired by the old SCUMM [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SCUMM] games like Maniac Mansion and Monkey Island, and the 'verb coin' interface, Nearly Departed uses, is very much like the one from Curse of Monkey Island.

What is your background, prior to Nearly Departed?

I'm a 'comic book professional' by trade. I have a BFA in Graphic Design and immediately got a job in the comics field. I eventually landed at Disney Adventures, a digest-sized magazine that has a comics section every month. There I handled production of various comics based on Disney properties. I wrote, coloured, lettered, and laid out comics like Kim Possible and Finding Nemo. I also illustrated the comics Jax Epoch and the Quicken Forbidden and Teen Boat, which I co-published with the writer, Dave Roman.

Are you working on Nearly Departed full-time, or as a side project?

I'm a freelancer, so almost everything I'm working on is a side project, as I have to devote some of my time to all the projects I have going on [at the same time]. But Nearly Departed is a non-paying hobby, really. And so, while I'd love to devote more time to it during the day, it's just not financially responsible. I do think about it constantly and usually at least jot down one idea or puzzle everyday.

Where did the idea behind Nearly Departed come from?

Nearly Departed started years ago as an idea for a comic book that I'd write and draw. I've got countless ideas for comics floating around in my head, as well as floating around on little post-it notes all over my apartment. When I got the impulse to [develop] an adventure game, Nearly Departed was just one of those ideas that seemed perfectly suited for it.

What was your first encounter with the scripting engine, LASSIE? How did you find out about it?

I had gotten back into playing those old LucasArts games sometime last Fall, and started doing Web searches for games similar to them. I had come across various adventure game forums and eventually AGS, where I found lots of classic LucasArts and Sierra-style adventure games being developed. Unfortunately, those games are primarily for PC and a fairly small handful of them can be played on a Mac. It's even harder to find a game engine for Mac that's specifically designed for creating games in the vein of Curse of Monkey Island. But that was when I found LASSIE, which was cross-platform compatible. There hadn't been any games created with it yet, but there was a demo, and it seemed perfect for what I had in mind.

Is it just you working on Nearly Departed?

Primarily just me in terms of writing, art, animation, and scripting, but Greg MacWilliam, the creator of LASSIE, has been a really big help,

and Mark Darin from Pinhead Games will be producing the voices and music, as well as handling distribution and promotion.

How did you get involved with Pinhead games?

In my search for adventure games that could be played on a Mac, I found their Website and played their Nick Bounty games. They were a lot of fun and very much like the kind of thing I'd like to make. I noticed they had another game in development, Nelly the Wonderdog, and they were looking for artists. I 'auditioned' to be a character artist and got the gig. Shortly after that I started working on Nearly Departed and Mark was curious what I had planned for it. Pinhead Games has more resources at their fingertips than I do when it comes to sound, so we pretty much agreed to make Nearly Departed a co-production, as we'd both benefit from it being the best game we could create.

Is Nearly Departed your first foray into game development?

Not entirely. I used to develop games for the Commodore 64 back in the late 80s, early 90s. I had put out a few games, but none were adventure games. The last game I was working on was a film noir style adventure game, and I had done some art and programming for it, but I can't recall any of it and I'm not sure where the disks with it are anymore. I'm sure they're in my parents' attic collecting dust. I did start working on another adventure game a number of years ago, but gave up because the engine wasn't cross-platform compatible. And when MacOS upgraded to OS X, it didn't quite perform the same. Nearly Departed is definitely my first game in a long time, though.

How has support for Nearly Departed been going? The online culture seems quite excited.

Support has been great. I'm genuinely flattered by all the attention it's getting and all the excitement people have about it. I just hope I can get the game done before all the anticipation for it goes away.

What would you consider your biggest learning experience while developing Nearly Departed?

My biggest learning experience is coming from the various adventure game forums out there. Reading about what people love about adventure games, hate about them, would like to see, have seen too much of, and so on, has been a big help in the development of the game.

What advice can you give anyone out there who is thinking of going into indie-game development?

As an independent comic book publisher, I've realised that this advice is true for any independent industry: don't try to be too ambitious, and don't expect to strike it rich or make it big. Do what you're doing because it's what you love. Do it because it's something you can't NOT do. Fame and fortune should not be your goal. They're a nice bonus, though.

What are your thoughts on the current game industry?

Here's my short answer: I could go on about how the game industry is on a very similar downward spiral that the comics industry had been on decades ago, but that'd take up half your magazine. Let me just say I think the industry does put out some great games and I hope it continues to grow in terms of producing a variety of types of games for a variety of audiences.

Do you play any of the current games?

I haven't played many recent adventure games, as the majority of them are available for PC and I work on a Mac, but that's not the only genre of game I like. I do have a Nintendo GameCube, a GBA and a DS, and I spend a decent amount of time playing them. I know I'll get criticised for this, but I love licensed games, like games based on movies or comics and stuff – Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Spider-Man, X-Men... I know these aren't typically the best games. The publishers figure the popularity of the license will make the game sell itself, so they don't have to put all their effort into making it the best game. But I like these games for the 'extension of the fantasy'. They're worlds and characters and stories I'm familiar with and I just like to play in those worlds and meet those characters and live out those stories. That's something a lot of games don't give you the chance to do. Sure, RPGs can have very defined characters and worlds and stories, but I just can't get into many of them. I just can't play them for twenty minutes and have my fill. Some will say you don't play an adventure game for twenty minutes either, and that's true, but there's a world of difference between RPGs and traditional point-and-click adventure games.

Do you think you'll develop any other games once Nearly Departed starts distribution?

I surely hope so. I've got all those ideas on post-it notes that I'd like to do something with.

When do you expect to release Nearly Departed?

There's no definite release date, but hopefully before the end of the year. Could be sooner, could be later, it's really just too early to tell for sure.

You can find the demo for Nearly Departed on this issue's cover DVD. For more information, visit the official Website: www. johngreenart.com/nearlydeparted.

While the final product is still a while off, the demo has managed to pique the interest of indie-developers and old-school adventure gamers alike - a very good sign for any one-man game development endeavour. As fans of the halcyon days of Sam & Max Hit the Road and the Monkey Island series, NAG wishes John all the best with Nearly Departed. **NAG**

PREVIEWS

ANOTHER ISSUE AND ANOTHER host of upcoming games to tickle the fancy of anyone so inclined. Often people complain that "it was much better to be a gamer in the old days, the days of the Atari and NES." While those titles did make their impact, there is no mistaking that now is a great time to be a gamer. The advent of HD with the rollout of next-gen consoles, such as the Xbox 360, is giving console games the resolution and clarity lift they've needed for a while. Improvements in the areas of team-centric multiplayer for the PC will soon provide endless hours of fun with friends, while keeping your clothes on. This year and the year after [and most likely all the ones after that], are all going to be great years for gaming. And that's what we're here for: the games.

SIN EPISODES

DEVELOPER: Ritual
PUBLISHER: Steam
PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: FPS
RELEASE DATE: 2006

WELCOME TO FREEPORT, THE city of the future. Elexis Sinclair, the head of Sincorp, has ambitions of reshaping humanity. Colonel John R. Blade has had several run-ins with Sincorp as commander of the elite strike force Hardcorps. It's still the Sin universe, but Ritual has plans to expand on the adventures of the game that stood in Half-Life's shadow. Episodic releases, via Steam, of chapters are planned for this Source-powered game. The developers promise new characters and weapons, but even if you played the original, this isn't a remake. Instead, it will be a complex new form of game that aims to take advantage of delivering episodic content. Besides, it's another Source-powered FPS. Who is complaining?

UT 2007

Developer: Epic   Publisher: Midway   Platform: PC   Genre: FPS   Release date: 2006

DO WE RISK A lot of angry e-mails if we called Unreal Tournament the FIFA of multiplayer shooters? It appears that the series keeps being updated with some changes to the gameplay, better graphics and improved effects [physics and such], but it's becoming a bit more challenging for non-players to appreciate or see the big changes. It has not yet come to that, though: UT 2007 will definitely stand out thanks to utilising the Unreal 3 engine. There's also the question of how many changes Midway will bring to the party, which was very apparent and effective in Unreal Championship 2. But the official word from Epic is to expect improved visuals, new weapons and vehicles, plus extra game modes.

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WHAT WE WANT...

SPORE [PC]

Does everything Will Wright touches turn into gold? We're about to find out, when the 'Sim Everything' Spore is released. Recently a video started circulating the Internet showing 30 minutes of gameplay footage. We were very, very impressed to say the least. It looks good so far, and the footage was actually from last year's E3! The premise of the game alone is appealing: you start off as an organism in a sea of life, evolving and growing until eventually you're taking over planets.

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3 [360]

It looks beautiful, it plays beautiful. Project Gotham Racing 3 for the Xbox 360 is being hailed as the best-looking racing game out there. It's hard to disagree! NAG got its hands on a copy for a while and the impression it left was lasting. Watching the top players on Xbox Live race via the Gotham TV system was captivating.

RUSH

DEVELOPER: Midway
PUBLISHER: Midway
PLATFORM: PSP
GENRE: Racing
RELEASE DATE: 2006

IT'S TIME FOR MORE vehicular insanity! Rush is a PSP exclusive that plans to introduce the stunt element to the portable. Players will have over 35 licensed cars to select from, which can then be raced, ramped and crashed across levels based in Los Angeles. Or the cars can be put to the test in the various stunt arenas. Features include building up cars with cash you win, a reputation system, and even the ability to win and chop up opponents' cars. It's doubtful that there'll be a big damage model, but the premise is interesting. Wireless play will be a feature.

URBAN CHAOS: RIOT RESPONSE

DEVELOPER: Rocksteady Studios
PUBLISHER: Eidos
PLATFORMS: PS2, Xbox
GENRE: FPS
RELEASE DATE: 2006

THIS ONE THREW US off a bit. It looks like another crime game, but instead, players take on the role of a riot squad officer who then goes about beating the living daylights out of a criminal gang instigating chaos in a futuristic city. It's not a riot simulator, though. The footage showed looked rich with gameplay, even if the graphics were still a bit low in quality. Moral watchdogs are bound to complain about it, because it's violent and has some neat scenes of rioters hacking at your police shield and you pressing a tazer against a rioter's neck. Little else has been announced, but Urban Chaos [which might be linked to the original Dreamcast game] looks like it will be a blast.

SUPERMAN RETURNS

DEVELOPER: EA Triburon
PUBLISHER: EA
PLATFORMS: PS2, Xbox, Next-Gen
GENRE: Action
RELEASE DATE: 2006

FASTER THAN A SPEEDING bullet and able to leap the tallest buildings! Those words still instil some awe, but the Superman games have really not come close. Enter EA and its magic. The game, based on the movie, seems to be less about the movie and more about being Superman. Players will have full control over his awesome abilities and will battle enemies that fit a superhuman open-world experience. But there's a catch: Metropolis [with over 10,000 buildings in-game] isn't indestructible, and the havoc Superman causes can affect his performance. This should present an interesting moral dilemma for players.

ASTERIX AND THE VIKINGS

DEVELOPER: Infusio
PUBLISHER: Infusio
PLATFORM: Mobile
GENRE: Platformer
RELEASE DATE: TBA

Asterix and his powerhouse friend, Obelix, are at it again as the duo head out for their eighth film, Asterix and the Vikings. Naturally there'll be games in tow, including mobile games. Vikings arrive near the Gaulish village, in search for the meaning of fear, because they think it'll make them fly. They kidnap the cowardly Justforkix, nephew of Vitalstatistix, and our heroes set off after the Vikings to save him. Unfortunately only Asterix will be playable in this game, but fans should get a kick out of it.

LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS [GC/REVOLUTION]

A long time coming and shrouded in mystery, the next Zelda game must hurry up already. Nintendo has been promising this one for a while, holding it back a little longer for 'more polish'. How much polish does a game need, really? Slated for the GameCube [probably the last game the GameCube will ever see] and the Revolution, Twilight Princess supposedly has something 'special' in store for the Revolution in terms of controller input. We'll have to wait and see.

BIOSHOCK [PC/NEXT-GEN]

The 'spiritual successor' to System Shock 2, Bioshock is looking to scratch the sci-fi thriller FPS role-playing itch we've all been having for a while. Developer Irrational has a lot of work cut out for it, but with promises of 'self sustaining ecosystems' and intricate hunter-hunted aspects, we're quite happy just thinking about it for now.

GUITAR HERO 2 [PS2]

RedOctane is working on Guitar Hero 2, CEO Kelly Sumner has admitted. The game will have '40-plus new tracks'. Seems there are also genre spin-offs in the works. Country, Rock and Metal editions are on the way – more game to rock out to. Guitar Hero with its sycophantic rhythm gameplay has been a big hit here at the NAG office – well worth the import required. Hopefully the recent release of Guitar Hero in Europe marks the eventual local release.

Daxter

"FOR BEHIND EVERY HERO,
THERE IS A WISECRACKING,
ANNOYING NINCOMPOOP!"
– SAMO THE SAGE

Platform: PSP   **Release date:** 14 April 2006   **Genre:** Action   **Wi-Fi:** Yes   **Developer:** Ready at Dawn   **Publisher:** SCEE   **Supplier:** Ster Kinekor Games [[011] 445 7900]

POOR DAXTER! THE LOVABLE Ottsel [Otter/Weasel] just doesn't get any breaks. At the start of Jak & Daxter II [PS2], Jak is imprisoned and Daxter is left to fend for himself. The self-titled Daxter for the PlayStation Portable [his first foray into a game of his own] covers the two years leading up to Jak's eventual rescue by Daxter, expanding the universe into new directions and putting a bit of a twist on the original start of Jak & Daxter II.

But Daxter is by no means a Naughty Dog-developed game. The original developers behind Jak and Daxter are taking a backseat to let newcomer studio Ready at Dawn flex its wings and give Daxter his own adventure.

Being small and furry doesn't bode well for Daxter in Haven City, so he quickly finds himself in a new job as exterminator to help stamp out a mysterious bug infestation. The premise behind Daxter is very much in line with the original Jak ethos: exploration and combat with the occasional distraction in the form of either racing or sliding down a tube on his furry butt.

The laundry list feature-set is sound; pure platform-based gameplay spread across 15 levels with 25 missions. Weapons and gadgets specially tailored for Daxter, such as Fly Swatters, Crop Dusters and so forth, help him along.

A rather strange side-game, Bug Combat, lets up to four players duel each other via the *ad hoc* wireless multiplayer.

What can make or break a platformer however, is the 'feel' of the game. How the levels flow, how the character responds to input and how fluid the combat ties in all make a big difference to the end product.

The first noticeable aspect to the early development release we played is that the Jak & Daxter humour and style is intact. Ready at Dawn seems quite comfortable with the subject matter. Daxter almost feels like a fan project created by Jak enthusiasts [or more accurately, Daxter lovers].

Daxter runs, jumps, flips and belly-crawls effortlessly. The controls are tight. Daxter is responsive and easy to control. While he may not be as detailed as his PlayStation 2 counterpart, he looks, sounds and feels the part without fail. It seems that even the original voice actor for the spunky side-kick has made a return, lending a real sense of authenticity to the game.

Progression through the plot comes in the form of missions, with each mission accompanied by a story-driven prelude. While the missions thus far seem run-of-the-mill in presentation [go here, kill bugs], they rapidly become quick and entertaining jaunts into vivid environments. Each area in Daxter is as detailed as previous Jak & Daxter titles,

despite being powered by the lesser PSP hardware. While Haven City is not represented in its full PlayStation 2 glory, what you do see of the City, from Daxter's [slightly lower to the ground] perspective, is enough to give the right impression.

Killing bugs, collecting items and exploring the environment come naturally – a testament to the design behind Daxter as a platformer. Interestingly, levels may contain cages: these hold bugs which can be used in Bug Combat. As a separate mini-game which can be played wirelessly against friends, Bug Combat is a 'my creature vs. yours' type battle situation where you select the type of attack your creature will make and your opponent responds in kind. Whichever attack has more 'power' [a golf-swing style gauge influences this] will overpower the other and damage gets done to the bug. Added 'cards', which can be found in the main game, can change the outcome of such an attack, or make an attack more powerful.

It's a little Magic the Gathering crossed with Pokémon, really. It's both entertaining in its own right, and serves as a welcome distraction from the main game. The multiplayer aspect couldn't be tested, but it was engaging enough just fighting an AI opponent.

Daxter can also link up with Jak X on PS2, the racing title based on the franchise, presumably via a USB cable that links the PSP to the PS2. It seems that you can unlock tracks and weapons for Jak X, while on your travels through Daxter's campaign.

As with any hands-on preview, often a game has certain traits that may not be representative of the final product. In Daxter's case, it's the slowdowns that occur just after saving or entering a new area. It's no train smash really, and wouldn't detract from the final product if it made its way to final code, but it would be nice to see Daxter as a wholly smooth experience [despite the lead protagonist being a furry critter].

In terms of the PSP, Daxter is a wonderful example of what the PSP can do – in its own unique way – to compete with its bigger brother. Daxter is detailed, polished [even this early on] and contains all the bells and whistles of its brethren. Various unlocks, extra content and so forth, bring much joy to the gaming table, but expect to work for them, they're not cheap to unlock.

So for now, we'll keep an eye on Daxter and make sure that he doesn't get up to too much mischief before the game hits retail. **NAG**

THE CHARACTERS
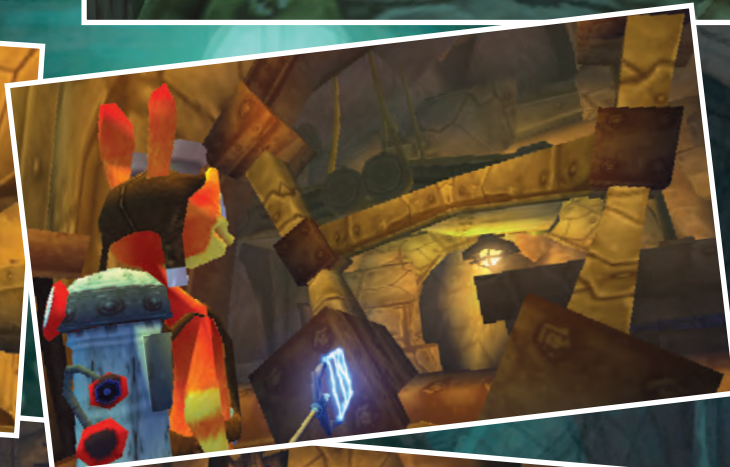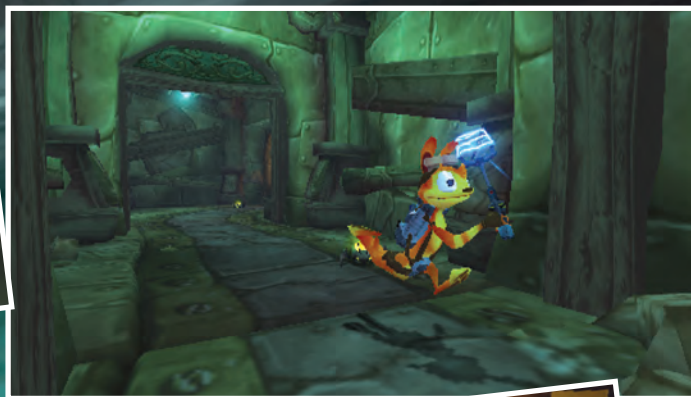
Daxter
The Exterminator

Daxter
The Daxternator

Rayne
The Weapon's Expert

Kaedan
The Bug Boss
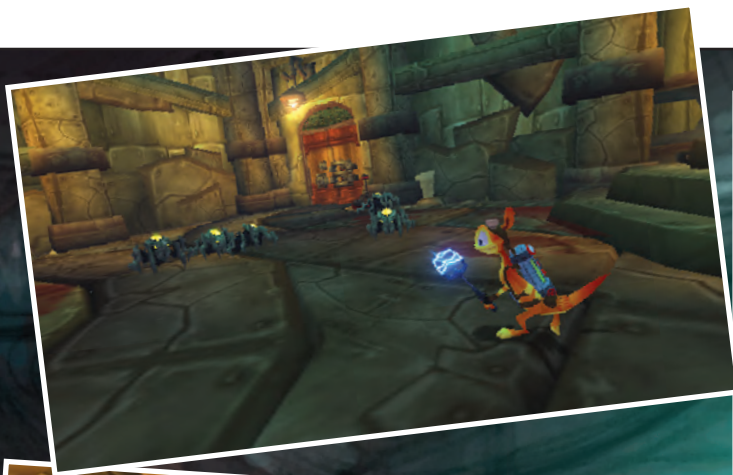
MEET THE NEW BOSS

IT MAY SEEM LIKE Ready at Dawn is a new developer, but in truth [as is the case with a lot of 'new' developers] Ready at Dawn actually has a lot of the old Naughty Dog staff.

A few staff members from Naughty Dog broke off to form Ready at Dawn, and then pitched the idea of Daxter to Sony. Worshipping canon, Ready at Dawn stressed that they wanted Daxter to be as true to the Jak universe and story as possible, hence the plotline being parallel to the start of Jak II.

It will be interesting to see what Ready at Dawn produces after Daxter - either a new franchise or yet another Jak & Daxter related product.

The Da Vinci Code

Developer: The Collective   **Publisher:** 2K Games   **Distributor:** Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900   **Genre:** Action/Puzzle   **Platforms:** PC, PS2, Xbox, GCN   **Release:** May 2006
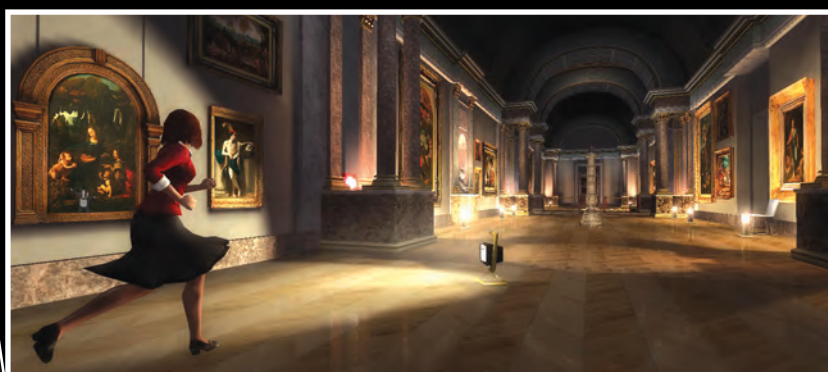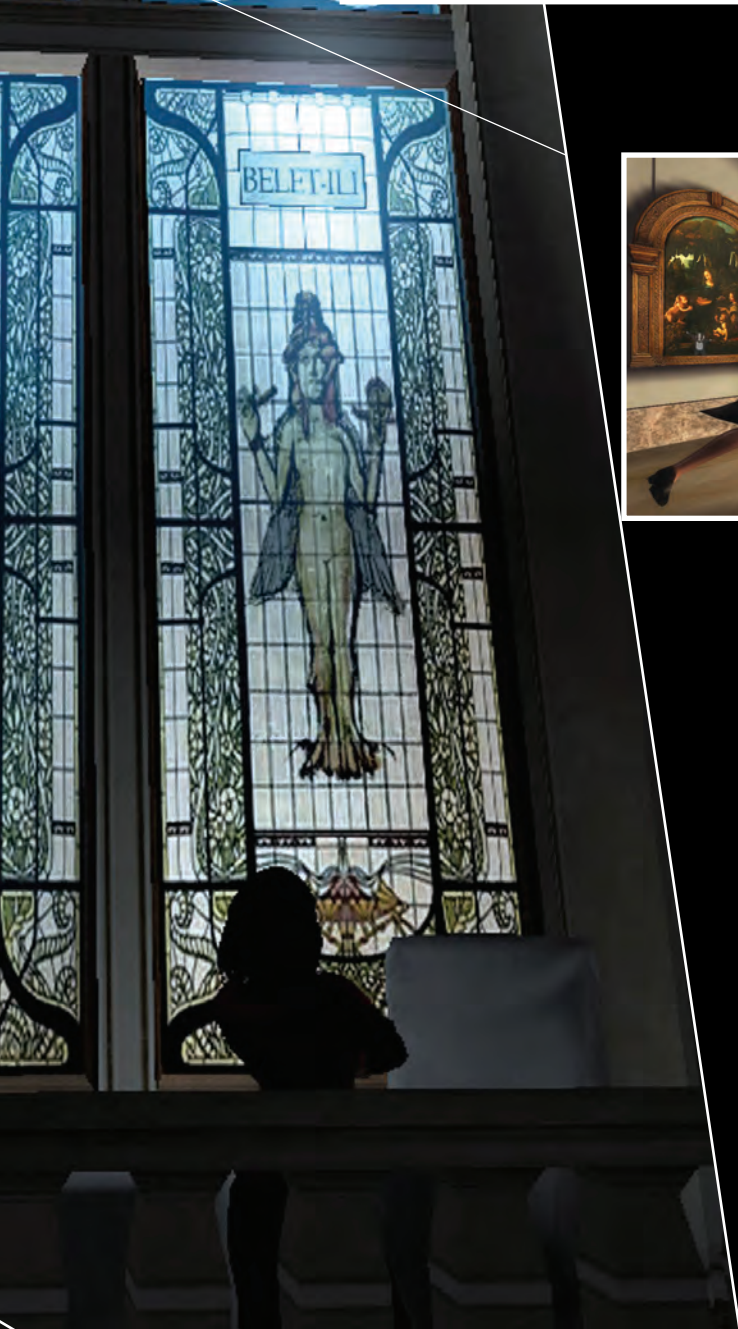
Leonardo Da Vinci 1452 - 1519

Italian painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, and scientist, b. near Vinci, village in Tuscany. The versatility and creative power of Leonardo mark him supreme example of Renaissance He depicted in his drawings, with precision and consummate artistry, subjects ranging from flying machines caricatures he also executed intricate. Leonardo moved to Florence, where he entered the shop of Verrocchio and came into contact with such as Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Lorenzo di Credi. Early apprenticeship he painted an angel, and perhaps of the landscape, in Verrocchio's Baptism of Christ. In 1472 he was registered in the painters' guild. The nation of Leonardo's art during his first period in is the magnificent unfinished Adoration

Florence
Botticelli
Ghirlandaio
Tuscany
Lorenzo di ...
Verrocchio
Baptism

SCROLL   SELECT   BACK

SCROLL   SELECT   RESET

I S IT STILL NECESSARY to defend writing for a license title? Look, we'll be quick to admit, The Da Vinci Code is a cash-in, a project born from the Ron Howard movie project, not to mention the incredible popularity of Dan Brown's novel. Tales of the Holy Grail and what might be going on inside the behemoth Catholic Church have always grabbed the imagination of the masses. This helped the book to stay on the New York Bestseller List for over two years and to sell nearly 40 million copies to date. It's made Brown one of the richest authors on Earth – not as rich as J.K. Rowling, but she's had a few movie deals already.

So the game is inevitable. In fact, it's sobering to see that a popular novel being adapted for a movie also took on a game guise [should we thank Tom Clancy for that?]. The book is fairly cerebral, thus this won't involve strutting around abbey corridors, fragging mad monks with your unholy hand grenades. The development duties lie with The Collective, arguably one of the most underestimated developers in the market. The underrated Deep Space Nine: The Fallen as well as the shallow but fun Buffy game came from the developer, though the current jewel in its crown is definitely Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb. Apart from that, the studio also developed Revenge of the Sith and the recently released Get Up: Contents Under Pressure. If anything, The Collective's games look really good, and as the screenshots show,
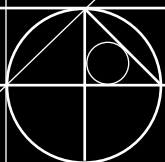
The Da Vinci game is set to look very atmospheric. It uses the studio's own proprietary engine, but the team hasn't elaborated if the PC, GameCube and Xbox versions of the game will have higher graphical fidelity than the increasingly geriatric PlayStation 2 [though a point-and-click interface will be in place for the PC version].

Players will assume the role of Robert Langdon and the game will largely focus on the storylines of Langdon and Sophie Neveu, the grand-daughter of murdered Louvre curator Jacques Sauniere. Solving Sauniere's death is the key plot-element in both the novel and movie. Subsequently, Robert uncovers a much deeper conspiracy of lies, deceit and the hidden story of what really happened in Jesus' life. The book sparked a lot of other writing and even more criticism, controversy and praise, but at its heart Da Vinci Code is a tale of sleuthing and conspiracies – a much-loved combination. As such, investigation and collecting clues is a big part of the game, as is keeping monks at bay with a pointy stick. The Collective muses over this feature: players will be able to play the game how they want. If sticking to the shadows, collecting lots of clues and piecing the whole thing together in your head, is your style, the game will cater for that. Alternatively, players can go for a more hands-on approach. Both combat and puzzle solving will be elements of the game dynamic.

The developer is mindful not to mess with the Da Vinci Code universe. Taking a lot of cues from the book and movie, the game world has been expanded to present a new experience for anyone who has read the book and/or seen the movie. It's promised to be even more entertaining to people who've done neither. The game starts and ends in a linear fashion, but in the middle it's a multi-linear experience as players choose where to go and what to do next. There are likely to be points where the game prompts you into a direction, but that's to be expected. This doesn't give much clarity on replay value, and we don't expect a complicated, interwoven affair as experienced in Fahrenheit. But the game seems to be elaborate in its vision. The need to present a game package that goes beyond the experience of the movie or book has become a key factor in license development. Even the second Incredibles game, which dealt with new material, was actually refreshing and enjoyable, because it went for new story ground. Players will be able to explore locations such as the St. Sulpice church, the Louvre, Westminster Abbey and even Sauniere's mansion at their leisure.

It's not an all-cerebral romp, though. Enemies come in the form of mercenary monks, guards and policemen, to name a few. Stealth is a big element of the game and the feature is reportedly very advanced in the game. Combat is also gritty, reflecting the fact that Robert, a professor of 'Religious Symbology', probably isn't a good fighter. This is maybe why Tom Hanks and not Vin Diesel got the lead role. As such, combat will be intense, but not muscular. Players will probably avoid confrontational situations, so don't expect a heavy-handed action game. The recent Call of Cthulhu game shows how much confusion and negative reaction a game causes when players don't understand its underlying playing principles.

Unfortunately, details aren't as forthcoming when it comes to cooperation with the other elements of the Da Vinci universe. In other words, we don't know what influence Dan Brown, Ron Howard, Akiva Goldman [the movie scriptwriter] or Columbia Pictures had on the game. It would be nice to see a more hands-on approach such as that which Peter Jackson gave the excellent King Kong game, but we don't think Dan or Ron are that into games. Neither is there any mention of the character voices. Whether we can expect Tom Hanks to give Robert his digital vocals is anyone's guess. It's not even clear if the game character will look like him. But perhaps the lack of obvious involvement by the various fingers in Leonardo's pie gives The Collective a freedom to change the game into a serious game based on the book and movie, not some lacklustre spin-off.

