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PC GAMER

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200 reasons
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gaming

■
50 games to
play at work

■
15 massive
reviews

■
4 stunning
previews

■
3-display
gaming PCs

■
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0 52 NUMBER 200
MAY 2010

CLICKING A TITLE TAKES YOU DIRECTLY TO THE ARTICLE

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PC GAMER®

#200 MAY 2010

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Future US, Inc. is part of Future plc. Future plc produces carefully targeted magazines, websites and events for people with a passion. We publish more than 180 magazines, websites and events and we export or license our publications to 90 countries around the world.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).

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PC Gamer levels up

After 16 years and 199 issues of what began as "The World's Finest PC Games Magazine," it amazes me how *little* the fundamentals of PC gaming have changed since our first issue in 1994. It's still the platform where *everything* happens first—optical drives, high-fidelity sound, 3D acceleration, high-definition video and voiceovers



by Patrick Stewart. And it's still the *only* open platform, resisting all attempts at taming and centralized control—the independent and free society, versus the rigid, do-it-our-way-or-else feudalism of the consoles.

But a few things have changed. There are now more PC gamers on the planet than gamers on all the consoles combined and doubled. High-end gaming PC maker Falcon Northwest reported 2009 annual sales as the best in its 18-year history—despite a global financial apocalypse—and the median selling price of each of its rigs was an insanely hard-core \$4,000. And PC Gamer just adopted an *ultra-spiffy* and more flexible design to accom-

modate our increasing coverage of massively multiplayer games, independent developers and the spectacular mod scene that continues to blow us away every month with its boldness and creativity. And, last but not least, we're now "The World's Number One PC Games Magazine."

Things just get better and better. Thanks for enjoying it with us!

LOGAN DECKER
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Talk to PC Gamer

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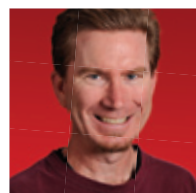
WHODUNIT



Evan Lahti
 Senior Editor
 Evan will stab you in the face and then say "Good game." Which qualifies him to review *Bad Company 2* on page 56.



Dan Stapleton
 Reviews Editor
 Dan's spectacular bumper crop of reviews begins with *Command & Conquer 4: Tiberian Twilight* on page 60.



Dan Fitzpatrick
 Lead Designer
 See that guy? He made all the pages pretty. He also rendered Logan as a Gibberling (above), to Logan's infinite delight.



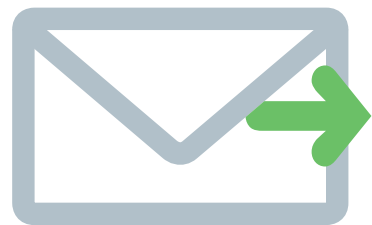
Josh Augustine
 Contributing Editor
 Of course, we wouldn't even know what a Gibberling was if Josh hadn't spelled out *Allods Online* for us on page 14.

PC Gamer (ISSN 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus a Holiday issue following the December issue, by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Periodicals Postage Paid at South San Francisco, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Subscriptions: One year basic rate (12 issues & 12 CDs: U.S.\$29.95; Canada: \$49.95; Foreign: \$69.95; Canadian price includes postage and GST (GST #128220688)). For customer service, write PC Gamer Customer Service, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Phone: (800) 898-7159. Online: www.pcgamer.com/customer-service. Subscriptions do not include newsstand-only specials. Postmasters please send change of address to PC Gamer, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Corporate, advertising sales, circulation, editorial and production offices: Future US, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax: (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Editorial information should be addressed to: Editor, PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Overnight delivery parcels should be addressed to: PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Future US publishes Guitar World, MacLife, Maximum PC, Nintendo Power, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, Pregnancy, Revolver, Windows: The Official Magazine and The Official Xbox Magazine. Entire contents copyright 2010 Future US. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Reproduction on the Internet of the articles and pictures in this magazine is illegal without the prior written consent of PC Gamer. Products named in the pages of PC Gamer are trademarks of their respective companies. Future US is not affiliated with the companies or products covered in PC Gamer. IPM# 0781118. Produced in the U.S.A. Ride-along Enclosures in the following edition(s): B1, C1, C2, C3, C4. Standard enclosures: None. Publications Mail Agreement #40043631. Returns: 4960-2 Walker Road, Windsor ON N9A 6J3.

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MAY 2010 PC GAMER 3

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Your emails, Facebooks, Twitters, and yes, we still get the occasional letter

BACK CHATTER

■ *Arcanum*, there was a game. Why don't they make impossible and tedious games like that anymore? I think I just answered my own question.
@JoeViturbo

■ I buy most of my games digitally. I'm saving the game developers printing, packaging and transportation costs. Unfortunately, those savings have yet to be passed on to me. Until the games industry stands up to Wal-Mart or Best Buy or whoever, I'll pass on \$60 games like *Modern Warfare 2* and *Assassin's Creed 2*.
John Pritchard

■ I'm proud to be a few years behind everybody else. I just played *Crysis* for the first time last summer—cost me \$10. Just finished *Dead Space* last month—cost me \$15.
Aaron Thomas

■ *Star Trek Online* currently owns my ass. The space part of the game rocks! The ground game, not so much.
William Anderson

■ Thank you for the awesome *BioShock 2* poster included in the latest issue.
@Myp

■ The first issue of my new *PC Gamer* subscription arrived today. Tonight, I read and game!
@TehBadger
Welcome to the club!

Digital effect

Mass Effect 2 looks brilliant, and your review highly recommends we play the first game before we dive into BioWare's newest epic. Is there any benefit to buying the retail version of *Mass Effect* instead of downloading the game digitally, or vice versa? I know that the retail DRM limits the number of installs, whereas Steam is somewhat more flexible. But at the same time, if the retail copy has a nice beefy manual to read through, I'd like to get that version. So which is better?

Alex Opifcius

Mass Effect's manual won't be making Oprah's Book Club anytime soon.



Get the digital version, hands down. The manual's a skimpy black-and-white booklet, so you're not missing out on much there. In fact, you can view the entire manual in PDF online (in color!) at tinyurl.com/y88sepl. PCG

Bills to pay

In the not-so-distant past, *PC Gamer* led revolts against having to pay to play the games that we already bought. That was for suckers who bought an Xbox, and you brutally mocked Games For Windows Live for even suggesting we pay to play. But now we are being overtaken by games like *WOW*, *EVE Online* and now *Star Trek Online* that want us to keep paying! My wife will kill me, don't you understand?

G. Kendrick

What we still mock Microsoft for is expecting people to pay for non-persistent online play (like

THE HOT MAIL

Rewarding Bad Behavior

As a rule, I never argue with Game of The Year awards. However, when it comes to MMO of the year I think you guys got something wrong in picking *EVE Online*: it didn't come out during the year in question.

The argument that MMOs have running servers and updated content is irrelevant. As with any other non-MMO title, no one would make *Fallout 3* game of this year based on DLC Bethesda produced after the original launch. MMOs are no different.

This is more than just a philosophical question: this award supports the trend of prematurely releasing games knowing they can be improved later on! *EVE* is a great game today, but when it

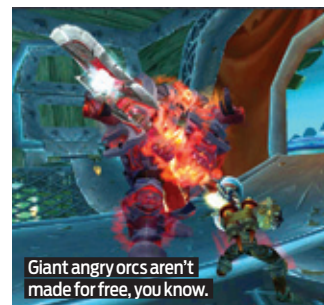
came out it sucked—and that was the year that mattered. Game producers should be pushed to deliver great, polished games at launch, and GoTY awards are one way to encourage that.

Michael Roy Shapira

It's a fair point, but wouldn't giving the award to an MMO that launched with problems in 2009 (as almost all of them did) reinforce that unfortunate trend even more? EVE's award should serve as incentive to MMO developers to remain dedicated to community and outstanding improvement for the years following launch, and encourage our readers to try out a currently fantastic game that they might have otherwise passed by based on old information.

PCG

The WoW 3.3 update added the Icecrown raid as part of the "Fall of The Lich King" storyline.



joining a first-person shooter match) on the PC or Xbox 360, but MMOs are kind of a different animal. A subscription to WoW is like a subscription to a magazine—you keep paying Blizzard to keep their servers humming along, as well as employ teams of designers to develop new patches and content (like the recent 3.3 update that added the Icecrown raid as part of the "Fall of The Lich King" storyline). Besides, you can make the compelling argument to your spouse that by paying \$15 per month to play an MMO, you're actually saving money compared to buying a new game every month or two at \$50 each. PCG

They prefer "Deceased Americans"

Why does *PC Gamer* continue to refer to the "undead" in the *Left 4 Dead* series when Valve has stated that they are not undead zombies but living humans infected with a nasty form of rabies? **Jim**

Thinking like that will get you

killed in the coming Zombie Apocalypse, Jim. They may look like your friends and family, but those people are gone, and a moment's hesitation could result in the deaths of your entire party of survivors. PCG

A+

I am an eighth grader writing an English report and decided to write it in response to an article in your March magazine: the *Lego Indiana Jones 2* review. I do not agree with the rating you have given it. It does not go with the movie plots at all, nor do the boss fights make sense. If the game wasn't trying so hard to have something in common with the movie, I would say make it a new theme. I believe that the game is a total letdown and that its rating should be reduced to 41%. In conclusion, this is a very bad game.

Patrick A. Nunnallee

Oh, originality, where art thou?

As a returning subscriber, all I can ask is: What happened? I have been out of the loop the past eight years, but now have the time to relax again and I'm looking for a game. You know, the kind that makes you show up to work the next day with a tense neck and bleary eyes from playing all night. But all I find is endless crap, mostly first-person shooters that are all clones of themselves. Where are the new *Civilizations*, the *Black & Whites*, the *Alpha Centauris*, the *Homeworlds*, the



Lego Indiana Jones 2 does not go with the movie plots at all, nor do the boss fights make sense.

PRTSCN

Damn, what was that game where you glued zebras to jeeps?



Do a BEAR-EL Roll!
Austin Wagner

I flew through the air/But the bear wasn't there/The gnome began to

roam/But I didn't care/So when the flannel-suited man/Fast he began to ran/Away from the gnome/The bear carried me home

SHOW US YOURS Take a great screenshot lately? Send it to us at letters@pcgamer.com with PRTSCN in the subject line and a description of what's going on in the body, and we might feature it in next month's issue.

original *Warcrafts*? Will Wright's *Spore* comes the closest so far—a good game that just missed being great by a little bit. Computer games should be for the thinking gamer; leave the run-down-a-hall-and-shoot-some-things-to the kids on the consoles.

George

Hey, PC gaming invented running down the hall and shooting things! We don't believe the PC should be limited to any one type of game; in fact, that's one thing that makes our platform the best. We have both the big crowd-pleasing shooters and a thriving community of smaller independent developers that create clever innovative works. Just a few recent games that might scratch that itch of yours are Sins of a Solar Empire: Trinity, Gratuitous Space Battles, AI War, Machinarium, Sumotori Dreams and Ozmos. PCG

First!

I enjoyed reading "They Did It First" in the March issue. It reminds me how impressive some of the "first time" features were when they arrived. One in particular was my experience

with *Flight Simulator 1.0*, released in November 1982 by Microsoft and developed by Bruce Artwick's Sublogic Corporation. *FS 1.0* led me to buy a Hercules Monochrome graphics card; it was a great experience, making "suspension of disbelief" very easy—I recall once breaking a joystick trying to pull out of a dive.

Steve Kennedy

While "They Did It First" in the March issue is correct in saying that the first MMORPGs were MUDs, it's way off on the first graphical MMO. It cites *Meridian 59* as the first, released in 1996, but it's 1991's *Neverwinter Nights*, which was offered as an add-on service through America Online, that was the very first.

Robert Klebes

I just thought I'd point out that in *Leisure Suit Larry III: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of the Pulsating Pectorals*, Larry's wife Kalalau leaves him for another woman at the beginning of the game, effectively making her gaming's first lesbian. It came out in 1989, predating *Circuit's Edge* and *Phantasmagoria 2*.

Tojophantom

BACK CHATTER

■ Reader Q&A: Do you prefer single-player or multiplayer demos? **PCG**

Single-player. I'd rather get a flavor for the story, see if it's any good and check how the AI is. Most multiplayer demos are exactly the same as any other multiplayer demo. It's very hard to judge a game on it.
Benjamin Mallow

Multiplayer, if possible. It really gives a better feel for the game. If you're willing to download a demo of the game, chances are that you're already familiar with the concept/story (which is the only thing the single-player demo has over the multiplayer demo).

Ronald Tran

I'm gonna have to go with single-player. I'm much more into the SP aspects of games because many other players in multiplayer matches can be a-holes.

Jim VanDieren

WHERE WE PLAY

Play on the official PC Gamer community servers

Battlefield: Bad Company 2
8.17.251.133 (search "PC Gamer" in the server browser filter)

Counter-Strike: Source
207.210.252.63

ArmA 2
75.102.38.106

Garry's Mod
8.17.251.201



Our game servers are provided by Art of War Central, PCG's staff-approved hosting service. Visit artofwarcentral.com

MONITOR

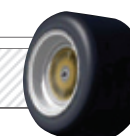
THE **PC GAMER** VIEW OF THE WORLD



»12 KillCreek



»15 Bean



»18 Vroom

MONITOR

Season 1

The Vanderlans flee the city for the slower pace of suburban life. But it doesn't take long for them to find that there's a seamy side to every neighborhood. *The Sims* launches in February 2000. Millions of gamers simultaneously undress their Sims and are simultaneously disappointed.



Season 2

Rudy begins to suspect that a malevolent force is tormenting him. Susan is troubled by her daughter's new career.

A virus once spread throughout *The Sims*, eventually traced to pet guinea pigs mischievously introduced by Will Wright.



Season 3

Poorly dressed aliens try to pick up on Earth chicks with little success. *The Sims* later discover, however, that extraterrestrials are delicious.

The French gave *The Sims* an official postage stamp, and gave the rest of the world Carla Bruni.



Season 6

An unexpected storyline that strands *The Sims* on a strange inhospitable island, where life is a desperate struggle to survive in a bizarre and inhospitable environment, is criticized for too closely mimicking a popular television series: NBC's *Friends*. A lawyer/weirdo goes on television telling everybody that *The Sims 2* promotes nudity through mods or patches. No one knows what he is talking about.



Season 7

Using a series of colorful detonators, *The Sims* finally manage to repel the alien infiltrators. *The Sims: Pets* becomes the best-selling expansion pack of the series to date.



Season 8

Oliver does not get the house after the divorce, and his mistress Dot tells him that if he had wanted it, he "shoulda put a ring on it," and dumps him. Oliver then spends most of his time just standing in someone's front yard. *The Sims* sells its 100 millionth copy.



Season 10

Season 10? Just getting started. With its appeal to casual, hardcore, and even non-gamers as well as teens, young adults and especially female gamers, *The Sims*, says EA President and CEO John Riccitiello "has broken all the old established rules about videogames."

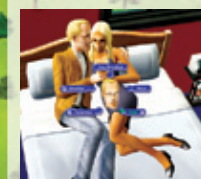


10 Years of The Sims: A Viewer's Guide

THE BIG STORY Love. Jealousy. Relationships. Adultery. Tragedy. People from outer space. If you haven't been playing *The Sims*, you don't know what you've been missing. *PC Gamer* gets you up to speed with highlights of what's been going on inside and outside the world of the best-selling PC game of all time. **by Logan Decker**

Season 4

Carl and Reye discuss how many things they have in common, unaware that a father is one of them. *The Sims Online* launches in December 2002 and, despite creeping everybody out, lasts until 2007 when it is re-branded as *EA Land*, and shuts down altogether the following year.



Season 5

The Vanderlans launch a family-owned taxidermy service. Hilary Duff appears out of nowhere. Seven expansion packs are released for *The Sims* before *The Sims 2* is launched in September 2004.



Season 9

Lisette meets Dot. Three months later, she puts a ring on it. *The Sims 3* takes off in November 2009, winning a 93% and an Editor's Choice from *PC Gamer*.





THE SPY

LIFE EXTENSIONS

A list of upcoming games confirms The Spy's suspicions that EA is going to play it safe for the next few years. Thanks to BioWare, the publisher has a duo of new universes to mine: *Mass Effect* should continue beyond its planned trilogy, and *Dragon Age* can expect a new game in 2011.

