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AUGUST 2006 VOLUME 9 ISSUE 5

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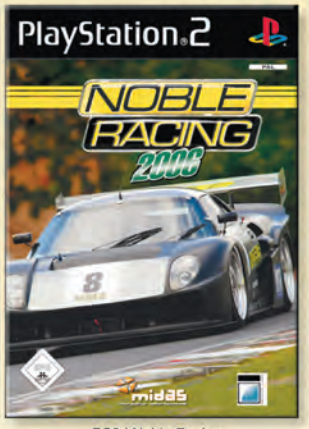

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CONTENTS

REGULARS

8 Ed's Note
10 Inbox
12 Bytes
20 Calendar
24 Opinion – Miktar's Meanderings
26 Opinion – Domain of The_Basilisk
28 Opinion – Dammit
30 Opinion – Kingpin
106 Multiplayer – News
108 Multiplayer – MMO
110 Multiplayer – Online
112 Game.Dev
118 Lifestyle – Movies
119 Lifestyle – Comics
120 Lifestyle – Raven's Loft
122 Game Over

FEATURES

32 Warhammer: Mark of Chaos
36 Brain Age
40 Ninja Loves Pirate
88 iMac vs. PC
114 Playing The Game

HARDWARE

86 Hardware Introduction
90 Intel Core 2 Duo X6800 Extreme Edition
92 AMD FX-62
95 Sparkle 7950GX2
96 iSound PSP Cinema
96 Sandisk Cruzer
97 Logitech G7 mouse
98 H@rdcor3 – Power Supplies

PREVIEWS

44 Previews Intro
46 TalkMan
48 Battlestations: Midway
50 Crusty Demons
52 B-Boy
54 Sid Meier's Railroads
56 Scarface
58 El Matador

REVIEWS

60 Reviews Intro
62 Prey [PC]
68 Hitman: Blood Money [PS2]
70 Tourist Trophy [PS2]
72 Spellforce [PC]
74 X-Men III: The Official Game [PS2]
76 Ape Escape 3 [PS2]
78 Championship Manager 2006 [PS2]
79 Worms PSP [PSP]
80 The Movies: Stunts & Effects [PC]
81 World Poker Tournament [PS2]
82 Daxter [PSP]
82 Juiced: Eliminator [PS2]
83 Paris Hilton's Diamond Quest [MOB]
83 The Fast & The Furious: Tokyo Drift [MOB]
83 My Dog [MOB]

ON THE DVD

ADD-ONS & MODIFICATIONS Half-Life 2 - Fakefactory's Cinematic Mod v2.32 Full
Half-Life 2 - Ravenholm- The Lost Chapter
Oblivion - PJ's Spell Compendium

DEMOS Darkstar One | Glory of the Roman Empire | Lands of Legends
Micro Machines V4 | Night Watch | Prey | Terrawars
X-Men: The Official Game | Zen of Sudoku

DRIVERS ATI Catalyst v6.6 [WinXP] | NVIDIA v91.31 [WinXP]

DEMOS Titan Quest Demos | Hitman Blood Money

EDITING TOOLS Battlefield 2 Editor v1.3

EXCLUSIVE VIDEOS Prey NAG Office Deathmatch | rAge 2006 TEASER 01

FREE GAMES Jet Jumper | Ninja Loves Pirate | Penumbra
King's Quest 2 Remake | King's Quest 3 Remake

GAME TRAILERS Alone in the Dark | Auto Assault HD (E3 2006) | Dark Messiah (E3 2006) | Dark Messiah Assassin | Dungeon Runners (E3 2006)
Glory of the Roman Empire | Half-Life 2 Episode 2 | Halo 3 - Behind The Scenes | Paraworld (E3_2006) | Spore (E3 2006). | Tabula Rasa (E3 2006) | Urban Chaos | Xenosaga Ep3

MOVIE TRAILERS Spider-Man 3 | Superman Returns | Transformers

UPDATES & PATCHES Battlefield 2 v1.3 FULL | Call of Duty 2 v1.3 |
Dawn of War v1.41 - v1.50

UTILITIES Browsers - Opera 9 | K-Lite Codec Pack v2.73 Full Beta 1
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ED'S NOTE

I think now is a good time to clarify my position regarding rAge, the yearly gaming expo that is just around the corner. As a NAG reader, you definitely know about it (unless you are new; welcome) and the close links it has with the magazine. That's because it is the creation of Michael James, long-time editor of NAG and head honcho at Tide Media. However, rAge isn't NAG's expo and NAG isn't rAge's magazine. The synergy between the two, though, allows them to cross-promote each other. It would be stupid not to do that.

Still, this means that as NAG's editor, and in my previous roles at the magazine, I've never been directly involved with rAge. I get free tickets and have options to do things if I want to, but most of the time I steer clear of it. That's because rAge is separate from NAG and there are more than enough NAG staffers involved. Therefore, when I write something positive about rAge, it's not marketing spin. But at the same time, I do get urged to give rAge a mention in this space. Luckily, being able to boast a modest amount of expos that I've visited, I think of rAge very positively anyway. Trust me when I say that in terms of an international event rAge is definitely a great show.

Granted, because of the size of the local market, it doesn't match in scale, but rAge means serious bang for your buck. The local gaming companies eagerly support it and do their best to get the latest code on the floor for gamers to play with. A lot of the code you get to play at rAge was also on display at E3 and other gaming conventions this year. There are definitely more games at overseas expos, but that's because of bigger markets. Every year, rAge has more games and hardware on display – imagine what it can be in a few years.

The idea is to show the country how big and interesting gaming actually is, and for this reason rAge is always working at the cutting edge of the local gaming industry (which in itself keeps pace with the European industry), so this year next-generation consoles are hopefully going to be a big part of the show. I can't confirm that, because I don't stay in the loop, but Michael has been walking around with a grin and responded with a "What do you think will be there?" when asked. Therefore, no one's talking, but you can see where this might be heading.

That's my rAge bit. Keep an eye on this magazine and www.rageexpo.co.za for all the little details, like pricing, the NAG LAN (tickets go on sale 1 August by the way), and who will be there.

On a closing note, *Prey* marks yet another SA exclusive review for NAG. This isn't much of a trumpet to blow, since this is the only speciality gaming magazine on the continent (that I know of), so we tend to be first in line for these things anyway (though don't think they simply fall on our laps). But it makes us feel warm and fuzzy. Now, did any of you actually think *Prey* would ever appear after 3D Realms shelved it?

James Francis [Editor]

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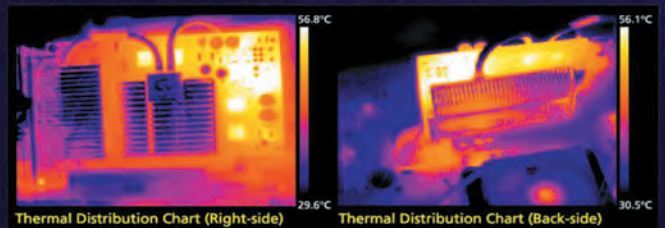

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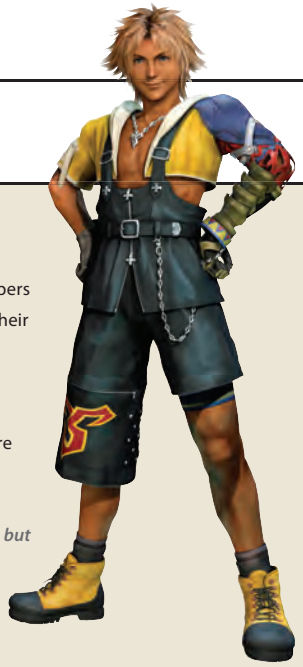
INBOX

LETTER OF THE MOMENT

FROM: Edward van Niekerk
SUBJECT: Games with feeling

How many games can you name that make you feel involved, connected or in some way emotionally affected? The *Final Fantasy* series has always had a powerful story with characters you really care about in the end. How can other game developers not realise that this is a good thing? How about creating a game where you want to finish it because you want to save the princess/sister/planet, and not because you want stronger weapons, or you're waiting for that bit you saw in the trailer? I've realised that this is what makes me think: "Whoa that was a great game." At some point, great graphics and gameplay won't be enough anymore, and people will want more out of their games. This is why multiplayer games are so immensely popular. It's the human element: the friction, the camaraderie and relationships that are created when people gather. It's the fact that you feel involved. *Shadow of the Colossus* made you feel small yet determined. *Metal Gear Solid 2* had characters you really liked. *God of War*, *Baldur's Gate* and others may not have been played, but you did because you wanted to finish it. You wanted to know what would happen. You liked the characters. I can't understand why people still develop bad games when there are excellent examples of what makes a good game. The developers and big companies need to get their heads out of the bank and start looking at creating high-quality games, because pretty soon the majority of gamers will want more than 'pretty with gimmicks'.



A good story is key to some titles, but is it such a key factor to make or break a game? Probably – as games have become more complex, so have the stories. Since most people never finish their games, it's fair to assume that the games: (a) are too difficult; (b) are bad; or (c) lack an interesting story. Some gamers will argue deeply about the virtues of a good game story, and as we get tired of simply shooting things, we want more reason for all the bloody insanity. But a great story can never patch a mediocre game, so foremost, a really good game has to play well and captivate you with its dynamic. The story is secondary. If you need the story as a reason to finish, the game has already failed.

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.

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TOPIC FOR NEXT MONTH:
Does swearing in games $%# you off?

FROM: Werner Brummer
SUBJECT: Episode 1 woes

I recently bought the *Half-Life 2: Episode 1* DVD for my PC and after spending about four hours on my 56K dialup connection, it still says that the game will be ready to play in about 64 hours! Is this a joke? I remember spending a lot of time updating the Steam platform back when I got the original *Half-Life 2*, but after a good night of downloading I was able to go. At this rate, it will take more than a weekend of solid downloading to get *Episode 1* going. At about R10 per hour, the updating process is going to cost me much more than the R180 I spent on the DVD. What is the DVD for if I have to download a whole bloody DVD's worth of data in any case? Did I choose the wrong option somewhere? Maybe the installer thinks that I prefer downloading all the files off the Internet instead of it just installing the game off the DVD. The biggest joke is on the back of the box where it says: "Half Life 2 not required: No other software needed to play." Yeah, right. No other software needed indeed.

Here's hoping it will be a while off before console games run into problems like this. I can see the day when I buy that great new PS3 game and it also requires a lengthy download before play can commence. Wake-up call to the powers that be: just because the Americans all have cheap broadband and can download huge chunks of data in no time at ridiculously cheap monthly subscriptions, doesn't mean all the consumers can. Or are we too small a market segment to be bothered with?

You answered it: South Africa is too small a game market for companies like Valve to care how their technology impacts us. Unfortunately the future is broadband. While we definitely share your pain, this type of thing is likely to become more common, not less. The bugs are being ironed out of these systems and Steam is already a lot better than the decrepit system that was launched with HL2. But unfortunately, 56K doesn't cut it anymore. Your download time was probably also reflective of how busy the Steam servers were (especially if you tried this just when the game was launched). Yes, it sucks that you paid for the DVD and still had to do downloads, but this is an increasing reality around games. The real problem? Telkom still charges an arm and a leg for bandwidth. If it charged less for its 'service', we wouldn't be having this conversation.

FROM: Alien4Life
SUBJECT: Game revivals

When I read about the topic for this month being about the revival of games, I started to remember the old games I used to play with my dad on our old 386. One game I really remember was *Mega Phoenix*: the game where you were a spaceship in a galaxy filled with robotic birds. My dad and I played it multiplayer and were always setting new high scores and having great fun.

I think that many old/classic games should be redone, but only if they are done properly and stick to the original formula - for example, *Leisure Suit Larry*. The game was a classic in the 90s; the puzzles were challenging and the humour brilliant. It was even great to know you had finished the game with Larry having a happy ending.

WHAT IS THE DVD FOR IF I HAVE TO DOWNLOAD A WHOLE BLOODY DVD'S WORTH OF DATA IN ANY CASE?

When I heard that *Leisure Suit Larry: Magma Cum Laude* was being developed, I couldn't wait. I bought a copy as soon as I could and was surprised with what I found. I thought the semi-cartoon graphics were great and the humour was still there, but what let me down was the gameplay. There were next to no puzzles and it was all mini-games that only required correct timing/pressing of buttons to be successful. I know that games with a *Broken Sword/Monkey Island* formula aren't popular today, but playing mini-games takes the magic of the original games away!

Then there are games that stick to the original formula and only improve upon it, for example the *Elder Scrolls* and *GTA* series and even the *Monkey Island* series, which I feel has only grown from strength to strength by keeping the wonderful humour and still having challenging puzzles.

THERE ARE TWO GAMES THAT I WOULD LOVE TO SEE A RIVAL OF: LEGEND OF KYRANDIA AND THE POLICE QUEST SERIES

There are two games that I would love to see a rival of: *Legend of Kyrandia* and the *Police Quest* series. I still love solving crimes, writing tickets and arresting drunk drivers with Detective Sonny Bonds.

Ah, so many fine games that you mentioned! But seriously, yes there are great classics out

there that could use a fresh breath of air. Kyrandia is at the top of our list too, but since Westwood technically doesn't exist anymore, the series might be dead for good. Maybe EA is considering a revival. As for Police Quest, those morphed into the SWAT games (the PQ series became progressively more forensic towards the later chapters).

FROM: Geoffrey Webb
SUBJECT: Game Revivals

Game revivals... It all depends on the game that you want to bring back. Just look at *Pong* - the amount of mindless hours of fun I had playing that back in the day, and now with Rockstar releasing *Table Tennis*. Personally, I think that it is a great idea to revive old games, but it also means lots of work. Let's face it: no old Nintendo games from the early 90s had a storyline. But like you said this month, "Some games work perfectly with no plot whatsoever." Games like *Contra*, *Space Invaders* and *Formula 1* are seriously fun old games, but I enjoy a game with a plot - it just brings more enjoyment when one plays it. Although back in the day, *Pong* was fun because we didn't know any better. No game today, without some form of vague story is going to sell very well, but by giving the games a story we already lose some of their original qualities. It's actually a double-edged sword: in order to bring them back, we have to change their foundations, and not only in graphics and style. In order to make them a hit once again, the feel of the game as a whole will have to be changed and will therefore be unlike the original. That is our first problem, the game just won't be the same in the impression that it leaves with us.

But look around us at our modern FPS, RPG, Space sim and Racing titles. They all stem from the smash-hit titles of the early 90s. *Mario* could be classified as the first RPG title, and *Space Invaders* could have inspired someone to code *Star Wars: BattleFront 2*. *Contra* becomes the inspiration for *Call of Duty 2*. The list is endless.

The fact is that game revival is happening all the time, because it happens with practically every new release nowadays. Every title today came from somewhere, save the truly originals like *Age of Empires* and *Diablo*. So the question is not if game revival is a good or bad idea, but how many games today owe their existence to our old classics.

Many, many games do. It could be argued that all of them do, though one should be hesitant. Really classic games do not define the origins of some genres such as rhythm games. But dig deep enough, and you'll find a game that came before. The thing is that we shouldn't consider game revivals as inherently trying to remake an oldie point-by-point, adding flash and dash to get the new kids to play it. That defeats the purpose and you are right: adding elements such as story to games that didn't have it will ruin the experience the game intended to bring. That said, quite a lot of games from the eighties had good storylines. Each game is a prelude to something newer. It is true that most of today's games use ideas from previous titles. But there is an old saying that there are only nine stories to tell. Pretty Woman was a retelling of My Fair Lady. So the concepts are being reused, refined and redefined. But that doesn't mean we should yearn for a new Ice Climber game with 2.5D graphics backed by today's GPUs.

FROM: Kevin Leong
SUBJECT: Cheap gaming cases? Over Thermaltake's dead chassis

Everything about a gamer's equipment has to be up-to-date and in style. From his processor to graphics card, and now even the case that holds all these parts. I'd recently decided to upgrade my 'no features', beige AOpen case to a more stylish and practical gaming case. Having seen the Thermaltake ads boasting their snazzy gaming cases, in your magazine no less, I immediately took it upon myself to improve my box of shame. After doing some online shopping on SA Websites, the cheapest I could find the Thermaltake Tsunami Dream and Thermaltake Shark for were R1,350 and R1,600 respectively. I almost had a stroke! It's not like having an expensive gaming case will improve your gaming experience in any way. It will most likely improve your low-self esteem, but that's about all. I admit that some gamers buy expensive cases because they have better cooling and noise reduction features, but the majority of gamers buy cases purely for aesthetic reasons.

I understand that top-of-the-range gaming cases are made from aluminium and are all imported from overseas, but that doesn't justify their insanely high prices! A quick search of American Websites showed that the Tsunami Dream could be purchased for as low as $110 and the Shark for $155. Now I'm not an expert on gaming cases, but those are huge differences in prices. To add insult to the SA consumer, both these cases are more than two years old. There is just no way that Thermaltake can justify charging a mark-up of almost 100% for simply shipping its products here. Even reviewers in the US complain that paying over $100 for a case is unreasonable. We are paying more than double that amount! Unfortunately, the same is true for Antec and many other case manufacturers. There are other manufacturers that charge more reasonable prices such as Gigabyte, Chenbro and Coolermaster. But if you aren't a fan of these manufactures, your wallet will most likely lose a lot of weight. I think paying more than R800 for a chassis is just plain ridiculous. My ideal case would be a stylish black or silver one without all the flashing lights and colours, but alas, I'll have to stick to my trusty AOpen case. But at least I can take consolation in the fact that I don't have to feel like a loser every time someone asks me why I spent over R1,000 for a computer case.

IT'S NOT LIKE HAVING AN EXPENSIVE GAMING CASE WILL IMPROVE YOUR GAMING EXPERIENCE IN ANY WAY. IT WILL MOST LIKELY IMPROVE YOUR LOW-SELF ESTEEM, BUT THAT'S ABOUT ALL

It's a sad reality that hardware in South Africa is much, much more expensive than in most other markets. This can be because of shipping and taxes or a myriad of other reasons, but you're right: it hardly explains why we are paying double the amount, and sometimes triple for expensive items. Forget cases. Have you compared what some graphics cards retail for locally and internationally? The problem, though, is that people are still voting with their wallets and few companies seem to be interested in growing the market by introducing better pricing. Surely, a grand less for a new graphics card means quite a few people can afford it. High hardware prices are one of the main reasons stifling gaming's growth in South Africa, though it used to be a lot worse.

FROM: Raif
SUBJECT: Online gaming How-to

I've been an avid reader of NAG for the past year and a half and have never missed a magazine. I have grown attached to this godsend necessity and was wondering if it is possible for you at NAG to give some advice on how to begin with online gaming. I read about ADSL, but how do I connect to the Internet? What price range must I look at? Which providers are better, and that sort of thing? I love games. I even think I'm good at a few, but I never have the opportunity to play against others.

Good idea – we'll bribe one of our writers to put something together. **NAG**

BYTES

CONTENTS

WHAT'S MAKING NEWS
IN THE WORLD OF GAMES

WOW REALM TRANSFER LIVE

WOW players can now transfer their characters from one realm to another, if they pay Blizzard an additional $25. [14]

IS ROCKSTAR IN TROUBLE?

The house of GTA has stock problems, legal problems and employees leaving it. Is this the beginning of the end? [15]

WCG/RAGE GAMES LIST

What will you be playing competitively at rAge later this year? Arena 77 announces your options. [16]

THE 360 UNCLOAKED

There are a few things you didn't know about the Xbox and its successor the 360. [17]

NVIDIA READIES FOR G80 LAUNCH

NVIDIA has produced the first G80 chip and seems set to launch its new graphics card family later this year. [18]

SEAGATE GOES NANO

Hard drive manufacturer Seagate has filed a patent that aims to increase storage capacity on drives by up to ten times. [19]

AMD AM3 DETAILS SURFACE

AMD reveals that AM3 chips will work on AM2 sockets. But if you want real performance, you'll need the board too. [20]

CALENDAR

What's happening and what you'll be able to buy in August. [22]

The DS Lite is available locally for all your touching pleasure

NINTENDO SA LAUNCHES DS LITE

WITH A RECOMMENDED RETAIL price of R1,500, Nintendo South Africa has officially launched the Nintendo DS Lite.

The Nintendo DS Lite is a slimmer, more lightweight redesign of the earlier Nintendo DS model, aesthetically sleek to appeal to a wide commercial audience. The Nintendo DS Lite is 42% smaller in volume and 21% lighter than the original. The layout of the buttons has been adjusted slightly, as well as placement of the stylus. The screens now also have four levels of backlighting, making the Lite even more efficient on battery life. The DS Lite comes in glazed white or glazed black, with more colours planned. The DS Lite is still 100% compatible with all DS and GBA games. Nothing was changed to make it incompatible with the previous Nintendo DS model in any way – including wireless multiplayer.

New titles available for the Nintendo DS and Lite include *New Super Mario Bros*, *Metroid Prime: Hunters*, *Tetris*, *Princess Peach*, *Phoenix Wright*, *Resident Evil* and *Cars* – all of which can be purchased from the official Website, along with the Nintendo DS Lite.

For more information, or to order online, visit www.nintendo.co.za or e-mail Christo Carstens (ccarstens@nintendo.co.za).

SNIPPETS

YOUR ESSENTIAL INFO, NOW IN BITE-SIZED PORTIONS!

Fans of the classic Nintendo game **Excitebike** can relive the nostalgia with a fan-made Flash version of the bike race/stunt title at www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/318328.

Taito is working on a sequel to the interesting PSP game **Exit**. According to Famitsu, *Kangaeru Exit* (Thinking Exit) will boast new features and obstacles as Mr. Exit tries to rescue more trapped people in the 110 stages.

The DS version of Web browser **Opera** has become available in Japan during July. It is retailing for ¥3,800.

Fans of Eternal Darkness will be glad to hear that Silicon Knights' Denis Dyack wants to make more games based on the GameCube title's universe. Right now, though, the company is busy developing Too Human for the 360.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT REALM TRANSFER

UNTIL NOW, TRANSFERRING CHARACTERS from one *World of Warcraft* 'Realm' to the next was impossible. Recently, however, Blizzard implemented Realm Transfer, at a questionable price of $25.

You cannot transfer your character from a PvE server to a PvP server, naturally, and you cannot transfer a character you have already transferred in the last 60 days.

The five US servers currently supporting character-transfer are Altar of Storms, Argent Dawn, Demon Soul, Illidan and Warsong. Others will follow soon. European players can expect the service in the next few months.

Limits to Realm Transfer include the fact that a character must be at least level 10, and you can only take 300 gold with for levels 10 to 30, 1,000 gold for levels 31–50, and 5,000 gold for 51 and up. You also cannot have two characters of opposing factions within the same Realm. Speculation runs rife that perhaps Blizzard may even introduce a fee for a 'Premium Account' that will let players jump to the front of the long Realm queues, though this is unfounded and unconfirmed.

GENRE PLEASURE

THE ESCAPIST (WWW.ESCAPISTMAGAZINE.COM) PUTS forth the idea that as long as you understand genre, games lose many of their barbed edges, which society seems intent on being overly focused on.

Writer John Schnaars explains in detail:

"Genre, as a tool for cinematic analysis, didn't really come into its own until the 1960s. Drawing on their literary predecessors, critics during this period were able to develop and deploy the key tenets of genre theory in their efforts to analyse the Studio Era films of the '30s and '40s. These tools continue to shape our own filmic interactions today, and while few have turned their critical eye toward questions of genre and gaming, there is no better place to start than the survival/horror genre. Genre is a tool that both informs and drives our understanding of a text. In film, this practice has been commonplace since the 1960s, but as *Resident Evil 4* demonstrates, genre has its part to play in videogames as well. By utilising the economy of shared genre conventions, Capcom was able to create the highest achievement in survival/horror."

More importantly, he details the fallacies surrounding the *Grand Theft Auto* series of games, which have dealt with their fair share of criticism.

"Genre pleasure, that warm feeling you get when you see a dead hooker on the ground, is our reward for breaking free of our social constraints in an exercise in fantasy."

IS ROCKSTAR IN TROUBLE?

ROCKSTAR, FAMED FOR THE *Grand Theft Auto* series as well as cult classics such as *The Warriors* and the recently released *Table Tennis*, seems to be losing employees as it navigates through one of the developer's toughest years yet. The company recently had to pay a fine for the Hot Coffee content left inside *GTA: San Andreas*, after being hauled in front of a Federal Trade Commission investigation. It also had to close two of its studios, Indie Built and Rockstar Vienna, and has seen its stock price literally plummet from $30 a share to almost $10. While Rockstar and its publisher Take 2 are enjoying good revenue successes from *Table Tennis* and the recent PS2 port of *GTA: Liberty City Stories*, the overall picture still looks bleak.

According to industry news site GamesIndustry.biz, Rockstar has lost at least ten employees in the past year. Some of these were tied to apparent low scores that *Table Tennis* received, even though the game garnered an average score of 83% on Gamerankings. One key figure that has left is co-founder Jamie King, who used to be VP of development. Does this spell doom and gloom for the company? Not necessarily.

"Part of this is actually good, because it shows you that they're getting more financial discipline by eliminating redundant positions... To me marketing should be more central and not pushed out to the individual studios. You want an overall marketing strategy to brand all Rockstar products... so maybe this is just better discipline," said Michael Pachter, an analyst at Wedbush Morgan Securities who follows Take 2 stock closely. "None of this sounds really bad, but if they're losing key developers then that matters," he continued. "My guess is this is cost cutting. I don't think these people left because they're unhappy."

Companies such as Blizzard have also seen high-profile exoduses in their past, such as the teams behind *Diablo 2* and *Starcraft*, some of whom now reside at Arena.net (*Guild Wars*) and Flagship Studios (*Hellgate: London*), but these haven't stopped the developers. Nevertheless, some have criticised companies such as Blizzard for losing their creative edge – something fans fear might happen to Rockstar, one of the more edgy development companies.

JOHN ROMERO'S NEW STUDIO NAMED

FORMER ID SOFTWARE MEMBER John Romero recently stated in several interviews that he was working on a new MMO for an unnamed San Francisco company. That company has been revealed as Slipgate Ironworks (www.slipg8.com), founded and funded by John Romero.

Alfonso John Romero (born 1967) is a well-known game designer, programmer and developer, best known as co-founder of id Software and lead designer of games such as *Wolfenstein 3D, Doom* and *Quake*. He is also credited with coining the term 'deathmatch' and has served as Chairman of the Cyberathlete Professional League Advisory Board since 1998. Romero's first industry job was at Origin Systems in 1987 after programming games for eight years. He later joined forces with John Carmack and formed Apogee, which would later spiritually become id Software. Since leaving id after *Quake*, Romero has created the infamous *Daikatana* and headed the now-defunct Ion Storm studios. He also dabbled in developing games for mobile platforms.

CASUAL HARDCORE

EXPOSITIONAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL GAMING Website Gamasutra (www.gamasutra.com) notes that according to a recent study, the idea of the 'Casual Gamer' is perhaps more complex than initially thought, and not as transient.

"A new report released by Macrovision Corporation, which operates the Trymedia Network for the digital distribution of PC games, reveals that, according to a recent worldwide survey, 37 percent of those who use casual gamers play nine or more two-hour 'sessions' each week."

This directly contrasts with the assumption that casual gamers are mostly female or older gamers who are indulging in the odd game of *Solitaire*.

"Our survey has determined that mainstream audiences dedicate a substantial amount of time to gameplay - not just in 15-minute increments as previously thought," said Loren Hillberg, executive vice president and general manager of Commerce at Macrovision.

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BYTES

The appearance of the **Apple** logo on the **PlayStation 3** site has spurned speculation that Sony and Apple might be planning something between the PS3 and iPod, though neither side has commented on this, nor is it likely as Sony has its own mobile digital players.

Some analysts have yet again expressed their doubts that **Sony** will be able to meet the PS3's shipping numbers. The console has over 1,700 parts – the most complex yet in the industry – and this could cause problems with manufacturing. Sony recently denied rumours that it will only initially ship 150,000 PS3s to the US.

Pandemic mentioned to game site **IGN** that it is considering a 360 version of *Mercenaries 2*, but at the moment the game is still only in development for the PS3.

FINAL GAMES LIST FOR RAGE AND WCG

ARENA 77, THE ORGANISATION responsible for e-sports at rAge, has released the final list of games to be supported in this year's tournaments. After a Website poll, much debate, and a savage war of words between the *Counter-Strike 1.6* and *Source* communities, a decision was finally made, which will hopefully appease both sides. With the South African World Cyber Games qualifier also being held at rAge this year, Arena 77 has decided to run both a *Counter-Strike 1.6* and a *Source* tournament. The WCG qualifier will feature *CS 1.6*, while there will be a separate rAge tournament for *CS: Source*.

Several other popular games, for both PC and console, will also be on the combined rAge/WCG bill, including the old favourite *Quake 4*, and the new, immensely popular *Defence of the Ancients (DotA)*. The full game lists for both events follow below. Look out for a full preview of this year's rAge event in the next issue of NAG.

SUPPORTED COMPETITIVE GAMES AT RAGE

- Counter-Strike: Source – PC (Five-man team)
- Quake 4 – PC (Individual)
- WarCraft III: Defence of the Ancients – PC (Five-man team)

SUPPORTED COMPETITIVE GAMES AT WCG

- Counter-Strike 1.6 – PC (Five-man team)
- WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne – PC (Individual)
- Need for Speed: Most Wanted – PC (Individual)
- Dead or Alive 4 – Xbox (Individual)

FREE GAME OF THE MONTH

PENUMBRA

URL: frictionalgames.com/?q=penumbra
GENRE: Survival Horror
SIZE: Game: 195.8MB, Patch: 13.1MB (on the cover DVD)

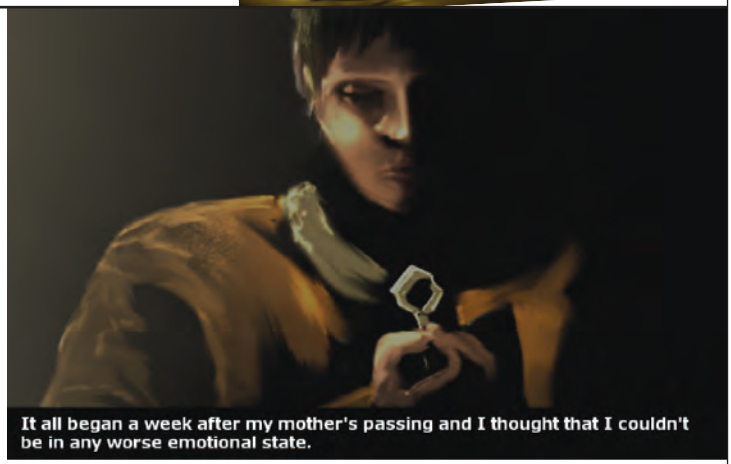
"The penumbra is that part of the shadow where the light source is only partially blocked. Part of the light passes through the edges of the object causing a partial shadow. The penumbra (Latin for almost-shadow) is the portion of a shadow that results from the source of illumination being only partially blocked." – Wikipedia.org

MORE ACCURATELY, PENUMBRA IS also a creepy, free survival-horror game, presented in first-person with a liberal dose of physics and creativity. *Penumbra* was developed by Frictional Games as a technology demonstration for its 3D engine and physics system, as well as being a showcase for using physics in gameplay (not just for the effect, but as a functional part).

As a result, *Penumbra* is a short but hyper-scary survival-horror (remember, flight before fight) where you must physically interact with the world. This means, doors are 'swung' open by holding down the right mouse button and moving the mouse forward (or backwards, depending on the door). The dark, dynamic visual environment, combined with motion blur, noise filters, bloom and unique sounds from object collisions, all add up to a fresh experience in survival-horror – one you don't even have to pay for.

Searching for your lost father, the game sets the player on a mission to solve puzzles, explore and survive, without weapons, and with very limited light. The physical interaction means drawers must be pulled open, crates moved manually and objects will have to be physically manipulated in general.

Be sure to play in a well-lit room, or depending on how you like your survival-horror, in a pitch-black room with cats.



It's free, it's creepy and it's on this month's cover DVD. What more could you ask for?

THE 360 UNCLOAKED

DID YOU KNOW?

- The Xbox and 360 use green lights, because blue light-emitting diodes cost 25 cents - more than 12 times as much.
- Microsoft's next-generation project would have been called Trinity, after the character in *The Matrix*, but this was already taken and Xenon became the official project name.
- Microsoft lost $168 for every original Xbox it sold.
- Huge cardboard cutouts of $10 million bills were used by Microsoft executives when deciding on where to spend their discretionary money.
- The 360 might never have been if it wasn't for Live. The Xbox cost Microsoft billions of dollars at the end of the day and several executives wanted to end the programme. However, Microsoft's CEO insisted that the project go ahead, pointing to the immense popularity of the Xbox's online service.
- While expressing enthusiasm for Live, Ballmer accidentally broke a conference phone when he pounded the desk during a Live meeting.

SOURCE: *The 360 Uncloaked* by Dean Takahashi (www.spiderworks.com/xbox360)

INTEL ELIMINATES IDE, BUT RUNS INTO TROUBLE

THE NEW INTEL 965 motherboards seem to be a bit late to market. After a bit of digging around it has become known that the new ICH8 Southbridge has done away with traditional parallel IDE channels. While this may seem like a good move, there's a distinct shortage of SATA-based optical drives.

In fact, only Plextor manufactures a SATA optical drive, and it's very expensive compared to the generic IDE models floating around these days. This could be a serious problem for buyers of the new boards, as Windows XP still isn't as friendly as it could be towards many SATA controllers. Thus, there may be issues booting from OS installation CDs in the drives.

Some motherboard manufacturers are just adding third-party controller chips that they then use to provide an IDE port and additional SATA channels. However, this doesn't completely eliminate the Windows XP problem. Some of these chips will need drivers to work, which is hard to do before the install CD even boots. For now, it seems like the best solution may be to grab a cheap PCI IDE controller and use it for the initial installation.

SONY ACCUSES MICROSOFT OF STEALING

THE CORPORATE SNIPING CONTINUES this month, with Sony on the offensive this time. SCEA President Kaz Hirai mentioned in an interview with *PlayStation Magazine* that Sony felt Microsoft was the actual copycat. Sony has received numerous criticisms about its 'apparent' copying of Microsoft and Nintendo concerning the Wii's gyro-sensing controller and Microsoft's Xbox Live. When PSM noted that it looked like Microsoft and Sony are taking the same path, Hirai frowned upon Microsoft's decisions.

"We seem to. Every time we go down a path, we look behind and they're right there - we just can't shake these guys. I wish that they would come up with some strategies of their own, but they seem to be going down the path of everything we do. If you look at their strategy in other business areas as well, they tend to do that."

Hirai seemed adamant to point out that every good idea Microsoft has had of late, was copied from Sony. Hirai also alluded to Microsoft being poor planners with a quick jab: "And the other thing is you take a look at, for example, the fact that we incorporate the Blu-ray drive from day one. You're not going to be asking me, 'So, talk to me about this Blu-ray add-on that you have. Does it work for games? Is it just for movies?' That's exactly the kind of pitfall you fall into if you launch something that's too early, too premature..."

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LOST & FOUND

Every month in honour of our favourite TV show, *Lost*, we'll hide the Dharma Initiative logo somewhere in the magazine. It could be in a screenshot, on a piece of hardware or anywhere, really. Find it and send an e-mail to ed@nag.co.za with the subject line [Dharma]. We'll announce a random winner next month and that person will win a prize from our friends at HomeTheatrePC.co.za.

LAST MONTH'S WINNER

Aart Verrips, p95

Throwback Entertainment has picked up several Acclaim licenses and is eyeing to release sequels to some of them on next-generation platforms. Licenses secured from the now-defunct publisher include *Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance*, *Vexx* and *Revolt*.

EA has terminated over 180 user accounts in ***Ultima Online*** for participating in system exploits using the game's cheque system. Around 15 trillion pieces of gold were also removed from the MMORPG's server.

LOGITECH ANNOUNCES STEERING WHEEL FOR 360

GOOD NEWS FOR LOCAL fans of the Xbox 360, which should be launching locally within the next few months. Logitech, one of the leading manufacturers of console peripherals, will bring a new breed of steering control technology to local shores in the guise of the DriveFX Wheel. The new peripheral is aimed at the racing market and should be a great accessory if you enjoy tearing around the track in *Project Gotham 3*, though the DriveFX doesn't as yet, endorse any specific title (unlike the *Gran Turismo* branded Logitech wheels). Its main appeal is what the company refers to axial feedback technology. Unlike other steering wheel peripherals, the DriveFX won't create shudders and vibrations in the wheel to make a player feel that they are driving over gravel or clipping a curb. Instead, the axle itself will react to the type of car, impacts, steering at high speeds and other physical reflex indicators. For instance, going around a tight corner at high speed will make the wheel heavier, while driving into barriers or other drivers will make it jerk to a side.

The DriveFX also ups the quality of peripherals, and Logitech has managed to create the steering wheel in a single mould, making it much sturdier with no seams or parts that can come loose. The unit is completed by a set of gas and brake pedals. The DriveFX will retail for R999.99. [www.logitech.com]

NVIDIA READIES FOR G80 LAUNCH

FANS AND HARDWARE AFICIONADOS waiting for NVIDIA's next graphics card series, which will be based on its upcoming G80 chip, will be glad to hear that the company has produced its first G80 chip. This puts it on schedule to meet its launch date later this year. The graphics chip manufacturer aims to release its new breed of graphics cards six weeks before ATI can release its new chip, the R600, which is reported to be due in November. Both are said to be powerhouse chips and NVIDIA hopes that the G80 will help cement the current performance lead it has established with the GeForce 7950 GTX. The R600 will no doubt be more powerful than this top-end card and the G80 might ensure NVIDIA a performance foothold over ATI. However, it is still too early to speculate who might be the winner, as clock speeds haven't been revealed yet. NVIDIA has released some information on the G80, though. It will sport 32 pixel shaders and 16 vertex and geometry shaders. The R600, in contrast, doesn't separate shader pipes, allowing developers to assign what they want where. Nevertheless, at the least gamers can look forward to current card prices dropping as the new chips vie for market control.

MRAM ENTERS PRODUCTION

FREESCALE SEMICONDUCTOR INC HAS announced that it is beginning volume production of magneto-resistive memory, or MRAM. This was somewhat unexpected in the tech industry, as it was believed MRAM was still several years away from any sort of volume production.

MRAM has been considered the 'holy grail' of memory technology. Modern DRAM used in computers is very fast, but loses data once power is cut. Flash memory can retain data without power, but is significantly slower and has a limited number of write cycles before it wears out. MRAM combines both advantages with neither deficiency, providing fast storage that can hold data without power and can be reused indefinitely.

The main barrier is cost: 1GB of memory in an average PC would require 2,048 of the chips and cost $51,200. However, Freescale is confident that volume production will spur development of improved technology to increase capacity and reduce cost. It is considered possible that MRAM could become cheap enough to replace hard drives as well as DRAM and flash memory.

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 [August Caption].

JULY CONTEST

NAG'S LAME ATTEMPT:

"The answer to the age-old debate: Boxers vs. Briefs ... Boxers. Definitely boxers.

JUNE WINNER

My brother, Agent 47, will hear about this!

– Jean Mynhardt

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. (6) Don't tell me what I can't do!

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SEAGATE WRITES VERY, VERY SMALL

STORAGE DEVICE MANUFACTURER SEAGATE has filed a patent for a technology aptly called Nanotube Lubricated Harddrives. The new system will allow data bits to be written even more closely together on a hard drive's platter. Because of a hard drive's design, the closer the read and write head is to the platter, the more data it can store. Seagate's new patent takes this to the extreme by letting the read/write head actually touch the platter. This is achieved by covering the platter with a highly durable lubricant, getting rid of friction on the platter and thus avoiding any damage. The design also includes a laser that can heat up parts of the platter to make molecule arrangement more precise. However, the heat of the laser will cause the lubricant to evaporate on these spots, thus the design also includes a reservoir system to re-apply lubricant vapour to the platter. According to the patent, the lubricant will be applied within one turn of the platter.

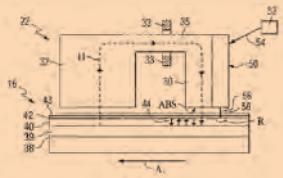

FIG. 2

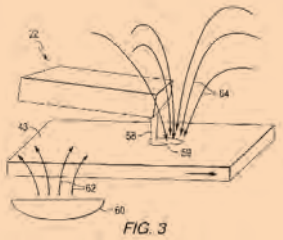

FIG. 3

With this technology, Seagate claims it can get up to ten times the current storage capacity on a drive. It indicates another step by storage manufacturers to meet the ever-growing demands from users for more space to store their data. Earlier this year, the hard drive market started seeing drives using perpendicular technology, which briefly involves stacking data bits in vertical positions and thus open more space on a platter. Seagate has not given any indication when the new technology would be seen in its drives.

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- Its small size marking it easy to carry and store
- Built-in USB Notebook Professional software

The latest PQI portable storage device is available with a whopping 8GB capacity and measures only 3mm thin. Image a credit card size device that requires no external power to function and stores any type of data you put to it. Sporting all the functions of a USB (2.0/1.1) compatible device, functional on Windows or Mac OS, it definitely packs more value into your wallet.

