NAG

PC   PLAYSTATION   XBOX

HALO 3 ODST

OTHER DESIGNATED SOLDIER TYPES?
ONLY DENTISTS SANITISE TEATS?
OBSCENELY DARING SAUSAGE TACTICS?
NOPE, ORBITAL DROP SHOCK TROOPERS
HAVE LANDED IN YOUR NAG.

+ COMPETITIONS
Win R20,000 worth of
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The ultimate gaming keyboard

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How to be a GPU geek

VOL 12 ISSUE 6 09.2009   SOUTH AFRICA   R42.00

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The Game(s) Of The Year
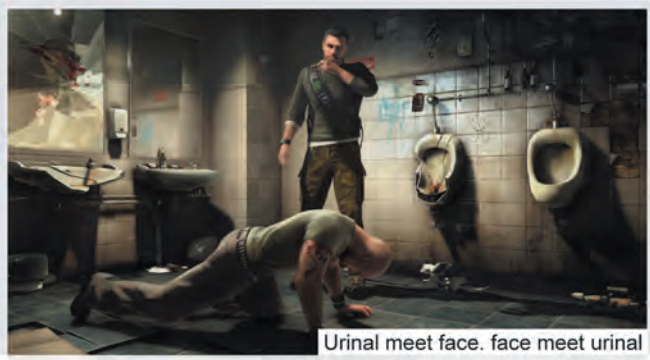
rAge ring a bell...

The range of games that are coming to you from Megarom this Christmas will rock your world. Whether you want to make music that will make your neighbours bang on the wall in the early hours of the morning [as if they have not already done this with GH:WT... ED] or sneak around Venice in the 15th Century, the choice is yours [hidden blades rock, I want to be an Assassin... ED]. But there is more!

Fight your way to the top of the King of the Iron Fist Tournament [Tekken FTW... ED] and be victorious over your adversaries. The options to win are endless. Juxtaposed to this is the magical world of Pandora, created by James Cameron for his upcoming film. What will happen between the Na'vi and the RDA Corporation? Only you can decide [and no you can't play with your Xbox Avatar... ED]. You may be content with these titles, but Megarom has more to offer.

## "THE OPTIONS ARE ENDLESS.

MAKE YOUR CHOICE AT RAGE"

"You may be able to destroy me...but the beast will eventually come for you..." — Vladimir Makarov. Will he be stopped, or will the world fall into anarchy? Only time will tell as you fight across all regions of the world to stop this madman [Remember Soap MacTavish? ED]. As if one FPS is not enough, Megarom is bringing a new concept to gaming. The RPG and FPS have made a baby, Role Playing Shooter with 87 Bazillion guns to choose from [87 BAZILLION, count me in to protect the Borderlands... ED].

Urinal meet face. face meet urinal

Wiki wiki wa!

The Anticipation

rAge expo

megarom
interactive
@: www.megarom.co.za
: www.megarom.mobi
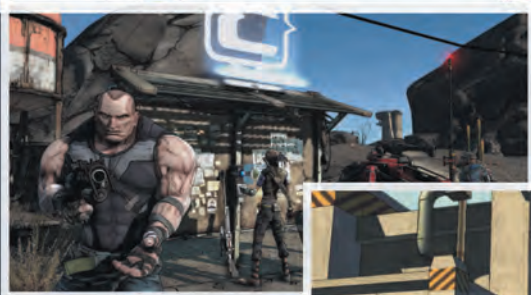
Plus	Minus
+ Excellent graphics	- If there was one, it'd
+ Involving storyline	go here
+ Strong gameplay	

Bottom Line

If you're not at Rage this year, you won't see the epicness that Megarom has to show

10%

*The above prediction has been paid and written by the staff of Megarom Interactive, and should be taken seriously.

Gotham C

Notorious Vill

Available from 7 September 2009

PC
Batman
Arkham Asylum
R399.90

PLAYSTATION.3
Batman
Arkham Asylum
R699.90

Contents

52

28

42

On the DVD

Demos

Batman: Arkham Asylum | Braid | Demigod | East India Company | Hearts of Iron III | Restaurant Empire II

Drivers

ATI Catalyst Drivers 9.7 Vista & XP | NVIDIA ForceWare 190.38 WHQL Vista & XP

Extras

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare PeZBOT 008p | Girls of Gaming 7 Sample | Glum Buster | PS3 Sounds.zip

Patches

Call of Duty: World at War Patch v1.5

Game Videos

Aliens vs. Predator - Marine Trailer | Army of Two: The 40th Day - Day at the Office | Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines - Announcement Trailer | Bayonetta - Ice Skates Trailer | Bayonetta - Torture Attack | Beatles: Rock Band - Game Trailer | Bit.Trip Core - Game Trailer | Blood of Bahamut - Japanese Launch Trailer | Blur - Vision Documentary | Champions Online - Melee Combat Trailer | Command and Conquer 4 - Debut Trailer | Darkest of Days - Firearms Training Trailer | DiRT 2 - Baja Landrush Trailer | DiRT 2 - Croatia Rally Trailer | DJ Hero - Game Trailer 1 | DJ Hero - Game Trailer 2 | DJ Hero - Jay Z and Eminem Trailer | Dragon Age: Origins - CEO Interview | Dragon Age: Origins - Game Trailer 1 | Dragon Age: Origins - Game Trailer 2 | Dragon Age: Origins - Game Trailer 3 | Fairytale Fights - Story Teaser Trailer | Fallout 3 - Mothership Zeta - Abduction Game Trailer | Fallout 3 – Mothership Zeta - Launch Trailer | Forza Motorsport 3 - Content Director Interview | Fullmetal Alchemist - Senaka wo Takuseshi Mono - Japanese Trailer | Gears of War 2 - All Fronts Guardian Nowhere Game Trailer | GI Joe: Rise of Cobra - Desert Game Trailer | Guitar Hero 5 - Features Trailer | Guitar Hero 5 - Rockfest Multiplayer Trailer | Halo 3 - Bungie Pro Video Sample | Halo 3: ODST - Desperate Measures | Hive Rise - Debut Trailer | La-Mulana - Japanese Debut Trailer | LittleBigPlanet - History Kit DLC Trailer | Machinarium - Game Trailer | Mafia 2 - E3 09 Demonstration | Mass Effect 2 - Developer Diary | Metroid Prime Trilogy - Debut Trailer | Mini Ninjas - Shun Hero Trailer | Modern Warfare 2 - Multiplayer Trailer | ModNation Racers - Debut Trailer | Monster Hunter 3 - Online Intro Cinematic | Monster Hunter 3 - Online Quest Game Trailer | MX vs. ATV Reflex - Game Trailer | MX vs. ATV Reflex - New Features Interview | Naruto Shipuuden - Ninja Destiny 2 - Montage | Need for Speed: Shift - Vaughn Gittin Jr. Interview | Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 - Deadly Co-op Game Trailer | Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising - Fear and Anticipation Trailer | PROTOTYPE - Hints, Tips and Stupid Chopper Tricks | Rabbids Go Home - Character Featurette #1 | Red Faction: Guerrilla - Demons of the Badlands DLC Trailer | Sands of Destruction - Game Trailer | Something... | The History of Hammerfight - Debut Trailer | Trine - Forest Game Trailer | Trine - Terrain Game Trailer | TRON 2 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves - Don't Quit Cinematic | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves - Multiplayer Camera Tool | Wet - Rage Mode Game Trailer | Wii Sports Resort - Escape to Reality Trailer | Wii Sports Resort - Swordplay Trailer | Wolfenstein - Origins Developer Documentary | World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King - Call of the Crusade Trailer

Best of E3 2009

Action Adventure Game | Best of Show | Biggest Surprise | Downloadable Game | Driving Game | Fighting Game | First-Person Shooter | Graphics | Missing in Action | Most Disappointing | Most Embarrassing Moment | Most Innovative | Music or Rhythm Game | New IP | Nintendo DS Game | One to Watch | Online Game | PC Game | PlayStation 3 Game | Press Conference | PSP Game | Role-Playing Game | Software Line-up | Sports Game | Strategy Game | Third-Person Shooter | Trailer | Wii Game | Xbox 360 Game

STEP UP YOUR GAME

XBOX 360

ARCADE CONSOLE BUNDLE

+ + +

Arcade bundle includes: Arcade Bundle includes: XBox360 Arcade Console (256MB Internal Memory), 1 x Wireless Controller, Standard TV Cable, Internet Cable and Banjo Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts.

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ONLY R3499   **SAVE R1500**

Elite Console 120GB

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AVAILABLE 22 SEPT 09
ONLY R599⁹⁹

FORZA MOTORSPORT 3
AVAILABLE 23 OCT 09
ONLY R699⁹⁹

LIPS: NUMBER ONE HITS
AVAILABLE 16 OCT 09
R349⁹⁹ (STAND ALONE)
R699⁹⁹ (BUNDLE)

ACCESSORIES

ONLY R1399⁹⁹   **ONLY R599⁹⁹**   **ONLY R299⁹⁹**   **ONLY R499⁹⁹**   **ONLY R399⁹⁹**

Steering Wheel   **HDMI Cable**   **Microsoft LifeChat LX-2000**   **Wireless Microphone** *Available 9 Sep, 09*   **Universal Media Remote**

DVD • CD • GAMES • MP3 • ACCESSORIES

Look & Listen
For the Fans

Feel the love

WELCOME TO ANOTHER ISSUE of *NAG*. August 2009. Where exactly did the year go? From here, we rush into the October issue (just before rAge); and right after rAge, we start the November / December / January sprint (it's a sprint because we all go on holiday for most of December and need to get two issues out without the usual break in between). So, to all those budding magazine publishers out there, a word of warning: don't do it. ;))

This more or less brings me to what I have to say here...

I'm a firm believer in getting out what you put in. With this in mind, I approach every issue thinking that the more love and attention we put into it (right from the general mood in the office at production time to the consistent distances between each screenshot), the more you'll get out of it (on a karmic level), thereby building strong brand love and general thoughts of awesomeness directed at us. I've always maintained that if it's perfectly put together, it'll feel just right when you get it in your hands – no matter what. This is why it drives me crazy when there's a spelling mistake or similar silliness in 'my precious' – all that effort ruined by something dumb. I'm assuming this also applies to game developers. If you analyse game releases, their aggregate scores and their development history, you'll find that stressed-out and troubled development companies don't produce games that feel just right. Now, during this global economic crisis, I wonder about the general quality of games being developed this year; what with companies closing, staff cuts and general uncertainty all around. So, bear this in mind and be a little more forgiving while playing all those hot December titles – the 'karma' might be 'off' for a few of them this year. If you do have an opinion on this, or a valid example in your own work environment or experience, send a mail to the usual address...

That's all the depth I have in me for this issue. Hope you enjoy all the goodness that went in. Until next time.

Michael James
Editor

Cover story

No real huge shakes this issue – just a small 7.8 on the Richter scale. We had *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, *Assassin's Creed II* and even another *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (multiplayer exposure) as cover options this month... But... the material didn't show up for *Uncharted 2*, and we've just done both *Assassin's* and *MW2* (but, the multiplayer feature will go in when I get it regardless – never fear).

But that all aside – the clear choice was *Halo 3: ODST*. Now 'Halo anything' gets us all excited, because it's an awesome franchise that appears to still need a good kick-start in South Africa. The real stress this month was getting the final screenshots for *ODST* (a whole one day before we sent the issue to print). Lucky for us, we used placeholder screens in the original version of the feature in case they didn't arrive in time. Gulp. In this regard, thanks to Yvette, Jonathan and Ethel for pulling this off – sorry for all my endless nagging, but a deadline is a deadline. ;) Enjoy the feature; and for once, the game is actually done and should be available for sale at the end of September – just in time for rAge, actually.

rAge 2009

We were going to do a two-page advertorial, advertising spread on rAge this month to highlight all the coolness on the cards for the show, but we ran out of time. So, I'm just going to highlight some of the general attractions. I also tried to get some of the exhibitors to confirm which games might be appearing at the show, and all they could tell me is, 'most of the Christmas stuff'. Not very helpful... but this is all tied to overseas publishers never committing on time. ;) Regardless, we have a stage (maybe two), gaming competitions, cool and new hardware, a huge screen, good food, general competitions, a busy LAN, tons of swag, thousands of people coming, anime, cosplay, comics, figurines, preview code of games only coming out in November and December and maybe even next year, games to play, chairs and tables, amazing specials, tons of games for sale, T-shirts, and so on.

Just so you know, the LAN sold out in two and a half days this year, but everyone is welcome to attend the exhibition during the weekend – there's no limit on that. By the time you get the October issue, rAge will be upon us (2-4 October). Also note that in the October issue and at rAge, Corex and their hardware vendors in partnership with rAge are going to be running a competition where you can win a **R70,000.00+** PC! This is the best gaming computer you'll ever own...

Inbox

All letters sent to *NAG* are printed more or less verbatim.

Letter of the Moment

FROM: Henry
SUBJECT: My fear of the future
*[I'm going to put a little * next to sentences, words and ideas in this letter to highlight areas, issues and concerns that might be useful to your family when they try to get you institutionalised, Ed]*

"**I'VE BEEN READING A** lot about cloud gaming recently, and I'll admit it's making me nervous. See, I'm an über-consumer. I love buying things. Sometimes I go to the mall with no idea what I want to buy, just the feeling inside that I need to buy something*. Yes, I do realise that it's an addiction. My shrink tells me I am compensating for something missing in my life or some crap, but I couldn't be buggered to try to find out what that is*. Why? Because coming home with something shiny and new is a feeling that makes all the bad things go away*.

When it comes to games and gaming hardware, I take it more seriously than just showing up at the mall and committing random acts of mass consumption.

I don't just go rushing in willy-nilly, flashing my credit card around like a plastic pervert*. I spend weeks* researching the latest hardware, I study release schedules on a daily basis*, and I consider myself 'in the know' when it comes to what to buy when. The joy that comes with buying a game or bit of new tech that I have been looking forward to for months is matched only by the pleasure that comes from getting home and opening the packaging, smelling the plastic*, reading the manual, really just the whole retail experience. It's like that first cigarette after a good meal. Like when you are stuck in peak traffic and need to pee, when you finally get home, and you can breathe again. It's that 'ah' moment*.

That was a rather long-winded introduction, but it was necessary to convey the level of enthusiasm I have for buying new games and hardware. It's about the search, the purchase, and the physical ownership, the upgrade, the fancy bit of new hardware in your system, the updated 3DMark score*.

Now a few newfangled ideas are threatening to take that all away from me. OnLive is coming, and it wants to ruin my life*. So does David Perry's Streaming Worlds. They go on about 'all you need is a tiny set-top box and an Internet connection, your hardware is unimportant!' - like I'm supposed to be bloody delighted to hear it! Oh, and then there's 'all the games are hosted and run remotely, in the cloud, so you don't need to buy games!' Wow, thanks guys, that's awesome! Next up will be 'in fact, screw it, we'll even play the games for you, you just sit back and watch!' I thought it was bad enough when Steam came along and told me I could download the games straight onto my computer. Where is the soul in that? Give me discs, in a box, with a booklet. Hell, give me a limited edition collectable never to be repeated one time only piece of whatever. But don't give me a lengthy download and a folder on my desktop. That hurts me in a place deep inside*. And as for OnLive, telling me 'you'll never have to worry about upgrading your PC again!' Fantastic! But I LIKE upgrading my PC*. I LOVE it*. It's my passion, it's what I do*. So what if all I get for my R4,000 are three more frames per second in Minesweeper*? That's beside the point. To make matters worse, with OnLive I don't even get digital ownership of the game, let alone physical ownership. I cringe at the very thought of it.

Don't get me wrong, I realise that I am one of the very few people who are not looking forward to these advances in the gaming industry*. I am also well aware that the future is coming and there is nothing I can do to stop it. But I have a plan to make it less painful, even just for a little while. I am going to start stocking up on games and hardware now, and I am going to hide them (still sealed) all around my house and in my garden*. Then, when you are all sitting at home logging on to whatever evil on-demand gaming service tickles your fancy at the time, I will be crawling through a bed of daffodils looking for that buried copy of Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing 2011*."

I wouldn't say you're the minority. I enjoy the convenience of Steam sometimes because it really works very well, but I'm not too keen on total cloud gaming – if it ever really happens as predicted. I just don't see it replacing gaming as we know it. Your addiction to the shopping experience isn't unique either, and like the fallacy that the Internet will replace magazines and books one day, simply hasn't happened yet – and how long has the Internet been around now anyway. People like real stuff – we have for thousands of years and this Internet fad is never going to change that. Ed.

FROM: Regan
SUBJECT: Any Imagination?
"**LOOK AT THE PAGES** 34 -39 of the August edition NAG... yes, now you all know my pain, THEY ARE ALL THE @#$%#@%$@ SAME. We all know the same story, assassination, war and crime. Now can someone get those pessimists out of the game development seats and get some real people in there. Even I like a bit of skull crushing madness but too much makes me feel depressed, as if all the problems we have in this world are not enough. I mean we know the Middle East is at war; do we have to rub it in their faces by killing them online too? Whoever you people are, you make me sick."

In all fairness, please consider that most people are uneducated in the ways of the world. So, when game developers need to come up with some bad guys, they simply pick any race, creed or nationality (when they don't have aliens and zombies) that's different to the American buying public, and slap a crosshair on their back. Personally, I don't care who I'm killing online as long as I'm winning. Ed.

FROM: Jon
SUBJECT: LOL Noobs!
"**PAGE 74, AUGUST 2009** issue – you wrote the same thing twice. How did they slip that one past you Ed?"

I'm obviously getting old (actually, the new zombie map pack arrived during the production of that issue and you know how we love our zombies). Regardless, I'm officially blaming the copy editor for this - there's supposed to be a checking process in place here somewhere. He'll probably blame the designers for not making his corrections and then they'll deny everything. Some days I wish I could just replace everyone with robots. Ed.

FROM: Kyle
SUBJECT: Stupid No Good Department of Education
"**THE OTHER DAY I** had to write a paper for the Department of Education for my CTA. Now the thing was the paper's subject was how gaming was a really bad thing and should looked upon like a drug or an addiction. They called it a cyber addiction or something like that. They also say it leads to excessive violence like throwing stuff in class like bricks at each other. How can games make us do that? Don't you find that outrageous, they explained that more than an half an hour gaming makes you a cyber addict. I did agree on some points like only playing games after homework (I don't do it though, WoW is too much fun). The department makes stuff up as they go along one of youngest cyber addicts was a boy of 9. I've seen many younger kids who play way too much Xbox. Anyway I think that games teaches us skills that we might never learn in real life (or only later in life anyway). For example In Fable 2 they give you may choices to make that alter the future like the appearance of the town .You never going to get that in the real world expect for a selected few. The department must get their facts straight and stop blaming games for addictions. It's not very nice."

Kyle, my dear boy... as you grow older, you will learn (as I have) that the world is

full of stupid people with idiotic opinions who make factually incorrect statements to anyone who'll listen. Fortunately for us smart ones, we have the choice of listening to them or not. I must also add that you might want to do your homework in future - especially your English homework, if you know what I mean. ;) Ed.

FROM: Hendri
SUBJECT: These damned ratings!

"**MESSAGE: IF YOU LOOK** closely at games and scores that are given to them by reviewers you will see that most good games are rated 16+ or 18+. I am 15 and thus my mother and stepfather don't want or allow me to play these games. My stepfather believes my favourite game is Top Spin 3 and the only thing you do in Oblivion is to pick locks. I wonder whether some of these people rating the games are like my parents. I may not be allowed to play these games but Top Spin 3 is soon going to be replaced by Fallout 3. My point is no matter how violent or whatever a game is nobody can rate it high enough so that I won't play it. By the way some people are pretty stupid, they complain about NAG being too slim then tell you to get more advertisers. If there are more adverts it still won't give us more reading pleasure. I think the magazine is fine as it is. Thanks for reducing my study times to zero."

I've left this letter unedited. It was a fascinating journey into the unknown. What exactly does he mean by saying, "My point is no matter how violent or whatever a game is nobody can rate it high enough so that I won't play it."? It actually defies editing – you don't get that often. Ed.

FROM: Anri
SUBJECT: Arkham Asylum

"**I MAY SOUND OUT OF** line [*you are, Ed*] and you'll most probably send this around the office and have a good laugh about it [*I did, Ed*]. But I'm going to try in anyway. Batman Arkham Asylum has got to be the one game that just won't seem to arrive early enough. You guys tested it 'hands-on' this month and I'd just like to know if it's at all possible that you can send me a copy of the unfinished game? My budget is really tight so I haven't been able to buy any new games for about a month now and I'm saving up to buy the Collector's Edition of Arkham Asylum when it's finally released. So please, please, please help me out. Either way, thanks for taking the time to read this."

Umm, I don't think so. What an absurd idea. Ed.

FROM: David
SUBJECT: Greasy, Spotty, Nerds

"**WHILE BROWSING THE SHOPS** the other day I saw the most amazing sight, the new NAG was on the shelves. So of course I grabbed a copy, threw 42 bucks at the cashier and rushed home as fast I could.
    When at home I tore open the plastic

NAG Fan artwork

This is the best of what we received during the month. If you can insert, use or create a piece of gaming artwork incorporating the *NAG* logo, you might also end up here for your three lines of fame. This entry wins a Gamers Gear t-shirt!
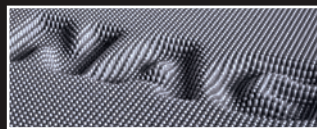
Hubert Knoblauch: "The NAG stepped pin logo was done by creating a 75x75 mesh plane. The 5,625 chrome pins were aligned to each of the planes vertexes via a compound scatter, the plane itself was deformed with a Normal displace map."

Ryan Downing: "I did this for fun – I just thought it was a funny idea and all done in Photoshop."

wrapping and eagerly began to read my NAG. The first thing I saw was a prompted to look at the new 'men's lifestyle' adverts on pages 25 and 27. So I unquestioningly obeyed the Ed and turned to the pages. Did I find adverts for Men's Razors? No. Did I find adverts for Men's Shaving Balm? No. I found adverts for spot and blackhead removal products. Ed himself said that car companies stick with car magazines, deodorant companies stick with men's lifestyle magazines, why, oh why do spot removal companies stick with gaming magazines? We are not all GREASY, SPOTTY, NERDS! So, GARNIER I do applaud you for taking the first steps by advertising in a computer magazine but whoever told you that the main demographic are facially arid and dappled individuals, needs to be beaten severely with a garden gnome."

You do know that you don't have to be greasy or a nerd to get a pimple. I'll bet you a million pimp slaps that at least 98% of every person who has every played a game on this planet has had a pimple at some point in their lives. Give us a little slack dude and stop being so judgemental. Ed. **NAG**

On The Forums

QUESTION: **If you had to pick only five words that describe being a gamer in South Africa, what would they be?**

TheLionsInnards: "Good Lord that controller's expensive."

Sharky: "Disconnected, Expensive, We Have NAG!"

zom813: "An unfortunate set of circumstances."

Cpt.Monde: "My PSN sucks so much"

goleastro: "Not very many of us"

FoX: "Disconnected due to high ping"

01DT!m3r: "Service (or the lack thereof)"

jason111: "AWESOME!!! But man, the prices..."

Mikit0707: "It's better than you think."

GhOsT_828: "I hate Telkom so much."

Demikid: "You can't beat NAG, No0b"

Tieron: "What? It costs how much?!?!?"

Stalker_103: "What? No LIVE Support! ****"

Takiro: "For low ping players only"

FaNbOy: "Our game cases are empty"

CrashHelmut: "Online gaming ate my cap"

cr@zydude: "It could be even worse"

hAwk2323: "NAG NAG rAge NAG NAG"

RazcoTheInsane: "Improvisation plus dedication equals win!"

VoXoV: "Fail, Fail, Fail, Fail, Fail."

echo: "Where the ****'s our Live?"

vii: "Why won't I stop lagging?"

Azraphael: "I only NEED one kidney..."

Cleric: "Expensive but worth every cent."

BlackMage: "Least it's better than Australia."

Maheshvaran: "NAG keeps us all alive."

nukem: "Why do we even bother?"

Wamster: "Unlike Germany, we play Counter-Strike"

Necrowolf: "Salesmen know nothing about games"

Tigman_1: "All gamers love pretty ponies."

Xcaliber: "Eskom + Telkom = WTF"

joejoe: "One month's wages for game"

Bontebok: "So much better than rugby."

H3R3T1C: "Third World Country? Go Figure..."

Shadow_Con: "Major Technological advances avoid us"

BTROG: "THE BEST GAMERS ON EARTH!"

.:Enigma:.: "We travel in small packs..."

P|2070+YP3: "People don't believe we're real"

Xbox portable is coming, eventually

The long-rumoured Xbox portable just came one step closer to reality. In a recent interview, Microsoft corporate VP Shane Kim explained that it's not so much a matter of "if" they enter into this market, but more a matter of "when".

"For us, it's a matter of focusing on 'when', because if we chased after a mobile or handheld opportunity, we would not have the resources and ability to do things like Project Natal." Kim explains. "We've chosen to focus on the living room experience from a hardware standpoint, but we're building a service in Live that will extend to other platforms. No question about it. So the question will be, 'how do we enter into that market?' Do we do our own device? Do we create our own phone? That's a question for the company itself. Do we continue to go down the Windows Mobile path which is that path that we're on today?

Microsoft Updates

Xbox grows an extra arm and GFW:L gets serious

THE NEXT BIG DASHBOARD update for NXE should be available for download by time you read this, and is set to add a few major new features to the OS. Microsoft is ramping up the social-networking aspect with tons of new stuff for your Avatar through the new Avatar Marketplace. You'll be able to buy all sorts of kit, including fashion items from Adidas, Quicksilver, Roxy and tokidoki, as well as steampunk and "Recessionista" clothing (burlap sacks, perhaps?). Additionally, you'll have access to tons of game-specific clothing that can be bought or earned simply by playing games, as well as a collection of accessories for them to play around with, including a basketball, cheerleader pom-poms and a mobile phone. If Avatars just don't do it for you, then why not spend some of your hard-earned cash on the new Games on Demand service? There will be 20 titles available at the launch of this service, including *Assassin's Creed*, *Burnout Paradise*, *Mass Effect*, *Prey* and *Tomb Raider: Legend*. Pricing is not

Bonus points to anyone who can identify these NAG staffers.

yet confirmed but, if things go smoothly for us locals, you'll be able to purchase the games directly with a credit card, without the need to mess around with MS Points (which can still be used, if you're so inclined).

Microsoft hasn't stopped there, however. They've also revamped the infamous Games for Windows Live service to bring it a little closer to what users may expect. No longer will you need to exit a game to access its marketplace; everything can now be performed in-game, including purchasing downloadable content, installing it and even purchasing Microsoft Points. Piracy is also a concern with the new service. MS has implemented two new optional features for publishers to take advantage of: Server Side Authentication, which links games to a user's account for easy portability (with, thankfully, no effect on offline play), and Zero Day Piracy Protection, which will help publishers ensure early buyers/pirates can't play the game before the official street date.

GAMING IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE

The biggest problem with MMO addiction is that, in order to treat the person suffering from said addiction, they need to tear themselves away from the computer long enough to jump on a leather couch and tell someone how much their parents don't love them. With that thought in mind, UK shrink Dr. Richard Graham takes the "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" concept into the gaming world, by signing himself up for *World of Warcraft* to offer players in-game therapy and assistance with breaking their addiction. He's even filed an application with Blizzard to provide him with a free subscription to carry out his "work".
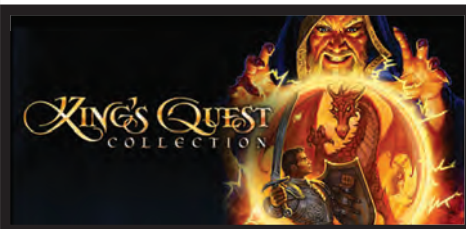
Sierra quest on steam

While the Sierra *Quest* collections have been available at retail form for some time now, they're not always readily available and, you know, require that you get off the couch and go down to your nearest store. If you've had trouble getting your hands on them or simply can't bring yourself to leave the house, Valve is (once again) coming to the rescue. Two of the *Quest* collections are now available through Steam's digital distribution service at the paltry price of $20 (about R160) each. Currently on offer are *Space Quest 1-6* and *King's Quest 1-7*. There's no mention of the other two commonly-found collections, *Leisure Suit Larry* and *Police Quest*, or any word on the super-rare *Quest for Glory* Anthology, but we're holding thumbs that it won't be too long for these titles to arrive.

We've got a ticket to rock

For some bizarre reason, our sandy shores have always been frowned upon by the massive freighters that deliver copies of Rock Band to the rest of the world, but no longer! EA South Africa is now bringing in both *Rock Band 2* and the upcoming *The Beatles: Rock Band*. While pricing can't be confirmed at this stage, our spies have found *Rock Band 2* and *Beatles: Rock Band* on the Xbox 360 for the pre-order price of R549, as well as The Beatles Limited Edition Bundle (including drums, bass and microphone) for the comparatively cheap price of R2,235. We're almost certain that prices will change as the release draws nearer (as they tend to do), so hurry down to your local gaming store and be sure to put down a pre-order for these titles as soon as possible.

Expand your horizons

It was only a matter of time; EA has announced the first expansion pack to *The Sims 3*. *World Adventures* will see your Sims travel to three locations outside of their neighbourhood, based on China, France and Egypt in search of adventure, treasure, new people to meet and wild places to explore. There's no info yet on what else the expansion will add, but if previous releases are anything to go by (and they are), there'll be a lot more than just new locations and objects for your virtual home. In addition, PC and Mac buyers will get 1,000 Sim Points to spend on the Sims Store, which works out to about 20-25 items.

DO NOT ADJUST YOUR MAGAZINE

We're not sure if this should make us laugh or cry, but it seems that there is a *Twilight* game in development. Academic-led Brainjunk, a brand-new studio, is handling the development of this game, which the official site describes as a "journey through the events of the *Twilight* Saga", in which players will "experience the story from the perspectives of their most beloved characters". Players will be able to take on the role of a human, vampire or werewolf, using the journal to travel through back in time to visit the events described. Whether or not this title will ever see the light of day remains to be seen. It's not uncommon for licences like this to simply fizzle, much like the highly-anticipated *Firefly* MMO, and with there apparently being no official backing of this project; we might not even see it scrape through the conceptual phase.