The Spy also understands that EA will be releasing a shooter from Epic's People Can Fly studio. Epic, the makers of the Unreal 3 engine and *Unreal Tournament 3*, bought the Polish makers of *Painkiller* a few years ago and turned them into a satellite studio. The expected name: *Bullet Storm*!

MORE GOLD

The Spy's other discovery should land him a gold medal in the Spylimpics. He can report that the *FEAR* series will be made a trilogy—proof has been spotted in a casting call for a viral video. Plot details have leaked too, suggesting the controllable character from the first game, Point Man, will return, Paxton Fettel (Point Man's evil, cannibalistic and presumed dead brother) will be back as the main villain, and the now-pregnant zombie Alma also returns.

Keep your collapsable backpack helicopter blades always at the ready, friends. Spy out. ■

NOW

AT THE PC GAMER WEB STORE

Our forefathers had to travel far from home in order to play the latest games, and on the journey they were frequently eaten by bears. That must have sucked. Today, you need only go to www.pcgamer.com/store to buy and download games without fear.

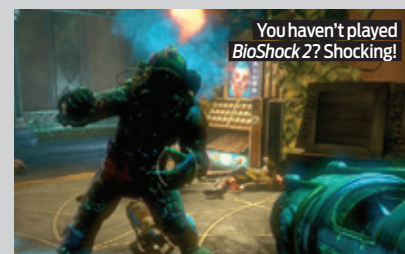
Star Trek Online Pew-pew action!

BioShock 2 Little girls, Big Sisters

Mass Effect 2 Relays, alien babes

Dragon Age: Origins Dwarf-tastic!

Torchlight Hack, slash for less cash



SPY ILLUSTRATION: DAVID LITTLETON



Precognitive Gamer!

We saw the future...and no one listened

Not to pat ourselves on the back, but we're geniuses. Marvel over the predictions made in our 100th issue back in August 2002!

SimGeneSplicer

"Mix and match DNA and...create new life!" Gosh, sounds a lot like Will Wright's *Spore*! Of course, we predicted you'd be using *real* DNA, but whatever. Accuracy: 67%

Star Trek: Federation

"Warp around the universe with a million alien pals in the massively multiplayer *Star Trek: Federation*." That's what we predicted then, and right on

schedule, *Star Trek Online* is reviewed in our 200th issue! Accuracy: 99%

Doom III: Free to Pocket PC Subscribers!

OK, so Pocket PC is now Windows Mobile, and "fun" isn't the word we'd use to describe that. But *Doom Resurrection* takes many of the textures and much of the artwork of *Doom 3* and delivers a remarkably faithful adaptation on the iPhone. Accuracy: 88%

Best Game of 2010? Killcreek Does It Again!

Well, three out of four ain't bad.

Massive Attack



Sailing Free

Recruit a crew in *Allods Online* and explore otherworldly planes in your flying galleon

The first thing I did was take pictures of a slug. Seriously. I took 32 screenshots of a slug before moving on to a lightning spell effect. The ability of the *Allods Online* artists to make sewer slugs a tourist attraction already has me pretty impressed. That leads a beaming Community Manager, Katelyn Omstead, to tell me that the team's artists won six individual awards in the prestigious

Dominance War digital art competition (dominancewar.com) this year.

Yes, it's pretty, gorgeous, even. But *Allods Online* (yeah, the name, we'll get to that)

busted onto the MMO scene with much more to boast about than its art. It's best described as sci-fi fantasy—it has traditional Orcs and Elves, but they're marching side-by-side with a biomechanical race called the Arisen. A total of 28 classes fall within eight archetypes, each of which utilizes a unique combat mechanic. Paladins, for instance, limit the amount of damage they take by absorbing blows with temporary shields that delay pain, and then use the damage built up on their shields to reduce the final blow. That's some trick. Meanwhile, Psionicists have a host of supernatural abilities that rely on linking minds with an enemy, making them see copies of you or themselves (or just messing with their heads in general).

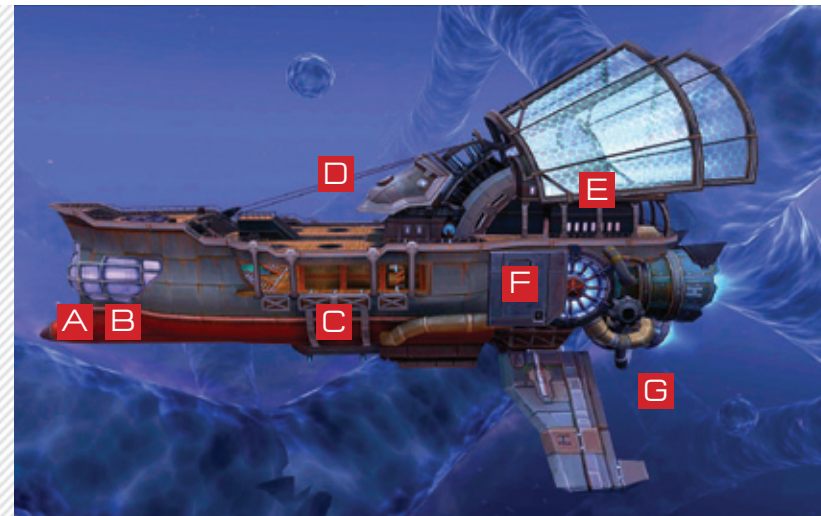
But it's the Astral—sort of like outer space, except that it's imbued



Josh Says: I haven't been this excited about an MMO since *World of Warcraft* launched. I'll be enlisting a crew and braving the Astral as a Psionicist—and winning a couple Goblinball matches along the way.



with magical energy and inhabited by dangerous creatures—that really primes me for *Allods Online*. It'll take a ton of resources and about three months of effort, but once your guild builds an Astral ship, you'll be able to explore the Astral in a giant steampunk-style flying galleon. These Astral ships are huge (the team claims they're about as big as *WoW*'s Stormwind, although they don't seem quite that large to me) and a crew of up to six can shift around the duty stations on board (see Astral Ship hot spots) to keep the ship running at full capacity.



Astral Ship hot spots

A Engines (2 players)
Start 'em up to get this baby under way.

B The Wheel (1 player)
Choose a destination and keep the ship on course.

C Visor (1 player)
Check which parts of the

ship have been damaged when you come under attack.

D Cannons (2-6 players)
Hit the top deck and open fire on your enemies!

E Scanner (1 player)
Scan the area for other ships, allods and monsters.

F Mechanics (2-6 players)
Grab a fix-it Goblin by the head and drag him to the area that needs repairing.

G Security (2-6 players, no specific location)
Repel any boarding parties trying to get to your treasure hold.

The ultimate reward of any trip into the Astral is loot, and lots of it. The best way to get it is to hunt down one of the 26 elusive floating chunks of land, known as "allods" (derived from the Latin term that refers to property that no government has any right to touch), which often house dungeons. But if you succeed in scoring "teh phat lewtz," your crew had better be on top

of their game if you're going to get it back to the guild bank safely. Piracy is a totally legitimate progression choice in *Allods Online*: You'll find there are going to be plenty of ne'er-do-gooders firing cannons and boarding the deck of your Astral ship to plunder your treasure hold. (Ship-to-ship combat features location-specific damage, boarding parties and repair crews.)

Of course, life in *Allods Online* isn't all-pillage-and-no-play. You might have a go at Goblinball, the sport that involves teams kicking a Goblin around a field. It's similar to soccer, but crueler. You can join in the fun directly or, if

you're a dedicated galleon potato, simply bet on the outcome without leaving the comfort of your ship.

Allods Online is subscriptionless, supported by a cash shop that sells vanity and temporary boosting items, all of which can be sold in the auction house for in-game currency. But you'll probably want to hang onto what you buy. Life looks as though it might get pretty rough in the Astral. **Josh Augustine**

TRIPLE FUZZ

All of *Allods Online* animations were motion-captured and look incredibly fluid, but the tiny trifecta Gibberling race really steal the show.

Gibberlings are pint-sized puppy people that walk on two feet and are always born as triplets, meaning your character is actually a pack of three Gibberlings—named and customized individually—that work together as a unit to defeat their enemies. They turn animations for the most basic actions, like shooting a bow (one holds the front, another pulls the string, the third loads the arrow, and they almost fall down afterwards), into an amusing performance.



MMOS CELEBRATE OLYMPICS

SPORTS GETTING INTO THE COMPETITIVE SPIRIT

» Quite a few MMOs celebrated the winter Olympics with unique outfits, achievements or PvP zones. Our favorite was *League of Legends*, which served up a hearty helping of unique content: toboggan-, curling- and Union Jack-themed skins for champions; powerful, unique runes; and an Olympic-themed update to the game's winter map throughout the Olympics.



REAL LIFE WOW STUFF

TOYS THAT'S ONE SMALL STEP FOR BLIZZARD...

» One giant leap for *WoW* merchandising, as plushy Gryphon and Windrider dolls took flight from Blizzard's warehouse to players' doorsteps. But what's the point of buying something if you can't show it off in Dalaran? Blizzard thought the same thing and included a code with each doll that you can redeem for a digital version of your respective plushy purchase—a non-combat pet for all of your characters.



QUICK TURNAROUND

CHAMPIONS FLIP-FLOPPING LIKE IT'S SUMMER AT THE BEACH

Cryptic is offering its first batch of end-game content to *Champions Online* players for free, making peace after their initial announcement of paid-only content sent the community into an uproar. Cryptic made the right choice—this content should have been included at release. But shouldn't the monthly subscription price be instead of, not in addition to, paid DLC?



STILL UNDEFEATED!

Lawl! Maplestory noobz, learn2play.





Bruce Shelley is a more than 20-year veteran of strategy game development and has worked alongside industry greats, such as Sid Meier. In 1995, he helped found Ensemble Studios.

When Ensemble Studios was completing the first *Age of Empires* in 1997, we read in a gaming magazine that there were well over 50 real-time strategy titles in development. The genre was absolutely booming—the vast success of *Warcraft II* and *Command & Conquer* was giving publishers the signal to greenlight more RTS games. In that period of renaissance, strategy became a core genre for the advanced multiplayer gamer, but also one with enough depth and flexibility to be a success with broader audiences as well.

A decade later, real-time strategy has lost that position as a genre that serves core and mainstream audiences. I believe this has less to do with strategy games losing favor—after all, there has been a cascade of big strategy sequels with the recent releases of *Supreme Commander 2*, *Command & Conquer 4*, *Napoleon: Total War* and *Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising*. Strategy's shift in popularity has more to do with new genres appearing, others being heavily boosted and new audiences wanting different experiences.

On the defense

Other genres have done a better job of creating entertaining online multiplayer experiences. Shooters foster great community on the dedicated servers they reside on; MMOs are broad habitats unto themselves (I'll admit to playing *Lord of the Rings Online* for nearly two years).

Another factor, even if it seems like it shouldn't affect PC development, is the bitter console war between

Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo over the past several years. The success of console platforms dictates what's profitable, and a huge amount of resources have been invested in attracting audiences to those platforms. A consequence of that effort is less interest and investment in PC games. Strategy has rarely adapted well to consoles, so the genre has been disadvantaged by any shift toward mass market console games.

Big, blockbuster strategy games are expensive to make, and that fact has encouraged some publishers to invest instead where the bets look safer, or where they can ride on the backs of console marketing blitzes.

Counter-attack

Despite these headwinds, I believe strategy remains a strong genre with a big audience.

In the short term, strategy board games have to be transformed from a source of mainstream popularity into hardcore interest. The Settlers of Catan board game, and games like it, are popular in Silicon Valley at lunch time, on college campuses (where it's always lunch time) and even on corporate retreats. The audi-

New audiences want different experiences.

ence for excellent strategy board games is receptive to compelling computer strategy games, especially when they can play with friends and reproduce the social experience.

Most interesting to me is what's happening on what I think of as the frontier of game development—the

environments where small teams can still make a significant game. That frontier seems to be mobile platforms, like the iPhone, Facebook and, perhaps, Apple's iPad. And most of the games on Facebook look like strategy to me.

If *Civilization's* upcoming Facebook version brings more traditional strategy to this platform, attracts a big audience and makes money, it will be followed by many others. The world of strategy gaming could look a lot different and be amazingly healthy in 2017. ■



Will we see another *Age of Empires*? If the *Civilization* series is any indication, you might be playing a sequel on Facebook or an iPhone before your PC.

IN SIMULATION



Andy Mahood is back as a PC Gamer columnist. He's currently playing *iRacing.com*, *DCS: Black Shark*, *Rise of Flight*, *Wings of Prey* and *Race On*.

For a gaming genre that many pundits have written off, simulations are proving to be stubbornly durable. As you read this, the PC lays claim to the most painstakingly accurate and realistic racing sim and flight sim ever developed for their respective fans while several new titles hover tantalizingly on the horizon.

Heading into its third year of operation, *iRacing.com* rolls out virtual race cars and real world tracks every few months that continually set new standards for authenticity and down-to-the-millimeter precision. David Kaemmer's subscription-based service never stops refining itself. With the recent addition of Canada's Mosport International Raceway, England's Brands Hatch circuit and the soon-to-be-released Mid Ohio course, *iRacing's* tarmac roster will balloon to over 40 tracks (comprising close to 100 layout configurations). The service also boasts 17 varied race car classes ranging from small sedans and sports cars to classic competition machines like the Dallara IndyCar and Lotus 79 F1. *iRacing* recently slashed its yearly subscription rate by over a third, which should boost its subscriber base (already at 20,000 and growing).

Kick the tires, light the fires

Similarly impressive in its rivet-counting realism is Eagle Dynamics' *DCS: Black Shark*, PC Gamer's Sim of the Year for 2009. This rotary wing simulation showcases the Kamov Ka-50 Black Shark attack helicopter in system-by-meticulous-system detail, and the Russian-built product has already set an absurdly high bar for depth and accuracy in a PC "study sim," as these recreations are called. *DCS: Black Shark* is the first in a series of planned standalone modules that'll eventually

include *DCS: A-10C Warthog* and some intricate future releases featuring the Apache AH-64A and F-16C Falcon, in all their switch-flipping, missile-packing glory.

And it certainly doesn't end with those. Race sim fans can look forward to new entries in the *GTR* and *RACE* series' from Swedish developers SimBin, whose latest *GTR Evolution* and *RACE On* releases wowed critics in 2008 and 2009. More accessible titles from the inventive Brits at Codemasters, who brought us *DiRT 2* and *GRID*, are also expected. Although not as overtly "simmy" as the *iRacing* or SimBin offerings, Codemasters' games have established sparkling new benchmarks for PC racing graphics.

Surf and sky

Fixed-wing flight sim fans have plenty of options to keep them airborne as well. Neoqb's *Rise of Flight*—a lovingly detailed, Russian-built WWI dogfighting sim—transports canvas-winged biplane aficionados back to the glory days of Dynamix's revered *Red Baron* series. WWII fighter jocks can sharpen their strafing skills with *Wings of Prey*, an arcade-style flight sim that shares DNA with the award-winning *IL-2 Sturmovik* series.

Simulations are proving to be stubbornly durable.

Not to be trumped by their air- and asphalt-connected brethren, nautical sim enthusiasts recently rejoiced at the news that Ubisoft (one of the few big-league publishers left in the simulation business), plans to follow up *Silent Hunter 4* with a new U-boat simulation that's set in the Atlantic and Mediterranean theaters. Featuring a unique first-person view of the submarine's interior spaces, *Silent Hunter 5: Battle of the Atlantic* should hit retail channels this March. Claustrophobic types (who like to keep their head above water) can also check out Akella's *PT Boats: Knights of the Sea* for some wake-churning, deck-pounding surface action. Although stuck in development limbo for years, the Russian-built *PT Boats* is finally available in North America through Battlefront.com's online store.

That's just a cross-section of current and pending titles that'll dominate the leisure hours of sim fans in the months and years ahead. Stay tuned to this space—I'll keep you filled in on as many of them as possible as the simming landscape continues to adapt and reinvent itself. ■



From new rides like the exquisite Lotus 79 F1 car and new tracks like Brands Hatch, *iRacing.com* continues to improve its position at the head of the sim racing pack.