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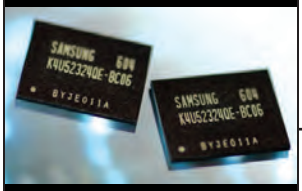
Asus and **NVIDIA** joined up to host the first ever notebook gaming tournament at the Electronic Sports World Cup Grand Final, held in Paris last month. The Asus A6Jm Series is a 15.4-inch Intel Centrino Duo with an NVIDIA GeForce Go7600 (512MB) graphics card and built-in high-resolution Webcam. (www.asus.com)

AMD has released a software tool for dual-core owners that improves game performance in Windows. The utility can be downloaded at www.amd.com/us-en/assets/content_type/utilities/TscSync.zip.

Samsung has started shipping volume quantities of GDDR4 memory. The new chips can process images 33% faster and boast 9.6GB/s of bandwidth per chip, much faster than GDDR3's 7GB/s.



Matsushita/Panasonic has unleashed its massive 103-inch plasma screen on the market. It boasts a 1,080p resolution and a 3,000:1 contrast ratio, but it will be pricey, plus only 5,000 will be manufactured per year.

EUROPEAN BLU-RAY LAUNCH DELAYED

PIONEER, ONE OF THE major players in the Blu-ray camp, has said that it had no 'concrete' plans for a European launch this year. Originally, it was thought that the new players would appear at the IFA trade show in Berlin in the first week of September. IFA is Europe's largest consumer electronics show. Instead, Pioneer has said a launch of its hardware was more likely sometime after the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, scheduled for January. It is likely that other manufacturers of Blu-ray drives will be similarly delayed.

Even though both Blu-ray and HD-DVD next-generation disc formats have been launched in the US and Japan, players have been extremely hard to obtain. It is being speculated that the current hardware may be sold at a loss to try and drive early adoption in the market. Others in the industry cite the increased complexity of newer Digital Rights Management (DRM) software designed to prevent copying of discs as causing problems and delays. German magazine *c't* recently performed an experiment that showed both formats were still unable to prevent copying of films by users. Both Blu-ray and HD-DVD groups claim software updates will prevent this in the future.

15-INCH LCDS BEING PHASED OUT

THE DAYS OF THE 15-inch LCD monitor might already be numbered as 17-inch displays gain ground in popularity. However, the most telling fact that this is happening is that a 17-inch display now costs slightly more than a 15-inch model (in Euros), and it doesn't equate into value for money to buy the smaller model. Likewise, while a 15-inch LCD retails for around €150, a 19-inch LCD only costs a bit more as well at around €200 to €300 for a top-end model.

BenQ, a leading manufacturer of LCDs and the first to debut a 4-millisecond refresh rate on its screens, is apparently already phasing out 15-inch screens in favour of larger displays. An insider at the company told tech site The Enquirer that BenQ "… doesn't want them anymore."

LCD prices have been dropping steadily, now even rivalling products from the shrinking CRT (tube) market. Last year, both types of displays shipped equal amounts of units worldwide, and higher refresh rates and image quality on LCDs have made them a popular choice amongst designers and other professionals. Nevertheless, CRT isn't quite dead either: engineers at firms like Philips are working hard at reducing the size of current tube-based displays.

AMD AM3 DETAILS SURFACE

CHIP MANUFACTURER AMD HAS sent details of its next-generation desktop CPU interface, Socket AM3, to OEM partners. This has revealed several new features for the chip, most notable being that AM3 chips will fit into older AM2 sockets. This means that current owners of AMD motherboards should be able to buy and install the newer CPUs when they are released, provided they have an AM2 socket for the chip. However, AM3 boards will not be backwards compatible with AM2 chips. This falls in line with the normal upgrade pattern, which would be the CPU first, then the motherboard and finally the memory. In this regard, AMD unveiled that the AM3 boards will be compatible with DDR2 SDRAM and DDR3 SDRAM, though not combined with each other.

The new specification also introduces HyperTransport 3.0, AMD's implementation to connect to the front side bus, and the company standard boasts transfer speeds of 5.2 giga-transfers a second. HT-3 will also be compatible with AM2 boards, though these boards only reach 2.0 giga-transfers per second. In other words, to get the best performance out of an AM3 chip, one would obviously need to buy one of the latest motherboards that support it.

No release date has been announced yet, but analysts expect both AM3 and AMD's K8L architecture to launch at the same time, possibly later this year. The AM3 processors will be the first designated as 'HT-3 ready'.

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CHARTS

PC GAMES

#	Title
1	The Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff
2	The Sims 2: Open For Business
3	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter
4	The Sims 2
5	Half-Life 2: Episode 1
6	Hitman: Blood Money
7	Heroes Of Might & Magic V
8	Hitman 2: Silent Assassin
9	Lord Of The Rings: Battle For Middle Earth Classics
10	CSI 3: Dimensions Of Murder
11	Need For Speed: Underground 2 Classics
12	The Sims 1 Deluxe Edition Classics
13	FIFA World Cup 2006 Germany
14	Tomb Raider: Legend
15	Rise Of Nations: Rise Of Legends

PLAYSTATION 2

#	Title
1	FIFA World Cup 2006 Germany
2	Tourist Trophy
3	Burnout 3: Takedown Platinum
4	Rugby 2006
5	Need For Speed: Most Wanted Black Edition
6	Need For Speed: Underground Platinum
7	Buzz: The Big Quizz
8	Singstar Rocks
9	Hitman: Blood Money
10	Tekken 5 Platinum
11	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
12	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas Platinum
13	Burnout Revenge
14	Tomb Raider: Legend
15	The Da Vinci Code

PSP

#	Title
1	FIFA World Cup 2006 Germany
2	Tomb Raider: Legend
3	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories
4	Dragonball Z Shin Budokai
5	Socom Fireteam Bravo
6	Need For Speed: Most Wanted
7	Need For Speed: Underground Rivals
8	ATV Offroad Fury
9	Daxter
10	Pink Paradise: Table Dance & Striptease
11	Harry Potter & Goblet Of Fire
12	FIFA 2006
13	FIFA Street 2
14	Lemmings
15	Splinter Cell Essentials

Apple has filed a patent for technology that will allow your iPod to talk to you. The patent explains that this is done by converting song and artist names into sound files, which are copied to the iPod along with the song. But the company has not yet officially announced this addition.

Ricoh has announced that it developed an optical device capable of reading both Blu-Ray and HD-DVD devices. The technology, which will be offered to other companies later this year, can read the new formats as well as DVD and CD without changing lenses or pickups.

If you need a lot more storage space, **Seagate** has added a new member to its NAS line. The Maxtor Shared Storage II, like others in its series, can have up to 20 Mac or Windows PCs connect to it, and uses two 500GB 7,200 RPM drives. In other words, one terabyte of space.

Intel will invest $600 million in the Clearwire Corporation, pushing the wireless seller towards its goal of moving to WiMax, the much-more powerful wireless option. Motorola and other investors also put their money in, bringing the total to $900 million.

Google is now officially a verb. The 11th edition of the Merriam-Wesbster dictionary listed it along with 100 other new words, including 'spyware'.

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- Sound Equalizer

Model: Piano 101 Black

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- Subwoofer:5W x1
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- Signal-to-noise ratio:> 80db

Drivers:
- Satellites:2 x 1.5" Full-range drivers +2 x 1"
- Highl-range drivers
- Subwoofer:2" woofer

Speaker dimensions:
- Satellites:(H)19.0 x (L) 100 x (W)40 (mm)
- Subwoofer:(H)26.0 x (L)120 x (W) 60 (mm)

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CALENDAR

AUGUST

NAG FUN FACT:
The best Game is often the one you don't know about!

1

EVENT: NAG LAN @ rAge tickets go on sale (www.computicket.co.za) 1,200 tickets go on sale this day, for the biggest LAN event this year! ▶

9

RELEASE: Formula One 2006 (PS2) *Date TBA* ▶
RELEASE: Army Men: Major Malfunction (PS2) *Date TBA*
RELEASE: Monster House (PS2) *Date TBA*
RELEASE: Micro Machines V4 (PS2) *Date TBA*
RELEASE: Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence (PS2) *Date TBA* ◀

21

RELEASE: Cocoto Kart Racer (PC)
RELEASE: Golden Age of Racing (PC)
RELEASE: International Cue Club (PC)
RELEASE: Heracles: Battle with the Gods (PC)
RELEASE: Stock Car Crash (PS2)
RELEASE: WWII: Tank Battles (PS2)
RELEASE: Daemon Summoner (PS2)
RELEASE: Noble Racing (PS2)
RELEASE: Leaderboard Golf (PS2)
RELEASE: GT-R 400 (PS2)
RELEASE: Golden Age of Racing (PS2)
RELEASE: Deadly Strike (PS2)
RELEASE: Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga (PS2)

22

EVENT: The Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival (EIEF06) (www.eief.co.uk) *Aug. 21-22*

29

30

RELEASE: Civilization 4: Warlords Expansion (PC) *Date TBA* ▲
Only R387.95 until 31 August @ kalahari.net
RELEASE: Cabbage Patch Kids: Where's my Pony? (PC) *Date TBA* ◀

Release date information supplied by Kalahari.net

3

RELEASE: Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror (PSP) *Date TBA*
Only R387.95 until 31 August @ kalahari.net

RELEASE: Formula One 2006 (PSP) *Date TBA*

RELEASE: Guilty Gear (PSP) *Date TBA*

RELEASE: Capcom Classics Remix (PSP) *Date TBA*

RELEASE: Micro Machines V4 (PSP) *Date TBA*

5/6

RELEASE: Darkstar One (PC) *Only R249.95 until 31 August @ kalahari.net*

RELEASE: El Matador (PC) *Only R249.95 until 31 August @ kalahari.net*

RELEASE: Crusty Demons (PS2)

RELEASE: Dungeons & Dragons Deluxe (PC)

12/13

LAN: Mayhem Open Lan (www.langames.co.za) *Aug. 12*

19/20

FUN GAMING FACT:
In 1995, the game Flashback: The Quest for Identity was released by Delphine Studios.

24

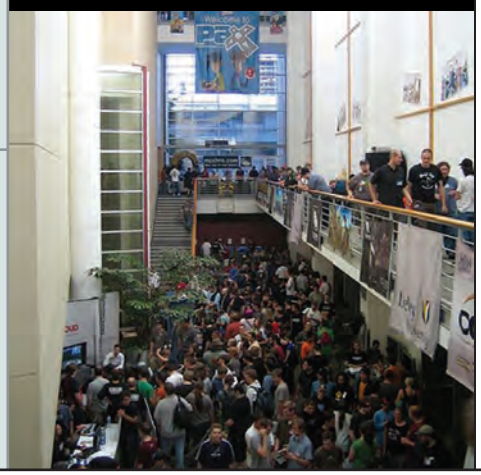
EVENT: GC Games Convention (www.gc-germany.de) *Aug. 24-27*

25

RELEASE: The Sims 2: Glamour Stuff Add-On (PC)
Only R114.95 until 31 August @ kalahari.net

26/27

EVENT: Penny Arcade Expo / PAX06 (www.pennyarcadeexpo.com) *Aug. 25-27* "Last year's PAX was like a big party with 9,000 of your closest friends," said Penny Arcade's Robert Khoo. "It's hard to imagine, but PAX '06 is on track to be even larger and more outrageous."



1

SEPTEMBER

MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS

GAMING GAP

By Miktar Dracon

YOU'VE HEARD IT BEFORE, right. Some person, somebody, going on and on about "game developers only care about graphics now." Yes, I can see you nodding – you have heard someone say that exact phrase. It might even have been me. We all do and say dumb things sometimes, before we know better.

But hey, you live, you learn. One thing most people learn, if they are paying attention, is that there is this thing called a 'generation gap'. But what does that actually mean? Generation X (the generation following the baby boom in the 1960s and 1970s) was damn sure their parents didn't get what they were about, but then again, neither did their parents.

I have a very simple definition for generation gap: "You have a generation gap when the children of the previous generation don't pay attention to what mistakes their parents made, or even what their parents did."

You see, the quote I mentioned earlier, the one about 'game developers are focusing too much on graphics, and not gameplay!', well, it came from a Nintendo Power magazine, or something with Nintendo in the title - around 1985.

Whoa, creepy huh?

Okay, so what does this mean? It means that every generation bitches about the previous generation, because face it: the previous generation is the one developing the games, isn't it? You don't produce something like Need for Speed Carbon with a team of 12 year olds. No, most development teams are in their twenties and older, usually around their thirties if you look at the bigger production houses.

So, you get writers who – in youthful naivety – will proclaim that now is the time developers are not improving gameplay anymore, and that graphics without gameplay is the opiate of the masses!

Now, I don't want to say those Chicken Little should grow up, but they really should grow up. Yes, graphics is getting better and better, and with it, the perception that somehow gameplay is suffering.

I'm sure Shakespeare would look at today's books and exclaim that they were quite terrible, but show me a kid today who'll actually read Shakespeare by their own choice, and I'll show you someone who is really, really odd.

IT MEANS THAT EVERY GENERATION BITCHES ABOUT THE PREVIOUS GENERATION, BECAUSE THE PREVIOUS GENERATION IS THE ONE DEVELOPING THE GAMES

Games evolve and evolution is often a sore point of contention among rational beings. However, while the rest of them argue about gameplay going down the drain, just pick up a game from today and compare it to a game of yesterday. Or better yet, pick up an Atari 7600 or something of similar ilk and tell me gameplay has gotten worse.

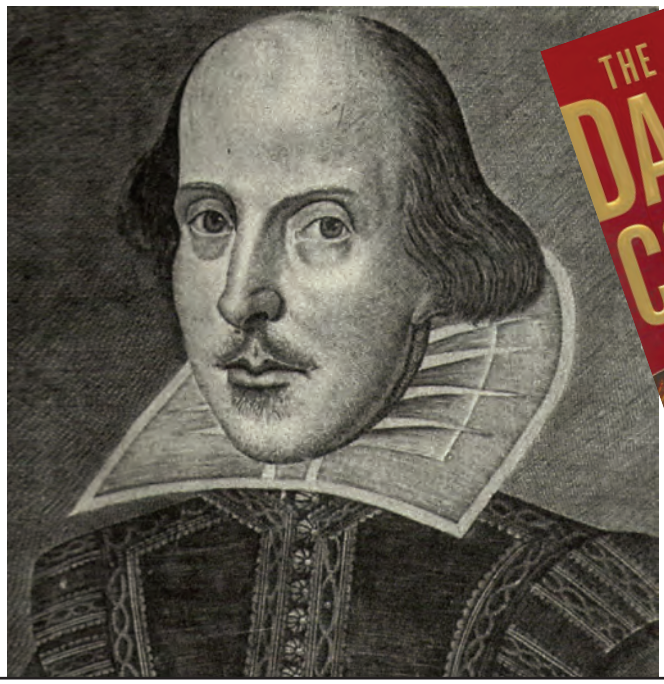
You see, the generation gap produces what is called a 'straight line projection', where people look at the immediate, current trends and then, using a mental ruler, draw a straight line projection based on one or two previous data points.

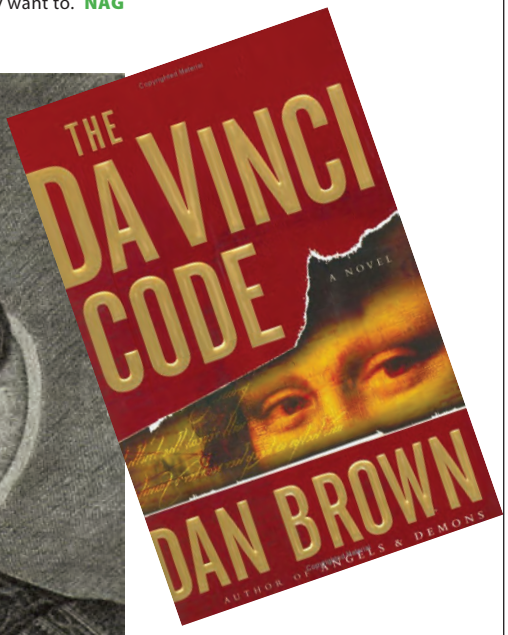
I don't need to explain just how wrong that can be.

In fact, there is a term for it: Jumping to a conclusion.

Many people jump to conclusions, myself included. It is a very easy habit, one that people learn very early on, and then continue to feed as they progress through life. However, jumping to conclusions is rarely a good thing, except if you are in the jungle and a tiger attacks. The correct conclusion there would involve both a jump, and then a plan to run the hell away, or something. Tigers aren't really my thing.

So, if I had to pick one moral for you to take away from this whole experience, try to think things through a bit - perhaps do a little reading. It's amazing what people can learn, when they want to. **NAG**





We are pretty sure that Shakespeare would think that *The Da Vinci Code* sucks

The views and opinions cited in this column do not necessarily reflect those of NAG Magazine and its staff.

NEW GAMING

Formula 1 2006
[PS2]
Also available on PSP™

Mortal Kombat:
Unchained
[PSP™]

Tekken:
Dark Resurrection
[PSP™]

Syphon Filter:
Dark Mirror
[PSP™]

Civ City Rome
[PC]

Dance Factory
[PS2]

Monster House
[PS2]

Grand Theft Auto
Liberty City Stories
[PS2]

Civilization IV:
Warlords
[PC]

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THE DOMAIN OF THE_BASILISK

MAJOR LEAGUE WHAT?

By Anton Lines

MOST OF YOU ALREADY know where I stand on the 'PC versus console' debate. (You probably also know that I disagree in principle with anything James, our Editor, says.) However, if you haven't figured it out yet, I'm not a console fan. I don't like dumbed-down anything, and the console is the ultimate dumbed-down toy for the masses. However, I've said this before, on numerous occasions, and nobody wants another tirade on why the PC or the console is better. Instead, I'm here to talk to you about the recent explosion of console games in the world of e-sports.

Last month, Major League Gaming (MLG) announced two-year deals worth $1.25 million with top team Final Boss and individual star player Tom "Tsquared" Taylor. Don't worry; I hadn't the foggiest idea who they were either. Outside of the *Halo 2* community, they were only background names, and outside of the USA, they were completely unknown. One simply has to read the user comments on popular Websites like ESReality.com and Gotfrag.com to see that this development came as a total shock to the existing e-sports world. While none of these *Halo 2* players are making more money than Fatal1ty just yet, they are making decidedly more than any of the Counter-Strikers, and this little fact has everyone up in arms.

THE CONSOLE IS THE ULTIMATE DUMBED-DOWN TOY FOR THE MASSES

It's easy to see why. I'd also be pretty upset if I'd been playing a game at a professional level for seven years, when all of a sudden something new came along and rewarded its comparatively amateur player-base with obscene amounts of money. Skill-wise, *Halo 2* cannot even be compared to *Counter-Strike*. While I've always complained about the random bullet spread in CS, imagine my ranting about a first-person shooter where you don't even have to aim (due to the console control system). In addition, competition in *Counter-Strike* is so fierce that the same team almost never wins consecutive international tournaments, yet in *Halo 2*, the same team has won nearly every MLG event for the past two years.

That said, anyone with any intelligence has to have seen this coming. In terms of mainstream exposure to e-sports, it makes sense that the most feasible platform would be the console. Xbox Live has over three million subscribers, a good portion of them being *Halo 2* players (with over seven million copies of the game sold worldwide). This simply means that console-based e-sports have the numbers advantage. More people are playing these games, and, theoretically, more people will watch them on television, which is the direction in which Major League Gaming is heading.

Like it or not (and I don't), this is a good thing. The primary challenge facing the popularity of all e-sports is their complexity. Everyone plays football or tennis at home and understands the rules, which makes watching them on television quite natural. However, someone new to *Counter-Strike* will have a decidedly difficult time trying to figure out what's going on. The fact that everyone plays *Halo 2* at home will begin to give e-sports a similar grounding to that of physical sports. In addition, an increase in exposure for *Halo 2* can only be good for the status of *Quake 4* and *Counter-Strike*, because they all follow the same basic rules. PC and console e-sports are developing concurrently even now, each feeding off the successes of the other. Not to be outdone by the MLG, the Cyberathlete Professional League has just announced a partnership with DirecTV, who will be broadcasting live for their PC tournaments. Sit tight, *Counter-Strikers*, your dues will come. **NAG**

The views and opinions cited in this column do not necessarily reflect those of NAG Magazine and its staff.

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Nouveau is a perfect Desktop/Gaming solution. This is one of the many AOpen products featuring the "Powermaster" system and smart fan that bring you only silence and low electricity bills. The Aeolus 7800GTX-DVDC256 graphics card accelerates clockrates with full HDTV support and comes with an amazing game bundle.

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- AOpen DSW1685L - bundled with a AOpen Stop Watch
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DAMMIT

NEXT-GEN: DUMB

By Megan Hughes

BRILLIANT! GENERATION Y HAS now been defined as the generation that defies religion (thank the lord!), is tolerant of other races (except for those people), and is much dumber and lazier than all previous generations. Why? Well, it is thanks to the intelligence and ingenuity of the previous generations, especially the baby boomers. These generations suffered terribly due to a lack of instant communication and high-speed travel, so they invented it. Thanks to them, technology exploded in recent years, bringing with it a surge of new inventions and improvements that allowed the up-and-coming Generation Y (those currently between the ages of five and twenty-five*) to sit back and enjoy a much easier lifestyle.

Unfortunately, this, 'the simple life', has brought about huge problems. All developments and inventions are ultimately designed to make our lives easier, and so, those who were successful ultimately did just that. However, add a whole lot of these life-easing inventions together, and you create a life so easy that there's nothing difficult to do. So easy, in fact, that the generation enjoying these spoils is just too lazy to do anything for themselves. And why should they? Everything that can possibly be done for them, by a machine, is. Why do the work that a machine can do quickly, and much more efficiently? This type of basic logic is definitely one thing Generation Y (also known as the 'Google Generation') has developed.

Unfortunately, their laziness often overpowers their logic. Just one look at the general crowd in any shopping mall, and you'll notice the obesity problem our country is faced with. However, the gyms only seem filled with the slimmer people, and I have yet to see 'large' people eating salads at restaurants. No one ever got fat eating salads - that's a fact. The Y Generation, unfortunately, seems satisfied using 'instant' weight loss products and happily ignores the fine print ('only effective when used in conjunction with a calorie controlled diet'). It all boils down to this: The Y Generation doesn't like hard work, even when it's for its own benefit, and is very much in love with anything that's 'instant'.

And what of the rising AIDS infection rates? How many sex education talks, television adverts and free condoms do you need to get the message across? 'Instant' gratification, anything 'fast and easy', is of far greater concern to this mass of people, than long-term effects.

UNFORTUNATELY, GENERATION Y'S LAZINESS OFTEN OVERPOWERS ITS LOGIC

Okay, so laziness doesn't necessarily equal lack of intelligence, does it? Logically it does. This generation is going through schooling systems that are weak to say the least, and are coming out the other end, twelve years later, illiterate. They cannot spell and they cannot add, and yet they're passing each year. Technology has made life much simpler for these students, who are just too indolent to open up a textbook or pay attention during lessons. Many of these students believe, and will soon be shocked to discover how far from the truth their belief is, that spending a huge amount of time playing a vast number of computer games, fiddling with computer parts and trolling the Internet forums will ultimately land them an easy career. Dream on - life is actually hard work. And to work for NAG you have to be able to string more than a couple of decent sentences together. It's not all fun and games (pun intended).

In fact, it seems that this generation has become so lazy when it comes to language and communication, that two simplified alternatives to the English language have been developed, namely SMS lingo and LEET† speak. Both demonstrate the inability to spell without a spell-check program and general degradation of the intelligence of this generation. Internet forums, which were designed to provide a platform for intelligent debate with people from all lifestyles, have been degraded to a platform for random trolling and spamming. It's a sad state of affairs.

And even sadder still is the idea that these are the people who have been given the responsibility of being the 'future' of our country. That also means that Generation Y is supposed to be the hope for the game development here in South Africa. What can we expect from a generation that is so dependent on technology? Not much, unless you focus on the select few of the generation that really are striving for development in the gaming industry, even starting their own online game development magazines, and evolution (not just of the thumbs). But these are, of course, the exceptions that make the rule. **NAG**

* An approximation according to Wikipedia.com

† Also known as 1337, l33t, and l33+. Derived from the word "Elite".

The views and opinions cited in this column do not necessarily reflect those of NAG Magazine and its staff.

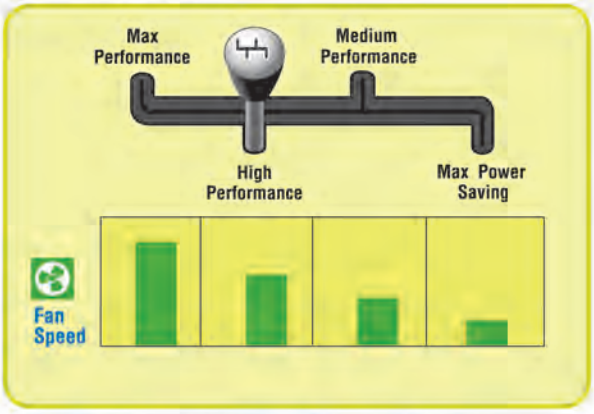
advertorial

Adjust Computing Speed as you wish

In accordance to the release of the Intel P965 chipset, ASUS recently launched the P5B Series. The two new boards come equipped with 3 unique tools - AI NOS™, AI Gear and AI Nap - that enable precise PC performance control during various applications.Today, let us walk you through these new solutions.

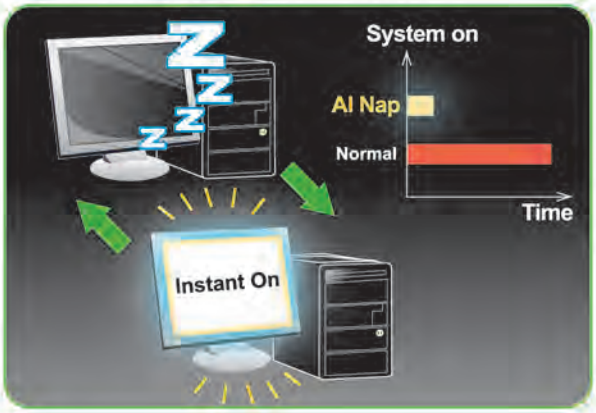
AI Gear - Minimum Noise

To balance system performance and silent computing, **AI Gear** enables users to choose from profiles to adjust CPU frequency and vCore voltage, minimizing system noise and power consumption. It takes careful fine tuning of various settings to get the most out of a high-performance system.



AI Nap - Maximum Power Saving

AI Nap lets users "relax" their PCs without terminating current tasks. System will continue to operate at minimum power and noise when users are temporarily away. It downloads files and runs applications at the quietest state while users are asleep. Simply click on the mouse to wake up the system in seconds.



AI NOS™ - Extreme Performance

AI NOS™ or Non-delay Overclocking System detects system load, and automatically boosts performance for the most demanding tasks. Compared to other performance tuning technologies that monitor system temperature (temperature rise usually comes minutes after system load increase), **AI NOS™** delivers performance hike when users need it to most.

Intel P965 chipsets and Intel Core2 processor support

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To bring out the very best of the P965 chipset and Core2 processor, the ASUS P5B Series is an excellent choice. Attached are the boards' basic specs. We strongly recommend these new ASUS boards.

P5B Deluxe WiFi-AP Edition

- LGA775 socket for Intel Core2 Extreme / Core2 Duo / Pentium Extreme /Pentium D / Pentium 4 / Celeron D Processors
- Intel P965 with Intel Fast Memory Access Technology
- Intel ICH8R with SATA RAID 0,1,5,10 support
- 1066 / 800 / 533 MHz Front Side Bus
- 4 x DIMMs, max. 8GB, Dual Channel DDR2 800 / 667 / 533 MHz, non-ECC, un-buffered memory
- 2 x PCI-E x16 (the blue one @ x16 mode, the black one @ x2 or x4 mode)
- Dual Gigabit LAN
- 8 x Serial ATA 3.0 Gb/s ports including 1 external port

P5B

- LGA775 socket for Intel Core Extreme / Core2 Duo / Pentium Extreme / Pentium D / Pentium 4 / Celeron D Processors
- Intel P965 / ICH8 with Intel Fast Memory Access Technology
- 1066 / 800 / 533 MHz Front Side Bus
- 4 x DIMMs, max. 8GB, Dual Channel DDR2 800 / 667 / 533 MHz, non-ECC, un-buffered memory
- 1 x PCI-E x16
- Gigabit LAN
- 6 x Serial ATA 3.0 Gb/s ports including 1 external port

KINGPIN

PROCRASTINATOR'S TOOLBOX

By Michael James

WARNING! THIS IS COMPLETELY unrelated to gaming, but related to real life, and considering that games are getting more realistic, it should still be valid. Right? Well, that is the line of reasoning I'm going with and it's up to you to decide if I'm right or wrong.

My Outlook backup file is 864MB in size, a hefty bugger by my standards – it is e-mail after all, a handful of messages between 7KB and 39KB each. The worrying part is that this is what's left after an extensive cleanup operation. I'm too scared (lazy actually) to hunt down the backup file from my unclean mailbox just to see how big it is, but I wouldn't be surprised if it started at around 1GB.

Does anyone else see this as a serious problem? I have 12,068 items in my clean backup .pst file (you can use scanpst.exe to find out your item count; the file is already on your machine by the way). 12,068 - that's a lot! What it actually means is that I have to deal with 46 mail items a day for an entire year until everything is dealt with, and that's not counting what keeps coming in (between 10 and 40 a day). Admittedly, it's not that bad as many of them are calendar entries, sent items I need to keep and older stuff that I could probably delete now, but cling to with nostalgic stubbornness, and so on. The point being, see how long it takes you to read and deal with 46 messages… It's about an hour or two depending on what demands the message is making. Being asked to send a company a proposal for sponsoring a gaming event takes time if you actually expect them to take you seriously.

My tactic is to just ignore most of it and hope that one day I'll be able to delete everything in disgust and spend my final years on an island with a 20GB Internet connection and sunshine all day. Therefore, I ignore some messages until guilt forces me to look at the bottom of my inbox and then I start hammering away. Right now, there's a mail there from 15 March. It forms part of a good plan I had for getting more proactive and unusual brands into gaming. Hey, if Standard Bank wants to launch a technology concept, I'm going to make sure they spend some serious time and energy on the gaming side of things too. I think this country breeds a unique kind of pioneering gaming industry person. Whether they are in the publishing industry, the distribution industry or the retail industry, we have a lot of them in key positions in all of these parts of the pie, and they work harder than most to make sure gaming is taken seriously in South Africa. It's not easy here like in the States or the UK - there everything is handed to them on a plate. Here in Africa we have no Internet, no water and no lights (but that's another story about my new house). No really, in Africa we don't have millions of gamers all rushing out to buy *Halo 2* the day it hits the shelf. We have a more modest industry, but probably one of the fastest growing in the world if you look at things like rAge, the birth of competing gaming magazines and the increased profile we've earned when talking to international marketing and distribution people here.

SORRY MR. JAMES, PERSON X DIED ABOUT A MONTH AGO OF BOREDOM WAITING FOR SOMEONE TO A REPLY TO THEIR E-MAIL

Back to my e-mail. I'm sure there are more than a handful of you out there who do the exact same thing I do, horde e-mail until you're forced to deal with it. This is a very bad habit that I'm trying to break away from. If I actually ever replied to that mail dated 15 March 2006, there's a strong chance the person who sent it might be dead. "Umm, sorry Mr. James, person X died about a month ago. They died of boredom waiting for someone to send them a reply to their e-mail. Can I perhaps help you with something?" At this point, it's best to say nothing - act shocked and make a polite getaway. At least then I can delete the mail with a clean conscience, and as an added bonus, all the other mail related to that particular thread.

Computers were supposed to make our lives easier and they have. They then say that technology is actually making people busier and it has, but I still say it's the user who's to blame for how the program behaves, and if I actually dealt with each mail item that arrived everyday when it arrived, I wouldn't be in this predicament. I'm actually hoping this article does two things: (1) rescues me from my problem - if it makes sense in print it must be true, so I'll read it later and believe it; and (2) serves as a form of apology to anyone out there who is still waiting for a reply to a mail they sent me any time after 15 March. I will eventually get to it, but between playing games, meeting deadlines and organising rAge, I sometimes just don't have it in me to start any new projects, reply to everyone wanting to work for NAG or follow up on that question I sent you regarding that proposal you wanted. NAG

The views and opinions cited in this column do not necessarily reflect those of NAG Magazine and its staff.

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A Gun in a Knife Fight

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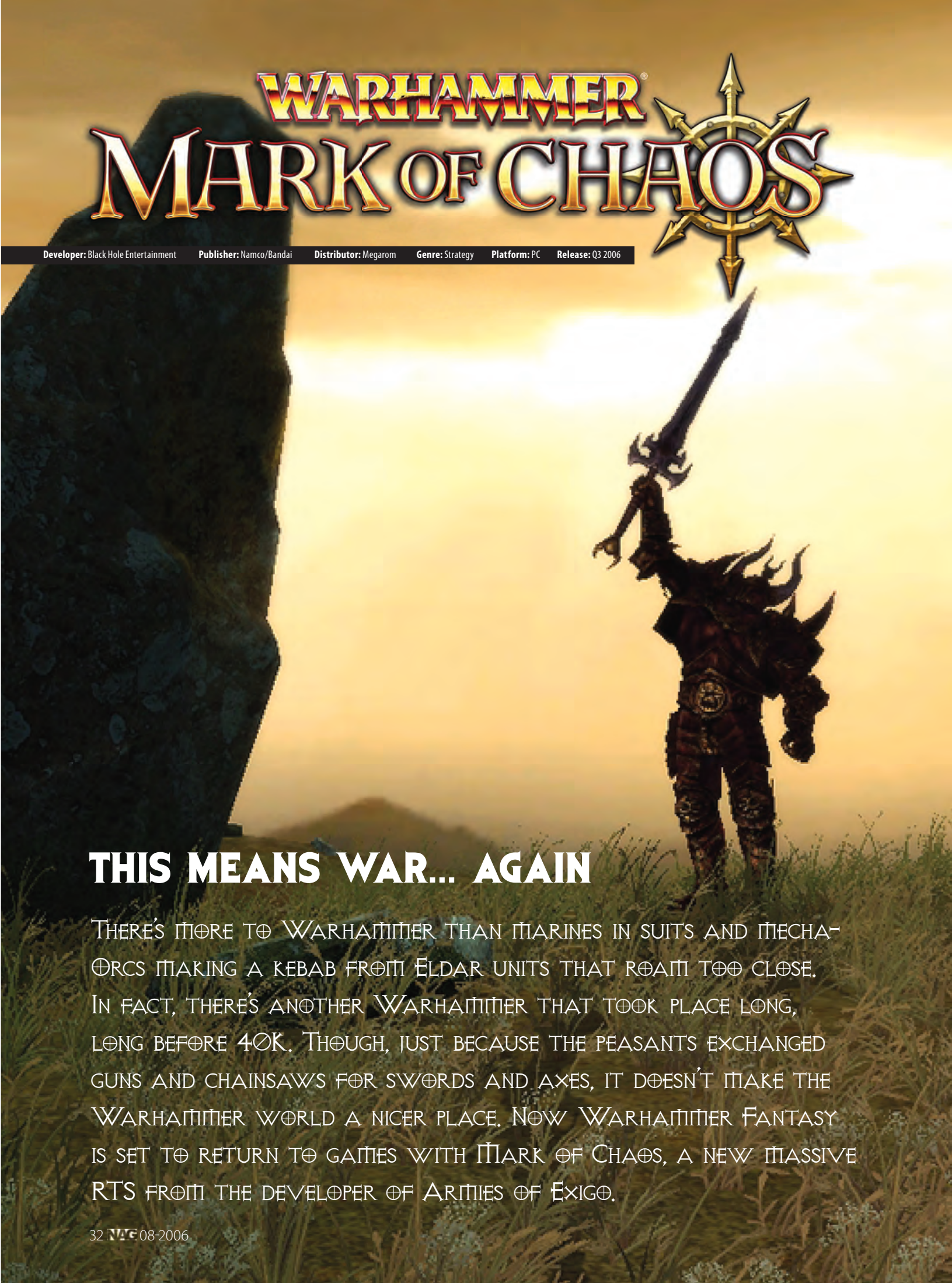
GAMEPAD

WARHAMMER® MARK OF CHAOS

Developer: Black Hole Entertainment **Publisher:** Namco/Bandai **Distributor:** Megarom **Genre:** Strategy **Platform:** PC **Release:** Q3 2006



THIS MEANS WAR... AGAIN

There's more to Warhammer than marines in suits and mecha-Orcs making a kebab from Eldar units that roam too close. In fact, there's another Warhammer that took place long, long before 40K. Though, just because the peasants exchanged guns and chainsaws for swords and axes, it doesn't make the Warhammer world a nicer place. Now Warhammer Fantasy is set to return to games with Mark of Chaos, a new massive RTS from the developer of Armies of Exigo.

Guts and Glory - when you combine rabid dogs, iron-clad warriors and big blades, things are bound to get messy

WARHAMMER IS RETURNING TO the digital game world! Does this confuse you? It might if you, like us, aren't really that familiar with Games Workshop's fantasy epic. A year before the company released its epic *Warhammer 40,000* tabletop game, it was already preceded by a more traditional fantasy war game, namely *Warhammer Fantasy*. While *40K* sat snugly in the hands of THQ and developer Relic, this older version has been up for grabs. The *Warhammer Fantasy* universe has already had a few games, such as *Warhammer: Dark Omen*, but just like *40K*, these were lacklustre or failed to grab the fans' attention. Then came Dawn of War and brought a completely new legion of fans to the franchise. Mark of Chaos hopes to do the same for *Warhammer Fantasy*.

"When we set out to make this game, we had the vision to expand the genre of RTS gaming by bringing to it a bigger sense of a war going on around you. We wanted epic battles on detailed landscapes with thousands of troops, and we wanted to recreate the feeling of the *Warhammer* world in a beautiful 3D PC game." Chris Wren, the senior producer behind *Mark of Chaos*, is very positive about the game developer Black Hole is busy developing. Some reports have taken to calling it *Warhammer: Total War* because the game shares many attributes with Creative Assembly's own epic series of war games. In *Mark of Chaos* players will command large armies towards massive battles and command dozens of squads and columns to beat your opponent. At the same time, the world events take place on a turn-based strategy map, where players make decisions about recruitment, resource management and where they go next. An interesting part of the design, in this respect, is that random events will appear on the map, which players can choose to take part in. There might be a fight between two clans and intervention means that you can gain an alliance, though this might upset other clans. These events can also be completely ignored. If the Chaos hordes are pouring over your Northern border, you don't have to stop them, though it might be a good idea to consider it.

But massive armies in real-time battles and a turn-based

world map is where most of the similarities end. Much like *Dawn of War*, which some initially claimed was just a clone of other popular RTS titles, *Mark of Chaos* is distinctly *Warhammer*: bloody, heavy-handed and completely without mercy. The resource management has been toned back, placing more emphasis on the actual warfare and the tactics your units use.

"Current RTS games put about 70% of the player's time dedicated to building structures, units and advancing tech trees, with very little time actually spent swinging swords, casting spells and giving commands," Chris explained. "We are shifting the focus to balance this equation to allow more time for battling and to give the player more to do while in battle. To this end, we are providing many more options for the player to adjust their ranks, change their formations, issue commands in the heat of battle and really get into determining the outcome of any given skirmish, rather than just watching it."

An impressive zoom level allows players to get up close for hands-on decisions, or far back for mass army movement. Each character will be impressively rendered and while they aren't all individuals, there are variations in facial hair, posture and the armour they wear. Here Chris also pointed out that, in *Warhammer* tradition, army colours and décor can be changed to suit a player's taste. The visual detail in *Warhammer*, provided you push everything to the max, will be mouth-watering. "Imagine a cannon blast striking, leaving a crater, throwing troops (and troop parts) in all directions, dust and debris scattered about, the terrain littered with bodies, some still moving, and pools of blood staining the battlefield, and you will begin to see the artistic vision of the battles we are planning."

There are two major factions: the Empire and the Hordes of Chaos. Each has an additional race: the High Elves for the Empire and the Skaven from the Chaos Wastes. There will be two campaigns and each will let players control both races from a faction at some point. Each race has a distinctive style as well. For example, the Chaos armies will become increasingly demonic as they progress, giving rise to some nasty abominations and dark magic, while imperial forces benefit from wider technologies and diverse unit types. Army sizes are dictated by resource points and these are region dependent. It basically stops someone from simply taking a massive army and storming over everything – forethought has

Build massive armies, recruit mercenaries and call on your heroes to slaughter the hordes

to go into what is being sent into battle and how it'll be used. Along with this is a player's Command Authority. This grows the size of armies and how many units can be controlled, and unlocks new units as players progress. Freebooters, basically mercenaries, are also around and represent other races from the world. As such, you can't build an army out of trolls, dwarves, Orcs or the undead, but they can become units in your larger force. Your army can also be supported by hero units. If the massive demons and machines from *Dawn of War* got your attention, the ones in *Mark of Chaos* will frighten. Each hero unit also has its own skill tree, items and spells. All this will also find its way into vast multiplayer battles, though not a lot has been revealed about online and LAN play.