Time for Heroics

Activision pulling out all the stops this holiday season

WHILE *ROCK BAND* **HAS** had this capability for some time now, *Guitar Hero 5* will finally allow users to import tracks from previous titles into the new game. Tracks from both *World Tour* and the recently released S*mash Hits* will be importable, as well as (currently) 152 of the 158 downloadable songs. And, yes, it will cost you money. How much money, or what the details are with the downloadable tracks, can't be said at this stage, but we're banking on around 800MS points or R80. On top of that, Activision has confirmed that Xbox Avatars will be able to rock out with Judy Nails, Axel Steel and the gang. Players will be able to import their Avatars into the game, kit them out with all manner of rock-star accessories and watch them sell out stadiums. The list of new features in *GH5* is hardly revolutionary, but it looks like the developers have been hard at work fine-tuning all those little things that we've been wanting for years, which suits us just fine.

Guitar Hero isn't the only thing on Activision's mind, however. The upcoming releases of *Band Hero* and *DJ Hero* should ensure that there's a "Hero in Every Home" (we're copyrighting that). To achieve that goal, the *DJ Hero* Renegade Edition has been announced. It's a silly name, no doubt, but this deluxe package includes a carry case that expands to an appropriate-height

DJ stand to help you mix up those decks without the risk of a sore back. It will also feature "premium metal controls and finish". Way to fight the system, man. A few new names have also been announced for the title, which is now set to include the Fresh Prince's better half – DJ Jazzy Jeff. Additionally, there will be a ton of crazy mixes including tracks from Nirvana, Gorillaz, Gwen Stephani, Eminem, The Beastie Boys and Black Eyed Peas.

Band Hero also received a strange announcement – the ingenious addon for the Nintendo DS. This facade will clip directly onto the handheld to allow players to drum along with their friends (who will use the built-in microphone to sing and touch-screen support to play the guitar). It includes four pads (the same as *Rock Band*), which should make for an excellent transition to the little console. There's no word yet on tiny matching drumsticks.

TURBINE SECURES ADDITIONAL FUNDING

The amount of money that does the rounds in the gaming industry never ceases to be a source of amazement. And, even when the global chips are down, there is a lot of money to go around – apparently.

MMO developer Turbine, believed to be the second biggest MMO house (after giants Activision Blizzard, of course) has managed to secure a further $6.6 million in venture capital investment, barely a month before the launch of its new, free-to-play game (based on the *Dungeons & Dragons* franchise).

A number of regulations require special measures to be taken in this kind of deal. This investment is part of a 'series D' funding round, and brings the total raised by the company close to $200 million – although they had planned to make more from the venture.
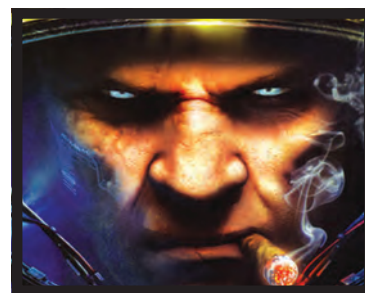
Don't shoot the messenger

Blizzard has always been a little soft when it comes to nailing down release dates, mostly because they're almost always further away than people had hoped, which earns them a few grumpy looks for their troubles. Such is the tale of *StarCraft II*, which has now been officially delayed until the first half of 2010. The reason, it seems, is twofold. First, Activision is waiting for the world to gain a little wealth, having recently announced its projected earnings for the next financial year at about $250 million under initial speculation. The publisher is expecting people to quite simply have less money to spend on games, especially with the upcoming release of *Modern Warfare 2* with its tempting yet pricey Prestige Edition.

Money isn't the only thing keeping *StarCraft II* from our grubby hands, however. Blizzard has big plans for Battle.Net which seem to be taking longer to manifest than expected. The service is set to resemble the Microsoft Live system, offering players cross-game communications, social networking features and unified account management.

PSP gets a chance to Judge

Sony fans who've been dying to get their hands on *Eye of Judgement*, but just couldn't bring themselves to purchase the scaffolding required to get a game going should be pleased to know that there's a PSP version heading our way. Due out in March 2010, *Eye of Judgement PSP* (working title) will take all the pain and effort of the PS3 game and cram it inside the PSP – without any need for peripherals, physical cards or weird looks from your visiting grandparents. You'll be able to play through a brand new single player campaign to unlock the 300+ cards in the game, and take the show on the road with you to challenge other players in 1v1 battles, as well as exchange cards through ad hoc wireless. To top it all off, there will be 30 additional cards available for premium download, bringing the total up to 341. Portable platforms are ideal for trading card games, and we can't help thinking "Why didn't they just do this in the beginning?"

Take it to go

To tie in with the release of *Modern Warfare 2*, Activision has announced the simultaneous release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare: Mobilized* for the Nintendo DS. The game will feature much of the action from the "big" versions, but will run its own unique storyline as a companion narrative. Players will experience building-to-building tactical combat, computer hacking and even vehicular control including tanks, UAV spy drones and, of course, manning the guns of an AC-130 gunship. The multiplayer modes also look pretty enticing, including 6-player online multiplayer and a brand-new Survival mode, in which players must survive wave after wave of incoming enemy forces. Sound familiar? This is pure speculation, but we can't imagine the PC/console versions lacking a similar mode, given the popularity of *CoD: WaW*'s Nazi Zombie Mode. There's also the Arcade Mode, which lets players go through the single-player campaign with a time limit and running score, with extra points awarded for specific achievements. *Mobilized* is being developed by n-Space, the team behind both previous *CoD* DS titles as well as the DS and PS2 versions of the upcoming *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2*.

Sacred 2 expansion announced

An icy wind blows over the world of Ancaria, and a lot of blood too, apparently. The first expansion for *Sacred 2* is on its way, entitled *Ice & Blood*. It will introduce a new class – the Dragon Mage, who has access to both magic and the ability to transform into a dragon – complete with fire breathing and flight. There will also be new quests, characters and locations to explore. Most likely a lot of ice and snow as well. No other details (including release date) are available at present but from what we can tell, there will be a few new spells and combat skills to go around for the existing characters. *Blood & Ice* will be developed by *Studio 2*, a subsidiary of Ascaron that's unaffected by its recent bankruptcy.

They said it...

"...you know if it was left to me, **I would raise the prices even further.**"

Activision CEO Bobby Kotick,
on the price of *Modern Warfare 2*

"In order to price the games at a level where they would support an industry like they did ten years ago, **they'd have to be sold at £70.** But people just don't have that kind of money, there's a psychological glass ceiling."

Chris Deering, former president of SCEE

"**EA's history is one of making sports games.** Sports games have a very rigid set of rules, therefore you don't really need to come up with crazy design, you just need to design within rigid rules."

Paul Barnett, Mythic Entertainment's creative director

"In order for us to get into a cycle similar to films and movies we have to go to a universal media where this is what plays your videogame. **We need to get to a point where we have one medium you can play the games on.** Right now we've got five or six."

Denis Dyack, Silicon Knights founder

"I don't think [motion controls] replace typical control devices or typical interfaces, but they do definitely augment them. **The right games work on the right platforms.** They're definitely here to stay and they're definitely cool."

Harvey Elliot, head of EA Bright Light Studios

Not left 4 dead just yet

IF YOU'RE STILL REELING from the mention that *Left 4 Dead 2* will be on its way out soon, this should cheer you up. Not the type to renege on promises, Valve has announced the upcoming DLC for the first *Left 4 Dead*. Entitled *Crash Course*, this downloadable content pack will fill in the gap between the daring helicopter rescue at the end of No Mercy and the beginning of Death Toll. The chopper pilot, who turns out to be infected, sends the helicopter crashing down into and all-new location, leaving the survivors to fend for themselves and find their way through to Death Toll. No new weapons will make their way into the DLC, but tweaked weapon drops and infected respawn rates (for versus mode) will make an appearance, along with a

number of other bug fixes and additional voice talent.

The new chapter will be much shorter than those we're used to, clocking in at around 30 minutes across the two sub-chapters. The chapter will support the campaign, versus and survival game modes. Expect *Crash Course* to be available in September on Xbox LIVE for 560 MS points, and absolutely free for PC gamers.

IS THIS GOING TOO FAR?

If you thought that the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* Prestige Edition was awesome (or "ridiculous, but necessary", depending on how thin your wallet is), then you'll no doubt pre-order your copy of *Operation Flashpoint 2: Dragon Rising* the minute you finish reading this. This kit will contain a full-size, apparently metal, army helmet as well as steel dog tags. We're quite certain that the use of this helmet in conjunction with your *Call of Duty* NVGs will have you classified as both (a) the envy of all your friends, and (b) "he started off as such a good child", but that's the price you pay for ultimate nerdness. PC gamers should also be pleased to know that this edition will be available for the PC version of the game, unlike *Call of Duty*, which is limited to the consoles.

More Bullfrog, anyone?

The boss over at Electronic Arts' Bright Light Studios, Harvey Elliot, seems to be a sentimental sort. He recently said that he would love to see EA working on some of the old Bullfrog IPs. This is quite possible, of course; EA acquired Bullfrog back in 1995.

"For me, I love the old Bullfrog IP, it got me really passionately into games, and I'm really proud that Bullfrog is part of the heritage of Bright Light," Elliot said. "I'm personally a huge fan of *Populous* and *Theme Park*, they were some of my favourite games – many years ago, obviously – and I'd love to see both of those remade. The thing is, the romance of the idea is often detached from the reality of executing it. If you remember all the old classics you played, if you go back and play them now, they're not the same. They were right for their time, and the trick with those games is coming up with what's right for the time now. I'm going to look at them at some point, I think there's an opportunity to bring those back in the future, but only if it's right for the time and not just a 'remake' or something. We'd need to do it in a way that's true to the original values, but would still make a great game today."

Carmack on consoles

When John Carmack speaks, people listen. That might be because he gives the impression of being a bit grumpy, but it is also because the guy knows what he is talking about.

He has stated his belief that one of the major players in the console market may 'jump the gun' and release a new generation of hardware much earlier than expected.

"The whole jockeying for who's going to release the first next-gen console is very interesting and pretty divorced from the technical side of things," Carmack said in a recent interview.

"Whether Sony wants to jump the gun to prevent the same sort of 360 lag from happening to them again seems likely. As developers, we would really like to see this generation stretch as long as possible. We'd like to see it be quite a few more years before the next gen console comes out, but I suspect one will end up shipping something earlier rather than later."

Evolution of
BOXING GAMES

1984: Punch-Out!!

1991: 4-D Boxing

1994: Super Punch-Out!!

1999: Ready 2 Rumble Boxing

2003: Knockout Kings 2003

2009: Fight Night Round 4

Smiling all the way to the bank

With all the noise of studio closures and bankruptcies doing the rounds in the gaming industry, it's good to hear about companies doing well – and Activision Blizzard most certainly is. With very solid IPs and a steady flow of income (which includes, of course, those many millions of dollars they make from *World of Warcraft* every month) Activision Blizzard haven't been in the wrong kind of news very much, if at all.

By way of demonstration as to how well the publisher is doing, we simply have to take a look at CEO Bobby Kotick's salary for 2008. A Forbes profile listed his salary for 2008 as $15 million. This includes a salary of around $900,000, a $5 million bonus and options awards totalling $6 million.

Next time your parents tell you that you can't make money from games, show them this.
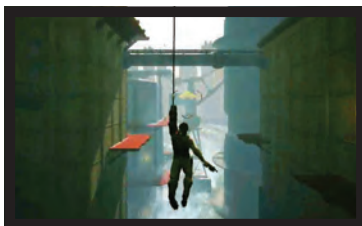
GRIN not smiling

Producing games that do well in the market is crucial these days, and developer GRIN is feeling the effects of three rather dubious titles. *Bionic Commando* didn't perform particularly well at retail, while *Terminator Salvation* has a Metacritic score of around 43 and *Wanted: Weapons of Fate* was met with some rather mixed reactions.

While these three games aren't purely to blame for GRIN's woes, they were the studio's most recent releases. Now Employees at the developer's main studio in Stockholm have been told to not go in to work, and many fear that bankruptcy proceedings may be taking place. This follows the closure of GRIN's studios in Barcelona and Gothenburg, which went hand in hand with staff cuts.

GRIN is probably best known for producing *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* for PC.

'Alo 'Alo

THE HALO UNIVERSE AS a couple more games heading its way, and with them is a renewed interest from the film world. Apparently, Steven Spielberg has been in talks about producing the film adaptation. According to Internet film site IESB, Spielberg was blown away by writer Stuart Beattie's work on a film pitch for *Halo: The Fall of Reach* and how it adapted from the game.

Not content to let the West take all the glory, Microsoft looked to the East for an anime adaptation of the videogame series, and they struck gold. *Halo Legends* will be a series of anime short films to be directed by Shinji Aramaki (*Appleseed* and *Appleseed EX Machina*) and Mamoru Oshii (*Ghost in the Shell*). The films don't yet have a release date but Microsoft has announced that previews will launch first on Xbox LIVE when the time comes.

"*Halo* and its characters are a very natural fit for anime," said Aramaki, creative director for the *Halo Legends* project. "As a fan of the *Halo* universe, it is an honour to work with Microsoft and my very talented peers from other studios to create this collection."

They won't stop there, however. Microsoft will soon launch *Halo Waypoint* – the one-stop portal for everything *Halo* related. It will be packed with news, podcasts, trailers, screenshots and exclusive footage. It will also provide a career system with player rankings and it will keep track of a *Halo* player's accomplishments. *Halo Waypoint* should be available on Xbox LIVE towards the end of the year, possibly indicating a release date for *Legends*.

Cleanup on aisle 3

Rebellion Developments, the team behind *Aliens vs. Predator* and the PSP versions of *Star Wars Battlefront*, has snapped up a few stray licences from the Activision/Blizzard merger. Most notable of these is *Evil Genius*, but a few other premium licences are included as well, namely *Ground Control*, *Empire Earth*, *Lords of the Realm* and *Lords of Magic*. While we doubt the team is going to continue working with all of these licences at once, plans are already underway.

"We have complete ownership of the IP from the past and going forwards, so yes; we're putting our plans together for new titles in each series," said Rebellion CEO Jason Kingsley. "Exactly what and when is currently up for discussion."

WHO EVEN HAS 100 FRIENDS?

If you've ever wondered "Why is it that I can't have more than 100 friends on Xbox LIVE?", Microsoft finally has an answer for you. It's all *Halo 2*'s fault. The original Xbox LIVE was never designed to support more than 100 friends. Fair enough, given the state of online console gaming at the time, but now things have changed; social networking is on the rise and people are pretending now more than ever that their diaries are chock-full of friendly get-togethers. Unfortunately, they can't even do anything about it. Apparently the limitation is so deep-rooted in *Halo 2* that the only way to get around it is to discontinue support for the game altogether. The problem with that, however, is that *Halo 2* is still one of the most popular games played on Xbox LIVE.

PS3 price cut imminent?

The PS3 price-cut rumours continue when Sony Corp CEO and Executive Vice President Nobuyuki Oneda revealed that the cost of manufacturing the PS3 console have dropped by 70%. "The cost reduction since we introduced the PS3 is very substantial and this is on schedule," said Oneda. Based on the initially reported figure of around $800 to manufacture the console at launch, we can assume that the device now costs around $240, or R2,000, which is currently less than half of the retail price. From that, it's pretty clear that the company is no longer losing money with each console sold, but how long will they keep up the quick cash in favour of expanding their user base?

Collect 'em all

Everyone loves a special edition. At least, that's what Ubisoft thinks. So much so, that they will be releasing two limited editions of *Assassin's Creed 2*. The Black Edition will contain the game (well, we hope so), a rare "Master Assassin" Ezio figurine featuring the character in his upgraded shadowy get-up, three bonus in-game quests, a "conspiracy book" with exclusive insights on the game art, story and background direct from the developers, a soundtrack CD and access to tons of e-content including interviews and the like. For those of you who don't have the cash to part with, there's also the White Edition. This budget gamers' package will include the game, one bonus in-game quest and a similar figurine, albeit clad in white and not quite so "upgraded".

Gaming Charts

LOOK & LISTEN RECOMMENDS...

GfK   June 2009 figures provided by GfK
www.gfksa.co.za

PLAYSTATION 3
1	Need for Speed: Shift
2	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen
3	Madden NFL 10
4	Gran Turismo 5
5	Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

XBOX 360
1	Halo 3: ODST
2	Fight Night 4
3	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen
4	Dark Void
5	Forza Motorsport 3

PLAYSTATION 2
1	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen
2	Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
3	MotorStorm: Arctic Edge
4	Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2
5	FIFA 10

PC
1	The Sims 3
2	Wolfenstein
3	Resident Evil 5
4	PROTOTYPE
5	StarCraft II

PSP
1	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen
2	Soul Calibur: Broken Destiny
3	Naruto Shippuden: Legends: Akatsuki
4	Gran Turismo
5	Ratchet & Clank: A Crack in Time

WII
1	Wii Sports Resort + MotionPlus
2	My Fitness Coach: Cardio
3	World Championship Sports – Summer
4	Ashes Cricket 2009
5	Wii Fit Plus

DS
1	Super Mario Brothers
2	Ice Age 3
3	More Brain Training from Dr. Kawashima
4	MySims Agents
5	Cooking Guide: Can't Decide What to Eat?

PLAYSTATION 3
1	PROTOTYPE
2	inFAMOUS
3	Destroy All Humans! Path of the Furon
4	FIFA 09
5	Assassin's Creed

XBOX 360
1	PROTOTYPE
2	Trivial Pursuit
3	Burnout Paradise: The Ultimate Box
4	FIFA 09
5	Saints Row 2

PLAYSTATION 2
1	Rugby 2008
2	Ben 10: Alien Force
3	FIFA 08
4	FIFA 09
5	FIFA Street 2

PC
1	The Sims 3
2	PROTOTYPE
3	Need for Speed: Most Wanted
4	Cricket 2007
5	FIFA 07

PSP
1	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories
2	Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
3	Need for Speed: Undercover
4	Ben 10: Alien Force
5	Burnout Legends

WII
1	EA Sports Active
2	Wii Fit + Balance Board
3	Grand Slam Tennis
4	Super Mario Galaxy
5	Mario Kart + Wheel

DS
1	Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day
2	New Super Mario Bros.
3	Ben 10: Protector of Earth
4	Brain Training
5	The Sims 2: Apartment Life

Madden NFL 10

Wii Vitality sensor coming soon

NINTENDO'S WII CONSOLE IS getting supported by lots of weird and wonderful devices. The latest official toy to use with the diminutive white box is the Wii Vitality Sensor. The device looks a lot like those funky clips you always see on the end of the patient's finger in House, MD, and it performs the same kind of function – it monitors the player's pulse.

Okay, stop raising that sceptical eyebrow – Nintendo boss Satoru Iwata has full faith in the device. "A human pulse not only contains information as to how many times a heart beats in a minute, but also various kinds of information such as the condition of automatic nerve," he said.

The news is that Nintendo plan to bring the device to market sooner than anticipated, with the official line being "not too late in the next year."

Gaming in Wonderland

It might not be as dark as American McGee's foray into Wonderland, but Disney's next move into the *Alice* franchise is said to be inspired by Tim Burton's upcoming rendition of the film. Players can expect all the regular characters: Mad Hatter, March Hare, Cheshire Cat and White Rabbit, who will come to the player's aid to defeat The Red Queen and The Jabberwocky. The game will release on DS, Wii and PC, oddly missing out on the other two current-generation consoles.

"More than just a retelling of the movie, *Alice in Wonderland* introduces fans to an entirely new style of innovative gameplay designed to challenge the puzzle solving skills of older players while making the adventures accessible and enjoyable for the younger crowd," said Craig Relyea, senior VP of global marketing at Disney Interactive. "Innovative gameplay and distinct artistic styles on each platform gives players a range of unique and engaging experiences."

WORLD OF FILMCRAFT

Sam Raimi, the director behind the *Evil Dead* series and, more recently, the *Spider-Man* films, has just been signed on to direct the film adaptation of *World of Warcraft*. Raimi will reportedly focus his attention on the upcoming *Spider-Man 4* in the new year, but once that's out of the way, will shift all his efforts over to *WoW*. No other details on the film have been confirmed, but at this rate it looks like it'll only be due by time Blizzard's next MMO is out and about.

DARKNESS 2 CONFIRMED

Fans of 2007's *The Darkness* should be pleased to know that the sequel is officially in development. Based on the comic book of the same name, this sequel will feature the writing of comic book author Paul Jenkins. Sadly, Starbreeze studios, the team behind the first game and other titles including the *Chronicles of Riddick* series, will not be involved with this sequel, apparently because they're busy working on two as-yet unannounced EA titles.

THE BAGINATOR

So we all know the history of the poor badger, stomped by a demon and then resurrected, lost to the Internet torrents, only to return as the Dread Pirate Badger. All of this left him with a peg leg, an eyepatch and a healthy respect for demons.

And so his story continues...

On the weekends, the badger likes to run free in the long savannah grass near the highway by the airport. Often he dashes across the road (you know... to get to the other side). The peg leg and eyepatch have robbed him of his usual nimbleness. Too bad he didn't spot that truck carrying cybernetic body parts, which was luckily followed by an ambulance full of cybernetic doctors and scientists, which was luckily followed by a military jeep on its way to Vicinity 42 in Kempton Park (they do advanced experiments here in an underground lab). They worked for days on the battered remains of our poor badger and finally produced what you see on this page. He's still hiding (they wanted to use him for nefarious purposes) in the magazine – go get him. Remember, it's not going to be easy anymore – he's more advanced.

Send your sightings to **ed@nag.co.za** with the subject line 'September Badger' and stand a chance to win a Speedlink 5.1 surround sound head set.

LAST MONTH'S WINNER
Brian Holton, p85

Caption of the Month

Every month we'll choose a screenshot from any random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better caption. The winner will get a *Red Faction* PC game with a limited edition hand painted walker figurine. Send your captions to **ed@nag.co.za** with the subject line [September Caption].

THIS MONTH'S CONTEST

NAG'S LAME ATTEMPT AT HUMOUR:
"Woof."

LAST MONTH'S WINNER

"Optimus, I told you I was getting the Pink Eye!!!"
– *Salim Ismail*

JULY WINNER
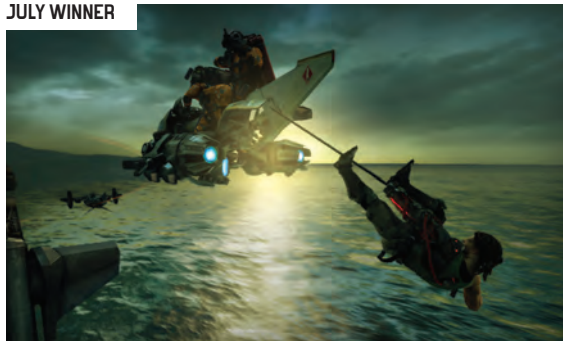
"You WILL pay for that petrol sir!"
– *Christof*

bt GAMES™ Release List

Release dates subject to change

WEEK 1 – 4 SEPTEMBER

TITLE	PLATFORMS
Rock Band 2	360, PS3, Wii
Rock Band: Unplugged	PSP
Champions Online	PC
Fallout 3: Broken Steel / Point Lookout	360, PC

WEEK 2 – 11 SEPTEMBER

TITLE	PLATFORMS
Batman: Arkham Asylum	360, PS3, PC
Dissidia: Final Fantasy	PSP
Mini Ninjas	360, PS3, PC, Wii
The Beatles: Rock Band	360, PS3, Wii
The King of Fighters XII	360, PS3
MotorStorm: Arctic Edge	PS2, PSP
Red Faction: Guerrilla	PC
Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs	Multi

WEEK 3 – 18 SEPTEMBER

TITLE	PLATFORMS
Wacky World of Sports	Wii
UP: The Video Game	Multi
Need for Speed: Shift	360, PS3, PC, PSP
Naruto Shippuden: Legends: Akatsuki Rising	PSP
Star Wars: The Clone Wars – Republic Heroes	Multi
Heroes Over Europe	360, PS3, PC
Spore Hero Arena	DS

WEEK 4 – 25 SEPTEMBER

TITLE	PLATFORMS
Resident Evil 5	PC
Halo 3: ODST	360
Colin McRae: DiRT 2	360, PS3, Wii, DS
Rogue Warrior	360, PS3, PC
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2	Multi
MySims Agents	Wii, DS
Championship Manager 2009	PC
Spore Hero	Wii
Aion	PC

MIKTARS MEANDERINGS

BY MIKTAR DRACON

This Bit Right Here Will Entertain You

HELLO MIKTAR! I AM writing to you from the future. I can't say from how far into your future, temporal paradoxes and all that, but I'm sure you won't mind. Just getting a letter from your future self is pretty cool, huh?

Being you, I know what you're thinking. You want to write. Writing about games is awesome, but writing for gamers is boring, right? I don't blame you, really. Mr Gamer wants this, wants that. Mr Gamer thinks that they're the centre of the gaming universe. It's not Mr Gamer's fault, though. Anthropologists will tell you that humans abide by the "anthropic principle," but we may as well call it the "anthropic delusion." Mr Gamer, for all his astounding intellect and lightning reflexes, godlike hand-eye coordination and 'leet skizzles', is a victim of thinking the gaming industry exists for him, and not that he is the product of the gaming industry.

You are poised at the brink of a syntactic abyss, teetering back and forth in indecision, aren't you? You know you're having fun, writing what you consider interesting 'experimental' columns in the hope of titillating and surprising a reader you do not know, cannot know and have no way of understanding. But you think you overshoot, coming across instead as bizarre, inane or worse, utterly misunderstood*. You could just write about the flavour of the month, but that's not satisfying. I know.

Don't worry about it. I'm from the future, remember? Sure, some readers may tell you they don't understand your column at all, and others may vent their confused anger at you, but long-time readers know you for satire, experimentation, and writing the unexpected. You're having fun, after all! Just go with it. You must be doing something right, if over six years they've still not fired you, or removed your section. Of course, we both know readers only buy the magazine for the DVD... but we don't like to admit that to ourselves.

But enough about us. The reason I'm writing this e-mail is because I wanted to highlight something nobody seems to want to talk about. Amidst the incredible hype surrounding 'epic HD' games like *GTA IV* and *MGS4*, rabid journalists and fanboys alike repeated, "Here is the game that will make **console X** sell millions of units!" – like a mantra offered up in prayer to the manufacturer deity of their choosing. Now, years later (and much later for me), both *GTA IV* and *MGS4* failed to drive consoles sales. They both failed to expand markets! Not including marketing, 'epic HD' games cost upwards of $100 million to make. So far, 'epic HD' games seem to only sell about ten million copies – most of that to pre-existing hardcore fans.

Publishers, in approaching your current HD era, assumed core gamers wanted escalation of movie-like stories and cut-scenes, expensive visuals and long campaigns akin to 50-hour Japanese RPGs. And yet, customers rejected overly avant-garde, faux games-as-art titles like *MGS4*. The gaming press act suspiciously like pundits in financial markets, jumping on key hype trains such as *GTA IV*. Even though *GTA IV* gained an instant 10/10 from many publications, let's face it: it was inferior to *GTA: San Andreas* in most ways, barring visuals. *GTA IV* cost twice as much to make as *GTA: SA*, yet sold half as many copies before flat lining in the sales charts.

The gaming press help to create launch hype for slanted launch window sales! Tons of hyped games are sold back to retail within a month, on average. Few hyped games become evergreen titles (except if your name is Mario and you're riding a Kart). Incidentally, *Halo 3* managed to sell ten million copies on one platform to date (and still sells healthily each month); yet, *GTA IV* and *MGS4* are tapped out. *GTA IV* sold just over ten million on PS3 and 360 combined...

I guess all tiers of gaming can be 'overshot' by developers, not just 'casual' games (who get overshot because publishers replace 'casual' with 'stupid' when planning what games to make to entice the expanded market). The 'epic HD' games that overshoot user needs may still sell well due to hype and drama for a limited time; but I feel they may be souring customers and leading to a distrust of major hyped releases. Just look at how much cynicism surrounds summer-popcorn blockbuster movies, where moviegoers are well versed in films that are not very good, but hyped to seem grand and 'not-to-be-missed'.

Sometimes I wonder if there isn't a kind of queer 'developer shame' that manifests as game creators who are ashamed of what they do, having absorbed the 'mom said you waste your life with videogames' rhetoric. So they wish to be like moviemakers, because they see established mediums like movies as being respected. It's probably just me, but it seems that big-time developers no longer see gaming as a movement, but instead as an industry. Of course, that's obvious – business is business. But have developers really forgotten how to be excited about gaming for its own sake?

Factors such as 'developer shame' may be what cause developers to forget the customer and overshoot, instead of advancing gaming for its own sake. Now you and I both know we love overzealous multimillion-dollar blockbuster franchises as much as the next guy; but at this rate, eventually the bottom will fall out.

Anyway, I have to go. You don't have to write back; I know you've read this and what your response is. Oh, and for 2012, remember to bring your pyjamas. **NAG**

* Not at all, Ed.

> Sometimes I wonder if there isn't a kind of queer **'developer shame' that manifests as game creators who are ashamed of what they do**, having absorbed the 'mom said you waste your life with videogames' rhetoric.

I. GAMER

BY MIKLÓS SZECSEI

A Family Portrait

OWNING MULTIPLE GAMING PLATFORMS is sort of like being a parent to more than one kid: each demands a certain amount of your time, and you can't help but feel that you may have a favourite. You say you love them equally, but you know deep down that there is one you enjoy spending more time with. Any parent who is reading this is probably throwing their hands up and shrieking with parental dismay, claiming that you can never love one child more than the other. This is probably true, but that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that there is, in all likelihood, one child that you prefer spending time with. I don't have any real kids (the ones made of squishy, pink bits) so for now, let's assume that the kids we're going to refer to for rest of this analogy will be the ones made of plastic and silicon.

There are many gamers who have to split their affection equally among their gaming platforms. They do this not so much out of a desire to make them all feel loved, but more so out of a want to avoid the god-awful label of fanboy. In the beginning, the adventure into gaming starts with a single platform. As the years progress, and the foray into gaming becomes an all-consuming passion, the likelihood of owning just one platform becomes increasingly unlikely.