What can we say? The NAG staffers who read the book loved it and we'll certainly catch the movie. Will the game give us the same sense of excitement and engrossment? That's the point behind a license title, though one not achieved a lot [but much more recently than in the past]. The credentials behind the Da Vinci Code game are sound enough to not make us brush it aside in a moment of gamer cynicism. And even if you don't like it, if the game doesn't downright suck, it will be the perfect gift with which to introduce some family members to gaming. **NAG**
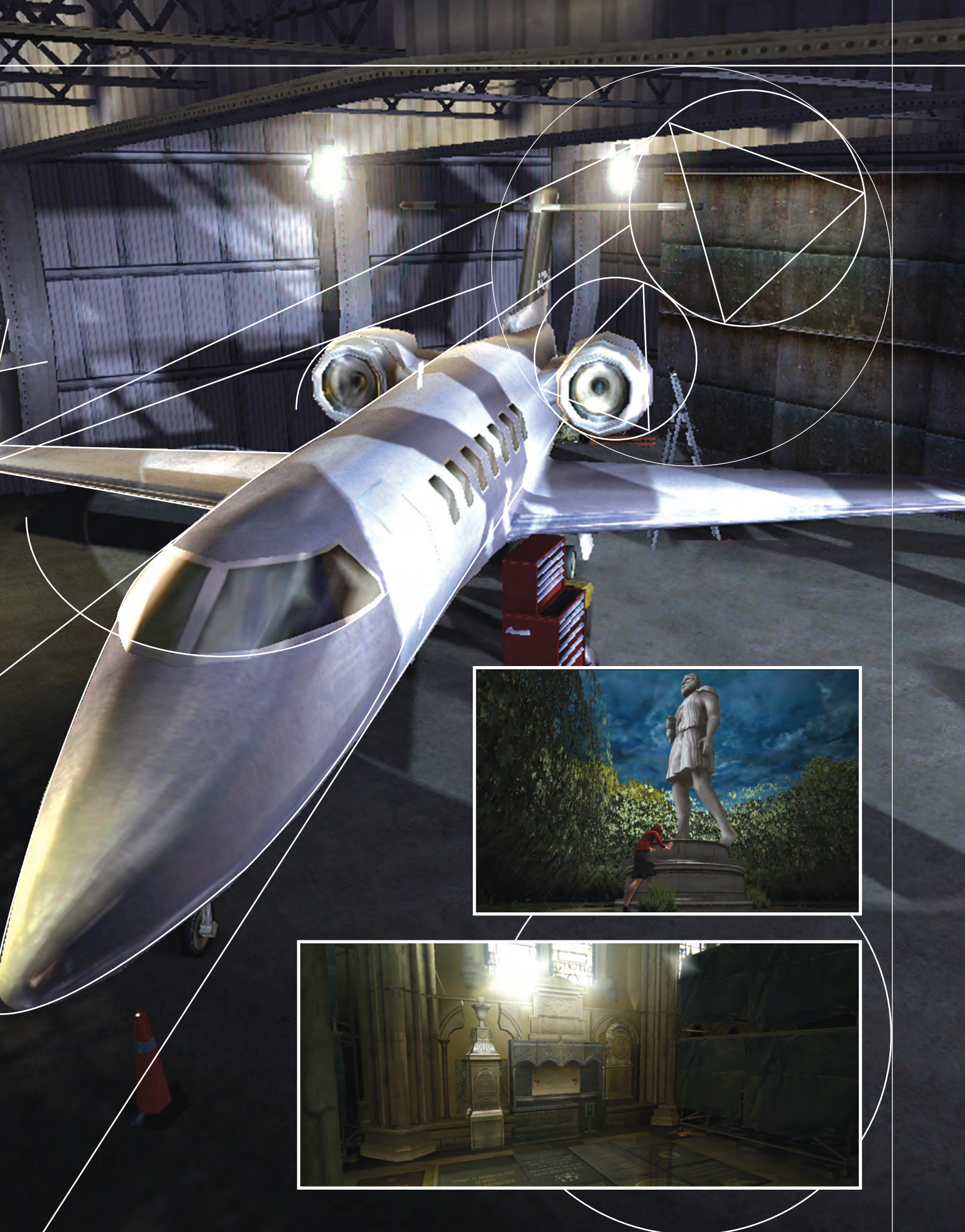
YEAH BABY!

HANDS
ON
TESTED

TOMB RAIDER LEGEND

YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT IT. You've seen the screenshots. You've downloaded the wallpapers. You've checked out the new model. Some of you probably even have a date circled on your calendar. Well, we've played it…

Not only did the distributor rush at the last minute to get us the PlayStation preview code for Tomb Raider Legend, they also managed to send us the preview version for the PSP too. It was a rare late night session that lasted until the early hours. Sleep was kept at bay with liberal shots of two scoops hold-the-milk coffee and a high level of anticipation, mixed with a little dread. Would this be the next big thing or would it be Angel of Darkness [see box] all over again?

We didn't have time to play anything more than the first level or so before this copy you're reading now was sent for proofing. What follows is a brief account of most of what we can remember from the first mission and a little on the mansion.

The mansion is accessible from the menu system and isn't a tutorial, but rather a whole level of the game full of locked doors and mysterious places. The training comes during the first level or so with various instructions popping up as you go along. You know: push this button to do this and that button to do that while you play. Lara isn't alone while playing this time, and is in constant communication with one of her guys back at the mansion who provides useful insights here and there. Personally we prefer going it alone - just us, the tomb and the thunder stick. Lara now also has a waterproof PDA, which is useful for accessing arbitrary information – a nice touch. Other new equipment includes a magnetic grappling hook, a personal illuminator [torch in a stick] and a pair of binoculars that, when switched to a certain mode will highlight mechanical items and so on. The infamous Tomb Raider camera, with it oddly wild angles and inconvenient non-intuitiveness, has returned for this version and will definitely bring a smile to the face of any fan of the series. But fear not. A quick push on the stick and the camera can be moved around to face where you need it to. It's not so much of a bug but an essential 'feature'. The game is stunning-looking and so is Lara. Sporting a fresh set of polygons, our daring lass is looking as good as ever and this is further enhanced when she moves. The first few bits of the game take you through jumping and kicking a few rocks about, climbing up walls and leaping from vine to vine. There's water, so you can expect to dive and swim with limited oxygen. The initial puzzles are simple, easing you into the game. But further along there's a nice momentum-based puzzle that'll remind fans of the very early games. The game also has a decent set of secrets to find [ranging in difficulty], and discovered secrets are kept track of by your PDA.

Further along you'll end up shooting bad guys, a few big cats and even some of the scenery. For example, shoot at the pillar to make it fall on the bad guy. The first level is very engrossing and

we only managed to find around half the secrets [can't imagine where the rest are].

Ending the level opened up a few doors back at the mansion, and without giving anything away, you'll probably spend more time playing the mansion area after unlocking it than you will playing the whole first level. In addition, once a level is completed a time trial is unlocked, as well as a few other bits and pieces. Think change of outfit and access to artwork and videos. So far, without hyping things up too much, it's an exceptional experience that has definitely cleared the cloud created by Angle of Darkness. It may not be the most original game out there, but it's Lara Croft doing what she does best. And that's what we've all been hoping and waiting for. **NAG**

ANGEL OF DARKNESS

Widely regarded by both the gaming press and gamers in general as the worst Tomb Raider game ever, Angle of Darkness [the sixth in the series] effectively sealed the tomb on the lagging franchise, and most thought it was the last we'd ever see of Lara Croft. With Tomb Raider Legend, a different development team [Crystal Dynamics instead of Core Design] is working on the project along with Toby Gard, one of the creators of the series and the creator of Lara Croft. This new combination of talent is what has reinvented the series and injected some of the old vital essence back into the series.

AMANDA EVERT

The press release on Amanda tells of her relationship with Lara Croft as being one of "… playful philosophical banter; they disagreed, but they crossed intellectual swords without becoming exasperated or angry at the others' firm viewpoint." Amanda features in Legend, but this comes as a surprise to Lara who thought Amanda was killed in an excavation in Peru. As the story unfolds, players will learn more about Amanda and how she fits into the story. Easter egg alert! Finish the game and you'll be able to play it again, this time using the Amanda model.

PSP

A quick session with the PSP test unit indicated that the game was identical on the PSP as it is on the PS2. Too good to be true… apparently not! There's a press release floating around the office stating that the PSP version will feature exclusive game modes, but we saw nothing while playing it for the ten minutes we had it.
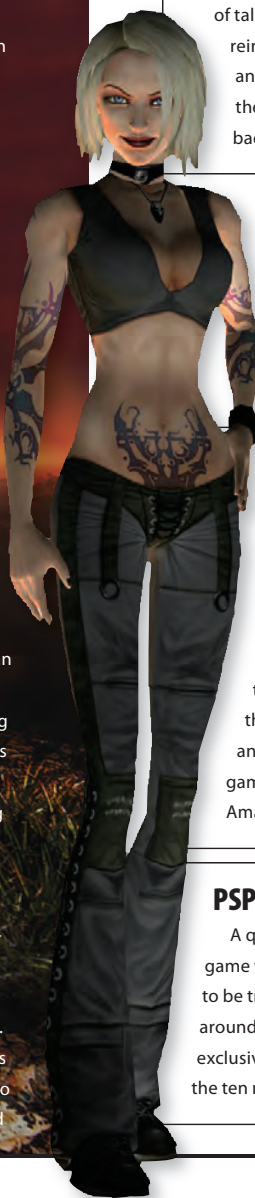
FLATOUT 2

BEFORE IT WAS RELEASED, Bugbear touted Flatout as the Half-Life 2 of racers, obviously pointing to the heavy focus Valve placed on the shooter's physics engine. While it didn't make the same impact, Flatout was definitely fun and garnered a dedicated and appreciative crowd of players. But the game wasn't perfect and fell short in a few areas, which kept it away from absolute classic status. That's why we have sequels: sometimes a game needs a few scrapes and bumps polished out before it's really something special.

But the game was still a lot of fun. Flatout found firm footing in the racing school where cars get torn apart into smouldering wrecks - the far more entertaining side to a genre where car manufacturers still childishly hang on to keeping their cars in mint condition. Titles like Flatout, Demolition Derby, Burnout and others sidestep this with fictional vehicles, but Bugbear's game added the charm of advanced physics. It effectively combined a lot of the elements that we like in destruction racers, giving fans a package that was a lot of fun.

So Flatout 2 is definitely off on a head start. The main design philosophy seems to be 'double': there are twice as

many vehicles, twice as many tracks and twice as much to gain. Bugbear wants to polish the racing segment of the game, perhaps to come in line with the spectacular gains the Burnout series has made in the genre, so therefore tracks are more focused on racing than simply hurtling along a track full of gravel speed bumps. With this end in mind, the car types have been expanded from muscle cars to also include sports models, pickup trucks and compacts – thirty four vehicles in total. Each car is customisable with parts, bought with cash racers gain by taking part in the various events. Players will be able to upgrade and change the cars significantly more in the sequel, and then take them out on the tracks where more than forty deformable parts on the cars can be dented, crushed and ripped-off.

The tracks themselves are even more robust. With the new emphasis on racing, fans might be afraid the point behind the series could be lost. In Flatout 2 money, nitro and other bonuses are really gained through trashing the environment and your opponents. Each track has over 5,000 destructible objects in it, something that veteran players will immediately see as an advantage, since throwing rubble and debris in front of rival racers can often give you the edge. Now pushing opponents into railings and through barricades will have more of a pay-off,

while the enhanced Crash TrueT engine and physics model will hopefully get rid of those moments where your car got stuck on a single piece of wood.

The popular rag doll games have been upped a level as well. There are double as many events to take part in [twelve in total], plus the developers say we can expect a better launch system and improved physics. But the real draw card is that players will finally be able to play these online, as well as complete several tournaments that hand more game cash and prestige to winners.

Flatout 2 will take place in the US [the original was in Europe] and will feature a fair array of tracks in cities and the countryside. The LA storm drains, Rocky Mountain and desert tracks are some mentioned. There will be over sixty track combinations.

Clearly, Flatout 2 took a lot of inspiration from racers like Trackmania Sunrise and Burnout, and graphically the title is adding the latest bells and whistles. The question is how much of the original game idea could be lost in this shift of focus, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. It could, in fact, be the touch that escalates this series into the attention it deserves. But for those of us who've played the original, a Flatout sequel is not bad news, and it appears that Bugbear is fixing and adding what fans have asked for. **NAG**

DEVELOPER: Bugbear **PUBLISHER:** Empire **SUPPLIER:** WWE [011] 462 0150 **GENRE:** Racing **PLATFORMS**: PC, PS2, Xbox **RELEASE DATE:** Q1 2006

VITAL INFO

■ **Platforms**

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ **Developer**
Ubisoft

■ **Publisher**
Ubisoft

■ **Distributor**
MegaRom [011] 234-2680

■ **Genre**
Tactical Action

■ **Release Date**
31 March 2006

Sam's back, except it's before he went anywhere

TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL: ESSENTIALS

HANDS ON TESTED

SAM FISHER FINALLY GETS his PSP debut and rightly so. Splinter Cell is the top selling spy-franchise, after all.

Regardless, NAG got its hands on an early version of Splinter Cell: Essentials for PSP and ran the portable Sam through some hoops. Even this early on Essentials looks impressive. It moves, sounds and feels just like a Splinter Cell game should, despite slightly lower-quality visuals than its big-brother counterparts.

Essentials starts where the upcoming Splinter Cell Double Agent, for next-gen and PC, ends, taking place in the years before Splinter Cell, when Sam was still a Navy Seal. The game design has been centred on unique sequences, designed specifically for the portable nature of the PSP, in theory at least.

After a rather lengthy load [close to a minute, though this might be attributed to early code] Essentials drops into a mission. A textual explanation of what it is that's going on serves as prelude. Controlling Sam isn't as intuitive as it should be. Analogue movement works fine, but when the camera needs to be adjusted, the control scheme falls apart a little. You have to

stop, hold down 'Circle' and then move the analogue to adjust the view. You can't adjust the view while moving, something that quickly shows its limitations when the action starts.

Everything else seems intact however. Interacting with the environment, items and people is as simple as it has always been; get close, hold down the button and select the relevant contextual action. Lock picking and mine defusing revolve around the 'turn the analogue in a circle' concept - letting go of the analogue at the right time being the idea.

The menu reveals that the game has a multiplayer mode. It seems that two players can square-off wirelessly, though the exact mechanics of this couldn't be tested. Suffice to say, Spy vs. Mercenaries seems to be the multiplayer theme, though obviously more watered-down than the home console versions.

Essentials is looking good, despite the control issues. The mission structure seems slightly distilled, perhaps a touch too much for Splinter Cell fans, but time [and the final product] will tell. **NAG**

DESPERADOS 2: COOPER'S REVENGE
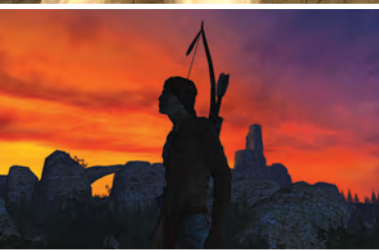
WHO REMEMBERS THE ORIGINAL Desperados? The name doesn't come up that often, but people who have played Commandos in the Wild West remember it fondly. It took the formula pioneered by the first Commandos game and transferred it to a Wild West setting, complete with a mysterious and evil masked cowboy villain. Coming from German developer Spellbound, the game was a celebration of the Cowboy movie culture and as such, the game was rich in style and atmosphere [Europeans love to present exaggerated accounts of the Wild West or Mexico, while Americans are far more flamboyant with World War II titles]. It wasn't perfect and a lot of reviews punished it for following the Commandos formula very closely, but the game hardly gave the impression that you are playing Commandos in a cowboy theme. That's because you weren't, and those who played it to the end enjoyed the experience.

So it goes without saying that we are glad a sequel is on its way. But the new engine and the new approach might lead to some confusion, so let's categorically state this from the start: Desperados 2 is a turn-based strategy game. The gameplay footage released so far gives a different impression, but the classic game is still intact. John Cooper, the framed cowboy from the first game, is back and clearly getting his revenge, hence the subtitle Cooper's Revenge. He is joined by five other characters, spread over the wide demographic of Wild West stereotypes. All of them appear to be the familiar faces from the first game, but the kid and her monkey got replaced by new arrival Hawkeye, an American Indian.

The turn-based system, as mentioned, is a familiar one. Useing a group of characters, each with different abilities, you navigate around a level and its many obstacles in the form of enemy units. This style gives a lot of emphasis to stealth play, but Desperados 2 wants to buck the trend a little. The new 3D engine powering it gave the developers a lot more opportunity to bring some variation to the genre. Now it would be apt

to look at Commandos and how that series has changed to accommodate a growing market, essentially showing to fans that as far as third-person isometric turn-based action goes, Pyro has run out of ideas. So what does Spellbound have up its sleeve? The obvious difference here is the cowboy theme: it's a far more action-packed world with a huge amount of cinematic reference that defined the mythical style of the era. As such, gun battles, daring horseback chases and bar-room brawls are as much part of the tapestry as dust and Indian villages.

It's here that 3D makes the difference. The original game used 2D sprites, thus zooming was limited. In a 3D environment players can get up close to the characters. The game can be directed from a bird's eye view [with a free and high zoom camera] or from the ground across a character's shoulders. This also allows players to take charge of characters in certain situations, such as a gun battle or throwing an axe. It also adds tactical benefits and allows characters to perform a range of new actions, such as sneaking and horse riding. Additionally, each character has four individual actions that can be upgraded, and characters can be given five actions in advance, which will cut down on micro-management.

Desperados 2 is very ambitious in how it wants to change this genre. Players are promised a cinematic experience that takes advantage of the 3D environment: there will be lots of destructible objects, especially in barroom brawls, and interactivity will switch between turn-based and real-time actions, depending on what the player wants to do [and is allowed to]. The developers offer an epic story with a large amount of maps to play through. Locations vary from dusty settlers' towns and Indian villages to wagon convoys and forts.

This one is coming in under the radar and it could be rubbish. But we really hope it isn't. The original was a fun and engaging game and if Desperados 2 aspires to do the first game justice, plus add some of that flair this genre has been missing, it will be good. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer
SCEI

■ Publisher
SCEE

■ Publisher
Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445 7900

■ Genre
Action

■ Release Date
Q2 2006

Black Ops gets blacker as Logan and his team take on a super-dangerous group

SYPHON FILTER: DARK MIRROR

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS of Solid Snake and Sam Fisher is Gabriel Logan, a Precision Strike Operative who has been doing his thing since 1999. The Syphon Filter saga started on the first PlayStation where Gabe and a co-agent had to stop terrorists from spreading the dangerous viral weapon of the same name. The run-and-gun action was a step to the side from the stealth mannerism of the two aforementioned games, making Gabe a much more hands-on spy hero. But Syphon Filter also had its ups and downs, especially when later games hardly managed to capture the charm of the original title.

But whether the series was meant to be a once-off or not, that won't get a publisher down and Sony saw it fit to port the series to the PSP. This might actually help the series. One thing Syphon Filter perhaps lacked was the same profile other similar titles got. While the game did well, it always seemed to have a black sheep image on the PlayStation consoles, often being overshadowed by other titles. As its fifth game, Dark Mirror is breaking with a lot of Syphon Filter tradition.

Fans of the series will recall that Gabe went MIA after Omega Strain, the last game. In the new game, he reappears and is working for a US Black Ops group that doesn't exist, not even to the knowledge of the President. Gabe can work without the hindrance of a chain of command, and the term 'extreme prejudice' is likely to come up a lot as he gets sent into sensitive and dangerous situations.

This is exactly the case in Dark Mirror, a very destructive weapon that falls into the hands of paramilitary group Red Section. Gabe has to infiltrate the group and recover the weapon, eliminating whoever gets in his way. Judging from past Syphon Filter plots, this is likely to become much more complicated, but fans will have to wait for more news to hear if Dark Mirror ties in with the events of former games. There are some familiar faces in the new game, and a bonus mission will explain what happened at the end of the last game, but this could spell a whole new chapter in the SF series.

Being action-focused, Gabe can attack multiple targets with various weapons. He is also an accomplished hand-to-hand combatant, thus the developers are planning a contextual combat system. Enemy AI is said to be advanced, using a lot of the squad tactics we've seen emerging out of more intelligent combat titles [flanking, regrouping, investigating noises and so on]. The action will be spread over 23 levels, while an additional nine will cater for the four multiplayer modes - these include deathmatch and team deathmatch. Top players will be awarded with new levels, models and weapons.

Let's call it what it is: an attempt to resurrect a piece of Sony IP on the PSP, which is a big platform for a lot of Sony franchise extensions [thankfully, actual porting is kept to a minimum]. But there's no harm in this: Syphon Filter is a good series and a new lease on life would definitely be welcomed by fans.   **NAG**

SEEING IS BELIEVING.

www.tombraider.com

REVIEWS

WEB SCORES [Correct at time of printing]

24: THE GAME [PS2]

NAG [100]	80
Metacritic [100]	62
Gamerankings [100]	64.9

CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER [PSP]

NAG [100]	80
Metacritic [100]	74
Gamerankings [100]	67.9

STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR [PC]

NAG [100]	74
Metacritic [100]	79
Gamerankings [100]	79
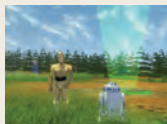
DRAKENGARD 2 [PS2]

NAG [100]	69
Metacritic [100]	65
Gamerankings [100]	70.0

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE [PS2]

NAG [100]	73
Metacritic [100]	68
Gamerankings [100]	69.1

GENE TROOPERS [PC]

NAG [100]	59
Metacritic [100]	NA
Gamerankings [100]	53.4

RESIDENT EVIL 4 [PS2]

NAG [100]	94
Metacritic [100]	95
Gamerankings [100]	95.9

TALES OF ETERNIA [PS2]

NAG [100]	80
Metacritic [100]	84
Gamerankings [100]	84.2

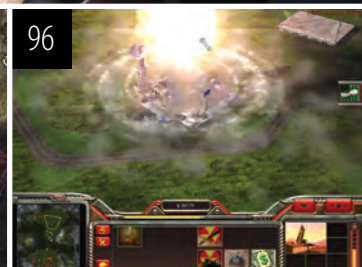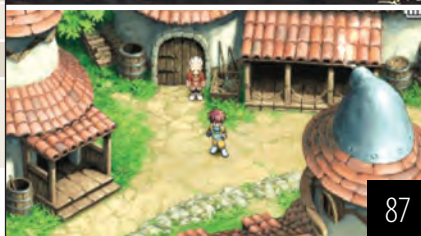*The ratings in this section, apart from the NAG ratings, are not the opinion of NAG Magazine. Duh.*

INDEX

WHAT WE'RE PLAYING...

GEOMETRY WARS: RETRO EVOLVED [360]

James can't seem to get enough of this budget Xbox Live Arcade download with its unique retro style and manic pace. Watching him try to beat the 150,000 milestone is like watching a person slamming his head against a wall. Wait, that's just James slamming his head against a wall. Geometry Wars, originally the 'load screen' game for Project Gotham Racing 2, works well as a stand-alone title, especially with all its Xbox Live Achievements that are unlocked when you meet certain criteria.

FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3 DEMO [360]

Two muscular boxers beating the living daylights out of each other have never looked this good. Only a demo, but already finding its way into the gaming hearts of the NAG staff, Fight Night Round 3 is the perfect example of next-generation gameplay and graphics – all rendered in beautiful 720p High Definition. The combat itself is tactical, strategic and downright visceral when it comes to blows. Nothing quite prepares you for seeing skin ripple under the force of a hard punch to the face.
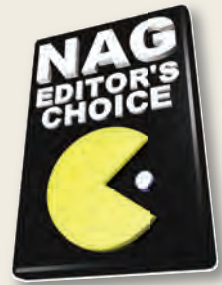
AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE

This prestigious award gets bestowed upon games that really catch NAG's collective eye. The Editor's Choice award is for games that have some indefinable trait that just make them stand head and shoulders above the rest, peering about nervously. Usually, games that are fun, visually stunning and which leave a lasting impression are honoured with the coveted Editor's Choice. It's almost similar to knighthood, but not as humiliating!

CLASSIC AWARD

Any game that scores above 85% gets the much-envied Classic Award in honour of its achievement. Above 85% represents a game that has managed to set itself apart from the crowd of mediocrity – a game worthy of some attention. Games awarded the Classic Award are games you can trust.

84

SCORING

NAG is different, NAG is special. We score games on the 50% principle, meaning that we regard 50% as 'average'. It's neither here, nor there. 50% is the perfect middle ground. A game that scores 50% is a game that does nothing wrong, but nothing right either. If a game won't install properly, naturally it scores less than 50%. If a game brings something new to the table, or does what it does well, it'll go up from the 50% average. 60% is above average, a game that might appeal to some. 70% is a game that's pushing its own limits slightly, one that's perhaps putting a new spin on common ideas. 80% represents a game with a difference, one of quality and as few rough edges as possible. 90% is outstanding, a game that has separated itself from the horde to do its own thing, and does it well. No game will ever achieve 100%, because if a game ever did, we'd be out of jobs. Nobody would play anything else anyway.
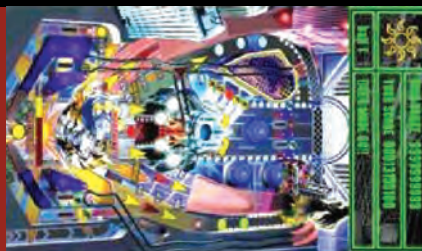
80

76

TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND [PS2]

The real reason why Michael quit as Editor of NAG! Tomb Raider: Legend seems to be shaping up to be the best Tomb Raider since the first one. It's hard to get Michael to give us the low-down on the game, so you'll just have to read the hands-on preview in this month's NAG. A kinder, gentler, less busty Lara; what's the world coming to?

PINBALL CLASSICS [PSP]

It's pinball. What more is there to say? Our hardware guy, Inspector Gadget, seems to be enjoying this slick PSP-based Pinball game. It presents itself lengthwise down the PSP screen for the authentic experience of a pinball table, sans the sweaty guy waiting in line to play next, and the smell of fish-'n'-chips in the air. We don't recommend bumping your PSP to make the ball go where you want it to, though.

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS [PS2]

Is anyone surprised that our Art Director is currently addicted to this 'giant killing' simulator? Its beautiful vistas and colossal [pun] encounters seem to have him hooked. Shadow of the Colossus, reviewed in the previous issue of NAG, still stands as one of the best games to have come out of the PlayStation 2 line-up [with Criterion-developed FPS Black hot on its heels].

24: THE GAME

08: 10.
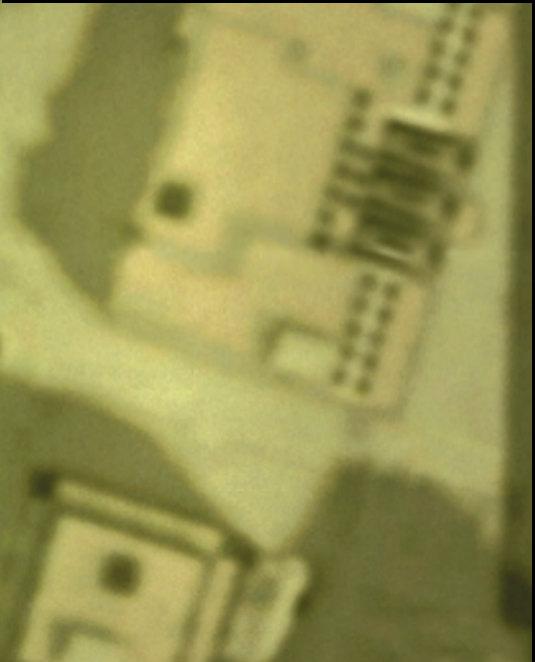
Get ready for the longest gaming day in your life

BOTTOM LINE

As authentic a 24 experience can be, right down to the little ticking clock and Jack Bauer kicking copious amounts of ass. While not the best license game out there, 24: The Game is definitely one of the better ones.

80/100

Alias [PS2]

BETTER THAN

"Nothing," says Jack Bauer

WORSE THAN

THE GAMING COMMUNITY STILL can't help but groan when a license title based on a popular movie or TV show is announced. We can't help it. The many, many years of terrible movie-based games and offerings such as Alias: The Game have jaded us. For a while all hope seemed lost, until Jack Bauer stepped in.

The trend of movie-license games is certainly on the rise in terms of quality, but games based on popular TV series are still rather lacking – with 24: The Game being a most happy exception. It's not a brilliant game. In fact, in terms of what it brings to the table in innovation is rather run-of-the-mill. What sets 24: The Game apart from its mediocre peers however, is its octane execution and faithfulness to the franchise it's based on.

Fans of the series will be interested to know that 24: The Game is essentially day 2½, taking place between seasons two and three of the show. It ties together some of the characters, events and such, of the two seasons, including characters that are still around to this day. Chase and Chloe are introduced for the first time, both of them working for the Washington DC branch of CTU. When they find out something bad is about to happen in Los Angeles, Chase boards a plane to LA. He stays in California and eventually becomes Jack's partner in Season 3. The game also aims to answer several questions fans of the series may have. Who was really behind the assassination attempt on President Palmer? How did Jack Bauer and Chase Edmunds first start working together? How did Kim Bauer get a job in the LA CTU?

The way that 24: The Game ties the seasons together and utterly respects canon is refreshing. Fans of the series will be delighted with all the extra elements the

24 the Game smartly puts the player in charge of several characters, not just Jack

game introduces, as well as the various plot threads it resolves. The plot of the game and dialogue was written by the show's official writers. Naturally, the voice talents are brought to the game by the actual actors themselves. Jack Bauer [Kiefer Sutherland], Kim Bauer [Elisha Cuthbert], Tony Almeida [Carlos Bernard] and other characters from the show are all there in likeness and vocal talents.

It's authentic, it's canon. These two facets alone are usually enough to sell a game to a fan of the franchise, but thankfully it doesn't end there.

The game spans an impressive 100 plus missions which may sound daunting at first, but lend themselves perfectly to the 'time' element popularised by the show. In theory, 24: The Game should take you 24 hours to complete, but only if you're not adept at the game or third-person action titles in general. More advanced players, or players comfortable with the controls and ideas, will probably be able to finish the game in less than 12 hours, still not a number to laugh at. The game accommodates this change to the timing-element of the game, by simply speeding up the clock if the missions are completed faster.

A hundred missions may sound tedious, but the game manages to avoid over-repetition by being multi-genre.

The main third-person action sections [where you usually play Jack] are high-octane and fun. To its benefit, 24 employs a nice mix of auto-lock and manual targeting. This makes it easy to quickly lock onto an enemy, but also provides you with the freedom to take shots at particular body parts. The auto-aimed chest shot may all be fine and well, but some quick manipulation with the right analogue stick will allow you to pinpoint the head or even shoot pistols out of hands. During these third-person combat sections, almost anything can be used as cover. Overturned couches, tables, walls, doorways, and a huge assortment of varying locations can all be used to

your advantage. Some missions, still on foot, are stealth affairs instead, while others may include puzzles or sniping.

Driving challenges break up the action even more. Sometimes you have to tail a suspect cunningly and avoid being seen, and other times a high-speed pursuit is called for. The driving sections of the game feel like a cross between Burnout and Grand Theft Auto 3: neither here nor there, but solid enough. The car handling feels responsive, while the incidental detail scattered around the city makes for a pleasant environment. Trashcans explode into debris and oncoming traffic veers out of the way realistically.

Sometimes a little interrogation is called for. Using a mini-game style approach, you have to coerce information out of suspects. These sections are often nerve-wrecking, timed affairs where you as the player sometimes feel just as frustrated as your in-game counterpart. Suspects are usually unwilling and only through tough-love can anything be accomplished. It's satisfying to eventually break the suspect down, and get the vital information in the nick of time.

Lastly, some missions are gadget-centric. This usually involves decoding information, examining satellite images or solving a lateral puzzle involving current flows to defuse a bomb. In an interesting twist, you'll never see the same puzzle more than once throughout the game, avoiding repetition which would have otherwise brought down the overall experience.

The 'genre mash-up' is refreshing, yet never feels out of place. '24' [the show] lends itself naturally to such situations which the game replicates perfectly, complete with the recognisable visual style of the show. The series' creator and cinematographer worked closely in conjunction with the development team to make sure that everything looks, feels and quacks like 24. Even the game's music was composed by Sean Callery, the award-

REVIEW

winning composer of the TV series' music.

Tying all the interactive elements together are the cut scenes. These real-time affairs are both stunningly produced and of the same quality as the TV series itself. Everything one would expect from 24 is in 24: The Game. The cut scenes don't just serve to progress the plot, but they are actually also cunningly employed to hide loading screens. Any sort of loading that needs to be done is covered either by a cut scene or by 24's trademark yellow ticking clock.

The show's multi-panelled camera views aren't just there for storytelling either. They have a very practical purpose in gameplay. During certain segments of the game, especially during Jack Bauer's 'shoot the terrorist' segments, the multi-panel idea is employed to show you either where enemies are lurking for dramatic effect, or is used as a map to help you navigate. Often though, a new view port will open up to show you some impressive pyrotechnics or an enemy falling emotively over a banister. Often, creative use of the multi-panel idea really lends itself to the game and the objective at hand. It shows the player important things not otherwise possible to see, or gives a specific event a sterling cinematic flair.

Naturally the show's time-centric theme is predominant throughout the game. While the game does indeed follow the same single-day format of the TV series, and mostly stays true to the real-time nature of it, there are many ways that it doesn't.

Part of the reason for this is that the game only focuses on the actions of the good guys like Jack and Tony. The TV series, as fans may know, switches back and forth between CTU, terrorists, the President and other connected characters. This buys the series enough time for monotonous actions on either side of the law.

The game takes a few liberties here and there to speed up the pacing of the game. It works to keep things moving, but it's a bit of a change from the TV series.

24: The Game is a prime example of what can be achieved when the franchise is handled with integrity, and isn't just flogged to a developer to do with it what they please.

The interaction between the series' creators, writers, directors and actors with the game developers has produced a quality license game that is sure to keep fans of 24 very happy indeed. **NAG**

Various game types keep the game varied and interesting

You can lead a horse to water. Jack Bauer can make him drink.