The great questions of our time, such as "will citizens actually pay two greenbacks to clothe their disposable virtual steeds in gleaming mail," have already been answered. Four years after *Oblivion*'s release, misfits among us still buy horse armor daily. Despite that inauspicious origin, downloadable content is now a validated commercial model that's proven to be popular with RPG fans. So why has EA screwed up *Dragon Age*'s DLC so badly?

Providing different preorder incentives to various retailers was a bad omen. Many in-game items bestowed through those offers were overpowered, which rendered much of *Dragon Age*'s magical loot mundane, thus making questing less rewarding. Players had to shell out extra to store items, a feature that should have been included *gratis*. *Warden's Keep*, the first commercial DLC, encumbered camps with a bleating NPC begging for aid. Confirm you're willing to assist the hapless wretch and you'll be notified that it's time to crack open your real-world billfold. The fellow's fate is dependent upon Visa. That's annoying enough to turn a Grey Warden into an emissary-booting King Leonidas.

It gets worse. The second commercial DLC, *Return to Ostagar*, has been delayed, released, then retracted and further delayed. When it finally became available, I booted up *Dragon Age* but it wasn't listed under available DLC, and all my previously loaded DLC had somehow become "unauthorized." I sent an email to EA support and was promised a response within 24 hours, but none was ever delivered. Hundreds of customers seeking a remedy for this issue at the official support site were given an erroneous answer that satisfied only 61 out of 1466 respon-

dents. The problem actually arose because a content updater service needs to be running on your system, even though resource-hungry gamers routinely turn off all non-Microsoft services.

Funny money

Enabling the service and refreshing the game's main menu finally made the DLC available for download, but only with sufficient "points." Since I had no points, I was abruptly jolted from the game and sent to BioWare's social website—that webpage was a dead-end containing no information on either points or the *Ostagar* DLC. Buying DLC is apparently such a difficult process that BioWare felt the need to produce a five-page explanatory PDF titled "How to Buy Downloadable Content From Within the Game" (bit.ly/biowpdf), yet even *that* document still doesn't explain how to buy points. So I tried to repurchase DLC I already owned and was finally taken to a page to buy points (which, by this time, seemed less accessible than Spanish doubloons), but couldn't just buy the 400 needed points because they were only sold in larger packages. Resigned to buying needless virtual

Why has EA screwed up *Dragon Age*'s DLC so badly?

coinage, I presumed the largest of the three packages (560, 800, and 1600 points) offered the best price-per-point, but realized that each charged an identical price-per-point making them even more arbitrary and meaningless. Rigoddamndiculous.

These problems are hardly insurmountable, but they collectively aggravate and dissuade potential purchasers and annoy anyone who perseveres. Along with the technical problems the social site has

experienced, EA is delivering an experience that's half-baked and ill-considered. Even once acquired, none of the commercial DLC products to date offer more than a bite-sized adventure that's likely too insufficient to lure back players. *DA: O-Awakening* will change that, and hopefully it's not too late.

Dragon Age's DLC sounded so promising. We were pledged a program of new adventure modules, additional creature and building models for content creators, and perhaps even radical gameplay additions. I'm still hopeful that *Dragon Age* will grow and thrive as a franchise, but these missteps have removed some of its luster. ■



Desslock returns as a regular PC Gamer columnist. He's stocking up on cigars and poker chips for when *Fallout: New Vegas* becomes a reality, and currently playing *Dragon Age: Origins - Awakening*, *Risen*, *Mass Effect 2*, *Arma 2*, and *Batman: Arkham Asylum*.





One of my first successes: an infantry rush that crippled the enemy's early economy.

STARCRAFT II

BETA TEST A new player's plunges headlong the beta, and emerges a stronger player, a wiser man, and a seasoned warrior

This is, shamefully, the first time I've ever put my hands on a *StarCraft* game. But even as someone that doesn't consider RTS his forte, jumping on the SC2 beta bandwagon has been one of most fulfilling gaming experiences I've had in years. Realizing that *StarCraft* isn't simply a system through which Korea extracts pride from the rest of the world has been part of that good experience, but so has Battle.net. Blizzard's platform for match-making is a source of comfort: after 10 "placement matches" of lump-taking, it assigns you to a league of comparably skilled players. I was placed into the Copper league: the tournament of pennies.

League matchmaking isn't a new idea—other RTS games released in the past few years have their own systems—but it's likely to help counter SC2's biggest stigma: the idea that a pro player is

waiting to beat you up and take your lunch money the moment you begin. On that topic, SC2 doesn't soften the complexity of its inherited mechanics—perfecting an efficient build order and hotkey and mouse agility are still key—but there's room between investing early in cheap units, like the fast-moving Zerglings, to harass your opponent's economy, or focusing on tech upgrades to rule the late game, which make you feel like you have some flexibility.

Mastering a build order is a remarkably personal moment in *StarCraft II*; the first time you develop a routine that's yours has the same feeling as a go-to "move" in a sport, a maneuver you can deploy reliably. Mine is a rush tactic using Terran Reapers: agile, jetpacking anti-structure

infantry that can demolish an enemy that has focused its resources on climbing the technology ladder in the early game. Being fresh to the sounds and scenes of SC2, Blizzard's respect for ambience as a tool to create better gameplay was constantly apparent. The starting moments of a game played as the Terrans begin with a *Firefly*-like western song that immediately sets a casual pace. It's a tune that understands its own context—this is a time to plan and ramp up your economy by harvesting minerals and gas. By the time you're rolling out structures, the melody is surging with upbeat guitar twangs that punctuate the sounds of pressing steel and welding made by construction units.

My main lament is that SC2 isn't a game that gives you a moment to admire your handiwork—if you stop to watch, your opponent is using that time to launch a counter attack. Check back next month for our massive feature on the game—written by our guys who *have played* before. **Evan Lahti**



No one outrushes the Zerg.



I lost my main base, but my expansion thrives on high-value yellow resource crystals.



DocLobster: this is why we can't have nice things

Protoss Carrier raids bring out the worst in me. Sorry, teammate.

Celebrity StarCraft

How would these famous tacticians play *StarCraft II*?

	Known for	Race	Fave Unit	Tactic	Skill	Weakness
SUN TZU	The Art of War	Zerg	Changeling	"All warfare is based on deception."	8	Can only chat with teammates in Chinese poetry
JOAN OF ARC	Bravery, divine guidance	Protoss	Zealot	Total martyrdom	6	French heritage, fire
GENGHIS KHAN	Conquering Asia	Zerg	Zergling	Horde warfare	9	Must constantly produce Mongolian beef to feed army
ADMIRAL ACKBAR	"It's a trap!"	Protoss	Carrier	Wander gill-long into the fog of war	2	Slight surprises, crawfish jambalaya
CAPT. JAMES T. KIRK	His eyebrows, two-handed attacks	Terran	Battlecruiser	"...Fire!"	6	Pauses mid-battle to make out with Sarah Kerrigan
CAP'N CRUNCH	Establishing trade with Sugartonia	Protoss	Void Ray	Create cavities in enemy defense	4	Must harvest crunchberries as an additional resource



Protoss Zealots attempt to land an airliner on my base.

Release Q2 2010



The Royal Library of Alexandria, pre-being burned to the ground.



Otto von Bismarck: unifier of Germany, devoted finger-exerciser.

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION V

FIRST LOOK Civ's fifth incarnation sees small but significant changes.

If you built your city next to an AI's capital in previous *Civ* games, they would be like, 'Oh, whatever,' explains Jon Shafer. *Civilization V*'s lead designer is telling us how Firaxis is changing PC gaming's beloved history-conquering strategy game.

'Now we've added logic that lets the AI evaluate what's going on in the same manner as a human would. So if you build a city next to someone's capital, that's actually going to annoy them.' The AI will send you a message at this point, asking just what the hell you're thinking.

Throughout its illustrious history, *Civilization*'s basic idea has remained the same: you're a famous leader from history, guiding your civilization through 6,000 years of development. Which civilizations survive and thrive is entirely up to you. Every change Shafer tells us about sounds small, but in a game like

this, tiny changes can make a big difference. Take, for instance, city states.

'City states are weaker, as single city AI players are scattered throughout the map,'

In a game like this, tiny changes can make a big difference.

says Dennis Shirk, the game's producer. And the interrelationships between them can result in unexpected consequences.

'I was playing the other day,' says Shirk. 'I captured a neighboring city state that was very close to me. It immediately sparked off a war with another civilization that was getting benefits from being friends with that city state. The war went on for some 200 years.'

Combat is another area *Civilization V* is going to change. You can command ranged units, like archers and catapults, that can fire across multiple tiles. But instead of stacking them, each tile can now only hold

a single military unit, causing battlefronts to form along enemy borders.

The other major change is to the tile shape: They're now hexagons. 'There are a couple of things about hexes that give an advantage over squares,' explains Shafer. 'They look better. You can have more of an organic look. You don't have to have 90 degree angles everywhere.'

None of these changes sound particularly dramatic, but they should make *Civ V* feel different from its predecessors. 'We recognize that *Civ* is a great game and we didn't want to just keep piling on top of that base,' says Shafer. 'We wanted to create something that was good in its own right, where we could try new things and provide a new flavor.'

If you don't like *Civilization V*'s new taste, you'll be able to add spice of your own with user content. Firaxis is planning a standalone world builder and an in-game mod browser where you can go to download and install mods directly. ■

Graham Smith



Montezuma: mankind's first frat boy.



Your territory has never been so...hexy.



Among other cultural advances, Catapultagonia is known for its elegant wine country.

READ ME
PUBLISHER
2K Games
DEVELOPER
Firaxis Studios
LINK
firaxis.com

Release AUTUMN

Beautiful. But you're going to invade it, so do it neatly.

THE SETTLERS 7 PATHS TO A KINGDOM

NEW INFO An Englishman's home is his castle. Meet the hired help

Computers aren't evil enough. When they beat us, they usually just out-hitpoint or out-gun us. They lack real, creative maliciousness—just the sort of moustache-twirling treachery that *Settlers 7*'s multiplayer will encourage in its human players.

Instead of merely accumulating the most land or money—*Settlers 7*'s multiplayer focuses on Victory Points. Players earn VPs by completing epic tasks (such as having the biggest army, or being the first to defeat the local witch's soldiers). Some are straightforward awards, while others can ebb and flow, be won, lost or stolen. Collectively, the ways to earn points are split neatly between military, scientific and economic glories, ensuring that everyone is likely to be working toward a different set of goals at any particular time.

Happily, this system doesn't skimp on providing you with evil ways to hurl tacks under your fel-

low players' feet. Research, for instance, involves pitting your clerics against your rivals', effectively starting a bidding war for new technologies. Special landmarks on the maps offer their services to any player capable of unlocking them. For instance, defeating the Fallen Knight in his Dark Tower will cause him to send a wave of death toward

With *Settlers*, the economy is your lord and master, just as you are to your servants.

your strongest opponent, or you can bribe the Archivist of the Great Library into letting you peek at his books. Sure, winning a war by sending in troops and siege equipment is all well and good, but isn't it more satisfying to do it without lifting a finger?

More importantly, while most nonsquad-based RTS games ultimately revolve around your economy—if only because it dictates

how many doom tanks you can churn out—with *Settlers*, the economy is your lord and master, just as you are to your servants. Making a simple loaf of bread requires farming the wheat, crushing it into flour, baking it and providing somewhere to store it until dinner time—and that's only one of many products you need to stockpile to keep your armies marching.

Grain, meat, wood, stone... all of them have their place in the construction tree, and it's not enough to simply slap the relevant building down and reap the rewards—distance matters. Clerics need beer, and regular workers only go at full pace if you're willing to serve them quality chow for dinner.

Speaking of whining bastards, let's talk DRM. Along with *Assassin's Creed 2*, *Settlers 7* is the first of Ubisoft's games to insist that you have an Internet connection running while you play. Is there any benefit to this for us? So far, not really. It stores your save games online, but chances are you'll be playing primarily in skirmish mode anyway, so that's a limited benefit. Slightly more

useful is the fact that the game won't require the usual honesty-check of the disc being in the drive when you want to play, which would be considerably more handy if the main attraction of a game like this wasn't being able to pop it on a laptop for travelling and playing on trains, in hotel rooms and various other places where you aren't up to your elbows in Internet connections.

The meat of the game may be in the multiplayer modes, but there's still something to be said for just building up a little village, watching it tick along nicely and zooming in periodically to watch your little ants hard at work.

Security aside, the big question for *Settlers 7* is whether the slow and steady playing style it encourages will be enough to win the hearts of fans after the last fairly simplistic game—and if so, just how much variety can the maps and objectives provide? City-building, fiendish tactics and the thrill of competition? We'll settle for nothing less. ■

Richard Cobbett

Release MARCH

Release Meter

Deep in the Canadian tundra, there is a frozen cavern whose entrance is guarded by a great walrus. Being pure of spirit, we were allowed to pass into this cave and speak to its shaman, who has tapped deep into the life force of gaming. And from his visions, we have unveiled the future for you.

Q2 2010

Alpha Protocol	Sega
EVE Online: Tyrannis	CCP
GTA IV: The Ballad of Gay Tony	Rockstar
GTA IV: The Lost and the Damned	Rockstar
Greed Corp	Valcon Games
Lead and Gold: Gangs of the Wild West	Paradox
LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4	Warner Bros.
Mafia II	2K
Metro 2033	THQ
Rise of Prussia	Paradox
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft
Splinter Cell: Conviction	Ubisoft
Victoria II	Paradox

Q3/Q4 2010

APB	EA
ArmA2: Operation Arrowhead	IDEA Games
Brink	Bethesda
Crysis 2	EA
Dead Rising 2	Capcom
DeathSpank	Hothead
Deus Ex 3	Eidos
Elemental: War of Magic	Stardock
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
Homefront	THQ
Lionheart: King's Crusade	Paradox
Max Payne 3	Rockstar
Magicka	Paradox
Medal of Honor	EA
Rage	Bethesda Softworks
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	TBD
Sid Meier's Civilization V	2K
Split/Second	Disney Interactive
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Two Worlds II	TopWare
World of Tanks	Wargaming.net
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

2011: THE PREQUEL TO 2012

American McGee's Alice II	EA
Diablo III	Blizzard
Guild Wars 2	NCSOFT
Mass Effect 3	EA
MechWarrior	(TBD)
Star Wars: The Old Republic	EA
Spec Ops: The Line	2K
Sword of the Stars II	Paradox



Reasons to love PC Gaming

The most heroic heroes. The vilest villains. The heftiest hardware. The wildest worlds. And the very best games of all time.

Despite relatively inexpensive and ferociously marketed console systems, why do millions still flock to the PC? Why do we spend our free time establishing guilds, modding shooters, swapping out videocards and making free games? *Because we can.* The PC is the only gaming platform that puts the player in charge, which makes it the most accessible, creative and the most transformative platform in all of gaming. So that's one reason. But if you need more than that, no problem—here's 200 more!



PC GAMING'S PRECIOUS MOMENTS REASONS 01-09



ENHANCED GRAVITY GUN (*Half-Life 2*) After hours and hours of using it—sensibly and conservatively—to solve intricate puzzles, flinging Combine soldiers around like rag dolls with the weaponized version of *HL2*'s Gravity Gun is pure catharsis.



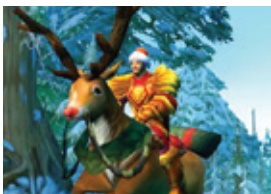
\$16,500 OF GALACTIC GOODS, STOLEN (*EVE Online*) In 2005, after a year of preparation, the Guiding Hand Social Club infiltrated and ransacked a rival corporation. The most prominent, elaborate virtual white-collar crime of all time.



BOOTING YOUR FIRST HOMEMADE SYSTEM A mad scientist moment. "IT'S ALIVE!"



A GAME-WINNING HEADSHOT (*Counter-Strike*, others) An instant high: being the last living member of your team, then breaking the tension with a clutch skullshot.