In my case, it all began with a PC: a healthy, bouncy 486. For sixteen years, it was just the two of us and no console would have been able to lessen the attention I lavished on this first child.

However, the inevitable happened, and before I knew it, I had to start splitting my affection between the first child and a new addition to the family: an Xbox 360. Of course, the first few months were exciting; here was a new platform to play with. I couldn't help but feel as if the elder of the two was beginning to feel resentful: after all, it could do everything this new pretender could, and to a certain extent it could do it better. Regardless, for some time it was exhausting having to split affection between the two as they jostled for my attention, each enticing me with platform exclusives in typical one-upmanship fashion. Something would have to give sooner or later, and it did with a new addition to the family: a PlayStation 3.

All of a sudden, there were three of them and if I had initially thought that having one was expensive, nothing could have prepared me for the financial kick to the nuts of having three platforms to look after. Nearly every week one of them would need something new and I would find myself buying it in order to satiate both the platform's and my desire for entertainment. And it wasn't long before they started acting up in typical sibling fashion. The eldest remained mature about the whole thing and was reliable in a sense that it constantly adjusted itself for my needs. The middle child, living in the shadow of its older sibling and no longer the youngest, began rebelling in order to get my attention. It developed a condition known as

RROD, which ensured that I began treating it with kid gloves less it had another episode in an attempt to prove me a bad parent. The Xbox 360 didn't only use self-destructive tactics to gain my attention, however; and at one point it had me for weeks after it reinvented itself and changed the way we interacted. This change it referred to as its NXE, but I knew it was just a phase and that essentially it was the same platform trying desperately to keep my attention. While this was all going on, the youngest of the siblings (the PS3) continued to enthral me with its versatility and desire to please. It was almost as if it was trying to prove its worth. It did benefit from the fact that it was the youngest and as such, the novelty value continued to allow it centre stage.

There is a final member of the family: the Wii. This platform isn't really part of the direct family but is more like a distant baby cousin: it's fun to play with when visiting others, but you're thankful that it isn't yours and that you are able to hand it back to its parents when you've grown tired of it.

We are by no means a conventional family, and the sibling rivalry can at times become fierce; I blame what they read in the media as it perpetuates the misconception that one is superior to the other, which only serves to fuel their bickering. Despite the rivalry and the vying for my attention, one thing is certain: they are all very good at what they do. Their purpose is to entertain and as such, as I cannot say that I love one more than the other. I can, however, maintain that there is one out of the three that I prefer spending more time with. **NAG**

> In the beginning, the adventure into gaming starts with a single platform. **As the years progress, and the foray into gaming becomes an all-consuming passion,** the likelihood of owning just one platform becomes increasingly unlikely.

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HALO 3
ODST

Joseph Staten Creative Director, Writer
Paul Bertone Design Director
Brian Jarrard Community Director

HALO 3: ODST, THE game formerly known as *Halo 3: Recon* (but not the game known as *Halo: Reach*) is a standalone expansion following *Halo 3*, but set during the events of *Halo 2*. And if all that wasn't daring enough for you, this one doesn't star UNSC career hero and teenage heartthrob, Master Chief. No, you'll be strapping on your Orbital Drop Shock Trooper stuff for this trip around New Mombasa, which is totally cool because the ODSTs have always had the best armour in the *Halo universe* – **FACT**. If your mind's still not blown into chunky bits all over the carpet, Bungie is even re-launching their Website with the game's release, with shiny, pretty, redesigned career and service record stats (plus more) spanning the last three *Halo* games. How many cumulative sticky grenade kills have you managed since 2004? Wonder no more!

We threatened Joseph Staten (creative director, writer), Paul Bertone (design director), and Brian Jarrard (community director) with a Spartan Laser, and made them answer our questions. Then we shot them anyway for a Triple Kill medal. Thanks guys.

The player character in *ODST* is known only as "the Rookie." What prompted the move away from a named character?
Joseph Staten: "It wasn't as much a desire to move away from named characters as it was to move away from one specific named character: the Master Chief. Don't get me wrong; we love the big, green guy. But ODSTs are really interesting personalities in the *Halo* universe that we've wanted to explore for many years."

From a design perspective, was it liberating to approach a *Halo* title without the inescapable narrative context of Master Chief, or was it sad and lonely and you'll never do it again?
JS: "Liberating, absolutely! The ODSTs in this game aren't concerned with saving the galaxy or worried about Flood and Forerunners. Their primary motivation is to help the other members of their squad survive a desperate, dangerous situation, which allowed us to tell a much more intimate, human story. I'd love to tell more stories like this."

What steps have you taken to make the ODST characters not feel like Master Chief?
Paul Bertone: "We spent a good bit of time getting the feeling of being an ODST 'right'. We started with the easy stuff – movement speed and camera height. Once we got it feeling good to run around as an ODST, we turned our focus on what it feels like to fight as an ODST. We knew we wanted to slow down the pace of combat a bit and we also wanted to introduce a bit more tension into the encounters, so we removed dual wielding,

usable equipment and the motion sensor. Around the same time we were prototyping playing as an ODST, we settled on New Mombasa at night as the main backdrop for the game. Those decisions lead us to develop VISR mode and the VISR database."

Why did you choose an *ODST* as the point-of-view character?
Brian Jarrard: "The fictional timelines didn't allow Master Chief to be the hero in this chapter; and as Joe and Paul have both stated, the team was very interested in finding a new twist on the *Halo* gameplay formula. The Orbital Drop Shock Troopers have always been a favourite character of our fans, and they have a special place in *Halo* lore alongside the Spartans."

Will choices made in the side narratives of *ODST* impact on the main character's plot?
JS: "No. But there is a great deal of choice when it comes to the order in which you tackle the flashback missions. New Mombasa is a big, wide open urban environment that you're free to explore pretty much however you want. Just watch out for roaming Covenant patrols... and keep your eyes peeled for the Superintendent, New Mombasa's 'infrastructure' AI. He's here to help – and he's got his own interesting story to tell."

For the first time ever, *Halo* is going 'open world'. How's this going to work?
BJ: "We often refer to *ODST* as a 'hub-and-spoke' design, with the massive, expansive, open city of New Mombasa serving as the hub; and then the flashback missions acting as spokes that sprout off in various directions. Players are free to move about the city at their own pace, exploring and investigating and pursuing clue objects and missions in any order they choose."

Apparently there's some stealthy stuff going on in *ODST*. Just how stealthy are we going to go?
PB: "The stealthy aspects of *ODST* are more about the mood and setting. We didn't set out to create a stealth-based tactical shooter. We did, however, want to up the level of tension that players feel when they're exploring New Mombasa. As with all *Halo* encounters, the player chooses their tactics. If you want to run and gun... by all means, run and gun. If you want to take it slower and play a little more 'stealthy', *ODST* will more than oblige."

ODST is looking a lot 'sexier' than *Halo 3*. What changes have been made to the engine to facilitate this? Are there any significant changes to the AI?

BJ: "Building *ODST* on top of the robust and stable Halo 3 Engine allowed our art team the luxury of focusing purely on content and knowing exactly how to squeeze the most out of our tech without having to fret about performance or our pipeline. That, along with a totally different mood and aesthetic resulted in some beautiful environments: from the mysterious, film noir-inspired night-time city to the gritty, high-octane daytime flashback missions.

On the AI side, there were a few upgrades included with *ODST* – most notably the introduction of a squad mechanic, which controls how the Covenant groups react and patrol around the city. You'll also notice that enemies will be quicker to take cover; and in Firefight, some Covenant, like the Jackal, are significantly more tenacious."

The outrageously overpowered pistol is back! Tell us about that.
PB: "*Halo 1* pistol = outrageously overpowered; *ODST* pistol = expertly crafted and perfectly balanced. :-) We wanted to add a headshot weapon that still requires skill to use. You can fire off rounds as fast as you can pull the trigger, so it's great for clearing out a room of grunts. It's not very good against shields, though, and you won't be taking down banshees with it any time soon."

Any new weapons or weapon modifications we should know about? Don't you think a sticky-grenade proximity mine would be totally awesome?
BJ: "ODSTs have a few new tools at their disposal to help improve their odds against the powerful Covenant forces. The new sound-suppressed pistol is a one-shot wonder, firing off rounds as fast as you can pull the trigger, and feels like the spiritual successor to the beloved *Halo 1* variety. You'll also have a new sound-suppressed SMG, which is great for mid-range combat and chipping away at the shields of pesky Brutes. Beyond the weapons, the VISR is new tech that provides a low-light target-acquisition visual system, as well as a database that links up to provide a tactical map and mission objectives."

This HUD is all different. Help... what's going on here?
BJ: "ODSTs have a slightly different view on the world than a Spartan, and this is reflected through the modified HUD in their helmets. The biggest different, right off the bat, is the omission of a motion tracker. You'll have to use your wits, your VISR database map and your teammates to keep track of your foes. Health/stamina and a navigation compass are located at the top/middle of your HUD, while grenades are bottom left and your weapon/ammo is lower right."

Looks like players can carry three grenades of each type now... Could you elaborate?

PB: "We made a few subtle modifications to the grenade throw for *ODST*. Grenades travel with more of an arc, so you can't be quite as accurate. We felt it was okay to up the grenade count to make up for this. Plus, grenades make big explosions, and big explosions are awesome."

Firefight looks like the hottest co-op thing since *Gears of War 2*'s Horde mode. How is Bungie planning on showing Epic how it's really done?

PB: "Firefight is the hottest thing since sliced bread. Nuff said."

We've been waiting for these three new maps since the Achievments turned up. Tell us about them. Have you hidden another skull as deviously as you did in Sandbox? Now that was devious.

BJ: "There are several new achievements tied specifically to the three new maps; and yes, there are also skulls to be found. Finding all of the skulls is one of the requirements to complete the Vidmaster achievement string, which will unlock Recon armour for *Halo 3*."

www.bungie.net

Here are a few screens from the new and shiny www.bungie.net.
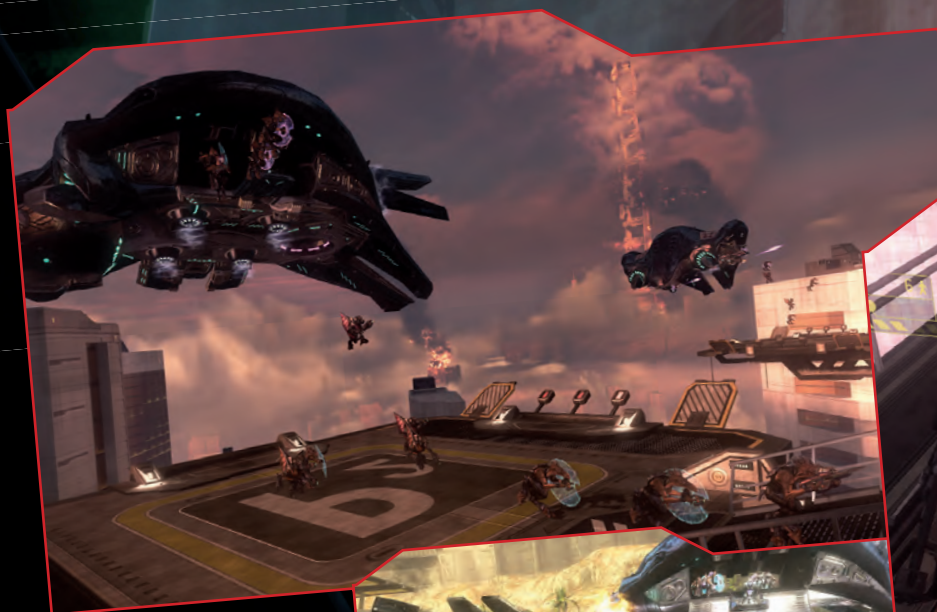
The ODSTs actually have the best-looking armour. True or false?
BJ: "They do look pretty badass, and their armour can reflect more of their unique personalities than Master Chief's Spartan armour did."

Come on; tell us a secret about *Halo: Reach*.
BJ: "*Halo: Reach* is the next big game from Bungie, and it serves as the prequel to the original *Halo* trilogy. There will be a public multiplayer Beta over Xbox LIVE that can only be accessed via your *ODST* game disc."

How far into development is *ODST*?
BJ: "*ODST* is all done and just a few weeks from landing in stores. In fact, the game was finished this past spring, just prior to E3."

What do you think of Project Natal? Do you have any ideas on implementing Natal technology into current or future *Halo* games?
BJ: "From what we've seen, Natal looks very interesting and could really revolutionise the way gamers interact with their games and break down barriers for non-gamers to engage with virtual experiences. It's too early to say what role, if any, Natal will play in future Bungie games, but we'll be watching closely and awaiting more details."

What do you feel is the main thing that makes *ODST* stand out?
JS: "Its nonlinear approach to storytelling and hub-and-spoke mission design, where the night-time city of New Mombasa serves as a hub for the various flashback missions. These design elements aren't only new to *Halo* games, but to shooters in general; and they make for a really fun, unique experience."

PB: "The mood and setting are what sets *ODST* apart for me. It's feels great to explore the city at night, engaging or avoiding Covenant patrols, searching for 'secrets' and locating the beacon objects that help unravel the mystery of New Mombasa. The open-world environment and *Halo*'s combat mechanics are two great tastes that taste great together."

Since *ODST* isn't just an expansion, does that mean it has its own full set of achievements?
BJ: "Yes, *ODST* is a full standalone title, which means it comes with a complete offering of achievements and a full 1,000 possible gamerscore. The *Halo 3* multiplayer disc that is included in the box has up to 750 additional points available that can be added to your original *Halo 3* gamerscore."

Is there any DLC planned?
BJ: "Our focus now is getting *ODST* into the hands of our fans and rolling out our suite of features on bungie.net, which will enhance the community experience. And, of course, we have that other big game we're working on, which is due for release next fall!"

Could you describe the design team? What makes them the best possible people to put this game together? What makes them tick?
PB: "We had a really tight design team for *ODST*. Although we had a ton of design hurdles and an insane production schedule, we always managed to keep the mood light and have fun every day. We were always open and honest with each other. It was a great environment to develop creative ideas. Everyone was extremely excited to make the greatest game we could in the short time we had. I can't say enough great things about my fellow *ODST* designers. They all kicked major ass."

Where does the development team draw inspiration from?

JS: "The game has a distinct, film noir vibe. Yes, you're an ODST. But you're also a bit of a detective, alone in a dark city, conducting a dangerous search for important clues to the fate of your squad mates. Personally, as far as the writing went, I took a lot of inspiration from great, hard-boiled movie thrillers and TV crime serials."

What were/are the biggest challenges in producing/developing *ODST*?

JS: "We had a small team with a tight schedule. But even if we had a bigger team and more time, creating the night-time city of New Mombasa – *ODST*'s big, non-linear environment – would have still been a major challenge. The fact that we pulled it off and did it so well is a testament to the hard work of the team, as well as what you can do with a stable, powerful engine like *Halo 3*'s. The city feels moody and mysterious and is full of emergent combat, as well as cool nooks and crannies to explore. It's a terrific part of the *ODST* experience."

PB: "Our production schedule. Every day of *ODST*'s production was a major challenge. We all had to be conscious of what we were doing and why we were doing it. We had very little margin for error. If a feature was taking too long to come together, we would inevitably be questioned on whether that feature was critical for the game. The design and construction of New Mombasa was the single biggest challenge we faced. New Mombasa is by far the largest playable environment we've ever built. We developed a lot of new technologies just to make it possible." **NAG**

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Assassin's Creed II

Quick update on one of the hottest games this year...

Genre→ Action Adventure   **Platforms→** Xbox 360 | PS3 | PC | PSP

A VIDEOGAME SEQUEL NEEDS TO do more than just follow-on from a previous title. Fans who look out for sequels expect a certain level of delivery to be associated with the new product – otherwise it's just more of the same. Ubisoft seems to be more than aware of this fact, just as they are aware that the success met by *Assassin's Creed* needs a strong follow-on to keep fans interested.

A while ago, we had an initial look at *Assassin's Creed II*, the follow-on to the popular stealth-based game set during the Crusades. From our initial view, we learnt a few very interesting things: the game will be moving from the Holy Land to Renaissance Italy, where the protagonist (a young Italian nobleman named Ezio) will practice his shadowy trade. We also learnt that the overall feel of the game would be slightly different. The missions will be much more free form than before, allowing the player greater latitude in completing them. Additionally, we learnt that a new economic system would be introduced into the game world, allowing the player to earn money and spend it on various upgrades.

There was also mention of numerous game-dynamic improvements, as well as improved AI in crowds and a host of other elements that will make the world seem more real.

Naturally, we wanted to know more. Which towns will Ezio visit? Is there any more information on the upgrades he can buy? What other game dynamics have been introduced that we don't know about yet? Say what you like about us, but you have to admit that we have the right kind of inquiring minds.

Luckily, Patrice Desilets, Creative Director for *Assassin's Creed II*, was on hand to answer some of our questions. He told us a bit about the technologies brought into the game, some about its setting and a little more about the economic system and the upgrades that the *Assassin's Creed II* player will have access to.

What are the specific technologies you developed for this second episode of *Assassin's Creed*? Are there any particular achievements you're proud of?
"What I'm particularly proud of is the new game architecture, allowing much more diverse gameplay and missions in our engine. We also have enhanced NPC navigation showcasing parkour-like acrobatics that will spice up the chases and escape missions in the game.

Now, for the visuals, the *Assassin's*

Creed game engine – Anvil – got some awesome new technical features that let us create a world with an even better visual treatment.

We have many new technicalities we added in the engine that affect the graphics in the game and improve the overall visual treatment:
- Night and day cycle;
- New load distance for more detailed open-world environment from greater distances;
- The same internal vegetation technology used in *Far Cry 2*;
- Several rendering improvements to support improved lighting, reflection and more special effects;
- New cloth system used extensively for characters.

Beyond the technical achievements, the very location we chose poised us to make a visually outstanding game. Cities like Florence and Venice are amongst the most stunning landscapes in the world and all the technology we developed just served this purpose, made you feel this beauty. We are not only recreating the architecture but also everything that makes Italy so unique during the 15th century – from the special lighting of Venice to the colourful carnival disguises. Every minor detail was important for the artists and they are very excited for players to get their hands on the game and explore such a stunning city."

Venice featured prominently in the E3 coverage of *ACII*. What other cities/ regions are players able to visit?
"Ezio is a young noble from the city of Florence. He will live the beginning of his life in the city that is considered the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance. His family is well respected by the Florentine society. Florence is known for having some of the most beautiful churches and monuments to come out of the Renaissance. The most prestigious and dominant building in Florence is Santa Maria del Fiore, also known as *The Duomo*. There are many other landmarks that players will want to discover: Santa Croce, Palazzo Vecchio, Ponte Vecchio, Santa Maria Novella, etc. The first sequence of the game will be set in Florence and players will get to meet Ezio's family, friends and his enemies.

As the game progresses, Ezio will have to travel to various cities and regions. There is, of course, Venice, as you have seen in the E3 demo, and this is just a

> "Every minor detail was important for the artists and **they are very excited for players to get their hands on the game** and explore such a stunning city."

small portion of the world of *Assassin's Creed II*. Players will discover the famous Tuscany region, known for its beautiful and fertile fields; as well as the town of San Gimignano. Beside Tuscany and San Gimignano, there are the mountain regions that players will have to go through on their first journey to Venice.

Another region players will get to discover is the wetlands, situated to the west of Florence. This region is known for its continuous floods, cloudy weather and its various aquatic plants. Players will get to explore and perform various missions in the city of Forli, deep within the Wetlands.

It was important for us that each city, region and sub city have an important role in the game. We didn't intend for the countryside to be a simple walk in the park for the players. They will all have their role in the game and will require players to invest time in them. Each region will have its main, secondary missions. There will be lots of exploration and time investment for the player to discover all the secrets behind each location."

What are the Secret Locations?
"The Secret Locations are interiors of several famous landmarks. You can discover their entrance in various regions of the game. The gameplay in these locations will challenge the player in acrobatics, puzzles and stealth. These locations are not bound to the main quest, but offer hours of additional gameplay, details about the story of the assassins/ templar's war, and a special reward as players complete each of them."

What is the chase gameplay?
"Ezio can control a horse carriage in the Italian countryside to reach his destination faster and escort people alongside it. Guards will try to jump aboard the carriage... This is one of the surprises we have in store for the player."

What are the armour upgrade system and the character customisation?
"At E3, we've learnt that there is an economic system that lets the assassin collect money through various ways and make the most of the tools at his disposal. Weapons, tools, ammunition, faction

service, and doctors will be available for our assassin to spend his hard-earned money. There is still much to reveal to what players can do with their money.

In *Assassin's Creed II*, there will be an armour upgrade system where Ezio will be able to upgrade various armour parts: shoulders, chest, boots, etc. There will be different armour ranks and each of them will offer better protection as well as a new look to Ezio. Also, there will be tailors in *Assassin's Creed II* that will be able to customise the colour of Ezio's outfit."

What is the poison blade?

"The poison blade is another one of the cool, hidden blade upgrades that Ezio will get from Leonardo da Vinci. The poison blade is a needle that the assassin will have attached to his forearm. He will only be able to use it when he is in low profile. The needle is very small and can be used without the target noticing it. When he stings his victim with the needle and its poison, the victim continues his tasks until he starts losing his balance and finally, falls into a 'berserk' mode. The victim then starts attacking everyone surrounding him. If

it's a guard who is poisoned, he takes his sword out and attacks with it. This creates a lot of commotion and attracts the attention of guards in the area. After a few seconds, the victim dies and guards come to investigate. Thanks to this commotion, the player will already be far from his victim and the attention of the guards."

How do we recharge the poison blade? Who are the doctors?

"Players will be able to buy weapons and tools and hire factions in the game. To recharge the poison blade, players will have to go see a doctor that will sell him poison vials. Doctors will also heal Ezio's wounds when he is hurt. Players will have to find a doctor in the city and pay him to get patched up."

It seems as though Ubisoft wants to deliver a more realistic and engrossing experience with *Assassin's Creed II*; and, from what we have learnt thus far, it looks like they are certainly on the right track. We will know soon enough – *Assassin's Creed II* is scheduled for release towards the end of this year. **NAG**

www.kingoffighters12.co.uk

THE KING OF FIGHTERS XII™

Developer→ Ubisoft   **Publisher→** Ubisoft   **Web→** http://avatargame.us.ubi.com   **Release Date→** November 2009

The game takes place on Pandora, but is an entirely standalone plot from the movie

SEEN AT E3

James Cameron's Avatar: The Game

Science fiction, action-adventure role-playing in 3D!

Genre→ Third-Person Action
PC   360   PS3   WII   PS2   PSP   DS

THEY TOOK OUR LAPTOPS, handhelds, cellphones and voice recorders, even our pens and notepads, before allowing us access to the *Avatar* private viewing room at the curvaceous Ubisoft booth. The guard at the booth had a gun, we swear. If he so much as guessed we might be sneaking in a video recorder, he'd shoot us in the head. Our guess is that these measures were also employed during the production of the movie the game we're about to see is tied to, which would explain how James Cameron has managed to keep his new *magnum opus* so secret for so long. Inside is a giant 180-inch screen.

That's a giant screen. No, seriously, that is a huge screen. You don't realise just how big 180 inches is, until you're sat down in front of it, square in the centre, about a metre away from its monolithic surface. Leaning forward, its sides touch the edge of our peripheral vision. You could get lost in a screen that big. And the damn thing is **stereoscopic** too. Granted, to get the true 3D effect, you have to wear these goggle/glasses that make you feel like a bad extra in an 80s geek flick, but at least the lenses aren't red/blue. The stereoscopic in question is that of alternating polarised lenses.

The simple version: the goggles rapidly flicker the left and right lenses between solid and see-through on a very specific frequency. The stereoscopic screen flickers between two angles of the scene being shown, at the same frequency as the goggles. Your brain combines the two into 3D, using magic. The result is an image on the screen with a very realistic

illusion of depth. Things literally pop out at you, the distance has perspective, and parallax and nearby objects try to assault you in the face. You really have to see it to understand, and if you'd gone to see a 3D movie at the cinema lately, you might get what we're saying. If you've never seen a movie in 3D, we can guarantee you that *Avatar* is one you will.

AVATAR: THE MOVIE
Fourteen years ago, James Cameron (*Terminator, Titanic, Aliens*) had a script for a movie he really wanted to make, but the technology just wasn't there. The script required so much computer imagery, at a level of detail that made graphics artists cry (even today), that Cameron had decided to shelve the script until such time that the processing power existed that could bring his vision to life. About three years ago, *Avatar* went into

production. Cameron not only wanted to redefine realism in terms of CG locations and characters, he also insisted that everything be filmed and rendered to make use of stereoscopic 3D. Even though both the game and the movie make use of the technology, both can be enjoyed in regular 2D.

The movie takes place in the future, deep in the jungles of a distant, alien planet called Pandora. It is a lush, jungle planet filled with floating mountains, bloodthirsty creatures known as viper wolves (which look like a wolf had sex with an iguana), and ten feet-tall, blue, furry cat-like beings called the Na'vi. You can tell they're aliens because they have alien markings (apostrophes) in their names. The Na'vi are a tribal race of natives, adept hunters and totally annoyed at humans for appearing on their planet. The humans are after a natural mineral

> 'You can also **shoot arrows that split** people in half...'

There is danger no matter where you go on Pandora

found only on Pandora, an amazing superconductor, which also happens to have the best name for a mineral ever: Unobtainium. War ensues between the humans and the Na'vi.

Jake Sully, a 20-something war veteran with the RDA (Resources Development Administration) military, is paralysed from the waist down. Jake is a man who has always wanted to fight for something, but has never had something worth fighting for. Part of the setting, for both the movie and game, is that Pandora's air isn't breathable by humans. To make expansion on to the planet possible, humans have bioengineered a hybrid creature that can breathe the air, called Avatars that resemble the Na'vi for infiltration purposes. Jake's consciousness is put into an Avatar where he can walk, run and fight once more. Of course, nothing ever goes to plan, and in a Pocahontas-style love story, he falls in love with a Na'vi female and ends up fighting against his fellow humans.

AVATAR: THE GAME

Jon Landau, the producer on both Cameron's *Titanic* and the upcoming *Avatar*, says, 'This is the first time we're really showing the world of *Avatar*', as he fires up the game of the movie. When the CGI technology finally reached a point where Cameron felt comfortable to start work on *Avatar*, 'One of the first things we did,' Landau claims, 'is look for a videogame partner.' Ubisoft, having had great success with their movie-licence titles, such as *King Kong*, thus far, became the studio's partner.

The game takes place on Pandora, but is an entirely standalone plot from the movie, following different characters and unfolding before the events in the film. Ubisoft isn't revealing much about the plot in the game. As you progress through the story, we're told, there are points where your choices influence which side you fight for more. Either you like humans the most, or you prefer giant, blue furry boobies. The choice is yours, ultimately. The side you fight for most often will end

up controlling the lion's share of Pandora.

Looking a little like a more polished *Lost Planet*, Avatar plays 'third person' with plenty of action. Mixing things up are some mild role-playing elements in the form of upgradeable weapons and abilities. There is danger no matter where you go on Pandora: hellfire wasps, the aforementioned viper wolves, and a creature that looks like a rhino loved a hammerhead shark too much. As you take out enemies and complete objectives in what appears to be an open sandbox world, you gain Effort Points. These are used to unlock new powers and equipment, and the EP are also used to determine which faction controls the numerous sectors of the world.

Some of the skills we saw included Active Camouflage, blurring you into the environment, and a Quick Dash that lets you effortlessly dodge through the underbrush to sneak up on enemies. Playing for the humans, you get access to 'helijets', big mechanised lifters, and other vehicles. Choose to fight for the Na'vi, and all you need is your big, blue self. As a child of the jungle, most of the wildlife respects you. You can also shoot arrows that split people in half, and fight with a spiked staff. Strength is the great equalizer for the Na'vi.

But the most beautiful part of *Avatar* comes at night. When darkness falls – the game runs on an accelerated day-night cycle – every plant and animal starts to glow in bright blues and purples. The entire environment goes bioluminescent, changing the lavish jungle flora into a wonderland of stippled leaves, like the ultimate jungle rave. Wading through a small pond at night leaves violet water wakes, as incandescent fish and other amphibian life forms splash away. There is a good chance that, just how the environment gradually changes from traditional videogame jungle into something fresh, new and glowing, so too will the *Avatar* game change how the industry approaches movie-licence titles. **NAG**

Miktar Dracon

Developer→ PlatinumGames   **Publisher→** SEGA   **Web→** www.sega.com/platinumgames/bayonetta/   **Release Date→** September 2009

SEEN AT E3

Bayonetta

Who better to fight legions of demons, than a witch with high-heel guns?

Genre→ Stylish Action Fighting

PC   360   **PS3**   WII   PS2   PSP   DS

CRAMMED INTO THE TINY temporary private viewing area constructed inside the SEGA meeting room at E3, there is barely enough room to shake hands without elbowing someone. People jostle each other as they attempt to get comfortable in their seats. Hideki Kamiya and his translator are perspiring visibly in one corner; probably wishing, as we were, that there was air conditioning in here. It's hot and sweaty, yet oddly intimate. While not the best way to meet the director behind one of the sauciest games since someone decided a fighting game in which females mud-wrestled was the good idea it is, Hideki Kamiya's outwardly jovial attitude is oddly infectious. On the screen behind him, a tall woman in gun stilettos is cartwheeling through an empty void, shooting off thousands of bullets at nothing in particular.

GOOD DEVILS DON'T CRY

At a cursory glance, *Bayonetta* is a game type that's instantly recognisable, no matter what fancy dress it puts on. More recently, its specific genre has come in flavours ranging from bombastic Greek Mythology right on through to Neo-Tokyo-Ninja-Flips-Out-And-Kills-Demons. Even though the "Stylish Action Fighting" genre has been popularised lately by titles like *God of War* and *Ninja Gaiden*, the roots of that particular style of action game can be traced back squarely to the seminal *Devil May Cry*. While they share a common ancestry, *God of War* and *Ninja Gaiden* are both different takes on the same idea. Both are exceptional games, but both also contribute to the 'photocopy fatigue' the

genre currently has.