24: THE MOBILE GAME

IF YOU'VE BEEN PLAYING mobile games for a while, you may have found that titles based on a game released on other platforms tend to come in two flavours. Games like Splinter Cell and Prince of Persia use the same concepts and approach as their counterpart games, but with the mobile-friendly environment of a side-scroller. Brothers in Arms and Call of Duty 2, on the other hand, broke completely with the tradition of their console and PC peers, presenting action and tactical games respectively. 24, in this case, goes for the former: a wide variety of mission styles are done in sequence, as players head through a day in the life of CTU. This is a big saving grace for the console game, because its variety of modes stops the game from feeling too generic. But in the case of the mobile version, it feels like a collection of lacklustre mini-games.

Everything is represented in place: breaking code, driving, lock-picking, tracing calls, infiltration and combat. The latter two modes are particularly uninspiring. While the other games represent interesting and fairly entertaining puzzles, combat and sneaking around are graphically dull and action-less sections. The controls aren't even that responsive and combat generally comes down to frantically clicking to fire. If these sections were given a lot more attention, 24 would be much more enjoyable. Unfortunately the game's overall presentation also feels shallow and the story is really disengaging and of little interest to fans of the series. This is a case where breaking the mould would have helped this game shine. More thought to the action elements could have salvaged a lot. But in the end, 24 The Mobile Game is a set of rather poor puzzle games and action sequences. It tries too hard to imitate its big brother instead of being a more engaging mobile experience. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	**MOB**

■ Suggested Retail Price
R50

■ Developer
I-Play

■ Publisher
I-Play

■ Supplier
eXactmobile

■ Genre
Various

■ Download Instructions
SMS: MG18608 to 42222
*Check www.exactmobile.co.za
for phone compatability and download-
ing instructions.*

BOTTOM LINE

Lacklustre and uninteresting

50/100

STAR WARS
EMPIRE AT WAR

A LONG TIME AGO, IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY… A man by the name of George Lucas created a film trilogy that was to become almost a religion for some. This classic masterpiece has captured the imaginations of audiences even twenty years down the line. While it can be argued that the more recent 'prequel' trilogy lacked the charm of the original, it cannot be denied that the franchise is hugely popular to this day, which is why LucasArts has for years been churning out Star Wars-themed computer games. Then, a couple of months ago LucasArts released a statement to the effect that the company had come to believe that its game titles were not up to scratch. The press release further stated that a policy revision was to be implemented. Games would take longer to produce, and would be fewer and farther between; but consequently, it was hoped, of higher quality. A statement like that is welcome to most gamers, as we have increasingly been experiencing mass-produced 'disposable' titles, and movie franchises are usually the worst culprits. Empire at War is the first offering from LucasArts since that communiqué, and, at least at first glance, appears to deliver on the promises…

NAG EDITOR'S CHOICE
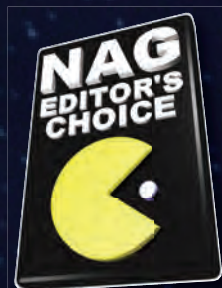
FIRST IMPRESSIONS

For us, the gaming experience doesn't start with the game being run for the first time – it starts earlier than that. And so it was a pleasure to open the spacious box to find a manual, rather than a mere leaflet, as well as a fold-up reference card presenting a bewildering summary of information. Too early for that – no good until the manual has been read! This turned out to be well presented and reasonably instructive. Of course, the real lessons were to be found in the tutorial missions, which alternate between Imperial and Rebel perspectives. These tutorials made it plain that this game was something that combined familiar elements from several other games, and yet the whole lot is put together in a relatively new fashion.

The overall nature of the game is nothing particularly new in its own right. Games such as Masters of Orion and Imperium Galactica, to name just two, have already furnished us with this basic format. The game takes place on three levels. Firstly, there is the galactic view, which is the strategic level. Here planets are equipped with facilities, fleets are issued with orders and information and some enemy systems can be viewed. Once a fleet encounters an enemy force, a space battle takes place in above a planet [or the remains thereof!]. When a planet's surface is contested, a land battle ensues. We will cover each of these elements in more detail shortly, but first let's take a 'look and listen'.

LOOKS GOOD, SOUNDS GOOD – MUST BE GOOD, RIGHT?

Those familiar with the Star Wars films [the original second trilogy] are no doubt well acquainted with the 'Imperial March', the tune that plays during certain iconic moments in the movies - usually when Darth Vader makes an entrance. Know that if you play this game, unless you turn the music off, you'll be hearing its echoes in your mind's ear for days, perhaps even weeks! At least this means that the score is authentic. But this 'authenticity' goes well beyond all the musical compositions being used. Extensive use has been made of a variety of media assets, predominantly sound bites. Clever use has been made of various characters' quotes, often for unit acknowledgements, and often adapting the context. Han Solo's quips, in particular, have been amusingly applied. Some of the other characters are, of course, far less humorous! But this use of recorded voices is not the extent of it. The development

team must have had some great fun rendering some key and very recognisable scenes from the films using their 3D engine. Most notably, when the imperial shuttle lands in the hangar with hundreds of storm troopers neatly arrayed, and Darth Vader greets the emerging emperor on one knee, 'that particular' musical composition plays at that point!

The 3D graphics engine [Alamo] is quite advanced. Trees, for instance, are rendered with an incredible number of leaves on them, and that kind of attention to detail is present through most of the game. Although some items aren't extremely detailed, the whole nevertheless far exceeds the sum of its parts. The overall visual experience is extremely immersive, particularly due to environmental effects such as varying weather conditions. The graphics levels are highly configurable, and it doesn't take a monster of a PC to get decent quality and frame rates. But don't expect to be able to run the game with all items maxed-out if your system merely meets the listed system requirements. That said, it must be noted that the game is not hugely resource-hungry – not for what it accomplishes.

FEELS OK

Empire at War's controls are adequate, but nothing exceptional [this is one of the title's weaknesses]. This is mostly due not to inadequacies in the control interface itself, but rather to some quirky bugs that rear up from time-to-time. One of the most annoying bugs involves a hero unit getting stuck just after capturing and developing a build pad [more on this later], requiring one to wait for the construction to be completed, and then sell the item in order to free the trapped hero. Another happens in the galactic view, with systems becoming unresponsive to mouse clicks, rendering them unselectable – fortunately, there are ways around this.

In other regards, the user interface is quite slick, and boasts a couple of innovations. In either space or land tactical battles, the view can be zoomed out two levels back to the 'highest' elevation, giving the player an overview of the battlefield without any interface buttons or such. Also, at any point hitting the space bar will result in a cinematic view, which places the camera in the action, favouring whatever was selected at

The space battles are particularly impressive

BOTTOM LINE

This is one of the best film-to-game conversions we have ever played. While less innovative than its marketing blurb declares, it does feature some new elements that are most welcome. It also presents a very high level of challenge. Swallow your pride and play on 'easy' first time around!

74/100

BETTER THAN
Master of Orion

WORSE THAN
Driving around in your own Star Destroyer

the time, but roaming around and changing angles. This will continue until the mouse is moved, and can be quite entertaining during a battle that needs no supervision.

This game is not the fastest-paced title you'll ever come across. In fact, at times it feels downright pedestrian. During combat, the action is ever-so-slightly too slow, giving an overall feel of sluggishness. So it's a good thing that an accelerated time function is available. This doesn't mean that little happens, it just doesn't happen as frenetically as in some games. Well, not often, anyhow.

STRATEGY AND TACTICS

As mentioned above, this game features both strategic and tactical levels of play, and it's time to take a look at how these have been implemented.

The galactic view shows a [two-dimensional – sigh!] map of dozens of systems in the default campaign. Those appearing in green are yours,

those in red are your enemy's, and those in yellow are neutral or pirate-controlled [and will fight either faction that sets foot there]. Greyed-out planets have not been explored yet. Various filters allow the player to control how much information is summarised next to each system, with the highest detail level rendering the map rather cluttered and messy. Any world can be zoomed into for more detailed information, but only known data will be displayed. In this zoomed-in view players can see what facilities have been built on and around the planet, as well as which troops are garrisoned on the planet and which forces are present in orbit. Troops can be moved from the garrison to a fleet and *vice versa*, and the fleets themselves can be rearranged if necessary.

Unlike most similar titles, fleets in Empire at War don't take very long to travel from anywhere to anywhere else. This has two implications. Firstly, if you discover that your fleet is somewhere but needs to be elsewhere, this is usually easy to rectify. Secondly, it's almost impossible to respond to the movement of a threatening fleet once its approach has been detected.

The first tactical layer deals with orbital battles involving space ships and, often, space stations. The maps usually contain asteroids [bad for big ships] and nebulas [good to hide in], as well as other more decorative items. These battles have been presented spectacularly well. The units all have special abilities that reflect those of their respective counterparts

in the films, and the graphics are stunning. Battles focus on tactics, so [except in skirmish mode] there is no unit construction, though sometimes there are platforms that can be captured and turned into laser or missile stations. Smart use of the 'terrain' wins the necessary edge in these battles.

Land battles are how planetary control changes hands. Once again, except in the case of skirmishes, there is no base or unit building. Whatever units were dispatched to a particular battle, become available as reinforcements. Here it seems the developers have taken a page from Ground Control II. Reinforcements can only be dropped at designated drop zones, and only if under your control. Each controlled drop zone increases your unit cap by a varying amount, so taking these becomes very important if you wish to field a large army. In general, battles take place with small armies with the emphasis being on managing your limited forces effectively. Scattered around most maps are build pads, which can be equipped [for a small cost] with one of three turret types [anti-vehicle, anti-infantry or anti-aircraft], a Bacta healing station, a repair station or a sensor node [which clears the fog of war in a respectable radius]. An interesting fact is that the game 'remembers' the state of each of these. So if a battle site is revisited, the state of the build pads will be as when they were last used. This is an important fact to keep in mind during the course of an invasion, as well-placed emplacements today may help defend tomorrow.

VARIOUS WAYS TO PLAY

The above discussion has assumed that a standard campaign is being played. For single-player, there are two more game types: galactic conquest and skirmish. Galactic conquest refers to 'scenario campaigns'. Each presents a different subset of the systems comprising the entire galaxy, and each also defaults to certain settings, such as starting and maximum tech level. The galactic conquest mode is otherwise very similar to the regular story campaign, except that it lacks rendered cut-scenes.

For those wanting a quick battle without becoming enmeshed in the intricacies of a galactic campaign, there are skirmishes. These space or land battles differ from the regular in one major regard. The ability to construct buildings and train units makes this mode more like 'traditional' real-time strategy. However, it fills these shoes rather poorly, as the tactically-orientated dynamics don't lend themselves very well to providing anything more

than a rather superficial and linear RTS experience. Players can't even choose where to build their structures [an important aspect of RTS is base design, after all], and are rather supplied with a set of 'ruins' to renovate. Sure, it's fun to play such a game, but after playing in campaign mode, this mode falls rather short. Space skirmishes are also great fun, and rather more challenging.

The story-line follows events from sometime after the point that Anakin donned his black suit. The designers have been wise not to try to follow the story too closely, although those familiar with the Star Wars books will no doubt recognise some of the other events. Of course, when playing the Empire campaign, events play out rather differently than when playing as the Rebel Alliance. **NAG**

WHERE THERE'S LIGHT, THERE'S ALSO DARKNESS

Multiplayer has been included in the game. These days it's almost a prerequisite for a computer game's success! While the game offers up to four-versus-four skirmish-style games, it also offers something that is all-too-often lacking: a head-to-head campaign mode with one player assuming the role of the Rebels and the other controlling the Empire. Of course, expect such a game to take a rather long time, as it will very likely consist of dozens of space and land engagements. After finishing the campaigns, this is where we believe the game's true replay value will reveal itself.

BACK THE FAVOURITE OR THE UNDERDOG?

Perhaps this is merely a mental block on the part of this reviewer, but it very much felt like the Rebel Alliance is far more difficult to play than the Empire. If this is intentional, then it may reflect the fact that the Rebels were, after all, fighting against the odds in the original story.

DÉCOR STAR

We cannot agree with how the Death Star is represented in this game. In terms of the eye-candy, it is great, and the way it fires and the resulting planetary 'boom' are fine. But in all other regards [except one specific Rebel mission, of course] it sits in the background, untouchable, and not even dispatching TIE fighters or such. It may as well be window-dressing.
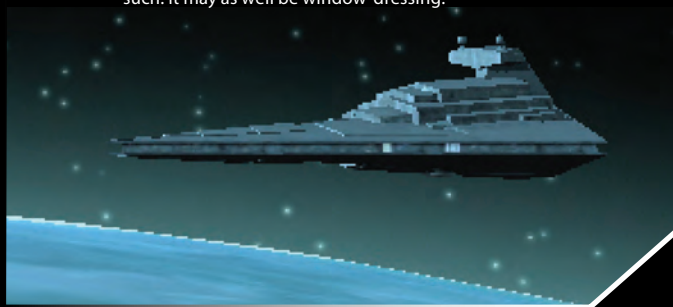
HOW ARTIFICIAL IS THE INTELLIGENCE?

In this regard, the game comes across rather inconsistent. For instance, when a computer-controlled fleet approaches a largely undefended star base, it will park at a distance and bombard the base with artillery units. But in contrast, it may send tanks into a base right under two turbo-laser towers and the tanks get slaughtered, even though a slight detour would have led to the undefended power generator that would disable the turbo-lasers. However, in general the AI tends to be reasonable, and more often it is doing something smart rather than something stupid.
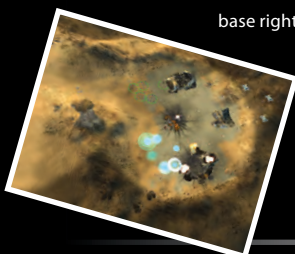
SUPER-SMART WEAPONS

No area-effect weapon in Empire at War ever hurts friendly units, be it airdropped bombs or even an EMP [electromagnetic pulse]. While understandably we had best maintain a certain level of suspension, this is nevertheless rather 'unrealistic'. However, it can also be argued that if such weapons did cause collateral damage, they would be virtually unusable, and the game would be even harder than it already is.

FAMILIAR FACES

As has become fashionable, the game features a number of leading characters, or 'heroes', who play a part during the course of the game. Most of the to-be-expected faces make an appearance, with a couple of notable exceptions: a certain headphone-hairstyle-adorned princess and a shrivelled little grey-green mighty warrior.

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Suggested Retail Price

R399

■ Developer

Capcom

■ Publisher

Capcom

■ Supplier

SK GAMES [011] 445-7960

■ Genre

Action

■ Age Restriction

15 (BBFC)

■ Specifications

Online: No

Controllers: 1

Players: 1

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NAG CLASSIC AWARD

BOTTOM LINE

A superbly crafted survival horror [or action] title, definitely not for the fainthearted, that will keep you on the edge of your seat for more than a good few hours on end. Fantastic audio-visual presentation, gripping plot and plenty of monster-blasting action make this one of the finest titles of its kind.

94/100

BETTER THAN

Resident Evil 3
and everything else
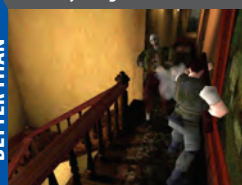
AS GOOD AS

Sean of the Dead - the game...
if they made it

SHAUN OF THE DEAD
A ROMANTIC COMEDY. WITH ZOMBIES.
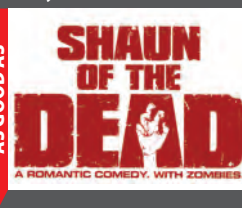
RESIDENT EVIL 4

RESIDENT EVIL, THE SERIES that made the 'survival horror' genre one of the most prominent console genres around, has boldly ditched the very label it created, with its latest instalment branding itself rather as a 'survival action' title. A description which, if anything, undersells what is without a doubt one of the finest action titles to grace any console.

Originally released on the GameCube to much critical acclaim, Resident Evil 4 sees protagonist Leon Kennedy, who will no doubt be familiar to devotees of the franchise, sent to a mysterious village in Europe to rescue the missing daughter of the American President. Needless to say, this task soon proves to be much easier said than done, and very quickly Leon finds himself entwined in a battle for survival against all manner of terrifying foes. The story, though not exceptionally well-told, manages to be suspenseful and engrossing, and perfectly maintains the atmosphere created by the play dynamic. Furthermore, in addition to Leon's storyline, the PS2 version of Resident Evil 4 also features an additional storyline, entitled 'Separate Ways', which follows Ada Wong, a mysterious spy caught up in the midst of Leon's saga. The extra missions, not present in the original GameCube title, serve not only to add a few extra hours to the title's lifespan, but also full in some of the blanks left by the main storyline.

Visually, it's difficult to find much fault with Resident Evil 4. The characters and environments are all superbly detailed, and create a perfectly unsettling atmosphere that fits the title to a tee. It goes without saying that Resident Evil 4 is not for the fainthearted, and this translates into the visual presentation. If the sight of buckshot-strewn viscera is something that distresses you, you'd do well to steer clear of this title.

The audio doesn't disappoint either. Although the dialogue is occasionally somewhat ridiculous, the score and the sound effects are positively spine-chilling, and will serve to keep you on the edge of your seat, even when the action dips slightly. For those with home theatre setups, the game also offers Dolby Pro-Logic II support, to further contribute to the title's atmosphere.

Of course, since the game bills itself as 'survival action', it's quite clear that the play dynamic is intended to be the title's defining characteristic, and it truly is. Every other aspect of the game serves only to enhance the spectacular and exciting experience that comes from unloading hot lead into all manner of demonic opposition. There is a great variety of the aforementioned opposition on offer, with the foes gradually becoming more and more powerful as you progress through the game. It's difficult to go into any great detail about the enemies without revealing too much of the plot, but it should suffice to say that the sight of an enemy barely even flinching after taking a direct round to the head should give you an idea of the odds Leon finds himself up against. Having said this, although there are numerous foes capable of dismembering you in more ways than one would ever have thought possible, the game doesn't feel impossibly difficult either, and the difficulty gradient is paced perfectly well to ensure that at any given moment you feel just a little bit uncomfortable, without feeling completely overwhelmed. And, should you die [as you undoubtedly will], there's never so much backtracking to do as to make the experience tedious or frustrating.

Ultimately, superb graphics, masterful sound, a long storyline and spectacular boss fights, combined with the continuously sustained suspenseful ambience make this a thrilling experience from start to finish. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Suggested Retail Price

R199

■ Developer

Blue Byte

■ Publisher

Ubisoft

■ Supplier

MegaRom [011] 234-2680

■ Genre

RTS/Management

■ Age Restriction

12+

■ Specifications

CPU: Pentium III 1.0GHz

Video: 32MB Graphics Card

RAM: 256MB RAM

HDD: 1.0GB HDD

CD/DVD: CD-ROM

Internet: Not required, but supported

Players: 1-6

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BOTTOM LINE

Those who neither own nor intend to own The Settlers: Heritage of Kings, or who don't enjoy it, need read no further. However, fans of the game will find that this product greatly extends its playability, by providing lengthy additional campaigns and challenging standalone scenarios. The Legends disc also enhances the game's multiplayer value.

70/100

Heritage of Kings without this expansion disc

BETTER THAN

A hot date (real- life, rather than The Sims)

WORSE THAN

Just another day at work
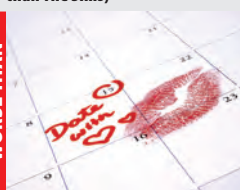
THE SETTLERS: H₀K – LEGENDS EXPANSION

RATING THIS EXPANSION PACK has been no easy task, given the fact that it's an add-on for a game, and other than new content, it doesn't really add anything new. Fans of The Settlers: Heritage of Kings are likely to enjoy this product, while to others it will be completely meaningless.

This is the second expansion to Heritage of Kings and offers rather less than its predecessor – in terms of new features, at least. While the first add-on introduced new units and technologies, this one 'only' adds four campaigns. However, this might mislead readers into thinking that the title doesn't offer value. That's not the case: each of the four campaigns focuses on a different aspect of the game, and each is substantial in length. The first mission of each story is not very difficult, but the challenge level escalates thereafter. Also, bear in mind that all the single-player missions assume that the player has played the previous chapters in the Heritage of Kings saga, so you can expect to be dropped in at the deep end. In addition to the campaigns, there are a number of custom maps, which are highly goal-orientated.

To say that no additional features at all appear in this expansion is both true and not. Innovative use is made of existing resources. For example, while the terrain tile-sets are largely un-enhanced, they are used in refreshing ways. More time and effort have gone into the construction of the maps, and village layouts are now delightfully detailed. Also, the campaign editor enjoys a few upgrades, including the addition of a random map generator, which is a huge help in creating missions quickly.

The multiplayer aspect of the game has been improved with the addition of several new maps [some highly objective-orientated, making for interesting games], and the online server has been upgraded with a ranking that takes into account the relative strength of your opponent, granting greater credit for defeating stronger players [as is the case with all leading ladders].

The presentation is solid. Good packaging with a high quality manual, while not verbose, conveys pretty much all the information required. After all, there are no new game elements to instruct players on, so the new campaigns, editor enhancements and added multiplayer features are detailed. The text, both in the game and in the manual, retains its occasional and usually amusing misuses of the English language, just as in the original. It seems that the text-checking is still not done by someone with a good knowledge of English! This is generally more amusing than annoying, however. **NAG**

FOUR ROOMS

Each of the four stories presents a different angle:

FLAMING SHORES: Despite the title, this is a predominantly peaceful series of missions with a strong emphasis on economic development.

EMERALD BATTLES: This combat-orientated campaign sees the player defending a settled realm from an invasion by a corrupt and ambitious knight.

THE EVIL LURKS WITHIN: Here players get the unique chance to play 'the other side', taking control of the villains in a quest to overthrow the protagonists. However, the only real differences here are in the heroes you get to control. The buildings and units remain the same and this is a bit of a letdown.

VISION OF LIGHT: Another unique challenge is provided here. The very terrain conspires against the player by dint of drought and other adverse conditions that create a tough economic challenge, with some battles thrown in.

MARY
HERE IS WHAT I'VE BEEN THINKING. AT THE MOMENT, DARIO IS WAY TOO STRONG TO DESTROY HIM DIRECTLY.
IT WOULD BE MUCH EASIER TO GET RID OF HIM IN A SNEAKY, STEALTHY WAY.
I WILL BREW A POISONOUS POTION FOR HIM…

48/100

CRAZY FROG RACER

IN WHAT'S AN OBVIOUSLY blatant attempt to cash in on the already faded hype surrounding 'The Annoying Thing', or the 'Crazy Frog', as he is perhaps better known, comes Crazy Frog Racer, starring the bug-eyed amphibian and a few new, if equally irritating, characters, created specifically for the purpose of this game. As the name implies, Crazy Frog Racer is an arcade-style combat racer, much in the same vein as many of the light-hearted kart racers that have become commonplace on the PS2. Although this style of game is perhaps perfectly suited to the Annoying Thing, the game is unfortunately let down by its very rushed presentation, and an overall lack of depth. It seems that quality control came second to release date when the developers assessed their priorities, and as such, Crazy Frog Racer would probably be better suited to a mobile phone than to the PS2.

Visually, although the Crazy Frog is recreated fairly well, none of the only 12 available tracks are very well detailed, and the title also suffers from a too short draw-in distance. As for the play dynamic, the action is certainly fast enough, but there's a definite lack of depth. In addition to standard races and time trials, only a chase mode [evade a pursuing drone as long as you can before running out of energy] and a battle mode are available, and although the battle mode is mildly entertaining, it suffers from a lack of imaginative power-ups, weapons and traps to use against your foes. On the whole, Crazy Frog Racer, though at times being almost slightly entertaining, feels far too rushed, and offers too little variety to be enjoyable for any reasonable length of time. Ultimately, just like the ringtone that put Crazy Frog on the map, it's little more than just a gimmick. **NAG**

69/100

DRAKENGARD 2

FLEDGLING DEVELOPERS CAVIA INC. [working under the Square-Enix brand], certainly managed to improve upon the original Drakengard. This new addition to the boy/dragon buddy-buddy action adventure, flying/ground combat series works - no doubt about that. The action both on-foot and on-dragon is solid with tedium hovering around the edges, but thankfully kept at bay by the story. Yes, it's a button-mashing combat system but it's hearty and sincere. Multiple weapons, multiple characters along with a host of standard RPG items mix things up enough to keep you going, with the on-dragon air combat a fun distraction.

Drakengard 2 improves on every area of the original, but still relies heavily on filler. One can't help but feel that if they'd just put in a few more enemy types to battle, or perhaps a slightly more involved combat system, that then the developers would have a winner on their hands.

However, Drakengard 2 has that one special element that sometimes occurs in a game – usually not by design. It's the type of game that if you 'get' what the game is about, it yields an odd amount of fun output that seems oddly disproportional to what the game should actually produce. In other words, if you fall in love with the game, for whatever reason, then you will certainly have a wonderful time with it. If you don't fall in love with the game, for whatever reason, then the limitations of the PS2 [apparent in the enemies and landscapes], the slightly contrived plot and tedious combat will annoy you to no end. Overall, Drakengard 2 is fun, if a bit cheap in thrills. Fighting copious amounts of bad guys is a wonderful game design and premise, but one that has better practical examples found in other games and on other systems. **NAG**

Impressive Draconic air battles and crowd pleasing ground assaults. Top-notch fantasy

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- Virus scanning
- Spam filtering (SpamAssassin)
- Webstats
- Webmail
- Custom error documents
- 25 Group mails

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BOTTOM LINE

From Russia With Love does well to recreate the Bond of the past, whilst incorporating many of the elements that made Everything or Nothing a success. Unfortunately though, it does too little to adequately challenge the player. It's solid and respectable, but falls short of the brilliance it might have achieved.

73/100

Goldeneye: Rogue Agent

BETTER THAN

Everything or Nothing

WORSE THAN

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

IN AN ATTEMPT TO build on the success of the excellent Everything or Nothing [as well as to bury the memory of the dismal Goldeneye: Rogue Agent], the latest James Bond title retells the story of the 1963 film of the same name. The storyline follows that of the movie somewhat loosely. Although many of the more memorable movie scenes have been recreated, some are conspicuous by their absence, and there are a couple of additions to the movie plot, which may, in fact, detract slightly from the title's authenticity.

As far as the play dynamic goes, many elements from Everything or Nothing make their return, with some subtle refinements here and there, but certainly no major improvements. The game's levels comprise a respectable almost ten hours, particularly if you go hunting for all the extras, and do well to mesh together the different styles of play offered by the game. Often you'll find yourself sneaking, sniping, driving, rappelling and engaging in hand-to-hand combat, all in the course of a single mission. The control system is intuitive and responsive, just as in Everything or Nothing, though occasionally you'll find that Bond performs the wrong context-sensitive action in a given situation, on account of too many actions being mapped to a single-button - though this is usually little more than a minor annoyance.

Needless to say, Bond has a wide variety of typically nifty spy gadgets at his disposal, including his trademark Aston Martin, a remote controlled explosively charged miniature helicopter and even a jetpack. In addition to this, Bond is also able to interact with his environment by pushing over tables, taking cover behind objects, or taking pot-shots at exploding barrels. This is all good and well, but unfortunately the game is more than happy to allow you to successfully progress without doing anything out of the ordinary. Simply running through levels and shooting at anything that moves is generally more than enough to get you through. Of course, if you're trying to obtain all the 'Bond Moments', you'll need to make use of Bond's secret agent prowess, but for the most part, the game isn't challenging enough to force you to think laterally, which is somewhat of a disappointment.

What is a respectable addition, however, is the 'Research Points' concept: rummaging through cabinets and drawers nets you research points, which can be spent on upgrading weapons in your arsenal. You can increase rates of fire, ammunition capacity and damage potential as you see fit. You'll also come across 'Advance Points', which unlock bonus levels, and there's also much other extra content available to unlock, including video clips as well as clothing and other items to customise Bond's appearance.

Speaking of appearances, despite a few incidents of graphic slowdown when there's too much happening on screen, From Russia With Love does an excellent job of portraying the 1960s Bond atmosphere – the styling has been captured perfectly. Unfortunately, the animation at times leaves something to be desired, but the characters are for the most part very well detailed, especially Bond himself who is the spitting image of the 1963 Sean Connery.

In fact, Sean Connery himself even provides the voice for James Bond. He sounds noticeably older than he did the first time he played the role, but it still lends a certain feel of authenticity to the title. Sound effects and score do well to complement the action without ever being particularly memorable, and the same is true for the rest of the voice acting.

From Russia With Love, though not remarkably innovative or challenging, manages to be stylish and entertaining. It's not revolutionary, but it's certainly respectable. **NAG**

Only in Bond's world are there catsuited women with machine guns. In the real one they wear camo overalls

VITAL INFO

■ **Platforms**

PC	PS2	PS3	**PSP**
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ **Suggested Retail Price**

R399

■ **Developer**

Namco Bandai

■ **Publisher**

Ubisoft

■ **Supplier**

MegaRom [011] 234-2680

■ **Genre**

RPG

■ **Age Restriction**

12+

■ **Specifications**

Players: 1

Memory: 300KB

Ad-Hoc: No

Infrastructure Mode: No

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BOTTOM LINE

Having a tiny universe in your pocket is always fun, especially when that universe is presented in a bright, colourful and heartfelt way. The fact that the combat is entertaining and deep also goes a long way to making Tales of Eternia a worthwhile purchase.

80/100

TALES OF ETERNIA

IT'S BEEN A LONG time coming, but finally the PSP has an RPG that isn't terrible. So far, the RPG offerings for the PSP have been lacklustre, sordid affairs with long load-times and trite plots.

Tales of Eternia is a masterfully crafted, slightly old-school RPG and its series claim to fame came from the innovative combat system.

An RPG is all about story, but the story isn't worth anything if the gameplay in-between all the dialogue and cut scenes isn't entertaining. As with most RPGs, Tales of Eternia involves levelling up characters and hoping that you've equipped them with items capable of letting them survive the eventual major boss battles.

What sets Eternia apart from usual RPG tedium is the real-time combat, which is a touch more involved. It's called the 'Linear Motion Battle System', but that's just a fancy term. In reality, it's real-time combat where the player-controlled characters are locked to a 2D plane along with the enemies. The player can control a hero directly, or just switch it to 'auto' [wonderful for the lower-level fights where you know you'll win regardless]. There is a lot of combat in Eternia, so it's a good thing the combat is fun. You learn moves and combos, with the range of possible attacks increasing each time a character learns a new skill. Combination assaults and team-up moves sweeten the deal.

Outside the combat, Tales of Eternia is a deep, vast world that fits snugly on the PSP. The environments are detailed and saturated with colour, coming together as a magnificent fantasy tale.

Supporting this story, Motoi Sakuraba [a famous RPG music composer] sets the tone and mood for scenes and encounters with his original soundtrack for Eternia. His music is catchy, a welcome companion to a lengthy game such as Eternia. Dotted throughout the game, mini-games break up the monotony, with each mini-game fun in its own right, yet never far removed from the overall theme of the game.

The final element that pulls it all together is the PSP optimisation that Eternia has undergone [it is actually a port of Legendia]. There's not a single load screen during the whole game and you're never unceremoniously taken away from the action.

Eternia also features a properly designed save system [save anywhere, but in dungeons you'll load at the last Load Crystal you touched] that prolongs gameplay, but doesn't unnecessarily punish the player for saving and quitting the game.

It's a wonderful game, one that oozes polish and proper forethought. If in need of a portable RPG experience, look no further than Tales of Eternia. The only limiting factor on Eternia's success could be the anime/cute styling the game utilises. **NAG**

Upon hearing that he was played by Kiefer Sutherland, Jack Bauer killed Sutherland. Jack Bauer gets played by no man.

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59/100

GENE TROOPERS

A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF HOW 'back of the box' feature lists may sound awesome but don't work well in practise, Gene Troopers is [for all intent and purpose] quite terrible.

It's terrible, yet charming at the same time. Being an FPS, Gene Troopers has a lot of competition. To compete, it attempts to augment generic FPS methods with RPG elements such as a 'Skill' system and more dialogue-driven components. It's no System Shock however, and the RPG elements come across as bolted-on.

The game pans out across six worlds. These worlds come across as unique and even have their own physics [variations on gravity and such]. Each choice you make in the half-hearted dialogue with NPCs eventually results in a different ending, though the choices don't have much impact on the immediate.

The plot isn't bad. In fact, with a bigger budget and a more experienced team, Gene Troopers could have been a real contender. The squad system is manageable and your team-mates can't actually die, though they will get themselves stuck under elevators, eager to be killed only to appear again in the next scene.

Where Gene Troopers really falls apart is the weaponry. Guns have no weight to them and firing a weapon feels like flapping toilet paper at your enemies. It certainly comes across as offensive, but does little damage. Even the vehicles are negligible, limited to special situations and handling like a drunken yak.