Mark of Chaos is decidedly more aggressive and bloody than anything Total War has produced, and seeing it in action, shows the small and big differences that differentiates it from the latter. But let's be fair – it is using a fairly similar system. Is it a clone? Perhaps: if you want to argue that *Command & Conquer* cloned *Warcraft*. But this is once again more of a genre expansion and not one that will spend its time with historical accuracy. Instead, it's war, *Warhammer* style. **NAG**

BRAIN AGE™

Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!

STOP THE BRAIN AGE(ING)!

NEUROSCIENCE IS A FIELD filled with guesswork, strange chemical associations and a whole lot of controversy. Thankfully, most of us don't have to worry about all that hard work. We can just enjoy the fruits of other people's labour.

One such person is Professor Ryuta Kawashima of Tohoku University. He works at the Center for Collaborative Research on Future Technology, which probably sounds a lot fancier than it really is. The good Professor wrote a popular book that details a few ideas about how the brain works and even how a person can use that knowledge for their own benefit.

The book was titled *Train Your Brain* and through an odd occurrence of chance, it has now become a Nintendo DS 'game' that, quite literally, makes you smarter.

LONG-TERM RECOLLECTION

Nintendo, being a company constantly on the prowl for something innovative and/or fun, was looking for something new to develop that would appeal to both gamers and non-gamers. What Nintendo got was something that appealed to both, as well as a much older demographic than is normal for gaming.

The story goes that during a usual Nintendo meeting, the Chief Financial Officer of Nintendo Japan suggested reviewing a published book titled *Train Your Brain*, which was enjoying an odd and interesting success. Satoru Iwata, the president of Nintendo, arranged a meeting to see Professor Ryuta Kawashima, the book's author.

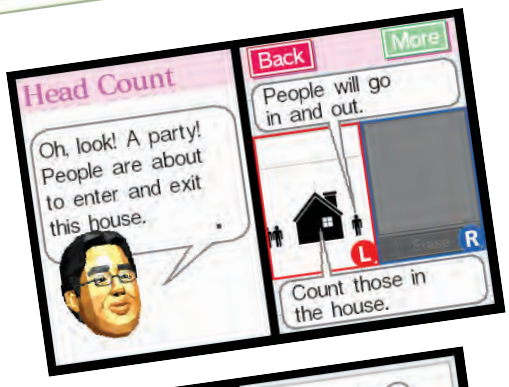
Both Mr Iwata and the Professor were very busy and couldn't meet under regular situations, so they agreed to meet for an hour during the Nintendo DS launch in Japan. This meeting then became a brainstorming session that, according to sources, lasted three hours. It was in this time that the Professor explained the basics of his studies to Iwata.

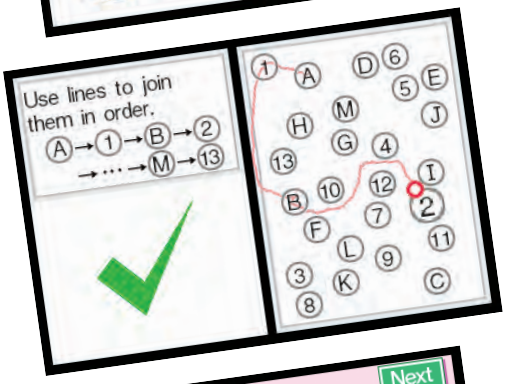
The president of Nintendo then ordered a team of nine developers to work on a game based on the ideas found in the book, and to have it ready in 90 days for demonstration. The result is a quirky 'game' called *Brain Age*, which is already enjoying a sequel in the Far East.

RESEARCH AND RHETORIC

The game (though calling it a game is misleading; functional tool would be a much more appropriate term) is very similar to games such as *Nintendogs* and *Animal Crossing*. It was designed to be played a little each day, no more than ten minutes or so. Each

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Distributor: Nintendo
www.nintendo.co.za
Genre: Puzzle
Platforms: DS
Release: Out Now





of these sessions can contain brain-training activities such as high-speed reading, drawing from memory, fast math problems and Stroop tests. In psychology, the Stroop Effect (postulated by John Ridley Stroop in 1935) is a tangible demonstration of interference in the reaction time of a task. The short explanation: when a word such as blue, green, red, etc. is printed in a colour different from the colour expressed by the word's meaning (the word 'red' might be printed in blue ink, for example), a delay occurs in the processing of the word's colour. This leads to mistakes. People will shout out 'red' when the word 'red' is in fact, written in blue ink.

The Stroop test itself means many things, but thankfully, most people don't need to worry about how it works, just that it has results that can be interpreted.

To play these games or participate in the tests, the Nintendo DS is held on its side like a book, with the touch screen on the right for right-handed people, or on the left for left-handed people. None of the buttons are really used, only the stylus for handwriting-recognition input and the microphone for additional input depending on the game.

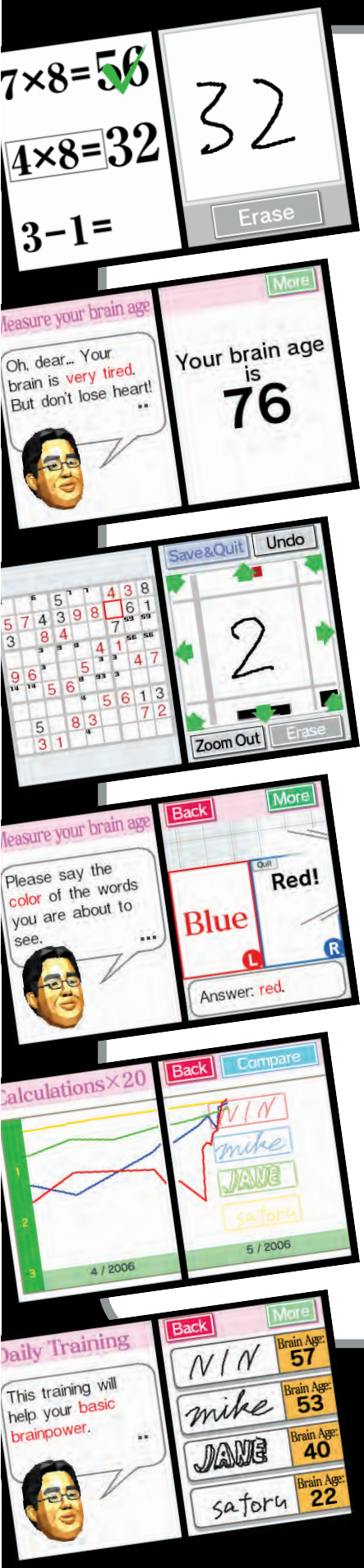
Each session is called 'Daily Training', and you can only get a score for a game played in the Training once per day (so that people don't constantly repeat the game until they get better, thus invalidating the meaning behind the eventual charts).

After each session, a polygonal and overly enjoyable Dr Kawashima gives the player a score. These scores are plotted on a graph over days/months/years, so that players can see if they're getting better or worse, and what their improvement rate is. The game tracks the progress of up to four players. The idea is to share the game with others, so that you can compare results and participate in healthy competition. It will even show other players the drawings of the other players, then facilitate discussion between the users of *Brain Age*.

MATURING BRAIN

The idea behind Brain Age is actually the *Brain Age* Test. This test is composed of various Stroop tests and other logic/deduction puzzles. After the session the Professor gives the player a score, called a 'brain age'. This is a number either twenty or up, with twenty being the ideal score. This is a score for the performance of the mind, according to the Professor. A brain age of 40 or 35 would be approximately equivalent to a 40- or 35-year-old mind. The research behind all this goes along the logic that, at 20, the brain is in its prime condition. Fit, healthy and strong, a brain after workout is more pliable, sharp and faster. It's what school tried to tell people, but managed to ruin through presentation.

Kids are always told their brain is a muscle - the more you work it, the stronger it gets. Thanks to *Brain Age*, there is now a (plausible) number that one can use as a representation for how fit the brain is. Naturally, this isn't



perfect science. Not even the most professional gym in the world can deduce the fitness level of a person, without rigorous testing.

Practical use of *Brain Age*, when used every day habitually, has commonly shown an upward curving graph. *Brain Age* tracks the brain age of each user profile on the cartridge, although it makes no promises about the data. An upward curve means the brain is more fit, but what a person does with a fit brain is up to them.

BLOOD ON THE BRAIN

As a tool, *Brain Age* is fun and function, if slightly limited. As an explanation for why it works, the game itself only gives basic insights. One would have to read the Professor's book to get the full picture, with all the research done.

Simply put, the Professor found that blood-flow to certain areas of the brain increases how productive those areas can be. He developed certain tests that, when done regularly, improve blood-flow to the various areas of the brain. Think of blood as both fuel and lubricant that allow the brain to run, and run efficiently.

In an interview with Website Kotaku (www.kotaku.com), the Professor explained more about his mental age idea:

"The mental age is calculated from expected average cognitive functions of [a] specific age of people. For example, if you perform a cohort study of memory function of healthy people, you would find age-related decline of memory function due to normal aging. Also, you could calculate [a] regression line between age and scores of memory function tests that enable you to calculate expected average memory function of [the] specific age of subjects. Then when you refer that regression data, you could know your memory function, that is, your test score is the same level as average people of some specific age. This is the mental age calculated from memory tests. We combined results of several cognitive tests to calculate the mental age in DS games."

He also elaborates about the sort of concrete improvements people can expect if they exercise regularly with *Brain Age*:

"We expect improvements of memory functions, extroversion, and positiveness. It is important to note here that we think DS games are not only for brain training, but also for a tool for communication with family and friends. Four people can play using [the same software]. Basic content of games is so simple that these are games that can be played with children, adults and aged people, and the results of games can be compared with all members. We already see many families have started communicating more with DS games in Japan."

IT'S FUN TO LEARN

However, it's no fun to always do tests, no matter how small or fast. *Brain Age* includes additional puzzles that can be solved for fun, mainly the popular *Sudoku* logic puzzle that has recently taken the world by storm (despite *Sudoku* having existed since 1979 in Indianapolis, or possibly as far back as 990AD thanks to Arabic numerologists).

There are over 100 Sudoku puzzles that can be solved, complete with handy notation and saveable sessions. An additional feature is that players can play 16-player multiplayer over Nintendo DS download play – only one cartridge is required. Granted, the multiplayer game is only a math calculation battle, but it remains basic addition, subtraction and multiplication, exactly the math skills most people need in their daily lives. No complex trigonometry or algebra here, just functional math.

SLEEP IS FOR UNDERSTANDING

The idea behind *Brain Age* is sound, if you decide to believe the research done (as it is with anything in life). Naturally, since *Brain Age* cannot appeal to all walks of life, it would be cruel to expect kids to just instantly understand what *Brain Age* is about, or worse, to force them to play it. In Japan, *Brain Age* has had its biggest success with old-age homes. The elderly even get to take classes to learn the basics behind using a Nintendo DS, just so they can play *Brain Age* in their own time. The new Nintendo DS Lite, a re-release of the DS with ergonomic fixes, even comes bundled with *Brain Age* at sale in Japan. The game by itself debuted selling around 43,000 copies in May, a good number for an educational title. Most titles only stay in the Japanese weekly top ten list of games for a couple of weeks, whereas *Brain Age* remained there for close to 34 weeks. As of May 7, 2006, *Brain Age* has sold over two million copies in Japan alone. **NAG**

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NINJA ♥ PIRATE

PIXEL PIRATES AND NINJAS DO BATTLE WITH ZOMBIES AND ALIENS

WHEN THE WORLD NEEDS MORE NINJAS, PIRATES AND/OR ZOMBIES WITH ALIENS, SWEDEN PROVIDES. ORIGINALLY IN DEVELOPMENT AT GREASEBEAT GAMES, NINJA LOVES PIRATE IS NOW A MUSKEDUNDER INTERACTIVE VENTURE WITH SOME SASSY PIXEL ART AND LOVEABLE OFFBEAT CHARACTERS. NAG CAUGHT UP WITH THE TEAM AND PUT A FEW PERTINENT QUESTIONS TO THE PLUCKY GROUP OF INDIE DEVELOPERS.

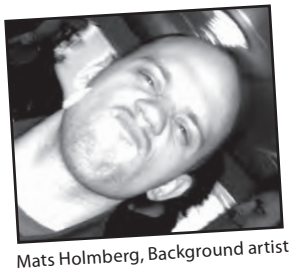
NINJA LOVES DEVELOPERS
Name: Muskedunder Interactive
URL: www.muskedunder-i.com

THE TEAM

Magnus Alm, Producer

Patrik Liljecrantz, Programmer

Emanuel Garnheim, Pixel and concept artist


Mats Holmberg, Background artist

Zoran Dokic, Sound designer

Jimmy Öman, Game designer

NINJA LOVES INTERVIEW

Where did the idea for *Ninja Loves Pirate* originate from? NLP was a participant in a GameDev.net 'Four Elements' competition. Is that where the ball got rolling?

Patrik: In fact, GameDev.net's '4E4' competition was exactly what got us going. Emanuel and I had been talking about making a game together for quite some time, and the four ingredients (Ninjas, Pirate, Zombies and Robots) featured in the competition seemed like a perfect starting point.

We started to develop the idea on a boat in the Stockholm archipelago, with pencils in one hand, and beer in the other. We rapidly started to see this old-school action adventure game take form, and before we knew it, *Ninja Loves Pirate* was born. This was quite late in the competition, and we started working on the game less than three months before deadline.

Have you worked on any other projects before NLP as this team?

Magnus: *Ninja Loves Pirate* as a concept was originally developed by Greasebeat games, but now the production is being financed and led by Muskedunder Interactive, though in cooperation with Greasebeat. Patrik was a founding member of Greasebeat, but now works fulltime at Muskedunder Interactive. So, as a team we have worked on few titles, but as individuals we have worked on many different titles spanning various genres.

How long have you been developing games, either individually or as a team?

Magnus: Everyone one of us has been developing and playing games as long as we can remember really. But developing them for a living? Only about a year actually.

NLP was created with the popular game-creation tool, Game Maker (www.gamemaker.nl). How do you find working in Game Maker?

Patrik: Game Maker was our saviour. Without it we could not have finished on time. We received a lot of criticism for using Game Maker in the competition that *Ninja Loves Pirate* was created for, but it was made clear that third-party software was the way to go. We actually managed to create almost as much as we wanted, in a limited amount of time. The fact that I didn't have much programming experience was a problem at first, but I had no problem learning how to use Game Maker in this short period.

NLP's crisp pixel art is very reminiscent of the *Metal Slug* series, and the much older, pixel art centric games. Was

Samurai showdown was the inspiration for the attack animations

there any inspiration from external sources, such as games and/or movies, specifically?

Emanuel: Before the pixel art was created, the general design of the characters was created. I looked upon various movie sources trying to find the core feeling of how pirates, ninjas and zombies looked. Good examples are the Romero zombie-movies (*Day of the Dead* being my favourite, zombie-look wise), *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and various 80s ninja-movies (such as *Revenge of the Ninja* - Sho Kosugi rocks!). After this I tried to create a stylised template that would work for all the different characters, and came up with a design with huge torsos and cylindrical heads which gave a good silly counterweight to the gory zombie-theme.

The inspiration for the pixel art came from various sources, Metal Slug being one of them, but not to such a large extent as you might imagine. The only example of scrutinising Metal Slug sprites was when I created the various blood squirts.

When I created the animations for the characters I was inspired by older games such as arcade and NES-games, aiming for a slightly 'jerky' animation style. Two games I looked to for inspiration was *Contra* (NES version) for the walk cycles and *Samurai Showdown* for the sword slashes. The general pixel style and palette was inspired by old Amiga-games, many of the later games having a lovely balance between resolution and amount of colours, especially the Bitmap Brothers games such as *Chaos Engine*.

How would you describe the indie game development scene, from your point of view?

Patrik: The indie scene has one major problem: everyone has different views on what 'indie' really is. To me, it's people developing games for the sake of the game. But I've seen far too many million-dollar companies calling themselves indie out there, and they really make it hard for what I call "real" indie developers.

Do you have any advice for prospective or aspiring game developers?

Magnus: Be realistic yet visionary. It sounds weird, but there is an important balance between these two agendas. You must know your strengths and weaknesses, but also constantly try to push your boundaries and grow as a team. Also remember that a lousy team with good sales skills probably in the end will do a lot better than a good team with lousy sales skills. It's as easy as that.

What are the favourite parts/aspects/ elements of NLP for the team?

Jimmy: My favourite aspect is the flipped-out setting and the lovable graphics that illustrates it. I mean, pirates and ninjas and zombies and aliens - you really have a wonderful pallet to work with. Such a heavy mix can crash and burn of course, but thanks to the talented work put into it, it is instant love for anyone who tries it! I also really like how easily controlled the characters are. It makes almost any game a blast to play when you can enjoy a nice flow, just like in the arcade games.

What can you tell us about future projects?

Magnus: Well, we have about three projects going on right now. The most exciting for the Ninja Loves Pirate fans out there is that we are working on a full version of the game right now. Expect better gameplay, a compelling and humoristic story, catchy tunes and wonderful new sprites and environments. We are discussing publishing with the help of a few good agents right now, and as soon as we have any news on when or where it will be published, we will make it public on www.muskedunder-i.com. The two other projects we unfortunately cannot discuss just yet.

Zombies are a piece of cake, for Pirates

NINJA LOVES GAMEPLAY

There is a lot to be said for *Ninja Loves Pirate*, but action speaks louder than words. The demo (released online and found on the NAG Cover DVD this month) shows off the smooth mechanics that let both ninja and pirate comfortably jump, lunge and attack. In action games, the 'flow' and feeling of a game is often much more important than even setting or theme. Thankfully *Ninja Loves Pirate* manages to capture the essence of action dynamics. Movement is smooth and responsive, while attacks hit their mark and look good while doing it. The enemies themselves, while not MENSA material, do what they set out to do - dismemberment by a pirate or a ninja, while putting up a fight.

The demo starts off with a quick-fire character exposition which leads to a 'hub' level of sorts, where a character asks ninja and pirate to deal with various problems. These may involve cleaning out a gold mine, or skulking around a warehouse full of flying grog. The areas are reached via the hub level, which may seem obvious now, but is actually a very clever and professional game dynamic.

While not a finished product, the demo is a positive representation of the quality and forethought the team put into their projects, which is only a good thing. **NAG**

PREVIEWS

REINVENTING THE WHEEL

ORIGINALITY IS OFTEN SOMETHING gamers call upon, saying there's not enough of it in today's games. Going through the games on these two pages alone can give that impressions, since everything seems to be originating from a game that has been before it. However, if every game had to be completely original and couldn't rely on taking what a previous title had established and make it better (or different), it would mean that not only would games be incredibly tough to develop, but they'd appeal to far fewer people. Moreover, while excellent, we'd just be sitting with a lot of creative and hardly comprehensible titles. The world needs its art movies, but sometimes all you want is Adam Sandler getting beaten up. Well, you can't have that if you always want originality.

DEVELOPER: Techland **PUBLISHER:** 1C Company **PLATFORM:** PC **GENRE:** Action **RELEASE DATE:** Q3 2006

THE TEAM BEHIND *CHROME* is taking players into the Wild West as this legendary (and often more fictional than true) part of history becomes a more popular theme for game developers. In *Call of Juarez*, you take on the role of Billy Candle, who is out to avenge the murders of his mother and stepfather. However, a second character also comes into play: the Reverend Ray McCall, a former gunfighter who believes God wants him to be Billy's judge, jury and executioner. It's an interesting approach, playing the roles of both the hunter and the hunted, and it leans quite closely to how classic Westerns tend to approach a story. Various game modes and co-op multiplayer are part of the package, though we hope the team goes for proper voice actors. The visuals will be powered by the third generation Chrome engine, and as the screenshots show, that's not something to smirk at.

DARKSTAR ONE

DEVELOPER: Ascaron
PUBLISHER: Ascaron
PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: Adventure
RELEASE DATE: August 2006

IT SEEMS AS IF you can't travel in space without trying to discover your family history or avenge the death of some relative. In *Darkstar One*, the lead protagonist sets out to discover the truth behind his father's death. This takes place in a large and vibrant universe full of alien species, civilisations and planets. Completely open-ended, players can take the ship, Darkstar One, and travel this galaxy, making money to buy ship improvements and then to make more money. It's in the tradition of *Elite* and *Freelancer*. Players can be traders, mercenaries, pirates or smugglers – or all of the aforementioned. Expect lots of rival factions that you can sell your services to, and plenty of action in space, as other privateers go around trying to make a dishonest buck from space travel. Visually, it looks like space is where no one can hear your graphics card scream.

INDEX

46	Talk Man	[PSP]
48	Battlestations: Midway	[PC ▪ 360]
50	Crusty Demons	[PS2 ▪ Xbox]
52	B-Boy	[PS2]
54	Sid Meier's Railroads!	[PC]
56	Scarface: The World is Yours	[PC ▪ PS2 ▪ Xbox]
58	El Matador	[PC]

WHAT WE WANT...

STAR FOX COMMAND (DS)

The *Star Fox* series returns to its roots – literally. This version was originally planned for release on the N64, but went missing in the sands of time. Now Nintendo is resurrecting it for the DS and adding some features to sweeten the deal. In old-school *Star Fox* fashion, players will take on the enemy in flying locations such as asteroid belts and the skies of strange planets. NPC pilots can also be given tactical routes, drawn on the DS's touch screen. Finally, take on friends next to you and around the world in wireless dogfights.

DEAD RISING (360)

This is about the third time *Dead Rising* appears in this part of the magazine. Clearly, we really, really want it. However, not every mention is frivolous. In the latest news, it has been revealed that *Dead Rising* is more of a GTA in a mall with lots of zombies. Completely open, it leaves it up to the player to decide what he or she wants to try and do. After 72 hours they get rescued, which means you can keep going back, try new things and kill more zombies. How cool is that?

GODS & HEROES: ROME RISING

DEVELOPER: Perpetual Entertainment
PUBLISHER: Sony Online Entertainment
PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: MMO
RELEASE DATE: Q4 2006

ALL ROADS LEAD TO Rome, but so do all invaders and monsters. This MMO takes us to the wild, wild world of the ancient Romans, as the empire establishes itself across Europe and North Africa. With enemies from Carthage and Gaul, not to mention other nations disgruntled with the Roman empire, knocking on the door, there are also plenty of mythical monsters like minotaurs and gorgons walking around terrorising people. This calls for a hero – or a whole legion of them. Players choose allegiance with one of the Roman gods, and then proceed to clobber everything in hundreds of missions and PvP combat. Players will be awarded NPCs, allowing them to create their own squads - these can include monsters from the age. An interesting combat system with a combo system adds to a package that reminds us a lot of *Guild Wars*.

MAELSTROM

DEVELOPER: KDV
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: RTS
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2006

FROM THE PEOPLE WHO brought us *Perimeter* comes the story of how humans eventually managed to mess-up the planet, started fighting about it and then also needed to fight off alien invaders. In *Maelstrom*, strategy fans have the choice of three factions: the urban-roaming Remnants, the technologically advanced Acension, or the alien invaders known as the Hai Genti. *Maelstrom* promises cutting-edge engine techniques that include fully deformable landscapes. The units in the battlefield can be upgraded in real-time, giving a pseudo-RPG feel to the army being built. However, if directing action from the lofty view of an RTS game isn't enough, units can be controlled directly for some hands-on destruction. *Perimeter* had a lot of interesting ideas that quickly garnered it a cult following amongst strategy fans. Will *Maelstrom* manage the same?

GUN SHOWDOWN

DEVELOPER: Rebellion/Neversoft
PUBLISHER: Activision
PLATFORM: PSP
GENRE: Action
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2006

GUN'S SCOPE WAS A bit small for the platforms it hit first. The idea was sound, but it left you just wanting more, mostly because for a free-roaming world, the game didn't offer a lot to explore. Nevertheless, on the more compact PSP environment, the scope makes more sense, and the developers are adding multiplayer support for some wireless battles. The story remains the same as in the original: a hunter sets out to avenge the death of his adopted father and also discover what happened to his real one. This involves a maniac preacher, a civil war renegade general, corrupt marshals and lots of outlaws to shoot off horses in the open plains. There are also Indians to visit, weapons to buy and a spot of gambling and hunting for recreation. The PSP version is complemented with quick-play modes, including the obligatory Texas Hold 'em mini game.

FATAL INERTIA

DEVELOPER: Koei Canada
PUBLISHER: Koei
PLATFORM: PS3
GENRE: Racing
RELEASE DATE: November 2006

PUTTING ON OUR THINKING caps, the name of this game seems to indicate high-speed collisions with obstacles long after you took your foot off the gas. In the spirit of *Wipeout* comes another no-wheels futuristic racer that will take players to the bleeding edge of virtual speeds you can steer at – after the *Burnout* series that mark is definitely a high one to reach. Being headed by Koei Canada, this PS3 launch title combines street racing with thuggish driving and guns blazing. A cutting-edge physics engine promises to handle interaction between ships clipping and colliding with each other and the scenery, while visually it's a true next-gen knockout – or at least looks really good for a proposed launch title. There are four classes of ships (no actual ship count yet), each of which can be modified with a new look, new equipment and even more destructive weapons. With no *Wipeout* announced for the PS3 yet, this might be the next best thing. Alternatively, considering the former's problems over the years, *Fatal Inertia* might very well surpass it.

STAR TREK LEGACY (PC/360)

We always have time for a *Star Trek* game, and overall the franchise has been very interesting and kind to fans (unlike its movie and television big brothers). Hearing that *Starfleet Command* veterans have come together to create the ultimate *Star Trek* battle simulator is exciting news. Fans can look forward to taking Starfleet, Romulans, Klingons and even the Borg into battle to see which is the superior force in the *Star Trek* universe. We all saw *First Contact*, so we know the answer, but maybe the other nations have a few new tricks.

THE DARKNESS (360)

Starbreeze, the company that created E*scape from Butcher's Bay*, is back with a new version of the engine that powered Riddick's exploits, not to mention a vastly improved build of *The Darkness*. Based on the Top Cow comic, players will take on the role of a former mafia hitman who receives some really dark and powerful powers. Blood, gore, imps and hilarity follow. Considering the credentials of the team involved, *The Darkness* will be interesting to play and a classic if it holds up to its promise.

F.E.A.R.: EXTRACTION POINT (PC)

The development has been given to another studio, as is often the case with expansions. The story kicks off right where the first game ended, and players have to get rid of the now-free Alma and her paranormal critters tearing people apart and leaving stains on the ceiling. New enemy units, weapons and locations are on the cards, but news of new multiplayer modes and engine improvements still remain absent.

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer
In-house

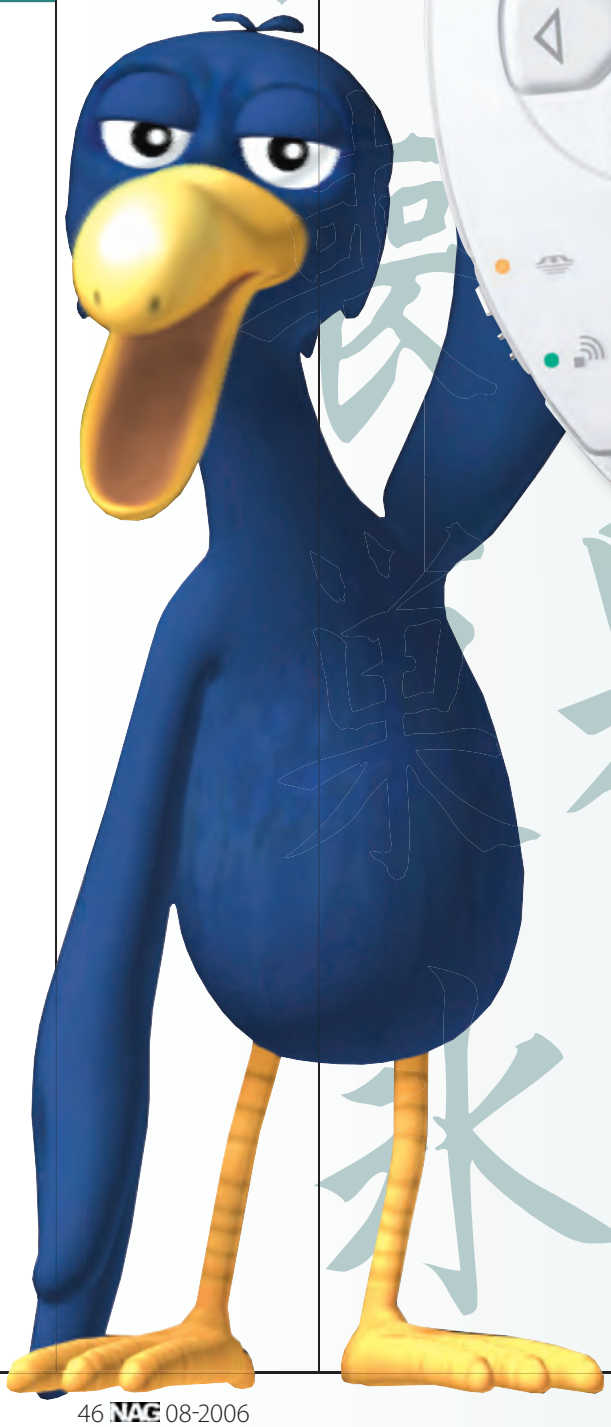
Publisher
Sony

Distributor
Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900

Genre
Interpreter

Release Date
Q3 2006

HANDS ON TESTED



TALKMAN

TALKMAN IS NOT A game. Instead, Sony has created a rather interesting multilingual phrasebook that can aid you during your travels to far-off, foreign-speaking places.

The idea behind *TalkMan* is simple and appreciated. Using your PSP, the 'game' and the included USB microphone that snaps to the top of the PSP, you can tear down barriers that keep nationalities apart. More realistically, *TalkMan* is a useful tool to have if you are ever out and about where people are primarily French, English, German, Spanish, Italian or Japanese.

TalkMan uses a bird-like character called Max that acts as your personal interpreter and translator. Max is a useful translator, because it will translate between two languages for you, but it also has to interpret because it isn't a one-for-one translation.

Once you've selected what language you want to translate to, and from, you pick one of 28 scenarios. These include 'hotel foyer' or 'restaurant', or more importantly, 'medical assistance'. These scenarios break up the phrasebook and help keep things focused. Without it, *TalkMan* would quickly become frustrating as it tries to guess what it is you want to say, or have translated.

Once you've decided what scenario you are in, you select what you want to say. This can be done in two ways: either by talking into the microphone, or by

Shop with Max...

...or learn with Max

selecting one of the stock phrases from the drop-down list.

Max will translate the phrase into the language you choose, and will even include different emotion levels if you choose. You hold up the PSP to the foreigner, and it will then speak out the phrase fluently. You could also just repeat the phrase yourself, if you're feeling brave.

The person you are TalkMan-ing to can then either reply or select a reply from a dropdown list. When you, or they, speak into the microphone, it won't give you an exact translation. Instead, it will give you the most likely phrases you meant, where you then select one. That does mean your talks are limited to specific topics and set replies, but a true translator would cost more and perhaps involve extra luggage. The emphasis is on natural conversation, instead of direct translation.

Max will actually get along better with the user the more *TalkMan* is used - a cute touch, but mostly just for character. Max has the odd habit to take itself more seriously than not. Often it will refer to the user as 'my friend', when it is talking to or asking a question to a foreigner. "My friend really needs a doctor" is what it might say in German, when the user selects 'I need a doctor'. It is subtle, but the benefits to this more polite approach are evident. People are more likely to like Max, and thus, give weight to its words. **NAG**

Developer: Eidos **Publisher:** Eidos **Distributor:** Megarom **Genre:** Strategy/Action **Platforms:** PC, Xbox 360 **Release:** September 2006

BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY

CAN *BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY* CHANGE the way we play and look at naval simulators? The game has switched position a few times since being announced in 2004. It went from THQ to SCI and currently resides under an Eidos development team (which was bought by SCI last year). The PlayStation 2 and Xbox versions have also already been released in Europe, but this is not the same game being polished for the PC and the Xbox 360. Where *Battlestations* is heading requires a fair amount of horsepower, something next-generation platforms have shown to have a lot of.

The main reason for this is scale. In *Battlestations: Midway*, players take charge of an entire fleet of naval vehicles during the Pacific campaigns in World War II. The action starts with the attack on Pearl Harbour and takes a young American sailor through to the Battle of Midway and the turning point of Japan's military naval expansion. This, in all likelihood, means that if *Battlestations: Midway* is successful, a sequel covering the other side of the war in the Pacific will be announced. The single-player experience focuses on the American campaigns, but in multiplayer, both sides of the conflict can be chosen.

The action will start uncomplicated as players are given a PT Boat to evade the Pearl Harbour invasion with. The game focuses on ships, aircraft and submarines, so there's no lugging on land. When controlling a unit, there are several things players can do. On a PT Boat, for instance, one can jump from station to station, steering,

shooting the anti-aircraft guns or dumping depth charges to stop enemy subs from causing problems. Likewise, when taking charge of a squad of planes, players control the lead aircraft, giving orders and leading charges, while the rest are AI-controlled wingmen. When a craft or squadron is player-controlled, the AI immediately takes over and continues the mission. Players can give commands to other units, thus controlling a large fleet while micro managing on a hands-on level. Tell a battleship to attack and then take control of a squadron of fighters to drop bombs on the carrier being targeted.

There are over 60 ships, airplanes and subs to use eventually, though the fleet sizes and profile will depend on which of the 11 missions is being played (with 12 additional missions and several multiplayer-specific scenarios). Each craft is modelled according to the real thing, and strategy will include knowing the strengths and weaknesses of a vehicle. But the controls are kept mercifully simple with arcade simplicity.

The sheer size of the maps are staggering, and you are able to pilot and command from a small boat to massive warships, including the Japanese super battleship the Yamato. The real appeal will be in multiplayer, where up to eight players can play with or against each other in teams, taking control of respective craft in the fleet. It sounds interesting and hopefully the strategic complexity won't be overwhelming. So, will *Battlestations: Midway* make naval strategy fun for non-simulation fans? We expect it will. NAG

PREVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms

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

Developer
Deep Silver

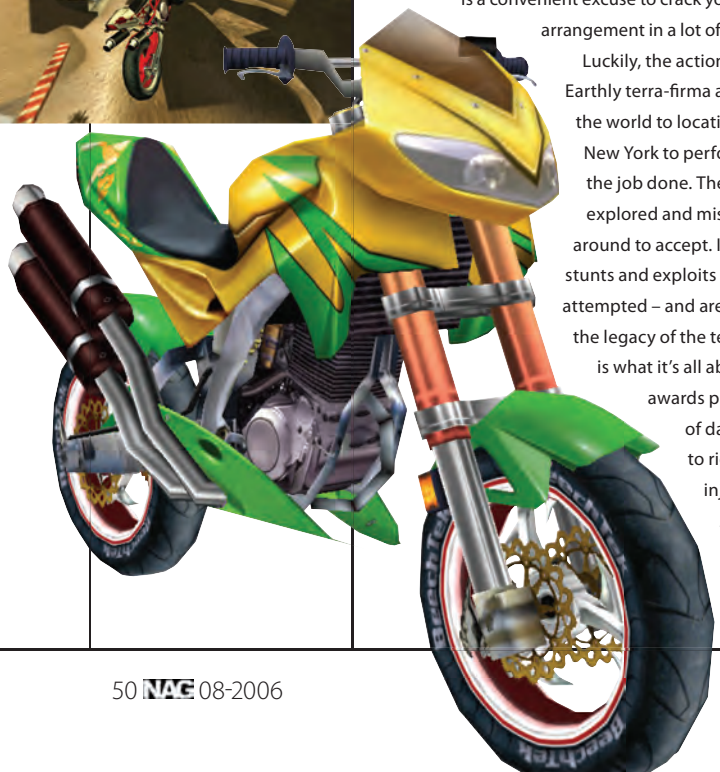
Publisher
Koch Media

Distributor
MegaRom [011] 234-2680

Genre
Sport

Release Date
Q3 2006

Rodney was having a tough time at bike school



CRUSTY DEMONS

WITHIN THE EXTREME SPORT of Moto-X, there is a bleeding edge of stunts and one-upmanship immortalised in the *Crusty Demons of Dirt* videos. This eventually expanded into a whole series of exploits around the Crusty Demons, a team of riders that push the edge of dirt-riding stunts. However, they are often joined in their escapades by top riders, and count some of the best in the world amongst their members. It's as much about high-octane sports as it is about insane stunts and death-defying crashes.

Therefore, after more than ten years, the *Crusty Demons* get their own game. The Moto-X side of games has not been extremely inspired and *Crusty Demons* instead takes a lot of its inspiration from the *Tony Hawk* series. Developer Koch introduced a story for the action: a team of riders has to regain their souls from Lucifer by performing insane stunts and completing objectives in an area. It's not all bad, though. While completing the dark lord's bidding, they are immortal, which is a convenient excuse to crack your rider's skeletal arrangement in a lot of different ways.

Luckily, the action takes place on Earthly terra-firma and players will travel the world to locations like Tokyo and New York to perform stunts and get the job done. The levels are open to be explored and missions are scattered around to accept. In the meantime, stunts and exploits of insanity can be attempted – and are rewarded. As with the legacy of the team, taking chances is what it's all about, so the game awards players for the amount of damage they cause to riders – much like the injury runs in *Amped 3*, but running permanently. Scores are built chaining stunts together and ending it with a spectacular injury. Being without a soul does have its uses.

Objectives can range around a variety of activities, but most will be of the timed nature. Some will involve other kinds of vehicles, keeping true to some of the later Crusty videos, though missions are much more creative. One involves chasing down pimps in a pimpmobile. Nevertheless, the real action lies with the bikes. With every level, a team of riders is selected, each with skill rankings of air control, 'smash ability', flight and trick skill. However, the bikes take the main focus and have the bulk of the stats - unlocking new models are the key to getting further in the game. Once all the objectives on a level are met, a final race takes place – win and move on to the next level.

It's applying a familiar formula to a sub-genre that could use a few new ideas, and the name stands with the crowd that this will appeal to. But the proof is in the pudding and it might just be a quick license buck on a extreme sports team. But you could say the same about *Tony Hawk*. **NAG**

High-Speed Data Transfer with Improved Accessibility and Reliable Performance

Innovative ASUS QuieTrack Optical Drive with Auto Vibration Reducing System (AVRS) Helps to Expand Multimedia Enjoyment

Multimedia and entertainment applications have become almost a daily routine in this age of digital living. Unfortunately the primary means of digital contents are still being played back through disc drives, where motors become the main source of noise inevitably. With disc rotation speeds in the latest optical drives reaching up to 66m/s, it is almost comparable to a 240km/s hurricane. The fast airflow coupled with motor vibration unfortunately helped to raise operation acoustics up to 50db in most drives. It could get very annoying when you are trying to concentrate on work or listen to some tunes.

The innovative AVRS, one crucial element of the three-part **QuieTrack** technology ensemble from the leading provider of high-performance optical drives - ASUS, is developed exactly with that in mind to dampen drive noise in every conceivable fashion while improves on stability, accessibility, and playability.

So just what exactly is AVRS?

With rotating machinery as one of the most frequent causes of vibration, AVRS (Auto Vibration Reducing System) can successfully reduce vibration and noise induced by unbalanced mass during rotations. Active ball-balancing is a method employed to adjust the state of the rotor and compensate changes that might have occurred. Balls run freely at the transient state and will automatically move to the opposite position when mass becomes unbalanced. AVRS effectively reduces the vibration caused by the unbalanced disc and most importantly enhances readability and playability.

AVRS reduces of unbalanced discs lower noise and enhance readability and playability

Additionally, the QuieTrack technology is not complete without two other essential features:

Airflow Field Modification (AFFM):

Noise and vibration are two major headaches users encounter when using a high-speed drive. AFFM is designed to change the uneven airflow field inside the drive. Furthermore, the four unique oval grooves on the upper case reinforce the structural integrity as well as modifying the internal aerodynamics of the turbulent airflow. The overall effect of balanced pressure distribution leads to quieter and more stable operation.

Double Dynamic Suspension System II (DDSSII):

The cutting-edge technology is designed to minimize vibration caused by spindle motors, components and PC cases. The patented DDSSII stabilize the pick-up head, both horizontally and vertically, achieving more precise tracking while reducing vibration and noise caused by high-revolution motors.

Incorporating such breakthrough features, enter the latest QuieTrack optical drive offering from ASUS. Aptly named, the QuieTrack Series provides a quiet and distraction-free environment. In recent industry reviews by hardware testing websites, noise produced from one competitor DVD-ROM out vocalizes 4 ASUS DVD-ROM, once again proving the effectiveness of QuieTrack.

Combined with high speed digital audio extraction and CD-audio playback, fast 52X CD and 16X DVD read features, along with the convenience of horizontal and vertical mounting capability, the DVD-E616A2 of the QuieTrack Series delivers superior flexibility and reliable operation that will certainly put all the quibbles to rest.

Expand your multimedia universe with unmatched playback compatibility

Employing the innovative QuieTrack technology, the ASUS DVD-E616A2 offers leading-edge multimedia experience with fabulous playback capacities and high-speed data transfer. Built-in advanced technologies provide users of the DVD-E616A2 a quiet, stable and high-performance multimedia environment.

Benefiting from the stability of AVRS, the DVD-E616A2 is capable of fast data transfer speed of 16x DVD and 52x CD-ROM, allowing users to access all CDs, DVD-R/ RW/ ROM, DVD+RW and DVD-Video, DVD-RAM without any compatibility issues.