At its root, the genre is as advertised: a melding of style, action and mechanics usually found in fighting games like *Tekken*. By taking the conventions of combinations, hit-strings, timed-blocking and giant move sets out of fighting games and wrapping them up in an action game with extreme focus on style, *Devil May Cry* birthed an entirely new way for gamers to get their fix. Since then, many companies have put their own spin on the idea, either by making it harder or easier, more stylish or less, so on and so forth. New iterations added their "advancements" that looked good on paper but really just contributed to the dilution and 'muddling' of the prime concept. For the original genre to survive, however, a game has to take it back to its roots. *Bayonetta* dares not only bring

the genre back home, but proudly says, "We're doing it better."

BOYS WANT GIRLS WHO WANT TO KICK ASS

In charge once more of the original team behind *Devil May Cry* itself, is director Hideki Kamiya. Known better for his more recent works, (the titular *Viewtiful Joe* and watercolour-fantasy *Okami*), stylish is something the man knows very well. He takes us through a single level from the game not shown on the show floor below. Bayonetta kills a bunch of demons, runs on the sides of buildings, and then fights a giant dragon with his head stuck through a wall in the sky. It's obvious that the lead character herself, voiced like a cross between a porn actress and a British nanny, is an overly sexualised trope that gamers get hard for. Even so, she plays second fiddle to the game's true fetish: non-stop climaxing action that shows no sign of slowing its inexorable escalation.

"When it comes to violence, we always think about what the users actually want rather than pushing something for the sake of it," says Kamiya. "We don't want to sicken people, but rather add to the satisfaction of killing an enemy." On screen, Bayonetta manages a well-timed dodge of an attack, which activates Witch Time. During the period of slow motion it provides, the game's presentations thrown into bold relief and Bayonetta can unleash Finishers on enemies. Her hair transforms into dragons, she pulls giant guillotines from the ether, and her hair can also turn into a massive claw that throws cars... Her hair is a central motif; it's also her cat suit. Don't ask us how that works – she's a witch. Almost every enemy has a variety of Finisher animations that defy comprehension if you stop to think about it. Either Bayonetta is the most demented witch possible, or she gets off on some rather strange sadomasochism.

AS HARD AS YOU WANT IT

In an odd inflection of who these types of games are usually aimed at, *Bayonetta* is difficult enough to challenge even the hardest of the hardcore, yet contains two difficulty modes for the most hapless button-masher possible. Below Normal sits Easy Automatic and Very Easy Automatic. These let the player – with minimal effort – pull off almost every combination-string in the game by just mashing a single attack button. On the flipside, there are two more difficulty settings above Normal that will require rote comprehension of the fidelity behind the various combination moves and timing of blocks/dodges.

"A degree of strategy is still needed across all difficulties," Kamiya insists, "but your granny could play this game on Very Easy Automatic. You could basically play it one-handed." When an enemy is about to attack, a 3D "DANGER" sign appears above them, assisting in last-minute saves. Dodge an attack, and a prompt pops up letting you vent pent-up energy measured by a gauge that notes the "megaton" level of the pre-canned torture attack Bayonetta unleashes after you run out of mashing-power. Bosses range from people-sized right up to building-sized, the spectacle of which is exactly why gamers pay the price of admission for these types of games.

HANDS ON ALL OVER

Controlling Bayonetta feels more direct, more credible than Dante or Kratos ever did. Her attacks are split between fist and feet, each with their own face button. There are no Quick Time Events. The combination system tallies separate scores for feet, fists, guns and specials: the total converted into a medal of varying grades at the end of the "Verse," which is to say, Chapter. The loading screens between levels double as an interactive practice session, combination notation streaming down the right-hand side as you press buttons to explore the various branches while Bayonetta attacks the void.

When a game is honest about what it is and whom it's trying to appeal to, it's usually quite easy to known from just a few play sessions if the experience is going to be what you're looking for. *Bayonetta* is a very honest game, and for Stylish Action Fighting fans, it's the sexy gameplay you're looking for. **NAG**

Miktar Dracon

> "Even so, she plays second fiddle to the game's true fetish: **non-stop climaxing action** that shows no sign of slowing its inexorable escalation."

Moisture is the essence of wetness, and wetness is the essence of beauty...

SEEN AT E3

Wet

Everything you've ever wanted from an action game, in one package

Genre→ Third-Person Action

PC   360   **PS3**   WII   PS2   PSP   DS

IF MAX PAYNE AND Quentin Tarantino had a baby - assuming for the sake of the strained metaphor that such things were possible - she would be called Wet. Not to put too much spin on it, the premise of *Wet* is a deliciously hedonistic one: it's a third-person, action-centric, Hong Kong-meets-Mexican shoot-'em-up extravaganza that lets you chain together all sorts of highly stylised, acrobatic bullet-time-endowed dual-pistol and katana moves for the sake of killing with panache. In other words, a **real gamer's** game.

RED VELVET

Playing as the curvaceous Rubi Malone, your usual problem-solving, gun-for-hire viper with a snarky attitude and penchant for swords, you're tasked with fixing problems for the very wealthy, who pay very well. Of course, there's always the risk of betrayal in such endeavours, and soon Rubi finds herself on the run and very annoyed at the man who betrayed her. Being the emotional type, she leaves piles of bullet-filled and partially dismembered bodies in her wake.

In keeping with the style the developers are aiming for, *Wet* is presented like a retro movie, complete with visuals giving it that trendy, grainy, budget Super-8 film look. Backing up the appearance of dated-film stock visuals is a sassy '70s music soundtrack, which lends an odd *je ne sais quoi* to the whole thing. To say that *Wet* is clearly aiming for the 'Grind house' thematic style would be to

shoot the obvious in the face.

Even though it's in vogue right now for games to try to be more 'edgy' by aping the gritty B-movie appeal, that's not to say the trope has overstayed its welcome. If anything, the saxophone holiday of contemporary music, force-fed into today's game soundtracks for the sake of appearing current and appealing, is a refreshing one.

Of course, none of this would matter if *Wet* didn't deliver on the second half of the Grind house experience; which is to say, buckets of blood covering the walls and floor after bisecting a goon you'd already filled with so much lead, he could be used for a pencil.

GUNPLAY IS FUN PLAY

The core gameplay dynamic upon which *Wet* is built is the seamless combat that links shooting, sword fighting and acrobatics together into a cohesive whole. Clearly, Max Payne

> "Back flip off a balcony **while shooting two bad guys through the head** at the same time."

was flirting with the Prince of Persia on the side, unbeknownst to Tarantino.

You can shoot at any time, from anywhere, be it jumping through the air, sliding along the floor, hanging backwards off ladders or cartwheeling off walls after wall-running a stretch. Adding to that, during any acrobatic move, Rubi's left hand (since she uses pistols akimbo) will automatically target enemies when you shoot, leaving you free to aim her right hand at specific enemies. The auto-targeting only happens during acrobatics, so if you're just running around, the gunplay actually has zero lock-on, making it
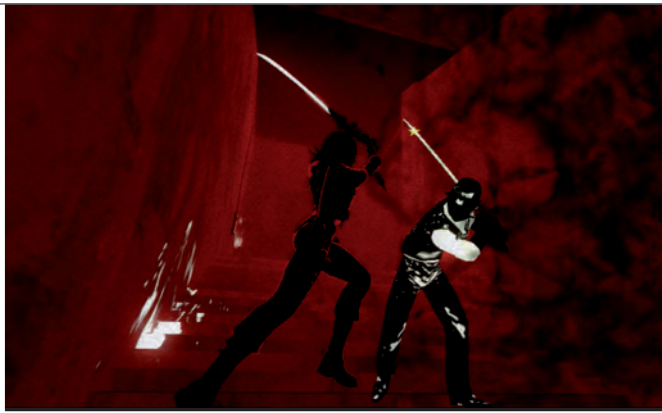
much tougher to take out enemies but not impossible.

The beauty of the system is that you really want to be doing plenty of acrobatics - not that one needs much encouragement to that end. Rubi controls exactly as one would expect her to, with responsive movements and precise execution of button presses. At first, pulling off the more complex strings of moves and acrobatics isn't going to be easy, as there is a learning curve to carrying them out, but learning to control Rubi and use her full complement of moves in the most glorious of ways is part of the fun.

NICE-LOOKING BADASS

That 'back flip off a balcony while shooting two bad guys through the head at the same time' thing you've always wanted to try? Yeah, you can do that. Hell, you can even add in some swordplay combination chaining in

there if you want, and you probably will because the more acrobatic gun and sword moves you chain together, the higher your combination multiplier. This, in turn, helps to rack up the points you need to purchase new moves, or expand existing ones with new combinations. Elements in the environment, such as horizontal poles you can swing and flip from, have additional score multipliers when used, so you can really go to town with the whole chaining-moves-together thing.

In the one-level demo we played, the action started in a Chinese restaurant, complete with giant, dragon ice statue that crumbled satisfyingly when shot. From there, it linked to wall-running through corridors, killing in a courtyard and wall-jumping across the rooftops before ending up on the roof of a car barrelling down a highway. If the final product manages to keep that kind of diversity at the forefront through each

level, it's going to be a non-stop, roller-coaster ride from start to finish.

THE WRITE STUFF

To tie all this 'epicurean' ecstasy together, acclaimed writer Duppy Demitrius was brought on board to write the plot. He's best known for his work on TV series *24*. Can it be? Is *Wet* the much sought-after unification of gratifying gameplay, an interesting and involving plot, wrapped up in super-saucy, over-sexualised thrills? One can certainly hope. As with all subjective experiences, there is the likely outcome that once completed, *Wet* will remain a chatoyant indulgence that hits all the right notes for some, yet grates discordantly with others. This could naturally be said for all games, but perhaps more so for ones such as *Wet*, which attempts to go the whole hog to deliver a very specific, stylised experience. **NAG**

Miktar Dracon

HANDS ON

Little details

The tactical options that will be available to the player in the game are looking to be quite extensive, judging by what I experienced. Your squad can be directed down to the finest detail, such as by organising their formation, their movement speed and the rules of engagement. Even something as seemingly simple as calling in support powers becomes a tactical decision, with players having to choose the type of support (air strike or artillery, for example) and what sort of bombardment you'd like – should it be tight or scattered, smoke or something more lethal? If you like your combat simulation games to be this in-depth, *Dragon Rising* looks to be right up your alley.

Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising

Can I get a number 1 with a side order of realism, please?

Genre→ First-Person Shooter

PC   360   PS3   WII   PS2   PSP   DS

WHILE BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE (DEVELOPERS of the original *Operation Flashpoint*) is busy pumping out titles in the *ARMA* (otherwise known as *Armed Assault*) series of games, the folks over at Codemasters have been working on a sequel to what was perhaps one of the most realistic combat/military simulators ever to grace the world of gaming. The first game embraced the tactical, the realistic and the authentic, dropping players into the middle of a heated conflict and tasking them with surviving by not only using the biggest guns, but also by putting their brains to the test. Gung-ho antics were not rewarded kindly (more often than not they'd turn you into a bloody mess of stuff that nobody would want to clean up), and it took patience, teamwork and solid tactics to prevail. After spending some time with some preview code of *Operation Flashpoint*'s sequel, I can honestly say that it seems like the new developers are creating a title that fans of the first will love.

Dragon Rising gives players control of the leader of a squad of United States Marine Corps. Infantrymen and, judging by the missions on offer in the preview sample, simply lets you loose on the world, free to complete the objectives detailed in each mission in any manner that you choose. The game takes place on the fictional island of Skira, which is located off the north coast of Japan and is a hotly contested zone. Russia and China are battling over control of the island in order to harvest its natural resources, leading to a military conflict that the USMC steps in to quell. According to the developers, the island of Skira features

over 120 square miles of in-game land, which the player is free to traverse at their leisure. Objectives can be completed in any way that you wish, and you'll have access to a number of different entry/exit strategies, weapons/equipment load-outs, and vehicles with which to progress through each mission. Teamwork will be a major part of the game and you'll have to work together with your squad to beat whatever odds you may face. If you fancy your first-person shooters to be laced with copious amounts of realism, then you're going to want to keep track of *Dragon Rising*'s progress. **NAG**

Dane Remendes

Dragon Rising gives players **control of the leader of a squad** of United States Marine Corps

Developer→ Bizarre Creations **Publisher→** Activision **Web→** www.blurgame.com **Release Date→** Q4 2009

SEEN AT E3

Blur

Trip the light fantastic, then shunt the other guy off the rainbow

Genre→ Arcade Racing

PC 360 PS3 WII PS2 PSP DS

THE ROOM IS DARK, but the colours are, oh, so very, very bright. Ahead of us on the track, a Dodge Viper lets loose a wave of electrostatic energy that shunts a BMW into a Ford; and then everything explodes like a grenade tossed into a rave on Planet of the Cars, where Car People like to race while wielding Jedi Glow sticks.

Our 20-car race around a Spanish oval circuit left us in third place and perhaps with a damaged retina, but it was worth the trip to New York to see (thank you, Megarom and Activision, the eye surgery bill is in the mail). We had given *Blur* little more than a passing glance while at E3 – shame on us – but to its credit, the game plays a lot better than it looks. It is bizarre indeed, to see Bizarre Creations (known for their photo-realistic quasi-arcade racing series *Project Gotham Racing*), play their hand at something one would more expect to see in the kart-racing sub-genre. Perhaps therein lies the appeal: bringing the bright colours and explosive power-up battles to a more realistic universe where you won't lose first place to a flying, blue turtle shell.

We'll say it now, because we think it's the best part: *Blur* has four-player split-screen, something racing games have habitually overlooked of late. Online, up to twenty people can duke it out with the five offensive power-ups that have been announced so far, with hints that there may be more unveiled before release. Picked up by driving over panels on the track, power-ups slide into one of three available slots – so you can store

them for later use. Shock sends out an electromagnetic pulse that disables cars; Barge blasts a huge energy wave out from either side of your car, knocking opponents away, and Shunt blasts out forward and lets someone ahead of you know you're knocking on their bumper. You can also use it to shunt a teammate forward for a little boost. Then there's Mines that drop little gifts for tailgaters while Nitro does what it says on the bottle. You have a rudimentary defence against Shock in the form of a quick X-button prompt seconds before impact, which deploys a shield. Repair zones on the track replenish lost health. There is an on-screen radar that shows you the relative position of cars around you, for planning purposes.

The entire game is wrapped up in a faux lampoon of today's social-network Websites: you gain chatty friends and fans by winning races, while the type of company you keep is determined by how you race – aggressively or clean. Progression comes from being invited by friends to new race locations, but it's not always about winning. Some races only require that you place, while others are more about taking down the other guy. Online, you can create and share custom races, while the Steering Assist and Acceleration Assist can both be toggled easily mid-race in case you're not so good with the turns or want to focus on the combat.

Blur is bright, bold and glows. The interface oozes luminescence from every pixel; keeping in theme with the game's light-sculpted racing elements on the track. Bottom line after some hands-on time: *Blur* is a lot of fun that an adult can play without feeling self-conscious. **NAG**

Miktar Dracon

Somewhere in this picture a sniper has a high velocity rifle trained right between **your eyes.**

Unless you're gaming on a Samsung Ecofit monitor, you're as good as dead. Its 50 000:1 contrast ratio produces sharper images, richer colours and extreme clarity that could just save your life.

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The Reviewers

It's the mid-21st century and a great earthquake has destroyed South Africa. With the world trading mostly in carbon, Project NAG attempts to rebuild the shattered continent by fusing together non sequitur statements until they can shoot lasers.

Miktar Dracon:
A sexy transsexual who claims to be "the eternal 28-year-old." Can teach you to love, fight and think.

Walt Pretorius:
Though a man of action and strong leadership, Walt is often a target of Miktar and Tarryn's teasing.

Dane Remendes:
Brought up by an ordinary family, Dane is a clever fellow with an honest heart, trying to capture Tarryn.

Tarryn van der Byl:
An armed, anti-government 18-year-old girl in school uniform, Tarryn defies any adversities in high spirit.

Chris Bistline:
An investment banker interested in opera, and funding the future of increased proletarian division.

Michael James:
A plump transsexual who worked with Miktar at their transvestite bar, the Tropical Fish.

Adam Liebman:
Unable to go out into the Sun due to a skin condition, Adam kills you if he thinks you're lying to him.

Geoff Burrows:
Aiieeeeyaaaaaaaaaaa! Geoff likes long walks on the beach, lives with his parents, and has three cats.

Alex Jelagin:
Composed of three different types of otaku – Loli, General and Camera – Alex forms the head of Voltron.

Anatomy of a Review

A quick guide to the NAG Reviews section

VITAL INFO: Who made it, who's putting it on shelves and where to find more information

GAME NAME: It'd be a bit confusing if we left this bit out. Now it comes with a short summary, too!

BOX OUTS: More good stuff. Just in a box.

GENRE AND PLATFORMS: What kind of game is it, and what platforms does it come on. All available platforms are in white, the one we reviewed it on is in yellow.

CAPTIONS: A picture's worth a thousand words. Here's 20 or so...

SCREENSHOTS AND ARTWORK: The game looks something like this, presumably

The Score

Breaking down the box

AWARD: Is this game worthy of our praise? If so, it gets an award. See details below.

MULTIPLAYER ICONS: How many players per copy, players per server, and players in co-op, respectively

PLUS/MINUS: What we liked, and what we didn't, in concise bullet-point format

THE BOTTOM LINE: Here's where we condense the entire review into 20 words or less. Because reading is hard...

AGE RATING: Let's see some ID, son

SCORE: Further reducing our bottom line to a number out of 100

The Score

Plus
+ Simple yet deep
+ Balanced
+ Challenging

Minus
- Lacks better instruction
- Medals only awarded for online play

Bottom Line
A true evolution for the series that knows what to keep and what to cut.

97

Editor's Choice Award
If a game bears this award, then it rocks. It does everything right – pure and simple. We don't hand these out every issue.

Must Play Award
Essential playing for fans of the genre. These awards aren't as rare as the Editor's Choice award, but if you see one, take note.

Pony Award
This isn't an award anyone can be proud of. If a game gets this award, then it's rubbish and you should avoid it like moss on a sandwich. We keep it only for the best garbage.

What We're Playing

Here are the top 20 games we're currently playing in the *NAG* office

#	GAME NAME
1	Call of Duty: World at War (Shi No Numa)
2	Call of Duty: World at War (MP)
3	Quake III Arena
4	Anno 1404
5	Overlord II
6	Aion: The Tower of Eternity (Beta)
7	Battlefield 1943
8	Blue Dragon
9	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (MP)
10	Fallen Sword
11	FF Crystal Chronicles: My Life as a Darklord
12	Fight Night Round 4
13	PROTOTYPE
14	Red Faction: Guerilla
15	Sacred 2
16	Star Ocean: The Last Hope
17	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10
18	Wii Sports Resort
19	Worms 2: Armageddon
20	The fool

Distributors

Apex Interactive	[011] 796-5040
Asbis	[011] 848-7000
ASUS SA	[011] 783-5450
Axiz	[011] 237-7000
Comstar	[011] 314-5812
Comztek	0860 600 557
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Web Scores

How do our scores compare to everyone else's? We've provided scores from Metacritic and Game Rankings for reference.

NAG // Metacritic // Game Rankings

ANNO 1404

PC

88
83
NA

DAMNATION

PS3

58
36
38

FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 4

PS3

88
88
88

OVERLORD II

PC

85
79
76

STAR OCEAN: THE LAST HOPE

360

82
72
75

TERMINATOR SALVATION

PS3

46
43
47

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 10

360

79
80
82

Developer→ Triumph Studios **Publisher→** Codemasters **Distributor→** Nu Metro **Web→** www.overlordgame.com
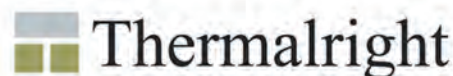
Are you not entertained?!

Overlord II

Six shades of evil

Genre→ Third-Person Action Strategy RPG

PC 360 PS3 WII PS2 PSP DS

Welcome back, Sire. We've missed you. Evil deeds just aren't as fun without you at the helm. Giblet has been looking especially downtrodden since the last Overlord vanished, so he's ecstatic that we managed to discover your nefariously miniature form amongst those dirty Nordbergians. It's just like old times again... Well, except for the Glorious Empire. Those pompous, feathery-helmet-wearing, magic-hating Empire folk have made the lives of magical creatures needlessly tough of late and it seems that they're now turning their attention to you. We can't have that, can we Lord? Put on your best evil grin, grab your strangely devious armour and let's do what we do best: bringing evil to every corner of this kingdom! – Minion Pus bucket

THE FIRST *OVERLORD* HAS a special place on my 'shelf o' games'. Every Tuesday night, I whip out a bunch of candles, arrange them (in a manner that I promise myself isn't at all ritualistic or creepy) around the game's packaging and pray to the Gods of Gaming that I, too, shall one day wear the glorious crown/all-powerful ring/colourful poncho of an evil overlord in the same vein as Sauron (from *The Lord of the Rings*), Michael James (editor of the magazine you're holding in your hands right now) and Jeff Bridges. It sort of came out of nowhere – a great title that combined elements of action, strategy and role-playing games and managed to surprise many gamers with its witty humour, terrific gameplay and focus on the evil (and naturally more enjoyable)

*Deep, Ed.

side of fantasy. Overlord II takes everything that made the first title so damn rewarding, throws it in a cauldron, brings it to the boil, drops in some awesome new ingredients and allows it to simmer on your hard drive while you enjoy its pleasant-tasting gameplay*****.

The game starts out in the small village of Nordberg and players take control of an adolescent version (dubbed the "Overlad") of the Overlord you will soon become. Apparently, evil's roots take hold early, and even as a child, you terrorise the local populace with your fledgling grasp of magic and command of a number of hilariously evil and endearing little minions (more on them in a box out somewhere on the pages of this review). These early years act as the game's tutorial, and by the end of it, you'll have had your first encounter with the Glorious Empire – a parody of the Roman Empire, ruled by an Emperor whose aim is to wipe out all magical

creatures by using superior tactics and deadly weapons of war (which you'll get a chance to commandeer). The story was written by Rhianna Pratchett (daughter of Terry Pratchett, author of the *Discworld* novels) and it's brilliantly humorous: the game is filled with hilarious dialogue and giggle-worthy parodies of real-world happenings, such as a group of elves (read: hippies) who are obsessed with saving the environment and its inhabitants – especially the cute and fluffy ones.

The gameplay will be instantly familiar to anyone who played the first title. Players take control of the Overlord, who runs around the game world either dominating or destroying everything around him. There's no choice between good or evil in this game – you can only choose the degree of your evilness by taking the path of either domination or destruction, which in turn affects the appearance of your Netherworld tower

Minion mayhem

Being an evil Overlord and everything, in this game you can command a number (which grows as you return specific tower objects to the Netherworld) of dastardly (yet surprising loveable) little minions. Available in four different flavours (each type has their own unique abilities and roles in battle), these guys are the main source of what makes the *Overlord* series different to your typical fantasy RPG. Here, let me introduce you to the minions.

BROWNS

These guys are your frontline fighters and as such, have the ability to pick up and equip any weapons or armour that you may find haphazardly lying around the world. They're also the hardiest minions, able to take quite a beating before dying. They can also mount wolves, which make them pack more of a punch when charging into battle.

REDS

These fiery fellows are your archers, able to fling flames at enemies and set them on fire in the process. Naturally, they're immune to fire damage and can ride salamanders into battle, allowing them to fire while moving and reach certain otherwise-inaccessible locations

GREENS

These sneaky, mischievous minions are great at sneak attacks. Get them behind an enemy and they'll leap onto them, slicing and slashing at critical weak spots and doing more damage than any other minion type (although they're not very tough). They have the ability to cloak to hide from enemies and they can also ride spiders, which let them reach normally inaccessible locations (you could place them on the ceiling and launch a surprise attack from above, for example).

BLUES

The Blues are the healers. They can resurrect fallen minions and are able to swim (which the other minion types are unable to do without drowning helplessly). In *Overlord II*, the Blues have been given a new ability: they can "blink" past enemies, letting them reach their target (be it a switch, lever or fallen ally) without obstruction.
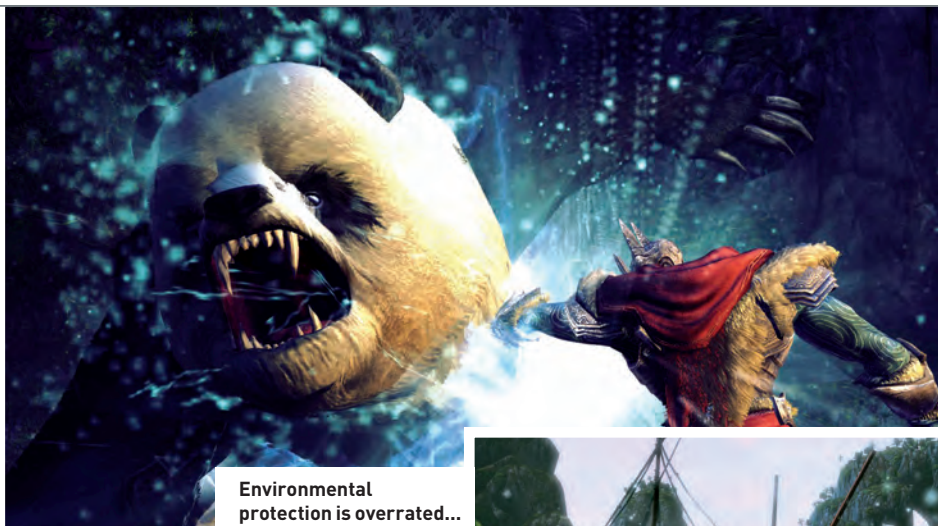
Environmental protection is overrated...

(your HQ) and the Overlord himself. It also affects how your magic spells work. Then there are your minions, who can be summoned to aid you, and these guys have been given centre stage in this sequel. This time around, you can even possess one of your minions and directly control it to reach areas that the Overlord can't. The puzzles in the game often involve the use of minions, and you'll find yourself becoming strangely attached to the comically evil little blighters. Between quests, you'll visit the Netherworld, your base of operations where you can forge new items, resurrect your favourite minions who have fallen in battle (a great new feature in *Overlord II*), visit your mistress and engage in a few other activities.

Overlord II adds plenty to the *Overlord* formula, such as minion mounts, a more customisable HQ and so much more. One of my biggest complaints is that these new features are underutilised. The mounts, for example, are only available in certain areas, and you'll very rarely get a chance to use them after you're done with whatever puzzle these mounts are linked to. Then there is the AI, which can be infuriatingly annoying at times - especially in terms of path-finding, with minions constantly getting trapped

behind/inside environmental objects and NPCs that rudely block your path and seem incapable of moving aside so your evil magnificence can pass. Other than the few minor niggles that annoy me in *Overlord II*, there really isn't much to legitimately complain about. I loved the first game and the sequel is an improvement in almost every way. It's filled with great humour, it plays great and it's just a very good game. If you enjoyed the first game, then what are you waiting for? **NAG**

Dane Remendes

The Score

2	2	2

16+
www.pegi.info

Plus
+ Good visuals and audio
+ Great humour and story
+ Gameplay mechanics

Minus
- Strange AI
- New features are underutilised

Bottom Line

Overlord II improves on everything that made the first game great by adding in a number of awesome new features. It's a hilarious, fun and evilly brilliant title.

(85)

Developer→ Related Designs (PC) | Keen Entertainment (DS/Wii)   **Publisher→** Ubisoft   **Distributor→** Megarom   **Web→** http://anno.uk.ubi.com

Anno 1404

Okay, so the ponies were a lie

Genre→ Management strategy

PC   360   PS3   WII   PS2   PSP   DS

MANAGEMENT TITLES ARE A bit of a strange and mysterious thing for many people. They're complex, challenging and require loads of time to get anything done, and tend to offer almost no instant gratification. They're certainly not uncommon, if you know where to look, but many fans of the genre will often find themselves latching onto just a couple of quality titles because the rest are either too boring, too simple or fail to hold one's attention for longer than a day. If you can identify with this problem, then here's some good news: *Anno 1404* is the perfect addition to that collection of games that you keep going back to.

Anno 1404 lands somewhere between *Stronghold* and *Civilization* by combining a rich, city-building system and complex resource chain with a massive trading system and diplomacy. Players take on the role of an Occidental (Western) settler with naught but a ship and a hold full of supplies. You'll need to explore the seas, find yourself an island to settle on and keep expanding to discover new resources, players and, before you know it, the Orient. There's even a rather decent single-player campaign filled with all manner of plots and conspiracies, interesting characters and massive cities – which should be more than enough to prepare you for the free play and scenario modes.

Progress in this game is based on a simple idea: your populace's needs must be met for them to advance. The more advanced they become, the more technologies become available to you, but the more complicated their needs become. The result of this is an incredibly deep chain (comprising almost 90 goods and resources) that urges the player to improve their civilisation constantly. It doesn't just end there, however. To get your population past the second tier, they'll want goods from afar. The more advanced they become, the more exotic their requirements become, which means you won't get anywhere without the Orient.

Anno is almost two games in this regard. On the one side, you have your Occidental cities, filled with beer-guzzling, book-reading Westerners and all of their requirements and buildings. On the other side of the ocean, you have your Oriental inhabitants, who have their own buildings, resources and needs. Before you know

Looking good

If you take a gander around these pages, you might notice that *Anno 1404* is an incredibly good-looking game. While the deformable waves, simulated cloth, elegant blur effects and perfect-looking water are obvious, it's the detail of every one of the 130+ buildings that really stands out when you get stuck into the game. Each building is meticulously detailed and is textured with bright, vibrant colours that, when combined with the tons of little people that go about their daily business in your cities, really brings the game world to life.
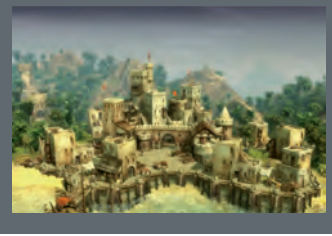
Off I go then

Those of you who enjoy free-play mode will be spoilt for choice here. There are six standard scenarios (in addition to the campaign) for you to dabble with, but most impressive is the continuous play mode. In addition to tons of the regular options (world size, land mass size, etc.), you can choose to set defined goals for domination, if you wish, or just kick back with any number of (or no) opponent AI (each with their own personality), but still give yourself something to do while you're conquering the world. Randomly generated quests will pop up from both the Lord of the Occident and the Sultan of the Orient, which can be fulfilled for additional rewards to speed along your domination. Worth particular mention are the 'find this person' quests, which quite literally require you to find a person hiding away in whichever city is in question. They might be loitering around the pub, patrolling the streets or hiding in an alley somewhere. It's a great little touch and reminds me of *Where's Wally*? For that, it scores instant brownie points.