So close, but yet so far for Gene Troopers. It sounds like a great game, but ends up looking, smelling and feeling like a terrible game - one that requires too much effort to really enjoy. **NAG**

Gene Troopers: "Aliens, sheilds, odd buttons - quality sci-fi!"

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89/100

WORLD RACING 2

W ORLD RACING 2 IS, much like Mercedes Benz World Racing, very much a hit-and-miss affair. You'll either love it or you'll think that it's total rubbish. If you race with a keyboard, you'll be of the latter opinion. We sure were sceptical after playing for a few hours using this input method.

Switch over to an analogue controller though, and the game really comes alive. Suddenly you can feel the rear wheels of your Pagani Zonda S roadster slithering sideways under attack from the forces of the power plant, as you exit a narrow, cobbled street in an Italian village tucked away somewhere in the stunning mountain ranges.

There are a number of highlights in this game we'll mention quickly. The damage model is positively superb. The physics model [totally useless using the keyboard] is a tactile delight with an FF wheel attached. Graphics effects are top-quality. For instance, running through mud will spray muck all over your wheel arches and bodywork, and subsequently driving through a river will wash these blemishes away. The 3D models of the cars themselves are also worthy of mention, as they're crisp and realistic.

The world in which you race has always been a strength - in both WR titles. Where most arcade racers have a set track on which to race, hemmed in by translucent chevrons which act just like walls, each WR2 map has multiple kilometres of area in which you can choose to simply go out and explore if you like. In some locations, you can drive flat-out for minutes on end before having to turn around and head back to the map. With 160 tracks including off-road 'chase the marker' missions you'll never run out of somewhere new to see.

The car selection is also brilliant. There's still a lot of interesting Mercedes machinery available, but contemporary street-racers like the Noble M3 GTO-R, Morgan Plus and Aero 8, Lotus Elise Sport, and many more have been added. In fact, the model count is in excess of 90 models, which you are able to put through their paces on a positively massive selection of beautifully rendered tracks, full of added detail that you won't find in any other racing title. **NAG**

NAG CLASSIC AWARD

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Match Events
20 McGaw, G
38 Duguid, C

Stoke City 1 45 : 00 1 **Plymouth Argyle**

21% 58% 21%

Possession

kpool | Burnley 2-0 Portsmouth | Burton I-I G | ⌂ ? ▭ ✉ 4 | Options ▲ Tactics ▲ | Play

VITAL INFO

■ **Platforms**

PC	PS2	PS3	**PSP**
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ **Suggested Retail Price**
R399

■ **Developer**
Gusto Games

■ **Publisher**
Eidos Interactive

■ **Supplier**
WWE [011] 462-0150

■ **Genre**
Sports Management

■ **Age Restriction**
3+

■ **Specifications**
Players: 1
Multiplayer / Wi-Fi: None
Memory: 4,096KB minimum

BOTTOM LINE

It takes a special type of person to appreciate a management game such as this. Championship Manager is ideal for people who enjoy fantasy leagues and think they can do better than the managers in real-life. If you are expecting mind blowing graphics with action packed sequences this is not the game that you would want to play.

80/100

CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER

MANAGEMENT-STYLE GAMES ARE GEARED towards a very niche market and you really need to want to fill the shoes of a team manger to enjoy this type of game. The PC version of Championship Manager is a rather popular game, but don't let the PSP platform fool you. Championship Manager for the PSP allows you to control virtually every detail of each of the 25,000 players in the 55 leagues situated in 12 countries. Taking the role of a team manager is a rather complex job, and this game goes very in-depth into the various aspects of such a job. You not only have to manage and create a successful football [soccer] team, but you have to keep the board of directors happy as well, and deal with possible bad press and criticism from the media. More than that, you also have to deal with players on a more personal level. More than often you will find certain players pitching late for practices and when your team travels, players can also become homesick - these are things you will have to deal with. It is also rather interesting that you need to consult your team's physiotherapist on your players' wellbeing, especially after possible injuries that might have occurred during a game. Scouting for new players is also very important for any team manager, and Championship Manager for PSP allows you to send scouts around the world to report on players with lots of potential. But what is a sport management game if you cannot update player statistics, player transfers and injuries from their real-life games? This game can be easily updated via the Internet so you have all of the latest information for your players' right on your PSP. As a sports management game this game is very impressive. It handles a lot of tasks effortlessly and it runs like a charm on the PSP.   **NAG**

Everything from the PC and Console version made it into this portable title

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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	**MOB**

■ Suggested Retail Price
R50
■ Developer
Mforma
■ Publisher
Marvel Mobile
■ Supplier
eXactmobile
■ Genre
Action
■ Download Code
SMS: MG19256 to 40020
Check www.exactmobile.co.za for phone compatability and downloading instructions.

THE HULK: ULTIMATE DESTRUCTION

HULK SMASH! HULK GRAB! But can Hulk handle a mobile? Hulk: Ultimate Destruction on the consoles focuses exclusively on the mean green machine and the incredible destruction he is capable of. With hundreds of weapons and attack combinations, it's a classic 'break everything' game. The mobile version can't deliver this wide array of mindless destruction, so instead the title has been transformed into a roaming brawler. Players switch between Bruce Banner and The Hulk through arrows placed around levels. The Hulk is used for breaking through obstructions and fighting the enemy, while Banner handles menial tasks like inserting key cards into computers. Players gradually move through the levels, which are essentially sections with obstacles between them to overcome. It's not bad, but the Hulk only has two attack moves, while the rigid nature of a mobile keypad doesn't work that well here. It's playable though, and quite nice graphically. **NAG**

Rigid and lacks depth, but amusing   75/100

DIRTY SANCHEZ

ONE THING ENHANCES ANY gaming experience: audience participation. Nothing gets a game into a crowd more than a party title. A shaming factor for both Sony and Microsoft is that none of their consoles has produced anything like Mario Party yet. Dirty Sanchez is another take on the party genre. You might be familiar with the MTV show, but even if you aren't it doesn't matter. The game is a collection of interesting mini-games to which you can apply your own rules. One involves turning the handle on a Jack-in-the-Box. After three turns you pass the phone to someone else. Whoever lets Jack out gets told to do something inane or bizarre, like walking backwards to a far wall or acting in a certain way. In another title you need to tap out the rhythm a critter dances to. Pass the phone around until someone loses. In another mini-game you leave the cellphone on the table. When it starts playing a song, everyone has to try and grab the phone. The winner passes the phone and its punishment to someone of his/her choice. The presentation is slick and very nice for a mobile game. Overall it's a neat package, but only if you want this kind of thing. It's not Warioware, but it's not the same kind of game. **NAG**

If you want this kind of game, you'll love it   85/100

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	**MOB**

■ Suggested Retail Price
R50
■ Developer
IOMO Studio
■ Publisher
Infospace
■ Supplier
eXactmobile
■ Genre
Party Puzzle
■ Download Code
SMS: MG19079 to 40020
Check www.exactmobile.co.za for phone compatability and downloading instructions.

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	**MOB**

■ Suggested Retail Price
R50
■ Developer
Amplified Games
■ Publisher
THQ
■ Supplier
Thumbtribe
■ Genre
Action Shooter
■ Download Code
SMS: tribe 30015 to 40014
*NB:make sure you leave a space after the word **tribe**.
Check www.thumbtribe.co.za for phone compatability and downloading instructions.*

THE PUNISHER

THERE PROBABLY ISN'T A better time to mention this: the sensational light-gun game Time Crisis is coming to mobile phones, utilising an innovative grid system that corresponds to the keys on your mobile keypad. Now if Amplified had thought about that system when creating the mobile Punisher game, they would have had a great title. Based around the exploits of the movie and comics, you play as Frank Castle, the vigilante who avenges the hit on his family. The game is set in the light-gun genre, except a mobile phone doesn't have a light-gun. As such, a cursor has to be dragged sluggishly across the screen with little hope of a reflexive shot. Granted, Punisher was developed well before Time Crisis mobile, but a bad interface is a bad interface. It's a pity, because the Punisher is a graphical accomplishment. Sadly the high detail level also means enemies are not as clear as they could be on the small mobile screen. In the end, this was a very ambitious but badly executed game. If it were reworked with the aforementioned interface, we'd pick it up again in a snap. **NAG**

Horrible controls can ruin everything   45/100

TAMAGOTCHI

IN THE NINETIES, THE Tamagotchi fad took hold. Everyone was walking around with a virtual pet on their key chains – a critter that demanded constant attention and feeding. Bandai, owner of the brand, has brought back the creatures a few times, but now they make their debut on your phone. Obviously a mobile device is perfect for this kind of game. As such, Tamagotchi works fairly well. The rules have been changed to accommodate less attentive users, so the little creature doesn't have to be fed as often. A few customisation elements have been added, but it's still the familiar creatures from the original craze. There are a few virtual pet games on the mobile market, reflecting the fact that since the arrival of the Tamagotchi, there has been a lot of expansion into virtual pet games. The mobile version is still very enjoyable and captivating, but the game itself doesn't make enough progress to let it stand against what might be around the corner. **NAG**

It's the original game on a new platform   70/100
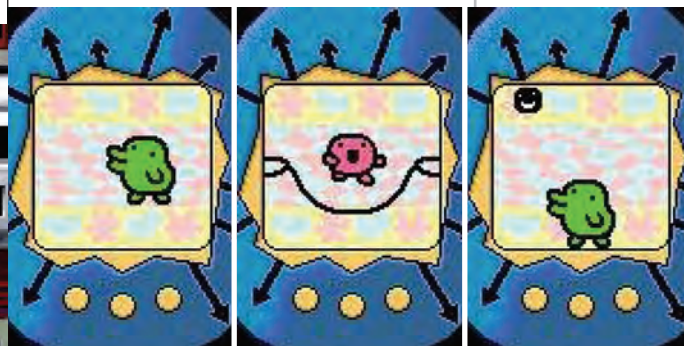
VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	**MOB**

■ Suggested Retail Price
R50
■ Developer
Bandai
■ Publisher
Bandai
■ Supplier
eXactmobile
■ Genre
Pet Sim
■ Download Code
SMS: MG19123 to 40020
Check www.exactmobile.co.za for phone compatability and downloading instructions.

GAME

STERKINEKOR GAMES

PSP

REVIEWS

A smooth remake of a classic that works pretty well 85/100

CIVILIZATION

OF ALL THE GAMES we thought we'd be seeing on a mobile phone, Civilization wasn't one. But given the extra capacity for an N-Gage game, as well as taking advantage of the more powerful mobile gaming platform, wonders never cease. This is especially the case when you consider that Civ shouldn't even work as a mobile game. Sid Meier's masterpiece is still vast and requires a lot more management than your standard mobile fair. But it's a turn-based game and one that found its origin on the Amiga [later the PC, Mac and SNES], so the graphical basis for a mobile version is there.

As such, developer Gryphondale did a sterling job. Menus have been simplified and the control scheme is also much less robust, but most of the game's features are available. This includes the massive Civilopedia and easy access to the tech tree. Players can customise their experience with land size, amount of opponents and the tech age to start in. Being a single-player experience, there is no N-Gage Arena or multiplayer support, but it is doubtful fans will miss that.

If anything, the N-Gage's screen is too small for this kind of game, but we're only emphasizing this. You'll spend a lot of time with the game without noticing the screen area, and the controls make jumping between units and managing cities very simple. At its heart, though, this is the real deal and not a stripped-down form of the classic. That alone is a good reason to get this. **NAG**

Great tactical game that deserves a better platform 80/100

PATHWAY TO GLORY: IKUSA ISLANDS

THERE ARE TWO WAYS you can approach an N-Gage game like this, and it wholly depends on whether you like the platform. If the N-Gage insults you, Ikusa Island isn't for you. But if the format has endeared to you, this sequel to the original Pathway to Glory will be a gem.

The easiest way to describe the PTG premise is Commandos. Pyro's classic turn-based war shooter gave a lot of inspiration to this series. Players are handed four soldiers that are equipped with different equipment. This affects the soldier's movement speed, so one carrying heavy weaponry will have less action points than a trooper with the basics. This is a turn-based title, thus action points determine movement and attack options. From here on the rest is simple: move your soldiers across the map towards game objectives and don't get them killed.

If you played the original, you'll note several changes. The most obvious is the move towards the Pacific and away from the drab Europe. Jungle is the main theme, though there isn't a massive difference between the German and Japanese opponents. Still, graphically it looks better, plus the enemy is a bit more robust, though not to the degree of replacing an actual human opponent. For this there is the N-Gage Arena, though we couldn't find anyone to play against. Sadly, the N-Gage's low popularity [as a gaming platform] is PTG's biggest problem; players will have to be happy playing alone, or hope a friend also gets the game.

Despite this, Ikusa Islands is fun to play, if a little intense. It's not an action title and demands a lot of strategy rarely seen in a mobile title. **NAG**

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Chipset	NVIDIA nForce4 SLI x 16		NVIDIA nForce4 SLI x 16	
Memory	Dual DDR 400/333/266		Dual DDR2 667/533	
NVIDIA Scalable Link Interface (SLI™)	Dual PCI-E x16 VGA Cards @ x16 Speed			
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BUDGET GAMES

BROTHERS IN ARMS: ROAD TO HILL 30

DEVELOPER: Gearbox
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234 2680
GENRE: War tactical action
PLATFORM: PC
RRP: R99

THIS IS A TOUGH one. Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30 was a defining game, bringing something new to the war shooter sub-genre and creating a new way to play tactical games. Graphically it was impressive and the developer went to a lot of trouble to reflect accurate locations, people and weapons. It might have been obvious from the title, but you could call Brothers in Arms the unofficial Band of Brothers game, because that's what influenced the game's design most. On top of that, this isn't a particularly old game and will still stand up strongly against some of the latest titles.

The problem here is Earned in Blood, the second title in the Brothers in Arms series. Gearbox made a small change in the game dynamic – the ability to get ammo from your squadron. This has, from a fan perspective, changed how the game works and brought it closer to the reality that the series wants to represent. Not actual reality, but creating the sense of atmosphere that only comes with unloading tons of bullets while giving cover fire.

So that's the catch. Road to Hill 30 is a good game, bar a few quirks, but the series has evolved a bit since. Still, it's a great experience. If you're not familiar with it, players have to guide one to two squadrons of fighters through various episodes in the Normandy invasion. Based on a true story, it's a change from the action-

heavy fields of Battlefield and Call of Duty. All this makes for an involved gaming experience that falls a bit short in the technical arena. But getting it as a budget release definitely is worth it - especially if you've never tried the series at all. **NAG**

Brothers in Arms is not that old and still looks spectacular when pushed to the top. Definitely a classic

THE BARD'S TALE

DEVELOPER: inXile entertainment
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234 2680
GENRE: RPG
PLATFORM: PC
RETAIL PRICE: R99

BACK IN THE DAY, The Bard's Tale was a funny, off-the-wall bundle of clichés and entertainment. This remake, more modern in only appearance, is just as big a bundle of clichés as the original. At heart, it's an RPG; in presentation, it's a lewd joke with a punch line that might not make everyone laugh.

As a budget title, The Bard's Tale is a worthwhile effort for anyone looking for a few light-hearted chuckles combined with some truly inspired game design. One spell The Bard has at his disposal is the ability to summon an old guy who runs up and leaps into any traps that may be in the way.

The Bard is a charismatic bundle of lust and loins, his quest for coin and cleavage a Monty Python-like romp through absurd fantasy where the concept of 'A Hero' is laughable.

It's a game where the '4th wall' is often broken [breaking the 4th wall involves a game acknowledging it's a game and acting upon that information]. The Bard never passes up a chance to comment on the 'odd' behaviour of his universe. "How can a rat drop this huge chest of gold when it dies?" The Bard might ask.

While not a top-tier game by any means, fans of humour and light RPG gameplay, where the few odd numbers influence the outcome of

Funny and inventive, the Bard's Tale still didn't go far enough to charm gamers. But at a budget price it's well worth getting

PLAYBOY THE MANSION GOLD EDITION

DEVELOPER: Cyberlore
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234 2680
GENRE: Management Sim
RRP: R99

WE WEREN'T TOO KIND to this management sim when it was reviewed in May last year. But it certainly sold, showing that sex sells. Ironically that element also drags on the game. Playboy the Mansion places the player in the role of Hugh Heffner, with the challenge to create the magazine empire Heff did. In the end though, this generally involves throwing parties, producing magazines and having sex with the models. The game lacks the depth that serious sim players would want, because the developers focussed too much on the sensational content in the game. Playboy

the Mansion isn't a bad game, but it loses its way in the material and produces a mediocre simulation.

That said, obviously people don't mind. It is comical, somewhat explicit and for most must be like buying their first adult magazine. As such, the Gold Pack includes an additional CD with extra costumes, party modes, animations, Playmate videos and a whole lot of stuff to make your mansion parties and events big and memorable. New party costumes and an updated Playmate roster are also added features. It doesn't turn the game into what some would like it to be, but the new stuff does provide a lot of extra things for fans of the current system.

Playboy the Mansion isn't groundbreaking, original or particularly challenging. But it is a quirky celebration of the brand and isn't half-bad if you're not expecting much. **NAG**

Running the Playboy empire is a simple gig, but the new content makes your parties even more interesting

SILENT HUNTER III

DEVELOPER: Ubisoft
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234 2680
GENRE: Naval Sim
RRP: R99

THE THING ABOUT A really good sim game is that it can, within reason, genuinely last forever. How many of us who played F15 Strike Eagle or F19, both by MicroProse, don't remember them fondly and didn't try and play them again sporadically through the years?

Silent Hunter III could well be classed in the same league as these big-name greats, but without the rose-tinted glasses needed to truly enjoy reminiscence about those older titles.

Visually, SH III brings an entirely 3D view of your various command posts, including detailed models of crew members moving about their business, and a positively stunning external view with plumes of spray as the waves of the ocean crash against

your surfaced sub. SH III has some of the most gorgeous weather effects we've ever seen.

It's the audio which really grabs your attention though. From your crew switching to whispers when running silent, to the ominous creaking and groaning of the hull at extreme depths, the audio effects in SH III deliver the feeling of realism to the player in stunning fashion.

Even removing the emotional impact of these great little aesthetic touches, SH III is still a top-notch simulator. That word is important: this isn't a title that run-and-gun players will find interesting at all. But if you're looking for something in which you need to calculate the maths of a working firing solution, based on vectors to the target as well as the victim's heading and current speed, SH III is absolutely perfect.

And now that SH III has gone budget, even more simulation fans can enjoy this genuinely engaging title. **NAG**

Naval warfare never looked this good in a game

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
R399

Developer
Westwood | Electronic Arts

Publisher
Electronic Arts

Supplier
EA South Africa [011] 516-8300

Genre
RTS

Age Restriction
12+

Specifications
CPU: Pentium III 800MHz
Video: 32MB Graphics Card
RAM: 256MB RAM
HDD: 9.8GB HDD [complete]
CD/DVD: CD-ROM
Internet: Not required
Multiplayer: 1-6

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BOTTOM LINE

The First Decade is a satisfying nostalgic rollercoaster ride through the Command & Conquer fun fair. Familiar sights and sounds, long since forgotten, resurface, taking you back to a time when you commanded your first army and games had to rely on playability and not graphical candy to impress.

92/100

Buying each title separately

BETTER THAN

Waiting for the next Command & Conquer game

PERFECT WHILE
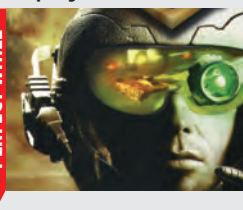
Play your way through every event in the C&C universe: it's a rare chance to experience a gaming legacy

COMMAND & CONQUER: THE FIRST DECADE

THIS TITLE WAS APPROACHED with a mixture of misty-eyed nostalgia and morbid curiosity. Command & Conquer hasn't seen hard drive space on any machine for close to ten years, and that's a long time for all the excitement and addiction to fade out of sight in the fog of war of the human mind.

The very brief history lesson begins and ends like this: The original Command & Conquer game was along with Warcraft the first significant step in bringing the real-time strategy genre to the masses. Yes we all know about Dune II [but we're talking massive commercial success here, the launch pad for real-time strategy gaming as we know and love it today]. All this happened towards the end of 1995, and the game quickly generated a huge fan base and sold enough copies to earn the Command & Conquer franchise an underlined and bold entry in the big old book of gaming lore. From there they created Red Alert, originally supposed to be an expansion for Command & Conquer, but it ended up taking on a life of its own. After this they jumped [technologically speaking] to voxels [3D pixels] for Tiberian Sun and later optimised the engine for Red Alert II. Between these two they experimented in presenting the C&C universe in the first-person with Renegade. Finally and most recently, C&C Generals and its expansion Zero Hour [using the Sage Engine, featuring proper 3D] appeared, marking a decade in the development of C&C. The First Decade also includes all the various expansions. You'll also find a bonus DVD in the box featuring various compilations spanning the series, with cut-scenes and interviews with everyone from Louis Castle to crazy C&C fans [a highlight is one fan who modified his computer to look like the NOD Temple, eerie red lighting and all]. The DVD is great for learning all about the history of the series, and even hints at future C&C games. There's much more they could have added to the bonus DVD. It feels a little rushed and incomplete, but it still offers compelling viewing if you're a fan or are wondering what all the fuss about Command & Conquer is about.

The installation uses just under 10GB of hard drive space - not

bad for a decade of gaming. It runs smoothly on a Windows XP system, but the odd bug here and there may occasionally crash your system, such as when you're attempting to land a transport helicopter on the commando. These issues are far and few between however, and overall The First Decade is presented in an easy to access and play format. Having to enter seven different serial numbers for each of the different games is a bit of a chore, but the positive here is that you're not forced to install everything, which is good for purists who don't want any renegade code on their hard drives.

The games are just as good as you remember them - even better in fact. This is especially evident when hearing those familiar voices obeying your commands. And then there's the music, particularly from the original C&C game and Red Alert. The stuff of legends! The graphics are a little hard on the eye, especially if you've played anything released in the last five years. But a few minutes into any game, telling those tiny pixels where to go is all that matters, not how they look. Command & Conquer The First Decade is a must have for fans. For the rest, it's an interesting journey back to the origins of the real-time strategy genre and how it was developed over the years by one of the best development outfits ever, Westwood Studios. **NAG**

Everything, including the ambitious Renegade is in the collection

August 2005

September 2005

October 2005

November 2005

SA Computer MAGAZINE

Hardware Feature: The GeForce 6800GS and the 7300GS.

Group Test: A comparative look at the products in our test lab. This month we compare eight media centre PCs.

Feature: The single lens reflex camera is still alive and well.

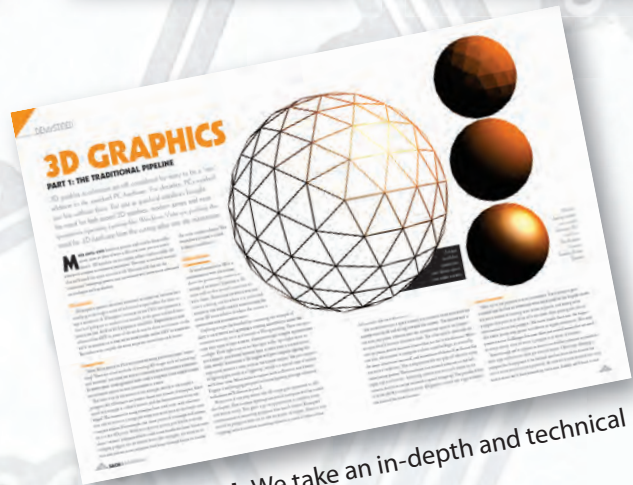**Gaming Feature:** Games for cell phones are taking off in a big way.

HARDWARE

HARDWARE FOR THE GAMER!

AH, AT LAST, THE hardware section! That's what you were all thinking, unless you flipped straight through all that boring gaming stuff to get here first.

Just kidding naturally, as all you readers well knew the moment I used the word 'boring'. It does, however, make for a potentially amusing little intro to our NAG hardware section. Thing is, while hardware, by its definition, is completely different to software, or games, the two are forever intrinsically linked, especially taking the gaming context of this publication into consideration.

PC hardware is largely driven by gaming, after all. It's the eternal quest for that 5fps advantage over your competitors, be they human or AI-controlled, that creates the demand for ever-spiralling CPU power, lower-latency but higher-MHz RAM modules, and the most obvious of the lot, graphics cards with GPUs that would eat 100MHz Pentium chips for breakfast and swallow literally thousands of ZX Spectrums.

Hardware is a term which describes components in their singular state. The word doesn't have a plural. It can be used to describe a SCSI Host Adapter, or an entire rack of blade servers powering the campus of a high-density office park. It is rather vague in almost every sense, except in that it does state emphatically that what the object being described is not - software.

So, what you will absolutely and unequivocally not find in the following pages is software. Everything else is fair game.

But hold on, once again we have to be selective thanks to our uniquely focussed nature. If we simply asked for hardware to review in our NAG hardware section, we'd need to launch a whole new publication called 'Toys Trinkets and Technology' to fit even half of it all in.

While we do have a new magazine in the stable as of this month, focussed squarely on killer bits of hardware, it has a much cooler title than the one I bandied about in the previous paragraph, and still our mission is to provide a complete read for gamers within the hallowed covers of NAG. This all means that we simply had to become a little bit more selective about what goes into this section every month.

Our most basic principle is that the hardware, reviewed or featured in the NAG hardware section, should be something which affects the way that we, gamers, interact with our electronic form of entertainment. Components which enhance our gaming experience, improve how we are able to control the game in question, elevate our systems' gaming performance, or are otherwise generally interesting to the gaming segment of the technology world, will be considered fit for inclusion here.

I've already spoken a lot about the PC in this intro, although to many gamers the PC platform is becoming passé, but platform-orientated hardware could barely even be called a product category in this country or, indeed, the world. Platforms are proprietary, and although in many ways based on the more conventional circuitry of a PC, upgrading your PS2 or Xbox hardware [aside from additional controllers for the former or larger hard drives for the latter], pretty much goes against the console gaming model, and therefore cannot be done. The console you buy is the same as the console everyone else buys, and runs the same games in exactly the same way, which is what cuts down on development costs for these titles [why are they more expensive then, well that's not the gamut of the hardware section now is it?]. That said, any interesting console addenda that do come our way are experimented on by our crack gaming team and will also be included in these pages.

In addition to those parts that directly impact the performance of your system in demanding modern games titles, there are a huge variety of pieces of hardware which influence our pastime more indirectly. Higher-resolution and crisper displays for instance, a whole new category of mice dedicated to gaming which would apply, power-supplies required for high-end dual-GPU rigs, as without these the most powerful gaming systems simply wouldn't function, faster and more interesting networking subsystems to make sure that network traffic starvation is never a cause for being fragged, surround sound or quality headphone sets for total immersion through audio, and more.

NAG is, first and foremost, a gaming publication, and our hardware section will reflect this focus as much as is possible. So, for all the technical low-down dirt on the latest games-orientated hardware, flip through to these pages each month and you'll be sure to find impressions of all the latest kit designed to keep us gamers forever upgrading. We're gamers here and can smell a gamer-targeted piece of tasty kit a mile away! We are also hardware junkies though, so expect to see cool 'lifestyle' tech toys that we couldn't resist, popping up from time to time as well.

Russell Bennet

AWARDS

THE NAG HARDWARE AWARD is reserved for those products that really blow us away, whether by virtue of sheer grunt, value for money, or pure unspecified sexiness. This award will only be bestowed upon products that really stand out, even to our somewhat jaded and cynical eyes, and should be considered among the primary choices when purchasing products in the respective categories. Products which receive this accolade are beyond doubt rather special. So watch out for them and take note!

Jack Bauer won the Tour de France on a unicycle to prove to Lance Armstrong it wasn't a big deal. He thinks yellow wristbands are gay.

OUR HARDWARE APPROACH

AT NAG, WE HAVE a very malleable approach to testing the latest hardware for you, and define the test procedures on a more or less product by product basis. Due to the wide range of hardware we review, a single policy cannot be laid out and strictly adhered to.

In addition, the number of products that comes over our desks on a monthly basis is so vast that it's a prime selection that even reaches these printed pages you read. We also try to include the hardware which gaming enthusiasts, a term synonymous with the more oft-maligned 'gamer' moniker, would like to find out more about.

Therefore, at NAG our review process, although rooted in a technical background and based on solid benchmark data, is largely objective and as such is our considered opinion, of the samples we receive. And we've been exposed to so much technology in our collective years in this vocation that these opinions are, we like to believe, among the most educated in the country, thanks to this vast amount of experience.

So we run all the requisite benchmarks, like FutureMark's synthetic 3DMark series, the latest system-heavy gaming titles [F.E.A.R. and X3 : Reunion are two that spring to mind right off the bat], and more specialised benchmarking suites like EVEREST [specifically for RAM performance] and SiSoft Sandra 2005, which is very good at measuring CPU performance.

What's most important to us is that we get a detailed impression of the reality of using the equipment being reviewed here. While that impression naturally includes 'The Numbers' from the various benches, these do not always reflect the absolute, final verdict. It's possible that we, from time-to-time, prefer a package which may not score the highest during testing, and where that is the reality, we'll explain our rationale. Although it isn't always entirely rational as we're emotional beings who can be swayed by feel-good factors [killer software bundles in high-end graphics cards boxes, for instance].

After all, our goal is to provide you, the reader, with the most accurate information about how satisfied you will be with your purchase. So enjoy reading about the latest and greatest hardware in the pages to follow, which we have slaved over so that you can make the most educated choice possible in your next hardware purchase.

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THRUSTMASTER ®

THRUSTMASTER TECHNOLOGY COMES TO SA MARKET THROUGH BOWLINE

T ISN'T OFTEN THAT we feel we need to begin a technology feature with some history on the company behind the kit being discussed, but in this case we must make an exception. This company, after all, has such an interesting history. It's also no doubt very well known to local gamers, even though the company has never been officially represented in SA – until now!

We're talking about Thrustmaster, which has built up such a strong leadership position in the markets in which it operates, that the name has over the years almost come to mean joystick. And it's a real shame that this country has lacked Thrustmaster products for so many years. All that is about to change, thanks to the local distribution agreement between Thrustmaster and MobileG, and their selection of Bowline [a close partner of MobileG] as official SA distributor of the full product range.

Opens Nicolas Guillemot, Key Accounts Manager at Thrustmaster France: "Thrustmaster was approached by a local South African company called MobileG which expressed the wish to represent our interests in the South African market. Their keenness and their profile impressed us and so we agreed to sign a reseller agreement with them."

The company was actually born way back in 1991, when the founder of Flight Dynamics Inc, which focussed on flight simulations, decided that the PC interface used between simulator and user at the time was inadequate to convey any meaningful levels of realism. Thrustmaster was created to focus solely on the creation of input devices which would bring unparalleled levels of realism to the

sim gaming community, and urged on by ex-US Air Force F-16 pilot Buzz Hoffman the new organisation quickly found itself making and selling its first dedicated gaming joystick, infused with all the quality and realism which could possibly be incorporated into such a device.

Since this birth, the company has built upon this solid foundation and grown steadily through total commitment to the strong ethos of quality through all of its products, and through users driving potential customers to Thrustmaster's door with continued word-of-mouth reports on the realism and robustness of the product ranges.

This unparalleled reputation has led to a number of unique agreements between Thrustmaster and third parties, including the US Air Force, Ferrari, and Top Gun licensing agreements. Each of these organisations recognised the levels of effort being put into Thrustmaster input devices, and were happy to have the company replicate the control elements of some of their real products in its gaming devices – a high accolade for a relatively small manufacturer of PC gaming peripherals!

"Their unique product range has made Thrustmaster a market leader in Europe," comments Bert Doggart, MD MobileG SA. "Also do not underestimate the relationship with partners. The relationship with Ferrari allows Thrustmaster to bring a very realistic wheel to gamers. Similarly the Top Gun and US Air Force relationship means that they deliver a joystick with loads of added value to our customers."

Just look at its current range-topping professional racing wheel for instance. The Rallye GT Pro is the only gaming wheel to incorporate a full five progressive, analogue axes. The steering wheel itself is one, each entirely metal pedal another, and then two levers behind the wheel itself cater for the last two axes, often used

for progressive clutch, brake, or view-panning by the users lucky enough to own an RGT. This pedal set quickly became recognised after its introduction as by far the best wheel for hardcore driving sim fans to use.

In addition to the proper metal pedal set, the RGT also features a metal axis and ball-bearing steering mechanism connected to a smooth, silent gear and pulley force feedback system. Even the single-clamp securing mechanism eschews the use of plastic, even though the models further down the price range, which use the same mechanism made of this cheaper material, have proven near-unbreakable using this same clamping configuration.