Apart from the QuieTrack design ingenuity, every component of DVD-E616A2 DVD-ROM drives is selected with providing peace and quiet in mind. With the ASUS DVD-E616A2 DVD-ROM drive featuring AVRS, multimedia universe could finally be expanded to bring about more digital enjoyment.

PREVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer
FreeStyleGames

Publisher
SCEE

Distributor
Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

Genre
Fighting/Music

Release Date
September 06

HANDS ON TESTED

Down. Wit. Dat

B-BOY

A B-BOY WAS ORIGINALLY A person who danced break dance, but over time, the term has expanded to include anyone who identifies with that era of the hip-hop subculture. DJ Kool Herc apparently coined the term in 1969. He would shout the word out during a performance, and then the dancers would start break dancing.

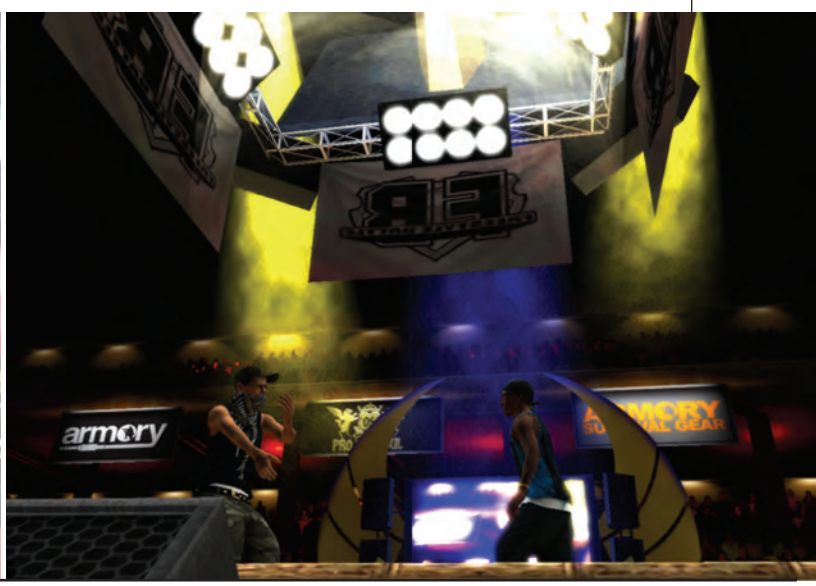
B-Boy takes this idea and culture, turning it into an unabashed oddball 'fighting' game where the player has to compete in a stylised competition, making sure to both impress the crowd, snag the 'requirements' and ultimately put on a much better show.

The preview code is fresh and rough, but the general idea comes across sound. The fighting system strings together moves the player executes via direction/button strings. Certain moves (and strings) have a limited amount of moves that can be activated from that state. Effectively, the more moves you acquire through success allow you to string together more complex patterns. The four buttons on the gamepad represent the four base moves. Certain base moves and their children have *Tony Hawk* style 'balance meters', where L1 and R1 help the player keep balance, while sustaining a hand plant/handstand and so on.

Work on the career mode would help take the game from disjointed battles into a more structured overarching plot, but right now *B-Boy* simply has a 'fight this person next if you want' career structure. Through training, the player can level-up the various base moves and sub-moves, which makes them easier and more appealing to the crowd. Certain moves can only be strung after previous moves of a high enough level.

The entire idea is haphazard depending on where you stand in the gaming universe. If you vehemently dislike hip-hop, perhaps *B-Boy* could sooth your mind into accepting it, or perhaps not.

The preview code for this hands-on was out of date, especially considering the September release date. If the code was not out of date, then *B-Boy* may just buckle under its own pressure and suffer from a lack of development time and/or funds. **NAG**



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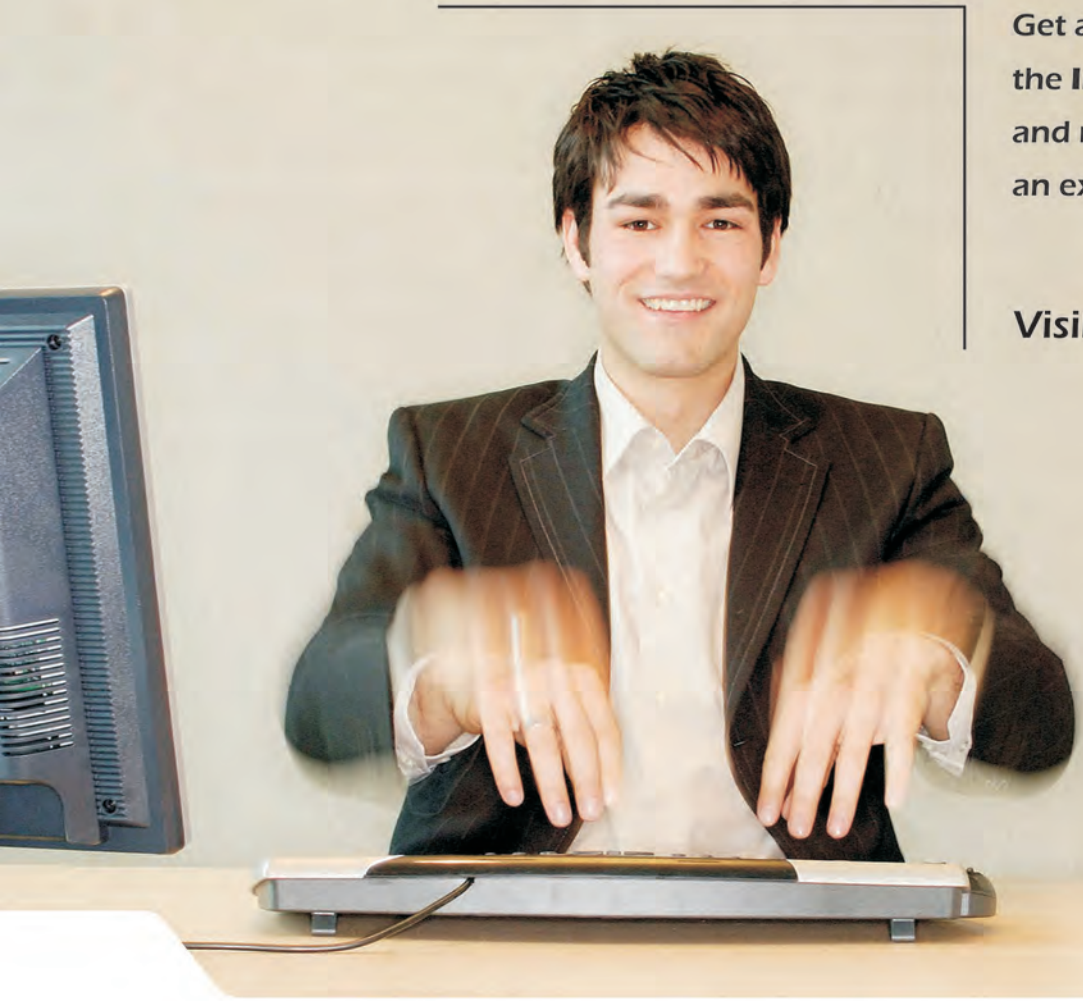

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PENQUIN J#0668

PREVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer
Faraxis

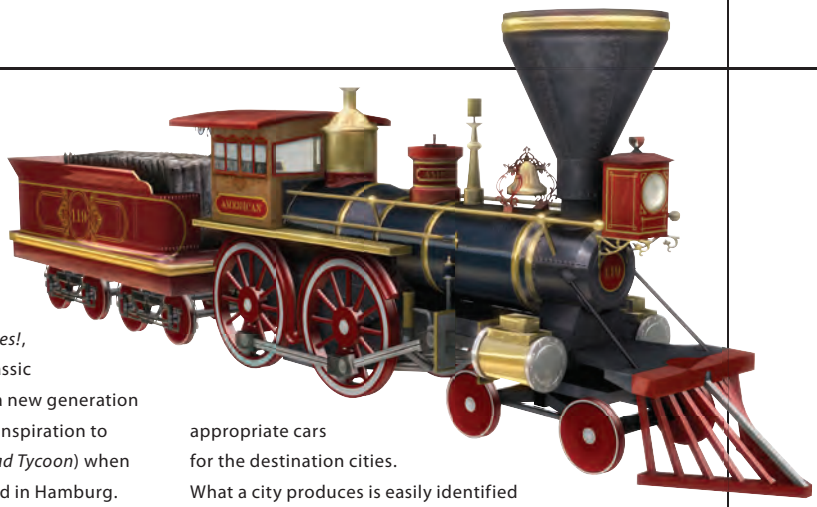
Publisher
2K Games

Distributor
Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

Genre
Simulation

Release Date
October 2006

SID MEIER'S RAILROADS!



AFTER THE SUCCESS OF *Civilization IV* and *Pirates!*, Faraxis and 2K Games felt that more classic Sid Meier goodness should be brought to a new generation of gamers. The story goes that Sid got the inspiration to update his 1990 classic (the original *Railroad Tycoon*) when he visited the world's largest model railroad in Hamburg. This is essentially what *Railroads!* is: a large model railroad set, except with a healthy dose of capitalism to keep things interesting. Players need to connect the various towns on the map to deliver goods from oil wells, lumber mills and farms to oil refineries, food processing plants and other manufacturing facilities. In-between all this, passengers and mail also need carting around.

Connecting towns create industry and the maps will become alive with activity as plantations are tended, traffic moves to cart the goods you deliver, and people move on and off platforms. *Railroads!* uses the same engine seen in *Pirates!* and *Civilization IV*, though the scale is a lot smaller, and unlike the original the maps, will stick to countries or regions instead of continents. Visually, the charm is the same and the various activities and industries have unique animations. It remains to be seen, though, if large amounts of railroads and cities will cause the slowdowns seen in *Civ 4*.

Building a rail empire is dead easy. Railroads are dragged in lines across the landscape. Passing through a hill or over a river will change the landscape to add tunnels or bridges, with the appropriate funds removed from the company chests. Using smaller increments allows players to build over terrain as well and fine-tune track routes. This can be necessary to cut off competition and keep an upper hand. Once a railway is ready, a train can be added, along with the appropriate cars for the destination cities. What a city produces is easily identified with icons, making snap decisions on what to focus on easy.

The real competition comes from beating rival rail barons. A player's company has a stock value and this is pushed up with more profits. Profits are gained not only with delivering goods, but also with adding facilities, buying industries and getting towns to expand. A high stock price means a prosperous company with lots of capital, but if it goes too low, a competitor can easily buy up stock, perhaps even taking over your company. At the very least, some of the player's hard-earned cash would go into someone else's pocket. However, the favour can be returned, and this is the main way to wipe out the competition.

Railroads! looks to be another Sid Meier gem that combines simple concepts to create a complicated game to master. A sandbox mode and multiplayer options provide more depth than the original, apart from the major graphical overhaul. After the stunted *Locomotion*, a good transport management title is very welcome. Now we just wish Sid would remake *Covert Action*. **NAG**

We've been assured that 'Locomotion' isn't on the soundtrack

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PREVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer
Radical

Publisher
Vivendi Universal Games

Distributor
MiDigital [011] 723-1967

Genre
Freeform

Release Date
Q3 2006

The Scarface drinking game: drink a shot every time Tony kills someone or uses a one-liner

SCARFACE: THE WORLD IS YOURS

CHEAP CASH-IN OR AMBITIOUS companion piece? The sandbox worlds perfected by GTA have provided a new platform for the movie license remake, since they give fans the ability to traverse the movie's world without the lack of tension from knowing the movie plot. In some instances, such as *The Godfather*, this doesn't work as well, while *The Warriors* smartly spent half the game as a prequel instead of trying to patch onto the existing plot. In *Scarface*, developer Radical optioned to go all-out and skip the entire movie phase. Instead, it starts at the end, where Tony Montana is in a gunfight with rival drug lord Sosa's men. In the movie, Montana dies tragically, a bittersweet end to a roller-coaster ride of greed, corruption and Montana's own downfall. This dramatic insight wouldn't flow too well in an action title, and instead *The World is Yours* is a what-if: what if Montana survived the mansion shootout?

As such, *Scarface* takes on the movie world, but puts players in charge of Al Pacino's character as he works to build a new drug empire. This means a lot of drug dealing, bad language, explosions, guns, women and acts of extreme violence. One could argue that Radical is only trying to push the envelope after *Vice City* already took ample inspiration from *Scarface*, but the movie itself was a violent concoction filled with controversy – apparently, Oliver Stone's script incorporated actual DEA cases. While it remains to be seen how far the game goes in this respect, it is very violent and over-flowing with bad language. But not having these elements included would be like filming *The Sound of Music* without any music. In the game, players will have free access to Miami and receive missions via a cellphone. Montana is also able to call up a driver to take him to places, plus the driver can be involved in firefights. There are three playable characters other than Montana, namely his driver, enforcer and assassin, useful for more messy jobs. But the main focus falls on Tony and his dealings. Whether it's a side-mission or main story endeavour, taking care of a rival drug dealer, making a new drug deal or betting some cash on a gambling mini-game, everything contributes to Tony's Balls Gauge. This is essentially Tony's reputation system and it also fills up the Blind Rage meter. When this is full, Tony can enter an invincible mode for a few seconds (in first-person), blowing his enemies away with ease. It complements the action of the game, which like *The Godfather* appears to take a large part of the focus.

How elaborate *Scarface* will be remains to be seen. Though as far as its handling and entertainment values go, the reports have been encouraging. Still, it's hard not to look at it as another GTA clone. That said, it's not a bad premise for one and the story was penned by the scriptwriter behind *Blow* and *American History X*. But story is not the main driving factor here. It's how much the game complements the world of *Scarface* and perhaps encourages a few new fans to take a look at the classic movie. **NAG**

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- SLI, Cross-Fire, and Dual Core CPU ready
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- Dual PCI-Express connectors, 4 SATA connectors, and nine 4-pin power connectors
- **Dual PCI-E Connectors- Nvidia SLI**
- **5.25" Drive Bay + Total Watts Meter Module**
- **Safety / EMI Approvals: CB,CE, FCC, UL, CUL, TUV certification**
- Embedded Socket and Modularized cable Management

Front Fan: 80 x 80 x 25 mm
Back Fan: 80 x 80 x 20 mm

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- **Dual PCI Express, 4 S-ATA connectors & ten 4-pin power connectors**
- High efficiency (80%) with 0.99 Active
- **PCI Express, SLI, Cross-Fire, and dual-core CPU ready**
- Mirror Effect Casing
- **High efficient with dual fans for lowest noise**
- Dual fan Design-Optimum Air Flow

Silent PurePower 250W - W099

- World's First nVIDIA SLi Certified Dual VGA Card-Dedicated Power Supply
- Standard 5.25" design
- Two 6-pin PCI-Express connectors support nVIDIA SLI technology
- **Three LEDs display**
- High reliability: MTBF>100,000 hours
- Experience The SLi Performance by Power Express.

Silent PurePower W0019 + Active PFC, 430W, ATX 12V 2.0

- **Plus total Watt viewer**
- **Transparent X-type side window** and replaceable
  X-type side panel : EMI test passed
- **Dual colorful LED: 7colors flash**
- X-blower with the embedded VR function to change the fan speed
- Intelligent Cable Management

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PREVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Developer
Plastic Reality Technology

Publisher
CENEGA Publishing

Distributor
Megarom

Genre
Action

Release Date
Q3 2006

HANDS ON TESTED

EL MATADOR

MAX PAYNE WAS A wonderful game, full of atmosphere and plot exposition via internal monologue. It wrapped itself in *film noir*, taking on the moody style of 1940s crime films.

El Matador is not *Max Payne*, despite 'lifting' most of what *Max Payne* did in the gameplay department. Whereas *Max Payne* was an overbearing drama involving betrayal, drugs and babies, *El Matador* is an espionage action explosion with more pop than plot. Unfortunately for *El Matador*, while its visuals are certainly up to speed with what we expect today (from last-generation, albeit), it lacks that certain X-factor so far that would set it apart from run-of-the-mill.

It is still too early to tell how *El Matador* will unfold. The hands-on preview only yielded a few paltry levels and some bad guys to shoot. And the shooting did happen, mostly in slow-motion.

Think *Max Payne*, but just remove the trench coat and grimy New York architecture. If you're moving in a direction and you tap shift, you lunge and everything goes syrup. Hitting TAB activates bullet-time until the reserve runs out, which replenishes when you shoot bad guys.

Bad guys appear in the various levels, which seem to range from jungle to slightly urban areas right down to dockside container-fiestas. The levels themselves thus far seem uninspired and overly bland. Their physical design makes the side-leap manoeuvre rather painful, especially when the current camera decides to embed itself in a corner and hide from the rest of the game world.

As a third-person 'tactical action' game set in South America, *El Matador* seems to look and play the part. Promises of "a fascinating range of enemies" that includes dogs and crocodiles may be kept, or not.

At its current level, *El Matador* is a fun distraction, but doesn't contain enough of the plot and/or action to really keep players interested.

If cleaned up, however, with a tighter camera and slightly more inspired designs, El Matador could finally be one of the first (of hopefully many) games to truly clone *Max Payne*, which could only add diversity to the original gameplay mechanics that Max brought to the world.

Or, it could crash and burn, scaring off other developers who'll then believe that Max can't be repeated by anyone other than the original team. **NAG**

ASUS PhysX P1 Card
Laws of Physics Make Games Look and Feel Real

Bundling Ghost Recon for a Complete Gaming Package

The ASUS PhysX P1 card is the world's first to incorporate a PPU (PhysX Processing Unit) to take gamers to a whole new level of video realism. Currently only two companies are scheduled to manufacture PPU cards, and ASUS is one of the pioneers.

Game titles with crazier and crazier graphics are hitting the stores every year. Do you think your computer setup right now is powerful enough to really take advantage of the 3D animators' skills and efforts?

In a gaming system, the CPU (Central Processing Unit) drives game AI and logic, while the GPU (Graphics Processing Unit) delivers beautiful three-dimensional visual representation. This year, a third component has arrived that will blow your mind away with never-seen-before dynamic motion and interaction.

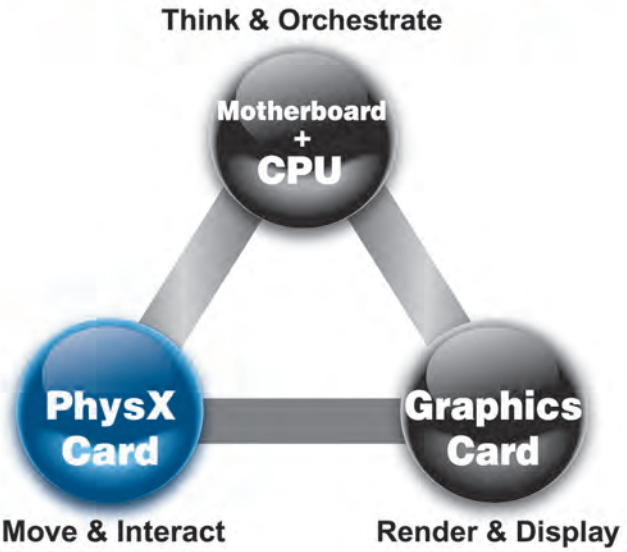
By bringing the laws of physics into video performance, systems with the ASUS PhysX P1 card can now offer enhanced realism for explosions, flying debris, liquid flows, water splashes and movements influenced by wind. No two motions will be the same, which means no more canned animations and predetermined interaction.

The PhysX P1 is first to leverage the PhysX core that optimized specifically for dynamic large-scale, physics processing. This new video technology accelerates real-time physical motion and interaction at a scale far beyond those of CPUs and GPUs.

The PhysX P1 now bundles one of the hottest games of 2006, Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter. The new game is made specifically for the next-generation systems, maximizing increased power to deliver exhilarating graphics and physics reality.

With the list of growing PhysX accelerated games poised to hit the stores this year, players need to equip themselves with the most advanced graphics technology to experience gaming realism that not only looks real but acts and feels real as well.

PhysX Completes the New Gaming Power Triangle

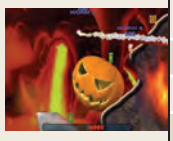


REVIEWS

WEB SCORES

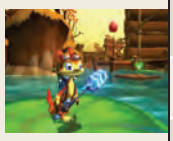
WORMS: OPEN WARFARE [PSP]

NAG [100]	70
Metacritic [100]	70
Gamerankings [100]	70



DAXTER [PSP]

NAG [100]	90
Metacritic [100]	86
Gamerankings [100]	87

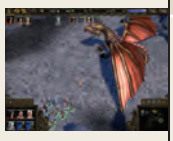


HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY [PS2]

NAG [100]	81
Metacritic [100]	83
Gamerankings [100]	83

SPELLFORCE 2 [PC]

NAG [100]	71
Metacritic [100]	81
Gamerankings [100]	81

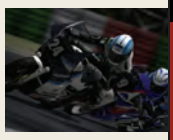


THE MOVIES: STUNTS & EFFECTS [PC]

NAG [100]	70
Metacritic [100]	81
Gamerankings [100]	82

TOURIST TROPHY [PS2]

NAG [100]	78
Metacritic [100]	74
Gamerankings [100]	75

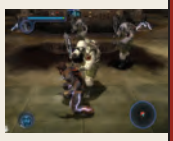


APE ESCAPE 3 [PS2]

NAG [100]	81
Metacritic [100]	77
Gamerankings [100]	79

X-MEN: THE OFFICIAL GAME [PS2]

NAG [100]	50
Metacritic [100]	51
Gamerankings [100]	58

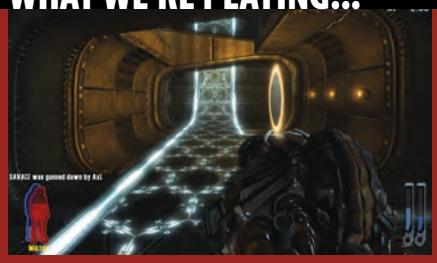


The ratings in this section, apart from the NAG ratings, are not the opinion of NAG Magazine. Duh. All scores were correct at time of printing.

INDEX

62	Prey	[PC]
68	Hitman: Blood Money	[PS2]
70	Tourist Trophy	[PS2]
72	Spellforce 2	[PC]
74	X-Men: The Official Game	[PS2]
76	Ape Escape 3	[PS2]
78	Championship Manager 2006	[PS2]
79	Worms: Open Warfare	[PSP]
80	The Movies: Stunts & Effects	[PC]
81	World Poker Tour	[PS2]
82	Daxter	[PSP]
82	Juiced: Eliminator	[PSP]
83	Paris Hilton's Diamond Quest	[MOB]
83	The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift	[MOB]
83	My Dog	[MOB]

WHAT WE'RE PLAYING...

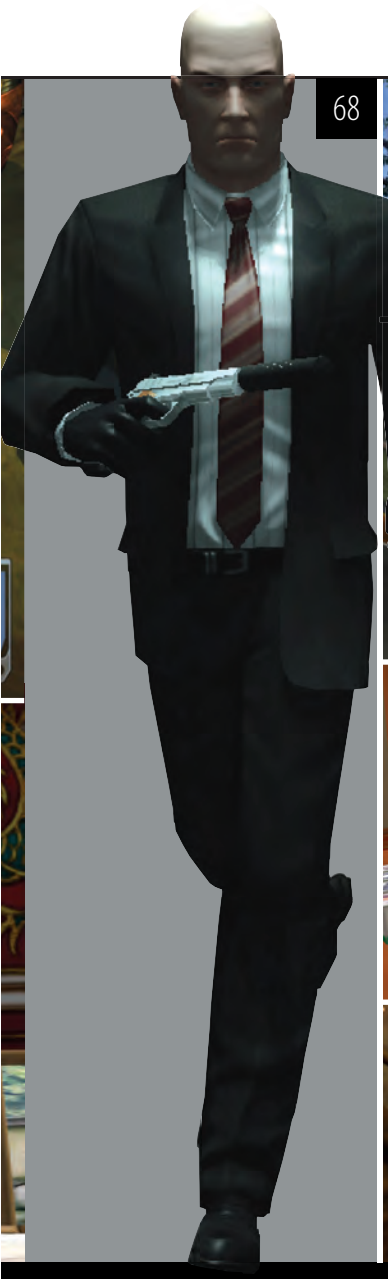


MULTIPREY (PC)

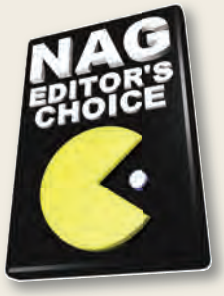
With the demo out, the NAG office has been ablaze with wall-walking, spirit-busting Cherokee action. The refreshing take on deathmatch along with the various innovations such as functional portals that actually affect gameplay have everyone joining the random server that may appear on the network. It is best played with the *Ghost Busters* theme song in the background. Be sure to wear moccasins before grabbing that alien-slug shooting cannon that everyone camps.

GUILD WARS PROPHECIES/FACTIONS (PC)

There is something to be said for playing a game from the start again, but paying much more attention to every little detail than you did on the first tour through. Both *Guild Wars* chapters (or episodes, if you will) have incredible lore and forethought. Playing the game from Chapter 1 right through to the end, *Factions* will only leave you anticipating the next episode in the saga Arena.Net is creating.



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.

SCORING

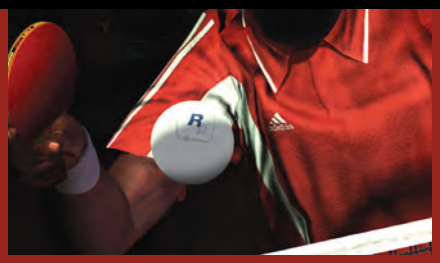
NAG is different, NAG is special. We score games on the 50% principle, meaning that we regard 50% as 'average'. It's neither here, nor there. 50% is the perfect middle ground. A game that scores 50% is a game that does nothing wrong, but nothing right either. If a game won't install properly, naturally 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.

FREELANCER MULTIPLAYER (PC)

Suddenly, for almost no reason, people started playing network *Freelancer* in the office. We don't know who started it, but we know that we're continuing it. *Freelancer* wasn't everything that was promised, but it is still the best game we have for space-based trade, exploration and piracy (that includes multiplayer and a decent-enough control scheme lifted from *Wing Commander Prophecy*). Now if only its sequel would magically appear…

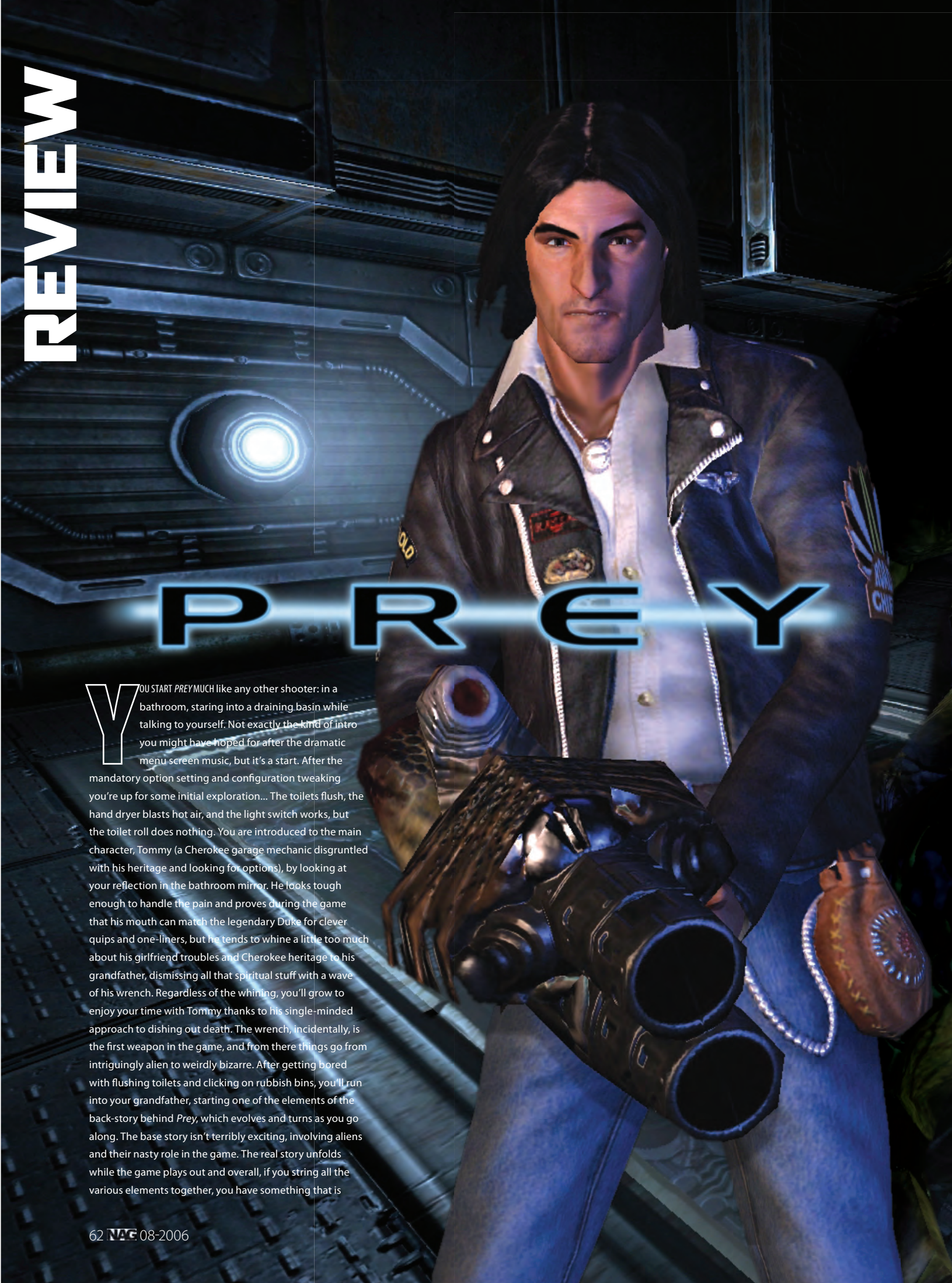
DAXTER (PSP)

The lovable Ottsel has captured the heart of our hardware guy, who denies having a favourable reaction towards cute fuzzy things. Daxter on PSP runs, jumps and attacks small things just how you'd want the game to attack small things – with aplomb. As a showcase for what the PSP is capable of once developers stop being obtuse, *Daxter* comes first in the race.



ROCKSTAR PRESENTS TABLE TENNIS (360)

Easily discarded as a vanity project, Rockstar's *Table Tennis* is actually a very clever technology demonstration, as well as a snide remark on game development today. Rockstar managed to take table tennis and turn it into a professional, slick game sold at budget simply because "… it doesn't quite live up to what Rockstar usually produces", so they felt it would be 'unfair' to ask full price. Match Point!



PREY

YOU START *PREY* MUCH like any other shooter: in a bathroom, staring into a draining basin while talking to yourself. Not exactly the kind of intro you might have hoped for after the dramatic menu screen music, but it's a start. After the mandatory option setting and configuration tweaking you're up for some initial exploration... The toilets flush, the hand dryer blasts hot air, and the light switch works, but the toilet roll does nothing. You are introduced to the main character, Tommy (a Cherokee garage mechanic disgruntled with his heritage and looking for options), by looking at your reflection in the bathroom mirror. He looks tough enough to handle the pain and proves during the game that his mouth can match the legendary Duke for clever quips and one-liners, but he tends to whine a little too much about his girlfriend troubles and Cherokee heritage to his grandfather, dismissing all that spiritual stuff with a wave of his wrench. Regardless of the whining, you'll grow to enjoy your time with Tommy thanks to his single-minded approach to dishing out death. The wrench, incidentally, is the first weapon in the game, and from there things go from intriguingly alien to weirdly bizarre. After getting bored with flushing toilets and clicking on rubbish bins, you'll run into your grandfather, starting one of the elements of the back-story behind *Prey*, which evolves and turns as you go along. The base story isn't terribly exciting, involving aliens and their nasty role in the game. The real story unfolds while the game plays out and overall, if you string all the various elements together, you have something that is

VITAL INFO

Platforms
Reviewed on PC

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

Suggested Retail Price
R349.00

Developer
Human Head Studios

Publisher
Take 2

Supplier
Ster Kinekor Games (011) 445-7900

Genre
FPS

Age Restriction
18+

Specifications
CPU: Pentium 4 2.0GHz
Video: 64MB Graphics Card
RAM: 512MB RAM
HDD: 2.2GB HDD
CD/DVD: CD/DVD-ROM
Internet: Not Required, but supported
Players: 8

NAG EDITOR'S CHOICE

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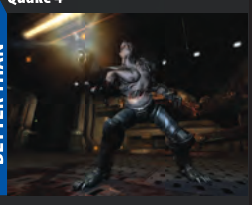
BOTTOM LINE

Prey brings spirit and soul into the limping and now almost lame science-fiction shooter genre. It proves that these games can still be fun and entertaining, while managing to offer up enough new and unique ideas that'll have you wondering why they haven't been done before. There is hope now and Human Head Studios should be very proud of what it has achieved here.

96/100

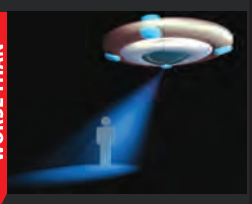
Quake 4

BETTER THAN



The real thing!

WORSE THAN

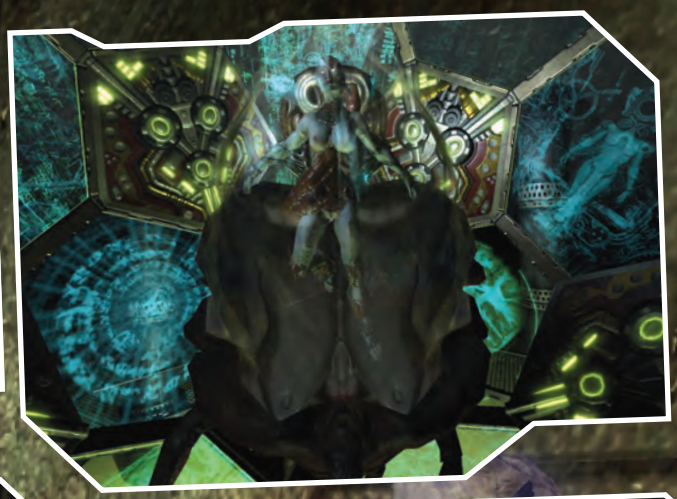


rather interesting, unpredictable to a point, but doesn't bog you down with endless non-player character chatter and hundreds of lines of dull dialogue. It's hard-hitting and somehow manages to get you emotionally involved through superb voice acting and plenty of small touches here and there. The game also smartly ties the various storytelling elements together with various play dynamic elements that we'll take a look at later.

After chatting to your grandfather a second time, if you unlock the Cherokee difficulty mode and decide to play the game again, you'll also discover that you can't click past these dialogue bits, so a few negative points there. But pressing 'F1' in the game brings up a colourful help menu that we can all hope other developers will replicate in shooters going forward. These small things help make *Prey* the trendsetting game that it is. Moving along past grandfather, we enter a bar setting (minutes before all hell breaks loose and the game proper begins). To our right is an arcade machine (playable) and a few gambling machines (also playable), straight ahead is a jukebox (adjustable) and on the left, a bar featuring your girlfriend Jen and two drunken louts. The fact that you can play on the poker and blackjack machines is also a nice touch. After a few exchanges between your girlfriend, the drunks and yourself, things turn ugly and you're soon reaching for your wrench and clobbering the teeth and blood out of the drunks. Calm settles over the pub, a dog is barking and there's a strange emergency broadcast on the television in the corner… something about sightings in the sky. You hardly have time to absorb anything when a strange blue light shines through the bar area. Tables and chairs start moving and disappearing, and before you know it, your grandfather and Jen are sucked up through the roof and into a strange alien vessel. After a brief introductory on-rails visit to the world, very reminiscent of *Quake 4* and *Half-Life*, you're about to explore, a mysterious stranger sets you free and you find yourself armed only with a wrench all alone on an alien craft with no sign of your girlfriend or grandfather. This is how it all starts, and from this point forward it's an all too short nine odd hours of exhilarating action and awe-inspiring exploration of a truly alien world.

Tommy has a lighter to illuminate his way and a wrench as a weapon to bang on walls and other objects. The environment is meaty, meaty meaning biomechanical much like *Quake* and *Doom*, but only slimier looking and sounding. Most of the alien vessel comprises of metal and biological material (assumingly harvested from various other worlds). After getting over the initial discomfort of travelling from one location to the other, through what can only be described as large sphincters, you'll soon come across a creature called a fodder. On two legs, these buggers move like lightning and often surprise you from dark corners. Bringing your wrench firmly down on their skulls deals with the problem and sets the pace of the game… dark, mysterious and filled to the brim with nasty surprises. In fact, more often than not it'll be a part of the level that deals out a little damage and not a weapon-firing enemy. The initial levels are lovingly crafted and full of

small touches and details, and while much of the game still follows the corridor, set-piece room, event, corridor formula, the game never delivers the same experience twice, and never has you running back over covered ground to artificially extend the experience. *Prey* is all about unique environments and fascinating technology that'll have you ogling the scenery more than you'd expect. The first few levels sees your grandfather killed (it happens so early on it's not a spoiler), you discovering your first alien weapon and your own death. However, don't worry. Dying is in fact one of the first dramatic deviations from the tried and tested first-person shooter convention conveyor. Consider what happens when you die in most games. You reload from your last quick save and play through a small section of the game again – this time a little more carefully. The downside is that you now know where the enemies will be and that lurking in that dark corner over there is a giant ninja frog that's going to take your head off if you do what you originally did. *Prey* throws all of this out the window and when you die, you enter the Death Realm, a small level (consisting mostly of a circular arena floating in the sky with rock pillars all around) where you must battle ghostly wraiths until you're returned (after a short time) to the exact spot and situation where you died. This makes the game much more immediate and it's refreshing not having to tread the same path multiple times until you either find more health or beat back that evil ninja frog. It's a mature approach to the genre, one that doesn't penalise you for dying, but gives you something fun to do instead of watching pixels filling up on a loading bar. Chalk a big one for innovation.



However, before we continue, back to the first time you die. It's a set piece that doesn't give you a chance, but you need to die to enter the spirit world where you run into your grandfather (in spirit form) and are reintroduced to your spirit hawk that'll end up following you through the game, distracting enemies and helping you read the alien scrawl on most displays. Having the hawk with you is comforting and almost makes the whole exploring bizarre and sometimes terrifying locations bearable, and unlike annoying intellectually challenged members of a Bravo team, for example, can't get in your way or shoot enemies you wanted to. Back in the spirit realm, after your first death you're told by your grandfather all about your ancestors and how they can help you in the challenges you're about to face. The most important thing that comes out of this whole exercise is a new ability, spirit mode. Pressing the correctly assigned key gets you into spirit mode, a mode where you leave your physical body and sneak around the alien vessel. Don't wander too far, however, because you'll eventually have to return to your physical body to continue playing. This mode is useful for passing through force fields, for example, and then fiddle with the disabling control panel so your physical body can pass through. As well as simple level navigation, occasionally you'll see spirit symbols on the floor or wall, indicating that entering this mode will help you to complete a level or gain access to a secret stash of weapons or health. Many of the game levels are structured in such a way that you'll need to enter this mode to complete that section of the level. For example, press a button and two halves of a bridge start moving together. If you press the button and make a run for it, you just never have enough time to get across. The solution… stand on the very end of one of the moving sections, enter the spirit mode and go back to where the button is. Now press it and instantly return to your body, which is already on the moving bridge. This is a simplistic example, but some of the spirit mode puzzles require a little thought before solving them. You can also sneak up on enemies in this mode, scope out a section of the level you're about to enter, or simply put spiritual arrows through various parts of enemy creatures. Chalk two for innovation.

Much of the game to this point is treading in fairly familiar territory – you've got your aliens, your levels and your health bar. Things start getting weird when you discover portals and wall walking. It's not uncommon to enter a portal upright and end up dropping from the ceiling, or even worse, being able to watch yourself enter a portal while looking into the portal you're about to enter. The world of Prey rarely makes sense, but instead of simply cobbling together a bunch of gravity and portal tricks, the designers have used these game elements to present a deeply disturbing world that not

and the entire room flips upside-down allowing you to get to previously inaccessible areas. Gravity flipping, portals and wall walking also play an important part in the puzzle element of *Prey*. This game goes far beyond collecting coloured key cards and finding the right door. The level designers for *Prey* certainly deserve an award for the amount of effort it must have taken to put some of these set piece puzzles together. Some rooms feature up to six gravity switches and a single portal, and the player must keep shooting switches until they fall through the portal and can proceed with further exploration. Besides this kind of puzzle, the game does bring things to a grinding halt on some occasions by presenting the player with what looks like a dead-end. After going back through a few rooms, searching for a way out or door that might have been missed, you'll finally discover the 'trick' to proceeding, and due to the simplicity of most of these situations, you'll be nodding and grinning at the ingenuity of the level designers for presenting such an obvious solution to a seemingly impossible and impassable situation. The best part is that these puzzles only getter better as the game moves along, highlighting that this game was lovingly put together from the first screen to the last. As you progress, you'll be introduced to more bizarrely twisted creatures, more plot devices and interesting revelations. You'll be shocked at what you have to do at one point in the game to proceed, and you'll keep seeing new things and experiencing new ways of playing the game all the time. It's rare for any game to keep delivering innovation once you start nearing the end, and Prey never disappoints. It actually gets better the more you play it.