All hands on deck!

While peaceful trade might be fine for some, there's always the allure of a quick buck for those with enough firepower. While titles like *Stronghold* had the foundations of their economy built around the military, *Anno 1404* tends more towards the passive side of things (especially in the lower reaches of the technology tree), which does leave it a little in the dark in this regard. Combat is a mix of ship to ship, which is handled by the very simple process of hurtling explosive balls of iron at one another, and land-based battles. The land-based combat uses a clumsy system of deploying troops to encampments and issuing relocate/attack orders from there, and certainly doesn't win any points for ease of use. If you're in the mood for simplicity, however, you can always just harass enemy trade routes or blockade their ports without getting your hands grubby. This will soon leave their population demanding exotic imported goods and rioting in the streets – so there's at least the opportunity to tailor the combat system to your liking.

Captaining 101, lession 42: Stare longingly at the horizon for the entire duration of your journey.

it, you'll be running two separate but dependent economies, with each spanning multiple islands and requiring dozens of resources to sustain themselves. This is where the trading system comes into play.

Almost everything concerning trading can be automated, and at anything past the beginning stages of the game, you'll realise how necessary this is. Complex trade routes between your colonies can be established, and can (and should) be adjusted on the fly, as well as trading between the player and their AI competitors (or allies, depending on how you play). Trading forms the core of *Anno* because each island is limited in what goods can be

produced, so it's up to the player to search for the right islands, trade with the AI or, when the going gets tough, take those resources by force.

Aside from the combat system, there's very little that's actually wrong with *Anno 1404*. The learning curve might scare a few of the less hardened management fans, and I wouldn't say no to a couple of overlays and those very businesslike charts that you often find in games like this, but otherwise *Anno 1404* is a huge success. If you enjoyed *The Settlers, Civilization* or *Stronghold*, you should, without a doubt, pick up this title. **NAG**
Geoff Burrows

The Score

7+ www.pegi.info

| 1 | None | None | |

Plus
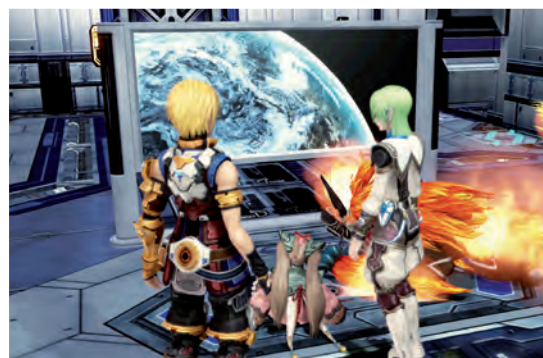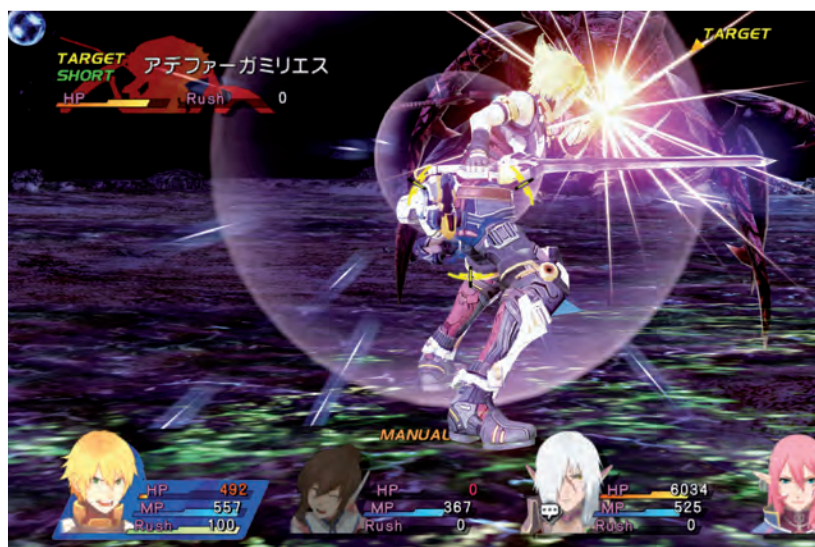+ Complex resource chain
+ Trading system
+ Amazing visuals

Minus
– Combat system
– Needs multiplayer

Bottom Line
Complex and challenging, Anno 1404 should satisfy the needs of almost any management game fan.

(88)

AVAILABLE AT
Look & Listen
For the Fans

Developer→ Tri-Ace **Publisher→** Square-Enix **Distributor→** Nu Metro **Web→** www.staroceangame.com

Star Ocean: The Last Hope

A mission to save the Earth? Let's send the teenagers!

Genre→ Japanese RPG

PC **360** PS3 WII PS2 PSP DS

IF YOU'RE A FAN of Japanese RPGs, chances are that you know all about "those JRPG elements." They're the spiky-haired antagonist, the self-deprecating female lead, the overly cute, furry creatures, and the faithful, stoic sidekick. They're the infuriating yet addictive combat system, the panic-inducing, hour-long slog between save points and the constant feeling that you've missed out on unlocking the biggest weapon in the game just because you didn't return that little girl's teddy bear during your first ten minutes in. These are the things that make those of us who enjoy JRPGs so besotted with the genre, and the same reason why those who can't stand these games stay as far away as possible. If you're on the besotted side of the fence, *Star Ocean: The Last Hope* will do just about everything you expect from a JRPG with militant dedication. For everyone else, *Gears of War* is calling your name.

Things kick off some eighty years into the future. Earth is a post-apocalyptic wasteland, no longer able to sustain life on its surface, and has forced the remaining inhabitants deep below the ground in protective vaults. Since they don't have a GECK on hand, Earth's superpowers decide to put their differences aside and resolve to get the human race back on track. Thus, the Space Reconnaissance Force is formed, and our teenage antagonist, complete with spiky (albeit downward-facing) blonde hair and a thing for swords, Edge Maverick, begins his adventure. The SRF's mission is to take off into the wild

"I'm afraid that you've got Gingivitis, Mr. Dinosaur. Take one small child and call me in the morning."

black yonder in search of a new home. When things don't go quite according to plan, however, it's up to Edge Maverick and his childhood friend Reimi Saionji (a hot pants-wearing brunette, who'd have guessed?) to take matters into their own hands and continue the SRF's mission, no matter the consequence.

While *Star Ocean* certainly follows the JPRG template, it manages to do so with a massive dose of charm and care, which saves it from being too familiar'. Within a few minutes of playing, you'll be comfortable enough with the system to pop into the menu between combat and lay down a few heal spells, and you'll quickly have figured out which characters are good candidates for distributing mana potions mid-battle, and who's the tank. Thankfully, things are shaken up just enough to be interesting and different; managing to find that very fine balancing point to keep players coming back in search of cool new stuff, without

"By the power of silly ears and impossible boob physiiiiiiiics!"

upsetting those looking for a traditional experience.

What stands out the most is the real-time combat system with four playable characters. It might sound crazy, but the combat works incredibly well, despite the fact that, especially during the early game, it's rather arcade-like and prone to button mashing. It can be rather strategic as well, given half a chance. Characters can perform counter-attacks if you're quick enough, and they do extra damage when attacking the enemies from the rear. There's also a simple aggression system in place that will have you frantically juggling character control in an effort to keep the big, scary monster away from the little girl in the pink dress, who just so happens to be the biggest damage dealer in your party. Additionally, the combat can be paused altogether to give you a chance to manually cast spells (or 'symbols'), use items, or perform combat skills. What you end up with is combat that's generally a lot quicker than the standard fare, and as a result moves through the general population of monsters at a great pace. It only really slows down during the boss battles where you need every inch of strategy. And, just in case this is on your "top ten list of things I hate about videogames," there are no random encounters of any sort in *SO: TLH*. Every monster you fight is present on the screen, and all but the boss battles can be avoided with quick reflexes and careful use of the sprint key. However, having said that, the monsters do respawn when you revisit areas, so it only just undercuts the annoyance of random encounters.

Stretching back through its *Star Ocean* roots, there's a pretty decent crafting and harvesting system in place. Depending on who you've got in your party and what skills they posses, you may be able to harvest randomly-generated items from certain points in the game worlds, as well as earning them as treasures from your battles (which are also skill-dependent). From there, certain items can be combined to form new ones, and are spread across a large assortment of categories including smithing and cooking. When the open-world mechanic kicks in (aka "when you get your airship"), you'll find yourself travelling back and forth between worlds in search of fruits, herbs, metals and all manner of ingredients to complete your perfect recipe.

Each character in your party is highly customisable, with a number of different types of skills and magic available for use both in and out of combat. While the class skills are simply earned by levelling up, tons of additional skills can be taught to different characters from skill books found throughout the game, either in convenient treasure chests or bought from shopkeepers. On top of that, skill points earned during combat can be distributed to all skills and symbols. It's not as open-ended as *FFX*'s Sphere Grid, or nearly as straightforward as *FFVII*'s Materia system, but there are plenty of options for customisability.

Star Ocean: The Last Hope does have its downside. Most of this is in the game's totally generic story and annoying (yet occasionally endearing) voice acting, but that's usually also par for the course. Aside from that, there are a few slightly irritating interface problems, but nothing game-breaking. Overall, the game plays it safe where it should and innovates where the opportunity presents itself, making for a great JRPG that should appeal to all fans of the genre. **NAG**

Geoff Burrows

The Score

1	None	None	12+ www.pegi.info

Plus
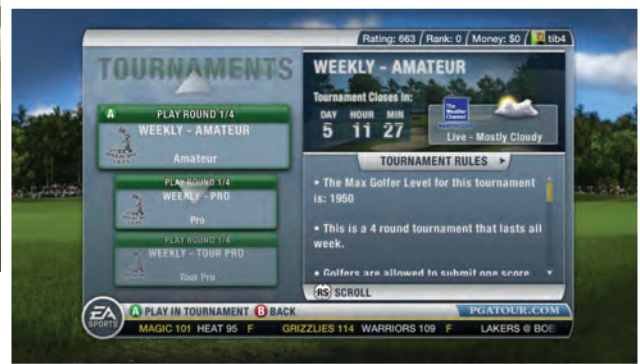+ Huge game
+ Great combat
+ Crafting system

Minus
- Generic story
- Voice acting

Bottom Line
Perfect for those who love everything about JRPGs, as long as you don't crave too much originality.

82

AVAILABLE AT
Look & Listen
For the Fans

Developer→ EA Tiburon   **Publisher→** Electronic Arts   **Distributor→** EA South Africa   **Web→** tigerwoodspgatour.easports.com

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10

They should have called it Tiger Woods 09++

Genre→ Sports

| PC | **360** | PS3 | WII | PS2 | PSP | DS |

CONSISTENCY IS A GOOD thing in life. Reliable, dependable, predictable – these are qualities that set us at ease in a product because we know we can count on it to always deliver. And if you can say one thing about EA's latest *Tiger Woods* offering, it would be that it's consistent. In fact, so consistent that it's almost indistinguishable from the last *Tiger Woods* game.

That's not altogether a bad thing, though. *TW 09* was an exceptional videogame; the best golf game ever made. *TW 08* and *09* introduced features that have become staples for the genre such as the swing stick, club tuner and simultaneous online play. *TW 10* keeps all of those innovations from its predecessors, but adds little to them. Maybe it's the recession. Or maybe it's just lack of creativity. Whatever the case, *Tiger Woods 10* isn't so much a sequel as it is an add-on for *TW 09*.

The most fundamental and welcome change is to the putting system. In the past, apparently, you had to carry around ten different putters, each able only to putt the ball a fixed distance. Now you only have one putter, thankfully, and you control how far you hit the ball by how long you pull the stick back. It's a major improvement and much more closely resembles real putting.

There are a few other new 'features' this time around, but they're more like cosmetic

The integration of real-time weather conditions would have been much cooler if they'd added lightning.

tweaks than anything actually new. And if EA hadn't made a big point of putting them on the back of the box, they would have largely gone unnoticed. For instance, gallery sizes have been increased and, apparently, they've become more vocal. Digital leader boards that are updated with every shot are posted at some holes, adding to the "intense experience of real tournament golf." The game now gets real-time weather data from the Weather Channel and applies it to the course. Cute, but hardly a reason to go run out and buy the game. A slightly more significant improvement is that EA finally worked out the licensing rights to use the name "U.S.

The Score

			16+
1 - 4	2 - 4	2 - 4	www.pegi.info
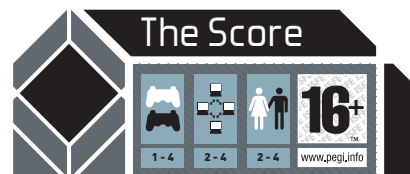
Plus
+ Improved putting system
+ As good as *TW 09*

Minus
– Nothing new or innovative

Bottom Line
A great golf game, but we've played it already. It was called *Tiger Woods 09*.

79

AVAILABLE AT
Look & Listen
For the Pros

Where did all the money and time go?

We're guessing it was all pumped straight into the Wii version of *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10*. While it can't best the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions in terms of graphical fidelity, the Wii version makes up for it with its support for the Wii MotionPlus accessory. Not only that, but the number of courses available to golf on in the Wii version has been increased to 27 from the 16 in the other versions (for the vanilla game at least – there is DLC available, which increases the number of courses available in the 360 and PS3 versions). The MotionPlus attachment makes for some fairly accurate virtual golfing: things like draw and fade shots can be manually applied simply by altering your swing (i.e., by rotating the Wii Remote to the left or right while swinging). The MotionPlus attachment also makes regular swings and putting a test of your proficiency with the Wii Remote, since the accuracy and power of your shot depend on your backswing and swing in real life. As an added bonus, Disc Golf is available as another gameplay option, because it seems that not even the *Tiger Woods PGA Tour* series is safe from the Wii's natural affinity to mini games. That doesn't change the fact that the Wii version of *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10* is probably the closest that you're going to get to a real game of golf without actually stepping on to a golf course.

Wii! Frisbees!

Open" in the game, so you no longer have to play a "summer major" in career mode. There's still no Masters, though.

Gone is the Tiger Challenge from previous games. In its place, we've been given the Tournament Challenge... which is pretty much the same thing. It just uses a few more letters in its name. In the Tournament Challenge, you play against situations that happened in real tournaments and attempt to do better – hardly an inspired idea.

Online play has received a bit of attention, and EA has added daily and weekly tournaments where you can post a round and compete against other players around the world. Not surprisingly, however, they've quickly become the domain of the unhealthily obsessive, and if you want a shot at the top 10, you'll have to shoot 70-80 under par over four rounds. You can also compete in the same event that's being played that week on the PGA Tour and compare your scores against the pros.

At the end of the day, *Tiger Woods 10* feels more like an expansion pack than a new game. If you already own *09*, you'll probably feel a bit cheated if you pay full price for this game. It begs the question: why force out a new game every year if there's nothing really new to offer? **NAG**
Chris Bistline

Developer➔ EA Canada | **Publisher➔** Electronic Arts | **Distributor➔** Electronic Arts South Africa | **Web➔** fightnight.easports.com

Blue Steel...
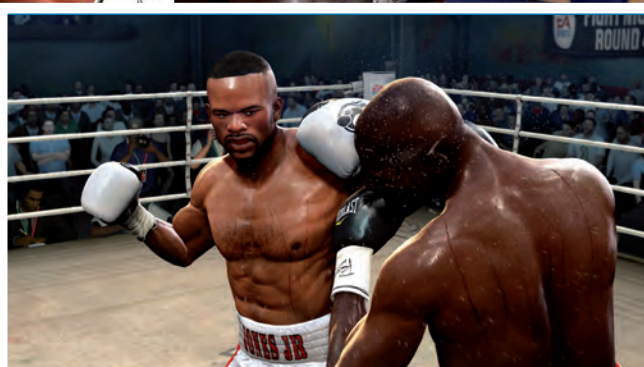
Fight Night Round 4

The champ is here

Genre➔ Sport

PC   360   **PS3**   WII   PS2   PSP   DS

EA SPORTS' LAUDED BOXING series makes its second appearance on the PlayStation 3; and although the game isn't entirely flawless, it does represent a significant step forward for the series. Developed by EA Canada, *Fight Night Round 4* introduces some bold, new refinements to the career mode, the control scheme and the pace of the action; and most players will agree that these changes are for the better.

The game opens with a brief tutorial that runs through some of the more basic controls used to punch, duck and weave. As it stands, all punches are now performed using the Total Punch Control system, which uses the right analogue stick to control your boxer's swings. The system won't feel too different to anyone who's played *Round 3*, though the option of mapping punches to the face buttons is absent (EA has announced that this will be changed with a free, downloadable update). The controls are intuitive, with simple flicks of the analogue stick used to perform jabs and crosses, while moving the stick in a broader arc will cause your boxer to unleash a hook or an uppercut. Blocking has also been simplified, with fighters now needing only to block high or low, rather than trying to parry blows from four different quadrants.

The crux of *Fight Night Round 4* lies in its Legacy Mode, where players can create their own boxer and then guide him from a lowly amateur to fame, fortune and boxing superstardom. The mode lets you schedule fights and training sessions, as you try to rise up the ranking ladder and boost your popularity, to the point

where you're eventually able to challenge your division's top fighters for their championship titles. Before each fight, you're offered a choice of six different training options, each of which boosts different areas of your boxer's statistics. If you're a power puncher, you'll want to focus on your toughness and strength, whereas if you're an outside fighter, you'll be more concerned with footwork and hand speed. It adds an interesting element of strategy to the game; it's just a shame that some of the training mini games are not only time-consuming, but also prohibitively difficult, often making it a more attractive option to simply 'auto train' these sessions rather than frustrate yourself trying to obtain perfect scores.

Visually, *Round 4* is an absolute feast, running unwaveringly at 60 frames per second in stunning high definition. The animations are fluid, the lighting effects realistic and the characters are incredibly detailed, right down to the beads of sweat that trickle down their backs. The game features a roster of 48 different boxers, including such legends as Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray

Robinson and Mike Tyson, contemporary favourites like Manny Pacquiao and Ricky Hatton, as well as a myriad of fan-made, downloadable boxers to keep things interesting. With its near-flawless presentation and deep, yet accessible play dynamic, it's clear that *Round 4* is undisputedly the best *Fight Night* yet. **NAG**

Adam Liebman

The Score

🎮 1 - 2	2	None	16+ www.pegi.info
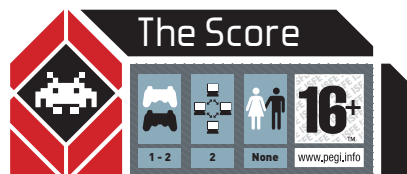
Plus
+ Stunning visuals
+ Expansive roster
+ Great career mode

Minus
− Frustrating mini games

Bottom Line

Fight Night Round 4 outdoes its predecessor, making for a title not only breathtaking to look at, but also a joy to play.

88

AVAILABLE AT
Look & Listen
For the Fans

Thousands of decisions in a microsecond. And no mistakes.

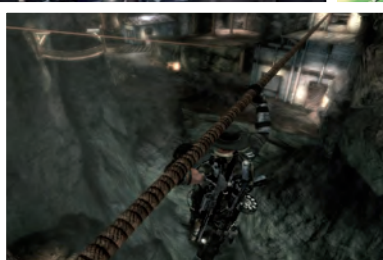**ESET** Smart Security 4

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Developer→ Blue Omega Entertainment **Publisher→** Codemasters **Distributor→** Nu Metro **Web→** www.codemasters.com

It was three hours before they realised they'd been using a mannequin for Rourke's photo shoot.

Damnation

The little mod that couldn't

Genre→ Third-person shooter

PC 360 **PS3** WII PS2 PSP DS

THE GAME-DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY IS a competitive one. Publishers expect only the best from their developers and we, the consumers, expect even more. And understandably so, given the price of games and the amount of time development takes. Sometimes, however, development periods go through a bit of turmoil, publishers lose faith and business decisions come into play that affect the final quality of a game. This is the sad tale of *Damnation* – the modification that grew into a real game, got itself a publisher, and fell hard when things didn't quite go according to plan. The result is a title that tries incredibly hard, is packed with awesome concepts, but falls short at almost every turn.

You play as Rourke, the ugly lovechild of Marcus Fenix and BraveStarr, in an alternative Middle America where steampunk is the order of the day. The story is fairly generic: power-crazed bad guy William Dean Prescott has developed a serum to turn the war-torn nation's population into mindless savages. Rourke and his friends – scantily-clad Yakecan, moustache-wielding scientist Winslow and smart-ass Zagato – decide that it'd be a great idea to stop this bad guy. The characters are boring and generic, and their interactions are as convincing as a cardboard cut-out, but at least they look pretty cool.

"Looks pretty cool" is a concept that manages to flow through almost the whole of *Damnation*. If you're a fan of steampunk, cowboys and dystopian settings, you'll be in your element here. Granted, the world does have the tendency to be filled with bleak, repetitive textures, but the level design is good and keeps players interested with puzzle-type level exploration and acrobatics. The same can't be said for the actual construction of these levels, however. Without fail, every zone you visit will have broken polygons, hideous clipping issues and walls that swallow entire vehicles if you're not careful.

The gameplay is divided into three types: the '*Gears of War*-ish' running and gunning (without any sort of cover system or particularly impressive weapons); the '*Prince of Persia*-ish' level exploration and acrobatics (without any actual grace or involvement in combat); and the 'I'm not really sure if anything deserves comparison to this' vehicular sections, which stagger drunkenly on the line between boring and frustrating and will make you throw down your controller in irritation at least once an hour. Everything else in the game is just average. The combat would be interesting if the AI weren't so predictable. The acrobatics-type exploration is decent, but simply doesn't innovate enough to offset the plethora of bugs and frustration that plague the rest of the game.

If you've got 15-20 hours of your life that you're not worried about losing, *Damnation* might do alright. It does get more entertaining the more you play - whether or not that's just the acceptance of bugs and other problems, I'm not sure. It certainly has its merits, but if you add up all the problems, they still outweigh the good stuff - leaving you with a dead average game that's vaguely entertaining but riddled with holes. **NAG**

Geoff Burrows

The Score

1-2 2-8 2 18+ www.pegi.info

Plus
+ Can look quite good
+ Decent level design

Minus
- Buggy
- Dull AI
- Frustrating gameplay

Bottom Line
Should do the trick if you're into steampunk and cowboys, but best avoided by everyone else.

58

AVAILABLE AT
Look & Listen
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X-MEN ORIGINS
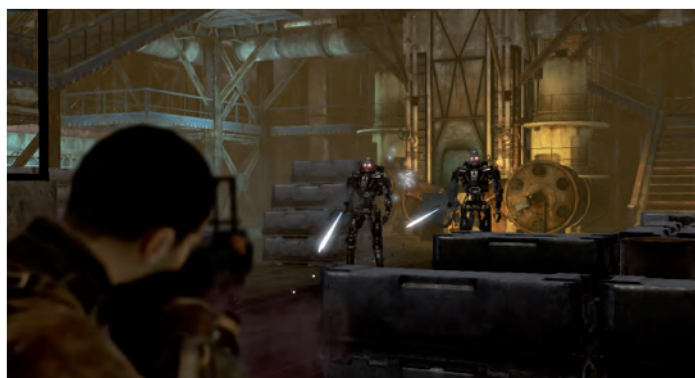## WOLVERINE

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Look & Listen
For the Fans

Developer→ GRIN **Publisher→** Evolved Games | Warner Bros. Interactive **Distributor→** Nu Metro **Web→** www.terminatorsalvationthegame.com

You won't be back!

Terminator Salvation

Third-person shooter that we hope will NOT be back

Genre→ Action

PC 360 **PS3** WII PS2 PSP DS

GAMES BASED ON BLOCKBUSTER movies have, over the years, garnered a reputation for being mostly shoddy efforts, little more than sloppily and hastily assembled products that, without shame or merit, seek to cash in on the hype of their silver screen counterparts; and it's an unfortunate fact that *Terminator Salvation* does little to dispel this stereotype. Set two years before the events of the movie, the game places you in the role of John Connor, as it tries to document the events that led to his becoming the leader of the human Resistance. The story itself is a fairly generic tale that offers little in the way of intrigue, serving rather as a framework for the game's mindless action rather than making any significant attempt at original storytelling. Making matters worse is the absence of Christian Bale's voice or likeness for the lead character. Although Rose McGowan, Common, and Moon Bloodgood all contributed their talents to the videogame, John Connor is portrayed by a stand-in - already a serious blow to *Salvation*'s credibility.

The game is a fairly standard third-person cover-based shooter, and to that end, it manages to be fairly competent, if uninspired. Much of the game is spent systematically traversing between different locations, while encountering all manner of robotic ruffians. Perhaps "all manner" is somewhat of an exaggeration – throughout the game, you'll primarily face only three different kinds of enemies, with one or two additional opponents making brief cameo appearances throughout the game.

After facing legions of Wasps, Spiders and T-600s, you'll quickly start to yearn for those brief interludes where the game allows you to combat something more interesting, such as the massive Hunter-Killers. While on the subject of interludes, the game also features a handful of rail-shooter sequences that see you manning a weapon with unlimited ammunition on the back of a vehicle, which provide a welcome change of pace, but do so without ever being particularly memorable.

Although the cover system works quite well, allowing you to easily dash between different spots using an intuitive radial menu, the action is hampered by lacklustre artificial intelligence. You'll often find yourself needing to distract an enemy so that your AI-controlled teammates can outflank your target and hit its weak spots, but they're often painfully ineffective at doing so. You can tackle the campaign cooperatively with another player to alleviate such problems, but only by playing split-screen - there's no online multiplayer options on offer here at all. In fact, *Terminator Salvation* is a very Spartan title, offering only its campaign mode (which can easily be completed within five hours) and no additional content whatsoever. The game does offer a selection of difficulty levels, but provides players with absolutely no incentive to replay the title after they've completed it.

While *Terminator Salvation* might be a technically sound shooter, it's one devoid of innovation or inspiration. A lacklustre storyline and short-lived, yet tedious campaign serve only to thinly veil an obviously hurried and sloppy attempt to profit from the movie's enormous hype. **NAG**

Adam Liebman

The Score

1 - 2 None None www.pegi.info 16+

Plus
+ At least it's short

Minus
- Tedious
- Lacklustre story
- Shoddy AI

AVAILABLE AT Look & Listen For the Fans

Bottom Line
Terminator Salvation feels like little more than a hurriedly designed tie-in, shamelessly failing to provide any sort of innovation or fun.

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Sacrifice

SACRIFICE, FIRST RELEASED BACK in November 2000, is a third-person action/strategy/RPG that puts players in control of a wizard who is empowered by one of five selectable gods to do their bidding. That unique mix of different genres made for a brilliantly entertaining title that unfortunately hasn't really been imitated since. The single-player side of the game tells the story of a wizard (the player's character) who ends up in the realm of five squabbling gods and starts doing their bidding in an attempt to manipulate them. Each mission in the game is different depending on which god you choose to follow, as well as which units and spells you're granted access to. This is also true for the game's awesome multiplayer component, which allows each player participating to choose a god and wage war, omnipotence style. The gameplay involves players controlling both their wizard (who can cast spells to aid his troops in battle) and a number of underlings, using the game's intuitive interface in order to banish opposing wizards from contested lands. The best way to describe the game would be to call it a mix of [insert RTS title name here] and [insert third-person action/ RPG title name here]. Add in some fantastically twisted visuals, exceptionally high production values, and some great humour, and you have an amazing game that we wish would receive a sequel (or a worthy successor of some kind). **NAG**
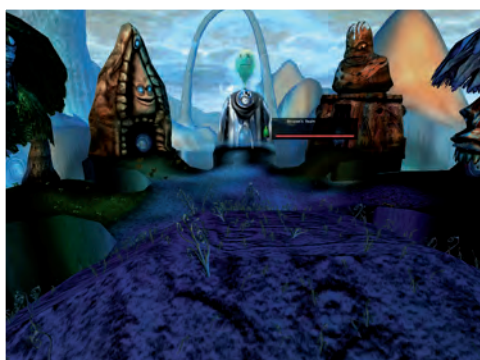
Godly disputes

The five gods in *Sacrifice* are the main source of your wizard's power in the game. Depending on which god you choose to follow for each single-player mission or multiplayer match, you'll gain access to a unique set of magic powers to utilise and creatures to summon. It's kind of like choosing a faction in an RTS title. These are the five gods and their respective domains:

Persephone
The goddess of life. Persephone's virtue is Justice. She's like the hippie who could kick your ass if you looked at a tree in a manner that she did not appreciate. Her ultimate unit is the Dragon and her top-level spell causes a bunch of "Meanstalks" (essentially very angry beanstalks) to erupt from the ground and toss enemies around the map.

Pyro
The god of fire's virtue is Progress. He's one of those 'tear down a forest, put up a multi-level parking structure' types. His top-tier unit is the Phoenix and his most powerful spell summons a volcano. *A frikkin' volcano!*

James
The god of earth. This omnipotent ball of goo's virtue is Peace. For a peaceful dude he has some pretty non-peaceful methods of destruction. James' ultimate unit is the Rhinok and his craziest spell is Bore, which carves out a giant hole in the ground and causes significant problems for anyone standing above said gaping hole. Damn you gravity!

Stratos
The god of air's virtue is Knowledge. He thinks he knows more than you do, and apparently, that means something. His most powerful unit is the Silverback and his highest-level spell summons a tornado to do all sorts of tornado-like things.

Charnel
The god of death. Charnel's virtue is Conflict. He's the guy you shouldn't accept candy from. His top-tier unit is the Hellmouth and his most powerful spell is Death (which summons Death - as in the scythe-wielding bloke).