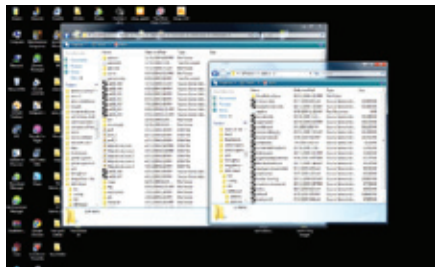
YOUR FIRST MOUNT (*World of Warcraft*) The closest thing to getting your first car. Riding 'round Azeroth in pride on a motorbike or a giant chicken is a right of passage.



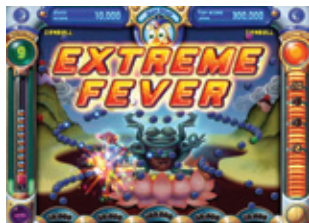
SEEING YOURSELF (*Portal*) The most genuine in-game double-take we've ever done.



THE ARRIVAL OF GTVA COLOSSUS (*FreeSpace 2*) "This is the GTVA Colossus. Fighters, stand clear of hostile warships. All batteries, fire at will!"



YOUR FIRST MOD There's no better feeling than refreshing a game with a completely free add-on.



IMPOSSIBLE PINBALLING (*Peggle*) "Thank you, oh mighty Point God, for guiding my final ball to those four remaining orange pegs."

DUKE NUKEM

REASONS 15-24

PC gaming's most recognizable hero may not be appearing in a new game anytime soon, but his long list of wise-ass catchphrases keeps him alive in our hearts.

"Damn, I'm good!" ■ "Nobody steals our chicks... and lives!" ■ "Come get some!" ■ "Ah... much better!" ■ "Nuke 'em 'till they glow, then shoot 'em in the dark!" ■ "Oh...your ass is grass...and I've got the weed-whacker." ■ "Ooh, that's gotta hurt." ■ "You wanna dance?" ■ "You're an inspiration for birth control." ■ "Bitchin'!"



TRUE HEROES REASONS 25-33

1 LARA CROFT (*Tomb Raider*) More than just a pretty face, Lara has the moves and adventures to back up her status as a PC gaming icon.

2 GORDON FREEMAN (*Half-Life*) The silent, bespectacled "everyman" hero (with a PhD) makes us believe that any one of us could save the world from aliens with a crowbar.

3 VAULT DWELLER (*Fallout*) Every character is unique, but each shares a sense and wonder as they step out of their sheltered home and into the bleak post-nuclear world.

4 COMMANDER SHEPARD (*Mass Effect*) The hero of PC gaming's greatest space opera makes saving the universe look easy. He also swings both ways—Paragon and Renegade

5 ARTHAS (*Warcraft*) PC gaming's own tragic hero, Prince Arthas fell from grace and became the villainous Lich King before ultimately redeeming himself.

6 BATMAN (*Batman: Arkham Asylum*) The Dark Knight has always been one of the comics' greatest heroes, but with his latest adventure, he's become one of PC gaming's greatest, too.

7 JC DENTON (*Deus Ex*) Big-headed, cyber-augmented super-agent Denton roots out the world's biggest conspiracies and looks fantastic in sunglasses.

8 JIM RAYNOR (*StarCraft*) In his battle for freedom, Raynor has suffered shattering personal losses and betrayals, but he never stops fighting.

9 TANYA (*Command & Conquer: Red Alert*) A vivacious one-woman army who single-handedly mows down legions of enemy soldiers and can end a game with one well-placed bomb. What's not to love?



REASONS 34-57

>>BLIZZCON Revel in the franchises of the most-loved PC developer for one nerdtacular weekend filled with LAN gaming, cosplay and a game-themed concert guaranteed to inspire respect in fellow gamers and confusion in the rest of the population. **>>STARCRAFT II**

See page 24: This is your ticket to PC gaming's next world-wide phenomenon. You'd be insane to miss it. **>>20,000 ON-SCREEN SOLDIERS** Creative Assembly's *Total War* series put an endless sea of soldiers before us, awaiting our orders. **>>JETPACKS** We got 'em. **>>THE ISOMETRIC PERSPECTIVE** The perfect angle to both appreciate the cool look of your equipped epic loot and be fully aware of your surroundings.

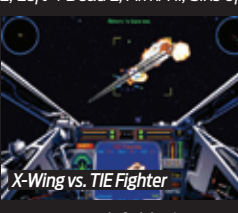
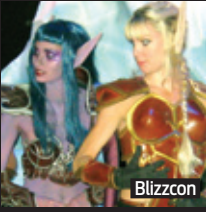
>>TASK MANAGER Better performance monitors exist, but the Task Manager, summoned by Ctrl + Alt + Del, is a valuable way of checking system resources and expelling memory hogs. **>>THE BEST MULTIPLAYER EXPERIENCES, PAST...** *Quake III*, *Unreal Tournament*, *Counter-Strike*, *StarCraft*, *X-Wing* vs. *TIE Fighter*.

...PRESENT... *World of Warcraft*, *Team Fortress 2*, *Left 4 Dead 2*, *Arma II*, *Sins of a Solar Empire*

...AND FUTURE... *StarCraft II*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *APB*, *LEGO*

Universe, *Battlefield 3* (Not announced? Pfft. It'll happen.) **>>PERSISTENT GAMING** Our favorite example: in *EVE Online*, corporations tactically time their assaults based on when their opponents are asleep. Getting a 3AM "our space station is under attack!" phone call isn't pleasant, but it's an example of the incredible personal investment made by MMO gamers.

>>EVER HARDCORE, EVER CASUAL The PC is home to high-fidelity sims like *Arma 2* and low-key phenomenons like *Plants vs. Zombies* and *FarmVille* alike. **>>OPPORTUNITY** Any schmuck can create and release a PC game. Even you!



PC GAMER REASONS 10-14

Not to toot our own horn, but we're tooting our own horn. We're honored to be the best-selling computer gaming magazine in the world. Over the past 16 years it's been our honor and pleasure to be PC gaming's chief cheerleader, critic and champion. We have 200 issues worth of fond memories—here are just a few of our favorite covers:



PCG #50
AUGUST 1997
A gorgeous double entendre.



PCG #53
NOVEMBER 1997
No game, but a badass cover.



PCG #106
JANUARY 2003
Vader! Shame about SWG.



PCG #192
OCTOBER 2009
"So...tricord here often?"



PCG #186
APRIL 2009
Best Period Placement, '09.

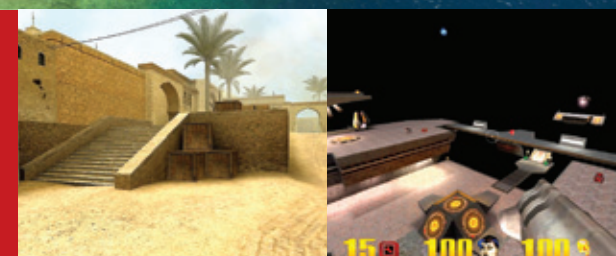


REASON 58 DIABLO

That virgin moment of stepping into the Dark One's lair and gazing upon the foe you clicked your way through the legions of Hell itself to find for the first time is one of PC Gaming's finest. Staggering, crimson, fire-tossing Diablo—we beat the loot out of you. We can't wait to do it for a third time in 2011.

CLASSIC MULTIPLAYER MAPS REASONS 59-61

WAKE ISLAND (*Battlefield 1942*) Forget the history books: WWII's greatest battles were fought on this tiny Pacific island.
DE_DUST (*Counter-Strike*) Without Dust, there would be no *Counter-Strike*.
Q3_DM_17 (*Quake III*) A perfect playground of rocket launchers and trampolines.



PURE SIMULATION REASONS 62-67

Let's use the most extreme example we can think of to demonstrate how incredible simulation enthusiasts really are: for more than a decade, a sect of PC gamers has built detailed replica airplane and helicopter cockpits in their garages and hooked them up to their PCs, just so they can feel more immersed in their flight sim (don't believe us? Browse simkits.com). Below, a handful of our other favorite realistic mini-genres:



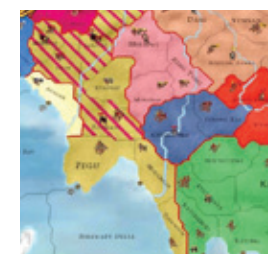
URBAN PLANNING
(*Cities XL*)



SPORTS MANAGEMENT
(*Football Manager*)



CITY BUS DRIVING
(*City Bus Driver 2009*)



NATION-BUILDING
(*Europa Universalis*)



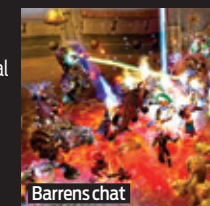
NAVAL
(*Ship Simulator Extremes*)



BATTLEFIELD
(*ArmA 2*)

REASONS 68-81

>>INCREDIBLE SALES Since Christmas '09, download services like Impulse, Steam and GOG.com have been pricing some of the best games of all time at the cost of a large cupcake. Here's just a handful: the entire *X-COM* series for \$2; *Team Fortress 2* or *Star Wars: KOTOR* for \$2.49; \$7.50 for *GTA IV*; *Fallout 1* and *2* for \$3.89. **>>FREEDOM OF CHOICE** Competition is good for consumers. If you buy an iPhone, Xbox or PlayStation 3, you're locked into the hardware-makers' online stores as your only source for software downloads. We've got Steam, Impulse, Direct2Drive, EA Downloader, GOG.com, and more. **>>AUTO RUN** Giving the "W" key a welcome break. **>>DRIVER UPDATES** Not always a smooth move, but they more than make up for the occasional hiccup when they—more often than not—improve graphics performance at no cost. **>>THE QUAKE ANNOUNCER** "HEADSHOT!" **>>THE FATHERLAND OF STRATEGY GAMING** Have you ever tried leading an army with a gamepad? **>>BARRENS CHAT** The dark corners of social gaming came to the forefront in *WoW*'s childish, offensive, yet always entertaining Barrens zone chat channel. **>>HERITAGE** Unique among platforms, PC gamers take pride in our memories of building, modding, and even the hardware hassles with these systems. **>> (THE CONSOLE)** Discovering secret commands is an ancient pastime. Our three favorite inputs... **"NOCLIP"** Showing walls, ceilings and floors who's boss since 1993. **"GOD"** Type it, become it. Instant divinity! In *Left 4 Dead*, you can type "buddha" for a similar effect. **"SV_GRAVITY"** Bored by playing the same multiplayer map for the 34,000th time? Tune down the gravity to moon-level, and see death-match re-energize with floaty antics. **>>RESOURCES** "We require more minerals." And ore, wood, vespene gas, crystals, metal, fish... **>>WINDOWS 7** A stable, intuitive platform. It almost makes Microsoft tolerable! **>>PEGGLE** ...inside *World of Warcraft*!



Barrens chat



The console

WORLDS AND UNIVERSES
REASONS 82-89

AZEROTH From Nagrand to Ghostlands, *World of Warcraft's* homelands offer up such incredible variety, we're amazed how it all manages to feel like one mammoth world.

SPACE *EVE ONLINE's* 5,000 interconnected star systems, plus 2,500 wormhole-accessible random systems, create an incredible universe for emergent gameplay to, well, emerge.

CHERNARUS *ArmA 2's* 225 square kilometers of fully realized Eastern Europe ready for you and your team to battle over.



FALLOUT'S WASTELANDS With all the super mutants and The Enclave running around, we wouldn't prefer to live here. But it makes for some awesome games.

TAMRIEL Every *Elder Scrolls* adventure to date has taken place on this massive continent. Stumbling into a random dungeon always feels organic.

MASS EFFECT'S UNIVERSE Between the floating Hanar preaching, the emotionless delivery of Elcor, the revolting Vorchas and surprisingly sexy Asari, Bioware takes sci-fi gaming to levels that rival the best literature.

THEDAS (*Dragon Age*) Embrace the taint! BioWare's latest world may not be especially bright or happy, but the way we affect the world in the game promotes a sense of purpose and immediacy unparalleled by other RPGs

LEFT 4 DEAD'S POST-INFECTION AMERICA Shopping malls, small towns, motels, and cornfields. Valve's realized the zombie apocalypse by putting zombies everywhere you never wanted them to be.

VILLAINS
REASONS 90-97



HITLER (*Wolfenstein*) History's greatest monster is also gaming's greatest villain. Eternally offing Die Fuhrer in game after game is revenge fantasy at its finest.



SHODAN (*System Shock*) The best-ever diabolical AI mastermind. A digital genie, and a basis for *Portal's* GLaDOS and Andrew Ryan in *BioShock*.



THE AWP (*Counter-Strike*) The most-banned weapon ever in a multi-player game. With it, one moderately-skilled sniper can clear out an entire server of *Counter-Strikers*.



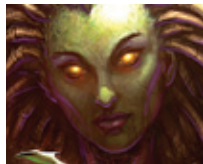
KANE (*Command & Conquer*) Charismatic and (probably) immortal. Kane's world-conquering rhetoric is PC gaming; tongue-in-cheek, playful, yet dramatic.



G-MAN (*Half-Life*) Creepy. Disappearing. Robotic. Enigmatic. Valve somehow made a thin, anemic suit one of the most unsettling characters ever in a game.



THE SPY (*Team Fortress 2*) Invisible, backstabby, yet charming—the Spy is the most disruptive foe you'll face in a multi-player game (see our full thoughts at #136).



KERRIGAN (*StarCraft*) Sarah Kerrigan went from Jim Raynor's sexy commando love interest to Zerg Queen ultimate betrayer of all mankind. Top that, Paris Hilton.



ALMA (*F.E.A.R.*) The creepy subtlety of a plain-looking little girl spurned by malice and possessed by revenge left many pants headed for the laundry.

DEVELOPERS
REASONS 98-103

Six developers who make the PC the best place to play games today.



With *Half-Life*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Team Fortress*, *Counter-Strike* and *Portal*, **VALVE** has produced some of the finest first-person PC gaming experiences of all time.

STARDOCK is the brain behind hardcore strategy games like *Galactic Civilizations* and *Elemental*, Michigan-based Stardock works with strategy game developers like Gas Powered and Ironclad to produce games that could only be conceived—and enjoyed—on the PC.

Warcraft, *StarCraft*, *Diablo*. Love them or hate them, everything **BLIZZARD's** Midas-like developers touch turns to pure gold—which, it so happens, you can only play on the PC.

RELIC's real-time strategy games—*Homeworld*, *Company of Heroes* and *Dawn of War*—set the standard against which all modern RTS games are measured.

Space MMO *EVE Online* is home to the most vibrant and dedicated community on the web, and its developer **CCP** is the pinnacle of post-launch support.

Resurrecting the long-dormant *Fallout* franchise under the same roof as their home-grown *Elder Scrolls* series makes **BETHESDA** an unstoppable RPG-developing powerhouse.

One of Valve's strengths is creating enemies that're fun to kill.



WEAPONS OF WAR
REASONS 104-111



ROCKET LAUNCHER
(*Quake III*)



MECH
(*MechWarrior*)



STAKE GUN
(*Painkiller*)



SIEGE TANK
(*StarCraft*)



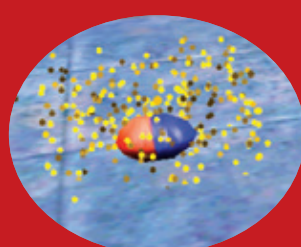
BFG 9000
(*DOOM*)



TESLA COIL
(*Command & Conquer: Red Alert*)



FLAK CANNON
(*Unreal Tournament*)



SPY DRUGS
(*Team Fortress Classic*)



GRAVITY GUN
(*Half-Life 2*)



ZEN BALL
(*Peggle*)

REASONS 112-135

>>STEAM CLOUD Steam has always allowed you play your games wherever you want. Now your save games (and key binds) can follow you there. **>>SPRAYS** Tagging walls with pictures of scantily clad women is a classic distraction technique in *Counter-Strike* and other shooters. More importantly, it's a small way we take ownership over our multiplayer spaces. **>>FLASH** This plug-in and a web browser are



all you need to turn the wimpiest of netbooks or work machines into a portal to infinite free gaming ecstasy. **>>JOYSTICKS**

Pull up! Flipping the missile switch on your flight stick or palming the throttle into an afterburn is as thrilling as peripherals get. Now, if only LucasArts would remake *X-Wing* vs. *TIE-Fighter*...