There are vehicle sections that see the *Doom* engine pushed to the limit with huge, if a little sparse, areas to explore, and even a few vehicle-based puzzles to solve. It's a nice touch being able to grab ground-based enemies with your towing beam and shoot them in the air while they wriggle about helplessly. This is such good use of the *Doom* engine that you have to wonder how id Software and Raven managed to put together such an average game (*Quake 4*) using the same technology. At least *Prey* has set the standard very high. Let's just hope we don't see wall walking in every new shooter from this point forward. *Prey* is teaching one important lesson, and that's innovation and in doing things the player has never seen before.

There weren't many high expectations going into this game. After the dead average *Quake 4*, hyped shooter games can't be taken seriously anymore. *Prey* is a surprisingly good game and does nothing wrong. In fact, you'll be very hard pressed to find fault with the game as it just keeps throwing good things your way. At the end of it all, you'll be thinking 'wow'! You know that feeling you get when watching the credits roll after a really good movie - that little twinge of sadness that it's all over... It's easily the best first-person shooter you'll ever play and will be remembered as a classic for introducing so many new ideas to the genre. You can thank Tommy and Human Head Studios for saving humanity at the end of the game, but what you really need to thank them for is how they've managed to save this once exciting genre from extinction. Bring on the next game already…

One last thing; remember to watch the credits right to the end for a nice surprise. **NAG**

REVIEW

MULTIPLAYER

Naturally there'll be a stern examination of the multiplayer component, because what good is a game these days without a strong multiplayer game. It's doubtful that *Prey* will achieve the success of games like *Quake* in the multiplayer arena – it's just too overly complicated to play quickly and features too many unknown elements. The weapons are also not really conducive to the kinds of things multiplayer gamers are expecting. It's plenty of fun to play with eight people all crawling around on the roof and firing spam rockets into portals, but the game lacks the kind of precision, simplicity and ease that are prerequisites for long running multiplayer titles. However, the gaming community is a strange beast, and if enough people get stuck in and play it, *Prey* might just get more interest than is expected. On the cover DVD this month you will find some movies of an in-office *Prey* deathmatch – Savage is a gaming noob so don't be too surprised if you see him dying most of the time.

using a portal system to get from one part of the map to another is that you're never really sure where you are in the game world. There's no linear path through a military base that makes sense, and while *Prey* is still linear, it never feels like it because you're so disorientated all the time that you feel that there's a huge amount of this vessel you're just not contemplating. It adds some artificial depth to the game world and you should always remember to look behind you after you've entered a portal. Portal technology fools the brain into thinking that just because you travelled from one point to another, you've seen everything there is to see from entry point to exit point – it's so bad you have to constantly remind yourself to turn around. This is another unique aspect to the game that comes as an unexpected bonus. Besides portals along the way, you're going to discover that you can walk on walls. Stepping onto specially textured and lit sections of many levels will have you standing on the ceiling looking up at the floor. Initially this is rather disconcerting, especially when an enemy appears out of a portal and you jump to the left to avoid his fire. Jumping while on this surface will send you crashing to the floor (usually from the ceiling), disorientated and taking damage from the enemy shooter now positioned on the ceiling. It's a wonderful dynamic to the game that makes it so much more challenging and again adds so much more to the feeling of exploring an incomprehensible alien world. If walking on the roof and popping in an out of portals weren't bad enough, the game also features strange gravity switching elements. Walk into a room and the walls on the left and right are actually floors, shoot a gravity switch

only keeps players guessing, but makes them paranoid too. You never just jump through a portal in *Prey*, you stick your head in just a little to look around, because more often than not, you're not going to like where you end up. Another nice touch with

REVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R499

Developer

IO Interactive

Publisher

Eidos Interactive

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

Genre

Action

Age Restriction

18+

Specifications

Online: No
Controllers: 1
Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Dark and intriguing stealth-orientated action has always been the mainstay of the *Hitman* series, and the trend is continued, though with greater precision and refinement, in *Blood Money*. A more substantial story, fantastic graphics, excellent sound and a highly polished play dynamic make this title the best in its series.

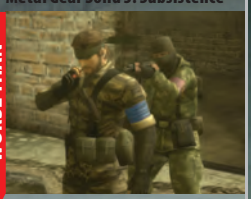
81/100

BETTER THAN

Hitman: Contracts

WORSE THAN

Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence



HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

AGENT 47, THE NOTORIOUS cloned assassin known and loved by fans of the *Hitman* series, makes his return in the franchise's latest instalment, *Blood Money*. This is the fourth outing in the series, and although it makes no remarkable departures from the tried and tested formula of its predecessors, it does well to further refine the play dynamic, and the result is indeed quite pleasing. The story is told in flashback form, and manages to be both engrossing and, at times, surprising. Without giving away too much, throughout the course of Agent 47's assignments, it becomes clear that a rival hitman agency is in operation, and that their target is, in fact, Agent 47 himself. It's a competent enough storyline, and makes for a refreshing change from the usually sparse plots familiar to the series.

In terms of the play dynamic, at its core, the game is, once again, about eliminating your targets with as little mess as possible. This time around, Agent 47's arsenal has been expanded somewhat, giving him not only a variety of upgradeable weapons to choose from (including pistols, poison syringes, sniper rifles and even shotguns), but also an extended hand-to-hand combat repertoire, as well as certain environment-orientated abilities such as hiding bodies in dumpsters, and leaping across rooftops. In fact, interacting with the environment is probably one of the most important facets of the game dynamic. Although you can simply put a bullet between the eyes of your mark with a silenced handgun, the game rewards you for making your marks' deaths as inconspicuous as possible, and thus it's advisable to attempt, whenever possible, to make your target's demise seem accidental. To this end, you can rig the supporting chains of chandeliers with explosives, push people off balconies, and even change the prop handgun in a certain play with a real weapon, to make your executions seem like bizarre mishaps.

Stealth is, once again, your greatest ally, and, as such, you'll often find that Agent 47's ability to steal a downed enemy's clothing is

indispensable, since being disguised will often allow you access to places usually off-limits to civilians. Needless to say, once disguised, you'll still have to take care not to arouse too much suspicion – a psychotherapist running around a rehab facility with a submachine gun tends to attract just a little too much attention, and attention is precisely what Agent 47 needs to avoid.

The fewer traces of foul play you leave behind, the greater the payout you receive for the contract, and this money can in turn be used to purchase weapon upgrades, intelligence tips for your next mission, or as bribes to lower your notoriety. The notoriety mechanic is another new addition to the game. The more publicity you receive after a hit, the more likely it is that civilians will recognise you in subsequent missions, making it more difficult to accomplish your objective. Thus, when your notoriety rises too high, you can bribe civilians, city officials, the police, or even obtain a new identity - all at a price, of course.

Although *Hitman: Blood Money* doesn't introduce any drastic changes to the previous titles in this series, all the alterations that have been made are implemented well, and, although subtle, make the game a richer experience. It isn't flawless, but is undoubtedly better polished than any of the previous titles. The more strongly integrated plot makes this a highly enthralling title, and the versatility of the play dynamic lends this game tremendous replay value. Superb graphics and excellent sound round off the package, making this the definitive title in the *Hitman* series. Followers of the franchise will immediately feel comfortable with it, and newcomers should be able to ease into it without too much difficulty either. *Hitman: Blood Money* is a near-perfect execution (if you'll forgive the horrific pun) of stealth gaming, and fans of this genre will be well rewarded by giving it a try. **NAG**

There is alot to be said for a man with a gun for every occasion

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	NGC

Suggested Retail Price
R489

Developer
Polyphony Digital

Publisher
Sony Computer Entertainment

Supplier
Ster Kinekor Gamers [011] 445-7960

Genre
Racing

Age Restriction
3+

Specifications
Players: 1-2
Online: No
Controllers: 2

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BOTTOM LINE

A very intricate and involving take on the motorcycle-racing genre, which demands patience and practice, but rewards the player with a rich and thorough play dynamic that truly does justice to the sport. It's not a game intended for everyone, but if you take your bikes seriously, you're likely to enjoy this.

78/100

MotoGP 4

BETTER THAN

The real thing

WORSE THAN

Its's like the real thing, only cheaper and with less tar mac

TOURIST TROPHY

POLYPHONY DIGITAL, FAMOUS FOR the exceptionally highly regarded *Gran Turismo* series, has turned its attention towards motorcycles, and the result is *Tourist Trophy* – the "real riding simulator." True to form, this slogan is, in fact, quite accurate, since, in many ways, *Tourist Trophy* does for the motorcycle-racing genre what *Gran Turismo* did for the car-racing genre. Having said this, casual gamers without any real fascination for motorcycles will probably find the game too involved and intricate for their liking. It takes quite a while to fully come to terms with the way the bike handles, and to become accustomed to the mechanics of properly leaning, and using the independent front and rear brakes, without splattering your rider on the tarmac.

Once you get a feel for the handling, however, the game becomes quite enjoyable, and the 30 tracks (which will be familiar to anyone who has played *Gran Turismo 4*) and more than 100 real world bikes add tremendously to the title's depth, particularly since each individual motorcycle has its own distinctive feel to it. The majority of the game lies in the career mode, similar to that found in *Gran Turismo 4*, with a couple of notable differences. Firstly, there is no currency in this game – additional vehicles are unlocked only by completing challenges and winning races. Secondly, although you can tweak a number of settings on each bike, they cannot be upgraded by purchasing parts and so on. On the one hand, this eliminates the frustration of having to earn enough money to afford a decent vehicle, but at the same time, it also fails to make you feel at all attached to any of your vehicles, which was perhaps one of the GT series' strongest points.

Nonetheless, as alluded to above, you are able to make some customisations to your bikes, including adjusting gear ratios, brakes, suspension and so on. In addition to this, you're also able to make adjustments to your rider's position – you can tweak arm angles, seat positioning, and the extent to which your character leans. In addition, as you go along, you'll also be able to kit your rider out with various pieces of gear from some real world manufacturers, adding a degree of individualism to your character.

The game is built on the same engine as *Gran Turismo 4*, and so it should come as no surprise to hear that the visuals are absolutely stunning, particularly in the replays, with each individual bike having a fantastic degree of detail. The sound effects too are well produced, and each vehicle has a distinctive note. The soundtrack manages to be competent, if somewhat unremarkable.

All in all, *Tourist Trophy* succeeds in exactly what it sets out to do. It's a complex and involved title that seeks to accurately simulate motorcycle-racing, rather than just providing a half-hearted, frenetic arcade-style interpretation of the sport. It's deep and can be exceptionally daunting, especially for the newcomer, though this is to be expected from developers of the calibre of Polyphony Digital. The title is aimed quite clearly at what is largely a niche market, and for anyone in its target audience it will provide a lengthy, enjoyable and often rewarding gaming experience, if you're willing to invest the necessary time to master it. Some of the departures from the *Gran Turismo 4* career mode are perhaps a little questionable, but ultimately, this does little to detract from the title as a whole. If you're looking for a complex and involving motorcycle-racing title, it's unlikely that you'll find much better than *Tourist Trophy*. **NAG**

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At this point you realise you don't have the lawnmower spell

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	NGC

Suggested Retail Price
R300

Developer
Phenomic Game Development

Publisher
JoWood

Supplier
WWE [011] 462-0150

Genre
Role-Playing Strategy

Age Restriction
12+

Specifications
CPU: Pentium 4 1.5GHz
Video: 128MB Graphics Card
RAM: 512MB RAM
HDD: 5.0GB HDD
CD/DVD: DVD-ROM
Internet: Not required, but supported
Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

This is an engrossing story-driven role-playing adventure with airs of strategy. While the battles tend to be quite tactical, the strategic elements are farcical and lacking in depth. Players looking for an RTS experience should look elsewhere, but those looking for a more casual take on the *Baldur's Gate*-style of role-playing will likely enjoy this one immensely.

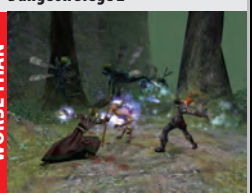
71/100

SpellForce (original)

BETTER THAN

Dungeon Siege 2

WORSE THAN



SPELLFORCE 2: SHADOW WARS

IT IS REFRESHING WHEN developers make the effort to transcend prevailing genre conventions. All too often, however, this merely means that two popular genres end up being blended into one. This is, essentially, what *SpellForce 2* is about. It combines a foundation of role-playing game dynamics with real-time strategy elements.

At its heart, this game reminded us somewhat of a cross between *Diablo* and *Baldur's Gate*, with a dash of generic real-time strategy. At the start of the game, the player creates the basis of a character, referred to in this game as an 'avatar', but this process is largely limited to choosing a gender and appearance. The actual character development takes place during the course of play. Party members and companions accompany this central character. The former are preset characters that are assigned to the group as siblings, and remain at the avatar's side throughout, while the latter come and go as the story progresses. Party members can be kitted out with equipment, and their skills can be manually advanced or left to the automatic mercies of the game, while companions are used 'as-is'.

Given that the game strives to strike a middle ground between the pace of *Diablo* and the group action of *Baldur's Gate*, an unusual, yet very innovative and effective control interface has been implemented. In most games, once a character has been selected, it can be told to apply an ability to another character by selecting the kill or action, then clicking on the target's portrait. In this game, the process has been virtually inverted. While it is possible, in theory, to select a character, then an action, then its target on the main view, this is often not viable due to the dynamic nature of the action. Instead, a player selects the target, and then chooses from whichever actions are available to be carried out by the various members of the entourage (and represented by icons under their portraits). This may sound cumbersome and unwieldy, but after only a few minutes of getting used to it, it becomes apparent that this method is, in fact, very efficient.

SpellForce 2's visuals are very appealing indeed. The graphical detail of the environment is impressive, and the models are rendered rather well. Our only criticism in this regard is the fact that all the models tend to be rather small, and zooming in is not always the solution that it could have been. The audio is a bit lacking, though, and it is disappointing to see dialogue sequences being handled by means of subtitles only.

As a role-playing adventure game, this title does well. Its real-time strategy aspects, however, are a farce. The game's strategy elements are so simplistic and superficial that we can only consider them window-dressing and a means to have the heroes of the story command armies. The base building and unit training elements only happen occasionally, though, and most will consider that a blessing. This game's core competency lies in its role-playing elements, and, if approached from that angle, it delivers very well. **NAG**

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Is it a cat? Is it a hedge-trimmer? No, it's Wolverine!

X-MEN: THE OFFICIAL GAME

VITAL INFO

Platforms
Reviewed on PC

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	NGC

Suggested Retail Price
R299

Developer
Z-Axis Games

Publisher
Activision

Supplier
MegaRom [011] 234-2680

Genre
Action

Age Restriction
12+

Specifications
CPU: Pentium III 1.2GHz
Video: 64MB Graphics Card
RAM: 256MB RAM
HDD: 3.0GB HDD
CD/DVD: 16x CD/DVD-ROM
Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

The inevitable cash cow to accompany the feature film, *X-Men: The Official Game* initially offers some nippy action and pretty colours, but ultimately degenerates into a Class C yawner. It isn't irredeemably awful, but you're not likely to pull any red-eyed raw-thumbed caffeine-fuelled all-nighters either.

50/100

BETTER THAN

Fantastic 4

WORSE THAN

X-Men Legends II: Rise of the Apocalypse

THREE OR FOUR YEARS ago, sequestered in a subterranean bunker you couldn't possibly locate on a map due to its official status as 'Non-Existent', a cabal of powerful people faced one another across an appropriately futuristic brushed steel desk, and made a momentous decision. Drafted minions scuttled about and dutifully set to drawing up interminably verbose documentation outlining this resolution, sealing it in manila envelopes, and sending it to every game developer they could find on Google. And thusly, in short, did this weighty tome command: "Lo, and for each blockbuster movie that is produced, so shall there be an accompanying game."

Therefore, coinciding with the theatrical release of the much-anticipated *X-Men: The Last Stand* feature film, Activision has cobbled together and delivered the inevitable game-of-the-film. However, there is a twist here. The paradigm-shattering gambit of *X-Men: The Official Game* is that it's a prequel to the film. Once your head stops spinning with the ineffable daring of it all, you have a game that promises to give you an exclusive inside edge over regular cinema patrons: the sort of elitist occult information you can blurt out loudly between mouthfuls of popcorn during the trailers, making you seem privileged, cool and eminently date-worthy.

On paper, this is a fully 3D, third-person perspective brawler, putting you in alternating control of Wolverine, Nightcrawler and Iceman. Natty graphics and lightning, Havok physics, voice talent courtesy of several of the film actors, including Patrick Stewart (Professor X) and Hugh Jackman (Wolverine), and a story penned by veteran X-Men scribbler Chris Claremont, augur a veritable feeding frenzy of fun. The reality, however, isn't quite as sumptuous as one might reasonably expect.

While the lithe, space-hopping Nightcrawler is mostly a treat to play, Wolverine's heavy-handed attacks and Iceman's glorified snowball hurling grow tedious rather quickly. And no, you don't have the luxury of choosing which character you're going to play. What's more, the occasional 'assistance' of NPC X-Men will leave you slack-jawed with frustrated dismay at their inexplicable ineptitude. There is something decidedly bizarre, for example, about the hulking Colossus being ham-fistedly unable to swat off a handful of puny henchmen on his own, bawling instead for Nightcrawler's intervention every 20 seconds. And you'll doubtless fail to be dazzled by Storm's remarkable disinterest in your pretty tail getting trampled by Multiple Man. There are no real combos to speak of, and somewhere, somehow, something has gone seriously loopy, as it were, when Iceman's slickest move is a 180-degree turn.

In spite of these lamentable shortcomings (especially lamentable given its potential scope), however, *X-Men: The Official Game* still manages to offer players a modicum of mindless button-bashing diversion. Sniffing out and snagging the scattered Sentinel Tech and Weapon X File items unlock bonus content (including new outfits for Wolverine and Iceman, and additional Danger Room scenarios). On the successful completion of each mission you get to plug boosters into your character's abilities, furthering their grandly titled Mutant Evolution. There's also just enough play diversity from mission to mission to keep the mothballs at bay (for a couple of hours at a time, anyway). You probably won't bequeath this game to generations of squabbling descendents, but you probably won't loathe it either. It's just disappointingly average. **NAG**

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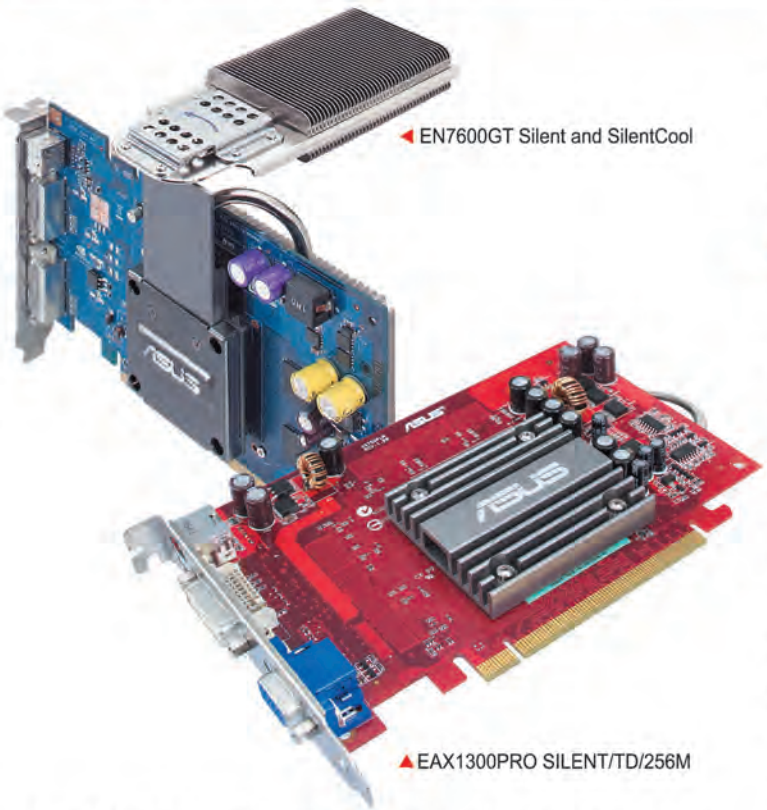

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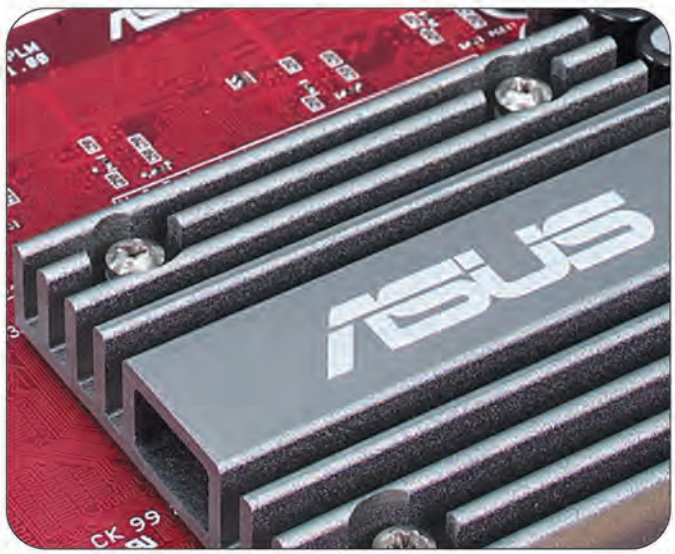

▲ Large heatsink on the back side.

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	NGC

Suggested Retail Price
R359

Developer
SCEI

Publisher
Sony Computer Entertainment

Supplier
SK Gamers [011] 445-7960

Genre
Platform

Age Restriction
3+

Specifications
Players: 1
Online: No
Controllers: 1

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If man evolved from monkeys, where are our red lights?

APE ESCAPE 3

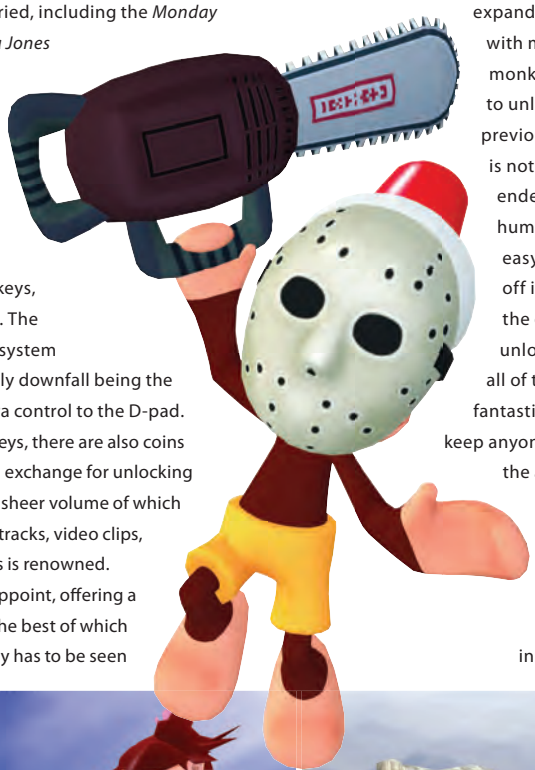
THE UNDERRATED BUT ENTERTAINING platform series *Ape Escape* returns, and the third instalment in the franchise is the best yet. The premise remains the same: megalomaniac monkey Specter is back and once again trying to take over the world. He has hijacked global TV networks, and is filming and broadcasting spoof TV shows, which are so awful as to render anyone who watches them catatonic. You must travel to the sets of the shows and stop the nefarious monkeys.

The shows in question are knock-offs of well-known movies, and as such, the sets are varied, including the *Monday the 16th* haunted house, the *Indiana Jones* spoof's desert set, and even a *Titanic* parody. Each level has a number of monkeys running around, and you're tasked to catch a certain number. If you want to unlock all the game's extras, you'll need to revisit each level to pick up the remaining monkeys, for a grand total of no less than 400. The typical dual-analogue stick control system makes a welcome return, with its only downfall being the inconvenient mapping of the camera control to the D-pad.

In addition to the hordes of monkeys, there are also coins to collect, which can be redeemed in exchange for unlocking additional content. This content, the sheer volume of which is simply staggering, includes music tracks, video clips, and mini-games, for which this series is renowned. *Ape Escape 3* once again doesn't disappoint, offering a variety of high quality mini-games, the best of which is a *Metal Gear Solid* rip-off that simply has to be seen to be believed.

Apart from some very over-the-top voice acting, which occasionally verges on the annoying, the sound suits the game perfectly. The visuals can hardly be faulted, with rich, lively environments, and superbly detailed characters (the boss characters in particular).

Ape Escape 3 stays very true to the spirit of its predecessors, making very few changes to the play dynamic successfully employed in those games. What it does do, however, is expand the sheer depth of the title, with many more stages to play, monkeys to catch, and extras to unlock than in any of the previous titles. The presentation is nothing short of completely endearing, and the off-the-wall humour makes this title very easy to enjoy. To top all of this off is the immense length of the game. Taking the time to unlock, and then to go through all of the extras, including the fantastic mini-games, is sure to keep anyone busy for far longer than the average platform title. It is light-hearted, fast-paced fun that simply oozes class. If you're a fan of platform games, *Ape Escape 3* is one of the finest in its genre. **NAG**



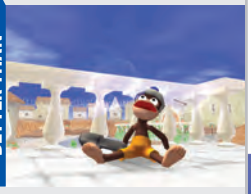
BOTTOM LINE

Ape Escape 3 is more of what we're used to from this franchise, but that's in no way a bad thing. High production values, offbeat humour, and an engaging platform game experience, not to mention the plethora of unlockable content, make this one of the best platform titles on the PS2.

81/100

BETTER THAN

Ape Escape 2



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12+ www.pegi.info

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REVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms
Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
R499

Developer
Beautiful Game Studios

Publisher
Eidos Interactive

Supplier
WWE [011] 462-0150

Genre
Sport Management

Age Restriction
3+

Specifications
Online: No
Controllers: 1
Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

The once flawless CM series is now nothing more than a mediocre management sim. It lacks the beauty and features of rival titles, but more importantly, leaves the player with a feeling that his or her input has little influence on results.

55/100

Championship Manager 2005

BETTER THAN

Football Manager 2006

WORSE THAN

CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 2006

FOR MANY YEARS, EIDOS and SI Games worked in harmony and created one of the most successful brands in gaming history. The *Championship Manager* series, by its very nature, excluded a sizeable chunk of the gaming market. Yet, the avalanche of accolades and awards that came its way continued unabated, and its perennial success was assured. In fact, *Championship Manager 4* once held the honour of being the fastest selling PC game on its first day of release. It all ended with a shock announcement in 2004 that publisher and developer would part. SI Games snuck away with the code and database of the former games. With the excellent and flourishing *Football Manager* series SI Games has managed to re-establish itself. Eidos, on the other hand, merely retained the naming rights. Sadly, it is in name only that *Championship Manager 2006* can be associated with its predecessors.

For the uninitiated, *Championship Manager 2006* seats the player in the manager's chair at one of a number of football clubs. The player can choose from a wide range of leagues and divisions, though our own PSL is markedly absent. The premise, in theory, is simple. Results will come your way via transfer market aptitude, tactical ability and coaching know-how. When results don't go your way, however, the threat of relegation or a parting pay packet looms large.

In fairness to the title, *Championship Manager 2006* is a far better game than last year's dismal effort. Yet, the new features cannot cover the cracks. The game simply doesn't work. Vastly changing a formation or team tactics has little noticeable effect on proceedings. Changing a player's fitness schedule seems a hit-and-miss affair when trying to bolster his weak attributes. And the game's balance is hopelessly offside. Bringing in a multimillionaire 'galactico' to bolster your team's waning performances is invariably unrewarding. Indeed, it is an aspect of the game to befuddle any hardened manager. Before starting each new game, the user can select a club benefactor option. This option injects millions into the club's finances, opening up a number of previously out-of-reach star players. Yet, the balancing issue makes this option redundant. When a 30-year-old reserve team player's performance tends to match Messrs Rooney or Messi, something is seriously wrong.

The interface mirrors the gameplay in that it is, quite simply, atrocious. Management titles are not renowned for their simple interfaces, granted, but *Championship Manager 2006* is an absolute eyesore. Glaring, clashing colours sit uneasily with each other, apparently chosen for their complete lack of compatibility. Console users will immediately notice how easy it is to lose track of the cursor on-screen. Only highlighted by a hint of yellow, it simply gets absorbed in the hodgepodge of hues on-screen. The *Football Manager* series seems to have made the crossover to console fairly effortlessly. *Championship Manager 2006* really has little excuse in comparison.

Thankfully, the match action has received a graphical facelift in the form of a number of 2D views. This much needed revision allows the user to pinpoint weaknesses in team tactics and formations. Unfortunately, that's only well and good if the user's input actually has an effect on events. Yet, *Championship Manager 2006* confounds the user by apparently ignoring changes to tactics and personnel. Highlights are packaged together in stuttering sequences that bear no resemblance to how the match is actually being played. In fact, the game as a whole leaves the user feeling on the periphery of control and input.

The *Championship Manager* series was once strong. However, since the split between Eidos and SI Games, the series has suffered a spectacular fall from grace. Although a number of new features have been introduced since last year's joke of a game, the title is still weak in gameplay compared to its rivals. New stats, tactical options and in-game cameras cannot hide the fact that, despite countless options, the player still feels incapable of having a realistic effect on team results. Graphically the game is a mess, which is exacerbated on the console version. Although admirable changes have been made to the actual match views, there seems little point to it. Replays seem mismatched to user input and, indeed, merely confuse the user. All in all, *Championship Manager 2006* is a weak effort and, with the success of the *Football Manager* series, must be on its last legs. **NAG**

REVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
R399

Developer
Team 17

Publisher
THQ

Supplier
WWE [011] 462-0150

Genre
Turn-Based Strategy

Age Restriction
7+

Specifications
Memory: 288KB
Wireless: Yes
Online: No
Game Sharing: No
Players: 1-4

BOTTOM LINE

Despite multiplayer being its strength, Worms PSP only supports four players via wireless. With single player lacking variety, it doesn't really motivate you to keep playing.

70/100

WORMS: OPEN WARFARE

THE *WORMS* LICENCE IS celebrating a successful decade of strong sales, heaps of sequels, an average foray into 3D and is now making an appearance on the Sony PSP and Nintendo DS. For the handful of you out there who haven't played *Worms*, the game is a multiplayer turn-based strategy game featuring small teams of combat worms, a huge selection of zany weapons and randomly generated 2D maps. Each player has a team of worms. At the start of your turn you can move an individual worm around the level, and before the timer runs out, take a shot at an enemy worm. There are 16 weapons you can use, ranging from the devastating terrain levelling banana bomb to the more sedate shotgun. A successful hit will reduce the health of the enemy worm until it reaches zero and is eliminated. This goes on until one side is completely wiped out.

The turn-based game dynamic is ideal for quick playing sessions, which is what playing games on the PSP is really all about. It sounds like a match made in heaven: a portable version of *Worms* you can play anywhere, anytime. Well almost… there are problems afoot here Watson and we intend to find the underlying cause of it.

The game is technically sound with levels scrolling smoothly by. The ability to zoom in and out, an intuitive control system, cute sound effects and average music all combine into a good-looking and playing game. The problem with *Worms* is twofold, and when combined results in a less than fun experience, despite everything else going for it.

For some unfathomable reason, the developers have only included a four-player wireless (*ad hoc*) mode. There's no game-sharing mode or online functionality, thereby removing two of the possible four ways of enjoying this game, and enjoying *Worms* is all about playing against other people.

The fourth multiplayer option is a 'hot potato' game mode, where the PSP is passed from player to player as they choose various moves and attacks – not as much fun as watching your opponents preparing their attacks. Limiting how people can enjoy the game is rather detrimental, which brings us to the second problem. The single-player game options are limited to quick sessions varying in difficulty to challenges increasing in difficulty. The issue here is that once you've played a few games, you've pretty much seen everything *Worms* has to offer, and the artificial intelligence is ludicrously accurate sometimes, which removes the tactical approach and replaces it with luck and varying degrees of frustration. *Worms: Open Warfare* is an excellent multiplayer game, but the limited multiplayer modes don't give players enough options to really take advantage of everything this game has to offer. **NAG**

REVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
R249

Developer
Lionhead Studios

Publisher
Activision

Supplier
MegaRom [011] 234-2680

Genre
Management/Expansion

Age Restriction
3+

Specifications
CPU: Pentium III 800MHz
Video: 32MB Graphics Card
RAM: 256MB RAM
HDD: 2.4GB HDD
CD/DVD: DVD-ROM
Players: 1
Internet: Not Required

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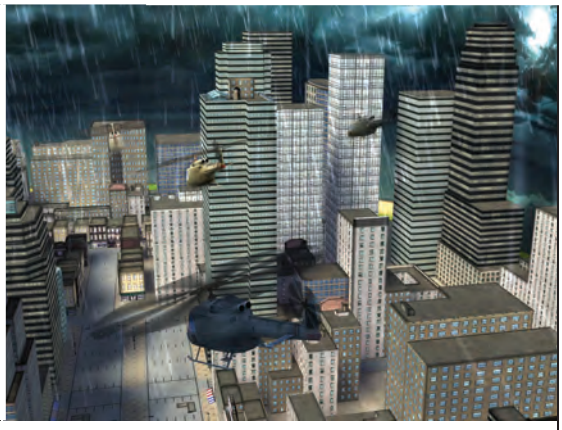


THE MOVIES: STUNTS AND EFFECTS

THE MOVIES WAS HIT-OR-MISS with most. Some people enjoyed the management side, others purely the creative side of making their own movies. Some enjoyed a bit of both, but not exclusively.

As expansion packs should, *Stunts & Effects* facilitates both sides equally by adding a new layer of complexity to the Management side, thanks to Stuntmen, while the added props, scenes, sets, etc. are great for the Director.

A true expansion, *Stunts & Effects* only augments *The Movies*, and it is doubtful this will make newcomers love *The Movies*. However, if you did enjoy *The Movies* and want to add a new layer, the price is right.

The Stuntmen are just like Actors, with skills for specific genres such as Action or Romance. With the expansion, scriptwriters can (after a specific year) write scripts with included stunt roles. These can either be filled with Actors who will perform their own stunts, or with trained Stuntmen. Stuntmen have their own training facilities to build along with other new buildings, and present a host of problems on their own (this only adds more fun-giving complexity).

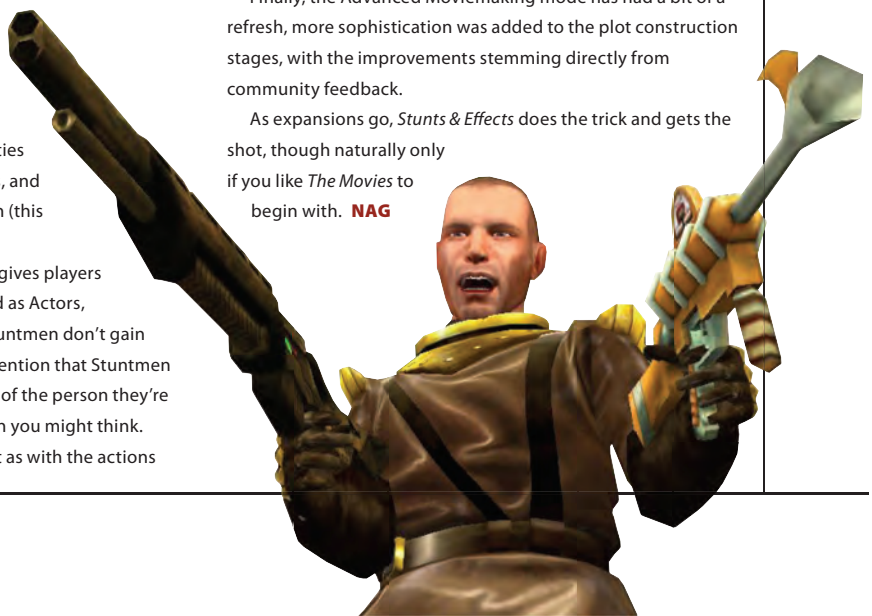
Keeping in line with how *The Movies* gives players odd choices, Stuntmen can also be used as Actors, though this is naturally a risky move. Stuntmen don't gain much fame from doing stunts, not to mention that Stuntmen need to match the rough age and build of the person they're doing a double for. It's harder to do than you might think. Stunts can be fine-tuned via sliders, just as with the actions of Actors. The Stuntmen have their own industry awards, achievements and reviews for new stunts and effects. These unlock new technologies for research if reached.

A new particle effect engine adds frivolity for the Management side, but naturally adds a new creative tool for Directors. Fireballs, shattering glass, smoke and steam all help to bring movies to life, while having access to laser beams never hurts.

The new movie sets and technologies include a lush jungle, bustling city street and more. A green-screen set lets you take your acts and fly them across whatever you please. Miniature sets let you play with scale, such as dramatic sweeping angles or star-filled galaxies. Additional costumes, backdrops, props and vehicles help spice up old sets.

Finally, the Advanced Moviemaking mode has had a bit of a refresh, more sophistication was added to the plot construction stages, with the improvements stemming directly from community feedback.

As expansions go, *Stunts & Effects* does the trick and gets the shot, though naturally only if you like *The Movies* to begin with. **NAG**



BOTTOM LINE

It adds stunts and effects to the movies in *The Movies*. People can make of that what they will, depending on how they feel about *The Movies*.

70/100

The Movies without Stunts and Effects (PC)

BETTER THAN

Making movies with Stuntmen and Fire (RL)

AS GOOD AS

REVIEW

VITAL INFO

Platforms
Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price
R249

Developer
Coresoft

Publisher
2K Sports

Supplier
Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

Genre
Sport

Age Restriction
18

Specifications
Online: Yes
Controllers: 1
Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

A fair attempt at a console poker title. Load times and poor graphics are annoying, but the mathematical component is spot-on. The artificial intelligence usually does a decent enough job at making things interesting. As far as console poker titles go, this is the best out there, but is no match for the real thing.

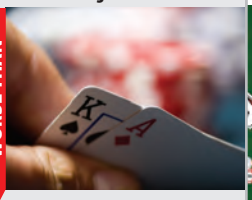
60/100

BETTER THAN

World Championship Poker

WORSE THAN

The real thing



WORLD POKER TOUR

IN RECENT MONTHS, POKER has taken off quite dramatically, particularly as a spectator sport, and as with any popular spectator sport, the emergence of videogame recreations has not been far behind. Featuring the official World Poker Tour license and with it the likenesses of such professional players as Antonio Esfandiari, Evelyn Ng, Phil Laak and others, World Poker Tour aims to take the poker game genre one step further than its rivals, by trying to more faithfully represent the social aspect of the game. To this end, the game purportedly uses 'Bluff Master' technology, whereby you are able to make your character project certain emotions, such as joy, anger or distress, by manipulation of the left analogue stick, as do your computer-controlled opponents. It's a valiant effort at reproducing one of the more intricate aspects of real poker, but is nonetheless still lacking, since it's difficult to gauge exactly how much of an effect your projected emotion is having on your opponent. At the same time, it's nigh on impossible to infer any useful information from your opponents' facial expressions. In terms of play dynamic, *World Poker Tour* makes a solid showing, offering more than 12 game types, including well-known variants such as *5-card-draw* and *Texas hold 'em*, as well as more obscure forms of the game such as *Billabong*, *Tahoe*, and *Shanghai* poker. If this isn't enough, you can even put together a new style of game using your own customised rules. Slightly less impressive are the unconvincing character graphics and the excessive load times. All in all, although World Poker Tour still fails to capture the true essence of poker (which can arguably only be had around a real table), it does a fair enough job of reproducing the game, and should provide a relatively enjoyable distraction to anyone with some spare cash and more than a passing interest in the game.

Trying to electronically reproduce a game like poker is exceptionally difficult, given the importance of real life person-to-person interaction in the strategy of the game. Having said that, *World Poker Tour* does a fairly decent job of portraying the game, and makes innovative strides with the introduction of the emotion engine, which, although still lacking, is certainly a step in the right direction. The artificial intelligence, though certainly not on par with a human player, manages to be surprisingly good at times, and makes for a competent, if not always terribly challenging, opponent. If poker's your thing, and you're having trouble roping your friends in to play with you, *World Poker Tour* might be able to quench your card-playing thirst - at least for a while. If, however, you have the option of playing poker with real people, then *World Poker Tour* just doesn't seem to make all that much sense in the first place. **NAG**

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DAXTER

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	NGC

Suggested Retail Price
R355

Developer
Ready at Dawn

Publisher
SCEA

Supplier
Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7960

Genre
Action

Age Restriction
7+

Specifications
Players: 1-2 (2 players for bug combat mode)
Online: No
Memory: 33KB
Wireless: Yes
Game Sharing: No

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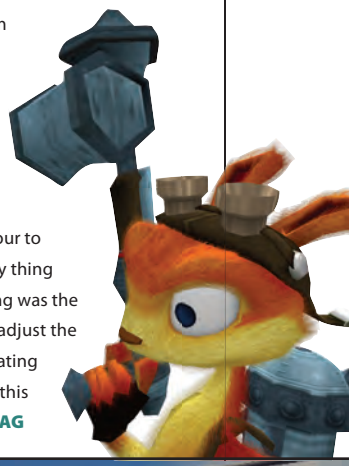
BOTTOM LINE

This game is fun and killing bugs has not been this exciting since mom left us alone with a can of Doom in the basement.