The company has a nicely differentiated range of products in this category as well, and even the cheaper units offer feature sets unmatched by gaming input device competitors currently represented in the SA market. They're all astonishingly robust devices, while awesome touches like the replica of the limited-edition Enzo Ferrari 'office' is executed with the tight quality demands from both entities in front-of-mind. And the Immersion-licensed feedback engine and mechanics employed are equally without peer. The detail and levels of feedback fed through to the user's hands via one of these units is rich, smooth and incredibly realistic.

Although it spent its formative years focussed on the PC, the more recent popularity of gaming consoles saw the company make a strong entrance into this massive market segment as well. But rather than developing distinctly separate products for these markets, Thrustmaster decided to build as much peripheral interoperability into its input devices as it could, and now offers a host of dual-platform devices in its line-up, so that customers can use their Thrustmaster on the PC and then simply unplug it, move over to the Xbox or PS2, plug the unit in there, and be up and running on the console platform immediately.

"The South African market is really an unknown to us. We do understand that some of our competitors have had a presence there for some time now. We also understand that most of the accessories available in South Africa are single platform, in other words they will work on either consoles or PCs. Most of our products will work with consoles such as PS2 as well as PCs and this will bring another dimension to your local gamers as they will only need to buy one wheel for example for their PS2 or their PC," explained a Thrustmaster representative to MobileG.

In the joystick arena, the Thrustmaster HOTAS [Hands On Throttle And Stick] Cougar is widely acclaimed as the premier flight-sim controller available in the world. It may be incredibly pricey for a joystick, but its astounding feature set, its replication of real HOTAS sticks in modern jet fighters, and its sheer bombproof build quality have actually made its cost irrelevant. Flight sim junkies dedicated to their obsession and requiring only the best joystick to feed their insatiable cravings could overlook the steep cash ask based purely on the desire to have the absolute best, which the Cougar undeniably is by a long margin.

"Thrustmaster's reputation in this area has always been known. This is mainly

due to our flagship product the 'HOTAS'. We have maintained our quality leadership thanks to our R&D teams and also through our strong partnership with licensees such as Top Gun."

One of the strengths of the company comes down to the realistic feel of not only the physical controller devices themselves, but also the realism of the feedback which the user experiences through his or her senses of touch. Thrustmaster, like many other companies looking for the highest quality 'feel', license the unique haptics technology known as the Immersion engine.

Immersion Inc is a research company dedicated to studying and replicating digitally and mechanically accurate sensations of touch. The same company provide the haptics system for the iDrive navigation and menu control system built into modern BMWs, which features a single dial for control of the myriad functions. Thanks to the Immersion engine at work in this device, the user can learn to tell just by the feel of the knob itself what function they currently have selected for adjustment.

Although other PC input device manufacturers have also licensed the same technology, it's the commitment to quality that allows Thrustmaster to deliver these sensations the most compellingly. This dedication and the unique collection of pulleys and belts which power the force feedback engines generating the Immersion 'feel' are what make Thrustmaster who they are – global leaders in input devices.

In addition to expanding its core strengths out to the console gaming market, and adding gamepads for both consoles and PCs to their input device mix, Thrustmaster has most recently spread its brand out into less established segments. The company now ships a full range of audio solutions for instance, compatible with PC, consoles, Mac and even iPods. It also now produces premium input device 'packages', like the Wireless Nomad range, which adds some innovative input value to mobile PC and Mac users' fingertips. And the latest product to be added to this range is communications, in the form of IP Telephony solutions for leveraging this low-cost voice-call option more effectively.

What's more, Bowline will also be bringing in the full range from Hercules, Thrustmaster's sister company, which focuses on WLAN and audio solutions.

The company doesn't take its licensing deals lightly. Every joystick which carries the Top Gun brand, every steering wheel with a Ferrari logo, is designed with the stringent quality controls of these highbrow licensees in mind. Once the products are finalised, they are submitted to the related parties for scrutinising, and only once approved, will Thrustmaster even think of approaching the market.

Thrustmaster has signed a deal with leading firearms manufacturer Beretta, and will be bringing out light-gun controllers modelled on the shape, feel and sheer quality of the Beretta handguns. Complete with a full Immersion haptics system perhaps delivering realistic feedback? We suspect so, but can't wait to find out... **NAG**

www.bowline.co.za   [021] 550-9700

HARDWARE

CMV
CT-937A

WIDESCREEN IS WITHOUT A doubt the display technology of choice moving ahead. In fact, the format has received a lot more interest even with Windows Vista now just on the horizon. Mobile PCs are rapidly moving to widescreen displays being the *de facto* standard, and of course there's the home entertainment side of things, where a widescreen has become a must for getting the most from your DVD viewing.

The PC desktop is no different. Widescreens are better for productivity, as applications can be split across the display in a manner similar to having a multi-monitor setup, without the configuration hassle and the desktop real-estate requirements of this kind of thing. Then there's better DVD viewing, and even enhanced gaming experiences dangled tantalisingly from the widescreen carrot-stick.

Enter the latest CMV offering, the CT-937A WXGA widescreen 19" LCD monitor.

It's peculiar that CMV stuck to a regular D-sub VGA connector rather than the more modern DVI input option. Despite this move however, the CMV has a stunningly clear display, with astonishing colour reproduction. At its native 1,440 x 900 resolution, text is only slightly choppy in Windows, but 3D and movie-playback are razor-sharp.

Although the TFT boasts a response time of 'only' 8ms, we actually preferred the unit to some of the 4ms panels we've had for review. Not once during fast-paced gaming or high-action video sequences was the CMV panel caught out ghosting an image. LCDs have come a long way since their introduction, and this CMV unit is a prime example of a modern flat panel. That said, forcing 1,024 x 768 onto the panel is not very appealing at all. In fact, any resolution but the native resolution makes text look quite jagged and difficult to read.

The other problem, you will occasionally come across, is the lack of a widescreen aspect ratio option in the gaming titles of today. And while you can go for a standard, square resolution with the monitor automatically scaling the game out to the edges of the screen to get around this shortcoming, it leaves your Windows fonts and icons stretched and distended, which is a minor irritation. Nonetheless, it's a small flaw as more and more games support widescreen resolutions today.

Gaming at these resolutions [TrackMania Nations allows the monitor to run at its best with native resolution supported], is a pleasure. You're given a much wider field of vision, which can be a distinct competitive advantage on the madly bucking tracks of this awesome free game. The same applies to first-person shooters; you can see more than a player running a conventional square monitor and resolution, which is always helpful.

Like many of its peers, the CT-937A features a quick display mode selector button, which, once you've eventually found it or cheated by looking it up in the manual, instantly cycles between picture, text and economy modes.

The viewing angle is worth a mention. The CMV can be viewed at a horizontal angle of 160 degrees, and 140 degrees vertical. It works very well in practice with the colours distorting once you go beyond a certain angle, but the image remains perfectly viewable, even at angles from which it really doesn't make a lot of sense to watch anything.

The mad function buttons aside, the CMV CT-937A comes out sitting pretty on pure ability. If this is the future of the PC display, as it almost certainly is, we'll be happy bunnies to usher in the transition. Great for games, awesome for DVDs, superb as an office workstation monitor, and in our opinion, with pretty nifty aesthetics to boot, this CMV offering definitely scores our approval. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros
• Lovely style
• Excellent image

Cons
Lack of widescreen aspect ratio mars some games

Supplier
Golden Nest Electronics [011]466-2870

Internet
www.gne.co.za

RRP
R2,795

Reviewer
Russell Bennett

SPECS

Input Interface
D-sub

Pixel Pitch
0.285mm

Resolution
1440 x 900 / WXGA

Display Color
16.2M

Brightness
330cd/m2

Contrast Ratio
600: 1

Viewing Angle
Horizontal: 160 Deg
Vertical: 140 Deg

Scan Rate
Horizontal: 30~82KHz
Vertical: 56~76Hz

Display Area
410 x 256 mm

Response Time
8ms [Tr+Tf]

Power Source
100~240VAC, 50/60Hz

Weight
4.7kg (Including Stand)

Tilt Angle
0 deg – 30 deg

Speakers
2.5W x 2

Dimension
W x H x D: 469x368x189mm

Power Consumption
43W

**TOP: 30º tilt angle enough for almost any environment.
BOTTOM: Unlabelled control buttons are quite a conumdrum**

ASUS®
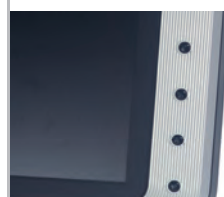
Rock Solid · Heart Touching

CROSS FIRE

ATi

MULTI-GPU

x2 ---- crossfire

MULTI-GPU

x2 ---- x4 ---- x6 ---- crossfire

DISTRIBUTED BY
aXlz

VITAL INFO

◼ Pros
• Great performance
• Bundles with Painkiller

◼ Cons
• Large heatsink
• Price

◼ Supplier
Eurobyte [011] 234-0142

◼ Internet
www.eurobyte.co.za

◼ RRP
R7,699

◼ Reviewer
Regardt van der Berg

SPECS

◼ GPU
NVIDIA GeForce 7800 GTX

◼ Core Clock
550MHz

◼ Memory Clock
1.7GHz [850 MHz DDR]

◼ Memory Type
512MB GDDR3

◼ Memory Interface
256-Bit

◼ Bus Type
PCI Express 16x

◼ RAMDAC
400MHz (support dual QXGA displays)

◼ Connectivity
2 x DVI + VIVO

◼ SLI-ready
Yes

◼ Pixel pipelines
24

◼ Vertex pipelines
24

SPARKLE GEFORCE 7800GTX 512MB

L AST JUNE, NVIDIA RELEASED its GeForce 7800GTX GPU. This graphics processor was, at the time, the most advanced and powerful GPU available. The decision to reintroduce this GPU was made so that NVIDIA could compete directly against the ATI X1800XTX 512MB graphics card. But NVIDIA not only added more memory to its new graphics card, it also upped the memory speed and core clock frequency.

Aesthetically this card is quite a bit larger than the standard GeForce 7800GTX. It features a monster heatsink and fan, and it now occupies two PCI-bracket slots at the back of your case. The heatsink makes use of heatpipe technology to disperse the heat from the copper block, which sits on the GPU, to the air-cooled fins on the top of the card. This works relatively well, and although the fan is not whisper-quiet, it still produces a very acceptable noise level, which shouldn't bother anyone too much. The main reason for this enlarged heatsink and fan is not because of the added memory, but because the memory speed and core frequencies have been boosted from 600MHz and 430MHz to 850MHz and 550MHz respectively. Sadly, we didn't receive two cards for this month's review, so we were unable to test the Sparkle GeForce 7800GTX 512MB's SLI capabilities. From the looks of it though, we see one problem with this graphics card in an SLI setup: its size. Older motherboards have their SLI PCI Express slots relatively close to each other, and if you were to put two of these cards into one of these SLI motherboards, they would fit very close to each other. This is not something that is ideal, as you would want maximum airflow between these two cards.

Using the latest ForceWare 81.98 drivers, we pushed the Sparkle GeForce 7800GTX 512MB to its limits by overclocking its memory and GPU even further. We used a nifty application called Coolbits and achieved a maximum of about a 10% overclock. Considering that this GPU is already tweaked, we were really impressed by this performance boost. At one point

we actually achieved a 30% overclock, but it produced rather obvious artifacts in our games and was relatively unstable.

For benchmarking we decided to run a few of our favourites on this monster. Our test-bed consisted of the Asus A8N32-SLI Deluxe, with the brand-new AMD FX-60 dual core processor and 1GB of DDR RAM. Running the new 3DMark06 at a resolution of 1,280 x 1,024, the Sparkle GeForce 7800GTX 512MB produced a not-too-shabby score of 5,396. We also decided to run 3DMark05. We set its resolution to 1,280 x 1,024 and we enabled 6x antialiasing and enabled anisotropic filtering. The end result was an overall score of 7,156, which is just over 1,000 points more than the 256MB version of this graphics card. The newly developed X3 Reunion benchmark is one of the new additions to our benchmark suite here at NAG. This benchmark is based on the game X3 Reunion, and really puts a system to the test. Plus it looks pretty impressive visually. Out of the three benchmark runs we achieved an average FPS rating of 55.07. Lastly we ran the PC- killing F.E.A.R. benchmark even though it didn't seem too much of an effort for NVIDIA's latest flagship product. With all the settings on high, F.E.A.R. produced an average FPS of 47.

In the time we were testing this graphics card we played a few games, including F.E.A.R, Battlefield 2, and X3 Reunion. The latter featured the most impressive visual performance increase. The Sparkle GeForce 7800GTX 512MB seems to be able to handle most games at maximum performance settings effortlessly, and more than simply looking at the benchmark results, we were very impressed with the visual improvement in all our games. We were also happy to see that Sparkle bundles a decent game with this card. Even though Painkiller is not particularly new, it's still a fun and graphically intense game. Plus we would much rather have one decent game bundled than a bunch of dated demo versions. This card is still very expensive, and if you are considering an SLI setup, be prepared to take out a second mortgage on your house. **NAG**

TOP: Elaborate heatpipe design large, but effective
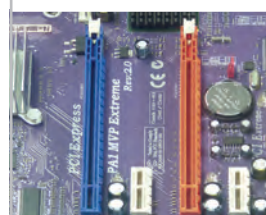**BOTTOM: SLI bridge connector on 7800STX just not quite adequate**

SPECS

■ **Chipset**
ATI Radeon Xpress 200P CrossFire Edition

■ **CPU support**
Intel LGA775 single and dual core processors, with 533/800/1,066MHz FSB

■ **Memory support**
Four slots, max 4GB DDR2 [PC2-5400]

■ **Expansion slots**
Two 8x PCI-E slots, two 1x PCI-E slot, two PCI slots

■ **Sound**
Intel HD Audio via Realtek ALC880 with 8-channel support

■ **Networking**
Marvell Gigabit Ethernet, Realtek Ethernet

■ **Ports**
Two SATA II, four SATA, two EIDE, floppy, two PS/2, four surround audio out, serial, line in, mic, optical and coaxial S/PDIF out, six USB 2, FireWire

ECS PA1 MVP CROSSFIRE

THE ECS PA1 MVP is targeted squarely at the performance-obsessed gaming and enthusiast market, thanks to its support of ATI dual-GPU technology, CrossFire, through an ATI Radeon Xpress 200P chipset and a pair of 16x PEG slots, which will split the available lanes between them, making for 8x slots when CrossFire cards are installed.

Despite the shocking purple PCB, despised by many but which we actually found quite appealing, the features of this board are relatively uninspiring. It's an LGA775 platform with four DDR2 sockets, six SATA ports, integrated Realtek HD Audio, two Ethernet ports on the I/O panel, and four USB ports. Expansion options include two PCI slots and two PCI-E 1x slots, although the proximity of these to the PEG slots could render them useless with graphics cards sporting 2-slot coolers installed. Two EIDE channels and a floppy drive interface, squashed up against the lower of the two PCI slots, complete the package.

The bundle shipping with this board is extremely conventional, with the addition of a 3.5" break-out box which sports two USB ports and a FireWire port that can be connected to the headers on the motherboard – a nice little touch in an otherwise consistently bland package. The lack of inspiration even extends to the software package, which installs almost all the drivers you need with one click and three restarts. It omits the Intel INF update however, so your USB root hub remains locked in legacy USB mode until you download this tiny package.

Included on the CD are a couple of additional tools, including the strange little ECSonic 2 software overclocking utility. Unfortunately the hardware monitor functionality is useless as it recognises none of the thermal monitors on the PA1 MVP, and it isn't even able to read the CPU fan speed. Try and go to the 'Overclocking' section, and the application simply pops up an error which reads "The model no support overclocking."

The layout of the purple PCB is adequate, but a couple of glaring oversights leap out right away. There are only two SATA II slots, supplied courtesy of the integrated SiL controller, and these can only handle a pair of drives in RAID 0 or RAID 1 configuration. Of the other four SATA ports, two are rendered unreachable by installing a large graphics card in the primary PEG slot, which could easily have been avoided. And finally, the front-panel headers for your power and reset switches are not even colour-coded as on most modern boards.

To get into the BIOS, you first have to view the hideous and unprofessional ECS MVP logo splash screen, which looks like it's an MCGA graphics which someone has been forced to display in EGA mode. Once into the BIOS, although it looks just like a regular Award setup, there are a lot of quirky features. And if you're looking for overclocking options, they're all there but annoyingly limited to adjustment by percentages only, including the voltage controls. What's more, although the ATI chipset ought to support DDR2 at 1,066MHz, the ECS doesn't allow for anything higher than 667MHz without FSB adjustment.

Performance of the board was sub-standard across all applications, running against a Sapphire PURE CrossFire II with identical 667MHz RAM and a 3.73GHz Extreme Edition processor. The Sapphire beat the ECS in every benchmark we ran, although by the slimmest of margins in most cases. So it's not like the ECS is pathetic. It's just barely behind the curve in fact, showing discrepancies which would be barely noticeable in day-to-day use.

We wouldn't recommend the ECS to the enthusiasts it clearly targets. If your wallet demands some mercy, but your pride insists on a dual-GPU capable platform, we would recommend the ECS PA1 MVP. It is solid and performs just about on par with more expensive competition. Just be aware. It has a few limitations. **NAG**

A Radeon Xpress 200 chipset nestles under this chunky cooler

The blower may eat I/O panel space, but helps keep the CPU and VRMs cool with little noise

CREATIVE FATAL1TY 1010 GAMING MOUSE

THE CREATIVE FATAL1TY 1010 is a high-definition 1,600dpi unit for the most accurate gaming experience, and has a clear, illuminated button between the two main mouse buttons which changes colour as you click it. When it is illuminated green, it drops down to a slow 400dpi, orange is 800dpi, and red is the full-bore 1,600dpi setting. It's much easier than playing with sensitivity in Windows or the fundamental Creative software that comes with the 1010, and you can instantly adjust the speed depending on what you happen to be doing.

The mouse looks totally different to any other desktop input device out there. It's short, squat, and quite wide. Wide enough for your index and middle fingers to rest comfortably on the two main buttons, leaving the movement of the mouse to your pinkie, ring finger and thumb. Ring and thumb have their own buttons to cope with as well, if you need them, with the red thumb button positioned fractionally too far back, but you get accustomed to it.

Upon first acquaintance with the mouse, we found it excessively light – without substance. This is the 1010's other big party trick. Press the large red button in the centre and the installed G-Weight pops out, allowing the user to replace it with one of the other two that come in the very nice, unique packaging. The lightest of the three, at just 3.5g, is installed by default. Your other options are 11g and 26g, both of which give the unit a much more solid, purposeful feel.

Then there's the SpeedWire zero oxygen copper wire with gold-plated USB connector. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? It's pretty pointless in fact. In reality, plugging the mouse into a bog-standard and very cheap USB extender cable, effectively eliminating the swish-sounding high-speed connection, makes absolutely no discernible difference whatsoever. In fact, the SpeedWire is the most disappointing component of the 1010. It's way too short for the average desktop configuration, necessitating an extension cable and underlining the comedy of the "benefits of gold-plating."

We really enjoyed our time with the 1010, but it's no more accurate than the Diamondback. In fact, the optical engine in the Razer product is ever so slightly more sensitive to minute movements, and the 1010 is quite compromised as a regular office mouse.

Creative could have a contender in the 1010, although technically, it's very much on a par with its contemporaries in the high-performance mouse arena with some extra useful tricks. It's probably the Fatal1ty name that will sell it though. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ **Pros**
• Adjustable DPI and weighting to suit your style

■ **Cons**
• Designed and built to suit somebody else's style

■ **Supplier**
Comztek [011] 237-1881

■ **Internet**
www.comztek.com

■ **RRP**
R549

■ **Reviewer**
Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ **Connection**
USB 2.0 with gold-plated "high conductivity" connector

■ **Buttons**
5 [including colour-coded, backlit dpi switching button]

■ **Movement resolution**
400/800/1,600 dpi switchable on-the-fly

■ **G-Weights**
3.5/11/26g

■ **Software**
Creative Fatal1ty control panel for adjusting mouse parameters

■ **Dimensions**
D x W x H: 7.2 x 10.4 x 4cm

■ **Weight**
136g adjustable

Gold-plated connector and SpeedWire look great, but don't make a noticeable speed difference

This small button changes colour as you change DPI

G-Weights allow you to customise the feel of the mouse to your preference
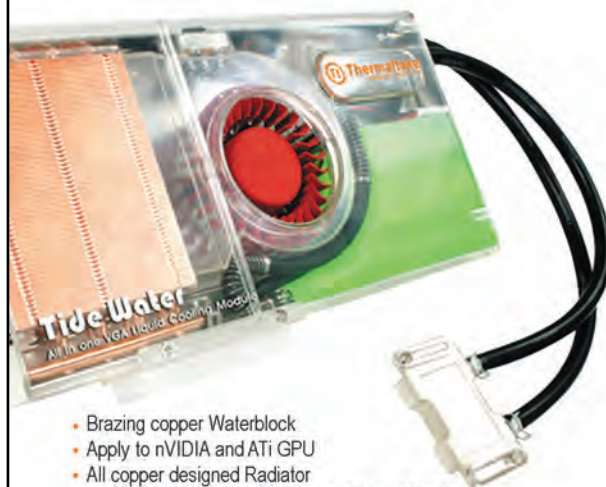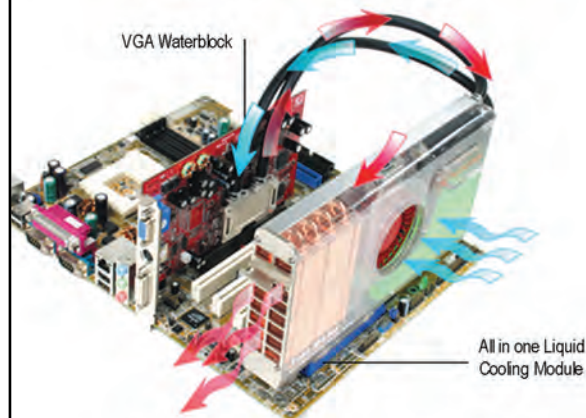
ASUS A8N32-SLI DELUXE

WE'VE SEEN THE WONDERS of SLI-capable boards with dual NVIDIA graphics cards, powering their way to 3DMark05 scores well above 10K. And yes, there are those [us amongst them] who have nitpicked at the fact that these configurations deny each individual graphics card the full 8GB/s bandwidth of 16-lane PCI-E, by not splitting the 16x PEG lanes evenly between the two slots.

NVIDIA insisted that 8x was more than enough raw throughput, and indeed has been proven correct in the interim. No modern single GPU requires more than 4GB/s to operate at its most effective, so the scaling-down really has no significant performance impact.

But progress must march on. Enter the NVIDIA nForce4 SLI X32 chipset, in the form of the Asus A9N32-SLI Deluxe. As the nomenclature in its name suggests, this board features enough PCI-E lanes to give each graphics accelerator installed the full 16x bandwidth, for a gargantuan total of 16GB/s potential throughput dedicated purely to graphics!

Let's do a quick run through the features of this particular example from Asus. This being the Deluxe variant, we expected a glut of features, and while there's no shortage, certainly there's no excess either. It features dual Gigabit Ethernet, integrated Realtek 8-channel audio, two EIDE channels, one FDD channel, five SATA II slots, three PCI slots, one PCI-E X4 slot, and four DDR DIMM sockets. Pretty standard fare really, and even a touch miserly in the limited SATA storage, I/O provisioning and lack of PCI-E 1X options [which is finally starting to make a difference with the introduction of some standard, but good PCI-E cards of late].

However, before we even get to the dual 16x PEG slots, there's some excellent stuff to be found on this platform. The incorporation of RAID 5-capabilities on your SATA II drives, for instance, is a welcome addition [at last]. There's also 8-phase power to ensure a stable supply of voltage, even when overclocking components well beyond acceptable limits, and Asus' own lovely passive cooling system, which connects the Northbridge and Southbridge and the VRMs under their individual heatsinks via a long, sinuous heatpipe affair.

Yes, the nForce chipset has become a two-chip design with the introduction of the X32. Rather than creating a whole new chipset, the company instead piggybacks a second chipset, controlling its own additional PCI-E lanes via the 1,000MHz HyperTransport bus, alongside a variant of the older nForce4.

A slightly quirky PCB design does mar this board somewhat. And it's not the new passive cooling on the VRMs either. That fifth SATA II port is situated near the rear of the board, between an installed graphics card and the I/O panel, which is a touch odd. More annoying is the placement of the BIOS reset jumper, situated so that not only must you remove your secondary GPU, you also need to bend its retention clip sideways to get at this often-used jumper!

The BIOS is an AMI variant and not only works well, but is packed with detailed tweaking options that overclockers would adore. Memory timing and CPU and bus frequency adjustments abound, and thanks to the 8-phase design, voltages can be tweaked extensively during the striving for stability at an extreme overclocked frequency.

Platform performance matches that of the best existing dual 8x SLI boards, and benchmarks confirm that doubling the bandwidth available to each card makes no difference at all right now, using a pair of Asus N6600 GT Silencer cards. Perhaps in the future GPUs will be built to take advantage of the additional headroom, but current-generation SLI boards will run precisely the same as a [far cheaper] vanilla nForce4 SLI board.

That said, the platform is very stable, and except for an annoying tendency to not power up the display every three or four reboots, it could not be faulted from an operational perspective throughout the testing process.

The A8N32-SLI is an excellent platform for any Socket 939 AMD processor, but a pointless upgrade if you already have an older SLI solution. Its price is also a bit of a hindrance, as you don't get anything more from the additional PCI-E lanes that you're paying top dollar for right now. You do get RAID 5, which is brilliant, a cool platform free of annoying chipset fan noises, and excellent overclocking capabilities for your money though. The A8N32-SLI is one of those boards that will make more sense in perhaps half-a-year's time, but it won't establish itself amongst the top of its class until that extra value is unlocked by newer GPU cards. **NAG**

TOP: BIOS reset jumper VERY poorly positioned
BOTTOM: Snake-like heatpipe keeps the chipset and VRM's cool

CREATIVE ZEN MICROPHOTO

CREATIVE'S AMBITION TO BE a major competitor to Apple's dominance of the media player market has brought about the Zen-line, a much fresher evolution of the Nomad series. The Zen players all boast extra features, sturdy designs and good sound, but the line-up has to perpetually expand to meet the iPod's feverish push for new models. As such, the Zen MicroPhoto comes along to try and create a gap for itself between two iPod models. With its colour screen and photo support, it beckons at buyers who look at the standard iPod, but aren't keen on its price or high capacity. For some people 20GB is just too much. With its 8GB capacity, though, it sizes in much closer to the nano. Granted, 8 gigs of space is much more than one, but it's closer to the nano than the colossal sizes the twenty to forty gig models offer.

The real reason for this mass of space is its photo support. This feature is a bit vexing, but as is watching pictures on a nano or any iPod. Generally, people like to see digital photos at traditional snapshot size. Still, it supports the storing and viewing of photos. This area isn't as refined. The software lacks a slideshow feature and the initial load of a photo takes a while, but afterwards it comes up in a snap. So that leaves us with the market's smallest capacity hard drive player. At 8GB there is plenty of space for your songs and the player is PlayForSure compatible, in case you want to buy songs from Rhapsody, Napster or several other online retailers. The Zen interface is largely unchanged, though its physical look has been smartened up with a few more contours. The player has a removable battery, which is a welcome addition, and more can be bought from Creative's Website. The supplied headphones aren't great, but they aren't terrible either.

The MicroPhoto still has the ability to partition part of its drive space for direct file transfers, turning it into a fairly large movable storage unit. Unfortunately, due to DRM the player still requires either proprietary software or Windows Media Player to transfer files. This isn't a major annoyance since most PCs have Media Player installed, though you'll need Creative's own software to synchronise the Calendar and Outlook features. Finally, the player supports 32 FM presets and can do decent voice recording as well, though these features are not one-touch accessible. The general interface has stayed the same, so if you never liked working on a Zen, you won't like this either.

Creative's biggest problem is the lack of something like iTunes, though hopefully the Microsoft partnership will soon bear fruit. The player itself is sound, well-priced, has a fair battery life [15 hours] and is a quality product. We won't call it better than other models on the market, but it certainly is competent enough to sit amongst them. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ **Pros**
- Touched-up design
- Swappable battery
- Doubles as storage device

■ **Cons**
- Music must be transferred via Windows Media Player
- Lacking photo display features
- Sluggish interface

■ **Supplier**
Incredible Connection 0860011700

■ **Internet**
www.incredible.co.za

■ **RRP**
R2,299

■ **Reviewer**
James Francis

SPECS

■ **Size**
51 x 83 x 17.2mm

■ **Weight**
115g [with battery]

■ **Capacity**
8GB

■ **Display**
1.5", 262,144 color OLED

■ **Song Capacity**
4,000 WMAs/ 266 hours (at 64kbps)
2,000 MP3/ 133 hours (at 128kbps)

■ **SNR for MP3 playback**
96dB

■ **FM signal-to-noise ratio**
up to 46dB

■ **Battery life/ playtime**
up to 15 hours

■ **Battery type**
Removable rechargeable Li-ion

■ **Voice recording**
Yes

■ **Organiser**
Yes

■ **Audio support**
MP3, WMA, Janus, WAV, IMA ADPCM

■ **Picture support**
JPG and slide show

■ **Connectivity**
USB 2.0
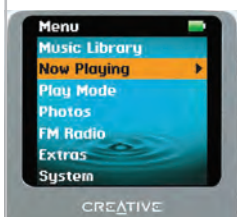
TOP: Menu system is very self-explanatory

BOTTOM: Navigation buttons now easier to press, and light up pleasingly

VIPOWER SATURN SATA TO USB EXTERNAL DRIVE CAGE

WHEN FRONTOSA DELIVERED ITS latest selection of ViPower external hard drive enclosures, we were amazed at the breadth of options available. This company seems able to convert simply any standard internal hard drive to a mobile system using USB 2.0 or FireWire.

The ViPower Saturn product on review here is a SATA to USB enclosure made entirely from high-quality, lightweight aluminium. The use of this metal and the design of the unit make for an extremely tough case, which creates a good first impression. Plugging your SATA drive into the unit, once you've unscrewed the back plate and opened the enclosure, is simple and safe. Just drop the drive into position, slide it backwards and it connects nicely with the SATA data and power sockets on the PCB.

But, this is also a drawback of the Saturn unit. We found that the only way to ensure that the drive remained securely connected inside the aluminium chassis was to bunch up some paper or cardboard into the space between the front of the drive and the front of the Saturn itself. Otherwise even gentle movement will dislodge the SATA data and power connections, making a 'cabled' design seem more attractive, thanks to connectivity flexibility.

Performance is very much on par with other USB 2.0 external enclosures, which means that you do lose some of the throughput of your SATA drive. The USB interface transfers data from the ViPower unit at 28MB/s, which is fast, but not the 50MB/s which this 160GB drive is capable of.

The face of the unit is adorned with some kitsch, but in fact, rather fetching lighting. A bar of clear plastic and a small Saturn logo cycles through the primary colours as long as the power is on. It's a bit tasteless we know, but brings an added aesthetic element to external enclosures. In fact, all told, the ViPower Saturn is in our opinion a good option if you have a SATA drive available which you'd like to convert to external removable storage.

We'd also like to make special mention of another ViPower enclosure in this consignment, the 2528B USB 2.0 product for 2.5" drives. What's notable about this slim-line unit is that it includes a backup button on the casing. One press initiates the included backup software, which sets about safeguarding the files you've configured as crucial, by writing them to the external drive. **NAG**

It's ludicrous that you need to stuff wads of paper in to keep the HDD in place

COMPRO VIDEOMATE H900

THE H900 PLUGS INTO a spare PCI slot on your media centre system, and within minutes it's ready to show you its stuff. Plugging the various requisite aerials into their jacks gives you access to all your television channels, FM radio broadcasts and video from your VCR, and allows you to play, pause, rewind and manipulate every broadcast source to your heart's content, via an included IR remote and IR receiver attached directly to the PCI card.

The VideoMate range also offers a unique Power-On scheduling functionality, which means that you can set up your system to record your favourite show and then shut down the PC. The ComPro kit will power the machine up five minutes before the scheduled time and make sure you don't miss a single moment.

In addition, the Timeshifting feature [pausing of live TV] is handled entirely by the hardware itself, meaning that this function will work flawlessly even on older, underpowered machines.