>>DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION Thousands of games, infinite shelf space, and zero chance they'll be sold-out.

>>NO MONEY DOWN You won't find better free games anywhere else. Play these: *Battleforge*, *D&D Online*, *Runes of Magic*, *Allods Online*, *Battlefield Heroes*, more than half of the *Command & Conquer* series, *Quake Live*, *America's Army*, *The Hunter*, *Wurm Online*, *Legends of Zork*, *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*, *Savage 2: A Tortured Soul*.

>>QUICK SAVE An indispensable digital bookmark.

>>TOWER DEFENSE Strategy gaming for the mainstream that keeps on giving.

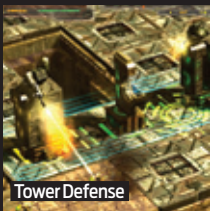
>>SELECTIVE VOICE CHAT Pile into Skype, Ventrilo, TeamSpeak or Steam Voice with your teammates. Or just mute everybody.

>>NUDE PATCHES On my computer? Never. But, uh, they're out there. Y'know. *For science*.

>>IMAGE/VIDEO CAPTURE Forget achievements. Uploading a YouTube video of your 22 kill streak is the best evidence you can ever share of your gaming exploits.

>>REPLAYS Where'd that *StarCraft II* match go wrong? Rewatch pro player battles in observer mode; scrutinize every stat and micro-command to become a better commander next time you play.

>>DE RATS MAPS Playing *Counter-Strike* in a kitchen, motorhome or bedroom is still a ludicrous novelty.

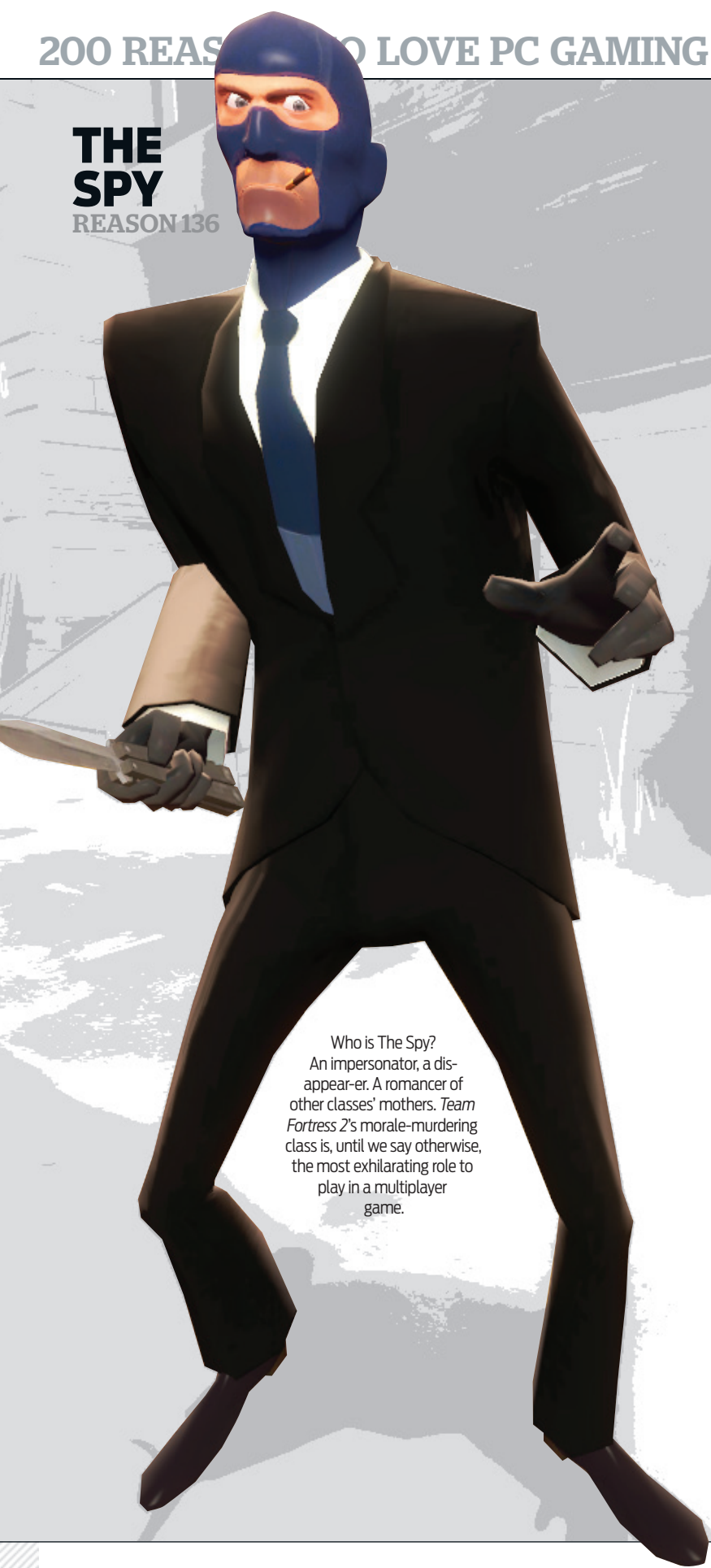


Tower Defense



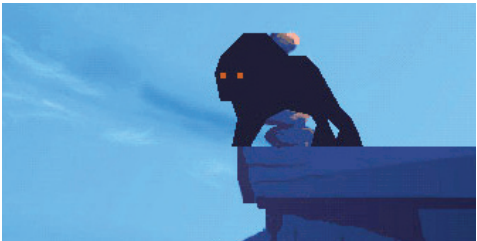
de rats

THE SPY
REASON 136



Who is The Spy?
An impersonator, a disappear-er. A romancer of other classes' mothers. *Team Fortress 2*'s morale-murdering class is, until we say otherwise, the most exhilarating role to play in a multiplayer game.

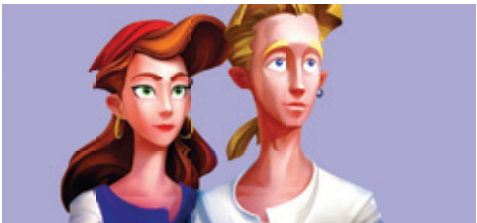
RICH REMAKES
REASONS 137-140



OUT OF THIS WORLD



TOMB RAIDER: ANNIVERSARY



SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND



GOLDENEYE: SOURCE

THE DEFINITIVE
HIGH-DEFINITION
REASON 141



MODIFICATION REASONS 142-149

Fan-made mods are a rich source of \$0 content on the PC. You've gotta admire their zeal; we may not see an official *Star Wars* shooter game for years, but modders went ahead and made it themselves.

OUR FAVORITES
For no reward beyond their love of gaming, ambitious modders produce some amazing stuff. Here are seven of our favorite mods today:

MECHWARRIOR: LIVING LEGENDS

NEOTOKYO

THE NAMELESS MOD

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

STAR WARS: GALACTIC WARFARE

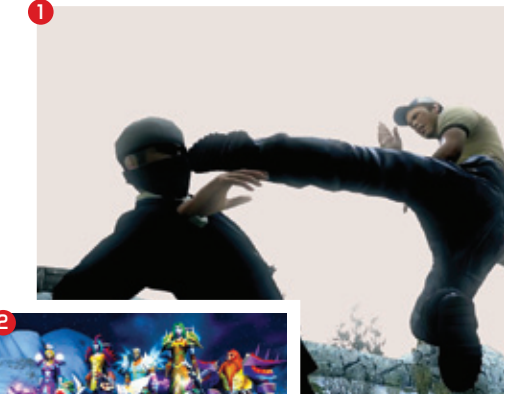
HALF-LIFE: BLACK MESA

DYSTOPIA

COMMUNITY REASONS 150-154

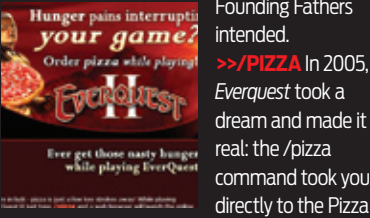
The openness and ubiquity of the PC has fashioned a sprawling society of communities: niche game clubs, collaborating modders, massive competitive leagues, and more.

- 1 MACHINIMA PRODUCERS** Mini-movies starring your favorite game characters. Ragdoll slapstick comedies never get old.
- 2 CLANS & GUILDS** Practices. Tournaments. Rivalries.
- 3 THE BEST INDIES** Gaming's "minor league" is a whopping creative force that out-designs major development studio pros on a regular basis.
- 4 LAN PARTIES** Mini-festivals of the hardcore, powered by energy drinks and zero-ping multiplayer.
- 5 SERVERS** Where we play; millions of interconnected gaming spaces. No two are alike.



REASONS 155-167

>>PROTOTYPES Not *Prototype*, although that was fun too. We're talking about playing the games before they become commercial hits, like *Narbacular Drop* (which, under Valve's guidance, would become *Portal*) or *Tower of Goo* (which would be dressed in extra charm-gravy to become *World of Goo*). **>>VIOLENCE** Sorry. No, *not* sorry. With no uppity licenser to bar the doorway, PC game developers are free to explore violence, sexuality and tastelessness to their hearts content—exactly the way the



Founding Fathers intended. **>>/PIZZA** In 2005, *Everquest* took a dream and made it real: the /pizza command took you directly to the Pizza

Hut online order site. **>>CATASSING** Also known as poop-socking. Look it up. **>>OPEN SOURCE** Unity. Adventure Game Studio. Quake. All these game engines either began as or became open source—meaning that their code was free to be used and adapted under the terms of a public license. (Soon, the spectacular *Doom 3* engine will join them). This trend is partially responsible for the PC being the world's most creative and accessible gaming platform. **>>DRAG SELECT** How else you going to tell a bunch of troops to get moving at once? **>>"PRESS 1 TO MELEE."** However many Nazi-slaying, demon-popping firearms you pick up in a game, you always you know where your fists, knife, or chainsaw are.

>>STAT-TRACKING My favorite server knows how many shots I've fired with a sniper rifle; that I'm more likely to hit an enemy in the left arm than I am the right; how accurate I am with a fire axe. Through server add-ons like HLXstats, I can scrutinize every detail of a life-time of combat. **>>RUTHLESS COMPETITION** Dollars-to-donuts, PC gaming's proximity to the internet puts intense competition within a click's reach. Message boards, world-wide tournaments and voice chat are the infrastructure we use to schedule and sustain our

home-grown rivalries. **>>W, A, S AND D** These keys are to gamers what opposable thumbs are to our hands. **>>MACROS** We script, therefore we rock. **>>ALT + TAB** The command on which all multitasking depends. **>>CTRL + ALT + DEL** When all else fails, hit the PC's e-brake and bail.

OUR RIGS, OURSELVES REASONS 168-176

ROLL YOUR OWN Building and/or upgrading your own gaming PC isn't just fun and informative—it's also a gripping RPG! You just got a \$300 tax refund: Do you bump up the RAM for faster Alt-Tabbing and better application performance, splurge on a fatter hard drive for that ever-expanding steamapps folder, or do you upgrade your videocard for a guaranteed framerate bump (at higher expense)? It's your call! Here are just a few of the bajillions of things we love about tinkering with the insides of our PCs.



DESKTOPS, LAPTOPS, NETBOOKS. Invest in a brawny desktop, or go for a portable retro gaming station to relive the classics. It's your privilege as a PC gamer; you won't find anybody playing *Uncharted 2* at the corner coffee shop.

CASE MODS From a simple case window to a garish supernova of bling with a custom paint job, cold-cathode lights, rainbow-hued illuminated interior fans and a rotating disco ball, your rig needn't be like anyone else's.

FREE PERFORMANCE BOOSTS THROUGH OVERCLOCKING! Even if you never delve into the dangerous and exciting world of overclocking CPUs and GPUs, remember this: the Xbox 360 can't even handle its *standard* clock speed (Red Ring of Death)!

THEY'RE ALL PCS Own a Mac? Use Linux? Cobbled your Franken-PC together from reclaimed parts? No problem—you are still a PC gamer.

SOLID-STATE DRIVES Speed demons! There goes our pee break during a level load screen.

FRAMES PER SECOND No other platform can give you the luscious experience of a shooter blazing away at 120 buttery-smooth images per second.

MULTIPLE MONITORS Two? No problem. Three? Can do. Four or more? Only on the PC, folks.



CRAZY KEYBOARDS, MAJESTIC MICE REASONS 177-183

We're not just talking about the standard mouse and keyboard against which the gamepad has a snowball's chance in the Devil's butt—the world of PC gaming has evolved much more refined and exotic devices designed to give gamers the golden edge on their opponents.



Logitech's decadent **G19 KEYBOARD** rocks its own programmable, color LCD display. (\$200, [logitech.com](#))



THE RAZER NAGA A mouse. For MMOs. With 17 buttons. (\$80, [razerzone.com](#))



The **DAS KEYBOARD** Model S Ultimate keyboard with blank keys has zero pity for you. (\$129, [daskeyboard.com](#))



Wireless trackball **POKER MOUSE** lets you play *Plants vs Zombies* from bed. (\$99, [pokermouse.com](#))



Ditch the keyboard, gain an **8-WAY THUMB PAD**, and look intense. (\$70, [n52te.com](#))



This wee mouse with a **RETRACTABLE CABLE** could be your netbook's best friend. (\$15, [belkin.com](#))

THUMB BUTTONS Put that opposable thumb to work!

SCROLL WHEEL Gamers reinvented the wheel.



DPI ON THE FLY Go from run-and-gun to drop-and-pop in milliseconds.

WEIGHT LOSS Add or subtract a few grams to suit your style.

GARRY'S MOD MADNESS REASONS 184-186

A breeding pool for debauched physics, insane animation and raw gaming creativity, *Garry's Mod* is equal parts university and insane asylum—it's where the next generation of great modders and indie developers are being born.



DEATHRUN ([bit.ly/bjNUha](#))



HALF-LIFE: FULL-LIFE CONSEQUENCES ([bit.ly/8h01](#))



WAYS TO DIE IN GARRY'S MOD ([bit.ly/kBFU8](#))

PERIPHERALS REASONS 187-192

The PC has, by far, the most incredible—and incredibly strange—variety of game-related peripherals you'll ever lay your hands on, on any platform.



NOVINT FALCON The most realistic haptic controller ever! (\$189, [home.novint.com](#))



THE STEALTHSWITCH II Boss switch, screenshot-taker, weapon-switcher, fun-maker. (\$80, [stealthswitch2.com](#))



NVIDIA 3D VISION The 3D glasses you can wear without shame! (\$199, [nvidia.com](#))



The **TRACKIR** head tracker keeps your eye on the prize. (\$150, [naturalpoint.com/trackir](#))



OCZ NIA The mind-reading neural interface that works. (\$109, [newegg.com](#))



The **WOW HEADSET** no Orc should leave Orgrimmar without (\$160 [soundblaster.com](#))

VIDEOCARD HALL OF FAMERS

REASONS 193, 194



NVIDIA GEFORCE 8800 GT



ATI RADEON HD 5970

REASONS 195-200

>>PLAYABLE CLASSICS The consoles are just catching on to what PC gamers have been doing for decades: preserving and enjoying the classics games of yore. Thanks to utilities such as DOSBox (free, [dosbox.com](#)), ScummVM

THE PC GAMER CLASSIC PLAYLIST

X-COM: UFO DEFENSE (\$5, [steampowered.com](#))

FALLOUT 1 AND 2 (\$6 each, [gog.com](#))

SYSTEM SHOCK 2 (Buy used on eBay, then Google the SHTUP and Rebirth upgrade mod packs)

BENEATH A STEEL SKY (free, [gog.com](#))

PRO PINBALL BIG RACE USA (\$6, [gog.com](#))

(free, [scummvm.org](#)), DRM-free *GOG.com* (we love you!) and abandonware sites that keep their noses clean (you know who you are), we can still enjoy the games that made us fall in love with PC gaming in the first place—often in better shape than they were when they were released! **>>WILL WRIGHT** Even if *The Sims'* mad scientist has moved on from EA, his work represents the standing gaming thesis on how to turn gamers into storytellers—without them even realizing it. **>>THE SIMS SILLINESS** One of the first major patches to *The Sims 3* welded shut a number of hilarious issues players had found ways to exploit. They included: "Sims can no longer 'Try For Baby' with the Grim Reaper;" "Sims will never wish their husband to be their boyfriend;" "Neighbors will no longer gather to watch a burglar who hasn't stolen anything;" "Eating specific prepared meals no longer has an impact on an unborn baby's gender." **>>GIBS** What does a good kill feel like? Relieving an enemy of his mortal coil with a rocket and seeing his spleen bounce, roll and smack against the dust. **>>THE DEFINITIVE VERSION** Not every port is perfect, but a handful of devs are going out of their way to take advantage of what PCs can do better than consoles. *Mass Effect 1* came with a better interface and inventory system. Running *Street Fighter IV* or *Resident Evil 5* at 2560x1600 resolution (and in Nvidia 3D Vision!) is a dream. We prefer *Batman: Arkham Asylum's* effortless mouse/keyboard controls to playing with a gamepad. **>>PC GAMERS** Dedicated, intelligent, clever and insanely passionate: You guys keep us in business. From the things you yell about on the Internet to the mods you make, we couldn't love our community more. All 200 million of you worldwide—we salute you.