Cyberforce / Hunter-Killer #1

Format: Comic Miniseries | **Publisher:** Image | **Writer:** Mark Waid
Artist: Kenneth Rocafort | **Price:** R28.50

FIRST A LITTLE BACKGROUND. *Cyberforce* tells the story of a group of rebels who wage war on the greedy and corrupt corporations, who are the hidden, behind-the-scenes power in a technologically advanced world. The Hunter-Killers are a team of super-powered operatives who try to work within the system, fighting against government policies of committing atrocities in the name of doing what's best for the people, while they hunt down other super-powered individuals who might use their gifts as weapons. *Cyberforce* and *Hunter-Killer* have both been very popular comic series in the past, both well known for their gripping story concepts, fast-paced, action-packed comics, and amazing artwork. Put them together and you have a crossover that really looks to be addictive, with a first issue full of cool characters, plot developments, terrific art, and an epic battle. "Welcome to the Future..."

Clive Burmeister

Halo: Helljumper #1

Format: Comic Miniseries | **Publisher:** Marvel
Writer: Peter David | **Artist:** Eric Nguyen | **Price:** R37.50

THE NEXT COMIC SERIES set in the world of the hugely popular game *Halo; Halo: Helljumper* takes place just before the events of *Halo 3: ODST*. When the Human-Covenant war reaches an archaeological colony named Ariel, the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers (or Helljumpers) of the 105th Marines are sent in to investigate a mysterious distress signal. While they search for an unknown enemy, the circumstances surrounding the attack become even more mysterious and sinister, as the scene doesn't resemble what the experienced soldiers expected of an attack by Covenant forces. Writer Peter David 'composes' the relationship between the characters and the developing plot expertly, providing just enough background and details to engross the reader within the comic, but leaving enough untold to grow a creeping suspense on many levels in the story.
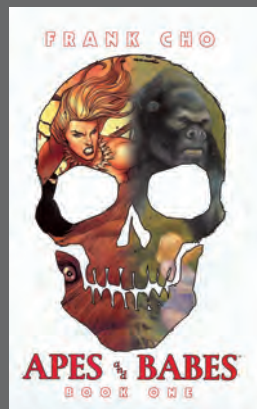
Clive Burmeister

Apes and Babes:
The Art Of Frank Cho Book 1

Format: Hardcover Book | **Publisher:** Image Comics
Artist: Frank Cho | **Price:** R330

DID YOU KNOW THAT Frank Cho never trained as an artist? Did you know that he graduated with a bachelor's degree in nursing? Did you know that he co-created *The Mighty Avengers*? Do you even know who Frank Cho is? If not, this book will be the perfect introduction to the work of this breast-obsessed artist. If you do, then stop wasting time and go grab it right away.

It contains tons of high-quality artwork, including pencil work, ink and finished work from throughout Cho's career - from his professional beginning with *Liberty Meadows* to his latest work. It could even make for a great coffee-table book, as the whole thing is image-heavy and invites readers to have a quick flip through. What it doesn't do, however, is explain anything. There's almost no text and no interesting foreword. So, if you're a budding artist who plans on using this book for reference, you need to be well on your way already.

Otherwise, there are plenty of babes and plenty of apes. If you have a particular interest in either, you'll find value here.

Geoff Burrows

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The Amazing Spider-Man #600

Format: Comic Series | **Publisher:** Marvel | **Writer:** Various
Artist: Various | **Price:** R46.95

CELEBRATING THIS MILESTONE, *THE Amazing Spider-Man*'s 600th issue collects a few mini stories along with its main tale. It also sees Spider-Man teaming up with some of his long-time allies, like Johnny Storm and Daredevil; and even features a brief appearance of the other members of the New Avengers, all in one issue. This issue also marks a special event - that of Peter Parker's Aunt May marrying John Jonah Jameson Senior. But what's a *Spider-Man* comic without lots of action, and this one is no exception. When one of Spider-Man's old enemies reappears with a diabolical scheme to control the entire city, Peter finds himself in his usual state of desperation as he is pulled relentlessly between his duties as Spider-Man, his tattered love life, and his commitments to his family and friends. With everything going against him, and even the city itself turning on him, Spider-Man must once again lift his mantle of responsibilities and solve this mystery, before it's too late.

Clive Burmeister

Y: The Last Man - Unmanned Vol. 1

Format: Graphic Novel | **Publisher:** Vertigo | **Writer:** Brian K. Vaughan
Artist: Pia Guerra | **Price:** R154.95

Y: *THE LAST MAN* is an incredibly mesmerising story about a young man named Yorick Brown, who, struggling to find his place in the world, gets by as an escape artist. Then, a devastating plague kills every male mammal on the planet in the summer of 2002, except for Yorick and his male pet monkey, Ampersand. In a desperate attempt to come to terms with the overwhelming situation in which he finds himself, he sets off on a quest to solve the puzzle of why he and his pet survived the unknown plague, which killed every other mammal with a Y chromosome in the world; and, perhaps somehow, even reunite with his girlfriend who is in Australia, meeting unlikely allies and facing deadly extremists along the way. *Y: The Last Man* is gripping and filled with suspense. Before you know it, you'll be turning the last page and hunting down the next book in the series. Need a second opinion? Stephen King rates this book as "The best graphic novel I've ever read."

Clive Burmeister
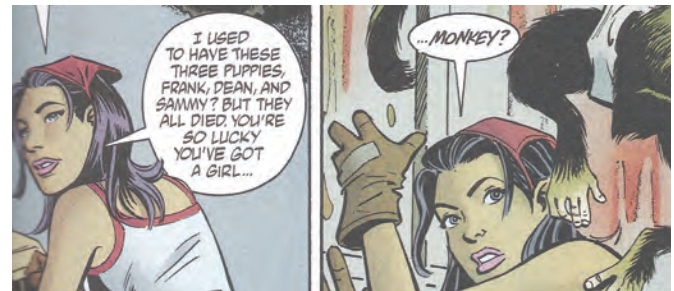
Red Hulk

Format: Graphic Novel | **Publisher:** Marvel | **Writer:** Jeff Loeb
Artists: Ed McGuiness, Dexter Vines | **Price:** R255

RED HULK FALLS PRETTY much directly into the "massive fan service" category of comics. This means loads of appearances from big names like The Fantastic Four, Thor, Iron Man and a brief visit from Abomination. The story begins shortly after the events of *World War Hulk*, tying up a few loose ends from the series. As is the case with most Hulk-based stories, *Red Hulk* sticks to the military-conspiracy template. It's written by veteran Jeph Loeb (*X-Force, Wolverine, Smallville*), but the writing feels too rushed. The story is pieced together throughout the book (which comprises six issues), throwing in gratuitous splash shots and action poses all over. It's cheesy and over the top, but not necessarily bad - if that's what you're expecting.

Ed McGuiness' pencilling is great, but is let down a little by the colouring of Jason Keith and Guru EFX – often being too soft or too vibrant in the wrong places. Nevertheless, when all of the artistic elements come together properly - which does happen in a few places - the artwork looks great.

If you're a huge Hulk fan or would give anything to see more action from S.H.I.E.L.D., *Red Hulk* should keep you entertained. For everyone else, it lacks the substance to stand out among the rest of Marvel's line-up.

Geoff Burrows

Yoko PVC Statue

RRP: R1,110
Supplier: www.awx.co.za
Scale: 1/8
Series: Gurren Lagann

Meet Yoko. She's one of the characters from the anime series *Gurren Lagann*. This figure essentially caters to two kinds of people: those who like their women to be scantily dressed and carrying big guns, and those who like their girls to be scantily dressed and have small creatures nestled in their bosom. If you fall into both of these categories, then you probably have this statue already. It comes with a display stand, so you can sit and stare at her with your hands free to pursue other endeavours.

WoW Miniatures Game Deluxe Edition

RRP: R552
Supplier: www.blowfishentertainment.co.za
Series: World of Warcraft

"*World of Warcraft* meets *Mage Knight*" is probably the best way to describe the *WoW* Miniatures Game. Players will go head to head, representing the Alliance, Horde or Monsters faction, in a battle for dominance that requires strategy, skill and most likely an obsession with *World of Warcraft*. What you see here is the Deluxe Edition starter kit. It includes a rulebook, cardboard playing field, six random miniatures and all the bits and pieces you need to get a two-player game going. There's also the regular Starter Set available that includes four miniatures and a paper version of the playing field, as well as booster packs that contain three random miniatures - should you wish to expand your army. All of the models come pre-assembled and pre-painted, and there are 66 to collect in the Core Set.

Gundam Plastic Model Kits

RRP: Ranges from R345 to R745
Supplier: www.awx.co.za
Scale: Varies depending on model
Series: Gundam/Armored Core

Remember building those model planes when you were a kid? Perhaps you still build model planes. Well, these kits are like that, except that instead of building planes, you'll be constructing scaled-down versions of big, stomping robots from the *Gundam* and *Armored Core* universes.

Yes, these figures have to be assembled and painted (if you want to paint them, that is) by hand, so expect to find hundreds of tiny labelled bits in the box, which you'll have to sort through and use to assemble the big, stomping robots. PS: We would have built one of them to show you the finished product instead of just photographing the packaging, but we kind of have a magazine to do. Sorry.

Designed through the eyes of the biker

It's a different feeling on a motorbike. We know. And you need different features too. That's why we developed the new TomTom RIDER with bikers for bikers, with specific and easy to use features for navigating in the road with two wheels.

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- Award winning TomTom software
- Dual capacity - use TomTom RIDER in your car as well

www.tomtom.co.za

TomTom RIDER. Find your way the easy way

High-definition gaming mouse and mat

STEELSERIES HAS JUST SPENT three years researching mouse grips used by professional gaming teams such as Fnatic, SK Gaming and Evil Geniuses. The end result is their new SteelSeries Xai Laser Mouse. The 10.8 megapixels/second high-definition sensor processes 12,000 frames/second at 5,001 CPI at movement speeds of 150 inches/second. Other innovative features include SteelSeries ExactAim, SteelSeries ExactRate, SteelSeries ExactSens, SteelSeries FreeMove and automatic lift-distance calibration. The Xai can also be configured using an LCD menu system, which is located on the back of the mouse. To ensure that the enhanced tracking abilities of the Xai are supported, SteelSeries has also developed a 9HD mouse surface. The finely textured surface consists of tens of thousands of light-reflecting microscopic points, allowing you to perform exceptionally precise mouse operations, including minimal movements as well as high-velocity "slingshots."
www.steelseries.com

Logitech expands its G-series

THE SUCCESSOR TO THE classic Logitech G5 Laser Mouse is being launched in November, and has been rebranded as the Gaming Mouse G500. It has been developed to reach a maximum hand speed of 165 inches per second (ips) and a maximum acceleration force of 30gs. The rugged finish, a broader thumb rest and a smoothed-out pinkie ledge are some of the new features you can expect. The Gaming Headset G330 is a lightweight, adjustable behind-the-head design. The headband is lined with soft silicone, with pivoting ear pads and a noise-cancelling microphone. You can expect to pay around R900 for the G500 and R700 for the headset.
www.logitech.com

OCZ Z-Series PSU

THE LATEST HIGH-END ENTHUSIAST power supply to come from OCZ is the Z-Series. The Z850 and the Z1000 are suited to high-end gaming systems and professional workstations, and are available in modular and hard-wired configurations. The power supplies have received Gold Certifications for delivering over 90% efficiency at typical load.

Snippets

Western Digital's flagship SATA (serial ATA) range is now available locally. The WD Caviar Black 'spins' at 7,200rpm and is available in 500GB, 750GB and 1TB capacities. The **3.5-inch SATA hard drive** has been designed for desktop, workstation and multi-drive system applications.

Two new **Alienware products aimed at gamers** were recently announced. The OptX AW2210 is a 21.5-inch monitor that has a 1080p screen with a 2ms response time. The TactX Headset has a retractable mic and also ships with a 7-foot extension cord in case the standard 3-foot one isn't sufficient.

CINEMA II is the new addition to Foxconn's Digital Life series motherboard. An **HD video and next-gen gaming** experience will be delivered using AMD's latest platform, ATI Radeon HD 4200 graphics with the AMD 785G chipset.

NAG Awards

DREAM MACHINE: We have a dream. That only the best hardware gets this hot chick, waving her derriere in the air like she just don't care.

HARDWARE: Ever wonder why it's called hardware? If something has this award, then someone got hard for the ware.

Hardware Scoring System

Our hardware scoring system is based on the reviewer's expert opinion. The scale is from 1 to 5 with no fractional values. Each number has a specific meaning, described below. Most products will score 3 or 4, with the occasional 5 or 2, and almost never 1. Note that a high price alone can never lower a score below 3.

5 **The stuff of Legends.** Buy it while you can, we already have.

4 **A good deal;** worth it if you're shopping for one.

3 **What you'd expect,** no problems. You might want to wait for a sale.

2 **This has some issues.** You should shop around for something else.

1 **The stuff of Nightmares.** You'll be sorry you got one, even for free.

Windows 7 FTW

"**WHEN WE ASKED WHAT** you wanted in a PC, you told us to make it simpler and easier to use. We listened. And we built Windows 7 to make your PC simpler and the things you do every day easier." Apparently, gamers' needs have also been taken into account. If you haven't had the opportunity to play around with the Windows 7 RC as yet, here are a couple of features you can expect:

- **Compatibility:** The top third-party games, services, and international versions of games have been tested in Windows 7;

- **Discoverability:** You can use Start → Search to find any game you just downloaded or installed. The Windows 7 Games Explorer will show you in-game statistics within a preview pane

and deliver up-to-date information about your favourite game publishers;

- **Easy updates:** The new Games Explorer will notify you whenever updates are available for your games, so you don't have to go searching for them yourself or have to launch the game to see if there's an update waiting;

- **DirectX 11 support:** DirectX 11 means better games, pure and simple, with more advanced features for games to use;

- **Multi-touch support:** Windows 7 supports multi-touch-capable machines, so you can buy the latest and greatest multi-touch laptop or desktop and be assured that it will work in Windows 7.

Razer Orochi and Kabuto

THE RAZER GAMING ARSENAL has been expanded to include a Bluetooth laser gaming mouse and an ultra-thin microfiber gaming mouse mat. The Razer Orochi is a notebook gaming mouse with a 4,000dpi Razer Precision 3G Laser Sensor and dual-mode, wired/wireless hybrid system. The Orochi is an ambidextrous design and comes with a custom carry case. The Kabuto mouse mat also doubles up as a laptop screen protector.

#3.0

The PCI SIG has officially delayed the release of the PCI Express 3.0 specification until the second quarter of 2010. Al Yanes, the president of the SIG has said that they need to maintain backward compatibility with current PCI Express standards, such as the older PCI Express 1.0 specification and current PCI Express 2.0 products.

Extreme laptop storage

WESTERN DIGITAL'S SCORPIO BLUE 1TB and Scorpio Blue 750GB are the first laptop drives that use 333GB per platter technology. The Scorpio Blue hard drives support the SATA 3Gb/sec standard, but have a thickness of 12.5 millimetres, as opposed to 9.5 millimetres in other 2.5-inch drives. This means the new drives will not fit in all 2.5-inch slots in laptops, so are ideally suited as portable storage solutions. Both new drives come with 8MB of buffer memory and spin at 5,200rpm, which is slightly slower than the 5,400rpm speed of mainstream laptop drives.

HARD DRIVES
"I want to buy myself a 1TB hard drive because I drastically need the space. My father on the other hand says I should rather buy two 500GB hard drives. He argues that if the 1TB hard drive fails I'll lose everything and the chance of two 500GB HDDs failing at the same time is not very likely. So what do you think is the best - a 1TB hard drive or two 500GB HDDs?"
From Francois

Neo: *Two 500GB hard drives will cost you more than a single 1TB hard drive; however, your father's advice is sound: you would rather lose 500GB of data than 1TB. Having said that, you can argue that four 250GB hard drives are better, because then you're likely to only lose 250GB at any single time and so on...*

WHERE'S THE SOUND
"No PCI x1 slot on the AM2+ MOBO? (Or any AMD MOBO for that matter.) You know the slot where your sound card comes in? Is there any specific reason for this or am I just missing something? If there are any MOBOs with that slot, could you perhaps list a few? And it must be a decent MOBO, it must be AM2+ compatible and under R2,000. NAG has recently taught me that graphics isn't everything in a game. Developers spend hours of time on sound (thanks guys), and I would like to experience it in its full quality."
From Loyal NAG Fan (And Sound) Michael

Neo: *You're missing something: there's a PCI Express 1x slot on every single AM2/AM2+ board on the market, from just about every manufacturer who has an AM2+ motherboard.*

CROSSFIRE
"I need some advice. I was wondering which is the better option - getting a Gigabyte ep45-ud3p motherboard and using crossfire with 2 Sapphire HD4850s between this year and next, or getting the ep45-ud3r and getting one xfx gtx260 now? I am currently using a 9600gso"
From Thashen Naidu

Neo: *CrossFire would be best avoided with any P45 chipset-based motherboard, as each lane is only 8x in CrossFire mode. Depending on screen size used, a single graphics card is always less of a headache than a CrossFire or SLI configuration.*

3D MARK06 PROBS
"Great work on the mag, and tech tips, keep it up. I have a small glitch in my 3D Mark 06, I have a Intel Core 2 quad q9550, and a GeForce 9800GTX+, the 1GB ver. But anyway, I realized that all my tests, as far as the graphics card goes is amazing, until you get at the part where it tests your cpu, and as far as I know the Q9550 isn't slow, so I should score some max fps, but I don't. I get an average of 1.39 fps, something like 1500 score from the cpu score, and then makes my total score only 14690. I read in an old NAG, the one where you guys overclocked the E8600 to 6Ghz, and you got amazing scores on it, so can you help me or recommend me to another Benchmark?"
From JP, your friendly NFS Viper!

Neo: *Your system score is exactly as it should be. The 3DMark06 CPU test is very strenuous and frame rates between 0fps and 4fps in those two specific tests are normal. Your CPU score is also a lot more than 1,500. To achieve a 14,690 total score with a CPU sub-score of 1,500 would require your SM2.0 and HDR/SM3.0 score to be above 11,000 respectively, which is not possible with a 9800GT.*

HARDWARE F.A.Q
"I was wondering how accurate\reliable is the Everest series of diagnostic\benchmark\status program? I have tried Speedfan but since it caused my cpu's fan to stop twice. The first one was unknown and as a result caused my CPU to reach 80C ° but the CPU is ok as I am still using it at the moment in my pc, but the second time I tried the program it was a controlled experiment, as my new case has the clear side to it so I could then see it the program stopped the CPU fan. The reason I'm asking is a number of people have said it is not good, crap, etc...Is it?"
From Richard

Neo: *Neither Speedfan nor Everest should stop your CPU fan from spinning. As to how good or bad these two programs are: they are just fine and used by many to diagnose and benchmark their computers (Everest) and for controlling fan speeds in their computers (Speedfan).*

GRAPHICS CARD PROBLEM
"Excuse me for being such a pain but do you think it's possible that my graphics card could be over powering my processor? I've sent the graphics card to the store and they sent it to the factory. It works perfectly according to them. It's a E5200 @ 2.5Ghz and the card is a 9800GT Super+. I'm planning to buy a s-series motherboard from Gigabyte. The problem is I don't know what my processor really is. According to CPU-Z it's a Core 2 Duo. According to Windows it's a Pentium Duo Core. Will the CPU work with S2 series? Help again........."
From PhysiX AgeiA

Neo: *Well, you say your CPU is an E5200, so that's a Core 2-based CPU and indeed, it is a dual-core CPU. Your CPU should work fine with the GIGABYTE motherboard, provided it is the right chipset (P35, X48 or P45).*

UPGRADES
"Hi. At the end of the year, I am going to upgrade my system. Right now, I'm running an AMD Athlon 64 3200+ 2.0 GHz. 1.00 GB of DDR1 400 ram, and I have a 8600GT. It cost R7,500 at the time. This rig of mine is 5-7 years old, and still kicks ass by playing every single game that has come out since my rig was put together. I haven't overclocked anything yet. I'm looking to upgrade to a GA-MA790FXT-ud5p, with an AM3 Phenom X4 (don't know which one yet). For RAM I decided on Transcend DDR3 1333MHz Dual channel 2GB. I'm also looking for a new power supply, chassis, and an LCD monitor.
My dad's on a tight budget, but will be able to spend around R7,000 to around R8,000. Is the hardware upgrade sound, or should they change somewhat? And what power supply, chassis, and LCD monitor should I look out for? And are the parts I want available in SA, or will be?"
From Keagan Vice

Neo: *The motherboard you have selected is fine, but may be a little more expensive than your budget allows. Nevertheless, it is more than capable. For that board, however, you will need a Phenom II AM3 CPU, as that motherboard will only take AM3 CPUs. As for monitors, since we don't' know what you have, it would not be possible to recommend one. The same applies to the power supply and chassis as well. However, you should be able to find good 22-inch LCD units for about R2,000 and a power supply for less than R1,000.*

UPGRADING
"I need help. I got an AMD 64x2 6000+ & 2GB ram and GeForce 8600 1 gig motherboard is k8m890m2ma. I want to know is a GeForce 9600 going to help me play the latest games? And what is the best to upgrade my motherboard or graphics card? I don't have the money for the best - help me please. I want to play all games smooth and fast."
From Stephen Fisher

Neo: *Upgrading your motherboard will do nothing for your performance. The best thing to do would be to purchase a 9600GT 512MB graphics card or better, depending on your budget.*

If you'd like our tech guru, Neo, to answer your hardware questions, send a mail to lauren.dasneves@tidemedia.co.za. There aren't any prizes for the letters we print, just simple and honest advice (that is, if we can even decipher the garbled e-mail we sometimes get).

Dream Machine

"This sound card is **an exercise in precision and the cutting edge in audio-reproduction** and playback technologies."

ASUS Xonar Essence ST

SCIENCE DICTIONARY

sound [1]

1. A type of longitudinal wave that originates as the vibration of a medium (such as a person's vocal cords or a guitar string) and travels through gases, liquids, and elastic solids as variations of pressure and density. The loudness of a sound perceived by the ear depends on the amplitude of the sound wave and is measured in decibels, while its pitch depends on its frequency, measured in hertz.

2. The sensation produced in the organs of hearing by waves of this type.

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Not to give all the glory to Sound this month, let's not forget the totally awesome Logitech G19 keyboard that is hands down THE best gaming keyboard bar none. It's pricey, agreed, but if you're a discerning gamer and you only want the best, then you ought to be saving up for one of these.
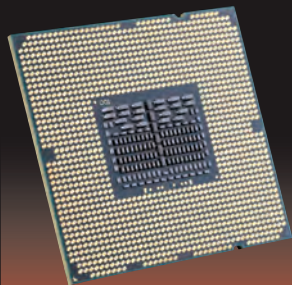
Processor
Intel Core i7 Extreme 975
www.intel.com

Motherboard
GIGABYTE GA-EX58-EXTREME
www.gigabyte.co.za

Graphics Card
ASUS GeForce ENGTX295
http://za.asus.com

Memory
OCZ Triple Channel PC12800 DDR3
www.ocztechnology.com
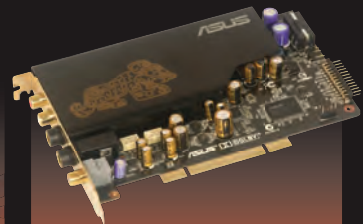
Case
Cooler Master Cosmos S
www.coolermaster.com

Storage
Patriot Torqx 128GB SSD
www.patriotmemory.com

Power Supply
IKONIK Vulcan 1,200W PSU
www.ikonik.com

Sound
ASUS Xonar Essence ST
http://za.asus.com

Monitor
Samsung SyncMaster T260 LCD
www.samsung.co.za

Keyboard
Logitech G19
www.logitech.com

Mouse
Logitech G9 Laser
www.logitech.com

Cooling
Thermaltake BigWater 780
www.thermaltake.com

HARDWIRED

BY NEO SIBEKO

Common Ground

FOR AS FAR BACK as I care to remember, Intel has had the biggest share in the graphics chip market. Now, please note that this means the graphics market as a whole and not add-in cards – that market has belonged to Matrox, S3, 3DFx, NVIDIA and others at various times.

However, since the advent of the GPU, there has been an ever-increasing performance delta between integrated solutions (all Intel chipsets save for the odd few) and the high-end, discreet parts. In fact, the performance delta is so large right now that synthetic benchmarks place the current fastest, single-graphics card, the GTX 295, at about 200x the performance of an integrated 945G graphics processor. This is a number that both ATI and NVIDIA boast about, as impressive as that is. It's the single biggest problem when it comes to games taking advantage of the impressive graphics chips we have today.

Even integrated solutions from either of the abovementioned companies suffer from these massive performance deltas, even though they do fare much better than the Intel equivalents. The future looks promising, however. From 2010, going forward, there just may be, for the first time, a completely different landscape, where games can truly scale in a linear way between integrated graphics solutions and high-end, discreet parts.

This also means that those who buy at the very high-end will benefit from their 'investments' by using copious amounts of antialiasing and/or extremely high resolutions. The customers at this end of the market would not only enjoy better detail in their games, but also better detailed textures, much higher polygon counts, better physics, better lighting, and such.

Currently, this is not the situation, as any game available on the market today either targets a fairly low performance bar or does a poor job at scaling if it is to take advantage of what high-end GPUs have to offer. A prime example of this is the many cross-platform games that look relatively similar on the PC, Xbox 360 and PS3. The GPUs in either of these consoles are relatively weak in comparison to what is on offer in the average, low- to mid-range gaming PC. A GeForce 9600 GT, for instance, has significantly better performance than an RSX or Xenos GPU when comparing GPU with GPU. However, the problem is not only caused by the integrated Intel parts, but also GPUs such as the GeForce 8200 and other graphics chips of similar performance, which are actually not much

better than the integrated Intel products – other than that they support HD video acceleration (which isn't a major boon these days).

With the upcoming parts from ATI and NVIDIA, if NVIDIA's ION and Tegra platforms are anything to go by, we just may have the power to simultaneously increase the graphics fidelity in our GPUs, while pushing the boundaries of what was considered possible with mobile graphics. Hopefully, there will come a time when you can play the same game on your smartphone, netbook and on your PC, with only the graphics scaling appropriately – instead of what we have today, where *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* is a side scroller on your phone, a slide show on your netbook, if you can get it to start at all, and a fluid 3D experience on your Desktop.

It would be spectacular if Intel's much-publicised foray into the discreet GPU market would accelerate this, but I will not hold my breath based purely on what Intel has produced to date. With 40nm GPUs already in production and 32nm CPUs available later this year, it is possible to pack even more transistors into a smaller space, producing more powerful and greener GPUs. These process advancements, together with OpenCL and DirectX 11 mean that we can finally get an even better integration between games and the hardware, which always results in better performance and hence makes better visuals possible on more platforms. The solution lies in diminishing the gap between the various market segments and platforms without bringing down the high-end, but rather improving the low-end. In a way, as this deficit diminishes, everyone benefits and realises better gains than what have been previously possible. **NAG**

> From 2010, going forward, there just may be, for the first time, **a completely different landscape, where games can truly scale in a linear way** between integrated graphics solutions and high-end, discreet parts.

LIFE, HARDWARE, AND CH@PS

BY DERRICK CRAMER

A note on practicality

AS I'M SURE YOU'LL remember, my column over the last few months has often been about mobility, gaming laptops, and mATX cube towers possible replacements. The whole point of these columns was to help make the LANer's life easier. In part, this was due to my own current thoughts, since lugging around my PC to LANs was becoming a rather mundane exercise.

It wasn't due to the size of my case; more the lack of any case at all, really. I was running my system, as all good overclockers do, on a box – well, several boxes, but who's counting? Imagine what a mission it was to repeatedly set up my entire PC each time I went to a LAN; and each time I got back from one, I was almost driven away from LANing all together. So, after all of this, I decided that it was time for a case. Most cube/HTPC cases, while being hideously expensive (remember this for later), are far too small for my current components, and lack the wow factor I am accustomed to. They say that in times of anger, people do stupid things – things they'll often regret in the morning. Sure, you may find this stupid, but I certainly won't be regretting it (not until October, at any rate). So, without further ado, let me introduce you to the Cooler Master ATCS 840.

If there was one case that 'went against' every point I had made about mobility, this was it. At 243mm wide, 580mm high and 630mm deep, the ATCS 840 is nothing short of huge. If Godzilla needed a place to rest his head after a hard day of trampling and destroying, the ATCS 840 would have enough room for him and his missus. Sure, it might only weigh 13.5kg when empty, and 24kg when I've installed my system into it, but the actual dimensions outgun most other full tower cases on the market. Another issue is price. If you had to Google local shops at the time of writing this, you'd find the case listed for just shy of R3,000. I hope you noted the part earlier where I said, "Most cube/HTPC cases, while being hideously expensive..." Well, in truth, I paid around half of that for mine, with extras, which is the only real reason I now have a case – I'm not just browsing online stores hoping to find 'The One'.

Right, you've probably managed to guess that I have a big case, and transporting it to LANs will be nothing short of raising the Titanic using balloons made of steel. Fair enough, but still doable. Onto my other recent purchase then, a Samsung T260.

The grand daddy of LCD screens out at the moment, the T260 is by far the best in its class. Anything bigger, and it would be classified as a TV; anything smaller, and it wouldn't

be much of an upgrade for my old and outdated 2233BW. I was forced into buying it, really. At least, that's my excuse and I'm sticking to it. No need to go into as much detail as with the case: a screen is a screen and the T260 is just like any other – only bigger, a lot bigger.