The VideoMate H900 is literally all you need to turn even an ageing system into a media centre powerhouse, with very little fuss. A raft of software completes the package very nicely, and you're not likely to be found wanting for PVR functionality with this card in your media centre PC. **NAG**
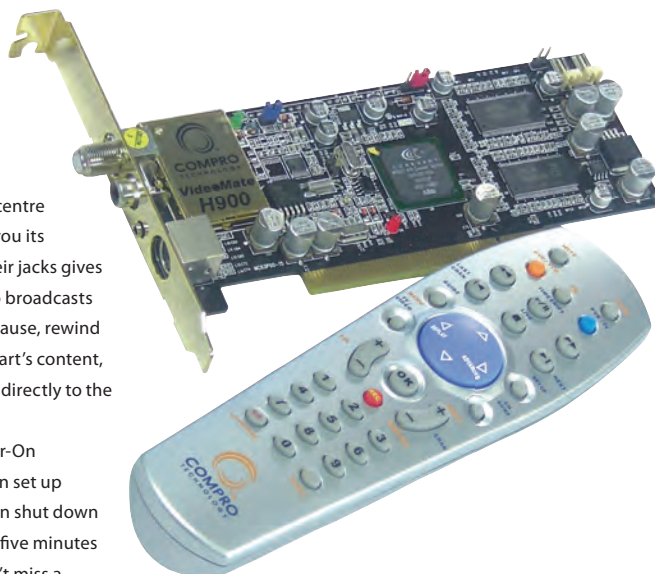
ZALMAN HD160

ONE OF THE KEY things about a great media centre PC is its chassis. We have seen many cases designed for this use, but the Zalman HD160 is by far the best media centre PC chassis we have seen to date. Zalman got many things spot-on when they designed this chassis. Firstly, it looks stunning and it's available in both a metallic-silver and matt-black finish. The front panel features an integrated VFD [Vacuum Fluorescent Display], which is compatible with Windows XP Media Center Edition 2005, as well as activity LEDs, power and reset buttons, and a large volume control knob. Hidden behind a push panel are a multi-memory card reader as well as two USB 2.0 ports, one IEEE 1394 port and mic-in and headphone-out ports. Usefully, it's also rather large on the inside which allows for plenty of airflow - essential especially if this chassis will be placed in a confined space such as a TV cabinet. The top panel is the only part that unscrews when you want to install your components. We would have preferred to see thumbscrews here, but this isn't really a major issue. Interestingly, the top panel also features an adjustable vent which is handy to allow more airflow to your CPU, should it require it. On the inside back panel are two pre-installed 80mm silent fans. On both the side panels and the bottom plate are large ventilation holes which will ensure cool air entering [or exiting] the chassis. Just behind the VFD is the hard drive bracket with space for three hard drives with noise dampening grommets. The single optical drive slot also incorporates this feature which should keep any kind of vibration to a minimum. Zalman actually recommends that you use a CNPS9500 CPU cooler with this chassis. The CNPS9500 CPU cooler stands upright and blows air horizontally, as opposed to vertically down, onto the CPU. This results in air being sucked from the front of the case to the back of the chassis, and out through the back panel fans.

As mentioned before, this is one of the best media centre PC chassis we have seen. It offers ample space inside the chassis which allows for sufficient ventilation, it ships with an MCE2005 remote, and it comes with a built-in VFD. What more do you need? **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Pros
- Plenty of space inside the chassis
- Rubber grommets on mounting brackets
- Bundled MCE2005 remote
- Built-in VFD

■ Cons
- Price
- Thumb screws would have been handy
- No fans near hard drive brackets

■ Supplier
Frontosa [011] 466-0038

■ Internet
www.frontosa.co.za

■ RRP
R3,030

■ Reviewer
Regardt van der Berg

SPECS

■ Dimensions
L x W x H] 435 x 420 x 160mm

■ Net Weight
4.8kg

■ Construction material
Aluminum

■ Motherboard support
ATX, Micro ATX

■ PSU support
ATX PSU

■ Card support
PCI/AGP

■ Drive bays
4 x 3.5" Internal, 1 x 3.5" External, 1 x 5.25" External

■ Cooling system
2 x 80mm Rear Exhaust Fans, ZM-MC1 Multi Connector

■ Expansion slots
7 Slots

■ Front I/O ports
2 USB, 1 FireWire (1394), 1 mic, 1 Headphone

■ Colors
Black and Silver

■ Card reader:
17 in one

BOTTOM: All the standard PC connectivity ports and an additional card-reader, hide behind this push-panel

THE ATI GPU RANGE

IN THIS BONANZA, WE check out the full range of PCI Express ATI 3D accelerators on the market to find the best value for money and the most powerful card out there. In the next few pages, twenty-two solutions are put to the test.

We've been constantly fed a steady stream of ever-faster, more potent graphics cards, built specifically to give us, the gamers, the most enjoyment and involvement. And this is just ATI-based products we're talking about here!

In all the excitement of this glut of hardcore hardware, we must remember that only a small fraction of the all-conquering monsters is actually sold on the general market. Simple economics dictate that it's the low- and mid-range models that move in the largest volume. This means that a substantial percentage of the gamers in this country are looking at or currently running cards which are less than cutting-edge.

Fortunately there are a host of good old and new options available to the more discerning purchaser. In the following pages, we'll wade through 22 ATI-based graphics cards to determine which cards would make good purchases.

We'll cover last-gen ATI products, the newer mid-range releases [X1000 series], and we'll also squeeze in some high-powered goodies at the end. The sheer scope of the project, with samples pouring in from all the major brands represented in the country, led us to limit our selection to PCI Express examples only.

Being who we are, we'll be evaluating this sizeable selection from one perspective: Gaming Performance. We'll also touch on how to get even more fizz for your money [hopefully not literally], and we'll reveal the best overclocking parts of the bunch. After all, this mistrusted art can unlock those desperately needed extra frames per second you're after.

With any luck, at the end we'll have a clearer understanding of all the different options available out there. You'll be able to use this as reference to find what you need, in your price bracket. We'll also have a much clearer picture of how each ATI card is positioned in this value stack, and which manufacturers boast the most capable cards in each category.

In this pile, we had models ranging from the humble X300 right up to the latest benchmark-basher, the X1900XTX. Manufacturers that we need to thank for getting their submissions in on time include Asus [via Axiz], ABIT [through Frontosa], HIS and GeCube [from Sonic Informed], Sapphire [thanks to Esquire], Gigabyte [from Rectron] and MSI [via Pinnacle]. Naturally it was a bit of a slog, but we managed to get them all together. So, let the group-testing commence!

HARDWARE

Test-bed specifications
• Asus A8R32-MVP Deluxe motherboard
• Radeon Xpress 3200 chipset
• AMD Athlon FX-60 Socket 939 CPU
• Corsair PC3200-C2 @ 2-3-3-5 400MHz
• Seagate Barracuda SATA 160GB hard drive
• Thermaltake SilentPower Xaser 480 PSU

SOFTWARE

• Windows XP SP2
• Latest system drivers
• Catalyst 6.2, except where specified
• 3DMark05 v120
• F.E.A.R. patched to 1.0.3
• X3: Reunion Demo benchmark
• ATITool version 0.24/.25 Beta 14

ATI ROUNDUP THANKS TO SUPPLIERS

ABIT: Frontosa	www.frontosa.co.za	[011] 466 0038
Asus: Axiz and Asus SA	www.axiz.co.za	[011] 237 7000
Gigabyte: Rectron	www.rectron.co.za	[011] 203 1000
GeCube: Sonic Informed	www.sonicinformed.co.za	[021] 551 8218
HIS: Sonic Informed	www.sonicinformed.co.za	[021] 551 8218
MSI: Pinnacle Micro	www.pinnacle.co.za	[011] 265 3000
Sapphire: Esquire	www.esquire.co.za	0861 700 000

THE SETUP

BEFORE WE COULD GET to the cards, the platform needed sorting out. To get you the most meaningful results, we wanted to make sure we ran everything, from the baseline entry-level up to the most wallet-wilting, on the exact same hardware, with only the GPUs changing. That meant getting motherboards that could do ATI's dual-GPU trick, CrossFire, as we couldn't resist at least looking at the big guns.

Fortunately, a bit of confusion with Sapphire saw Esquire deliver a host of CrossFire boards to our offices. We also had some from ECS and a few from Asus which had come in timeously enough. At first we thought we'd try the well-respected Asus P5WD2-E Premium, running our rare gaming Intel CPU, the 3.73GHz Extreme Edition. Problem is, the Northbridge cooler on this board sits right behind the primary PEG slot, and we have a number of passively-cooled cards here with large rear-mounted addenda [including one from Asus], and at least one of these would have been too close for comfort.

When a Sapphire Pure CrossFire II, based on the Radeon Xpress 200 chipset, had some trouble keeping our power-hungry CPU from getting a little warm during extended benching, we were concerned. But just then Asus delivered its latest CrossFire solution, the A8R32-MVP Deluxe. Based on the just-released dual 16-lane PCI Express chipset, the Radeon Xpress 3200, and supporting Socket 939 AMD processors, we had found our platform.

This board, and chipset, are brand new - not only on our market, but globally! ATI responded quickly to the nForce4 SLI X16 chipset with this baby, matching the pair of full-bandwidth PEG slots for maximum potential. We were impressed with how quickly Asus got the part to us. Other manufacturers announced availability or future releases on similar boards in the days to follow, but Asus had this one at our doorstep practically as it was being released.

First impressions last! The MVP was rock-solid throughout this massive benchmarking process, and delivered the best possible platform for our entire repertoire of GPUs to perform at their peak.

BANG FOR YOR BUCK

ABIT [Frontosa]	Price	3DMark05 results	OC results
RX600 ProGuru 256MB	R1,100	1,817	2,058 (502/265)
X300SE-Guru 128MB	R599	1,413	2,004 (451/303)
X850 Pro	R3,939	5,593	
X850 XT PE	R4,499	6,682	
Asus [Axiz]	**Price**	**3DMark05 results**	**OC results**
EAX1600XT Silent	R2,295	5,105	5,510
EAX1900XTX Crossfire	R6,995	9,751	
EAX1900XTX Crossfire	R13,900	14,039	
EAX1800 XTT	R5,999	9,105	
Gigabyte [Rectron]	**Price**	**3DMark05 results**	**OC results**
X1300 Pro 256MB	R1,295	3,013	
X300SE	R695	1,335	
X800 XL 512 MB	R2,595	4,499	
X1600XT 256MB	R1,795	5,508	
X550 256 MB	R995	1,644	1,850 (480/370)
X600 Pro 256MB	R1,195	1,806	2,033 (480/280)
GeCube [Sonic Informed]	**Price**	**3DMark05 results**	**OC results**
X1300	R749	1,779	
X1600 XT	R1,599	5,586	
HIS [Sonic Informed]	**Price**	**3DMark05 results**	**OC results**
X1600 Pro	R1,399	4,270	
X1600 XT	R1,899	5,507	
X1300 Pro 256 MB	R999	3,015	
MSI [Pinnacle]	**Price**	**3DMark05 results**	**OC results**
RX1300Pro	R950	2,989	
RX1600 XT	R1,950	5,583	
Sapphire [Esquire]	**Price**	**3DMark05 results**	**OC results**
X1300 Pro 512MB	R1,099	2,169	2,607 (549/301)
X1900XTX	R5,495	9,746	

ROUND 1! FIGHT!

WE COMMENCED OUR TESTING with the most affordable cards of the group, a bunch which naturally also included the oldest-generation graphics boards we received. We decided not to compromise too much when doing these benches though. Although we had to use 3DMark05 for the synthetic portion of our testing, due to its successor's reliance on HDR [and tendency to eat anything less than the most expensive kit], we chose punishing new real world titles so that we could clearly see how each offering fared under the demand of modern games. We used F.E.A.R. and X^3: Reunion, two of the most testing titles we've tried.

The very basic cards in our group just couldn't play X3. X3 would run, but average frame rates of nine and 11 are just laughable in terms of gameplay. And that's with all details on medium, at the lowest possible resolution of 1,024 x 768. Low detail looks, well, very dated and even in this mode, this batch couldn't post more than an average of 34fps. No matter, F.E.A.R. features a very nicely scalable engine, and combined with 3DMark will give us the data we need to find a leader here. There are six cards in this sub-R1,000 segment, the cheapest sitting at just under R400.

The cards in this class were based on the R370 [300s and 550s] and the R380 [600 Pro] cores. Each card featured between 128MB and 256MB of RAM, the Gigabyte 300SE being the odd one out with 128MB integrated memory and a further 128MB grabbed from system RAM through HyperMemory technology.

The ABIT RX600 Pro VGuru has a nice little stylised HSF. It's identical to the one on the X300SE-Guru from the same company, but the cheaper card didn't get the blue lights, or the high-pitched whine under load. Clocked at default X600-spec 400/250 clocks, the X600 was running the highest frequencies in this section, which should mean that it would be the best entry-level performer.

The MSI X550 variant offers higher stock clock frequencies, but struggled to run properly. The Catalyst 6.2 driver failed, as did the 5.8, and the driver on the CD. Gigabyte's X550 represented the class adequately, and ran F.E.A.R., at low and a resolution of 800 x 600, the best of all the cards in this class.

The X600s showed their small advantage better in 3DMark, where both the Gigabyte and ABIT ran neck and neck to 2,050 at 1,024 x 768. The ABIT and Gigabyte X300s weren't far behind, with 1,438 and
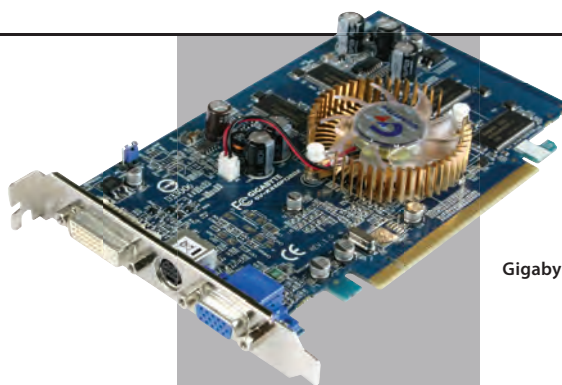
Gigabyte X600 Pro 256MB

Gigabyte X550 256MB
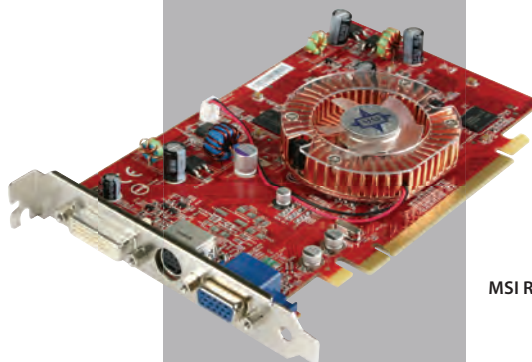
MSI RX550
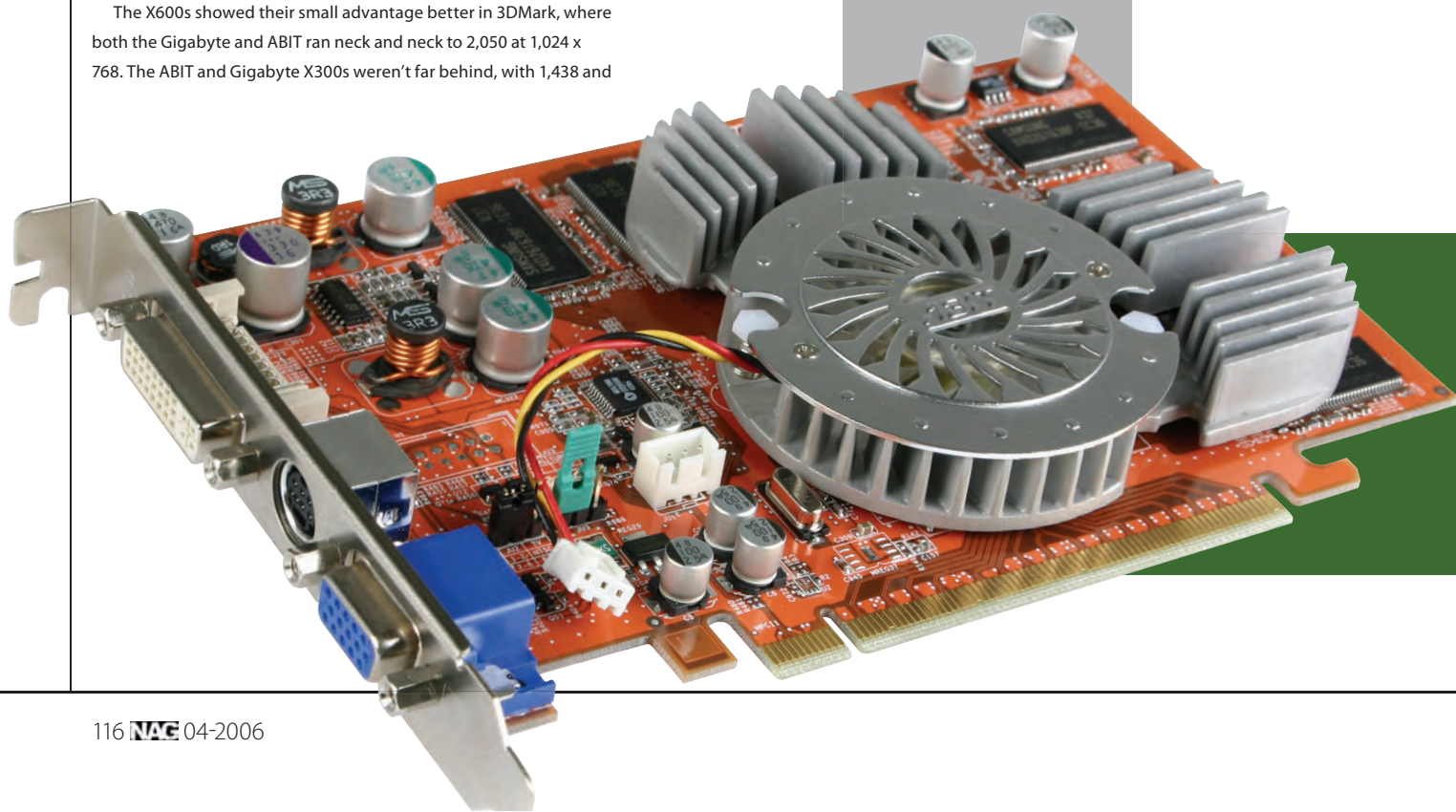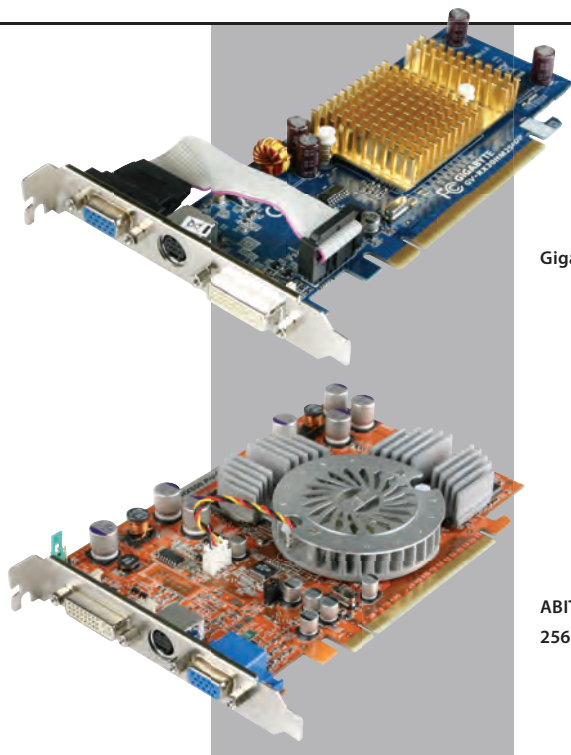
Gigabyte X300SE

ABIT RX600 ProGuru 256MB

1,335 respectively. But the ABIT had a trick up its sleeve.

While the others have largely gone for passive coolers to minimise noise, the ABIT has a [nearly completely silent] HSF. It's also advertised as a great overclocker, and it really is. From the lowliest stock frequencies of a mere 320/200, this card ran stably. It also ran without any temperature problems at 450/300 and could post times, in the synthetic test as well as the gaming bench, right on par with the R380-based cards.

Although none of these cards can play a modern game with many details turned on, they can give you decent frame rates at low quality settings – good enough to at least be able to play without deadly system lag. And what's very interesting is that of the lot, the best value card, and equal best in performance terms, is older technology. Possibly the worst of the lot was the other X300SE on test. The passive cooler let it down a bit. Of the others we'd recommend the X600 over the X550 range, because they're quite faster across the board.

The Gigabyte X600 Pro gave the best F.E.A.R. performance overall, managing a relatively lag-free [12% below 25fps] game at 640 x 480, with most details on medium. Volumetric lighting, soft shadows and AA are simply pipe dreams.

ROUND 1: STAR PERFORMER
ABIT X300SE-GURU 128

This card just loves to be clocked up. Cranking a massive 50% extra from the core and the memory is just awesome from a percentages point of view. What's more, it does these frequencies at no danger of being damaged whatsoever. That fan is quieter than that on the identical ABIT X600 offering and keeps the GPU at a healthy 48-50°C, regardless of your forcing the frequencies. Going for under R500, we just can't see a better buy than this: X600 performance for half the price!

ROUND 2: BATTLE ROYALE

THIS IS WHERE THE thick-end of our test roundup clashed horns. Thirteen of our cards competed in this space. Prices of these cards ranged from just over R1,000, right up to almost R4,000 in one case. Let's run through and position the field then…

R480

The top-end of the pricing structure is taken up by cards which were, three generations ago, top-of-the-line models. These include the ABIT X850 XT PE, the X850 Pro also from ABIT, and the Gigabyte X800 XL sporting 512MB RAM.

Then we actually have newer-generation cards filling up the hotly-contested mid-range, X1600 XTs from HIS, GeCube, MSI, Gigabyte and Asus. HIS also sent us a lone X1600 Pro, with X1300 Pros from Gigabyte, GeCube, HIS, and an interesting X1300 with 512MB of RAM from Sapphire.

All of these, as their names imply, are X1000-series cards, which means they're all capable of Shader Model 3 operations, HDR, and all the good, new, high-end stuff. The X800-series still slots into the high-end bracket thanks to its combination of clock frequencies and 16 active pipelines, as well as the high-level shader capabilities of the more modern cards.

This old guard put up a sterling initial skirmish. The X800 Pro and, in particular, the X850 XT PE from ABIT are both still really good cards. 3DMark05, at standard resolution, could do 5,593 on the Pro and a whopping 6,882 on the PE. At 1,280 x 1,024 with 6x AA enabled, the Pro was struggling, just posting 3,000, which the PE could do at 1,600 x 1,200 at the same AA setting. Gigabyte's XL version, despite its 512MB of RAM, lagged slightly at the standard resolution with just 4,500, but was almost equal to the Pro at 1,280 x 1,024, managing 2,998 with 4x AA.

The hyper-clocked R480 chipset in the PE, running 540/580, easily played F.E.A.R. at 1,024 x 768 with all settings maxed, but without AA or soft shadows [SS]. For 94% of the time spent in the benchmark, the card was delivering more than 40fps. The Pro managed 85% at the same setting, and the XL struggled slightly with 68%. The XL has 16 pipelines and 512MB of RAM, but only 400/400 clocks, while the Pro runs 500/520. What perhaps separates the cards the most are the coolers. The XL and PE feature noisy-when-busy, but undeniably effective coolers. The X850 Pro's single-slot design seems no less effective, and is much quieter. But in every other respect the PE is the best card.

R530

X1600XTs are the new breed. They've been designed to be second-class citizens, originally to the X1800 and then shortly thereafter to the current champ, the X1900XTX. Basically X1800s with fewer pipes, these cards for the most part run at 590/690 stock, and are therefore difficult to overclock successfully, since the frequencies are so high by default.

One thing to note at this price point is that some companies are already offering 'bundles'. The low-end cards are entirely bundle free, coming with a driver CD and perhaps all the cables you need. Those class-leaders that inhabit the high-end are often gifted with very enticing bundles. As if the power of the latest-gen GPUs isn't enough to entice you already. HIS supplied its X1600s as 'Platinum
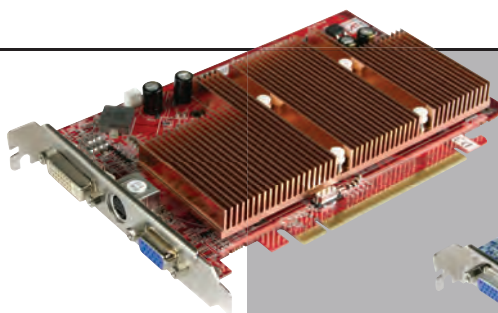
GeCube X1300

Gigabyte X1300 Pro 256MB

HIS X1300 Pro 256MB

MSI RX1600 XT

HIS X1600 Pro

HIS X1600 XT

Sapphire X1300 Pro 512MB
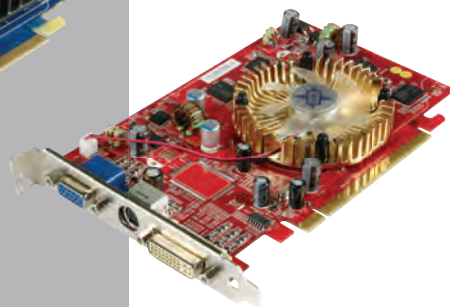
MSI RX1300Pro
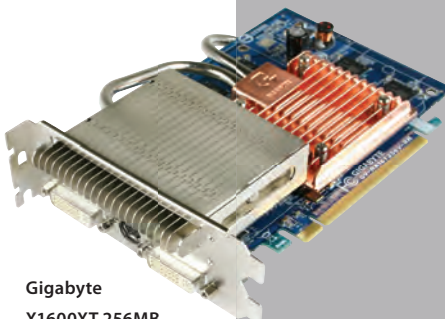
Gigabyte X1600XT 256MB

GeCube X1600 XT

Packages', which included Dungeon Siege and the two-CD racing-mayhem title, Flatout.

The HIS Pro variant, considering its low stock clocks of 500/400, leaps out as an interesting choice. Complete with its 'bundle', it also looks like a little tweaking might unlock the nicest value here, making a hero from a peasant for the second time in this test. The core easily clocks up to 567MHz, the 2-slot HIS Ice Cool HSF quietly and efficiently avoids any temperature concerns, but the RAM can't go past 450MHz. Still, not bad.

But, in this case the XT is definitely the better choice. All the XT variants scored almost identically in the benches, managing 5,500 in 3DMark05, while the Pro could only scrape together 4,300. The Gigabyte card, sporting a new Silent Pipe II cooler, struggled a bit during benching, with heavy load bringing the fanless design to its limits, and the GPU often hit 90+ degrees. All the passive coolers [and there were a lot of them] on the X1600 XTs ran rather hot, and kept getting hotter and hotter without direct airflow.

The MSI equalled the HIS in first place, thanks to a bundle consisting solely of Colin McRae Rally 05 – well at least it's something… X1600 XT cards all managed to play F.E.A.R. at 1,024 x 768 with everything on maximum, no AA and no soft shadows, with no frames dropping below 25fps. In X3, the MSI managed 45fps at 1,024 x 768 with no AA, all details maxed and HDR enabled.
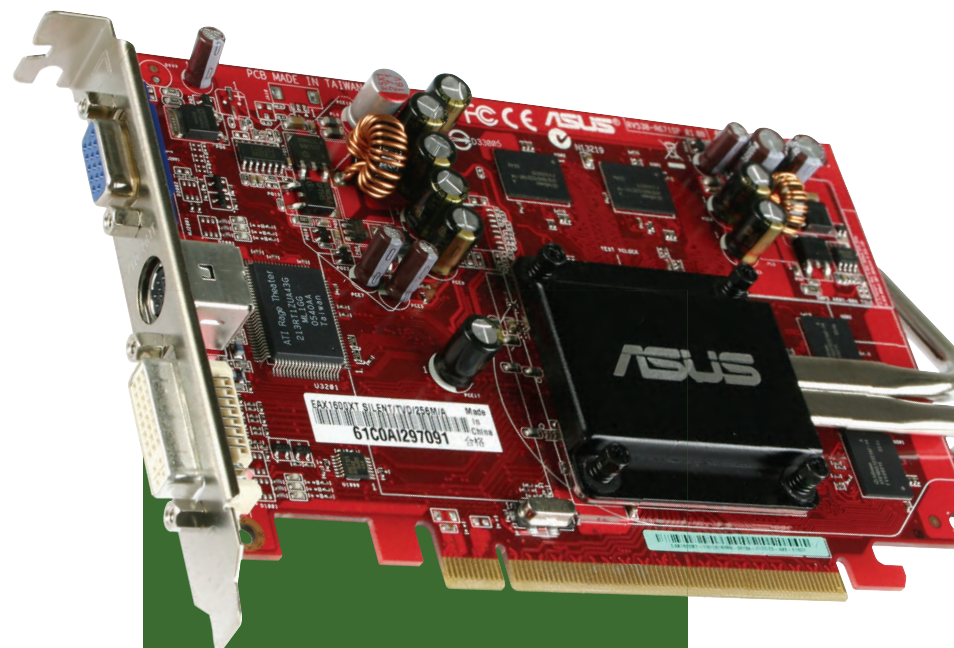
ROUND 2: STAR PERFORMER
ASUS EXTREME X1600XT SILENT

This card actually takes this mantle by being rather plain. It's squarely in the middle of the middle-range group. Its performance figures, however, beat every similar card by a good 300 points in 3DMark05. Although we'd have liked to have rewarded the bundles in the group, this unobtrusive offering was, in fact, better out the box. Although the X850 XT PE is clearly still a very powerful card, prices close to the high-end range mar its appeal. The X1300 range entirely failed to impress us after seeing a much older, much cheaper X300SE do almost as well as they could. That said, 512MB of RAM on an entry-level card makes the Sapphire instantly attractive.

NAG
HARDWARE
AWARD
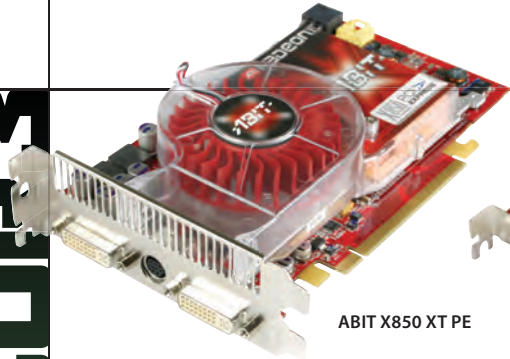
ABIT X850 XT PE

ABIT X850 Pro
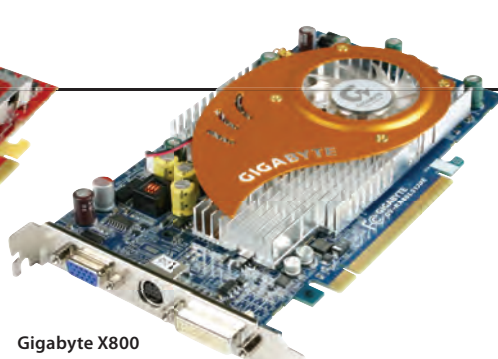
Gigabyte X800 XL 512MB

R515

While the X1600 replaces the old-generation X600 very effectively, adding a lot more horsepower and image quality to your games, we're less convinced about the X1300 series and its replacement of the X300. After marvelling at the ABIT X300SE's overclocking ability earlier, we've kind of developed a soft spot for the chipset. And the X1300 doesn't seem to add too much to the mix.

First of all, there are two dramatically different X1300 chipsets. There's the RV515 Pro, as featured on Gigabyte's Silent Pipe X1300 Pro and HIS X1300 Pro variants, and the RV515 LE – the GeCube and the 512MB Sapphire.

LE chipsets run at 450/250 as opposed to the impressive 600/400 of the Pro chipset. They also feature a 64-bit crossbar architecture rather than the full 128-bit DDR2 interface of their more amply-proportioned stable mate. That said, Sapphire's 512MB X1300 still looks interesting in its passive-cooling black armour plate.

Although at stock clocks it can only do 2,048 3DMarks, this card was still stable at 549/301. At these frequencies it managed a more respectable 2,688, although the passive

cooler was running too hot to touch by the end of the runs. The GeCube could also do similar frequencies, but managed only 1,778 stock and 2,021 clocked up.

Running at stock frequencies, Sapphire's X1300 512MB can play F.E.A.R. with the important detail settings at maximum, and even with 2x AA and 16x anisotropy turned on, provided you drop the resolution to 800 x 600. Meanwhile, the vanilla Gigabyte X1300 Pro with its very chunky silent cooler beats this score, but just barely thanks to much higher clocks and the better memory bus. It can play F.E.A.R. at 800 x 600 with everything on high and no AA. In 3DMark, the Pro variant was the winner, managing 3,051 at stock.