5

We all know that games are the best way to dispel boredom and unwind from the looming existential horrors of modern life. Gaming at work shouldn't just be seen as idling. You're exercising your mind, taking it to a mental gym. Indeed, gaming at work could even be good for office productivity.

A 2003 study, conducted by the University of Utrecht in Holland, showed that workers at an insurance company were happier and more productive when they were allowed to play games for one hour of their working day, and could choose when to play. Employers, take note.

We're going to assume that you, the gaming employee, know about *FreeCell*, *Minesweeper* and *Solitaire*, which can readily be played on any Windows machine. We're also going to assume that you have internet access that isn't too badly filtered and limited by The Man. Many large companies will filter out games sites and sites that have embedded games (such as Facebook), which don't give you a window into the world of gaming. More obscure games and game sites are often the best way to get around these filters because they won't be a common destination for other gamers in the workplace. But please be very careful about installing games on your PC without the permission of your IT folks—because they might give you a spanking.

Always have a work-related document open in the background so you can Alt+Tab to it when the boss appears. You may want to consider fitting one of those rear-view mirrors (bit.ly/122M85) to your monitor, too. And get into interactive fiction: there's an endless supply of great games at www.ifarchive.org, and playing them looks like you're just working on a text file. Cunning? It's almost as if we've done this before.

GAMES TO PLAY AT WORK

Your boss is the enemy, and a drop in productivity is your weapon. To help you in your struggle against The Man, we've assembled a list of **THE BEST GAMES TO PLAY AT WORK**—those that run in a browser, can be played in short bursts, or are free.

By Jim Rossignol



50 MADNESS ACCELERANT

newgrounds.com/portal/view/512407

A hyperbolic side-scrolling shooter that lasts about 15 minutes and never stops bombarding you with lunacy. It could hardly be simpler to play, but the effect is intense. Think Metal Slug games (bit.ly/1UU5VT) pushed through a cartoon sieve.



49 MONKEY LANDER

miniclip.com/games/monkey-lander/en
Monkeys, as we all know, started using spacecraft to collect fruit in the 1970s, and they've never looked back. Now you can join them, while avoiding various obstacles that threaten to stop you from touching down safely.



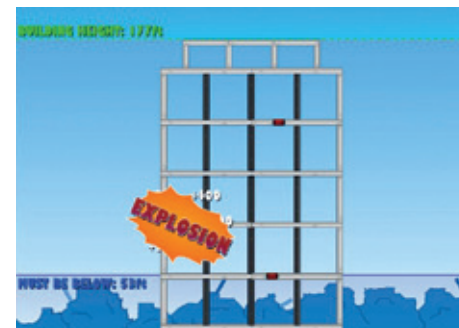
48 THE WALLS ARE NOT CHEESE

x2d.org/misc/misc3/wallsFixed.html
...But they are fuel for your weapon. As a small purple square you must kill—or be killed by—the blue squares. Blast through the scenery as you go, and vacuum up the debris. Conclusive evidence that graphics don't matter.



47 WOOSH/WAKER

gambit.mit.edu/loadgame/woosh.php
Abstractivist versus narrativist: the game. Two puzzle/platformers in parallel, one that has a story explaining its events, and one that is entirely abstract. Yes, it's an exercise in philosophy, done via a browser game.



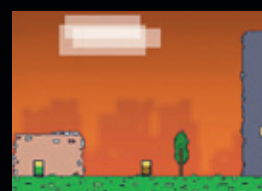
46 DEMOLITION CITY

armorgames.com/play/4142/demolition-city
Destroy each building using limited dynamite. Those ESRB warnings about implied alcohol or partial violence in games are all very well, but this game should come with one that says "This is going to keep you fixed to the screen until you beat it." Because it will.



45 CANABALT

adamatomic.com/canabalt/mega
Games requiring a single button press for interaction might seem too simplistic to ever really be engrossing, but that's not the case with break-neck running game *Canabalt*. All you can do in this game is jump, but after a few minutes of this, it's all you'll want to do.



44 THE BEGGAR

bit.ly/10tFGy
While you're toiling in the office, spend a little time thinking about those people who aren't going to get a check at the end of the working month. Do it while playing a side-scrolling puzzler where you have to work for your supper.



43 1066

channel4.com/history/microsites/0-9/1066/game
The most successful of British TV's games—a turn-based strategy in which Saxons, Vikings and Normans war upon each other. It even supports multiplayer.



42 WAYFARER

bit.ly/1sL6Rp
A certain kind of gamer will fall in love with this. It's a surprisingly sophisticated dungeon crawler whose stickman aesthetic hides real depth. Adventure through randomly generated levels—but read the instructions!



41 PIZZA CITY

bit.ly/4ANRCd
Adult Swim's site hosts a whole bunch of games, but the stand-out masterpiece is the super-retro *GTA* clone, *Pizza City*. It's basically an open-world driving game in which you must deliver pizzas. And it gives me melted-cheese flashbacks.



40 FANTASTIC CONTRAPTION
physicsgames.net/game/Fantastic_Contraption.html
A beautiful little physics puzzle game. The central idea is connectivity between moving wheels or cogs, which (eventually) allow you to get the contraption to the end zone.



39 ULTIMATE CRAB BATTLE
kongregate.com/games/wies/ultimate-crab-battle
As the name suggests, this is absurdly over-the-top and amusing. You face a giant crab and a ludicrous barrage of other enemies, including a pink AT-AT/lobster hybrid.



38 DINORUN
pixeljam.com/dinorun
Your enemy is nothing less than extinction. Gather eggs to preserve your species! But mainly, run. Run a lot. Because right behind you is a wall of falling space rubble and badness, and it's catching up fast.



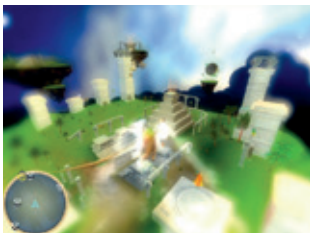
37 EPSILON
bit.ly/c9hQ0D
If you've played *Portal*, you'll be familiar with the idea of increasing momentum by falling through multiple portals. *Epsilon* is the exact same idea, except with 2D balls. An ingenious puzzler.

36

BOWJA THE NINJA 2

bit.ly/d9Ne5

An exquisite little action adventure game starring a bow-wielding ninja. You can interact with lots of things in the various environments, but there's a bit of point-and-click searching and experimentation to find the solution.



35 JETPACK BRONTOSAURUS
blurst.com/jetpack-brontosaurus
The Blurst games are so absurd they make men cry. Following in a proud tradition of games where reptilian beasts are given jetpacks, *Jetpack Brontosaurus* delivers a strange puzzle game that is achingly beautiful.



34 PANDEMIC 2
crazymonkeygames.com/Pandemic-2.html
A game where you play as the enemy of humankind is rare, and it's rarer still for that enemy to be a plague. You play as a contagion trying to kill the maximum number of human beings. A grim lesson in timing and mutation.



33 MAKE BOUNCY BOUNCY
bydesigngames.com/mbb
That sounds like a euphemism, but it's actually a marvellous 3D puzzle game in which you control a gelatinous bouncing cube. Bounce up enough platforms in succession and you hit the high score.



32 BREAKING THE TOWER
mojang.com/notch/ld12/breaking
Unbelievably slow-paced and consequently perfect for work (you could have a meeting, come back, and still be OK) this weird little strategy game has you building huts across an island. Eventually, the huts enable you to Break The Tower. More compelling than it sounds.



31 WARFARE 1917
armorgames.com/play/2267/warfare-1917
It's strange to find that a browser-based trench warfare game can actually have a high level of poignancy to it. A side-scrolling 2D strategy affair, *Warfare 1917* effectively demonstrates the conveyor-belt horror that World War I delivered to our troops.

30 HUNTED FOREVER

kongregate.com/games/Pixelante/hunted-forever

Vaguely terrifying platformer *Hunted Forever* will definitely keep you up at night. In it you control a tiny yet clearly athletic man who is being chased through a maze by a huge green disc eye thing. It knows you are there, and it wants you dead.

29

GUITAR GEEKS

newgrounds.com/portal/view/470263

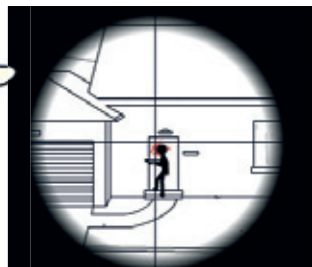
Browser-based *Guitar Hero* without the guitar means that you can pick up your keyboard and make like a rockstar. We do not recommend doing that in an office environment, however, as you are likely to attract attention from your fellow workers.



28 TACTICAL ASSASSIN SUBSTRATUM

gamekrunch.com/content/tactical-assassin-substratum

Sniping games are often amusing, but *Tactical Assassin Substratum* pushes the idea to an unusual place: you're shooting stickmen, but you have to interpret what's going on in the scenes you see from the briefing. Can you figure out which stickman to kill?



27 INCREDIBOTS

incredibots.com

This is one for the tinkers and the engineers among us. It's a remarkably sophisticated physics puzzler that enables you to build, and then set into motion, a huge variety of complex vehicles. You'll lose days to *Incredibots* if you're not careful.



26 QWOP

foddy.net/Athletics.html

There's something deeply tragic about *QWOP*. It's a demented button-bashing athletics game, where buttons control individual muscles. The result is a game in which the music from *Chariots of Fire* plays as you thrash helplessly on the starting line.



25 PONGOUT

allgamesallfree.com/games/1079-pongout.html

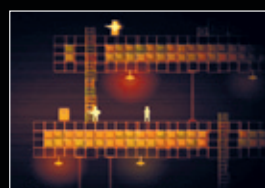
You've played Pong and you've played Breakout, but when have you ever had a chance to play both at the same time? *PongOut* does just that, with your mouse movement controlling paddles for both games.



24 OILGARCHY

molleindustria.org/en/oilgarchy

How about some politics in the office? In this game you're on the side of the oil industry, buying land, drilling, bribing politicians and stifling alternative energy sources. Go!



23 THE MANIPULATOR

yoyogames.com/games/show/65645

An essential inclusion simply because this mind-control platformer is an absolute classic remix of *Paradroid*. This game requires the YoYo Games plugin for Firefox.



22 TOP SPINNER CRICKET

mousebreaker.com/games/top-spinner/playgame

The most English of sports is a bit complicated to play when you're supposed to be productive. Thankfully, now you can bat away at work.



21 I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE MAJESTY OF COLORS

kongregate.com/games/GregoryWeir/the-majesty-of-colors

A fascinating, dream-like adventure puzzle game. The decisions you make will determine what ending you see. Oh, and you're a sea-monster.



20 THE SPACE GAME

candystand.com/play/the-space-game

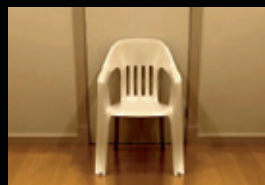
Sure, some titles tell you what to expect, but this one might actually be misleading. This is a brilliant puzzle-strategy game, where you have to build an energy grid through a field of asteroids. Mine them all to win.



19 MASTERMIND

theswain.com/Flash/MWC.htm

Similar to evil-HQ management game *Evil Genius*, only you can play it for free on your web browser, and it's all about perpetrating acts of grand villainy. Incredibly slick and very entertaining. Amazing stuff.



18 SAGARIO'S ROOM ESCAPE

sagrarios.room.escape.fizzlebot.com

There is a type of point-and-click game called *Room Escape* and this particular instance is lauded as both very tricky, and very clever. Finding out what to do is all the fun.



17 BLUSH

blurst.com/blush

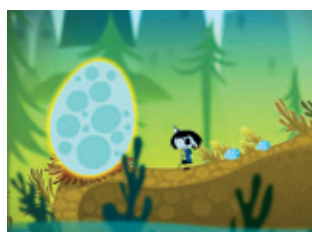
You'll need the Unity plugin (bit.ly/TuufC) for this one. You're away in a neon world of jellyfish. Collect eggs and take them to collection points to grow your tentacles longer, and use them to kill.

16

EFFING HAIL

kongregate.com/games/aelowu/effing-hail

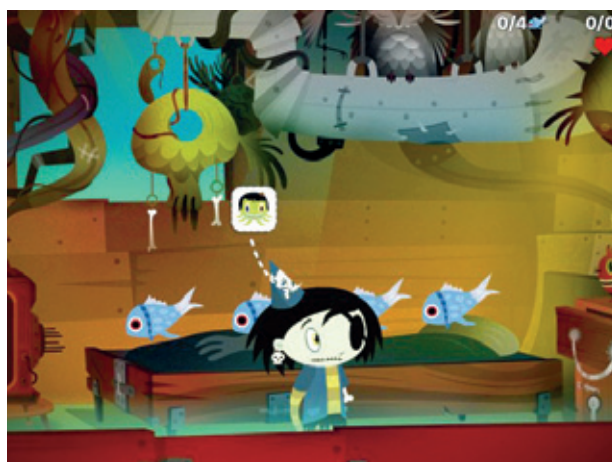
Hail is formed by tiny ice particles sent aloft by strong winds, forming large ice particles that eventually fall down as chunks of ice and break stuff. This is the principle of the game, too. In short: smash up cities with weather!



15 SCARYGIRL

scarygirl.com

Almost nothing in the world is as beautiful as the hand-drawn levels of *ScaryGirl*. Sure, the game itself isn't exactly inspired—it's a straight platform adventure—but if you can find a more visually attractive browser game, I'll eat my cat. Hat.



14 SPACEQUEST I

sarien.net/spacequest

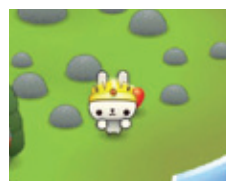
Sarien has lobbed a load of Sierra-style point-and-click adventures online, creating a spectacularly large amount of classic adventure gaming for you to grind your way through at work. We've picked *Spacequest* because we like quests. And space.



13 CRUSH THE CASTLE

armorgames.com/play/3614/crush-the-castle

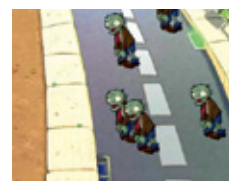
Of all the medieval siege weapons, the trebuchet is clearly the most elegant. Games created for trebuchets can be equally perfect in their deployment of Newtonian physics. Destroy fortifications with a ballistic game.



12 BUNNI

bunni.bunni.com

Bunni is a deeply strange and spooky island management game with sad-eyed rabbits. Take advice from the spirits of dead bunnies and solve the mystery of the island via a ludicrously slick real-time strategy interface. Exploration, building, weirdness. Bunnies.



11 PLANTS VERSUS ZOMBIES

popcap.com/games/free/pvz?mid=pvz_pcweb_en_full

You no longer have to purchase PopCap's garden-defence classic to enjoy a spot of undead, as there's a stripped-down version available on their website. To be perfectly honest, we feel it would be rude not to play it at work.

The Top Ten

These games might require some installation, but they're awesome for skipping back to the desktop to avoid the all-seeing eye of middle management.