Right, you might be wondering what this column has to do with practicality when it's obviously about some guy gloating about his new toys. Well, here comes the important bit. At the weekend, when I bought said screen and case, I made one other purchase: my rAge NAG LAN ticket. Only after I was safe at home, with the ticket locked away and the PC assembled, did I realise that I'm going to struggle a bit this year. How am I possibly going to manage a case the size of a small Third World country, a screen that you can watch football on, a bag with all the other essentials, an inflatable double mattress, sleeping bag, and all my girlfriend's stuff too (yes, she is real*****, and has gone to rAge many times in the past)?
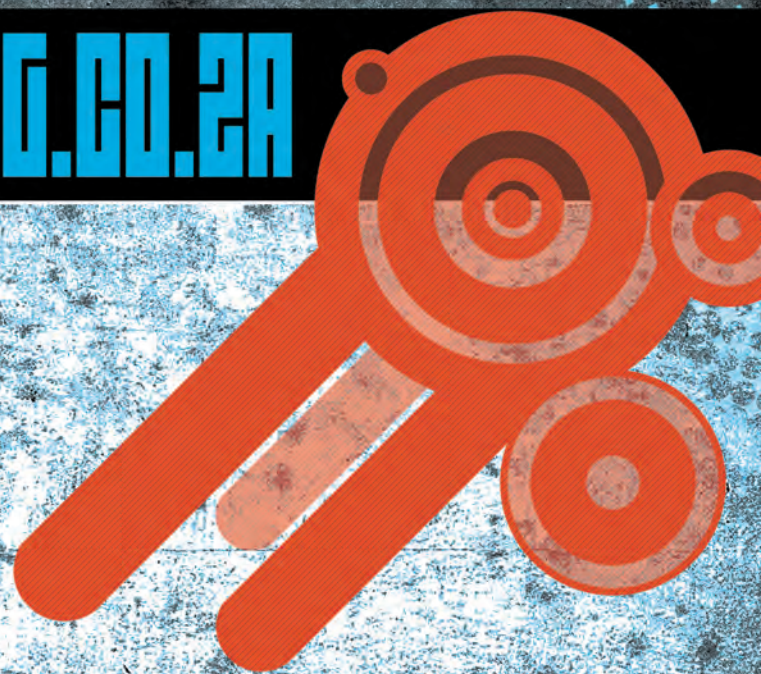
I haven't yet worked out a plan for how I'm going to make this all work. It would probably involve a roller trolley used to transport drinks, or a few menservants to lug my equipment around while I drink a PowerPlay in anticipation. I can't use my family – they're working and LANing with me at rAge. And since stealing trolleys is now frowned upon by all sorts of people who don't know how to have fun, that's out of the mix.

So here's the pro tip that this column has been building up to. If you're planning on LANing a lot, especially at the largest LAN in South Africa, where you have to fight your way to the door, don't buy really big, really heavy, really expensive equipment. You're better off with an old, shabby case covered in coffee stains, and a 17-inch square LCD (the horror, the horror!). **NAG**

> "It wasn't due to the size of my case; more the lack of any case at all, really. **I was running my system, as all good overclockers do, on a box** – well, several boxes, but who's counting?"

* As real as a blow-up doll can be, Ed

BIG BIGGER BEST

Although I thought it would be nice to start a hardware tech feature with something deep and meaningful, and was leaning towards the Orwellian "All graphics cards are created equal" quote from that great book about communist farming, well, they just aren't, are they?

Which, naturally, is great for us gamers. It's basically the engine of our gaming rig the CPU and RAM to a lesser extent and people do like comparing measurements of such things after all, and lusting after the most luridly expensive of course.

Although it is enough to know the basic differences the names and price brackets of the three commonly accepted performance levels (entry, mid and high, naturally) sometimes you really need to impress things upon people. And for these moments, it's good to be smart, and know exactly what you're talking about, delivered in an almost off-hand manner, of course, for the ultimate in macho smugness.

So, to arm you for these delicious instances in time, we're looking in more detail at the architecture of the two main players in each category. And for reference, there's even a distinctly non-gamer integrated graphics solution in here as well. As far as possible, we'll be giving you a low-level 'apples-to-apples' comparison between the variants, and 'unpack' what separates these offerings what drives the competing benchmark results tussles. So, you can be smart, confident, and just radiate geek godliness when you are 'called up to the plate' at a LAN.

by Russell Bennett

Entry-level

This segment is actually very interesting to look at right now. AMD/ATI's R1K 4770 is a high-tech, brand-new part packed with all sorts of industry firsts. It competes with NVIDIA's 250 GTS, which, conversely but perhaps more conventionally, is really an old architecture (G92) repackaged with a lower price tag.

ENTRY-LEVEL SPECS

	RV740	G92
GPU Clock	750MHz	745MHz
Memory Clock	3,200MHz	2,000MHz
Shader Clock	750MHz	1,848MHz
Memory Type	GDDR5	GDDR3
Memory Bus	128-bit	256-bit
Memory Bandwidth	51.2GB/sec	64GB/sec
Stream Processors	640	128
TMUs	32	64
ROPs	16	16
Manufacturing Process	40nm	65nm
Number Of Transistors	826 million	754 million
Die Surface Area	172mm²	330mm²
Claimed TDP	80W	150W
Multi-GPU Support	4-Way CrossFire	3-Way SLI
DX/Shader Model	10.1/4.1	10/4.0

AMD/ATI: RADEON HD 4770 (RV740)

Created using a cutting-edge 40nm manufacturing process, this is the first time that GPUs have overtaken CPUs on this score - Intel has just released the first 45nm CPU. Without a doubt, the next generation of high-end Radeon cards will employ the same process.

The upshot of the die shrink for ATI is cost efficiency, but usually tech providers price their latest developments higher to amortise development costs at first, so it's interesting that ATI leads the way in actually immediately passing these production efficiencies on to the consumer. The overall die size of the GPU is now 172mm², but it packs a mammoth 826 million transistors into that space. It also, in common with high-end Radeon HDs, sports the fastest memory available today - GDDR5, in this case clocked to an effective 3.2GHz.

So, although the bus width is still only 128 bits, the frequency of the GDDR5 memory endows the 9770 with excellent bandwidth potential - 51.2GB/sec in fact, which positions it only marginally behind 4850 cards featuring a bus twice as wide. However, GDDR3 chips, with the newer GPU, easily claim the highest fill rate in the segment at 12GT/sec.

AMD has stacked double the stream processors compared to the 4670 it replaces, and the new cards run 640 stream processors (identical to the 4830 but significantly higher than competing NVIDIA cards) at a frequency of 750MHz - the same as the GPU clock. This core clock speed is actually higher than quite a few much more expensive cards, but as we'll see throughout this article, this figure isn't that accurate an indication of how a card actually performs, given the complexity of a graphics solution today.

NVIDIA: GTS 250 (G92)

Although its nomenclature suggests that this latest entry-level offering from NVIDIA is part of their currently leading 200 series, under the hood the company has adopted the tried-and-tested approach to this budget market segment. Which is to say, pack last year's high-end GPU, with a limitation or two, onto a board with a more modern name. This strategy is great for amortising original development costs of the chipset in the long haul, as it gives the manufacturer a great, volume-selling outlet for chips that are essentially defunct otherwise.

And the G92, which powered the 9800 range, was a good one, after all. It may still be stuck on a 65nm manufacturing process, but the company has nevertheless crammed a significant number of transistors in (754 million) by creating a frankly enormous GPU measuring 330mm2.

Although based on GDDR3, clocked at 'just' 2,000MHz (effective), the 250 still offers the higher peak memory bandwidth at 64GB/sec, thanks to its 256-bit wide interface bus. NVIDIA is not as stream-obsessed as ATI, so the 250's 128 unified shaders seem sparse compared to ATI parts. But they've proven that the model works, and they're able to clock these units separately to the GPU itself. In this instance, they run at 1,848MHz, while the core all but matches the stock core frequencies of 9770s at 745MHz.

The result is a card that might not be fresh off the R&D floor, but it still delivers blazing performance at this budget price point. Left entirely stock, a 250 will generally post better numbers than a 9770, but the ATI card definitely has more headroom if you want to overclock a bit, and will edge out a slight lead at a stable OC. Still, NVIDIA's route to cost effectiveness is a much more sensible, conventional business model, allowing the company to 'plumb' all of its development resources into developing new high-end parts instead.
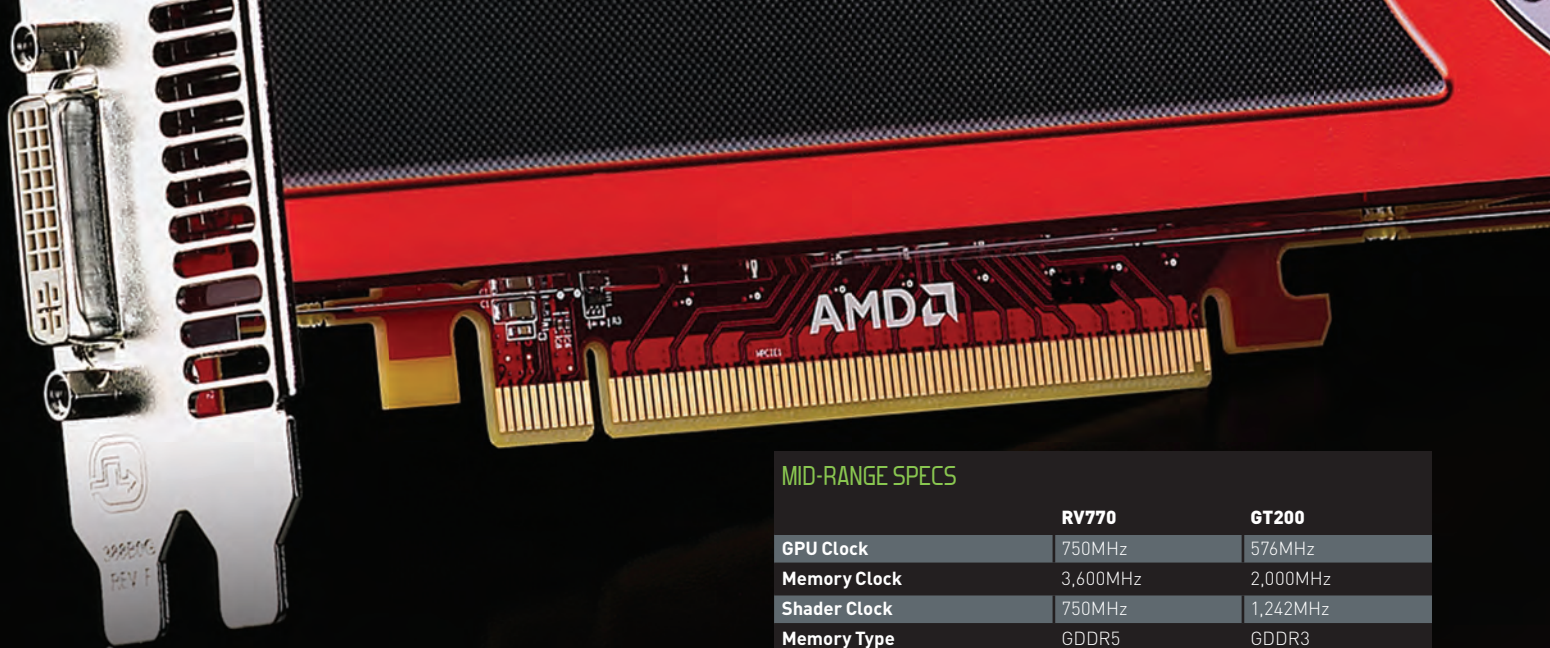
Mid-range

It wasn't long ago, really, that ATI's current mid-range card, the 4870, was its high-end, but today prices for 4870s are lower than a competing GTX 260, by at least R600 to R1,500, depending on the manufacturer's pricing. The difference, as ever, is in the details.

MID-RANGE SPECS

	RV770	GT200
GPU Clock	750MHz	576MHz
Memory Clock	3,600MHz	2,000MHz
Shader Clock	750MHz	1,242MHz
Memory Type	GDDR5	GDDR3
Memory Bus	256-bit	448-bit
Memory Bandwidth	115.2GB/sec	111.9GB/sec
Stream Processors	800	192/216
TMUs	40	64
ROPs	16	28
Manufacturing Process	55nm	65nm
Number Of Transistors	956 million	1.4 billion
Die Surface Area	260mm^2	576mm^2
Claimed TDP	160W	182W
Multi-GPU Support	4-Way CrossFire	3-Way SLI
DX/Shader Model	10.1/4.1	10/4.0

AMD/ATI: RADEON HD 4870 (RV770XT)

The HD 4870 was the first graphics card to use GDDR5, breaking NVIDIA's long-standing tradition of being first to market with the latest GDDR tech. In fact, GDDR3 was originally developed by ATI, but first offered to consumers by NVIDIA. The 4870 couples this new memory standard to a wider 256-bit bus, although the architecture does dump the interesting and undeniably effective ring-bus system of older ATI cards for a more conventional crossbar arrangement.

It's useful to know just how GDDR5 works. So, in brief...

In fact, that 3,600MHz clock speed, which the memory on a 4870 runs at, is an 'effective' speed, while the chips themselves are clocked at a mere 900MHz. The trick is that each memory module is now capable of transferring different instructions at different speeds, at the same time. In the case of GDDR5, there are two 900MHz pipes for carrying instructions and addresses, and a doubled-up 1,800MHz pipe for carrying data itself. GDDR3, on the other hand, effectively doubles up the operational frequency, like conventional DDR2, but also enjoys lower power consumption and voltage requirements, allowing for very high base frequencies, therefore providing effective speeds of double an already elevated base frequency.

Back to the 4870, however. The unified shader architecture now boasts a mammoth 800 processor units, once again running at the same frequency as the core itself, which is 750MHz. The increased frequency and GDDR5 were really the two areas improved over the 4850 (RV770Pro), and although yielding excellent performance results, this did result in early generation cards producing substantial amounts of heat. Maximum theoretical bandwidth is 115.2GB/sec.

Built on a 55nm manufacturing process, this GPU boasts 956 million transistors on a chip package just 260mm^2 in size, and was the first to go beyond 1.2 teraFLOPS of shader performance. It really was a substantial step up from the 4850 despite being based on pretty much the same foundations, and today represents excellent value for money.

NVIDIA: GEFORCE GTX 260 (GT200, GT200B)

The release of the GT 200 series GPUs saw NVIDIA at last ditch the fantastic G80 architecture, on which the G92 is based, for something entirely new. And the result, the GT 200, is truly epic, proving to ATI what can be done at the high-end if you dedicate massive resources to R&D in this space. But just how did the company manage this?

The GT 200 is still based on a 65nm manufacturing process, so to get its full complement of 1.4 billion transistors, the package is simply gargantuan at 576mm^2! The GT200b, released a month after the initial GPU and the chipset on which most modern GTX 260 offerings are based, moves to a 55nm process, which pushes the die size down somewhat to a still-substantial 470mm^2, and also lowers the TDP marginally from 182W to 171W, while all other details remain identical. This is the reason for the extreme length of these cards, the pure package size of the GPU itself, as well as that huge cooler arrangement, which does have its own advantages.

Also huge is the new memory bus, now up to an impressive 448 bits wide. Feeding this bus are still GDDR3 chips, but running at a reference speed of 1,998MHz, while the core is clocked at 576MHz and the shaders at 1,242MHz. Compare these frequency ratings with that of competition, or even cards from elsewhere in the same stable (GTS 250), and you might be disappointed. But a GTX 260 will destroy these offerings nevertheless, suggesting that improvements in the memory architecture, shifting to a 40nm manufacturing process and the resultant frequency up-scaling will one day yield absolutely astonishing results. Memory bandwidth, for the moment, is 111.9MB/sec.

A GTX 260 comes in two flavours - the older GT 200 has 192 shader cores, up to 216 on the GT200b. This is one of those areas in which NVIDIA has followed a very different path to ATI. Although it does still have more texture (72) and blending (28) units than any HD 4000s (40 and 16 respectively), it has fewer stream processing clusters overall.

The company has also focused on power-consumption properties as well as other secondary considerations. NVIDIA calls the solution HybridPower, and it basically means that the card only draws its maximum voltage when its full performance is being used in 3D applications, in effect turning the card off - or at least running it at a very low level of power draw - when operating in 2D mode.

But the combination of that 448-bit bus, which essentially means eight, dedicated 64-bit memory processors operating at the full potential of the bus, and that huge number of transistors in its chunky chip package, provides more than enough grunt to see off the competition; and GTX 260s ordinarily run somewhat quicker than 4870s. While the advantage of the CUDA GPGPU architecture and NVIDIA PhysX remains, softer advantages are yet to be entirely capitalised upon. ATI does have OpenCL, which is a similar standard to CUDA, except open rather than proprietary, but as yet hasn't revealed a physics-technology partner or home-grown solution for gamers.

High-end

Unfortunately, AMD/ATI fans are really still awaiting the release of a head-to-head competitor for the GTX 280/285, and the window is shrinking fast with early details of GT 300 chipsets already starting to circulate. Although local prices didn't at first reflect this discrepancy, HD 4890s can now be bought for as little as R3,200, while the cheapest 280s continue to sell for at least R1,000 more. The HD 4890 is actually, according to the company and the prices, pitched against the GTX 275, which is basically a higher-powered 260. But nevertheless...

AMD/ATI: RADEON HD 4890 (RV790XT)

Once more, to bring the performance of its HD 4890 closer to competing with the GTX 280, ATI followed something of a unique approach. Some call the 4890 over-engineered, but I must confess that I adore the thing. It reminds me of the sort of minute attention to detail that characterises motorsport, where seemingly minor tweaks cost disproportionate amounts of money to have carried out, but yield genuinely satisfying, race-winning results.

I've already mentioned that the RV790 didn't, in the end, win the race, but it's nevertheless good to see a company focusing so ruthlessly on improving the performance of an existing design. Yes, it might have been better off spending the time and money developing a new, properly competitive high-end offering, but then, ATI fans are usually a marginally more patient lot, much like aficionados of parent company AMD's products.

So, the RV790 is identical to the RV770, in short. Same 800 stream processors, 256-bit bus, and GDDR5 memory. Same 55nm manufacturing process, although there are a couple more million transistors slotted in for a total of 959 million. What ATI did was overhauling the physical design of the chipset, making for more efficient internal operations, and adding a decap ring to the outer edge of the GPU housing itself, which reduces signal noise for improved stability. They changed the way the ASIC distributes power, and finally re-timed the chip to take advantage of the optimisations. The result is a core speed boosted by 100MHz to a very healthy total of 850MHz, while the GDDR5 now operates at an effective 3,900MHz!

Although these engineering mods give the card killer frequencies to impress with, it ultimately still falls somewhat short of the bar set by the 280 and even the GTX 275. Depending on the rest of your rig, though, it should still net you 10K or thereabouts in 3DMark Vantage, which I guarantee is more than enough to play any current game at full detail up to 1,600 x 1,200.

NVIDIA: GEFORCE GTX 280 (GT200/GT200B)

In the same vein as ATI's 4870/4890 combo, NVIDIA's GTX 280 uses the exact same chipset as the mid-range GTX 260. However, again NVIDIA has taken a more conventional route, stripping some of the capabilities from the range-topper to create the mid-range card, rather than following the obsessive optimisation path of ATI.

So, the GTX 280 delivers a full 512-bit interface, adds a few rendering pipelines for a total of 240 (80 texture, 32 blending units), and gains a bit in clock speed. Core clocks are now 602MHz for a 280, 633MHz for a 275, and 648MHz for a 285. The memory is still GDDR3, now clocked at 2,200MHz, 2,268MHz and 2,484MHz respectively. Coupled to that wide bus, which gives a dominant, maximum bandwidth of 159GB/sec on the top-end 285, the shader processing units run at 1,476MHz on the same card.

Both the 275 and 285 cards run on the somewhat newer, optimised GT200b chipset, while only the original 280 runs the vanilla, 65nm GT200. Again, both pack 1.4 billion transistors into a huge chip package, but the 55nm GT200b parts have a somewhat smaller physical footprint.

Fully unleashed in these applications, the GT200 chipset really takes flight and flies. The GeForce GTX 285s are undoubtedly the quickest single-GPU cards available today. They'll post the biggest numbers in every test you throw at them, and will run every game at maximum detail and the highest resolution your display can handle. They are absolutely indomitable.

Incidentally, dual-GPU GTX 295s essentially run a bit of a hybrid GT200 chipset, combining the 512-bit bus and 240 rendering pipelines of 280s, but at the frequencies of the 260 range in order to manage heat.

HIGH-END SPECS

	RV790	GT200b
GPU Clock	850MHz	648MHz
Memory Clock	3,900MHz	2,484MHz
Shader Clock	850MHz	1,476MHz
Memory Type	GDDR5	GDDR3
Memory Bus	256-bit	512-bit
Memory Bandwidth	125GB/sec	159GB/sec
Stream Processors	800	240
TMUs	40	80
ROPs	16	32
Manufacturing Process	55nm	55nm
Number Of Transistors	959 million	1.4 billion
Die Surface Area	260mm^2	470mm^2
Claimed TDP	190W	236W
Multi-GPU Support	4-Way CrossFire	3-Way SLI
DX/Shader Model	10.1/4.1	10/4.0

What's next?

With the release of Windows 7 now imminent, we're expecting new graphics cards from both NVIDIA and AMD, capable of supporting DirectX 11 as close to this launch as possible. Both companies have already leaked some details on their solutions. Let's have a quick look at what we know.

AMD/ATI RV870

In the red corner, it appears as if ATI will be cramming a massive 1,200 stream processors into their next range-topper, while doubling the number of ROPs to 32, and bumping the TMU count up to 48 from 40. Core and memory clocks could be as high as 900MHz and 4,400MHz (effective) respectively.

These figures would yield graphics computational power in the region of 1.5 teraFLOPS (the RV770 can only manage 1.2 teraFLOPS), but perhaps more important are the multi-processor optimisations.

The company is also speaking about finally delivering dual-GPU cards via a Multi Chip Module (MCM), which essentially means the same as current multi-core CPUs: more than one processor core is built onto a single die.

Finally, ATI has confirmed that the interface width will move up to a full 512 bits, which ought to really give that GDDR5 the room it needs to properly shine. The projected theoretical memory bandwidth stands in the region of 180GB/sec. The RV870 will bring ATI's 40nm manufacturing process - already deployed in the 4770 range - to the high-end space.

NVIDIA GT300

This chipset, at this early stage, already looks set to be an utter beast. Let me throw a few figures at you.

It has more than double the existing number of shader units at 512, GDDR5 running at an effective 4,400MHz, a theoretical memory bandwidth in excess of 280GB/sec, a core clock of 700MHz, and a shader clock of 1,600MHz, all on a new, 40nm manufacturing process. The GT300 will destroy its opposition again if these details turn into a genuine product.

But again, we see the manufacturer moving to optimise for multi-processor operations, and in fact, the GT300 will run on a brand-new processing architecture dubbed MIMD (Multiple Instructions, Multiple Data). Existing GPUs naturally operate in a SIMD (Single Instruction, Multiple Data) mode, but this new massively parallel-processing method will undoubtedly produce substantial performance improvements, particularly as the company further develops CUDA and the application of its chip as a GPGPU - which is to say, useful in more computational tasks than merely rendering stunning gaming worlds. **NAG**

Supplier→ ASUS   Web→ http://za.asus.com

Specifications

SNR: 124dB
Output: Stereo (surround via optical-out)
Interface: PCI
Features: ASIO 2.0, Dolby Digital, Dolby Headphone, Pro-Logic IIx, Direct Sound 3D

ASUS Xonar Essence ST

ASUS'S XONAR LINE OF sound cards has proven time and time again that there's not much out on the market that can match them. Not only do they deliver excellent quality, features, and build quality, but the drivers are also updated regularly. They support just about every audio-decoding mechanism there is, and in essence are the pinnacle of PC audio these days.

Therefore, instead of telling you what the Essence ST is about, we will skip all of that. That is because the BOP (bill of parts) reads as if it's a high-end ONKYO amplifier or AV receiver. If you can name it, this card has it: power courtesy of ASUS's AV100 audio processor; a 24-bit DAC, courtesy of Texas Instruments' Bur-Brown PCM1792A; precise audio tuning for reduced jitter; Nichicon "fine-Gold" capacitors; 124dB SNR; EMI shield; headphone amplifier (with adjustable gain settings); and user-swappable OP-AMPs, to name but a few.

This sound card is an exercise in precision and the cutting edge in audio-reproduction and playback technologies. ASUS includes a full audio-precisions test report with the sound card, which only further proves how impressive and unmatched this sound card is.

If you thought the STX was impressive, the ST takes it even further. As impossible as it sounds, the ST sounds even better and it is a more focused product as it's geared purely for stereo output. There just isn't anything better on the market.

Listening to the Essence ST takes getting used to. If you upgrade from the STX to the ST, you'll notice the difference. The ST delivers an even warmer sound, but the stereo imaging is much wider, which some people might not like. We thoroughly enjoyed it, especially with Dolby Headphone DH-1 selected. The sound just comes alive, but instead of losing out on the stereo imaging, it lends itself to delivering a far more natural sound.

One of the most obvious things about the Essence ST is the bass reproduction, which can only be described as phenomenal. It's incredibly precise, and delivers a punch that we have never heard from a sound card. Paired with the Creative Aurvana Live! Headset, the combination is pure audio nirvana. There are very few things that can be considered perfect as far as PCs are concerned, but the Essence ST fits the bill.

The drivers are small, the control panel is very simple - almost to the point of being bare - but that's where the brilliance of the card comes across. It doesn't have hundreds of settings: the magic is not in the software but in the hardware. As with all other ASUS products, there's some form of competition with other manufacturers; but in the sound card market, especially with the Essence range, ASUS stands head and shoulders above the rest. In fact, even professional-grade sound cards do not sound like this. It's hard not

to stay impressed with the sound card even after having used it for weeks on end. It never ceases to impress, no matter whether you're playing games, watching movies or simply listening to music. It just breathes new life into audio.

ASUS has left the PCI Express interface behind- which some people might not like - meaning that it needs no bridge chip and is compatible with just about every single motherboard on the planet - even older machines can make use of the sound card.

Not only is the Essence ST the best sound card ASUS has ever produced, but it's the best sound card currently available; and the fact that it's a native PCI device makes it more accessible to a larger number of people.

The easiest and possibly the best way to describe the ASUS Essence ST is that it's pure audio perfection. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko

★★★★★

Bottom Line
Best sound card ever produced.

Plus
+ Audio quality
+ Headphone amplifier

Minus
- None

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Supplier→ Corex   **Web→** www.corex.co.za

Specifications

Weight: 22.5kg
Dimensions: 60.4cm x 24.9cm x 66cm

Thermaltake Xpressar RCS100 Micro Refrigeration Cooling System

PHASE-CHANGE COOLING HAS ALWAYS been highly regarded by extreme gamers and enthusiasts alike. This is because there just isn't any other way to cool a CPU to sub-ambient temperatures for everyday use. Water-cooling, while efficient, is simply not enough; and at the very best, will match the ambient air temperatures.

This is all good and well, but there are users who want and need even cooler-running CPUs for overclocking. In the past, these users' only option was to import cooling systems, which were not only cumbersome, expensive, and very difficult to install, but were not worth the risk associated with installing them. Such units have traditionally sold poorly, and as a result have mainly been used by extreme overclockers.

Thermaltake has changed all of that with the Xpressar RCS100. If you look at the pictures on this page, you'll see Thermaltake's Xaser VI chassis with the Xpressar micro-refrigeration unit installed in it. The Xpressar is built into the case, but the entire unit, including the motherboard tray, can be removed for installing and removing components, making the Xpressar the easiest-to-install phase-change cooling unit available today.

Installing the unit is easy and straightforward, and you'll be able to set it up in an hour. Unlike other refrigeration systems, the RCS100 is a one-button affair. When you power on your PC, everything powers on

at the same time (compressor and evaporator), which means that you can use your system much like you would if it employed water- or air-cooling. This is the easiest sub ambient temperature cooling has ever been.

The components used by Thermaltake are of industrial quality (R134a refrigerant), and even though everything is smaller than it is in any other commercially available kit, it's built to the same quality and should outlive several upgrade cycles. Having said that, should a new motherboard layout or socket placement emerge, the system will be rendered useless, as there's no way to relocate the head to another position, forcing you to stick to conventional ATX/microATX boards.

Let's look at the Xpressar's performance, shall we? Using a Core i7 965, we were able to record temperatures of around 5°C at idle at the default settings. However, nobody would buy this chassis to operate their CPU at the reference speed if the default CPU cooler would suffice. No, this is for those who want 4.2GHz CPU clocks on a daily basis, and this is where the Xpressar RC100 truly shines.

At 4.2GHz, the temperatures were in the 44°C range. This temperature is much better than any water-cooling kit will achieve, but not exactly what could be considered great. Do note, however, that this is a maximum load temperature and most people are unlikely to keep their

CPUs loaded continuously. If you play games and the like, the CPU will likely 'operate' at between 35°C and 38°C. A highly impressive feat considering that all eight threads are enabled on the CPU - using an air cooler at 4.2GHz would result in the temperatures approaching 70°C.

With 32nm CPU refreshes likely due within the next 12 months, these temperatures could drop, and it would be no surprise to see even the upcoming Core i9 12-thread CPU operating significantly below 40°C. For the competitive overclockers out there, this may not be what you are looking for, but for those gamers with money to spare and who will settle for nothing but the absolute best, this just may be the phase-change-cooled chassis for you. In this regard, Thermaltake has 'pioneered a first' with the Xpressar RCS100 and it receives a thumbs up from us. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko

★ ★ ★ ★

Bottom Line
The most convenient phase-change cooling system available.

Plus
+ Phase-change cooling
+ Cooling performance

Minus
– Bulky
– Expensive

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Mushkin GeForce GTX 295

THE HIGH-END GRAPHICS CARD market this year has been very interesting so far. We have seen prices drop dramatically – from 2008s $599 and $699 graphics cards to what we have now. Price wars and the like at the high end have reduced prices to the point where there are motherboards that cost more - a first in an industry in which graphics cards have always been the most expensive components (except for CPUs, of course).

This all changed, however, and the competing 4870X2 and the GTX 295 came in at a recommended retail price of $499 - which was almost unheard of. As great as these prices were, the problem - as always - with the ultra high-end parts is supply. The GTX 295 cards were very rare, and despite the brilliant and unmatched performance, the availability issues drove the prices up, ultimately defeating the point of the very aggressive pricing.

What made the situation even worse for the GTX 295 is that much like all GX2 solutions from NVIDIA, it is a dual-PCB product, which means that it cost more and the manufacturers could not meet demand, thus affecting bottom lines.

We heard rumours that NVIDIA was working on a new PCB (P658), which would eventually house two GT200b processors, reducing costs and allowing NVIDIA to ship more cards. As unlikely as we thought the rumour was, it turns out that NVIDIA was indeed working on a new part. However, it would not be a new product announcement, but would be quietly slipped into the channel to eventually replace all the GTX 295s.