90/100

GAMERS SHOULD RECOGNISE DAXTER from the *Jak & Daxter* series of games, where he plays Jak's sidekick. This time, however, Daxter is on his own. In this PSP-only game you join Daxter in the two years prior to the start of Jak II, when Daxter tries to free Jak from prison. The developers behind this game, Ready at Dawn, did an awesome job of capturing the essence of the *Jak & Daxter* franchise on the PSP. From the first time you load this game, you should immediately notice that *Daxter* is one of the most visually stunning games to have hit the PSP yet. The levels are well detailed and each mission is entertaining enough to keep you glued to your PSP.

The story kicks off with Daxter getting a job as a pest exterminator to eradicate the bug infestation that has hit Haven City. The first tool you are given in your quest is a funky-looking electric fly swatter. Together with some seriously special moves, killing bugs takes on a whole new art form. As you progress through the levels, you will later receive a bug spray gun, which later receives a few upgrades such as the one that turns it into a flamethrower. This bug spray gun will also help you perform incredible jumps, and even fly, which is really useful later on in the game.



Daxter is truly one of the most enjoyable and beautiful games for the PSP. The cut-scenes in certain levels also scream with Daxter humour, which really adds a nice flavour to an already great game. About the only thing that we found to be a bit disappointing was the camera angles. Even though you can adjust the camera on the fly, it gets a little frustrating in certain parts of the game. All in all, this is definitely one for the collection. **NAG**

JUICED: ELIMINATOR

VITAL INFO

Platforms
Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	NGC

Suggested Retail Price
R406

Developer
Juice Games

Publisher
THQ

Supplier
WWE [011] 462-0150

Genre
Racing

Age Restriction
12+

Specifications
Players: 1
Online: No
Memory: 241KB
Wireless: Yes
Game Sharing: Yes

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BOTTOM LINE

Eliminator is a fun racing game that can get very technical. Sadly, the graphics are not exceptional, but this shouldn't deter you if you're a racing enthusiast.

75/100

RACING ENTHUSIASTS SHOULD KNOW the *Juiced* franchise well, although many gamers (especially on the PC platform) had mixed feelings about the original game. This time around, THQ seemed to have done a slightly better job in the development of its latest game, *Juiced: Eliminator*. This game offers a myriad of features that should keep racing fans happy for a while. These include multiplayer capabilities, new cars, new tracks, and a plethora of options to customise and improve the performance of your car.

As a PSP-based racing game, *Juiced: Eliminator* is not the best we have seen to date, and visually it didn't blow us away, but it was fun nonetheless. In career mode, you keep in contact with in-game characters and select your races using a virtual cellphone. You can make money from racing and spend it on new cars, mods, and accessories. A nice feature for racing enthusiasts is the fact that you can manage your race crew that helps you throughout the game. The game's name is derived from a new race mode that is available in this game. Eliminator is a mode wherein the last driver from each lap is eliminated. If you get a few friends together, you can also play *Juiced: Eliminator* over Wi-Fi, and as in the game, you will be able to race for pink slips (the winner takes the loser's car).

Throughout the game, you are presented with fairly impressive cut-scenes, but the best part of this game is its soundtrack, featuring bands like Metric, Fallout Boy, and Limp Bizkit. We were very impressed with the line-up packed into this game. If you want a game that addresses almost every aspect of motor racing, then you will be very happy with this title. Just don't expect mind-blowing graphics. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Platforms

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

Suggested Retail Price
R50

Developer
Gameloft

Publisher
Gameloft

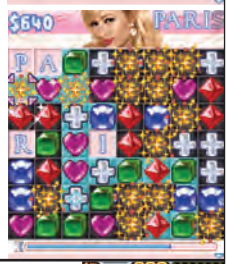
Supplier
www.thumbtribe.co.za

Genre
Puzzle

Download Code
SMS: tribe 20359 to 40014
NB:make sure you leave a space after the word ***tribe****.*
Check www.thumbtribe.co.za for phone compatability and downloading instructions.

PARIS HILTON'S DIAMOND QUEST

THE FIRST GAME SOCIALITE Paris Hilton decided to endorse is a quaint puzzle title that brings *Bejeweled* together with *Jewel Quest*. In fact, this used to be called *Jewel Jam* until Gameloft secured Hilton's likeness for the game. The lass with sass and Prada will guide you around over sixty levels split between several game modes. But it all comes down to a few basic jewel-related puzzle games. This is good news in two respects. Firstly, if you want a good puzzle game that involves jewel, but Paris scares you, there are other games like this. But if you download this, you can explain that your sister did and it wasn't you, plus you get a solid puzzle game to boot. After a while, Paris reminded us of the usual Manga avatars Gameloft uses, and she's not that annoying. Fans even get an image gallery. But we don't like Paris, so we're not keeping it. And it's nothing special either, just another good puzzle game on your mobile. **NAG**



It's a celebrity face on a familiar and solid puzzle concept 70/100

VITAL INFO

Platforms

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

Suggested Retail Price
R50

Developer
Iplay

Publisher
Iplay

Supplier
www.thumbtribe.co.za

Genre
Racing

Download Code
SMS: tribe 10346 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 FAST & THE FURIOUS: TOKYO DRIFT

IT'S THE MOBILE GAME of the movie! How much you enjoy this game hinges on whether you can play the 3D version or not. The 2D game is entertaining and well crafted, but also very familiar and becomes repetitive after a while. In *Tokyo Drift*, players find themselves in the land of the rising sun and race against top speed demons, who revere their ability to 'drift' around corners as a top skill. Going through the motions, you'll collect cash to upgrade your car and respect which will open up new levels. Unlocked levels can also be used in several additional modes. In 'Survival' you have to keep your respect meter up by doing drifts, in 'Last Man Standing' a racer is knocked out of each round, and 'Solo Runs' lets you re-race a track. The problem is that when you fail a track, you race on that track again. This lends itself to a lot of repetition and makes the game dull. The 3D version, though, gives you far more control over the cars, the races are much more interesting and the customisation is a treat. **NAG**

The 2D version falls short, but it rocks in 3D 85/100

VITAL INFO

Platforms

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

Suggested Retail Price
R50

Developer
Iplay

Publisher
Iplay

Supplier
www.thumbtribe.co.za

Genre
Simulator

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Check www.thumbtribe.co.za for phone compatability and downloading instructions.

MY DOG

WHAT CAME FIRST: THE Tamagotchi or *Petz*? Whoever was responsible (*Petz* came before the Tamagotchi), the world now has tons of virtual pet ideas since we've figured out that we can nurture something on a chip as well. There's nothing wrong with that and even the virtual thing doesn't really give you an idea of whether you can handle a pet. It does, though, see how dedicated you are and *My Dog* is no different. This cute pet simulator gives you a puppy and expects you to feed, pet and exercise it during the day. As *My Dog* runs in real-time, this means taking a few minutes off every now and then to check on your little companion. You can buy it toys, grooming tools and food, pet it and walk it, and even enter it in competitions to get more cash. Every day comes with $10, but this won't be enough if you really want to spoil your little dear. Graphically, it's a nice game and it's a fun and complex, not to mention demanding, simulator. **NAG**

A good pet simulator, but a demanding one 88/100

BUDGET TOP 20

1. Age of Empires Gold Edition

2. CSI: Crime Scene Investigation

3. Splinter Cell Chaos Theory

4. Brothers in Arms

5. Zoo Tycoon

6. Chessmaster 10th Edition

7. Silent Hunter III

8. Myst V: End of Ages

9. Combat Flight Simulator 2

10. Microsoft Train Simulator

11. The Bard's Tale

12. Rayman 10th Anniversary

13. Myst IV Revelation

14. CSI: Miami

15. Heroes of Might and Magic IV Complete

16. The Settlers: Heritage of Kings

17. Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield Gold Edition

18. CSI: Dark Motives

19. Microsoft Flight Simulator 2002

20. Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow

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UBISOFT

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HARDWARE INDEX

TECHNOLOGY FEATURE

88 iMac takes on PC

With Apple's latest iMac based on mobile Intel technology, and the company itself making bold claims about its performance in relation to a high-end PC, we decided it was time to put the platform to the test! Boot Camp has made it possible to run Windows XP on an Intel-based Mac, so these benchmark results should be directly compatible. However, will the iMac survive a shoot-out with our monster gaming PC?

REVIEWS

90	Intel Core 2 Duo X6800 Extreme Edition
92	AMD Athlon 64 FX-62
94	Acer AL1951 LCD
95	Sparkle 7950GX2
96	iSound PSP Drive-In Cinema
96	SanDisk Cruzer 1GB
97	Logitech G7 Mouse

H@ARDCORE3 ROUNDUP

98 Power up

Just like a motor vehicle, a PC is useless without a proper power supply. A PSU determines how pure the power feeding your internal peripherals is, and in the end, may be the difference between a reliable system and a very costly experiment in molten electronics. This month, we test eleven of the best PSUs to see which one is the one for your über rig.

SPORTS VERSUS COMMERCE

WELL THE 2006 SOCCER WORLD CUP IS OFFICIALLY OVER, AND THE ITALIAN FLAG FLIES HIGHER THAN ALL OTHERS IN THE GLOBAL SOCCER LANDSCAPE DO. DENIZENS OF THIS COUNTRY ARE NO DOUBT STILL FLOATING ON A EUPHORIC BUBBLE OF SUCCESS, WITH THEIR TEAM HAVING ACHIEVED THEIR ULTIMATE GOAL AND THE HIGHEST ACCLAIM POSSIBLE.

WATCHING POOR ABIDAL CHOKING back his own emotions, the antithesis of the Italian squad who were pouring out their joy at the time, the beauty of sport – whether you fancy rugby, soccer, badminton, motor racing – was plain for all to see. In most sporting events, when the shouting is over and the allotted time has reached its end, there is a definite winner and a clear loser. Both sides know it, every watching fan knows it, and in our world of instant global communication of information, the fact quickly spreads across the globe.

What's more, it is a lasting victory. The Italian squad, even should the magic that they command suddenly evaporate tomorrow and they lose every single game they play for the next four years, will nonetheless go into the South African World Cup extravaganza in 2010 as the defending champions.

TECHNOLOGY, IS IN A WAY, LIKE THE SOCCER WORLD CUP. SO MANY CONTENDERS FOR THE CROWN, BUT ULTIMATELY ONE WINNER. AND THEN, IT ALL STARTS OVER AGAIN

In business, however, and in our industry in particular, this clear and lasting definition between the world leaders and their competition is not as clear-cut, nor is it in any way as lasting. In fact, the IT market is a rather fickle one, with the majority rallying behind the current leaders even though they all know that tomorrow could bring a new product or technology which will turn the status quo on its head.

In this issue, for instance, we have the two leading protagonists contesting the high-end PC space in the form of AMD's DDR2-boosted FX-62 and Intel's new architecture that has replaced the venerable Pentium brand, the Core 2 Duo.

We'll let you read the reviews and judge for yourself, but from where we are sitting, the green squad ought to be rather dejected by this latest release. Intel's trademark blue and white flag was certainly flying substantially higher than, well, anyone's at this year's Computex trade show in Taipei, Taiwan. The golden goal appears to have gone emphatically to the older chip giant. Nevertheless, does this mean that Intel can claim "Game, set and match," and await the presentation of its large and shiny champion's trophy?

Well, the thing is that it isn't that single instance of technological advantage that makes or breaks a product or solution in our industry – it's the commercial success that it enjoys subsequently that really matters. In this particular case, the larger organisation should have little trouble in this area, thanks to the fact that it does have a killer and seemingly technically superior product and the industry muscle to push this platform harder than just about anybody else in IT could. AMD's riposte to this release is, sadly for this company, not the AM2 platform it has only recently released, and we fear nor is it the slightly crazy '4x4' platform that the company has started discussing in relatively hushed voices for a rematch next year.

If this were a sporting event, the green fans would certainly be weeping openly right now in abject despair, while the blue and white team would be carried on the shoulders of its cheering and cajoling crowd. However, in the commercial market, only time and the market itself will really decide the victor, and in the end rather than a winner and a loser, we will end up with a constant and eternal flow of advantage passing from the hands of one competitor to another.

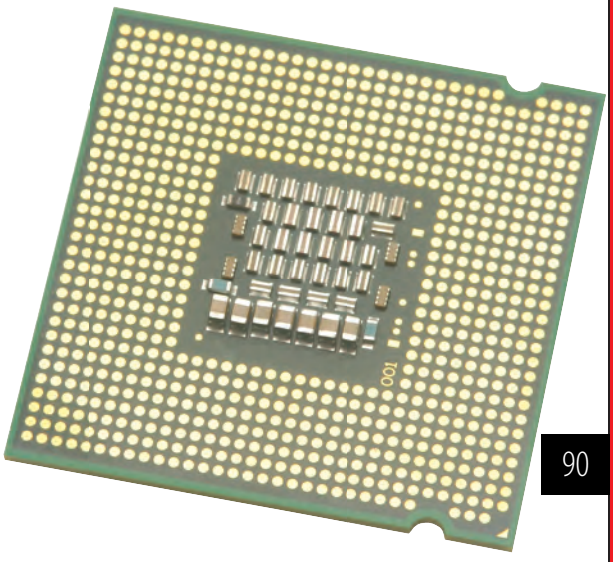
Russell Bennett

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 that receive this accolade are beyond a doubt rather special. So watch out for them and take note!

94

96



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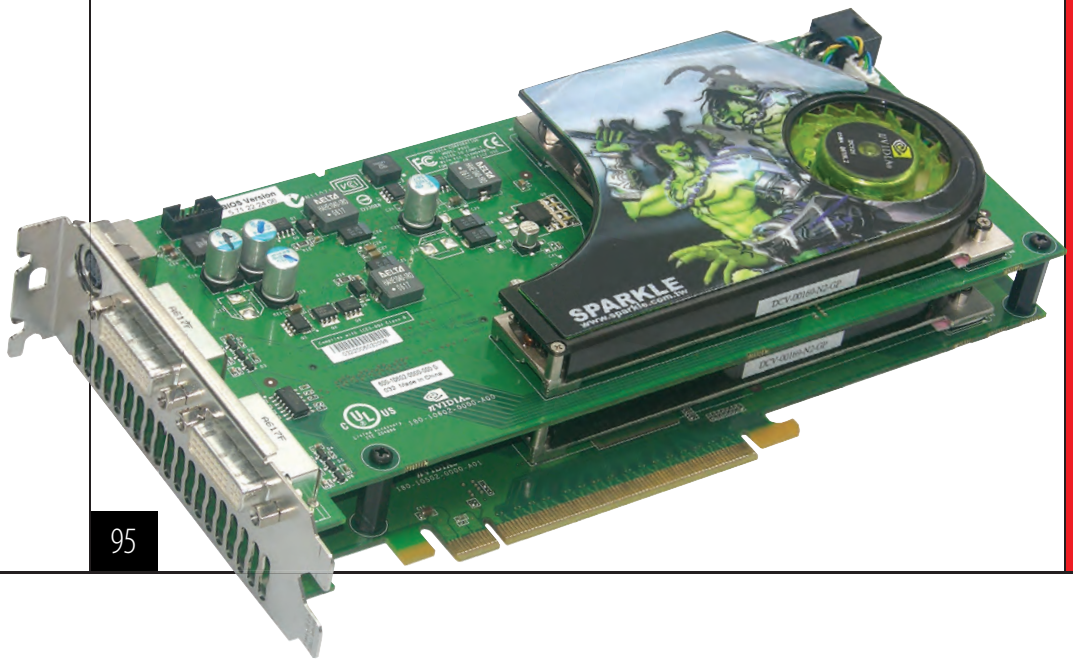


95

OUR HARDWARE APPROACH

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

In addition, the number of products that arrive at our office every month is so vast that it's only a prime selection that even reaches these printed pages you read. We also try to include the hardware that PC and gaming enthusiasts 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 objective opinion of the samples we receive. Moreover, 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.

So we run all the requisite benchmarks, like FutureMark's synthetic 3DMark series, the latest system-heavy gaming titles (*F.E.A.R.* and *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* 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.

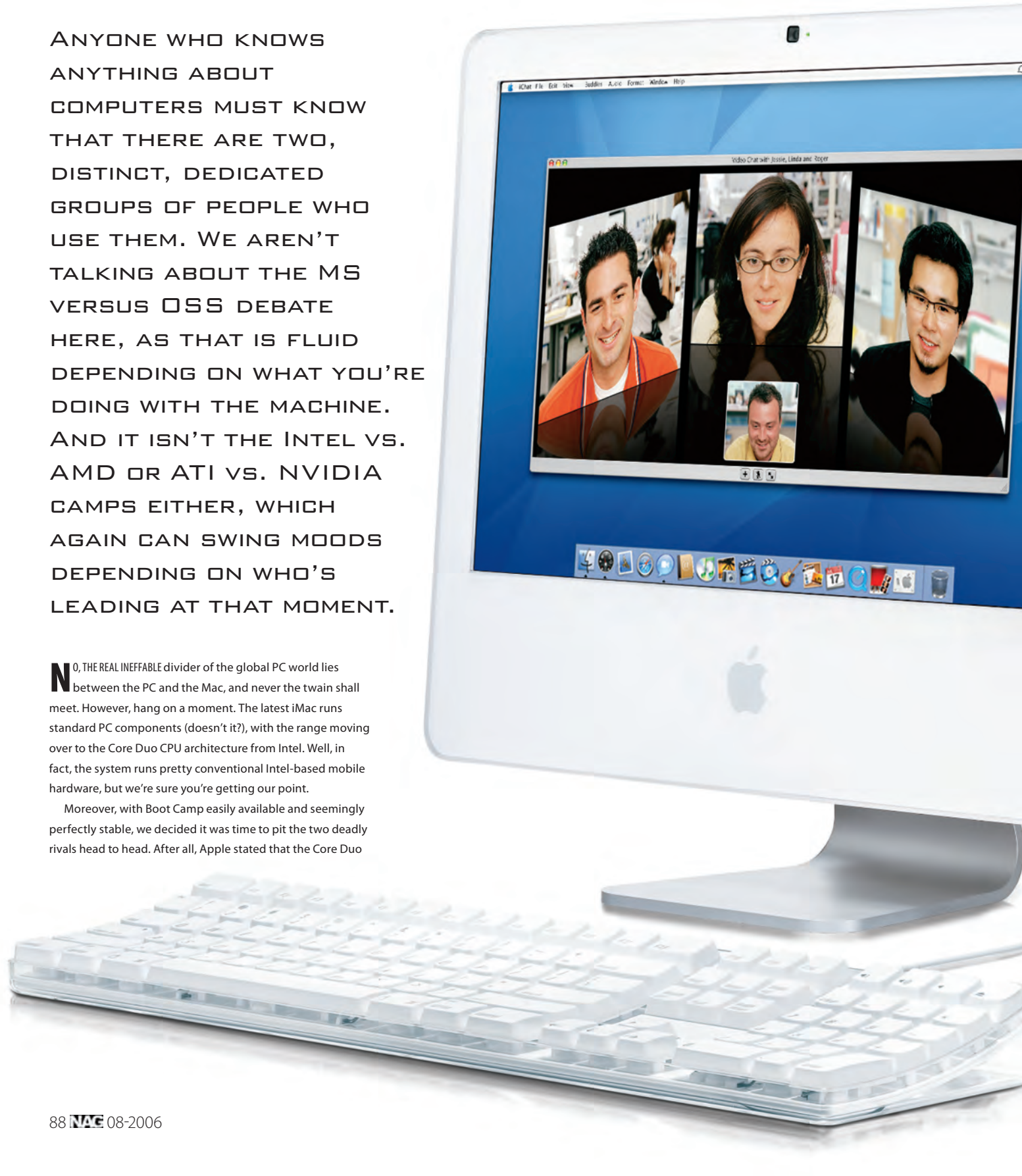
What's most important to us is that we get a detailed impression of the reality of using the equipment being reviewed. While that impression naturally includes 'The Numbers' from the various benches, these don't always reflect the absolute, final verdict. It's possible that we, from time-to-time, prefer a package that may not score the highest during testing, and where that is the reality, we'll explain our rationale.

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.

APPLE IMAC HEAD TO HEAD WITH DESKTOP PC!

Anyone who knows anything about computers must know that there are two, distinct, dedicated groups of people who use them. We aren't talking about the MS versus OSS debate here, as that is fluid depending on what you're doing with the machine. And it isn't the Intel vs. AMD or ATI vs. NVIDIA camps either, which again can swing moods depending on who's leading at that moment.



NO, THE REAL INEFFABLE divider of the global PC world lies between the PC and the Mac, and never the twain shall meet. However, hang on a moment. The latest iMac runs standard PC components (doesn't it?), with the range moving over to the Core Duo CPU architecture from Intel. Well, in fact, the system runs pretty conventional Intel-based mobile hardware, but we're sure you're getting our point.

Moreover, with Boot Camp easily available and seemingly perfectly stable, we decided it was time to pit the two deadly rivals head to head. After all, Apple stated that the Core Duo

iMac would outperform a high-end PC. A bold but dangerous claim now that we can run the same benchmarks, using the same platform OS, on both systems and get directly comparable, meaningful results on both!

The thing is, before even getting to the benchmark data, in many of the ways that will matter most to an iMac user, the Apple machine has won before we had even tracked down the hidden-away power button. Even diehard PC enthusiasts like us have to confess that this machine is aesthetically on a different planet compared to a clunky PC case and monitor combo. Resplendent in trademark white, with all that mobile hardware crammed into the bottom of the gorgeous, crystal-clear 20-inch widescreen LCD, matching keyboard and mouse, and even a lovely little white remote for controlling media functions from a distance, for pure style, can anything beat the Apple MO?

Nevertheless, for this article we are interested in testing the real performance of this beast. We know that the Yonah CPU is powerful for a mobile machine, but claiming that it can keep pace with desktop parts (and in fact beat them) seems a tad ambitious to us.

Installing Windows XP on the iMac is a breeze, even for someone far more used to having a two-button mouse than using Mac OS. Simply download the Boot Camp Installer Assistant Beta, double-click the package contained within the download, and the rest relies purely on you being able to read basic instructions! And don't forget to allow the assistant to burn an Apple drivers CD for you, which takes a couple of minutes but makes installing all the hardware in XP a cinch later.

Booting into Windows for the first time is rather strange, considering that the hardware in front of you is still pure Apple chic. To get the numbers on the hardware before us we primarily used SiSoft Sandra Pro 2005, and although we had promised not to focus on gaming performance, we are NAG, so we ran 3DMark05 and 06 to see how the iMac hardware would handle some PC-based gaming. The people who supplied us with the machine at Apple IMC told us that should we want to do a gaming-focussed test, we ideally needed the MacBook Pro, as it has more powerful graphics hardware installed. Peculiar, but we are in the world of Apple right now.

Let's talk about the specifications for a moment, so we know more or less what kind of results to expect from these benchmark applications. This iMac uses the second most powerful Core Duo processor available, the 2.0GHz T2500 dual-core with 2MB of shared L2 cache, and incorporates 2GB of DDR2 RAM running at 667MHz. The display is powered by a 128MB ATI X1600 Mobility chipset.

Ranged against the iMac we have a high-end PC, as well as a mid-range one, which in the real world would be closer to the price of the Apple machine (for some reason always seen as unusually high compared to a PC equivalent) than the range-topping monster. Our high-end rig is based on an Intel 965 Extreme Edition CPU clocking in at 3.73GHz per core, 1GB of Corsair PC2-6400 RAM, and an EAX1800XT TOP graphics card. Our mid-range system was running a Pentium D clocked at 3.2GHz per core, 2GB of the same Corsair DDR2 RAM, and a Sapphire X1900XTX Toxic graphics card. So, right off the bat, we know that both of these systems will absolutely annihilate the iMac in any gaming comparison.

It's the overall system performance we're really interested in measuring here, and SiSoft's benching suite should give us the answers we're looking for…

The iMac fared well in the full range of Sandra 2005 Pro benches we threw at it. CPU Arithmetic performance numbers put the Yonah-based Apple pretty much dead even with the 3.2GHz Pentium D, with the XE-based machine commanding a substantial lead. CPU Multimedia performance testing showed a similar result, although the iMac managed to put a small amount of distance between itself and the PC in the floating-point calculations, managing almost 10,000 points more than this system. Once more, the XE system outperformed them both, with 71,000 compared to 41,000 for the iMac.

The HDD and RAM performance numbers for the iMac yielded scores noticeably lower than those for the PCs, mostly due to its mobile-based technology. The HDD wasn't too bad, managing a 53.8MB/s average read speed compared to 62 for the Pentium D 920 machine. The RAM bandwidth measurement of 4,009MB/s indicated that the iMac's memory wasn't running at its claimed clock of 667MHz, but was rather running at 533MHz, as both PC systems ran their DDR2 modules at 667MHz and easily cracked 6,000MB/s.

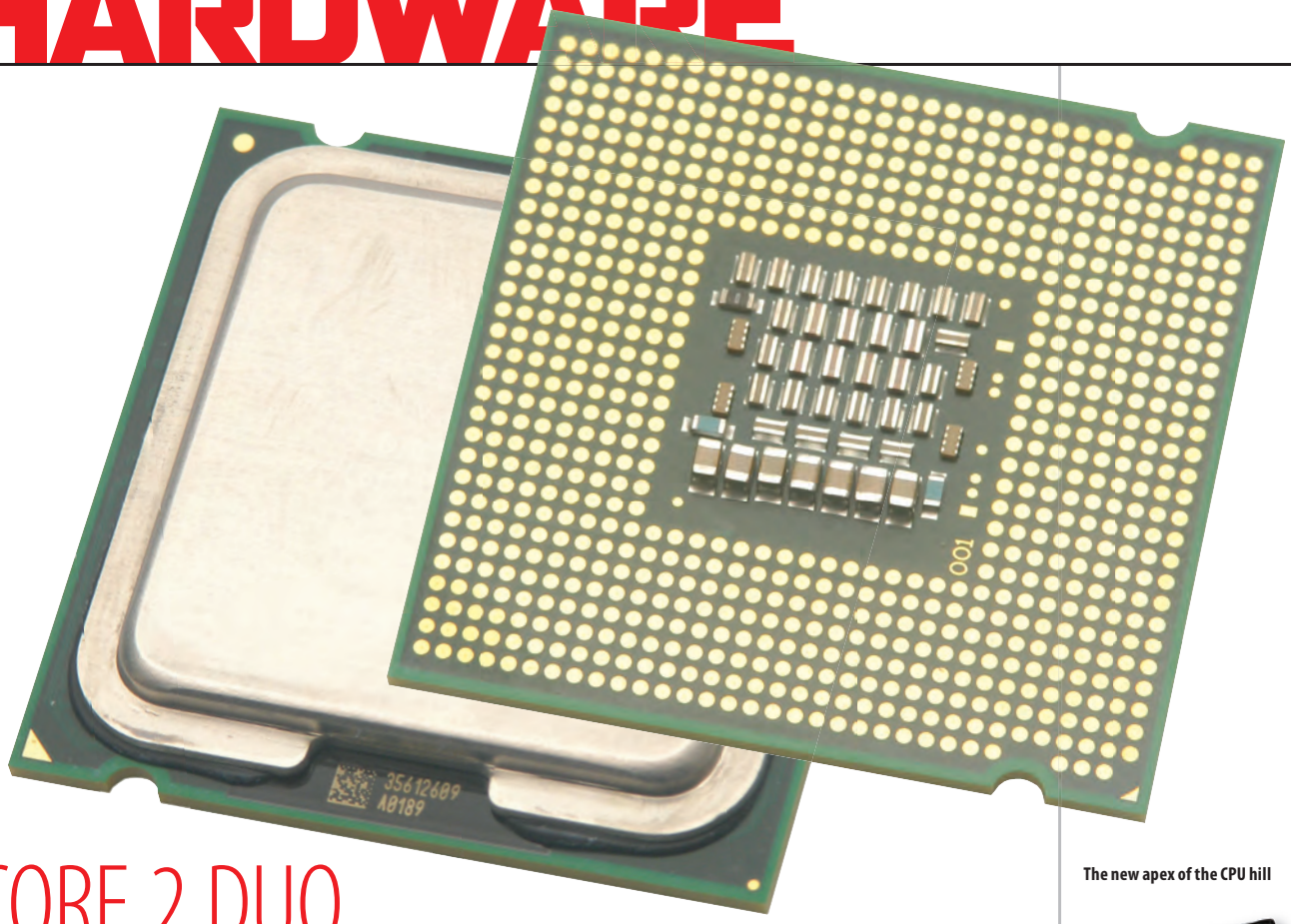
As anticipated, the gaming benches saw the poor iMac totally outclassed. In the end, the X1600 Mobility chipset couldn't at all compete with even regular X1600 PCI-E cards we've tested, and ran more on par with an X1300 or thereabouts. In 3DMark 06, the system managed a poor overall score of 1,273 at the maximum resolution that the monitor is capable of. The good news is that if you only look at the CPU score of this Futuremark benchmark application, the T2500 actually did exceptionally well, beating the Pentium D machine's score of 1,332 with a result of 1,684. The XE was still miles ahead with a couple of points above 2,000, but it was a decent result overall and shows that with a decent GPU installed, the iMac could conceivably run modern PC titles.

The result of these benchmark runs? Well it's tricky, but from a platform perspective, the iMac definitely runs head to head with a mid-range desktop PC system, but is overshadowed by high-end parts. Then again, if you consider that at around the R15K mark, the Apple in fact undercuts the overall cost of the XE-based monster rig quite substantially. In fact, the Pentium D 3.2GHz, with a similar X1600 GPU, gorgeous 20-inch LCD screen, integrated Webcam, and decent chassis and PSU to run in and on, would add up to only a couple of grand cheaper than the iMac.

Throw in Mac OS X, the wealth of applications bundled with this platform and the fact that the iMac works right out-of-the-box, and the iMac actually starts to look like something of a bargain. With just an XP license and the MS Office suite, the PC mid-range machine would eclipse the iMac in terms of cost.

Add the exquisite styling, the fact that the iMac runs totally silent, and Apple's legendary support, and the iMac starts to look like by far the more practical and sensible machine. Of course, from the PC side, arguments regarding boosting its base performance with add-in components being impossible, and the lack of gaming titles for the Mac swing it back in favour of the PC…

So, although we hate to cop out like this, at the end of this test all we can say with 100% certainty is that still neither machine can be declared the through and through winner, and the choice of which platform to go with in this case still resides entirely with the preferences of the individual making the purchase. The Apple iMac may not quite run with a high-end desktop PC, but its charms are nonetheless incredibly appealing, while the versatility of the PC hardware remains its strongest asset in this war. The iMac may now be based on an Intel, but a regular Wintel system it most emphatically isn't. **NAG**



CORE 2 DUO X6800 EXTREME EDITION

The new apex of the CPU hill

SAY HELLO TO THE chip that changes everything. For several years now, AMD has been the brand of choice among gamers. Not just for value, but because the top-end chips always came out ahead of Intel's best offerings in gaming. However, Intel has not been deaf to the pleas of gamers. Therefore, after a long age of AMD rule, we can expect a real fight for the gaming crown once again.

The Core 2 is an evolution of the older Pentium III design. This may seem like a step backwards, but in reality this chip bears about as much resemblance to the old 1GHz Pentium III as that did to a 150MHz Pentium Pro. There's more going on inside than just higher clock speed. The design has been reworked for more speed and efficiency as part of Intel's new "performance per watt" crusade. What this means is that the Core 2 chips will be released at much lower speeds than the Pentium 4 has been running at for some time now. However, due to higher efficiency and better design, they'll run software much faster, which is what counts in the end. They also won't turn your PC case into a miniature oven in the process.

Obviously some of you will be sceptical. That's what reviews are for. Admittedly, we'd be sceptical too if someone was telling us they had a chip that ran twice as fast as an Athlon FX-62 in *F.E.A.R.* without anything to back it up. We managed to nag Intel enough to get one of the new chips, so we could have all the real world details ready by the time the new chips go on sale in late July.

Of course, the rest of the system plays a part in this too, so we went for the best we could find to try and produce the kind of high-end gaming PC that people buying an Extreme Edition chip will be looking at. This ended up being a multi-distributor effort. First, we grabbed a Core 2 certified Gigabyte GA-965P-DQ6 "6 Quad" motherboard and some Corsair XMS2-8500 from Rectron. This was teamed up with a Sparkle GeForce 7950GX2 from Eurobyte, and a TWV 500W PSU from Corex, which was one of the only ones we could find to supply the 18A, 12V rails the Extreme Edition requires. Then, to round things off, we threw all that plus a 150GB Western Digital Raptor in the Zalman Fatal1ty case, both from Frontosa. Take note of that power supply requirement people, or you may be in for a disappointment.

Once assembled, we pushed the various components as high as we could. The motherboard achieved a remarkable 402MHz FSB without any voltage boost, which we were certain would be more than the Core 2 was likely to handle without extreme cooling. We suspected things were a bit limited by the stock Intel heatsink, but the heatsink Gigabyte has on the backside of this new board prevents sinks that use a back plate from mounting without using longer screws. Even with a standard heatsink, we took the X6800 from 2.93GHz stock to 3.30GHz without a voltage bump. Upping the voltage didn't get us any more headroom, which suggests that the limit is the heatsink. The chip is rated at 80W output, higher than the 65W specified for the non-extreme Core 2s, but still well below the three digit numbers of Pentium 4

EEs. The graphics card was also very friendly and we took it from 500/1,200 to 600/1,600 without any fuss at all. The RAM also delivered as promised, and ran at 1,100MHz without any tedious playing with manual timings. We ended up with a stable combination running a 366 FSB x 9 on the CPU, with the memory at 1,100 even. The only voltage we had to apply was a slight 0.3V bump to the RAM, which gave us no trouble at all after that. Once set, the system was rock solid stable. Nothing we could throw at it, from 3DMark to games to video editing, could destabilise it.

So then, time for what you've all been waiting for – the benchmarks! Obviously, we ran both stock and overclocked settings. First, with everything at stock speeds, 3DMark06 gave us 8,463 with a CPU score of 2,653. Overclocking the graphics card alone got us to 9,128. At top speed on both CPU and GPU, we pulled a 3DMark06 score of 9,316 and a CPU score of 2,888. It seems the 10K mark is still a bit out of reach for a single-slot graphics card, even with two GPUs. Given that, we saw about a 200-point increase for a 300MHz overclock, which would mean about another gigahertz or more to reach it on CPU alone. Those running SLI or CrossFire on the top-end cards should have no problems getting to five digit numbers though. Quad-SLI may actually be useful with this much CPU power as well.

Once we were done with 3DMark, we went on to the games. We also wanted to do a benchmark of *Prey*, but apparently the demo has some issues with time demos and the full version isn't out yet, so unfortunately that plan went out the window. *Splinter Cell* was also an option, but its StarForce protection threw a fit on our system for some reason and it wouldn't accept its own serial code as valid. However, trusty old *F.E.A.R.* gave us no problems, and is usually a pretty good benchmark as far as games go. For testing CPUs, we like to make sure the graphics card doesn't cause a bottleneck, so we set the computer settings to maximum, graphics to medium, and then lowered the resolution to 640 x 480. With that done, the stock 2.93GHz got us 113fps minimum, 275fps average, and 797fps maximum. Overclocked to 3.30GHz, we saw 126fps minimum, 300fps average, and 866fps maximum. Why don't we all just use minimum settings? That's an interesting question. We suspect *F.E.A.R.* may have issues registering more than 1,000fps, which could affect average scores if it runs into a ceiling. All minimum settings gave us 258fps minimum, 544fps average, and 998fps maximum. Note that the minimum framerate is more than twice what we get on our standard settings, but the average is significantly lower. Therefore, chances are that the game just hits a wall at 1,000fps, which messes up the average. Hopefully games that are more intensive will come out by the time faster CPUs appear.

Unless there has been a last minute change to this issue, you should be able to compare this to our review of the AMD Athlon FX-62. It's sometimes considered unprofessional to do a direct comparison of products in a review, but the results are fairly obvious. We don't think anyone will have trouble drawing the conclusion we have. Hopefully AMD will come out with something new and exciting and keep things interesting, but for now, the king is dead, long live the king! **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros
- Fastest thing out there

Cons
- It's not cheap
- It needs a beefy power supply

Supplier
Intel SA [011] 806-4530

Internet
www.intel.com

RRP
TBA

Reviewer
Toby Hudon

SPECS

Frequency
2.93GHz/3.30GHz Stable OC

Core
Conroe

Number of cores
2

FSB
1,066MHz

L1 cache
32K instruction/32K data

L2 cache
4,096KB Unified

Packaging
LGA775

Features
SSE4, EM64T, Speedstep, Virtualisation Technology, NX bit

AMD ATHLON FX-62

AMD'S LONG-AWAITED MOVE TO DDR2 memory has finally happened. Unfortunately, this change will mean new motherboards and new memory for those looking to upgrade beyond the current top range CPUs. We tested the new top of the line to see if the change has brought an increase in performance.

The FX-62 is a 2.8GHz dual-core CPU with 1MB L2 cache per core. The major change over the FX-60, besides a 200MHz speed increase, is the move to DDR2. Since AMD has gone with an onboard memory controller, changing memory types means changing the CPU itself, and is not something to be undertaken lightly. Thus, it has taken AMD some time to decide when the turning point in the market was likely to make DDR2 more worthwhile than DDR in terms of cost and performance.

It is this latter concern that makes things a bit tricky. While DDR2-800 is available now, it's not as common in the market as DDR2-667. However, due to the clock doubling tricks that DDR2 uses to reach high speeds, many users who switch over and use anything slower than DDR2-800 will likely see a decrease in performance at the same CPU clock speed. This is due to DDR2's much higher latency, which the integrated memory controller is more sensitive to. The reason for this is that the integrated approach gives AMD a very low latency system, which is good. However, the latency penalty for DDR2 is proportionally much larger than on a non-integrated system that already has a significant amount due to the external memory controller. Thus, the relative hit is bigger, even though in absolute terms the latency is still much better with the integrated controller. Overclockers who are already running DDR-500 and up will probably need to find very scarce and expensive DDR2-1000 and higher chips to not be looking at a net loss in performance.

Of course, with AMD looking at ending the older Socket 939 parts as soon as possible, there won't be much choice for faster grade CPUs. However, forcing users into a motherboard and RAM upgrade, simultaneous with a new CPU can be risky. At that point, current AMD users will be replacing as much of their system as they would need to if they wanted to move over to the Intel camp, and Intel is probably not unaware of this. Given what we're seeing of the upcoming Core 2 Duo chips, Intel may be planning to capitalise on resentment from AMD users forced to fork out lots of cash for an upgrade, and entice them to defect with aggressive pricing.

All speculation of doom and gloom aside, the FX-62 is not a bad chip at all as far as performance goes. We couldn't overclock it much at all; the best stable setting was around 3,080MHz. However, most top of the line chips don't

Range-topping AMD - now including a DDR2 MCH

have much overclocking headroom, so that's expected. 3DMark06's CPU score was 2,073 at stock, and 2,259 at 3,080MHz. Overall 3DMarks were 7,226 and 7,632 using the Sparkle 7950GX2 at stock speeds. Overclocking the GPU to 600/1,600 brought it up to 7,991. These are pretty impressive, but not a world of difference over what we saw on the FX-60, which is close even with a lower clock speed.

Since this is AMD's first foray into DDR2, we also did some extended testing using Sandra and *F.E.A.R.* to get scores at different memory timings and speeds. This should let us see what impact different quality memory has on the new CPU. The *F.E.A.R.* tests were run at our usual CPU benchmarking settings: computer at maximum, graphics at medium, with resolution lowered to 640 x 480 so there's no GPU bottleneck. With the Sandra results, we also tested with single-channel memory enabled, to establish how performance scales with the speed of the integrated memory controller, by lowering the CPU speed, but keeping the bus and timings the same. The results seem to paint a pretty clear picture. Timings make a little bit of difference, but the drop from DDR2-800, even at poor timings, to DDR2-667 is a big one. Big enough to negate the performance advantage of 2.8GHz over the FX-60's 2.6GHz. Lower core speed also seems to have a significant impact on overall memory speed, which means that you can likely stop worrying about expensive RAM if you're using a cheaper CPU anyway. This will likely please more budget-conscious gamers.

So, if you're planning for a top of the line AMD upgrade, either make sure you've got the RAM to provide the best performance you can, or you may want to wait until the dust settles a bit. Obviously, there will be faster clocked chips that will eventually make up any minor performance hit from the higher memory latency, so it might be worth waiting until they appear. Then again, that Core 2 Extreme Edition looks very interesting if you're replacing CPU, motherboard and RAM anyway… **NAG**

BENCHMARKS

F.E.A.R.