10 SPACED PENGUIN

bigideafun.com/penguins/arcade/spaced_penguin
Arguably one of the all-time classic puzzle games, *Spaced* sees you trying to slingshot a penguin around the gravity of various planets to get him back to his spaceship.



9 PUZZLEBLOOM

puzzlebloom.com
This also requires the Unity plugin for your browser. *PuzzleBloom* is one of the most beautiful 3D puzzles based on parasitic mind control that you're ever likely to play.



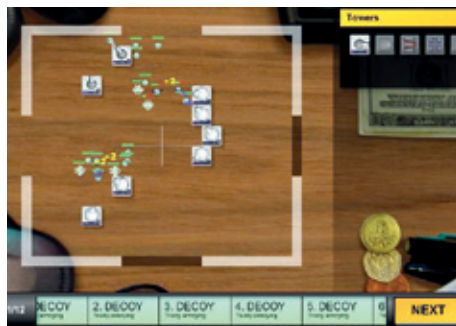
8 KICKABOUT LEAGUE

kickabout4.funorb.com/kickabout/8168/game.ws
Fierce soccer types might not like bending the rules (no throw in), but this multiplayer soccer game is still a magnificent achievement.



7 LITTLE WHEEL

fastgames.com/littlewheel.html
This little robo-adventure is one of the best things online. It's only about 20 minutes long, but that's like saying that *Portal* takes only a couple of hours. Who needs lunch, anyway?



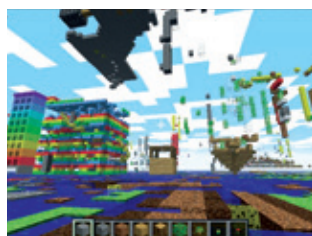
6 DESKTOP TOWER DEFENSE

bit.ly/3X1Fn2
Foes are coming! Place armed towers to thwart them! Arguably the most significant tower defense game of all time, this will even help you feel like you're still working, due to it being set on a, er, desktop. Brilliant sandbox mode, perfect missions. It's a micro-masterpiece.



5 DOOM

newgrounds.com/portal/view/470460
Every computer in existence is required to have *Doom* installed to test its capabilities. It's your duty to make sure the PC you use at work is not a *Doom* virgin. There's even a browser version if you can't get it on the hard drive.



4 MINECRAFT

minecraft.net
Multiplayer building might seem an unusual genre, but *Minecraft*'s gentle pace and browser interface mean you can take your time planting a few bricks, and jump back to work when the boss comes by.



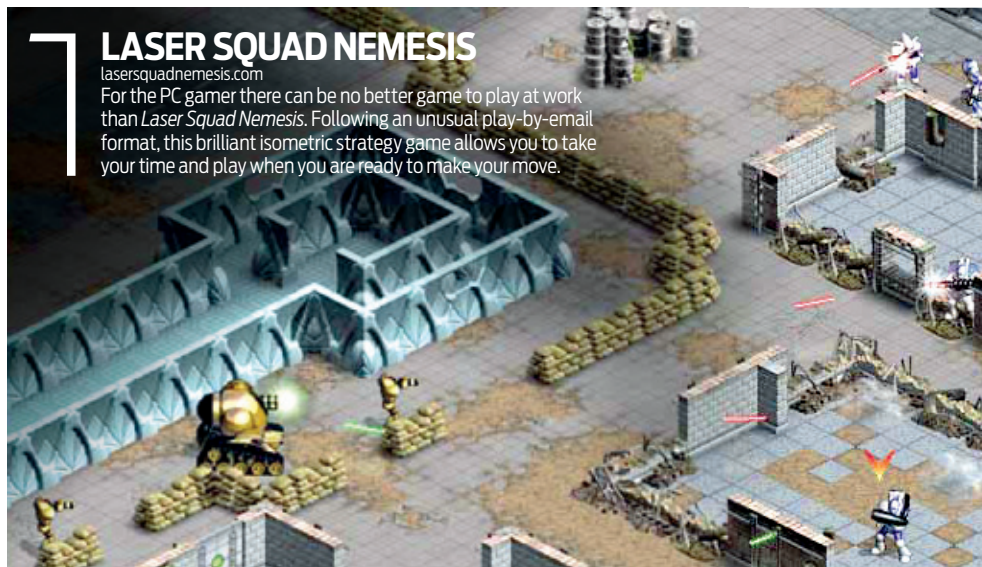
3 TRAVIAN

travian.com
Astonishingly popular strategy MMO *Travian* has made its reputation largely by keeping the office-bound entertained. With a neat village-building mechanic, it's got just enough depth.



2 DEFCON

introversion.co.uk/defcon
Perfectly-paced for gaming in the office, a bout of thermonuclear war is all any office drone needs to cheer up. The wargame even comes with a Boss mode, allowing you to hit a key and appear to be doing work.



1 LASER SQUAD NEMESIS

lasersquadnemesis.com
For the PC gamer there can be no better game to play at work than *Laser Squad Nemesis*. Following an unusual play-by-email format, this brilliant isometric strategy game allows you to take your time and play when you are ready to make your move.



Need to know

What is it?
A first-person brawl with infantry, helicopters and tanks tearing up the battlefield

Influenced by
Battlefield 2, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*

Play it on
2.4GHz dual-core, 2GB RAM, 512 MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850

Alternatively
Battlefield 2 (94%)

Copy protection
Disc check or online activation on up to 10 machines

BOLD WAR

Messy, accessible gunplay is **BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2**'s plan for a better war game *By Evan Lahti*

As a Medic, I'm constantly on corpse patrol. My second-to-second task on *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*'s battlefields is eyeing the mini-map for icons shaped like heartbeats on an EKG—they tell me who among my comrades needs to be re-alived. My magical battle defibrillator does the rest—no awkward mouth-to-mouth required. My other utility item is a crate full of bandages; when allies stand near it, their wounds disappear. For offense, I've got a light machine gun—a useless excuse for a weapon that, at last check of my stats, successfully hits bad guys a scant 10.62 percent of the time.

My foes are toting equally poor guns: assault rifles that spray like a loose fire hose, wobbly sniper rifles and pistols that kick like stubborn donkeys. These firearms would be your own worst enemy in a real war, but I'm enamored with the way they level the game's 32-player multiplayer junkyard. It's a reckless cauldron of colliding pieces—helicopters, health kits, grenades and tanks stewed by your tactics, teamwork and a mush of messy gunplay.

Is it wrong to praise a game's guns for being inaccurate? *BC2*'s designers have created a game that doesn't demand finesse, where it's unlikely that a single crack shooter will dominate a round. It's a game where your keyboard agility is less important than the tactics you take into battle. And that's valuable—even if some of that design stems from the simplified movement and shooting that's required for playing the game with a gamepad.

Slow and steady
Over time, the inaccurate weapons trigger *BC2*'s best assets: a pace that's

grounded in reality. This isn't *Modern Warfare 2*, and *thank god* for that. You're not going to be sprinting endlessly around a map like a psychotic Olympian, stabbing foes from eight feet away before activating a nuclear attack to win the game.

This isn't *Modern Warfare 2*, and thank god for that.

You're slow. You're a bad shot. But that challenge to your character and weapons is welcome—down to the half-second transition between a right-click and raising your gun's ironsights to eye level. Each of *BC2*'s four classes and dozens of unlockable weapons helps maintain that steady, patient gameplay pace.

The objective-based modes (squad deathmatch is a favorite for how it focuses the game—four teams of four operating independently to rack up body counts) have simple points at which to throw bullets and bodies, without making things so dynamic that there isn't a front line to focus your attention on.

Nowhere to hide
But *BC2*'s thoughtful pace doesn't come at the expense of action, and the ability to level most objects and structures in the environment with heavy weapons is a steady source of empowerment. Shattering the hiding spot of a sniper with a well-placed grenade is the closest gaming equivalent to transforming into the Kool-Aid man and shouting "OH YEAH!" You'll catch yourself

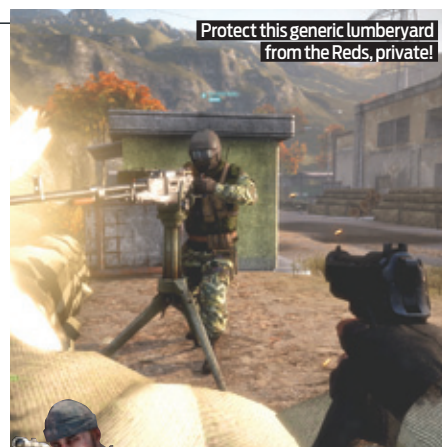
Cam-Pain

Oh, and there's also a lame single-player campaign. Here's all you'll miss by skipping it.

LEVEL	JAPAN, 1944	RUSSIAN ARCTIC	ARGENTINA	CHILEAN DESERT
If it were a war movie, it'd be called...	<i>Blands of Iwo Jima</i>	<i>Enemy At The Crates</i>	<i>The Guns of Navarowned</i>	<i>Boredfish</i>
Flimsy justification for shooting Russians	Save a brainy scientist defector that knows military secrets.	Recover a secret weapon. Wait, it's a fake.	Find a Russian guy who knows about the secret weapon.	Hack computers so you can find the secret weapon.
Only thing you're missing	Tedious backstabbing to teach you which button is used for melee.	Knocking the concrete out of your first house.	Lumbering over picket fences as a tank.	Swatting Hind helicopters with guided rockets.
# of mind-numbing vehicle sections				



Campaign characters try too hard to be comical soldier caricatures.



Protect this generic lumberyard from the Reds, private!



Drop it! Picking up enemy kits effectively lets you steal the class of who you kill.



"Our recon was right, sir. It's a combination KFC and Taco Bell."

breaking down walls just to frighten enemies, letting tank shells be the knock-knock on their door.

Defensively, it's just as exciting. The first time the wall that you're peeking behind collapses under a missile barrage, you feel naked, terrified and genuinely excited.

Unfortunately, the demolition technology is inconsistent, mostly restricted to the houses populating each map. The same rocket-propelled ordinance that remodels an entire wall won't dent a metal shipping container or a stack of construction materials.

The generous upheaval of snow, trees and terrain contributes another layer of visual dressing. A firefight between a tank and an infantry can fill a small area with dust and smoke; in tandem with *BC2*'s saturated sounds of war, the environment feels like a rippling pool of feedback that splashes with every grenade you throw at it. My screen has never been so clouded with dust and debris in a shooter.

Wounded

A mish-mash of conflicting game mechanics do get in the way of otherwise satisfying warfare. One tiny flaw that snowballs into a major one is an animation that occurs in the

middle of your screen every time your bullet finds a target. This feedback is vital: Knowing precisely when you hit an enemy can let you develop a firing style and proficiency with weapons. And it's doubly important when shooting with *BC2*'s guns because it's generally hard to hit damn near anything. In multiplayer, this animation always seemed to be lagging behind when we were actually hitting enemies. You can barely tell whether it's your first or fifth shot that hit. It sounds like a minor nitpick, but the misinformation cripples a player's ability to learn how to shoot better. Server admins can disable the animation entirely, at least.

One of the *Battlefield* series' traditions, the ability to respawn a few feet away from your squadmates, is a double-edged sword in *BC2*. Avoiding the constant need to run back to the action from a spawn point is great but facing your enemy muzzle-to-muzzle, and then having a second foe magically appear beside them, isn't something you can tactically anticipate. It also creates situations where defenders continually need to track down enemies that have snuck too close to their base: one rascal sniper can hide out of view and become a human spawn point for his teammates to

insta-flank your entire team.

Points of interest

These sins may be a necessary consequence of the game mechanics, but middling map design isn't. *BC2*'s multiplayer spaces flow and operate well, but they absolutely fail to entertain you. They're all hills, houses, valleys and brush. There are no centerpieces, no points-of-interest to rally around: A missile silo, a crashed airplane or a rail station would do a world of good here—anything beyond "left side" or "the big building" that players can call by name. When you're fighting 32-player scale battles, one or two recognizable landmarks mean a lot.

Ultimately, it's *Bad Company 2*'s de-emphasis on precision that makes it refreshing to play. It's a bold departure from the franchise's own history as well as PC gaming's heritage of fast-tempo shooters with sky-high skill ceilings—*Quake*, *Counter-Strike* or *Unreal Tournament*—but a welcoming venue for lower-key combat antics that's just as entertaining. ■

VERDICT

Unintimidating warplay boosted by rich visuals but held back by flavorless map design and a few console compromises.

PC GAMER
81

◆ Expect to pay \$50 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher EA ◆ Developer DICE ◆ Multiplayer 32 players
◆ Link battlefieldbadcompany2.com ◆ ESRB M

UNREFINED

The new and very different **COMMAND & CONQUER 4: TIBERIAN TWILIGHT** has both good and annoying surprises in store *By Dan Stapleton*

Need to know

What is it?

A multiplayer-focused, class-based real-time strategy game

Influenced by

World in Conflict, *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars*

Play it on

Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850

Alternatively

World in Conflict (93%)

Copy protection

Must log in online to play

In a very unconventional sort of surprise ending, *Command & Conquer 4: Tiberian Twilight*, the finale of the Tiberium storyline, abandons the basic mechanics the series is built on (kind of like *Highlander 2*, but not as insane). In fact, virtually nothing connects *C&C4* to its long heritage—gameplay is far more reminiscent of *World in Conflict* than *C&C*. If not for Joe Kucan and his shiny, goateed dome reprising the role of paramilitary cult leader Kane, and the faction names Nod and GDI, *C&C4* could be an unrelated sci-fi tactical strategy game.

How different is it? Instead of harvesting Tiberium resources to build a sturdy base and a diverse army, you deploy a specialized Crawler—a walking, rolling or flying distant relative of *C&C*'s Mobile Construction Vehicles—in a designated spot on the map, and unfold it to crank out units *for free* until you hit your unit cap. You then pack up your Crawler, advance (or retreat) to wherever the new front line might be, unpack it again and replenish your forces. If your Crawler is destroyed in battle, you just deploy a new one. So yeah, it's pretty different.

War on wheels

The pace of combat is constant. Even when you lose every unit you've got, it only takes a couple of minutes to go from just your Crawler back up to a full-strength army. No costs are incurred except for build time, so the only incentive to keep units alive is veteran bonuses, earned through combat and from picking up *Pac-Man*-like power-pellet drops from fallen enemies. Pathfinding is fussy, which is a hassle when trying to ensure that your favorite unit gets the pickup, but I love the visual upgrades (like extra arms on the Nod Avatar walker) when you snag a rare blue powerup.

On that note, the Crawler animations are cool but, on the whole, *C&C4* is a graphical step back from *C&C: Red Alert 3*—for instance, textures are less detailed, and the weak-sauce nuclear missiles look like something Wile E. Coyote might launch at the Road Runner.

What's most impressive about this game is that with three types of Crawler per faction, there are essentially six distinct armies. And unlike the sub-factions of *C&C3: Kane's Wrath*, no overlap exists between the Offense,

Defense and Support unit lineups. The choice of which specialization to play is meaningful, since each will force you to adapt your strategies to its strengths. For example, a GDI Support player can't match a Nod Offensive player's firepower, but his Orca VTOL craft can easily pick apart an undefended Crawler. If your chosen Crawler isn't working out, you can always pick another class when you respawn.

Unit-y

Units are in abundant supply—a few are pretty cool, like the giant UFO-ish Nod gunships. But unlike nearly every other RTS, you can't jump into a skirmish against AI and immediately play with all of your toys, because most of them must be laboriously unlocked with experience points, which are logged on EA's servers. I get what they're going for here—the same type of reward system you see in *Battlefield 2* or *Modern Warfare 2* that unlocks new weapons the more you play—but to hell with that. I want to understand the units available to me and my enemies before I see them in battle, and I *don't* want to get stomped by a guy online who's unlocked GDI's AT-AT-alike Mastodon walker before me.

Only one capture-point-based mode is available on the dozen multiplayer maps, all of which support up to five-on-five games. But these maps are too small for a fracas of that size to be anything less than a whirling explosion cyclone. Two-on-two or three-on-three matches are just about right for an enjoyable pace.

My favorite multiplayer trick is using the Tiberium pickups as bombs instead of redeeming them for upgrade points. A unit can carry the glowing green chunk into combat and detonate it, causing a Tiberium storm that does massive damage to anything caught inside its radius.