We'd go for the Sapphire board though. It's interesting thanks to its 512MB of RAM and its easy overclocking.

So, for mid-tier money, performance options go from pretty wimpy to almost high-end. We'd suggest shopping for the best deal here. The X1300 series is only a good upgrade from integrated graphics. X1600s are good but get the XT if you can, and X800s remain potent competitors, but are pricing themselves out of the game. A pair of X1600s in CrossFire mode would be an interesting, if pricey, option.

THE FINAL ROUND

R580/R520

We couldn't resist. After all, we had these high-end cards, and we're absolutely sure you'd want to read about them. So we're including them in this Hardcor3 Roundup, even if it's purely academic.

All of the major suppliers were still awaiting their X1900XTX variants at the time of going to press, but Esquire was able to get us a single card representing Sapphire, while Asus SA really came through for us and dropped off two X1900XTX cards, one a CrossFire Master card, to add to our current favourite GPU, the Asus X1800XT TOP, which was still here from being benchmarked previously.

The one bonus of the 1900 cards arriving so soon after 1800s hit our shores, is that these 'older' cards have quickly fallen in price. Sadly, in the case of the XTT from Asus, they've actually just disappeared, as this is the best of the bunch beyond question.

It's not only that sexy Arctic Cooling mirror HSF, or the factory-overclocked 600/700 frequencies. It's both of those. Then there's the awesome bundle as well, and naturally the phenomenal 3D performance on tap. Running stock, this card pulled over 9,000 at standard settings in 3DMark05.

That translates into a very playable 61.633fps in X3, running at 1,280 x 1,024 with all details on high and AA and HDR enabled. This is a very testing piece of software, as we mentioned from the outset, and this is a suitably impressive performance from the XTT. F.E.A.R. is dispatched with equal ease at high quality settings.

But the arrival of the Sapphire X1900XTX proves just what a difference three times the vertex and pixel pipelines really make. Running 48 pipelines, this monster has no problem beating even the lovely, pre-overclocked XTT with a 3DMark score of 10,872. An astonishing 2,000 points difference here already, and the gap widens with higher resolution and more AA. At 1,600 x 1,200 with 4x AA and 16x anisotropy, the Sapphire still managed to score 6,150.

This is the advantage of the R580 over the R520, and it's quite clear in real world gaming as well. This Sapphire, and the nearly-identical Asus X1900XTX, can just about run both F.E.A.R. and X3
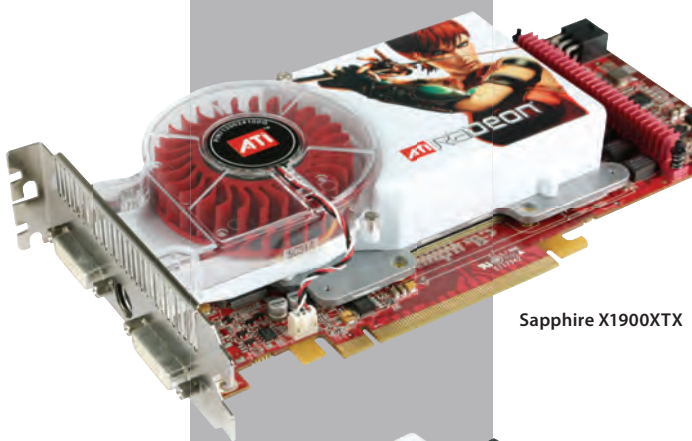
Sapphire X1900XTX

Asus EAX1900XTX Crossfire

A NOTE ON PASSIVE VGA COOLING

MANY OF THE 'SMALLER' X1000-series cards we tested came with passive cooling installed. This is not our favourite solution, particularly as we are gaming-focussed. Silent coolers are possibly useful for PVR systems, where you want the smallest acoustic signature possible, but for extreme gaming they just can't cope. With an active HSF cooler, the fan will kick into high [possibly noisy] mode when the GPU starts running hot, like an intelligent CPU fan. Without this function even the best passive cooler is likely to simply continue to get hotter in this scenario, particularly in our climate. Therefore, for extended gaming sessions these cards would require well-planned airflow through the case itself, which means adding fans and therefore negating the silence of the cards themselves. Without this air they usually just get too hot after anything more than an hour of hectic gaming, or benchmarking for that matter. The temperature-protection circuitry kicks in and clocks the frequencies down, which then mars your gaming performance. While passive VGA coolers have their place, gaming isn't really it. HSF-equipped cards can run forever without overheating, aren't that noisy really, and can support much better overclocked frequencies.
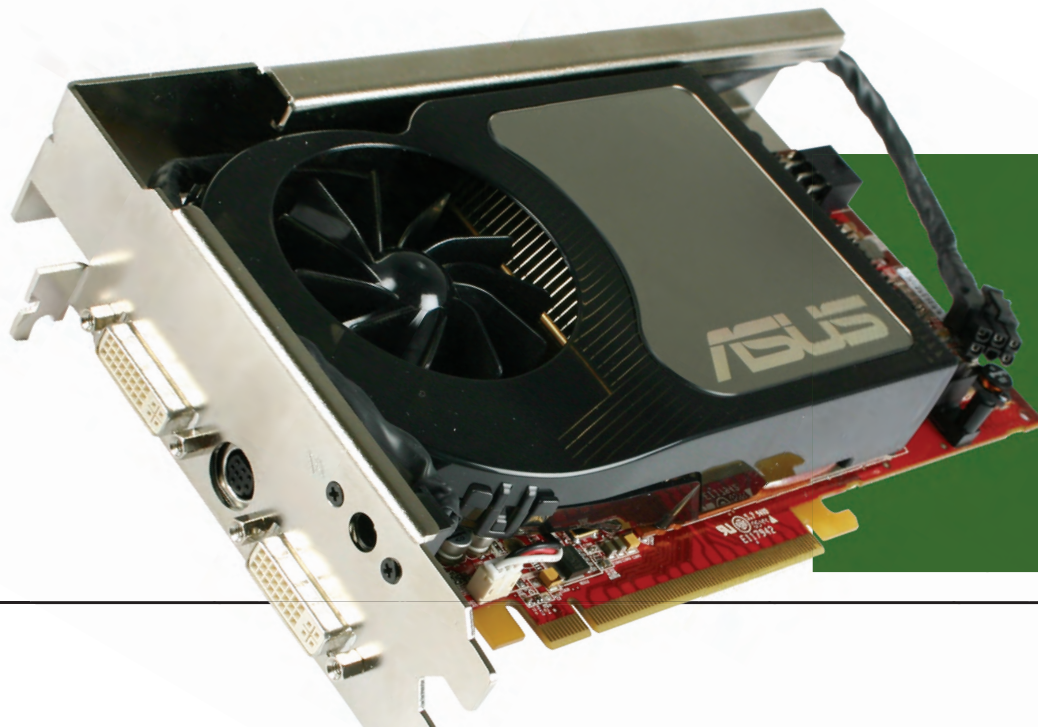
at the absolute limits. You can easily run F.E.A.R. at 1,024 x 768 with absolutely every beautiful little trick turned up full, including soft shadows and 4x AA, and still never dip below 25fps.

The HSF on these X1900s are identical. In fact, Sapphire and Asus X1900 parts are identical, except of course for the CrossFire capability of the Asus. As such, they were equally noisy under load, far more obtrusive than the older XTT, but undeniably more potent too.

Plug another X1900XTX into the second 16x PEG slot provided by this excellent board, and you step into a whole new gaming world.

Making CrossFire work was very easy on this platform, although we needed to hook up a second 450W AirCool PSU and dedicate it to the secondary card. The 480W Thermaltake was finally unable to cope with the strain. Once running, the first thing we fired up was 3DMark, and at standard resolution it scored the highest score we've ever seen – 14,039! What's more, dual-GPU systems always work better at higher resolutions, and at 1,600 x 1,200 with 6x AA enabled, we were still over the 10K mark, scoring the same as a single X1900XTX at 1,024 x 768 with no AA.

That's with Adaptive Antialiasing turned on in the Catalyst Control Centre, which is a stunning form of AA which makes a visible difference to the image quality. Without this setting enabled, the CrossFire cards can't synch up their AA efforts, and you get nasty red artifacts when running anything at more than 1,024 x 768 with AA fully enabled.

The racket this setup generates is tremendous, and then there's that power concern. We recon you need at least a 600W PSU to run this setup off one PSU.

Our two real world titles finally hit their absolute zenith on the CrossFire rig. X3 can be played at 45.522fps with all settings on high, HDR on, 4x AA on, and at 1,600 x 1,200 resolutions. Similarly, F.E.A.R. will run at 1,600 x 1,200 with 4x AA, 16x anisotropy, soft shadows, maximum volumetric lighting and every other detail setting cranked up all the way, with 1% of the frames transmitted falling below the critical 25fps mark.

Exorbitantly expensive? Oh for sure. Uncomfortably loud? The boot-time high-speed sequence can make your ears bleed. Ultimate power? Without a doubt! **NAG**

FINAL ROUND: STAR PERFORMER
ASUS EXTREME X1800XTT

This card is still the winner. It's the best value available at the top-end of the food chain, and looks and runs extremely well, almost as well as an X1900. And you get great free stuff in the box with it. Plus you don't need a nuclear substation in your case to power it. However, the enormous achievement of the X1900XTX boards in CrossFire cannot be ignored. This highest-ever benchmark performance may come at a price which 99% of us would consider way to steep, but it's nice to know that it exists and works so well. Gaming on a monster-rig like this would simply be a case of setting the maximum detail and resolution your monitor can handle, and launching the title. If it's an old game that doesn't support multi-GPU, it'll be fine. And if it's a new title which can take advantage of both powerhouse cards installed, you won't have any performance hiccups at all.
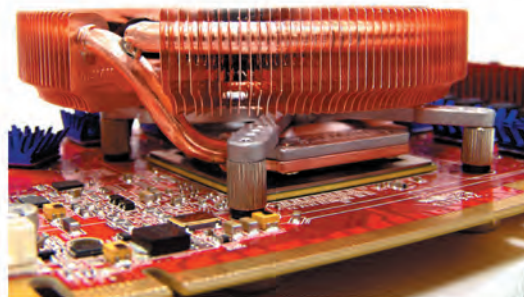
LAZY GAMER'S GUIDE

GUITAR HERO

DEVELOPER: Harmonix   **PUBLISHER:** SCEA
RRP: $69   **Web:** www.guitarherogame.com

NOT AVAILABLE LOCALLY [YET], but easily acquired from www.redoctane.com for a paltry $69, Guitar Hero is quite literally the most fun you can have with your pants on. Developed for the PlayStation 2 by rhythm-gaming expert Harmonix, Guitar Hero has a simple premise – to Rock.

And rock [like a rock star], you will. Guitar Hero has the most perfect selection of rock anthems this side of a Verimark 'greatest hits collection' TV ad. It includes songs made famous by such legendary artists as the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, David Bowie, Boston, Sum 41, Ozzy Osbourne, Audioslave, White Zombie, Franz Ferdinand and The Ramones.

At heart, Guitar Hero is a rhythm-game much like Dance Dance Revolution or Amplitude. You need to be holding the right fret buttons that correspond to the colours on the screen, and then 'strum' as the note goes over the indicator. It sounds confusing and may look confusing, but it's surprisingly natural.

Guitar Hero presents each song in one of four flavours: Easy, Medium, Hard and Expert. Easy only uses the first three [out of the five] fret buttons, and is generally an easy road to rock down. In contrast, Expert uses all five fret buttons and requires you to master the Hammer On and Pull Off techniques [which are real guitar techniques].

But at the end of the day, it's more about the fun of pulling off a successful solo in the sultry Ace Of Spades or rocking your socks off in Franz Ferdinand's Take Me Out. Team up with a buddy for some two-player action – a great way to see who rocks hardest.

All the while, the guitar experience is oddly authentic. The fret buttons form notes, sustains and chords, while the mostly optional Whammy Bar lets you bend notes so you can form your own unique sound.

The guitar peripheral that comes with the game is shaped like the Gibson Flying SG, an authentic shape for authentic rocking.

At the end of the day, if you don't feel like rocking with friends, the career mode takes you from lowly garage-band noise-maker through six venues up to a fully-packed concert hall complete with pyrotechnics.

Guitar Hero is all the fun, foolishness and required utter lack of self-image related to rhythm-games, wrapped up in one rocking package complete with guitar.

YOUR WEAPON

The Gibson Flying SG faux peripheral guitar contains five fret buttons on the neck of the guitar, each one a different colour that corresponds to the note colours in the game. It has a strum bar that you 'strum' to play each note – either up or down [or both] depending on your style. The Whammy Bar juts out precariously, waiting to be wiggled. It bends long notes so you can turn Smoke on the Water into what sounds like a yowling cat orgy.

THE STYLE

Guitar Hero comes with a sheet of stylish stickers to adorn your guitar with. After all, nothing shows how much of a rocker you are than the amount of cute stickers you have on your axe.

THE GAME

While not the most graphically spectacular game, Harmonix knows style and gameplay. Each song is straightforward and intuitive, while the rocker you selected to represent you, struts about onstage with over-exaggerated flair.

Jack Bauer knows Victoria's secret.

The Corpse Bride - Burton's magic keeps coming

By Jenny Cooney Carrillo

TEN YEARS AGO, TIM Burton read an old Russian folktale about unintentional nuptials between an unfortunate man and a deceased bride and he knew he'd found his next stop-motion animation movie, Tim Burton's Corpse Bride. "It's like casting," the filmmaker recalls of the film now available on DVD. "You want to marry the medium with the material and this seemed like a good match."

Recently nominated for an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film, Tim Burton's Corpse Bride is his second stop-motion movie, following the wildly successful The Nightmare Before Christmas, which he had just released when this quirky folktale caught his imagination. "I held out for years to have it done in stop-motion because there is something very beautiful and emotional about this process," he now says. "The puppets are a work of art and the animators are working in sets and lights and moving these things frame by frame. There are 24 frames per second so the animators are the real artists, because sometimes they might get six seconds a week but what keeps them going is they can physically see and touch these works of art."

The story is set in a small, gloomy Victorian town where two shy young people are being forced into an arranged marriage. Victor [voiced by Johnny Depp] is the clumsy bachelor son of nouveau-rich canned fish tycoons Nell and William Van Dort [voiced by Tracey Ullman and Paul Whitehouse], and Victoria [voiced by Emily Watson] is the daughter of broke aristocrats Maudeline and Finis Everglot [voiced by Joanna Lumley and Albert Finley]. After bungling his wedding vows at the rehearsal, Victor wanders into the forest and practices them flawlessly on a tree, even placing the ring on the tree root. Instead, he discovers it is the bony finger of a decaying corpse bride [voiced by Helena Bonham Carter] who he has inadvertently married and she now whisks him away to the bizarre and colourful underworld with her while his real bride, Victoria, waits bereft in the land of the living.

Creating a dark world for the living and a colourful world for the dead was a deliberate choice for Burton. "It was a symbolic gesture I was trying to make which was how I felt growing up, that the land of the dead was your internal creative mind where everything was much more vivid and lively," he says. "I enjoy cultures where death is celebrated, like the Day of the Dead in Hispanic cultures which is full of colourful skeletons and music. It's a more positive approach to the issue."

"DVD is such a big thing now so it's important to make it look good, because I know that is the way people will mainly see it from this point on," Burton said at a recent appearance in Los Angeles to mark the DVD release. "So I looked at the colour timing and the quality of the shots and tried to tweak it and do different things to enhance it so it gets to look its best in that particular medium." The DVD release is packed with material for fans: interviews with the cast and crew, documentaries about the animation process and the two worlds found in the movie, and even a tour of the puppet factory.

Tim Burton's Corpse Bride marked the filmmaker's second movie in a year, followed by the release of the fantasy adventure hit Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, also starring Johnny Depp. "Ever since I worked with him on Edward Scissorhands, I knew he was an actor

who loved to transform," Burton says of his close bond with the actor. "I asked him to do the voice of Victor while we were making Charlie and one night we'd finished filming and I just said, 'let's go do it now' and we walked over to a recording booth and I think he was so surprised and nervous that he used his fear to help create that character, which was absolutely accurate."

A Los Angeles native, Burton began drawing at an early age, attending Cal Arts Institute on a Disney fellowship and starting out at that studio as an animator. He made his directing debut with the animated short Vincent, narrated by Vincent Price, and in 1985 directed his first feature film, Pee Wee's Big Adventure. Other films include: Beetlejuice, Batman, Batman Returns, Mars Attacks!, Ed Wood, Sleepy Hollow, Planet of the Apes and Big Fish.

Now living in London with English actress Helena Bonham Carter and their two-year-old son Billy Ray, Burton jokes that he actually prefers the gloom of that city. "When you have sunshine your entire life, it's nice to have a change," he offers unapologetically.

While there's plenty of sunshine in his own career and life, Burton grins when asked if this makes it more difficult for him to tap into the dark places that have helped create his biggest hits. "If you grow up lonely or sad or an outsider, no matter how successful or happy your life gets, I think that will always remain in you so I can still go there quite easily," he says. "In fact, now that you're bringing it up, I'm going there right now!" **NAG**

Tim Burton's Corpse Bridge

Cast: Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter
Directors: Mike Johnson and Tim Burton
Genre: Comic adventure
Rating: PG10

VICTOR [JOHNNY DEPP] WANTS to marry Victoria [Emily Watson], but is too damn nervous and then [by accident, the movie wants you to believe] marries a corpse. He finds that the Land of the Dead has psychedelic colour, while the real world is drab, grey and boring. But hey, Victor prefers the boring, drab Victoria and tries his best to fix the situation.

The Film: Look, there is no denying, the visuals in Corpse Bride are creepy. As was with Nightmare before Christmas, Tim Burton has a distinct stop-motion animation style that either takes some getting used to or throws you right off. Victor, with his huge, pinpoint pupil eyes looks like he would be right at home in the 'Scream' painting by Munch. The film itself see-saws between serious and fantastical, a rollercoaster ride through 'should I, should I not?' by Depp's character. The entire film is essentially held together by Victor's voice - Depp as talented in only vocals as he is onscreen. It's a film that will feel right at home on the shelves of Burton fans, but newcomers to his artistic styling might be disturbed to see a man cut in half [with vital organs exposed] walking past.

Extras: Accompanied by a cute Illustrated Story booklet with some colourful prints, the DVD features are your standard fair. Interviews, making-ofs and such fill the extra content. The extrapolated feature on how the puppet play was achieved is probably the most interesting of the set, especially if you can appreciate the time and effort that went into animating the movie, by hand, little by little.

Fantastic Four

Cast: Jessica Alba, Ioan Gruffud
Director: Tim Story
Genre: Comic adventure
Rating: PG10

A SCIENTIST, A HOTSHOT PILOT, a geneticist, a former Air Force officer and a billionaire are all trapped on a space station when a strange radiation cloud hits them. Soon it becomes clear that the event changed their DNA and gave them special powers to become Mr Fantastic, The Human Torch, The Invisible Girl, The Thing and the dangerous Dr Doom.

The Film: Little comic lore made it to the film, but instead of using its own freedom to give us a film of true comic-book proportions, Fantastic Four wastes its time over the Thing moping his new power, a dull 'misplaced romance' between the two obvious choices for a romantic sub-story and a Dr Doom that takes three-quarters of the movie to really become Dr Doom. The final fight is pretty quick and while a lot of money was thrown at the impressive effects, not enough happens to define Fantastic Four as memorable. Still, if you though Spider-Man 2 was simply fantastic and you own the Daredevil DVD, these words will ring hollow to you.

Extras: The usual extras preside and while we don't complain about additions to the film, the commentaries and features are commonplace. The largest of these features is the 'Making Of', a usual collection of clips combined with interviews from the actors and some of the crew. A bit of enlightenment is given here over the changing of some of the comic lore, plus a look at Stan Lee's rubber stamp cameo. It makes for some light watching if the film wasn't enough.

L4yer Cake

Genre: Crime Thriller
Rating: 16SLV

FUTURE BOND DANIEL CRAIG stars as a drug middleman who gets contracted to buy a million ecstasy tablets. Things get sticky quickly in a twisty movie that wants to be Snatch badly and starts off well initially, but never gets off the ground. Not terrible, but only mildly entertaining and somewhat cliché laden. It's not bad, but doesn't live up to expectations.

Extras: Commentary, loads of deleted scenes, a 'Making Off', photos and an interesting Q &A with Craig and director Matthew Vaughn shine much more light on the film, but don't make it much better, though.

Returner

Genre: Action
Rating: 15V

MIRI HEADS BACK FROM eighty years in the future to find and convince current day, skilled gunman Miyamoto to help her save the world from an alien invasion. Returner's main claim to fame is being all about the action – and it delivers. The rest flounders around, but it maintains an over-the-top energy that makes it worth watching, providing you take a pinch of salt.

Extras: Subtitles in several languages and a few language options, though we recommend sticking to the Japanese with English subs. Some trailers complete the package.

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JLA Cold Steel
DC Comics : R44.95

A STORY MADE UP OF two volumes, Chris Moeller takes the world's greatest superhero teams and put them in a very difficult situation. When the natives of two different planets are at war, whose side do you take? It's easy if one side is evil and intent on destroying the universe or hideously torturing innocents. But what happens when both sides believe in what they are fighting for? And to make matters worse, it seems the good guys aren't as good as they seemed at first.

This book looks at the moral code that the superheroes have had since they were first written about in the 1940s, and tries to see whether that good/bad attitude still works in modern society. Is there a need for people who will go beyond the laws to make society work? Or do we give up all pretences of peace and civilisation and let the strongest rule?

Army of Darkness Tales
Dynamite entertainment : R47.95

A FTER THE 'ARMY OF Darkness' ended, no one really believed Ash would just go back to selling sporting goods at S-Mart, did they? Come on, a good cheesy event like that never ends! So here are the tales of the Army of Darkness. We follow Ash and Sheila through time and place as they stop the 'deadites' from rising up with the power of the Necronomicon and taking over.

The tales are written and drawn by a variety of people, but they always have one thing in common. They all have the cheesy humour that made 'Army of Darkness' stand out from so many other bad horror movies of the time. If you've ever wanted to take your 'boom stick' and blow away some 'deadites', you are going to chuckle madly as you read the Tales.

American Virgin
Vertigo : R21.95

T HIS IS A VERY odd comic. At first glance, it seems like a bit of a silly piece of fun. Adam is a young boy whose parents run a Christian fundamentalist TV channel. Strangely, this doesn't make him anti-religion. In fact, he has signed a pledge to remain a virgin until the day he marries. Sure, there are laughs, like when his cousins kidnap him and cuff him to a chair in front of a stripper for a surprise bachelor's party. However, the story takes on a serious side when his fiancée, who is doing peace work in Africa, gets captured by terrorists and… hmm. If we told you any more you'd know what happens. So, instead buy the comic and find out.

Faeries Landing
Tokyopop : R92.95

T HOUGH THE TOWN IS called Faeries Landing, no one there really believes in faeries. Then, 16-year-old Ryang saves a horn-headed man from the police. To show his thanks, the messenger, Goodfellow, shows Ryang a place where the faerie maids come to bathe. Needless to say, things go wrong and the poor kid winds up having to look after a young faerie maid who is stranded in the human realm. It sounds pretty nifty having your own faerie princess spending her time with you. Unfortunately, when she tells your fortune and says you are going to have 108 doomed romances, things don't seem so cheery.

Fanta, the faerie doesn't want that happening to her newfound friend, so she decides to take actions to prevent it. Suddenly Ryang finds himself totally surrounded by beautiful fay goddesses who keep an eye on his every move. Though they are trying to help, their understanding of the workings of the mortal world are limited, leading poor Ryang into one situation odder than the last.

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GAME.DEV

WELCOME TO THE SECOND article that details developing Golem Master, a strange little puzzle game. Last month we were a bit naughty and included a demo of the game that had a working tile sliding system, without explaining exactly how to develop that yourself. That's where we'll start this month.

BUT FIRST, PROGRESS CHECK-TIME!

IN THE GAME.DEV SECTION on the cover DVD you'll find 'GolemMaster_001.gm6'. Feel free to use it for reference, but we recommend that you keep working on the file that you developed during last month's article. It should have: (1) a grid consisting of Floor and GridEdge objects; (2) Wall and Tile objects on top of those that both inherit from an Obstacle object; (3) TileController with its array of stored tiles; (4) Selector, TileSelector and FloorSelector, forming our state-based selection system; (5) and finally, two empty objects called TilePuller and TilePusher with sprites and not much else.

At the moment, all the game can do is create some sort of selection effect when you move your mouse cursor over either a Tile or a Floor. Time to expand on that!

SELECTING TILES TO PULL

HAVING EVERY SINGLE TILE or exposed Floor object selectable [we can't select Floors that are under Tiles, thanks to the code in Selector], isn't what we want. There's a very important restriction that we need to enforce: there needs to be a clear path from a Tile to the edge and from the edge to a Floor for them to be legal selections if we want our sliding mechanic to work properly.

To find out if a spot has a clear path to in a certain direction, we'll use a script. GM allows you to import and export external script files, so go ahead and import CheckDirection.gml from the cover DVD. You'll now be able to use CheckDirection(direction, object) in your code. CheckDirection runs through a loop that starts from the spot we're testing [the selected Tile or Floor object], moving one grid-space at a time in the direction we want. If it runs into an Obstacle before it hits a GridEdge, it returns false. If it gets to the edge of the grid safely, it'll return true and set edge_x, edge_y and edge_distance to the values of the closest edge it has reached.

We can now make sure that Tiles are only selected when they have a clear path to the edge of the board. The place to do this is in a TileSelector's Create event. We'll add and Execute a piece of code action and make it look like the

image. [See **Image 1**]

As a rundown, first we make edge_distance some ridiculously large number so that the CheckDirection script doesn't throw an error [it expects edge_distance to exist], then we simply run CheckDirection in each of the four fundamental directions [0 = right, 90 = up, 180 = left, 270 = down] to see if any of them is a clear path to the edge. If we have a least one clear path, create a TilePuller on that edge. If we didn't find any clear paths, make this TileSelector invisible.

The reason for making it invisible is to prevent constant state switching. If we destroyed this TileSelector, we'd have to create a new Selector which would then create another TileSelector in the same place, etc. We also need to add code to the Mouse Leave event to destroy any TilePuller objects [just use the Destroy instance action and set it to apply to object: TilePuller].

If you run the game now, you'll notice that only Tiles with clear paths are selectable and we've got TilePullers at the edges closest to them, bonus! Now we need to make the Tiles actually do something when we click on them. Time to populate TileSelector's Mouse -> Left Button event with this wonderfully commented code. [See **Image 2**]

The final part of selecting a Tile is the responsibility of TilePuller. Because we'll be throwing Tiles towards TilePullers, the Collision with Tile event is where we'll store all our housekeeping. Populate it with: A Create instance of object Selector at 0, 0 to get our selection logic working again. Then we Set value of variable 'TileController.storedTiles [TileController.storedTileCount]' to 'other.id'. This stores the colliding Tile in our TileController's array. We also need to increase our stored tile count to keep track by using Set value of variable 'TileController.storedTileCount' to 1 relative. We also reposition our Tile by using Jump
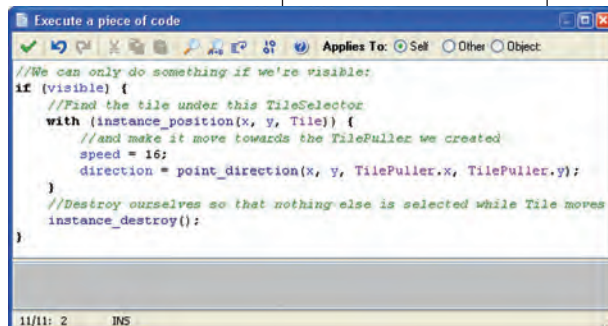
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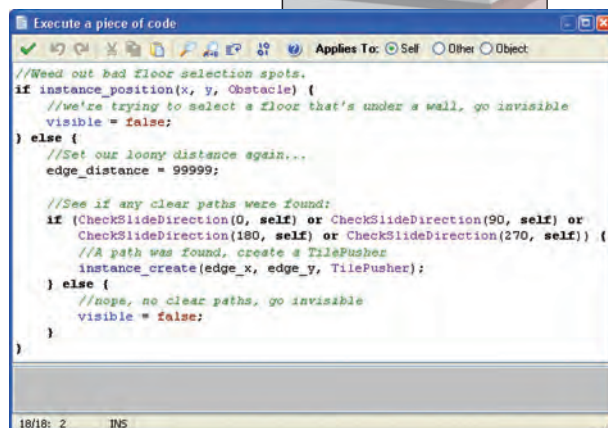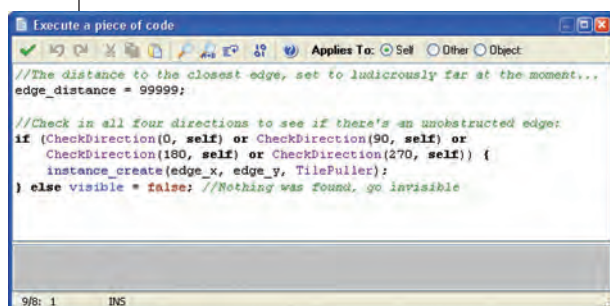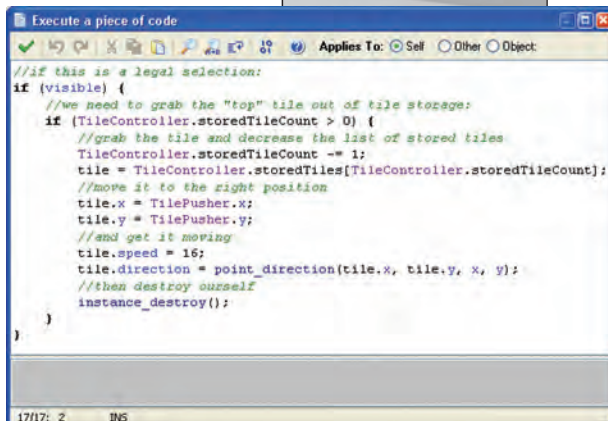
Image 4

Image 1

to a given position (x = -40, y = -40 + TileController. storedTileCount * 32), set to apply to the other object. Make sure we stop the Tile's movement with a Set direction and speed of motion (0, 0) also applying to other. And finally, we destroy this TilePuller as it's not needed anymore.

Run the game and enjoy pulling all the Tiles off the board. If only we could put them back on…

PUSHING TILES INTO PLACE

THE LOGIC TO PUSH Tiles onto the board is a bit more complex than pulling. We could simply make clicking on a GridEdge push a Tile onto the board from that position, but that's not very intuitive and could very well break the game if there's nothing to stop our sliding Tile from careening off the board.

Once again, not all Floor objects represent legal moves. Just like for the Tiles, we need to have a clear path to an edge. We also need to have something solid in the other direction to stop our sliding Tile. Logic to test this is all in CheckSlideDirection.gml on the DVD - import it. This makes the code we place at the bottom of FloorSelector's Create event a little more complex, but it's not too bad. [See **Image 3**]

Just like the TileSelector goes invisible when a move isn't legal, FloorSelector does the same thing. We also need get rid of the TilePusher object it creates, but this time instead of adding the Destroy instance action [applied to TilePusher] in the Mouse leave event, we place it in FloorSelector's Destroy event instead. When we click on a FloorSelector, it needs to slide a Tile from our TileController's storage onto the board, so this image indicates what the Execute a piece of code action in the Mouse -> Left Button event looks like. [See **Image 4**]

To finish off the pushing logic, we need a way to make our Tiles stop in the right place. Unlike TilePuller, TilePusher ends up having nothing to do with this. It's only a place-marker after all. It's a Collision event on Tile that ends up being the best place to handle this. When a Tile collides with any Obstacle [remember how we created that parent class for both Tiles and Walls?], we simply Set the direction and speed of motion both to 0. Finally, because we destroyed our FloorSelector when we started pushing the tile and thus broke the selection system, we need to check If the number of instances of Selector is smaller than 1, and Create an instance of Selector at 0, 0 if so.

SLIPPERY SLOPE

RIGHT, THAT'S THE SLIDING all sorted out. Play around with it and see if you can imagine the tiles you're lobbing around controlling our Golem as he walks around the level. As the Golem aligns with the middle of a tile, he should check to see what it tells him to do... But enough of that for now! We'll introduce our little protagonist next month.