MEMORY SPEED/TIMING	MIN	AVERAGE	MAX
800MHz 3-3-3-8-1T	59fps	121fps	244fps
800MHz 4-4-4-12-1T	58fps	114fps	228fps
800MHz 5-5-5-18-2T	56fps	114fps	225fps
667MHz 4-4-4-12-1T	50fps	101fps	201fps

SISOFT SANDRA

CPU SPEED/RAM SPEED/TIMINGS	DUAL-CHANNEL		SINGLE-CHANNEL	
	Integer Bandwidth	FPU Bandwidth	Integer Bandwidth	FPU Bandwidth
2,800MHz/800MHz 3-3-3-8-1T	7,252	7,188	5,915	5,920
2,800MHz/800MHz 4-4-4-12-1T	7,098	7,067	5,876	5,870
2,800MHz/800MHz 5-5-5-18-2T	6,908	6,823	5,771	5,778
2,400MHz/800MHz 3-3-3-8-1T	6,370	6,290	5,751	5,716
2,000MHz/800MHz 3-3-3-8-1T	5,360	5,325	5,257	5,211

VITAL INFO

Pros
- Fastest clocked AMD CPU

Cons
- Not cheap
- Not as fast as the competition
- Needs a new motherboard and RAM

Supplier
Frontosa [011] 466-0038

Internet
www.amd.com

RRP
R12, 895

Reviewer
Toby Hudon

SPECS

Frequency
2.8 GHz

Core
Windsor

Number of cores
2

HT speed
1 GHz bidirectional

L1 cache
64 KB instruction, 64 KB data per core

L2 cache
1 MB per core

Packaging
AM2

Features
MMX, 3DNow, SSE3, Cool 'n Quiet, AMD64

ACER AL1951C LCD

THERE ARE LCDS, AND then there are LCDs. This is one of the latter. All kidding aside, there is definitely a specific market for gaming LCDs, and this one is currently their king. We don't give such praise lightly, but sometimes it's completely deserved.

It is not one specific quality that makes this LCD better than all the rest, but rather its combination of qualities. Usually an LCD must make a sacrifice in response time, brightness, or contrast ratio, which makes it inferior to a top of the line CRT for gaming. However, we found that this LCD refuses to compromise in any way at any time. Even Acer's other 19-inch LCD, the Ferrari F-19, which we reviewed a while back, just can't match what this screen delivers.

Granted, you can find faster claimed response times than 4ms – even Acer manufactures a variant of the 1951 that sports a 2ms response. However, it sacrifices 25% of the brightness in the process. The 250fps capability of a true 4ms grey to grey response time should prove sufficient for even the most hardcore gamer, and we'd have to agree that there was no lag or ghosting visible at all, no matter what we played on it. The 400cd/m^2 brightness has to be seen to be believed. It looked especially nice when sitting next to a CRT that was considered exceptionally bright and clear, as the LCD could then do its best to put the CRT to shame. While the black is not absolutely black (a problem with virtually all LCDs), the 700:1 contrast ratio is enough so that details normally not distinguishable stand out. The only downside to this is that it makes one wish for more than 32-bit colour.

As we mentioned earlier, gaming performance was exceptional. Colours were vivid, everything was razor-sharp even in fast-paced FPS games, and there were no oddities like input lag that sometimes manifests on cheaper panels that use temporal dithering. Movie watching was likewise as close to perfect as we could hope for, and text was sharp and clear to a level rarely seen. The only time we found any kind of quality issue was when using the VGA input instead of DVI. This isn't to say that the VGA performance was lacking, but rather that the image quality from DVI was so high that the converted VGA signal looked blurry in comparison. Set next to other monitors, the VGA mode would normally give any of them a run for the money, but plug in a DVI cable and it's like comparing the stars to the midday sun. It's not just bigger and brighter, everything else simply vanishes.

The impressiveness doesn't stop at the screen's image quality and performance either. This monitor won an award for industrial design, and it's easy to see why. Rather than have the ports at the back of the LCD at an inconvenient to reach position, they're flat on the back of the base. The base itself is extremely solid, and folds up against the screen rather than snapping on or off like some cheap fast-food toy that many other screens resort to. The ports are straightforward: VGA, DVI, power, and audio. On the side of the base is a headphone jack, which can be convenient if your PC lives under your desk.

It's hard to give this monitor the praise it deserves without it seeming over the top. However, anything less would seem like an insult. There are other screens out there. Some of them may even come close, but so far, we haven't seen anything quite like this one. **NAG**

It's clear why this is an award-winning LCD

VITAL INFO

Pros
- Unbelievable image quality
- Solid no-nonsense design
- Reasonable price

Cons
- May make all other screens seem lame in comparison

Supplier
Acer SA [011] 233-6100

Internet
www.acer.com

RRP
R3,399

Reviewer
Toby Hudon

SPECS

Dimensions (mm) (H x W x D)
416 x 427 x 163

Display type
Active Matrix TFT

Colour
Black and Silver

Weight
5.4kg

Connections
D-sub, DVI

Viewable screen size
19-inch

Maximum resolution
1,280 x 1,024

Contrast ratio
700:1

Brightness
300cd/m^2

Response time
8ms

Extras
Integrated speakers

SPARKLE GEFORCE 7950GX2

FOR THOSE WHO LOOK on in envy at those with SLI, but don't have compatible motherboards, your prayers have been answered. While seeing two GPUs on one graphics card was rare, but not unheard of, it has now come to the mainstream in the form of the 7950GX2. Thus, SLI can now come to non-SLI motherboards, without needing a second PCI Express slot.

This new version of two GPUs in one is a bit different from the old. We've seen gigantic cards in the past attempt this, but they had difficulty fitting into many PC cases, due to the size of the cards and their massive heatsinks. However, a smarter approach has prevailed, and instead of the two chips being on one board, two boards are sandwiched together with thin profile coolers in a two-slot solution. Some may wonder exactly how this can still manage the heat of two high-end GPUs, and the answer is that the GPUs were taken from the mobile parts normally used for laptops.

So, now we have two mobile 7900GTs with 512MB RAM each. This gives double the pipelines of the single-GPU 7900GTX, at a slightly slower clock speed. 3DMark06 gave us 8,600 on the nose at a stock 500MHz core and a 1,200 memory speed, and just over 9,300 when overclocked to 600MHz for the core and 1,600MHz for the memory, which was quite stable. The HDR/SM 3.0 scores were 3,500 and 3,900 respectively. Overall, the card was quite fast, and it also translated well into real world benchmarks. We set *F.E.A.R.* to maximum settings at 1,024 x 768 and only disabled soft shadows as it sometimes causes issues when antialiasing is on. With 4x antialiasing and 16x anisotropic filtering, we got 78fps minimum, 143fps average, and 43fps maximum at stock, and a nice increase to 85fps minimum, 162fps average, and 502fps maximum, again at 600/1,600. The appearance of an SLI solution not limited to NVIDIA chipsets is a welcome development for gamers. With the early bugs of SLI ironed out, it seems like a viable solution for anyone demanding the fastest card to fit in a single slot. It's not exactly cheap, but then you get what you pay for. It also was quite reasonable on power thanks to the mobile GPUs, and we had no trouble at all running a high-end system with only one PCI Express power connector plugged into the card itself. It will be interesting to see if other cards based on this concept will appear, and how they will compare to the single-GPU high-end cards. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros
- As fast as it gets in one slot
- Works in non-NVIDIA boards
- Possible quad-SLI option

Cons
- Not cheap by a long shot
- Compatibility issues with some BIOSes

Supplier
Eurobyte [011] 234-0142

Internet
www.eurobyte.co.za

RRP
R8,099

Reviewer
Toby Hudon

SPECS

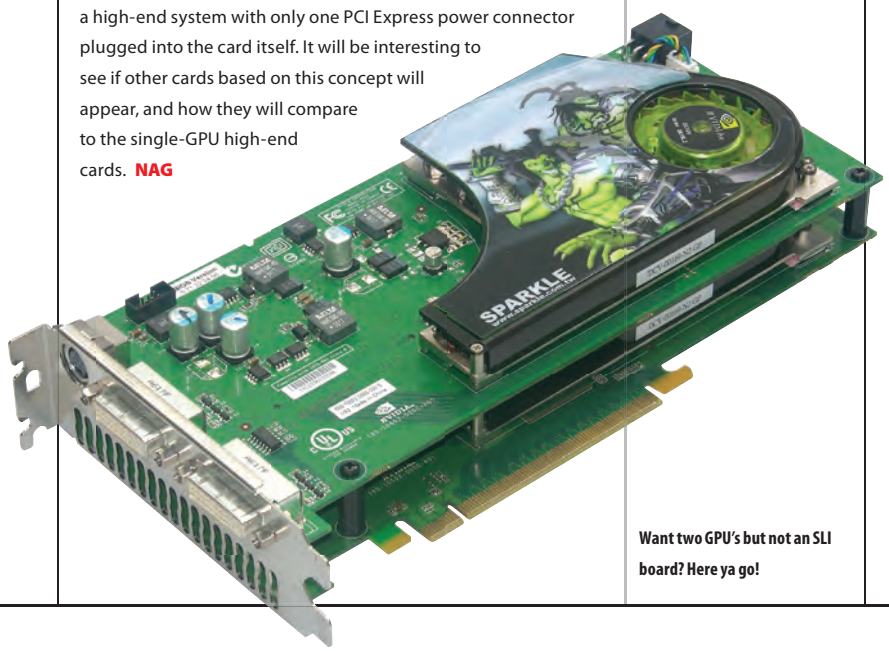
GPU
GeForce 7950 GPU, 500 MHz

Pipeline
24 pixel, 8 vertex, 16 ROPs, per GPU

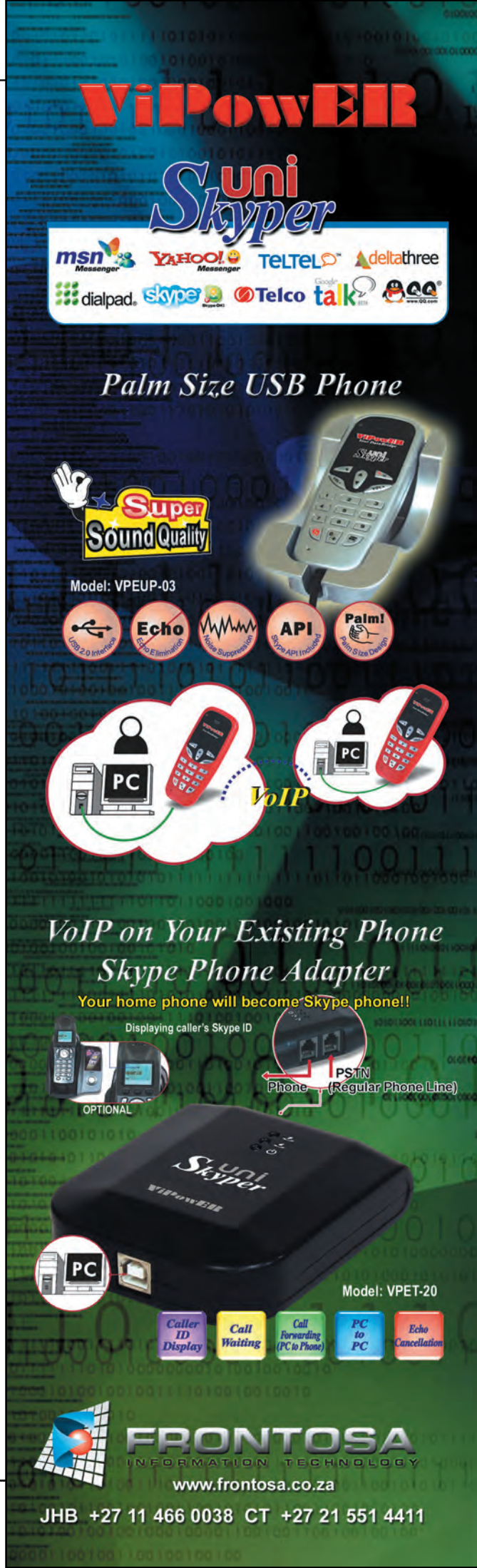
Memory
512 MB GDDR3 at 1.2 GHz effective, per GPU

Bandwidth
76.8 GB/s

PCI-E
16X



Want two GPU's but not an SLI board? Here ya go!



I.SOUND DRIVE-IN CINEMA

HAVE CHILDREN/PARENTS WHO JUST won't remain still or quiet in the back of your car during long trips? Well, if you have a PSP lying around and some UMD movies, the i.Sound Drive-in Cinema essentially straps the PSP to the headrest of the front seat. There it can be watched either using the four micro speakers built in to the unit, or using the two headphones provided.

The unit itself is sturdy and is attached to the seat headrest via some straps and a buckle. A remote (for controlling movies) plugs in, and then an audio splitter can feed sound to two headphones. The provided headphones are the tiny 'stick in your ear' kind that, while not amazing quality, do enough of a good job to merit using them.

The four micro speakers on the unit are tinny, and unless you have a quiet car, you won't really use them. An included car charger plugs into the lighter port and charges the PSP, though at the same rate as usual PSP charging.

A single stick-on screen guard comes with the unit, useful for avoiding scratches on your expensive toy.

Naturally, as with any product such as this, it's all about necessity. If two siblings can't share a PSP, there is a good chance both have one anyway (or are jealous of their mom/dad for having one, and the best they can do is strap it to the back of a seat). **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros
- Two headphones
- Screen guard

Cons
- Strap buckle is slightly fidgety

Supplier
MIDigital [011] 723-1967

Internet
www.dreamgear.net

RRP
R499

Reviewer
Miktar Dracon

SPECS

Includes
wired remote, 2x headphones, car charger, built-in desktop stand

SANDISK CRUZER CROSSFIRE USB FLASH DRIVE 1GB

A FLASH DRIVE IS A useful object, especially a 1GB one that can hold enough data to actually be useful in today's large-file age.

The Cruzer Crossfire is a sleek white Flash drive with nothing special going for it, but there's nothing wrong with it either. In terms of promotion, it comes with a *Prince of Persia Two Thrones* strategy guide on the Flash drive, as well as some promotional artwork of the Prince doing the Persia thing. It works with Mac and Windows, as well as the Xbox 360. Working with the 360 isn't specific to the Cruzer. The 360 can take most Flash disks and then play music off them or view images stored on them.

The Cruzer Crossfire communicates via USB 2.0 (compatible with USB 1.1), doesn't require drivers and is fully plug-and-play. For some frivolity, it also comes with a strap so you can wear the drive around your neck. A green LED lights up at the base when inserted into a powered PC or 360, and incidentally matches the colour-motif of the 360 quite nicely.

With its fair price tag, the Cruzer is a good choice for anyone looking to get a reliable 1GB Flash drive with some pretty art already on it. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros
- Useful
- High capacity

Cons
- It doesn't cook dinner

Supplier
Tudor Photographic [021] 423-4150

Internet
www.sandisk.com

RRP
R549

Reviewer
Miktar Dracon

SPECS

Interface
USB 2.0

Capacity
1GB

LOGITECH G7 SPECIAL EDITION

THE ORIGINAL G5 LASER mouse from this HID-focussed manufacturer quickly earned itself a place as a respectable gaming mouse, thanks to the excellent tracking precision of the Logitech laser optic system. This is the successor to the G5, and is set to become even more popular.

The G7 Special Edition package is basically the same as the 'standard' package, except that the mouse itself is black with a fake, carbon fibre-look weave printed on the plastic casing for a more upmarket appearance. This package also includes a handy, hard carry case for this precious gaming tool when travelling between LANs.

It may be fake, but the printed carbon fibre looks brilliant anyway. To get the mouse working you need to be prepared however. First, you'll need to plug the charging dock into a powered USB port on your machine. Then you'll need to extract one of the cellphone-like Li-ion batteries from its packaging and pop this into the charging slot, preferably on the 'Boost' setting that allows for complete charging of these cells in under two hours, as opposed to up to ten for the regular charging mode. Until this battery has some juice in it, your G7 will be unusable.

Charging done, just eject the battery from the dock, pop the second Li-ion cell, included in the package, into this vacated slot, and insert the charged battery into the matching slot beneath the G7 itself. The tiny wireless receiver unit can be connected to the USB port on the charger unit and you'll be good to go.

Installing the supplied software merely gives you access to the reprogrammable functions of the G7, and in these tools you can literally tweak everything about the mouse including individual axis's response rates!

It is just big enough to feel substantial in your hand, yet light enough to never get tiring. Its tracking is superb, and you can change between 400dpi, 800dpi and 2,000dpi at any time by pushing the buttons just below the scroll wheel. When you do, the battery-status indicator LEDs change to orange and show which level of sensitivity you currently have selected.

With the G7, you get the extreme tracking speed of a high-end gaming mouse, which in a second can revert to normal office-use speeds. And it's wireless too, but you never need to replace batteries. Simply swap the depleted one for the recharged spare and you're away. Moreover, the batteries last for ages as well, so you don't even need to go to these lengths very often! We like the G7 a lot. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros
- Battery-powered, but no battery hassles

Cons
- Cannot just rip open the box, plug in and play!

Supplier
Logitech [011] 656-3375

Internet
www.logitech.com

RRP
R999

Reviewer
Russell Bennett

SPECS

Tracking resolution
400/800/2,000dpi

Image processor
6.4 megapixels/s

Max acceleration
20G

USB data format
16 bits/s

USB report rate
500 reports/s

Th G7 includes handy Li-Ion batteries as well as USB-powered recharge deck

ZALMAN
Green Power
CNPS 9500 AM2
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POWER UP!

YOU NEED ELECTRICITY FOR YOUR MACHINE TO RUN GAMES, AND LARGE AMOUNTS OF A VERY STABLE SUPPLY OF THE STUFF IF YOUR SYSTEM IS A MODERN HIGH-END GAMING MONSTER. WE TEST A FEW OF THE BEST PSUS AVAILABLE AT THE MOMENT TO FIND OUT WHICH ONE IT IS THAT THE MOST DEMANDING GAMER REALLY SHOULD BE LOOKING AT.

THERE WAS A TIME, which we guess could well be called the 'vintage' era of the modern PC, at the speed at which our industry reinvents itself, when skimping on a PSU wasn't just accepted if your budget was tight, it was just about expected.

Today this would not be acceptable at all. Indeed, since the introduction of the PCI-E bus, it became necessary to upgrade to a newer PSU with at least two 12V rails and native PCI-E 6-pin power connectors, as older single-rail PSUs supplying juice via a two-Molex to 6-pin converter isn't likely to boot your machine at all. In addition, this happened quietly as well - the death of the single 12V-rail PSU. And although the latest raft of CPUs being released now tout improved levels of power efficiency, the total power draw of these chips will no doubt grow once more when their frequencies are pushed upwards in the eternal gigahertz wars.

Graphics cards, however, are the biggest culprits of overloading the PSU, and barring the CPU itself, the most sensitive to a shaky supply of power. Double the power draw of modern GPUs in an SLI or CrossFire rig, and we're talking about serious juice here. A Radeon X1900XTX, for instance, draws around 150W under load – so 300W in dual-GPU configuration, before even getting to the CPU, fans, hard drives and other components. What's more, although we believe these rumours could well be completely fake, there's talk of single-GPUs coming from the big boys (ATI in particular, it's whispered) needing 300W! That would be 600W in CrossFire mode, for your graphics cards alone!

It's for this reason of escalating power requirements that we saw a host of manufacturers exhibiting PSUs at or exceeding the 1kW threshold. Yep, that's 1,000W and up, the equivalent of a smallish hydroelectric station, just to provide your next-gen high-end components with the voltage they'll need. In addition to these monstrous beasts, we noticed a couple of new directions for PC power, one of which is actually included in our roundup here.

And yet, despite such monstrous outputs, the ever-demanding user is these days also concerned with how much noise pollution his or her PC is producing. Therefore, not that it really matters during hardcore gaming conditions, we've incorporated a decibel readout from our handy noise meter to give you a more complete picture of the PSUs included in this roundup. In some cases, this meter gave some interesting results…

In order to stress our high-end gaming PSUs, we built a system around the most power-hungry CPU of them all, the 965 XE from Intel. At 130W, we may not see anything as demanding for some time, with the Conroe XE needing a mere 80W in comparison. Add a Sapphire Toxic X1900XTX, complete with its own water-cooling system, and a Calibre 7900 GT running a secondary display, and we were well on our way to overwhelming the lesser PSUs in the roundup. A single DVD-RW drive, four SATA HDDs ranging from 160GB to 500GB, three 120mm system fans, and a 31W Asus P1 PhysX card (just for fun), brought our power draw total to a nice round 500W, and that's erring on the conservative side. Then, to stress our PSUs even further, we overclocked the CPU, knowing that the small increments of additional voltage we would need to send to this part for stability, would relate to an exponential increase in power draw.

Noise readings were taken at boot time, after 15 minutes idling in Windows, and once more after 30 minutes of benchmarking. And although the decibel reading is included as a useful reference and contributed to the overall result of the products reviewed, we were really after ultimate PSU performance. This is, after all, the NAG Hardcor3 roundup!

– Russell Bennett

ENERMAX NOISETAKER 600W

SUPPLIER: Frontosa
MANUFACTURER: www.enermax.com
PRICE: R1,649

THIS 600W UNIT IS meant to be the silent partner of the Enermax range, featuring a pair of 80mm fans below and venting to the rear of the unit to keep the PSU circuitry safely cooled while generating the minimum amount of noise. Aesthetically, the Noisetaker is appealing, with its case finished in a fetching deep, royal blue with a semi-gloss finish.

The cabling of the unit is more than adequate, although a tad messy. Three sleeved cables sprout from behind the Core Ring copper collar, which it is claimed, all but eliminates EMI interference, but the sleeving disappears halfway down the length of the wire into regular PSU connectors. This unit features seven Molex plugs, four SATA connectors and two FSS plugs, as well as a pair of PCI-E jacks, a 4/8-pin motherboard power connector, and a 20/24-pin main plug running off two individual 12V rails.

From its name, this Enermax offering is clearly squarely aimed at the noise-hating PC enthusiast. Yet, under load the decibel reading kicked up to 58dB, among the highest on test. Admittedly, at idle the unit ran at a far more palatable 49dB, and at 48dB (a solitary 1dB up on the ambient noise in the test lab) under Smart Fan mode, which leaves the cooling system active for two minutes after shutting down the system to ensure the PSU is properly cooled down. These reading were taken with the manual fan speed control knob at the rear of the PSU on its minimum setting, and the fan speed controlled automatically by the PSU itself.

The 600W Noisetaker did supply our demanding test platform with very solid and reliable power however, with the +12V and +5V rails steady at 12.0V and 4.94V to 4.90V respectively. Overall the Noisetaker is a likeable PSU with some talent, but perhaps a bit pricey, especially considering that it in fact turned out to be one of the loudest PSUs we tested – except for the Codegen dual-rail 480 we used as an initial reference (generating an almost-uncomfortable 62dB at idle).

ENERMAX LIBERTY 620W

SUPPLIER: Frontosa
MANUFACTURER: www.enermax.com
PRICE: R1,999

THE LIBERTY PORTION OF this model name from Enermax refers to the freedom of having a modular cable management system, allowing the user to select exactly which power connectors and how many of each his or her machine will need. You then simply grab the cords from the lovely included fabric carry bag, plug them into the PSU, and your system is left as free from cluttering power cables as it can be, but with all the power it needs.

It also looks excellently finished in a mirror black and gold grille covering the 12cm fan. In fact, this unit showed the weakness of the Noisetaker design - the 12cm fan made almost no noise! At idle the system was producing 51dB, and this never fluctuated throughout the benchmarking portion of the test, indicating that the Liberty remained largely unstrained, despite bumping the VCore up to 1.45V to cope with a 4GHz overclock.

The +5V rail was solid at 4.97V, the 12V rail ran at 12.0V to 12.1V, and the 3.3V rail at an impressive 3.33V throughout. And despite the rear of the unit being an open honeycomb mesh, Enermax maintain that the Liberty features high-end EMI shielding, which is nice to know.

We would definitely have to recommend the Liberty 620W to gamers. There's plenty of juice here, it's very stable, it will clear your case of unnecessary cable clutter, and it's quieter than the Enermax 'low-noise' offering.

ENERMAX EPS 660W

SUPPLIER: Frontosa
MANUFACTURER: www.enermax.com
PRICE: R2,349

THE EXCELLENT POWER SUPPLY (no, we're not joking, the box says this is what the 'EPS' stands for in this case) had some problems with us. The first unit we got in from Frontosa ended up being the one and only spectacular electrical event to come out of this Hardcor3 roundup. Then, when a replacement golden PSU was sent through, it simply failed to power up the test system at all. Weird, but since we had no time to grab yet another replacement part, we had to give up on the EPS 660W for the moment. We'll revisit this product in the near future to perform our full testing regime, or perhaps even wait for the 1,000W unit (which Enermax tried to ship to us in time for this roundup, without success) and figure out how to push it to its peak rated output instead.

SUPER FLOWER 520W

SUPPLIER: TVR Computers
MANUFACTURER: www.super-flower.com
PRICE: R698

COMING IN AT THE low-end of our price spectrum this month (the Super Flower costs less than half of our other competitors here), is this plucky 520W from the small Eastern manufacturer.

Unpack the box, and this PSU looks cheap, featuring no cable sleeving whatsoever and a very simple silver case. There is, however, also a massive 14cm fan built in to cool the internals without creating too much noise (according to Super Flower).

Once again, our sound level meter revealed that this 'silence' was apparently subjective, with this 520W unit hitting 59dB and staying there throughout testing.

Another small pain with this low-cost option was the very short cables, in particular the 20/24-pin main motherboard connector and the single PCI-E jack. In our Enermax CS-718 test chassis, this cable length meant we had to run the PSU outside the case, as we simply could not connect it with it firmly mounted in position.

Fortunately, the voltages provided were rock solid in our test system, despite the 12V rail dipping down to 11.98V at times. No tragedy, the Liberty went to 11.96V and yet proved one of our overall favourites.

For the price, we can really recommend that you look at the Super Flower 520W. Not for an SLI or CrossFire system however, as it includes only the one native PCI-E connector, but for power-hungry single-GPU gaming rigs on a budget.

SUPER FLOWER 350

SUPPLIER: TVR Computers
MANUFACTURER: www.super-flower.com
PRICE: R365

SKIMP EVEN FURTHER HOWEVER, and you'll get this: the 'baby' model (at least in gamers' terms). At a mere 350W rated output, this PSU cannot be considered adequate for the modern gaming rig. It did give us an opportunity to try some interesting additional testing however.

As originally equipped, our test system simply could not power up with this Super Flower installed, so we decided to start removing components one by one to find what configuration would work. Removing the primary GPU, the Toxic X1900XTX, would have done the trick, but would leave us running without our most powerful of the two installed GPUs, so we decided that it had to stay. Everything else was fair game.

In the end, the test rig booted up missing its PhysX card, its secondary 7900 GT graphics card, and a single 120mm fan. With the same 14cm fan as its larger sibling, the 350 made similar levels of noise as well at 58dB.

THERMALTAKE PUREPOWER POWER EXPRESS 250W

SUPPLIER: Corex
MANUFACTURER: www.thermaltake.com
PRICE: R1,450

THE DEFICIENCIES OF THE smallest PSU to be sent in for this roundup (see Super Flower 350W), gave us an ideal opportunity to put this Thermaltake unit to the test.

The Power Express range is designed for the situation where a gamer wants to or has already upgraded to a kick-ass dual-GPU system, and is now stuck with empty pockets and a struggling 350W (or lower) PSU, unable to power his or her new babies. Provided there's a free 5¼-inch drive bay in the system, the Power Express solves this dilemma.

Hooking the unit up requires that you screw the box into the bay and install the included matte-black backing plate, which then plugs straight into a wall socket using the bundled power cord. Coming out of the unit are, quite simply, a pair of PCI-E connectors and a single 4-pin connector for adding some juice to your main motherboard power connector too. We connected both our graphics cards, and plugged everything else back in with the 350W Super Flower still installed, for a maximum power capacity of 600W, and it worked liked a charm. There are also larger 300W versions on their way for more power-hungry applications (CrossFire X1900XTXs, for instance).

If you have the funds, we'd still rather upgrade to a newer higher-end PSU. However, the Power Express idea could certainly come in handy at times, especially considering that it works so darn well!

AOPEN PRIMA POWER 700W

SUPPLIER: Corex
MANUFACTURER: www.aopen.com
PRICE: R1,099

THE PACKAGING CLAIMS THAT the glossy black casing, coupled with a 12cm 'SilenTek' fan, help to keep the temperature in the unit down. Whatever the case, it looks good, but betrays some of the cost cutting. It is pretty quiet however, especially at boot time, when the fan doesn't spin up at all. After 10 minutes of stress, this unit kicks into action, running at a 58dB noise level for a minute or two before settling to 54dB at 950rpm.

The elongated cables make installation into just about any chassis a cinch, but considering its high rated output, we were surprised to find a relatively limited selection of connectors: two PCI-E, four SATA and five Molex plugs, and a single FDD power connector.

The voltages on the Prima Power, however, were rock solid, if slightly low going on the averages in this group, particularly on the 3.3V and 5V rails, which returned lows of 3.20V and 4.84V respectively.

It performed flawlessly, however, even when stressed, and you cannot get Quad 12V rails and a 700W rated power output for less money, which ought to be plenty of juice for even the most demanding modern gaming rig.

ANTEC TRUEPOWER 2.0 550W

SUPPLIER: Frontosa
MANUFACTURER: www.antec.com
PRICE: R1,299

THE TRUEPOWER 2.0 SERIES sits at the bottom of Antec's PSU pricing schedule. Clothed in a sombre, standard aluminium casing with unsleeved cabling (except the main motherboard power cable), you can immediately see why, but the technology beneath the skin is still of the typically high quality you expect from this company.

Rated at 550W, the TP2 includes five Molex, four SATA and two PCI-E connectors, in addition to the 20/24-pin and 4-pin motherboard plugs, meaning that this is an ATX 12V 2.0 specification PSU.

It coped admirably with our test system, but wasn't able to support the highest overclocks and their associated voltage boosts. The TP2 ran quite quietly as well, with the 12cm fan at 0rpm for a few minutes after boot and therefore generating no additional noise at all over the 47dB ambient sounds. When it spun up to a still leisurely 900rpm, the noise level climbed, but not beyond 52.8dB, so the PSU was barely noticeable.

The Antec TP2 may not be all that innovative, but quality does shine through, and for an attractive price it puts out enough juice to run your 'average' high-spec gaming rig, while remaining commendably quiet even under punishment from extended benchmarks.

ANTEC NEOHE 550

SUPPLIER: Frontosa
MANUFACTURER: www.antec.com
PRICE: R1,499

THE NEOHE RANGE FROM Antec is where you should really be looking if you're after more appealing features. Aside from its stylish gunmetal grey casing and fully sleeved cabling, the NeoHE also offers modular cable management to eliminate case clutter.

It may be rated at the same 550W output, but the higher efficiency of the Neo's circuitry means that it is also able to cope with slightly higher demands than its TP2 sibling may. We were able to overvolt the CPU all the way to 1.50V, with a resultant overclock of 4.2GHz, where the cheaper model managed only 1.45V.

Despite a single 8cm fan, rather than the more common 12cm fan, the NeoHE was surprisingly silent. In fact, it managed to record a loaded decibel rating 1dB below the TP, which suggests that 12cm fans don't always deliver lower volume levels than an 8cm fan. At this low level of noise generation, however, it really wouldn't be noticeable to the human ear and therefore is largely irrelevant.

The modular cable set includes seven Molex, four SATA, three FDD, and two PCI-E connectors as required for the SLI-certification that the box sports. The NeoHE also has three 12V rails and a very tight efficiency modulation of only 3%, which showed during our testing as unwavering voltages across the board.

THERMALTAKE TOUGHPOWER 750W

SUPPLIER: Corex
MANUFACTURER: www.thermaltake.com
PRICE: R1,999

THE ENTIRE PSU IS finished in gloss black, including the grille for the massive 14cm fan built into the underside of the unit. This cooler, combined with the EPS internal design on the ToughPower 750, resulted in a 54dB operating noise level, which never fluctuated no matter how much pressure we applied – or so it seemed to us. With 3.25V on the 3.3V rail, 12.1V on the 12V rail, and 4.88V to 4.95V on the 5V rail, the voltages were very stable although not as unflinching as the NeoHE.

Our one complaint about this 750W beast is that the cables, especially the 24-pin for the motherboard and both PCI-E, are a little short and required some tight fitting in the slightly peculiar Enermax chassis it was tested in. All the cables are beautifully sleeved though, and Thermaltake offers plenty, which makes up for the lack of a modular design. There are a total of eight Molex plugs, six SATA and two FDD connectors, in addition to the 20/24-pin connector, pair of PCI-E 6-pins and 4-pin or 8-pin secondary power connectors, which are separate sockets on the same cable, rather than the click together type more commonly used.

Nonetheless, as high-end gaming PSUs for the modern power-hungry system go, the Thermaltake ToughPower 750 is the best we have tested to date. And the thought of having a 1kW PSU just by adding a single 250W Tt Power Express brick is, well, appealing.

PHOTO FINISH

NOW, HAVING SELECTED OUR overall winner, it is clear just how close a roundup this actually turned out to be. Pretty much all of the 550W-plus PSUs really had a decent shot, and even the under-endowed Super Flower 520 impressed us with its value offering. The NeoHE is also an excellent unit, and once Antec has these up to 650W or 700W they could easily surpass the ToughPower 750.

We liked the Power Express line from the same company as well, creating new options for the voltage-starved enthusiast user on a budget. And that this first generation of products performed so reliably was encouraging for the future of these units.

However, it is clear, from this roundup, how far the PSU manufacturers have come in these last couple of years, driven mostly by the necessity of keeping pace with the component creators who keep making more and more powerful high-end parts. The 500W units that were around when PCI-E first came out are clearly in a very different generation to even these 500W units on test.

Having already mentioned the 1kW and up units at Computex, we can't help but wonder if this is going to be the heyday of the PSU. Energy efficiency is becoming a more and more popular buzzword in all corners of computing right now, and with next-gen CPUs being the first to start consuming less power for more performance, we're certain the rest of the industry is likely to follow suit. Unless we're going to be adding dozens of new power-consuming peripherals to our systems that we don't know of as yet, we suspect that 1,200W may just be the rated capacity peak that the PC PSU will hit.

For now, however, by the slimmest of margins, if you want the best PSU you can buy for your high-end and peripheral-packed gaming rig and cost is not a concern, the Thermaltake ToughPower 750 is it. **NAG**

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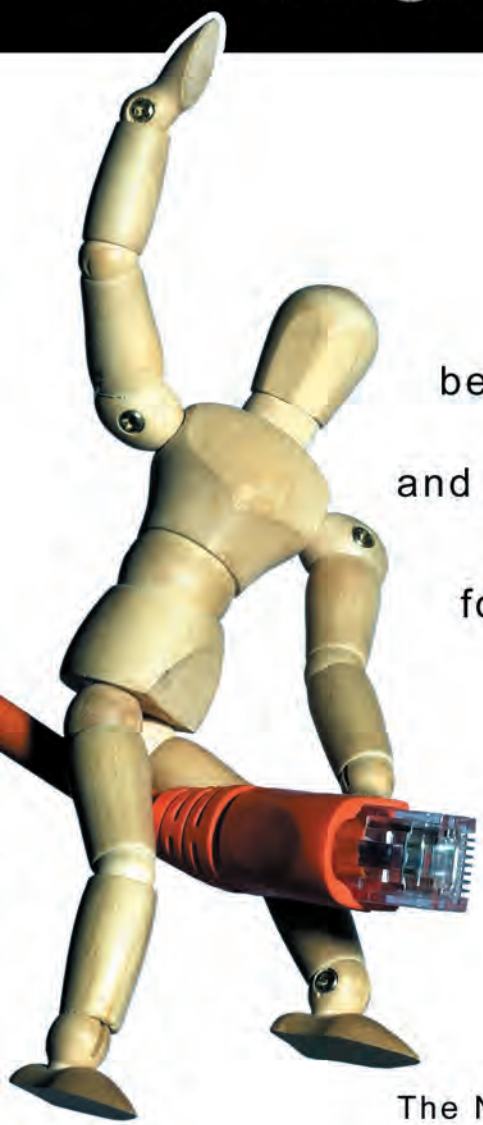

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EA NAG TOSHIBA CTT

Tickets go on sale @ Computicket
1 August 2006 for R195.00

D-Link has powered the NAG LAN since it first began. We make unrealistic demands on them and they keep coughing up the goods. The fact that they are the single biggest sponsor of gaming in South Africa when it comes to rAge and the NAG LAN should tell you everything you need to know when buying your next item of networking kit. Hint. Hint.

LAN open for the whole weekend [53 hours odd]. From Friday 10h00 to Sunday 15h00...

Some rules or don't bother coming

You need a valid Computicket ticket to enter – no exceptions one ticket per gamer
Computers enter or leave between 10h00 - 22h00 Friday and 8h00 - 22h00 Saturday
No additional power requiring devices such as cell phone chargers are allowed
No port scanning, hacking or cheating allowed – you will be escorted out of the event
No food or alcohol allowed to be brought into The Coca Cola Dome
Your power cords need the red plug with the flattened earth pin
No speakers, multi-plugs, double adaptors, switches or hubs allowed
No tents will be allowed
Right of admission reserved
More questions? Go to the www.nag.co.za/forums: rAge 2006 Section

www.vc.org.za

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MIXED SUCCESS FOR SA AT ESWC FINALS

THE LAST TIME THE local gaming community was this optimistic about South Africa's chances at an international event was the Electronic Sports World Cup (ESWC) in 2003. Ironically, that was also the year of our worst performance to date. Now, three years later, South African gamers are significantly more skilled and experienced. Even though the prospect of an internationally successful Counter-Strike team continues to elude us, our deathmatch (Quake 4), strategy (WarCraft III) and racing (Gran Turismo 4) players have shown remarkable improvement, and this growth was reflected in the results of ESWC 2006. It is no Cinderella story, but certainly a sign of greater things to come.

Representing South Africa were eight players and one team leader, having earned their stripes at the Rectron ESWC qualifier at The Carousel in April. They were: Counter-Strike team Damage Control, consisting of Harry "Incin" Apostoleris, Jannie "Hellhound" van Niekerk, Riaan "Style" van Niekerk, Tyrone "Explicit" Lautre and Chris "Apocalypse" Lautre; Quake 4 expert Stephen "Ph4ntom" Cloete; WarCraft III player Travis "Shase" Weedon; Gran Turismo 4 driver Jacobus "DunnoHate" Volschenk; and Arena 77 team leader Mandus "Recon" Momberg.

ESWC 2006 was held at the Palais Omnisports in Paris, France, a state-of-the-art indoor sports arena with facilities for 15,000 spectators. Several stages were arranged around the competition areas, featuring commentary and pre/post-game interviews with players. While falling slightly short of their attendance goals, the spectator experience at ESWC was, by all accounts, a roaring success. "For the Counter-Strike finals there were about nine thousand people watching," said Explicit. "I was shocked to find out what a huge difference a big crowd can make to the way you play the game. The French players did really well because of it."

However, one area where the event has perhaps not improved over the past year is the treatment of players outside of the tournament arena. Unlike events such as the World Cyber Games, where players are housed in a dedicated 'player village' and fully catered for, the hotels at which the players stayed for ESWC were located an hour's journey from the Palais Omnisports. "We stayed in a really dodgy area where numerous gamers were mugged, including my brother," said Explicit. "Luckily, nothing was taken from him." Apocalypse described the incident, which happened while he was returning to the hotel from

a nearby convenience store: "I was grabbed from behind while walking back to the hotel," he said. "I tried to pull free, and had to use my 12-pack of beer as a ball and chain. One guy nearly got it in the face, and when they backed off, I ran."

After a day of rest and registration, and another for practice, the various tournaments got underway. Damage Control was drawn into a fairly easy group by international standards, but at this level of competition, every game is difficult regardless of the opponent. After a default win against the Indian team A Plus E, who did not arrive at the tournament, and a narrow victory over 4 Glory from Serbia and Montenegro (17-13 on de_cbble), they were demolished by the American Team 3D (4-26 on de_train) and Austria's Team DRW (8-22 on de_inferno). Their final game against WebOne from France would regain them some pride, as they managed a draw with the French favourites 15-15 on de_dust2.

"It was one of those games where we just clicked," said Explicit. "Everything seemed to go our way. At least, as terrorist. We finished the first half 13-2 up, which is a wonderful score, but as counter-terrorist we were very unlucky. They seemed to be able to read our minds - every time we stacked an area they would go somewhere else. Overall though, I think there were a few rounds where we could have and should have won the game." Damage Control finished fourth in their group, while Team 3D and WebOne advanced to the second round.

In the strategy department, Shase was placed in group A, alongside the winners of the Brazilian, Dutch and South Korean qualifiers. Considering South Africa's previous performances in WarCraft III, few were expecting him to win any games. However, Shase convincingly overcame his Italian and Saudi-Arabian counterparts, both by map scores of 2-0. After losses to Fov (South Korea) and Pato (Brazil), he then went on to draw his match with Zerter, the Dutch winner, which placed him within one point of qualifying for the second round. "I wasn't really satisfied with my performance," said Shase. "I should've been able to beat Pato, since he also tied with Zerter, and I felt I could've beaten Zerter 2-0 with a little more practice on that level. If I qualify for WCG and I'm lucky with the groups, it may be possible to get past the first round there."

Ph4ntom played Quake internationally for the first time since ESWC 2003, and his return was impressive. In his first match, he defeated the French number two, Falcuma, by a clear 2-0 score. Against the Swedish number two, Ooze, he lost two maps to one, but recorded a convincing win on his strongest map, Monsoon. His final match in round one was against the Polish ex-Promode player Matrox, which he won in two tight maps, ensuring his progression to the second group stage. "One of my goals was to play on the stage," said Ph4ntom. "The games against Falcuma were really amazing, having the crowd go wild for every frag."