With the single-PCB GTX 295, NVIDIA has re-worked the cooling mechanism on the GTX 295, and surprisingly enough, it's still as effective as it was – if not more so. It's true that the new layout does dump some heat into the case, but you'd be hard-pressed to notice any temperature changes unless your case has poor ventilation.

The fan is situated in the middle of the card and it cools the heat sinks, which is better than the method employed on the 4870X2. This new cooling method doesn't make the card noisier: the graphics card is even quieter even with the fan set to its maximum rotational speed, and it's hardly audible above the other case fans. The temperatures are marginally higher on the card than on the dual-PCB version, but this should not affect performance or overclocking headroom at all.

Enthusiasts might not appreciate the new GTX 295 because of the power plug placement, which prevents one from using any block that doesn't make an allowance for the new location. However, for most people, and those willing to build new blocks, the new single-PCB GTX 295 is a welcome change: it's easier to find and should in theory reduce prices that were inflated by insufficient supply.

If you are in the market for a GTX 295, then the Mushkin card comes highly recommended, especially since it's the only single-PCB GTX 295 available locally. It's a no-frills card and comes in a neat wooden box, which is more useful than the cardboard boxes that every other manufacturer uses to package their cards. Paired with the WHQL Release 190 ForceWare drivers, the GTX 295 still proves to be the fastest single-graphics card money can buy right now. If you play at a resolution of 1,920 x 1,200, there isn't a game that can't be played with 4x AA at the very least.

A great card just got better; and best of all, it's available right now.   **NAG**

Neo Sibeko

★★★★★

Bottom Line

The only real solution for power users and enthusiasts.

Plus	Minus
+ Performance	**−** Vertically mounted power plugs
+ Relatively cool	

Logitech G19

IT'S NO MYSTERY THAT Logitech produces some of the finest gaming keyboards around. You'll be pleased to know, then, that the G19 continues this tradition by delivering a high build quality, tons of functionality and improvements all round, when compared to its predecessor, the G15.

Most notable is the fancy new LCD, which is full colour and boasts a resolution of 320 x 240. The display can perform all the regular functions, such as system monitoring, displaying the time and interfacing with Outlook, as well as a few new tricks. For those of you who like to have a video playing in the background while you game (or occasionally work), the LCD supports full-motion video playback and is incredibly smooth. As you might expect, you can also play music or view photos on the screen, but bear in mind that all the processing is handled by your PC – which means the LCD applications can collectively occupy about 100MB of system memory if you're not careful. Additionally, the G19 continues support for Windows SideShow applications, which is made even more useful by the colour screen. These applications let you do anything, from browsing your PC's media library to using third-party

Specifications

- 12 programmable macro keys with 3 modes each
- Full-colour, 320 x 240 LCD
- Variable-colour backlight
- USB 2.0

applications like the *WoW* Armory viewer or Gmail applet.

Everything about the G19 is just a little slicker and more refined than the G15, except for one glaring problem: it requires external power, supplied by a two-prong AC adapter (with no USB adapter in sight), to function properly. When not powered, all the macro functions and the LCD, along with its associated applications, cease to function. You still have access to the regular keyboard and multimedia keys, but if you're planning to take your G19 with you to a LAN, you should make sure that the hosts are prepared for your power requirements. Thankfully, however, this extra power means the USB hub has been bumped up to version 2.0. We managed to run an external, self-powered hard drive, a flash drive and a G15 off the USB hub, so you know there's sufficient power. **NAG**

Geoff Burrows

★★★★★

Bottom Line
The next evolution of the ultimate gaming keyboard. Don't miss out.

Plus	Minus
+ Feels great	- Requires external power
+ LCD functionality	
+ Powered USB hub	

ASUS M4A785TD-V EVO

ASUS HAS RELEASED A number of AM3-compatible motherboards lately. From the legendary M4A79T Deluxe to the Crosshair III Formula, ASUS seems just as serious about their AMD offerings as they are about their Intel parts, and has motherboards with as many features and, in some cases like this, even more.

The EVO board is based on AMD's 785G/SB710 chipset, which is one of the newest chipsets from AMD. It's not targeted at the ultra high end, but rather low- to mid-range users who require on-board video, but want the option of being able to upgrade their machines as and when necessary.

So, with that said, the board will support all Athlon II/Phenom II CPUs, up to 16GB of DDR3 RAM and just about every other feature you would expect from a fairly high-end motherboard. It features an on-board Radeon HD 4200 graphics accelerator with a dedicated 128MB of RAM, which drives the HDMI, DVI and analogue VGA output. For those who want more pixel power, the board has a full-speed PCI Express 16x slot and a secondary PCI Express 4x slot. The rest of the motherboard is occupied by five SATA 3Gb/sec headers, three PCI slots and a single PCI Express 1x slot for audio/LAN or TV capture cards.

The motherboard layout is simple

and well thought out. The first PCI Express slot doesn't block the SATA headers, and the DIMM slots are far from the PCI Express slot as well, which makes adding and removing RAM very easy, negating the need to remove the graphics card at all.

Performance is where the EVO board really shines. We were able to achieve a BCLK of 240MHz with the board without spending too much time in the BIOS, and are certain that with some tweaking, even more can be achieved. The on-board graphics accelerator supports full-frame HD playback and dual displays, along with DirectX 10.1 and OpenGL 2.0

The EVO board is supposed to be a relatively basic board, but it has just about every feature you would expect from a high-end motherboard; and for that we have to give it full marks. ASUS has once again produced a great motherboard. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko
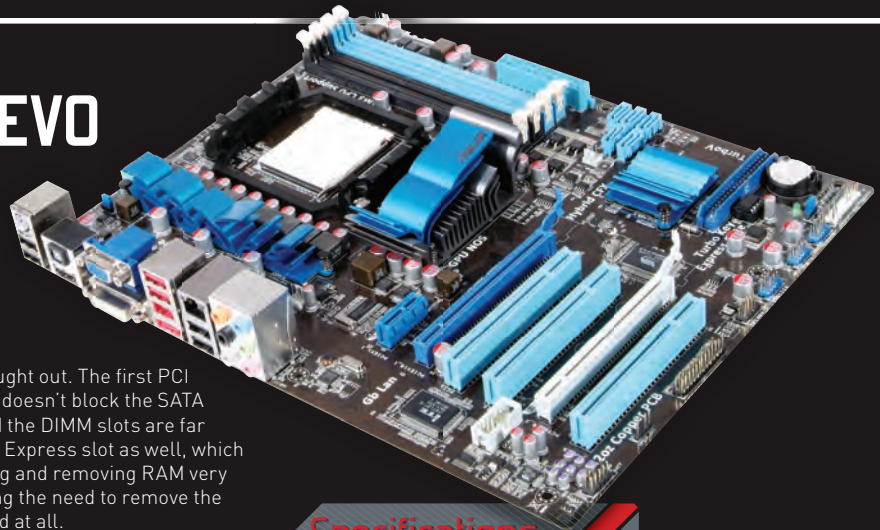
Specifications

Chipset: AMD 785G/SB710
Memory: 4 x 184-pin DDR3
CPU Support: AMD Phenom II /Athlon II

★★★★

Bottom Line
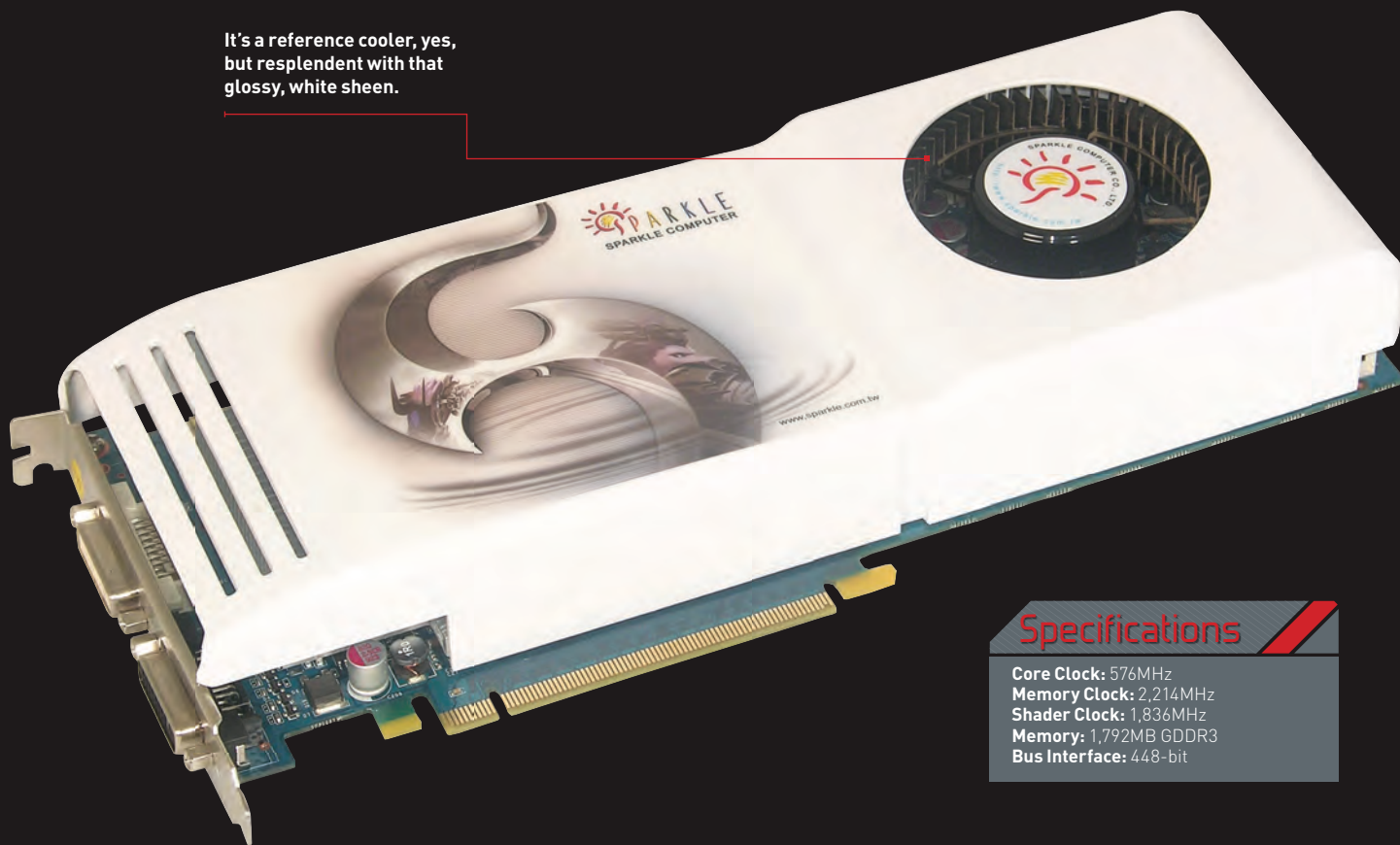A good motherboard for those looking for a fairly powerful AM3 system.

Plus	Minus
+ Great overclocking headroom	- OC Station support is missing
+ Plenty of features	

Supplier→ Eurobyte   **Web→** www.eurobyte.co.za

It's a reference cooler, yes, but resplendent with that glossy, white sheen.

Sparkle GeForce GTX 260 1792MB

ALTHOUGH I'VE PRETTY OFTEN voiced my dislike of the real budget graphics cards, and my disdain for the wallet-wilting costs of the absolutely highest-end monsters, it isn't that often that I get to appreciate my really favourite kind of graphics card: a mid-range monster. Something that offers value, while packing just about all the punch you're going to need for at least another couple of years.

I think this Sparkle GTX 260 1792MB is pretty much **the** card of the 200 series.

It's got the right specs: a 576MHz core; 448-bit bus, accessing 1,792MB of GDDR3 clocked at 2,214MHz; and shaders running at 1,242MHz. It features the same cooler as those used by everything from a 260 up. And it's got the 'look': it's all white, with two six-pin power sockets poking out the back.

Throwing massive amounts of video RAM at a crippled GPU is a very old trick for extracting more from gamer's wallets than is strictly necessary. And it very seldom works. But the GTX 260 is not a crippled GPU, and can actually make use of the over-generous amount for some healthy performance gains. A card that posts 9,399 on the GPU element of 3DMark Vantage is definitely a serious contender. For around R1,000 less, you're dipping into the 7,500s or lower. And this Sparkle will maintain a playable average of 33.8fps in *Crysis*, with all settings on very high. That's superb rendering power at this price point.

And newer games seem to run even better in many ways. Anything supporting PhysX, for instance, gets immediate benefits, while all the gorgeous effects of maxing detail levels are provided without significant hassles for this card in games like *Demigod* and *Mirror's Edge*.

Sparkle's original Core 216 260s featured some pretty interesting power-saving modes, actually claiming to offer "Greener gaming" by offering three distinct performance profiles, the lowest of which under-clocked the card, curbing overall power draw. This model doesn't 'advertise' this feature, nor did we find it in the latest ForceWare driver package we always use for benchmarking – perhaps it's in the custom driver, but we're not sure. Pretty nifty thinking, though, and elementary enough to work quite well.

You don't even need to upgrade your PSU: the 260 only needs a pair of six-pin power plugs and runs happily on older-model 550W PSUs – depending on the rest of the rig, of course.

For me, if I needed a graphics card now, this would be the perfect compromise between my high-end need for the ultimate gaming performance, and my need to follow the advice of our country's clever finance minister to maintain healthy savings through this recession. I know, it's still a lot of cash compared to a sub-R2K card, but you'll be much happier with this – and for much longer – than the stripped-out ones. You'll be able to run this card for almost as long as the guy who just bought his high-end GTX 285, still at good playable frame rates, which can't be said of, say, a GTS 250, really. That's where budget hardware still bites.

And that chunky, white cooler looks just rocking if you light it up with some system-installed 'bright works'. It really does. **NAG**

Russell Bennett

★★★★

Bottom Line

The Sparkle GeForce GTX 260 1792MB is the pick of the high-end segment if value is still a (perhaps distant) priority.

Plus
+ Just a few thousand points behind 'flagships'
+ PhysX support

Minus
- Not quite the cheapest

Supplier→ TVR Computers   Web→ www.tvr.co.za

Spacing on these gaming keys is not as good as it could be

Genius LuxeMate 525 Star Cruiser

HARDWARE MANUFACTURERS LIKE TO design products that are intended to appeal to a specific market segment, and what we have here is a product aimed at PC gamers.

To the left of the (almost) standard keyboard is the centrepiece of this design, which is a keypad that is meant to provide the often-used directional keys, surrounded by an array of other buttons that you may find useful. Of course, this means that the keyboard is longer than the norm, from left to right, so the keys between the main section and the Num pad have been rearranged and squashed in – not ideal. The gamepad is supposed to be fully programmable, but this is where I encountered a flaw. The driver software seems not quite up to the task, and while I could get the surrounding keys to work, in two games (*Call of Duty: World at War* and *Demigod*), I could get no joy from the directional keys in the programmed mode. If I used the default mode, I could not reassign the shortcut keys to other values, but had to do so within the game – a few games out there don't allow this, so it's a problem. Basically, the gaming keys are not as "quick and easy" to program as they are claimed to be, unless you run actual macros. Another, more subtle flaw is the fact that the numeric keys above the directional keys are somewhat farther

away than are the 'numbers' on the WASD keys, making it preferable to just use the regular part of the keyboard.

Ironically, the other extra buttons, the media and productivity shortcut buttons, I had far more joy with. The media buttons are easy and intuitive to configure, but the Internet and e-mail shortcuts are messy. If you use Outlook (or anything else other than Windows Mail or Hotmail), you better get ready to track down the program file; and likewise, if you use a browser other than Internet Explorer. There is a big button at the top right to lock your PC in the Windows password dialogue – this can be handy, whether at a LAN, at the office, or at home if you have naughty children around.

The overall styling of this keyboard is quite appealing (though the green number keys at the left are rather incongruous), and the main portion of this keyboard has a comfortable feel. Too bad that it is let down somewhat by the configuration software. **NAG**

Alex Jelagin

Specifications

- 26 programmable keys
- Up to 100 programmable profiles
- Built-in microphone and earphone jacks
- Macros of up to 11 keystrokes

★★★

Bottom Line

A pleasant-feeling and nice-looking keyboard that suffers from inexplicable design choices and poor support software.

Plus	Minus
+ Looks nice	- Slightly awkward gamepad
+ Headset connections	- Tedious to program
+ Fairly appealing styling	- Software is limited

Specifications

Chipset: Intel X58 + ICH10R
Memory: 6 x 184-pin DDR3
CPU Support: Intel Core i7

ECS X58B-A2

WE DON'T OFTEN REVIEW ECS products here at *NAG*, and that is primarily because ECS has been focusing on the ultra low- to mid-range market, with very little attention paid to the gaming public and certainly not the enthusiasts.

With the Black Series, however, ECS seems to have been taking notes. The company has been manufacturing motherboards that are above expectation, and with the X58BA-A2, it's no different.

Before we get to what the board features, it is important to note that this board is not only one of the cheapest X58 motherboards on the market today, but it is also not meant to compete with the likes of the DFI T3eH6, ASUS P6T or GIGABYTE's EX58 series. It is more for those who want all the power the X58 platform has to offer, but don't want to pay exorbitant amounts of money, and still want an easier motherboard to overclock than the Intel Smackover board.

Power comes courtesy of a six-phase system, which is definitely not enough for extreme overclocking, but enough for most users who will make use of slight overclocks on a daily basis. The simplified power-regulation system means that the board is not only cheaper, but should also be relatively uncluttered around the CPU socket. However, there are four capacitors that are alarmingly close to the CPU socket, and care should be taken when mounting coolers to not knock or bend any of them off the board.

The Northbridge is cooled by a spring-loaded heat sink, which is adequate but will definitely need some air flow over it - especially in the upcoming summer months. The same goes for the Southbridge, as the included heat sink is far too small, but it's nothing a fan cannot remedy.

The board supports SLI and CrossFire, but only features two full-speed slots, so 3-Way CrossFire or SLI is out of the question. The X58B-A2 also features a single PCI slot, two PCI Express 1x slots, and a single PCI Express 4x slot. An odd configuration but one that some people might appreciate.

Next to the first PCI Express slots is a four-pin Molex connector, which is used to deliver additional power to the PCI Express slots. This Molex connector is unnecessary, however, as it offers no improvements to system stability, regardless of what graphics card is being used.

ECS still has some distance to go before they can compete with the other manufacturers when it comes to motherboard design and layout, but the X58B is a step in the right direction. This is particularly true for the BIOS: all the relevant settings are there and even some we didn't expect. Having said that, though, navigating the BIOS can be frustrating, as any option changed requires the entire screen to be refreshed and you cannot input values directly. This means you have to wait for the slight screen refresh for every single adjustment, which can grow tiring very quickly. The ECS X58B-A2 also features no way of flashing the BIOS other than in Windows or DOS, and you cannot

save BIOS profiles. There's also no way to disable the boot-up splash screen, which can be very irritating.

What is impressive about the board, however, is that once you get over all the issues mentioned above, it scales pretty well, and one can achieve some impressive overclocking results if you spend the time tweaking the board. We were able to attain a 200MHz BCLK with this motherboard. While not Prime95 stable, it ran every other benchmark repeatedly. The memory speed was set low, as the 10x and 12x multipliers would not allow the motherboard to overclock, but we're confident that this can be remedied with future BIOS revisions.

Overall, the X58B-A2 is certainly one of the better motherboards from ECS. It is true that other manufacturers have moved ahead of the company, but this board is possibly the best motherboard ECS has ever produced. **NAG**

Neo Sibeko

★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

Bottom Line
A step in the right direction for ECS.

Plus
+ Price
+ SLI and CrossFire support

Minus
- Too many oversights in board layout
- BIOS slow to navigate

ASUS ROG OC Station

IF ANY MANUFACTURER WAS going to produce a product such as this, it was bound to be ASUS: the company is renowned for one-off components that are geared at overclockers or gamers, and, more recently, both.

The ROG OC Station is one such device. It works exclusively with ASUS's ROG line of motherboards, which makes it meaningless for everyone else. Nevertheless, it's a great device and well worth adding to your arsenal if you happen to own an ROG board or are planning to buy one in the near future.

The OC Station is what every manufacturer offers in the form of software-control panels for their motherboards in an external unit. The OC Station allows you to overclock the system in real time, during games and while benchmarking. This means that you can select several system settings, from Vcore, other CPU-related voltages, Northbridge voltages, DRAM voltages, FSB, BCLK, HT clock frequencies and voltages, RAM dividers, clock multipliers, and the like, on the fly.

Some might find the appeal of this product very limited, but for enthusiasts and those who want to extract the best from their systems, or simply want this level of control without fiddling with the BIOS, this is the perfect product.

For instance, during a 3DMark Vantage run, one can increase the CPU clock speed to maximise the frame rate in 3D tests, and decrease the clock speed when it comes to the CPU Physics test to prevent the application from crashing. This level of control can mean a lot, especially to enthusiasts who often walk the fine line between a stable overclock and one that will crash on the first run of Super PI.

The unit features three buttons, a silver dial that one uses to navigate the menus, and a small full-colour display, which can be set to display just about anything you want via the included software. It supports Windows SideShow, which allows it to be used as a secondary display.

A standard, four-pin Molex connector powers the unit, but we discovered that one can still operate the unit without the Molex connector - it can draw power from the USB connector it uses.

The OC Station is not for everyone, but enthusiasts with ASUS boards should definitely consider it.   **NAG**

Neo Sibeko

★★★★☆

Bottom Line
One of the more specialised, enthusiast-centric ASUS products.

Plus
+ Can adjust almost everything
+ Easy to set up

Minus
– Limited appeal

Mushkin Enhanced 6GB PC16000 Triple-Channel Kit

MUSHKIN PRODUCES JUST ABOUT everything memory-related, and of late has re-entered the graphics card market (see our Mushkin GeForce GTX 295 review in this issue). Where they always do well, however, is in the DRAM market, and the company's expertise here cannot be underestimated.

Mushkin has many DDR3 kits, including the high-voltage 2.1V kits used in the earlier days of the LGA775 platform, to the latest 1.5V triple-channel kits for the i7. We have yet to test a Mushkin kit that doesn't overclock well past its specifications, and this is a trend that we expected to remain true with their PC16000 kit.

Being a 6GB kit, this is exclusively for i7 users who are looking to maximise their performance and the memory capacity of their system. Obviously, the benefits of a 6GB kit are really appreciated in a 64-bit environment, but even if you're using a 32-bit operating system right now, the rated speed of 2GHz will be much appreciated, provided you are able to overclock your i7 to such speeds. And even if you're not, having RAM that has a very high clock speed means that as the i7 CPUs get better and the boards improve, one will eventually be able to take advantage of the high memory speed and operate the set at 2GHz on a daily basis.

The Mushkin set is outfitted in the usual Mushkin black heat spreaders, which look great in almost any case and with any motherboard. The RAM remains cool regardless of the speed the RAM is set at, and even with 1.7V applied, there is never a need to actively cool the RAM.

Where overclocking is concerned, it's a mixed bag. What is for sure is that you'll have a hard time overclocking this RAM past 1,030MHz (2,060MHz DDR), which is a relatively low ceiling. However, given the price of this set, it's more than enough. What is also worth noting is that, while we may not have been able to reach significantly higher speeds than what the RAM is rated at, we were able to tighten the timings to CL 9-9-9-24 1T, which is much better than the 9-10-9-24 2T the RAM is specified for. If an affordable 6GB high-performance set is what you want, look no further than this Mushkin kit.   **NAG**

Neo Sibeko
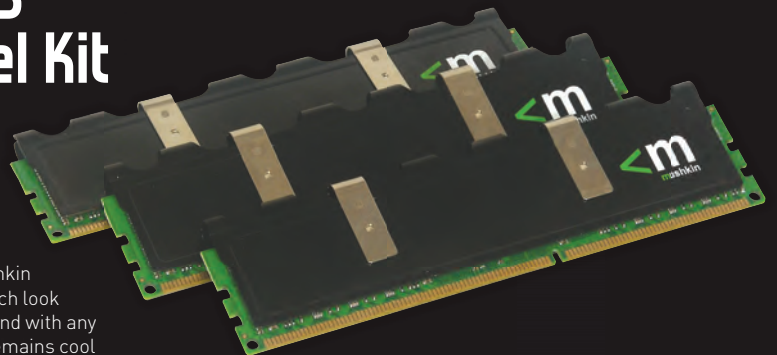
Specifications

Frequency: 2,000MHz
Timings: CL9-10-9-24 2T
XMP/EPP: No
Operating Voltage: 1.65V

★★★★☆

Bottom Line
Great RAM at a reasonable price.

Plus
+ Performance
+ Cool

Minus
– Not much overclocking headroom

Supplier→ Evetech   **Web→** www.evetech.co.za

Intel Basic Gamer PC

TODAY I FIND MYSELF staring into the case window of the third Evetech PC I've had for review in as many weeks. First impressions always count, and as far as gaming cases go, this one didn't raise my heart rate. You're greeted by a very *Transformer*-like-looking case. Let me take this opportunity to point out that gaming cases are very much a personal preference, so I am aware that my statement is therefore a very opinionated claim. However, each of the ten gamers I showed this case to had to agree with me. Apart from the looks, the actual case does rattle a bit due to the plastic covers, and I was scared of denting the thin metal even when removing the case from the polystyrene it came packaged in. Do remember, though, that this system was put together with a limited budget in mind. You do have the option of customising your PC before placing your order, and so you could effectively change the case to something better suited to your own taste and budget.

As with all Evetech PCs, this budget-range system is targeted at a specific market, and built to the exact needs of that market. The system is very balanced, no single component is held back by another, and each of the components makes sense for a PC at this price point. So, will the system play the latest games at medium settings? *Crysis Warhead* was playable at 1,280 x 1,024 at medium settings, which is acceptable; but in our age where 19-inch and larger screens are common at almost any LAN, this resolution may be considered low-end by serious gamers. When we cranked the resolution up to 1,680 x 1,050, the system started to fall apart and needed a mix of low and medium before we could play lag-free again. *PROTOTYPE* fared slightly better: at 1,280 x 1,024 the system managed medium settings just fine, and could even hold up with 2x AA switched on; although once again, at the higher resolutions, a mix of low and medium with no AA was the order of the day. Many of the other modern games we tested performed in the same way, although with older games, high settings managed over 25fps.

So then, how does the Intel Basic Gamer PC hold up? What we have here is a balanced system at a very good price point, able to play modern games at acceptable levels, and that's all you need really. The price tag of R4,499 is far from unjust, as the system comes with peace of mind that many worried parents would find welcome each time little Johnny steps out of the door on his way to a LAN. This PC, like all Evetech systems, comes highly recommended. **NAG**

Derrick Cramer

★★★★☆

Bottom Line

Well built and a good buy, this PC is best suited to people who want t o be able to play most games on normal settings without breaking the bank.

Plus	Minus
+ Very affordable	- Average case

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BY TARRYN VAN DER BYL

A sitdown with Diablo

It's been nine years since *Diablo II* caught the world by storm. That's some sort of mystical, unholy number or something. *NAG*'s underworld interrogator Tarryn van der Byl caught up with the Lord of Terror for a chat about life, the universe, and the eternal shame of having been bested by a runty, gothic brat with a big sword.

TO BE HONEST, I didn't actually expect him to turn up. After all, the last we saw of the Great Red One, he was lying in a crumpled heap in his subterranean lair, surrounded by the soggy remains of his erstwhile employees, and a randomised assortment of his most precious baubles.

"What?" he booms, prompting a minor earthquake. "Hell no, that was my stunt double, Gerald. One of several, actually, what with all the reloading. And that stuff lying around was made of plastic." He waves one enormous claw dismissively, and a pair of pedestrians crossing the street nearby fall dead. "Excuse me, I really have to take this call."

The colossal Prime Evil retires to a corner of the veranda to talk on his iPhone, while I'm left sitting with his bodyguard, an imp named Moloch. "Please," hisses Moloch urgently, leaning across the table and clutching my hand, "Kill me. Now." An awkward silence ensues, as I determinedly fob off a proffered dagger inscribed with fiery runes. Diablo returns, as a gentle rain of locusts begins falling around us, splattering on the umbrella overhead.

"That was Baal," he grunts, sitting back down and taking a noisy slurp of his Banana Smoothie. "Damned fool's gotten himself into a tangle with a couple of Harrogan tree-huggers. Would you believe those insolent barbarians levied fines for trampling the indigenous flora out on Mount Arreat? I told him his triumphal host was too extravagant for such a 'piddling' little town. Man, I totally learnt my lesson after trashing Tristram. Cost me a fortune repairing all those infernal fissures, never mind all those blasted cows." The gargantuan arch-demon sighs dramatically. The patrons seated at the table next to us break out in festering boils, while blood gouts from a passing waitress's eyes.

So, where to from here, I ask, somewhat apprehensively. The hulking fiend ponders a moment, absently scratching one immense horn, and seemingly oblivious to the unfolding hysteria surrounding him. "Well, I've been offered a few intriguing proposals," he concedes enigmatically, with a theatrical wink. "My covert operative, Jack Thompson, is playing the field, testing the boundaries of human tolerance, and sowing general discord. And I've a few subtle endorsements going – heavy metal, scanty underwear, Paris Hilton. That sort of thing. Oh, and of course there's *Diablo III*. The no-LAN plaything? That was my idea." He giggles, a sound inscrutably and uncomfortably like distant screaming.

Out in the bay, a gigantic, seven-headed beast erupts from the roiling waves, devouring swimmers and sending terrified beach-goers flailing headlong for safety. Diablo finishes off his Smoothie, smacking his lips grotesquely, and gazes meaningfully at the bill. Moloch avoids eye contact. Any wisdom to share with our readers? "You might think it's a good idea at the time," the Beast of the Apocalypse responds, "but a Soulstone in the forehead is a ghastly fashion accessory. It's really the mullet of the Abyss. Big no-no." **NAG**

> My covert operative, **Jack Thompson, is playing the field, testing the boundaries of human tolerance**, and sowing general discord.