In the meantime, if you're enjoying pushing and pulling tiles around, you might want to check out Pixelus from Popcap, which we've pretty much shamelessly copied so far. Grab Pixelus at [http://www.popcap.com/launchpage. php?theGame=pixelus] and see if the mosaic-building antics can't inspire your own creativity. **NAG**

Play sequence from top left

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12
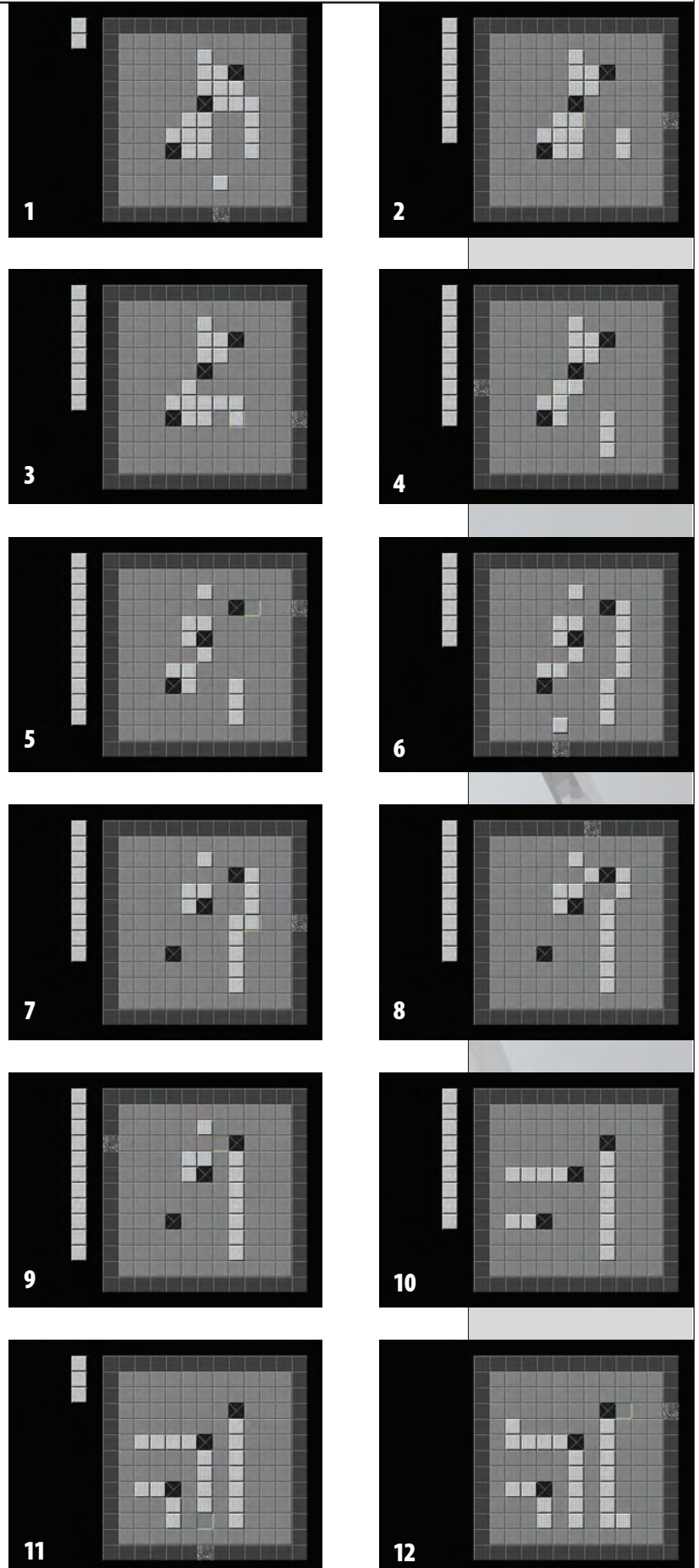
THE LIFE-CYCLE OF AN INDIE-GAME

INDEPENDENT OR INDIE-GAMES ARE completely different beasts to triple-A games. They're much wilder, less certain and more diverse out there on the fringe of the games industry, and their life-cycles reflect this by being less clear-cut and well structured.

CONCEPTION

JUST LIKE A TRIPLE-A game, every indie-game starts with an idea. The difference is in who is having the idea: triple-A games rely on ideas that emerge from established development houses, licenses, intellectual property or even a publisher's marketing committee. Anyone can have the idea that spawns an indie-game, which is the entire point of independent development.

It's probably a good idea at this point to try and define indie-games. The broadest acceptable definition is games that aren't developed under the typical developer-publisher relationship, often by very small or one-man teams. This limitation means that indie-games tend to appear on platforms that are cheap to develop for. You won't see many indie-games on consoles due to their high cost of entry and strict release-control mechanisms.

Indie-game ideas tend to differ from commercial games [i.e. games that are strictly business ventures] in a few ways. They tend to be what the developer really wants to play, although some casual game developers instead develop games that they feel the market wants. Ideas can range from simple changes or additions to existing 'Hey, it would be cool if…' mechanics to entirely new systems that haven't been seen before and might not work at all.

DEVELOPMENT

BECAUSE IT'S OFTEN A single person who has the initial idea for an indie-game, it tends to be very hard indeed to take that idea to a studio or publisher. Many indie-games are simply the result of an idea that someone feels strongly about being turned down time and time again, so the only course of action is to develop the game without commercial support.

Because indie-games have nonexistent or tiny budgets, they share very few common development methodologies. Whatever works best for the individual developer is what gets used in the end. One developer might swear by C++ and use Allegro, another would only ever use Blitzmax to write games, and others prefer Flash, Game Maker, Basic, Pascal, Java, Adventure Game

Studio, and Python. The list is endless. Because the second thing that anyone tries to do with a new programming language is to develop a game [the first being your typical 'Hello world!' example], you can be assured that every single tool that allows interaction on a computer [or other device] has some sort of game written in it. It may not be a great game, but that's hardly the point.

Indie-development tends to be an organic process, proceeding in fits and starts in the hours between sleep and work according to the fickle whims of inspiration and boredom. Many indie-projects peter out and start up again at random. Even the most amazing game idea isn't guaranteed to be developed because life has this habit of getting in the way.

In fact, right after the first step of development, when there's something slightly playable, is where 90% of indie-games die. This isn't the result of a sinister plot by evil multinational publishers or a flaw in the personalities of indie-developers, it is simply human interest. Because indie-developers tend to be developing games for themselves, they lose momentum after something starts working. They're satisfied that the game works, why go further?

Those few developers that do manage to keep going on their games, either because they see the opportunity for profit or they really enjoy watching other people play something they created, also tend to produce more prototypes than anything else. After a round of idea-farming, the best ideas will be selected and often get rolled into a single game.

The main development cycle is iterative. An indie-developer will develop something, get feedback, develop some more, get more feedback, etc. This iteration can continue for a very long time. In fact, most indie-developers will rarely classify a game as 'finished' because there's always something you can do to improve it. Without the pressure to get the product out there that publishers bring, the second biggest killer of indie-games is feature creep! But this can have a positive side too. Development continuing after a game is officially 'released' means that the game matures as more and more people play it, distilling the enjoyment and refining it.

MARKETING

THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE phases in an indie-game's life is often difficult to define. Any developer will market his/her game as he/she's developing, especially if he/she feels it's a good game. After all, can you stop yourself talking about a game you enjoy? There's a lot of overlap between iterative development and marketing actions. You could say that the feedback and change cycles are actually part of marketing rather than development.

"Infinity" is a prime example of how a one-man team can acheive something
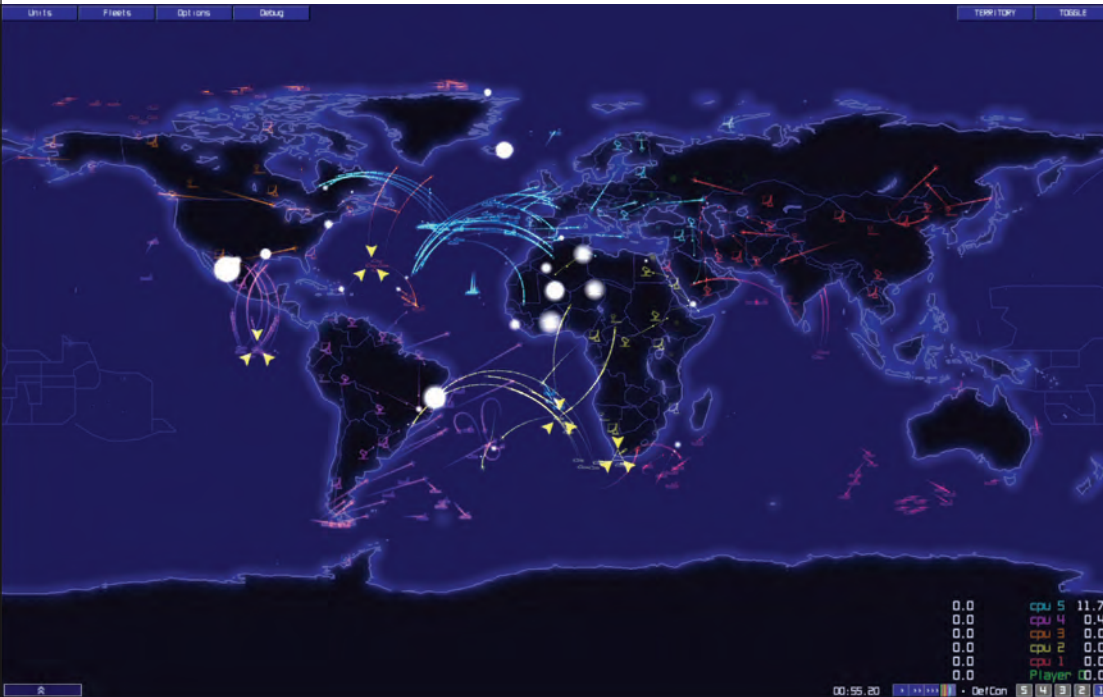
Defcon, an upcoming game by the creators of Darwinia, uses retro styling to appeal to the mainstream

Simply put, marketing is the process of 'getting the word out'. Without publishers to drive a game to market, indie-developers need to get their games out there. Gaining exposure is probably one of the hardest parts of developing a successful indie-game. One of the keys to this difficult achievement is knowing who will play your game, and why. Understanding the market for the game is far more important that being able to formulate the latest and greatest graphics algorithms. What hardware requirements are acceptable? How many people will play this? What type of knowledge do they already have? Is this a niche title? Where should this be announced to get to the players who will enjoy it? Will people be prepared to pay anything for this?

Essentially, marketing boils down to realising that other people will play the game and trying to get as many of them willing to play it by making it as enjoyable, polished and professional as possible.

SPREAD

THE MOST RECOGNISABLE MOMENT in the life of an indie-game is the moment of release. The point when the game goes from something that previously existed only on the developer's hardware and was known to the few people who tested it, to something that the rest of the world has access to. Unfortunately this tends to be an academic distinction, as very few people actually find most of these released games. But sometimes, if a developer has done his/her marketing right, release goes from being a drop in the ocean to a bomb in a bucket.

In indie-circles, you'll hear a lot about 'alternative publishing', i.e. using the Internet to perform the functions that publishers do for triple-A titles. Internet distribution has been a staple for indie-games since HTTP first appeared. Niche games will have Websites and communities dedicated to them, while the portal phenomenon is pushing casual and more mainstream games into a strange popularity race.

The core factor behind the spread of a game is word of mouth though. If people enjoy an indie-game and tell their friends, you've got a hit on your hands [provided those friends can get hold of the game]. Word of mouth is notoriously mercurial. Few developers who bank on it succeed in tapping its power. The few indie-developers who are trying to make a living developing games have more experience in developing games that sell well, but they are the first to admit that the market is difficult to judge once you start attempting a runaway wildfire-like distribution of your game.

Indies do have one big advantage over mainstream sales. Compared to triple-A games, indie-titles have an almost infinite shelf-life. Because indie-developers tend to focus on lower system specifications, players of their games aren't really bothered with the ongoing hardware battle, so an old game is just as likely to be enjoyed as a new one. This means that indie-games keep being discovered by new people after release. An indie-developer selling games can expect a trickle of steady business, no matter what the circumstances.

METAMORPHOSIS

THE INDIE-SCENE IS CONSTANTLY being watched by the big leagues, because it's there that new game ideas and concepts breed. Successful indie-developers have the chance to be picked up by a large publisher, provided the publisher has some vision. But even without mainstream intervention, the indie-projects that succeed will make their way into the triple-A ranks by the power of reputation alone. This is a good thing, as it drives the cycle of innovation vs. stagnation that characterises the games industry.

Indies will always be around, by definition. There will always be more people who want to develop games than there are publisher dollars to fund them. And there will always be people who have innovative ideas that are simply too risky for the publishers to feel comfortable with. Long live the indie-developers! **NAG**
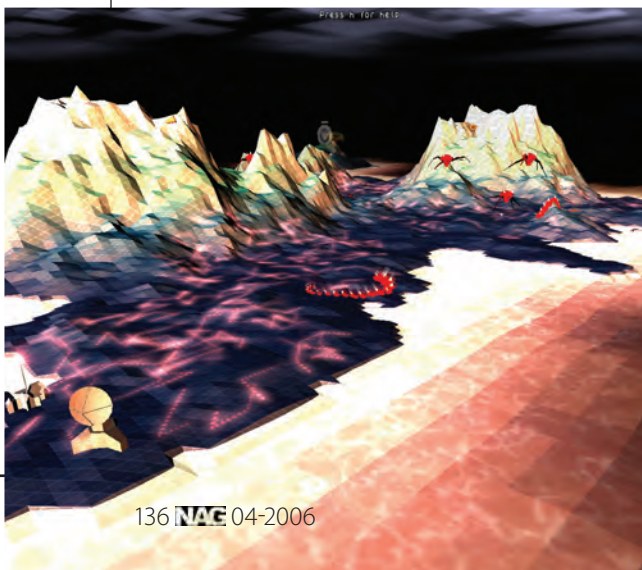
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MULTIPLAYER

CPL WORLD SERIES CANCELLED, WSVG FOUNDED

SPECULATION BEGAN EARLY LAST month when the Intel banner disappeared from the sponsor list on the Cyberathlete Professional League's Website. There was no statement from the organisation, and it seemed as though the development had been fairly sudden and unexpected. With Intel being the CPL's title sponsor and provider of the million dollars given away in last year's World Tour, the future of the 2006 series was quickly called into question. The CPL had already announced the host locations and "… at least" $1,500,000 in prize money. This official word served to reassure the community that the World Series would indeed go ahead, although many were already guessing that "… at least" would become "at most".

In the following weeks, the second clue to the series' fate was unveiled. Scott Valencia, former operations director for the CPL and now executive vice president of Games Media Properties, released vague details of his latest project. The World Series of Video Games [WSVG] – an oddly similar title to that of the CPL's brainchild – would be a new international e-sports circuit comprised of several 'major' events during the year, and culminating in a year-end grand final. Sponsored by [surprise, surprise] Intel, as well as Xbox 360, the circuit would host tournaments for Quake 4, Counter-Strike 1.6, WarCraft III and several as-yet-unnamed Xbox 360 titles. A final prize purse of one million US dollars was also announced. The similarities between the WSVG and the CPL did not go unnoticed by the gaming community, and while some were ecstatic that yet another event had emerged to give money to professional gamers, most realised that the market had become saturated and was thus unsustainable.

Part three of the saga unfolded in two waves. In the first, CPL President Angel Munoz divulged the particulars of his organisation's partnership with the WSVG - a move considered by many to be inevitable. The press released confirmed that the CPL's Summer Championship in July [also a CPL World Series stop] would become a WSVG 'major', and the high finishers would automatically qualify for the WSVG finals. Incidentally, it was also mentioned that the prize

purse for the Summer event, previously set at $500,000, would be dropped to $225,000 "… to fit into the $1,000,000 World Series of Video Games format." There was still no official word on the CPL's World Series and how it would be affected.

The news eventually came, strangely enough, from Mr Munoz in an informal interview with the community Website Gotfrag. com. "We are not holding a World Tour this year," he admitted. "Instead we recommend that the community looks at the WSVG as a great alternative, and our partnership with them as a merger of concepts and a united vision for the sport. These are not times for organisations to duplicate the efforts of others, but a great time to cooperate while remaining distinct."

Thus, on the surface it would seem that the change has been

WCG ANNOUNCES 2006 GAME LIST AND 2007 HOST CITY

THE WORLD CYBER GAMES has released the list of titles that will be supported at its 2006 Grand Final event and worldwide national qualifiers. The list looks similar to last year's and contains six PC and two console games. Counter-Strike 1.6; WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne; StarCraft: Broodwar; Warhammer 40,000: Winter Assault; Need for Speed: Most Wanted; and FIFA 2006 make up the PC corner, while Project Gotham Racing 3 and Dead or Alive 4 for the Xbox 360 constitute the console component.

Most notable is the continued absence of a one-versus-one first-person shooter [despite the popularity of Quake 4 at other international tournaments], while three real-time strategy games

feature yet again. Following feedback received by the WCG, Counter-Strike is returning to its basic form [version 1.6] for the first time in two years. Last year's competition ran CS: Source, and the previous year, Condition Zero.

In addition to the game list, the WCG has also decided on a host city for 2007. Signing the contract at City Hall, the mayor of Seattle, Greg Nickels, welcomed the event to his city. "Hosting the World Cyber Games in Seattle is a fitting tribute to our thriving videogame industry, which has over fifty game development companies in the Puget Sound area," he said. "We welcome the opportunity to host participants from around the world and show

one in name alone, that the WSVG is merely replacing the CPL World Series and all will continue as normal. However, information regarding the WSVG is still extremely scant, and this is already having a negative effect on professional gaming. The CPL World Series was seen as dependable, as an opportunity for payers to plan their gaming careers as they would any mainstream occupation. The WSVG's tentative structure has already resulted in several top contenders cancelling their plans to live purely as professional gamers for 2006. Additionally, the decreased prize money, spread over at least four game titles [as opposed to two in the CPL World Series] will allow fewer players to sustain themselves without sponsorship.

Scott Valencia, also in an interview with Gotfrag.com, defended the reduction in prize money. "We will not allow ourselves to be pulled into the 'purse wars' that have been escalating over the last three years," he explained. "The current rate of growth in cash purses is not sustainable and creates an artificial interest in these events. We need to look at creating a comparable sports model, one that helps generate more media exposure around pro gamers, which ultimately helps grow the size and number of endorsement and licensing deals."

On the other hand, Matthieu Dallon, CEO of the Electronic Sports World Cup, shares the community's scepticism about the WSVG. Speaking to GGL.com, Dallon said, "It's not a new idea or an advance for e-sports. In my opinion it's even a regression, because there is precisely no sporting project behind the packaging." The fear that the WSVG is too commercially based and was not conceived in the best interests of the sport is pervasive. With the presence of Microsoft's Xbox 360 as a sponsor, it is also feared that the WSVG will promote competitive console gaming over PC gaming. Console gaming, while certainly more popular amongst mainstream audiences, is regarded as less developed as a competitive platform, and is strewn with unbalanced titles such as the abysmal Halo 2.

Of course, the success or failure of the WSVG venture will be shown in time, and with numerous other organisations worldwide, such as the World Cyber Games, the Electronic Sports World Cup, and the Global Gaming League, the future of e-sports is not likely to be irreparably damaged. However, these developments shed doubt that 2006 will be the 'break-out' year for competitive gaming that it was previously slated to be.

The World Series of Video Games tour is scheduled to kick off in Louisville, Kentucky over the weekend of 15-18 June 2006. [www.thewsvg.com]

them our Seattle hospitality."

This location marks the second time the event will be held in the USA, the previous US host being San Francisco in 2004. The USA will join South Korea as the only countries to have hosted the illustrious event twice. Last year's Grand Final was held in Singapore, and this year's will be held in Monza, Italy. [www.worldcybergames.com]

RECTRON ELECTRONIC SPORTS WORLD CUP 2006 SA QUALIFIER

ON THE 27TH OF April 2006 The Carousel Casino, North of Pretoria will open its doors to the Rectron Electronic Sports World Cup 2006 SA Qualifier where gamers from around South Africa will compete in a massive four day competitive and LAN event.

The following games will be played competitively at the SA ESWC qualifier - Counter Strike 1.6, WarCraft III and Quake 4 as well as the PlayStation racing simulator Gran Turismo 4.

Through the support of main local sponsor Rectron, winners of the SA Qualifier will be sent to France to participate in the three day tournament, where they will compete against 53 countries in the Electronic Sports World Cup Grand Final.

The Electronic Sports World Cup Grand Final is an annual competitive gaming event hosted in France by Games Services and is sponsored worldwide by NVIDIA. A visitor to the final will experience a real sports atmosphere as one of the 40, 000 expected spectators viewing the world's best players on five stages dedicated to the ESWC official disciplines on more than seven large screens. The main stage, designed for face to face combat boasts a massive 250 square meter screen and will seat 15, 000 spectators cheering for their favourite country.

The grand final is scheduled to take place at the Palais Omnisports of Bercy, which is situated in Paris, France, from the 30th of June 2006.

[www.arena77.co.za]

TRACKMANIA NATIONS

www.trackmanianations.com

NADEO, DEVELOPERS OF THE highly popular online racing/puzzle-series TrackMania, recently released its free TrackMania Nations ESWC game.

Quite literally, for the first time in e-Sports history a game has been specially designed and developed for the Electronic Sports World Cup. The fact that it's free, so that players can train for the qualifiers and eventual Grand Final that will be held in Paris from 28 June, really helps.

In front of 40,000 people, the best players from each country will battle it out for a prize of $400,000.

TrackMania Nations is a graphically excellent title despite being free. The game is finely tuned for the newest graphics cards as well as lower-end machines, so that everyone can play. The built-in online ladder tracks players from around the world, and you can customise your car and avatar to suit your taste.

Locally, TrackMania Nations has proven to be very popular. Hundreds of South Africans are competing in the local ladder and

Already popular locally, nations is enjoyed in almost every country

international ladder. The better South Africa does, the higher SA appears on the international ladder. Since its release, more and more local gamers have taken to the tracks to compete.

What makes TrackMania such a wonderful competitive title is how it was designed. Players don't directly compete against each other [cars pass right through each other], but rather, players compete for the best times. Shaving milliseconds off your final time, trying and retrying as many times as you like until the round ends, it all comes together as a well-constructed competitive experience free from the usual frustrations of online multiplayer titles.

There is hope that TrackMania Nations will find local representation so that our local racers may one day travel to the Grand Finals.

MEDIC! PATCHES ON THE WAY FOR BF2

BATTLEFIELD 2 AND SPECIAL Forces recently received a patch [Patch v1.2 which you can find on this month's cover DVD]. Soon after the release of this patch, DICE and EA announced that another patch was on the way [v1.21] to fix some of the things 1.2 broke [dated 20 February 2006]. "Although patch 1.2 included several fixes that we know were eagerly awaited, it unfortunately introduced some new issues. These are being addressed immediately and we are working around the clock to resolve those. Patch 1.21 (coming soon) will be tested…," commented DICE and EA.

A quick trawl on any Battlefield 2 forum will quickly tell you that there is divided opinion on the 1.2 patch. It's great that you can now quickly and effectively remove any threat from above [more or less]. In the past, getting bombed whenever you broke cover ended up in the creation of the urban servers over at SGS [games.saix.net], and ironically the new patch ruined that experience for a few nights on these urban maps, only providing servers with snipers exploiting the game by planting claymores all over the place. Then there was more complaining regarding the accuracy of snipers and the reduced effectiveness of the grenade launcher, but you can go on all night if you really get into it. Regardless, this is a rather poor showing from DICE and EA with most Battlefield 2 players wondering if DICE and EA even bothered testing the 1.2

patch before releasing it. These various issues are now also delaying the release of the new Euro Forces booster pack.

Anyway, away from all the negatives for a few seconds, this booster pack promises to deliver an entire new army complete with multiple classes, three new maps, one of which features the Great Wall of China, four new vehicles [tank and chopper confirmed so far] and a handful of new weapons. It's something to look forward to under normal circumstances, but at the current rate these booster packs and patches tend to create more animosity than anything else. Here's hoping they get it right with v1.21 and then don't screw it up again with Euro Forces.

IMPORTANT UPDATE! EURO FORCE BOOSTER PACK FOR BF2

When the Euro Force booster pack is released worldwide, South African Battlefield 2 players will only be able to buy it from Digital Planet [www.digitalplanet.co.za]. Players will not be able to get the booster pack through the usual channels with a local credit card, although this is something EA South Africa is working on and might have fixed in time for the next booster pack. Regardless, you can think fondly of EA South Africa for responding so quickly to this issue and providing a way for local players to get the booster pack and more importantly, making it a little cheaper than doing a straight foreign exchange conversion.

AUTO ASSAULT – BETA

DEVELOPER: NetDevil
PUBLISHER: NCsoft
RELEASE: 14 April 2006
WEB: www.autoassault.com
SUPPLIER: Megarom [011] 239-2680

WHAT'S NOT TO LOVE about a post-apocalyptic wasteland akin to Mad Max, filled with jacked-up violent motor vehicles armed to the teeth with mini-gun turrets, rocket launchers and other Weapons of Mass Destruction?

Let's do a very quick synopsis of Auto Assault, the new Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, or more accurately, 'MMO-Car Pee Gee'.

Three races, each with their own stats and skills, four classes that affect how your weapons work, cars drive and how the world responds to you, a host of customisations for both your physical avatar and the colour-scheme of your car[s], and a post-apocalyptic world in need of mercenaries ready to go kill hordes of mutant creatures and bandits.

After securing our press Beta key, we anxiously fired up the client. Once the insane amount of updating [a side-effect of a press Beta key] finished, we punched the gas and promptly drove over the NPC that was supposed to teach us how to drive.

Auto Assault follows the traditional MMORPG formula – up to a point. The foundation concepts are intact: you gain experience by killing mutated wildlife, opponents and pretty much anything whose name is reported in red to signify enemy. You accept missions and quests, doling out free lead bullets and then returning to collect your well-deserved reward.

The first major deviation in Auto Assault from the MMORPG norm [aside from being uniquely vehicle-centric], comes from the nature of the game. In every MMORPG you get a quest at point A that requires you to go to point B, kill stuff/get stuff, then return to point A for your reward. Auto Assault, however, makes getting from point A to point B [and back again] fun.

The vehicle physics in Auto Assault are reminiscent of car-wrecking, people-killing game Carmageddon. Vehicles feel weighty but not overly constrained by the forces of gravity. On the whole, the vehicles handle well and are entertaining to drive around. This makes the trip from the aforementioned point A to B fun, augmented by the medals that get doled out whenever you do something spectacular, such as reaching new heights on a ramp or flipping your car over. Even killing hordes of wildlife in a short time span will net you awards.

In fact, we got so caught up in ramping, doing stunts and running over mutated deer that we completely forgot about the mission we were supposed to complete. Three hours later we drove into the area we were supposed to be, completed the objective [killed a few rebels] and then started the drive back to the NPC that handed out the quest.

Another two hours later we completed the four
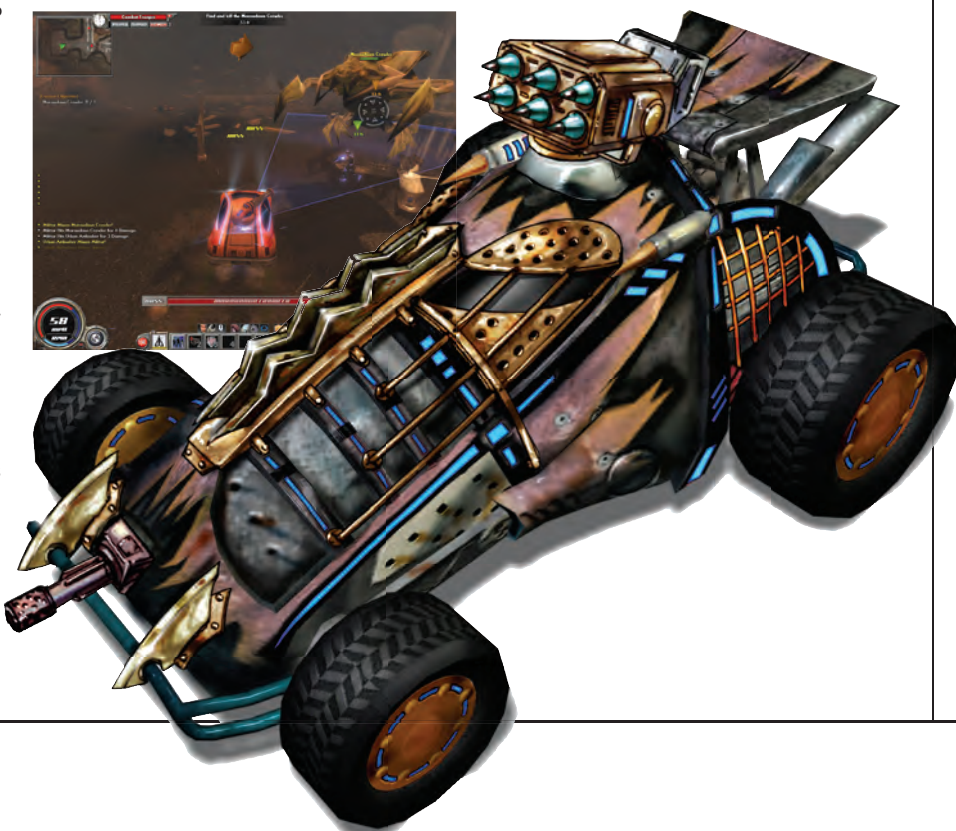
minute drive back to base.

The combat in Auto Assault is by no means lacking. Weapons have a natural 'arc' you can see. Anything in that arc will automatically be aimed at and fired upon when the player hits the trigger. This helps a lot, as you don't have to manually precision aim your weapons - it's more of a 'spray and play' mechanic. Each weapon has its own spread arc, and some even have a more circular arc [such as auto-aiming, top-mounted turrets].

The immediate control of driving around in your car combined with the quasi-auto-aiming weapons make for an enjoyable experience – far removed from the usual 'you-hit-then-I-hit' fare that you find in conventional MMORPGS.

In terms of teaming up with other players, Auto Assault has a simple 'looking for convoy' button that will hook you up with others thinking the same thing – perfect for either driving around in formation like ninnies [you know you want to] or teaming up to tackle the big boss characters or more difficult missions.

It is difficult to put a finger on exactly what it is that makes Auto Assault so appealing. The Beta, while no means indicative of the final product, does enough right and very little wrong to make Auto Assault worthy of attention. The theme of the game and the run-down, post-apocalyptic environments might not appeal to everyone, especially not those who like oversaturated or plastic-coated MMORPG graphics. But for those of us who like nothing more than a good hit-and-run, vehicular carnage and over-the-top weapons and stunts, Auto Assault might just bring to the table what we've been wanting.

By the time this goes to print, Auto Assault will have been released in Europe. **NAG**

STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING!
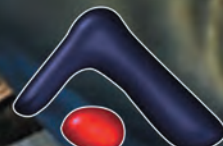
Check out the Readership Survey and subscription competition insert in this month's issue of NAG. Fill it in, send it back to us and you could win a basket of cool stuff from your friends at NAG!

EPILOGUE
WINDS OF PASSING

WHAT WAS ONCE MICHAEL talking about how the cover could have been this, or perhaps that, is now the **NAG Epilogue**. A tiny slice out of the NAG life, this section is where we'll be telling you, our readers, interesting little stories that happened around the NAG office [and beyond]!

Unbeknownst to NAG readers who don't frequent the NAG forums [www.nag.co.za], NAG recently invited a few loyal readers for lunch. We wanted some input, feedback and ideas about our magazine. 'Brazed', 'Dawinshome', 'Gen0cyde' and 'Spick' [their *nom de guerres* or nicks] came to the NAG office and indulged in some pizza, Fanta Orange [beers] and dialogue. Their input was invaluable and helped us shape a better, beefier magazine – one you hold in your hands as you read this. For their troubles they received a year's free subscription to NAG - a little token of our appreciation.

Aside from the fun meet, greet and eat, you have probably heard that Michael James is no longer the Editor of NAG. Oh, he's still around, sending e-mails to people, telling them to work harder. But for the most part, he's been quiet. Cuddled up to his press-copy of Tomb Raider: Legend, we can sometimes hear him crooning in the rafters.

James Francis is the new editor-in-charge-major-man-thingamajig,

and he seems to have taken to the role with gusto. He's out there right now as this is being written, delegating, managing and reminding people that he's Editor now. He's also ranting about mobile games, but nobody pays any attention.

Overall, the NAG office seems unchanged by this new radical change in management structure, which we guess proves the point that, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter who sits where. We still produce this gaming magazine, regardless.

The Editor is dead, long live the Editor. Clop!

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