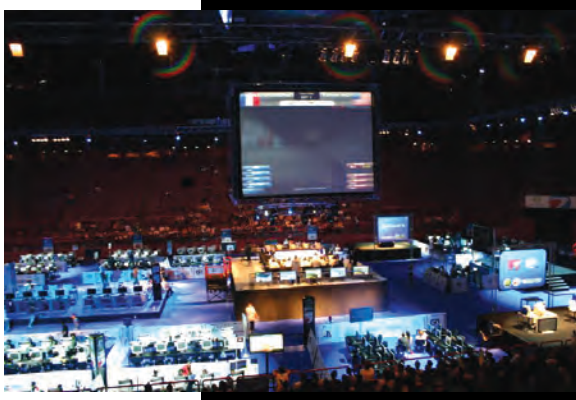
In round two, he was drawn in an extremely difficult pool, together with the two players who eventually finished third and fourth, Forever (Netherlands) and Cooller (Russia). While he failed to qualify for the elimination stages, he was satisfied with how he had played overall. "I was happy with my performance," he said. "My biggest weakness was the amount of practice I did, roughly only one hour a day for two to three weeks. It has also been a while since I last competed overseas."

DunnoHate's fifth place in Gran Turismo 4 may come as a surprise to some, but those who followed forum discussions prior to the event would know that his times were on par with the previous year's winner's. This meant there was a very real chance for him to do well, and he proved the assumption was correct by finishing in the top eight during the qualifying rounds. Earning a top seed for the tournament, he won all of his group stage games without any difficulty. He was eventually knocked out by the Australian representative, Hollo1, but still took home a worthwhile prize of $2,000 for his fifth place.

Members of the team also participated in the many fun competitions held during the ESWC weekend. Particularly successful were Apocalypse, who was the only person to win a Counter-Strike shootout match against a specialist 1v1 player from the French team Against All Authority, and Hellhound, who came fifth in the Asus Notebook 1v1 Counter-Strike tournament. Hellhound also finished second in a mobile Sonic the Hedgehog tournament, sponsored by Orange Cellular, for which he won a Nokia N70 and a Sega hamper. Even more astonishing is that the player who beat him in the final was South Africa's own team leader, Recon.

"Any gamer at the event could participate," explained Recon. "It had qualifying rounds and then went into a 32-player single elimination bracket. The aim was to obtain the most amount of points on the first level of Sonic the Hedgehog. In the final I got lucky, because Hellhound's strategy was based on a crucial jump, which he missed." For his effort, Recon also won himself a cellphone, as well as an all-expenses paid trip around the world for two. No kidding.

Finally, after yet another long flight, the players are all home again - until next year's qualifiers, where it all starts over again. ESWC is an experience that will always remain a treasured memory for those who attend, one that extends far beyond the technicalities of a gaming tournament. "The week was one of the best of my life," concluded Explicit. "The SA squad really had a good time talking about people in Afrikaans and knowing they couldn't understand us!"



FINAL RESULTS

COUNTER-STRIKE 1.6

1. Made in Brazil (Brazil)
2. Fnatic (Sweden)
3. Alternate Attax (Germany)
4. Team 3D (USA)

QUAKE 4

1. Michael "Winz" Bignet (France)
2. Aliaksei "Cypher" Yanusheuski (Belarus)
3. Ivo "Forever" Lindhout (Netherlands)
4. Anton "Cooller" Singov (Russia)

WARCRAFT III

1. Jae Wook "Lucifer" Noh (South Korea)
2. Ivica "Zeus19" Markovic (Croatia)
3. Xiaofeng "Sky" Li (China)
4. Zdravko "Insomnia" Georgiev (Bulgaria)

GRAN TURISMO 4

1. Pierre "Snake" Lenoir (France)
2. Thibault "Carter" Lacombe (France)
3. Arnaud "Lucky" Lacombe (France)
4. Daniel "HOLLO1" Holland (Australia)
5. acobus "DunnoHate" Volschenk (South Africa)

WORLD OF (GUILD WARS) CRAFT

GAMING CULTURE AND ITS VARIOUS PARTICIPANTS ALL SEEM TO HAVE A COMMON TRAIT, COMMONLY FOUND. IT DICTATES THAT GAMERS SHOULD, MUST, COMPARE TWO (OR MORE) GAMES IN A 'VS.' MINDSET, REGARDLESS OF WHAT THE MOTIVES BEHIND THOSE GAMES ARE, OR EVEN THE DIFFERENCES.

Locally, *World of Warcraft* and *Guild Wars* are currently the two most high-profile MMO games. Not even *Ultima Online*, *Everquest*, *Dark Age of Camelot* or even *Asheron's Call* managed to garner the same amount of interest. Other MMOs such as *Eve Online*, *Second Life*, etc. don't stand a chance of entering the mainstream mindset here, for now.

The misconception, however, perpetuated by gamer stereotypes, is that somehow *Guild Wars* and *World of Warcraft* are competing.

It is a fair assumption to make, but it ignores several factors from both sides and simply places both games on the same level. The reality of it is certainly much more complex. For the sake of argument, let us break down both games into three major components: the Idea, the Implementation and the Long-term. The Idea is how the game took shape, Implementation dictates how well the idea works, and Long-term is how well the company has researched future trends, if at all.

IDEA

GUILD WARS

As most people know, the creator of *Guild Wars* is Arena.Net, a large chunk of ex-Blizzard employees who were closely involved in the development of *Diablo 2* (as is seen from the skill structure of *Guild Wars*). They were also responsible for Blizzard.Net, the online matchmaking and Realm service for *Diablo 2* and other Blizzard games. As a result, *Guild Wars* is a large amalgamation of *Diablo 2* ideas coupled with Blizzard.Net expertise and forethought. *Guild Wars* is 'episodic'. Each new chapter can be played separately, or with any of the other chapters.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Blizzard knew that it had something potent with the *Warcraft* brand – it was firmly established by *Warcraft II* and *III*. Blizzard knew it could launch a successful franchise using the *Warcraft* universe, hence *World of Warcraft*. The races in *Warcraft* naturally lend themselves to a traditional MMO structure, which is what the development team looked at when planning *World of Warcraft* (as is plainly seen in how *World of Warcraft* 'borrows' ideas from already established MMOs such as *Lineage II* and other South Korean offerings).

IMPLEMENTATION

GUILD WARS

Arena.Net opted for a surprisingly unique approach to handling its MMO. It focused on efficient running costs and an overarching plot that can be augmented by additional 'Chapters'. It also separated PvP (player vs. player) and PvE (Player vs. Enemies) into two separate games: Role-playing and Player vs. Player. It also made both sides complement each other in a slightly complex way. People playing the PvP, if they win, can win 'Favour of the Gods' for their 'Region', i.e. Europe or America. When a region has Favour, a special instance opens up where the Role-playing players can go adventure (or the PvP players can quickly quit PvP and go adventure). Inside this instance are items beneficial to both sides, as anything you gain in the PvE segment 'unlocks' for use instantly with a newly-created PvP character. Skills and Special Items remain unlocked for an account, regardless of which character gained it. Ground covered in PvP helps PvE, and vice versa.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Because Blizzard is following a traditional MMO structure, there is a definite level treadmill in place, caused by a heavy emphasis on experience gain/levels, as well as finding hard-to-get items. This is a solid idea. It creates empathy between character and player. The player feels that they have 'worked hard to gain something worthwhile', or at least that's what would happen if most people didn't simply pay other people to advance their character. Monetary solutions often negate any kind of value one might have originally gained from the effort avoided. As is evident in the high running costs, monthly fees and the Realm server issues, an MMO such as *World of Warcraft* is difficult to maintain, a lesson already learned by many MMO companies. The business model may no longer be as viable as it once was. The people with the money to pay monthly fees rarely have the time or energy for something as intensive as *World of Warcraft*.

LONG-TERM

GUILD WARS

Here is where Arena.Net and Blizzard truly differ in philosophies. Using efficient (if slightly unorthodox) methods for running an MMO, as well as the intuitive nature of episodic content to regain interest at much quicker intervals than larger 'Expansion Packs', *Guild Wars* has settled down for the long haul. Barring any kind of major catastrophe or a dip in the frequency of new exclusive content, there is no reason that *Guild Wars* won't enjoy longevity in the mainstream online gaming market. To nail this idea in with finality, Arena.Net avoided a monthly subscription fee, something that seems to now be showing more problems than benefits for long-term MMOs.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

World of Warcraft has had unparalleled success, and rightfully so. It's a difficult battle to get to the top of the MMO market, and it requires bravery and quick thinking. Nevertheless, Blizzard seems to avoid long-term projections. The 'plague' catastrophe from earlier is an indication of that, as well as the player lash back against Realm waiting-queues. Blizzard has created a wonderful, engaging universe that is both creative and nostalgic. However, by looking at the bigger picture it is clear that Blizzard, with a rather expensive overshadowing monthly subscription fee, severe running-issues, as well an overzealous subscription number, may just face perilous odds in the near future when *World of Warcraft* becomes unsustainable.

CONCLUSION

Gamers insist on making comparisons, and when they are made using judgement and knowledge, they can be powerful tools. For example, *Guild Wars* really is just *Diablo 2*, in a new universe with online cooperative and deathmatch. *World of Warcraft* is a little bit of *Everquest*, *Lineage*, *Ultima Online* and *Asheron's Call*, all rolled into one MMO, with a monthly subscription fee, exploration, and emphasis on levelling, but an odd lack of non-combatant character classes.

When you break it right down, you have to wonder what the larger gaming population would prefer: an online *Diablo 2* style game with no monthly fee as well as the pros (and cons) of the *Diablo 2* idea (as well as new problems due to the social aspect of online play), or another Massively Multiplayer Online game with all the pros and cons?

One doesn't have to compare both games. However, if you had to compare them with honesty, there is a good chance you might not like what you see.

BAND OF BATTLEFIELD BROTHERS

SAIX (GAMES.SAIX.NET) HOSTS AND maintains servers for many popular online games such as *Counter-Strike* and *Battlefield 2*. The latter came to question lately, when the South African *Battlefield 2* online community rallied together for a single purpose.

The servers offered to the public by SAIX have been "… under tremendous strain from international players through to local players, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to find a slot available on the Public Gaming Servers," said Stuart "IcenFlame001" Davies, who shared this information with NAG Magazine.

"Once you were in, you were faced with a bit of a 'laggy' game due to the server being so full."

According to Stuart, this prompted Rizaan "=ASF= snake182" to create a thread on the SAIX community forum, suggesting that all the *Battlefield 2* players club together and purchase a new server, then donate it to SAIX.

As Stuart mentions, "Obviously like any idea in a public forum it received some criticism, but then something began to happen - one or two people began to pledge a donation. Eventually this got the whole community energised".

Over 954 replies to the thread later, the community had managed to raise just over R18,516 – in a matter of three weeks. Community members donated as little as R100 or as much as R1,500. Community member "[FIB]|OBC|Demo" even offered his bank account as a holding account for the donation pool.

Community member Quentin "TygerBS" arranged the server purchase and delivery to SAIX. Over 52 people donated time and money to this effort, and Stuart notes "… and it has paid off."

"We will soon have a 64-player server available for all *Battlefield 2* Online Gamers. Despite the arguments players have with each other from time to time, we all stood together to achieve a common goal. And the result is a lot of happy community members."

THE COMMUNITY WOULD LIKE TO THANK ALL OF THOSE WHO DONATED:

snake182; {BOC}EGGMAN; Demo; BlOuB52; cene; Bounty; killadoob; SCORPYON; Funguye; Gameshark_ZA; TipTop; SSS; Thinice; tcat007; IcenFlame001; R33per; =100%BOER=; Khahn; SOSMAN; AsaultMatrix; Speedy RSA; N|T3SH4D3; Leprechaun; SlipperyDuck; buka001; Cuchulain; DEFAULT; Anonymous; SkankyYuppieScum; TygerBS; fivelza; [FiB]Prisma; rainynight65; n3ddy; boomslang; Kotters29; Thallium; Python; Scart; misgeskiet; McSpafter; Albereth; Lawd_Vadah; The Boss; DL-Cruel; [LosT]; Dakkie; [UZA]Toppie; darnit696; Razor-Zn, TB= Bergfalke , EC_StarBuck,GenFX, IR_J_ZA, hillbillyza

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- 4 x DIMM Slots (ECC Registered, DDR2-400) Upgradeable to 8GB in pairs only
- 2 x 32-bit/33MHz PCI, 2 x 66MHz PCI-X, 1 x PCI Express x4
- 2 Integrated Serial ATA Channels supporting RAID 0 and 1, 1 Integrated EIDE controller, 2 USB connectors (optional header for two more), 1 Serial port – 9-pin
- 2 x Intel (1 x Intel 82541PI, 1 x Marvell 88E8050)
- Integrated ATI Rage XL SVGA PCI with 8MB video memory, 8MB Flash EEPROM – AMI BIOS
- National PC87431M mini-baseboard Management Controller, Intel Server Management
- 2 x Serial ATA 36G 10,000rpm HDDs in RAID0 Setup (Took out the SCSI)
- 2 x 3.2 Xeon Processors 2MB L2 Cache
- 4 x Kingston 1GB ECC Registered DDR2 RAM = 4GB RAM

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Stay tuned for an announcement on a Battlefield 2 competition to be held in the NAG LAN @ rAge!

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DESIGN TIPS FOR GAME NETWORKING COMPETITIONS

MANY TUTORIALS WILL TELL YOU EXACTLY HOW TO GET A COUPLE OF COMPUTERS, CONSOLES OR CELLPHONES TALKING TO EACH OTHER, BUT THEY ASSUME THAT GETTING DATA FLOWING IS THE HARD PART OF WRITING A NETWORKED GAME. HERE'S THE WISDOM THAT NOBODY'S TELLING YOU: WHAT TO SEND AND WHY.

MULTIPLAYER'S WHERE THE FUN IS

THANKS TO LANS AND the online gaming scene, everyone who has the game development bug wants to develop a multiplayer game at some point. Typically, multiplayer is seen as an easier way to complete a game than going through all the effort of developing a massive single-player campaign populated with compelling characters, puzzles and rewards. Why go to all that effort when you can have the world's craftiest enemies and best allies - other human players - for your users to play with?

Of course it's not quite as simple as that. Multiplayer isn't a silver bullet that will turn a bad game into a goldmine. In fact, multiplayer game design is often far more difficult than single-player designs. You have to deal with all sorts of devious people all trying to get an advantage over their friends and co-players. Just ask Tom "Zileas" Caldwell, the man responsible for balancing *Warcraft III* and who had to take the place of Rob Pardo, whose guidance shaped *Starcraft* into arguably one of the most balanced tournament games of all time. That said, there's very little else that can compare to the pure fun that a good multiplayer title can be with the right group of friends.

BUT IT'S MORE COMPLEX THAN YOU THINK...

Getting your game to communicate with other copies of itself is only the first step along the path of networking for games. Many tutorials can take you through the nitty-gritty of establishing a connection, choosing a protocol and keeping packets flowing, making it possible to send information. But very few answer the more important question: What information do you send?

Networking is a well-documented area of computing, with robust APIs and good support. Many different engines come with their own built-in networking solutions. Game Maker needs only two commands to establish a connection - the Torque engine is built around the legendary network code behind *Tribes 2*. Even if you don't have an engine that can do your communication sub-layer for you, third-party networking libraries such as RakNet are cheap and easily available. For this reason, we're not going to focus on how to implement networking at the technological level. Instead, we'll focus on the theoretical side of what to send when and why to make your game as enjoyable an experience as possible.

THE THREE PROBLEMS OF NETWORKING

If we assume that your game is able to send and receive data in some way (the actual implementation does matter, depending on the final system you decide to go with, but the theory remains the same), the next step is to analyse what problems multiplayer games need to address and find ways to solve them simply and elegantly.

Zileas earning himself a job

Typically, games have to deal with the concept of time as soon as they're connected across a network. Lag takes time and slows a game down. The time that it takes a player's actions to be visible can make or break a game. How can a game decide if a packet arrived late or out of order if it doesn't have a way to figure out what 'time' it is on the machine that sent it?

Games also need to be able to tell which messages have arrived from whom. It's no fun if players seem to randomly control different objects. A game also needs to be able to tell which information in a message is relevant to what's happening on-screen.

And finally, game settings and running conditions can differ from machine to machine, even on consoles. Just think of what it's like with a little bit of lag. Different players' inputs and actions are processed at different times in each game as they arrive. Your game needs to ensure that it's always going to do the same thing, given the same inputs at the same time, every time. This is called deterministic behaviour: the outcome is determined in advance, depending on the messages that arrive.

TIMING

To ensure that time information is constant across all the connected games, you need to build your timing system into the game from the word go. Think about what your game is doing

Chess has perfect positioning: F8 to B4?

and decide what it is you're going to need to do to ensure that you'll always know when things are happening.

For turn-based games, this is easy. All you need to do is keep track of the current turn, as the end of a turn is the only time that the game-state can change. For a real-time game, you have to have an accurate timer, plus you'll need to base all the game's action on this time. Movement, rotation, acceleration, everything must be time-based. You can't afford to handle real-time movement according to framerates - those aren't guaranteed to be the same on all machines.

The general rule is to decide how your game's logic is going to flow and when it could possibly change. Then you keep track of which of those 'logic steps' the game is currently in. Real-time games can change state at any time because the player can press a key at any time, so you need to record when everything happened accurately. Turn-based games can't change as often, so all the timing you need there is which turn something happened in (in this case, the logic tends to be based on turns anyway, not framerates). Between those two extremes lies the tick system, where a game's logic progresses at a specific rate provided by a timer. For accuracy in this case, you need to know which tick something occurred in, and the game must only be allowed to change on a tick. You also need to be sure that ticks are going to progress at the same speed on all machines, otherwise you'll get out-of-sync errors.

Timing information decides when your game can change. Make sure that you always know when something changes so that you can broadcast that information over the network. Without reliable timing, you're not going to get anywhere, no matter how fancy your communication layer is.

IDENTIFICATION

Most networking APIs and systems will provide a way to identify where a particular message came from. This allows you to identify individual players and the data they're sending. Something to keep in mind is what happens when you run multiple copies of your game on the same machine. How do you identify players then?

Identification questions are crucial to the architecture you pick for your multiplayer system. Do you go with a client-server system, do you use a peer-to-peer distributed model, or do you try something funky like a token-passing method? The answer depends on who needs to be able to control what. For a real-time game, often client-server's ease of identification (all clients send their changes to the server, the server broadcasts game state to all clients) works the best. Turn-based games might be able to use a token-passing system (the player currently taking their turn has the token and is the only player who can broadcast changes to all the other players). Peer-to-peer systems tend to be used mainly in strategy games. Each player controls his or her own units and sends their states to the other players.

Internal identification is more complex. It revolves around making sure that the right information gets to the right place in your game. Sometimes simple positional information is good enough. Grid-based games can work perfectly as long as they know where something started and where it ended. Chess is an excellent example of positional identification. Other systems might need to issue each game-entity with a unique ID, which is then used to identify it in messages. Real-time games often take this approach. Just be sure that the IDs are truly unique and identical on all machines, otherwise things can go pear-shaped very quickly indeed.

DETERMINISM

Provided you've got an infallible timing system for your game actions with time-stamped messages, and a dependable way to identify which information is intended for which player and which game-entity, the stage is set for determinism. For your game to be deterministic you need to be able to reproduce exactly the same game-state situation, given the same trigger information at the same times. It's this trigger and timing information that you need to send between games to ensure that they're all in exactly the same state across your network, all synced and having fun.

A deterministic game will allow you to 'hide' issues like lag and lost packets by predicting where other players are going to be, given their current states. Solid determinism means that you can save replays of your game, and the better you are at building deterministic situations, the less information you need to send, i.e. for a rocket to move correctly in a real-time game, you need to send it's starting position, direction and when it started moving. If rocket acceleration is always the same, you'll be able to predict exactly where that rocket is on all machines, based on how much time has passed since it was created. That's determinism, the least amount of information you need to replicate the same game-state.

CONCLUSION

Deciding what data to send across a network to turn your game into a multiplayer fun-fest is a function of how your game works and what you want to do with it. Tacking on multiplayer after you've already designed the entire game is probably going to lead to huge headaches. Design with it in mind from the beginning. Provided you take the three main problems mentioned above into account, you should be able to write fast, efficient and robust game network code. Good luck. Playing your own game with others is definitely worth the effort!

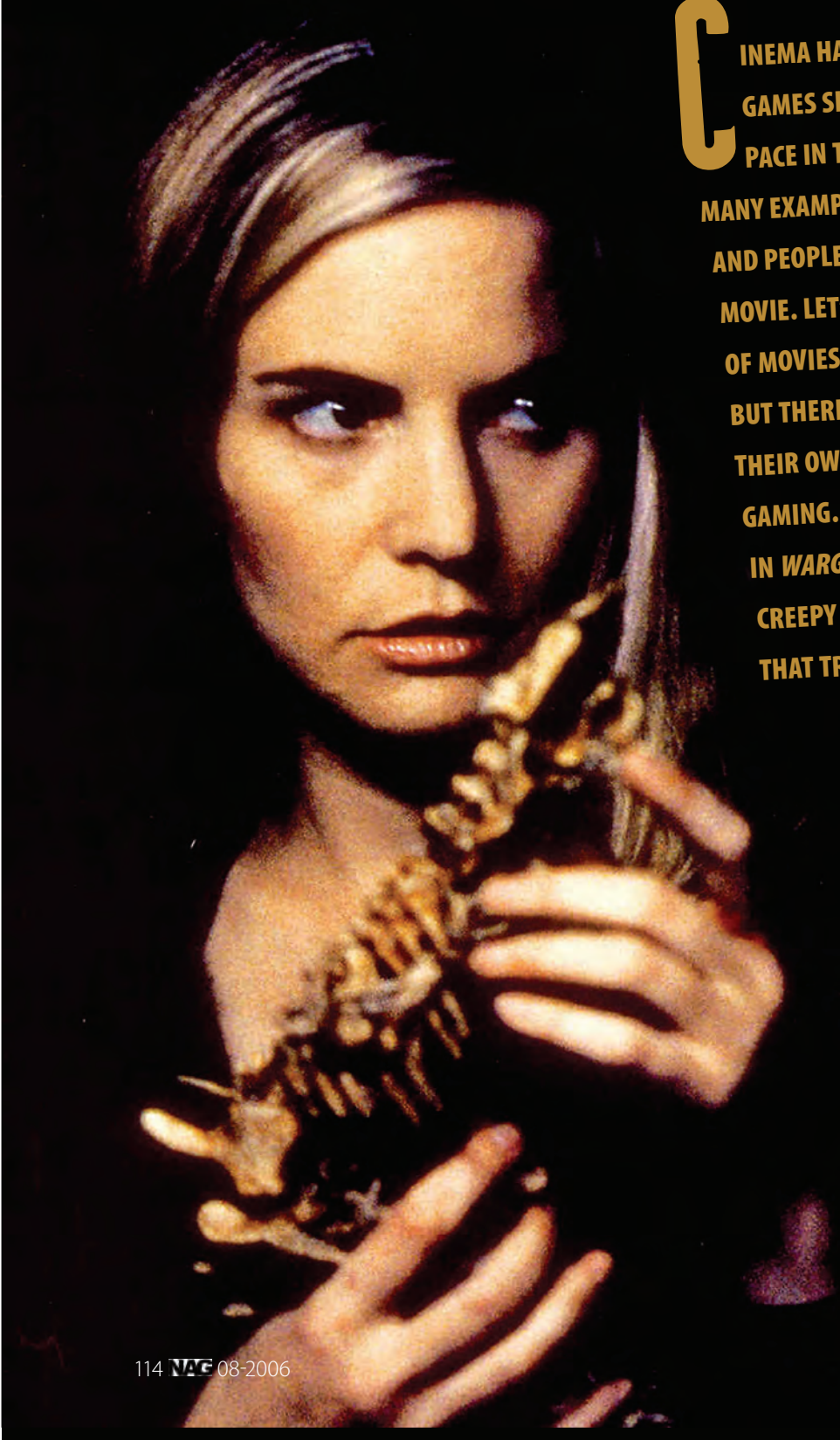
Originally presented as part of the Game Development Hotlabs. **NAG**

Quake's networking ran at 10 Hz

Tribes 2 sports some of the most stable netcode ever

Quake 3 communicated at 30 Hz

PLAYING THE GAME



CINEMA HAS HAD A LOOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH GAMES SINCE THE INDUSTRY STARTED GATHERING PACE IN THE EARLY EIGHTIES. TODAY THERE ARE MANY EXAMPLES OF COMPUTER THEMES LIKE HACKING AND PEOPLE PLAYING GAMES ON A CONSOLE IN A MOVIE. LET'S NOT FORGET THE GROWING NUMBER OF MOVIES BASED ON GAMES – BAD AND GOOD. BUT THERE ARE A SELECT FEW MOVIES THAT, IN THEIR OWN WAY, DEALT WITH THE THEME OF GAMING. FROM GAMES MEETING THE REAL WORLD IN *WARGAMES* TO THE QUESTIONS POSED IN THE CREEPY *EXISTENZ*, HERE'S A SELECTION OF MOVIES THAT TRULY WERE ABOUT GAMING.

T.R.O.N.

1982

The 80s was a magical time for game movies that shaped generations to come. Leading the charge, Walt Disney Productions unveiled the science-fiction movie *T.R.O.N.* with the tagline: "A world inside the computer where man has never been. Never before now." The plot follows a young and gifted programmer who wanted to create his own games, but was screwed out of promotions by another programmer stealing his work and presenting it as his own. Years later, the Master Control Program that runs the company starts going awry and the lead protagonist gets 'digitised' into the Computer World. While quite camp by today's standards, *T.R.O.N.* defied special-effects convention and essentially created the Light Cycle game-genre. Unfortunately for Disney, *T.R.O.N.*'s release was overshadowed by other box-office offerings. As a result, the film was initially unsuccessful, but has remained a cult favourite mainly due to its innovative use of computer graphics, and its gaming plotline.

WARGAMES

1983

Often regarded as a shining example of the '80s movie' phenomenon, *WarGames* brought us one of the biggest AI parts since HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Eighties icon Matthew Broderick plays the geeky teenager David Lightman, who uses a modem (this movie is credited as starting the home modem craze) to hack into what he believes is a game developer's system to play unreleased games. In reality, he hacks into a military defence computer with an AI programmed to learn from playing games. The game of 'Global Thermonuclear War' gets all too real when the computer starts simulating World War III, causing panic among the military and a manhunt for Lightman. Rather than coming out as a harmless prank, it gets rather serious as the computer decides its side of the game is for keeps, and tries to launch nuclear missiles. It then comes down to Lightman and the AI's disillusioned programmer to convince the computer that destroying the world is bad, while the superfluous teen love interest required by 80s movie standards looks on.

THE LAST STARFIGHTER

1984

It is always the mostly unknown movies that somehow seem to reach the furthest, despite managing to remain under the majority radar. Only two years after *T.R.O.N.* and already writers were again using videogames as a major plot point for movies – possibly to ride the rising popularity of home console systems and the golden-era of arcades. The movie follows a teenager who lives in a trailer park, who unsurprisingly becomes the 'best player ever' at *Starfighter*, a stand-up arcade game that has him "defend the Frontier against Xur and the Ko-Dan armada." The twist: the game is actually a flight simulator used as a training device. Getting the high score nets the teenager a trip into outer space to go do the real thing, and save the Frontier. *The Last Starfighter* was notable for many reasons, not limited to its extensive use of CG at a time when CG was still very expensive, as well as having gone further to become a novel, a videogame and an off-Broadway musical.

THE LAWNMOWER MAN

1992

Made at the height of the virtual reality craze, *The Lawnmower Man* (not to be confused with the story by Stephen King) is a retelling of *Flowers for Algernon*, a 1959 story by Daniel Keyes. A mentally retarded but otherwise happy man is made more intelligent through science, in this case using experimental drugs and virtual reality. At first, the experiments go well, but later things take another turn. Like some of the other films on this list, *The Lawnmower Man* was a CG tour-de-force in its time, and some things in the plot may seem silly and are included just as excuses to do more spectacular effects. While not a particularly moving film, it may be interesting to gamers in that it shows what people assumed "the near future of computing" would be like, and they were very, very, wrong. It also spawned

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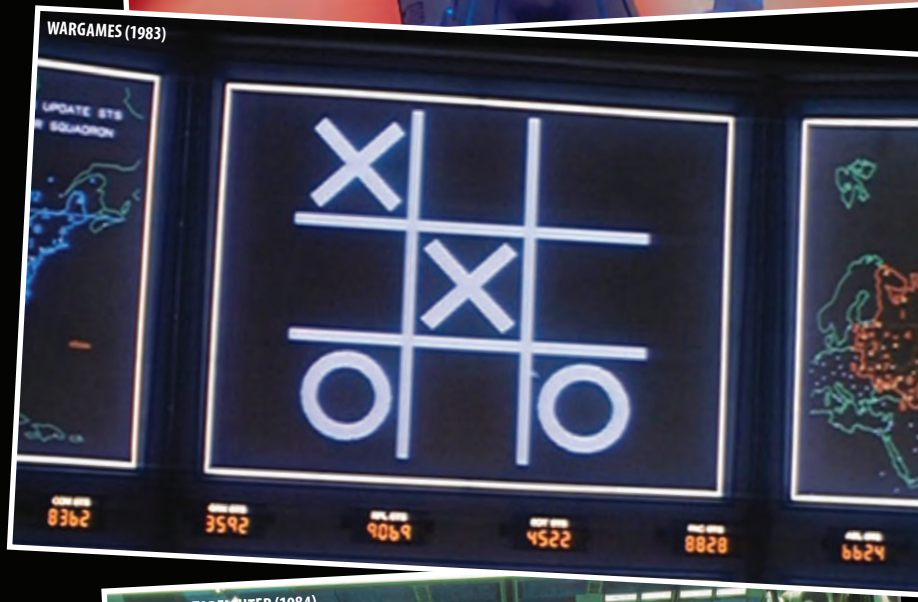
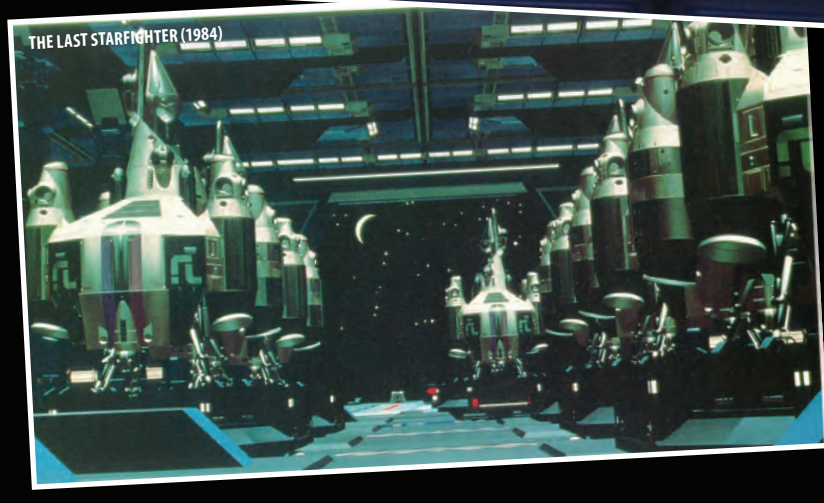
TRON (1982)


WARGAMES (1983)


THE LAST STARFIGHTER (1984)

an awful sequel, but a pretty decent game called *Lawnmower Man: Cyberwar* that was set after the end of the first film, but fortunately was based on neither.

EXISTENZ

1999

Where does a game start and end? In *Existenz*, cult director Cronenberg again messes with our heads with a new concept, but one that doesn't reveal itself until the end. When a marketer for a virtual game, set in the future and using biological implants to work, helps the game's creator Allegra Geller escape an assassination attempt, they have to play through to its end to discover what damage has been done to the game piece. But as they progress, things don't make much sense and the finale poses the question if they escaped the game, or are playing a game in a game. It's not an outstanding film, but the concepts are interesting, plus it involves a gun built out of the bones from someone's dinner that shoots teeth. It posed similar questions as *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor*, both of which were also released in 1999.

AVALON

2001

Avalon is weird, deep stuff. In a bleak future, most people are hooked on playing the virtual game *Avalon*, sometimes to their own downfall. Occasionally a player's spirit can remain caught in the game, leaving a catatonic husk on the other side that slowly fades away. Ash is great at the game, but a fallout with her former team has spurned her to reach the secret 'Special A level' rumoured about. It's a strange, intense ride that was produced in Poland and used native actors and dialogue in Polish, but directed by Mamoru Oshii, who also created *Ghost in the Shell* (*Avalon* was full of Japanese production value). On top of that, the handling of an online game environment makes sense, and the script shows a lot of knowledge about how MMOs work. The story is a bit surreal and the metaphors can be a bit heavy, but that's largely because the game relies heavily on gaming concepts. That in itself makes *Avalon* a great example of what a game-themed movie can be. **NAG**

THE LAWNMOWER MAN (1992)

EXISTENZ (1999)

EXISTENZ (1999)

AVALON (2001)

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CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

Cast: Liam Neeson, Tilda Swindon
Director: Andrew Adamson
Genre: Fantasy
Rating: 10

WHEN FOUR SIBLINGS DISCOVER a magical world through an ancient cupboard, they find themselves in the middle of a war between the good Aslan and the wicked White Witch.

The Movie: C.S. Lewis's books were never as complicated as Tolkien's was - thank goodness. As such, the (hopefully) first *Narnia* movie is fun, breezy and looks great. It's more like *Willow* than *Lord of the Rings* and tells a cute tale that pretty much anyone would enjoy. The SFX is impressive and though *Narnia*'s budget shows from time to time, the movie sits comfortably alongside its contemporaries. The big battle is visually impressive and devoid of the slight gore found in other recent fantasy movies. But it's aimed at a larger and largely younger audience, and in that respect, it works very well.

The DVD: Making of, interviews and looks into the books are nice additions to the movie, all packed onto an extra disc. It's nice to see this habit being more common with studios these days.

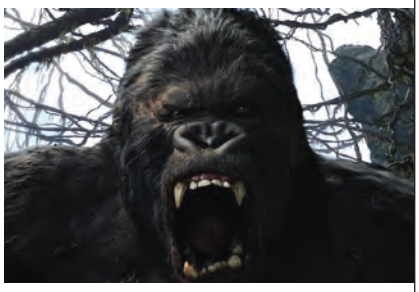
LORD OF WAR

Cast: Nicholas Cage
Director: Andrew Niccol, Ermond Walker
Genre: Crime
Rating: 16VL

YURI ORLOF IS ONE of the world's biggest arms dealers and he's really good at it. So good, in fact, that he's even been nicknamed the 'Embargo Buster' for notoriously selling arms to any country that would buy. This is his story...

The Movie: *Lord of War* is loosely based on the exploits of Viktor Bout, a KGB arms dealer whose story is actually even more fantastic than the movie. It's a coy look at the world of illegal weapon selling and the wars that demand weapons. Nicholas Cage is great in the role and *Lord of War* has a slick style that makes it very watchable, but with a dark message and some shocking visuals. Orlof takes viewers to conflicts in Africa and his narrow misses with law enforcement agencies. The catch is that you like him and he makes arms dealing seem cool. But at the same time the consequences and insanity of what he does comes through time and time again (especially with a character based on Charles Taylor, once a frequent customer of Bout's, played by *Oz*'s Earmon Walker).

The DVD: Nothing much at all. It almost feels as if rental copies were shipped into the retail market, because the cover can even be inverted.



KING KONG

Genre: Adventure
Age Rating: 13

Feel some monkey love as Peter Jackson takes the 1933 original and creates a three hour epic with plenty of special effects. On the one hand, it's really visually impressive, plus everyone's heart was clearly in it. On the other, somewhere Jackson got confused and thought this was *Return of the King*. Unless you really want sentimental soap and lots of padding, *King Kong* it stretched pretty thin.

Features: Interviews, commentary, making-of, and more detail on the movie's past and present.

THE HILLS HAVE EYES

Genre: Horror
Rating: 18

Wes Craven's classic has recently been remade. Now you can compare versions to see just how they differ. The original has been remastered and looks a lot better. Craven's second movie is still fairly creepy, but it's really more for camp value. It's just too old to still have any teeth. The bonus DVD has a lot on the film's history, and horror buffs will definitely want to get the Anchor edition set.

Features: Whatever you want, it's here, including the usual documentary Anchor dug up or commissioned. In this case, there's a new Craven feature and a 71-minute doccie about him and his movies.

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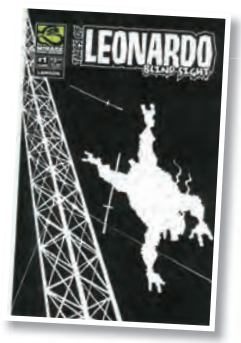

Leonardo: Blind Sight

Mirage, Mini Series R28.95

A follow-up to the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* series, this strip takes place after Leonardo has been blinded by an enemy he doesn't know. The entire work is drawn in a black and white style reminiscent of *Sin City*, giving you little more than a broad impression of everything you see - much like a mostly blind person would see things. Other than Leo dealing with his blindness, the story contemplates what might happen if normal people were to find a dead Ninja Turtle on the street...

Dr. Blink Superhero Shrink

Dork Storm, Series R32.50

HEY, SUPERHEROES HAVE PROBLEMS too, right? It therefore takes a special kind of man who can listen to them whine, pose and complain. That man is Dr. Blink and he has to deal with everything from flying super-beings that are afraid of heights, to wall-crawling arachnids that are having difficulties dealing with their guilt over the death of an uncle. And occasionally the good doctor even gets to save the world by dealing with the eating disorders of planet-devouring aliens.

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THE RAVEN'S LOFT

WINTER IS HERE

It is unusual for international marketing events that carry a season-specific theme to coincide with our weather patterns here, as most such events originate in the Northern Hemisphere. However, just this once, this is exactly what has happened, with the introduction of *Magic: The Gathering's Cold Snap expansion*, which is an anachronism in most regards…

LOST UNDER AN ICE FLOE

Veterans of *Magic* may be familiar with the following, but it will likely be news to most new players. *Magic* expansion blocks are structured as follows: a major expansion ushers in the new block, with two smaller expansions rounding it off. The usual period between expansions is around three months. After two expansion blocks, a new Edition is released (and, in fact, Tenth Edition is currently in the planning and design phase even as you read this, with Wizards of the Coast inviting the community to vote on certain aspects of the next major release). Looking back in time to the classic *Ice Age* expansion, it may be known to some that this block didn't really follow this formula, which had not really been established at that time. Part two of the block was *Alliances*, but there was no real concluding set, and eventually Wizards decided to nominally consider *Homelands* to be that set. However, that particular set doesn't fit the wintry theme of the block it was artificially inseminated into, and so the company has decided to complete the block now.

Now while this is very likely a gimmick to market more cards and a way for the company to short-circuit the usual release schedule in this instance, *Cold Snap* will provide closure to the unfinished story, and tie up some loose ends. By the time you read this, the set will have been available for about two weeks, with the pre-release tournaments having taken place on 8 July, and the cards becoming commercially available shortly thereafter. This set, in order to be consistent with the block that it is supposed to be a 'lost' member of, will revisit several themes not often seen in *Magic* since days of yore. The concept of spells that can be cast for 'free' by sacrificing cards in hand (Force of Will, anyone?) plays a role, as does cumulative upkeep, something that hasn't been used in ages. Snow-covered lands are also back, for now. In addition, several characters that previously only appeared in flavour text, now finally make personal appearances on playing tables.

However, the winter will end, as will this brief and chilly historical interlude, and in the very near future, the regular policy will be resumed with the release of *Time Spiral*. We can't wait to see what the next block will herald, given the excellent standards achieved by the recent *Ravnica* block! **NAG**

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GAME OVER

EPILOGUE
BOLDLY GOING WHERE NO GAMER HAS GONE BEFORE

ENSIGN'S LOG: SUPPLEMENTAL. The USS NAG Office is cruising along smoothly, though captains Guardien and RedTide have had their attentions diverted by the impeding intergalactic gaming peace-council rAge, which will be held on planet Coca-Cola Dome at the end of earth-month September. *[Time for a new back page writer, ED]*

The captain's Number 1, James "Priest" Francis, seems to be steering the USS NAG Office true, though some question his methods of interrogation and his insistence on subjugation to ancient documentaries about battle, labelled 'WWE'. To his credit, most of the crew feels that Number 1 won't have to be thrown out the airlock anytime soon.

The new recruit, Chris II, seems to be fitting in. The poor ensign is currently in med-bay however. He was caught in some crossfire between the captains.

Life aboard the USS NAG Office was everything the pamphlet said: travel to exotic worlds, meet strange beings. You're really on the cusp here, travelling through cyberspace. When you're a part of this crew, it really feels like what you're doing means something, to someone, somewhere, somehow.

The food isn't bad either.

Overall, I feel the choice to join the USS NAG Office was the right one to make. Sure, now and then someone dies when people beam down to the various Game Planets, but they gave their lives willingly – but mostly kicking and screamingly.

They perished for the greater good – and for that, we salute them.

Seems time is up, and I have to go do my cleaning duty now. Perhaps we'll finally manage to dislodge the remains of Reej from the holodeck – you'd think he would have known better than to try and shoot walls with a rocket launcher. **NAG**

NAG

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