Classified Which mobile war factory is right for you?



Offense

Offense is just like how it sounds: good old-fashioned ground firepower. Upgraded Offensive Crawlers get a turret that fires on the move, turning them into the game's biggest tanks.



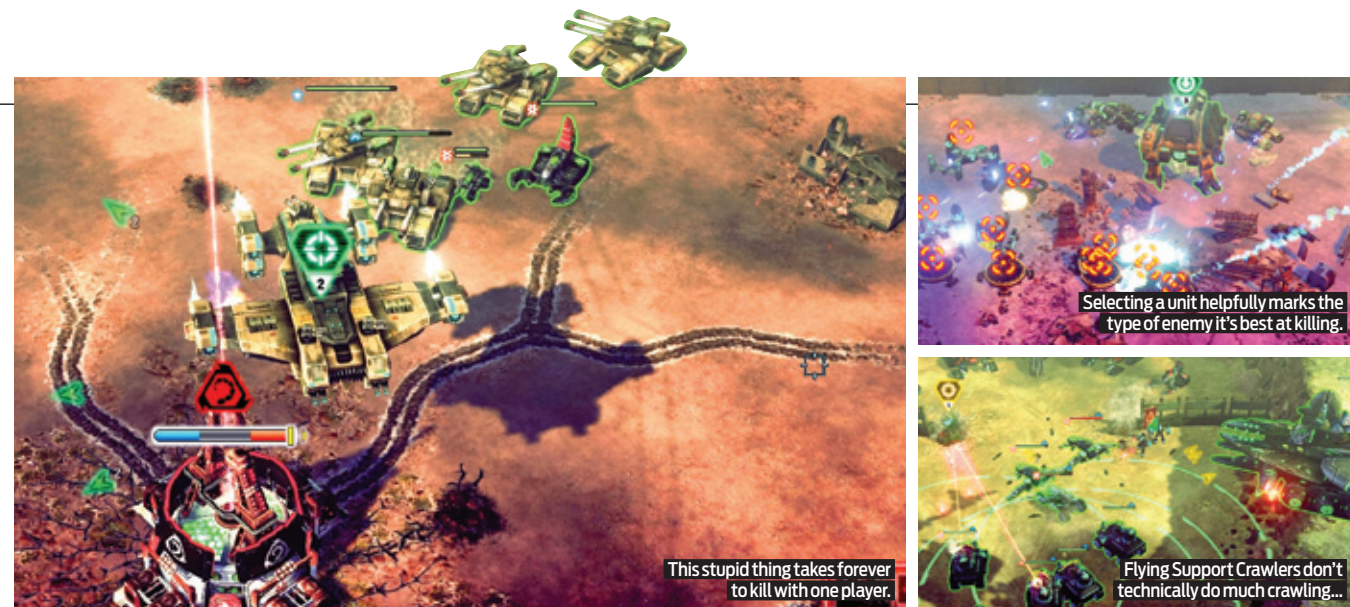
Defense

The last refuge of the base builder, the Defense class lets you erect a limited number of turrets and back them up with infantry and light vehicles. Upgrades favor the dug-in player with shields and a turret.



Support

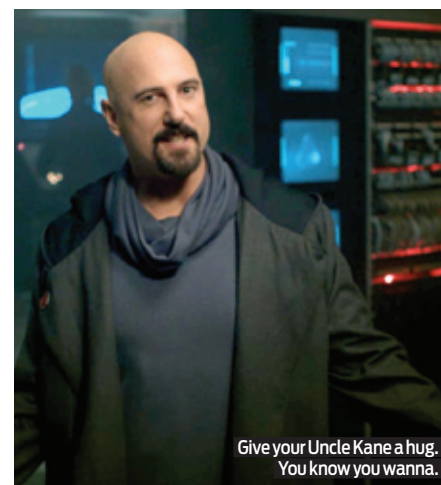
The mobility of an air force and flying Crawler make up for a lack of firepower. You also get handy cast-anywhere buffs and debuffs that can turn the tide of battle for your allies.



Selecting a unit helpfully marks the type of enemy it's best at killing.

This stupid thing takes forever to kill with one player.

Flying Support Crawlers don't technically do much crawling...



Give your Uncle Kane a hug. You know you wanna.



Note to Defense players: do not bring infantry to a giant tank fight.



Objective: Activate TCN Node

Kane leaves in: 13:30

Moments after taking this screenshot I realized I could just go around these defenses.

If not for Joe Kucan's shiny, goateed dome, *C&C4* could be an unrelated sci-fi tactical strategy game.



Who's the real monster?

One *C&C* tradition that remains intact is the signature live-action cut-scene briefings. *C&C4* takes a slightly different approach—gone are the hammed-up and stunt-casted performances and catsuit-wrapped *Battestar Galactica* babes. Although it's a darker, more serious story, it's not what I'd call great storytelling, and doesn't reveal the details about Kane's apparent immortality that we were promised. But thematically, it does do some interesting things that turn the Nod/GDI conflict on its head.

As a single-player experience, *C&C4* is a bust. The single branching campaign (the Nod/GDI choice happens a few missions in) is fairly typical, but there are several points where it's frustratingly unbalanced. I ran up against a Nod Crawler that pumped out units faster than I could kill them. In another mission, a massive GDI gunship flew in mindless circles around the map, its huge cannons obliterating units in one shot. In both cases I eventually won, but only by tediously whittling the target down with a constant stream of suicidal units. Not exactly fun.

When you call in co-op reinforcements by seamlessly inviting another player into your game, the action

becomes better balanced, faster-paced (since two Crawlers build units twice as fast as one) and more tactically interesting thanks to the combined options of two classes. It's still second-fiddle to the competitive multiplayer action, but it's a good place to start out and learn how the Crawler works—plus you rack up some experience points to unlock some decent units before going into the more interesting multiplayer fray.

The catch

A nasty catch to playing *C&C4* is having to log into EA's servers before launching the game, even for single-player. Considering that EA recently shut down servers for the less than two-year-old *Mercenaries 2*, I'm not enthusiastic about buying a product that depends on active servers to play. The multiplayer battles are good enough fun once you've ranked up, but a potentially short-lived service is a dagger dangling over our heads. ■

VERDICT

Delayed gratification of locked-out units dampens enthusiasm for the new fast-paced class-based multiplayer action.

PC GAMER
73

◆ Expect to pay \$50 ◆ Release March 16 ◆ Publisher EA ◆ Developer EA
◆ Multiplayer 10 players, 2-player co-op ◆ Link Commandandconquer.com ◆ ESRB T

www.pcgamer.com



Envoy versus starbase, who will win? (Hint: starbase)

TALKING POINTS

Make space friends and influence aliens in **SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE: DIPLOMACY** By Dan Stapleton

An old bit of wisdom tells us that diplomacy is the art of allowing others to achieve your ends. *Sins of a Solar Empire: Diplomacy* gives you a new set of handy tools to do just that: manipulate other players (AI or human) into helping you achieve your real-time strategic takeover of the galaxy.

This is a big-picture add-on, and it's complex stuff. In a marathon-length interstellar war between three or more empires, *Diplomacy's* new alliance bonuses—which can improve everything from resource income to rate of fire for both factions involved—will almost certainly shape the outcome of the game. It's a powerful incentive for putting your John Hancock on formal treaties, as opposed to lone-wolfing it. However, if all you're doing is playing small-scale one-on-one matches against a buddy or an AI, you aren't likely to even notice that it's installed.

There's only one new shipper faction (the unarmed envoy cruiser, which can improve relations and support allies), but *Diplomacy's* new relationships screen fills in some annoying gaps in *Sins'* political info—specifically, I can now tell if

there's any love lost between two empires at my doorstep. If they're not team-locked BFFs, I can use the new diplomacy tech tree to research the ability to give missions and rewards to other factions, and play one against the other. It's a more precise maneuver than offering a general bounty for attacking a faction—if I want to weaken an enemy's economy I can offer a sum of resources to a third party to specifically target his civilian structures.

Mission-giving is fantastic for communicating with AI players (humans could already be negotiated with via chat, though this formalizes agreements). The only hitch is that it's hard to tell if your scheme is working unless you've established a shared vision treaty with other factions.

But it's all a lot to handle for new players. Only advanced strategists are going to be able to wrap their heads around, much less appreciate most of these enhancements.

Diplomacy is great to have if you've progressed to the point where pure *Sins* combat has lost its luster, but nowhere near as essential an upgrade as last year's *Entrenchment*. ■

PC GAMER
78

◆ Price \$10 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Stardock ◆ Developer Ironclad ◆ Multiplayer 8 players
◆ Link sinsofasolarempire.com ◆ ESRB T



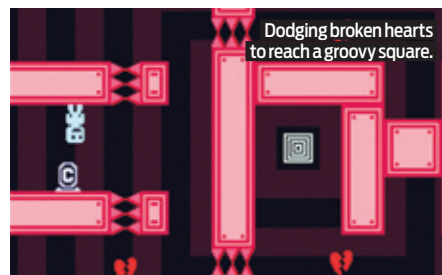
GREED: BLACK BORDER bites off more than it can chew

There's no reason *Diablo's* hack-and-slash fun can't work in a space setting, but *GREED* isn't the game that does it. The main problem here is that your character—you get a choice of three—controls like a mobile turret. It's an interesting idea largely ruined by the fiddly controls, and the fact that right from the start you're facing zombies that soak up far too much damage for their pay grade. Getting through the levels is a slog, and reliant on a broken dodging mechanic.

GREED's admittedly interesting ideas aren't enough to stop it from wearing out its welcome before the end of even the opening levels. Back into the dark crypts we go. ■ Richard Cobbett

PC GAMER
46

◆ Price \$20 (Steam) ◆ Release Out now ◆ Link bit.ly/4vQJ5E ◆ ESRB NA



Fiendishly clever **VVVVVV** is a straight up and down classic.

VVVVVV is a very clever 2D platformer where, instead of jumping to avoid obstacles, you flip gravity on its head and fall upwards, and stroll by on the safe ceiling.

The joy comes from plotting your path across ceilings and floors, around spikes, perhaps over moving platforms, to the next screen. Touch pretty much anything, and you die. It can be frustrating (I died 2,000 times in five hours), but only because you're not doing it right.

The relentlessly upbeat soundtrack is dripping with personality, as is the puzzle design and dialogue. It's a beautifully made game with lots of challenge, atmosphere and polish. ■ Jaz McDougall

PC GAMER
86

◆ Price \$15 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Link bit.ly/6Kl1x ◆ ESRB NA

MONSTER MASH

What good are the strength and speed of **ALIENS VS. PREDATOR**'s creatures if you can't control them? *By Dan Stapleton*

Need to know

What is it?

A three-way shooter based on popular sci-fi monster movies.

Influenced by

Aliens, Predator, Alien vs. Predator

Play it on

Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850

Alternatively

Batman: Arkham Asylum (93%)

Copy protection

Steam

Tap. Tap. Tap. The distinctive ticks of the motion tracker and my own foot-steps are the only sounds I hear while cautiously walking down the darkened corridor of an ancient temple on an alien world. Monstrous visages are carved into the stone, overgrown with foliage after millennia of neglect. Ping! The motion tracker's alert springs to the foreground. Ping! Ping! A bright white dot appears on my radar, indicating movement in the inky blackness, somewhere outside the illuminating beam of the flashlight fixed to my pulse rifle. The pings come faster as the beast closes in, but I see nothing. Grim realization dawns and I look up, just as a shiny gray blur plunges down. Red splashes across my screen. Wounded, I spin around and catch a good look: The iconic movie monster bares two sets of teeth at me, circling to strike again. But this time I'm faster—I line up my pulse rifle and fire. And fire some more. But the thing just won't die.

Bullets for breakfast

To its credit, *Aliens vs. Predator* captures the grim atmosphere of the

movie franchises. But the AI just isn't up to the task of recreating the experience of confronting any of the fear-some extraterrestrial killers. The Aliens and Predators lack cunning; neither makes good use of the stealth and speed that made them so menacing on the big screen. So *AvP* attempts to compensate by making them tough as nails instead. Intimidating *Aliens* pulse rifles are reduced to impotent noisemakers and almost every fight in the short Colonial Marine campaign turns into a spray-and-pray fracas that usually ends in a close-quarters rifle-butting of enemies that, by all rights, should rip my gun from my hands and eat my face. Time and time again, victory feels cheap.

In fact, each of the brief single-player campaigns—Marine, Alien and Predator—suffer from this kind of mediocre gameplay as well as a rehashed story that's only slightly better than the two awful *AvP* movies.

You'll squeeze out a bit more fun playing as the Alien and Predator, which replaces stale run-and-gun maneuvers with stealth hunting and gory prey decapitations. But these also

come saddled with control problems that make you feel slow and clumsy at precisely the times you need to be agile. The Alien's speed works against you when all too many essential actions, such as stealth kills or entering a vent, are contextual commands that require you to be in a very specific location to execute; the controls for wall crawling are as frustratingly unintuitive. The Predator's cloaking device, heat vision, blades and shoulder-mounted plasma caster make you feel like the badass hunter you should be. But a crucial move—the flying leap—must be set to a valid target before use, which renders it nearly useless for quickly escaping dangerous situations. Nobody took any cues, it seems, from *Batman: Arkham Asylum*.

To Catch a Predator

AvP is far more successful in its multi-player modes. Inter-species death matches are typical. Co-op Survival, one of the more exciting modes, delivers the most intense, most movie-like experience of Marines-versus-Aliens action, sending increasingly larger waves of more fragile creatures at you until you're overwhelmed. Now *that's* what *Aliens* is all about.

Another winner is the Predator versus Marines match, where a single player hunts a team of Marines (when a Marine kills the Predator, he assumes the Predator role). This mode lets you play the part the AI can't: a stealthy, lethal hunter that can use surprise to his advantage. Too bad the Predator still can't jump without filing a flight plan in advance—it could've been the break-out feature that this game badly needs. ■

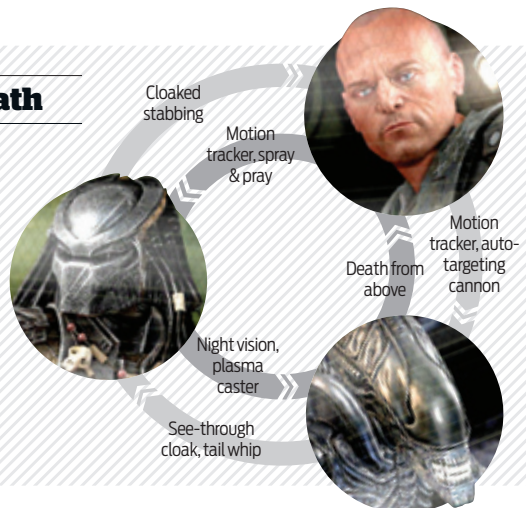
VERDICT

Strange balancing, clumsy controls and too many contextual actions make *AvP*'s classic movie monsters merely playable.

PC GAMER
65

Circle of Death

AvP's food chain is like Rock-Paper-Scissors, except with bullets, teeth and cloaking devices



◆ Price \$50 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Sega ◆ Developer Rebellion
◆ Multiplayer Up to 18 versus, 4-player co-op ◆ Link sega.com/games/aliens-vs-predator ◆ ESRB M

You feel slow and clumsy at precisely the times you need to be agile.



BELLISSIMO

ASSASSIN'S CREED II would be a triumph, if it wasn't crippled by extraordinary restrictions **By Tom Francis**

Need to know

What is it?

Third-person free-running action game in Renaissance Italy

Influenced by

Grand Theft Auto III, Hitman

Play it on

3GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/Radeon 4850

Alternatively

Hitman: Blood Money (81%)

Copy protection

Requires constant net connection—see review

It's brilliant. **Don't buy it.** The copy protection of *Assassin's Creed II* requires you to be connected to publisher Ubisoft's servers every moment you play. Any interruption to that connection kicks you out and erases all the progress you've made since the last checkpoint.

PC Gamer cannot recommend a game that imposes such stringent and potentially problematic restrictions on paying customers without good reason.

It doesn't change the quality of the game, and it's not for me to tell you how much it should piss you off. But it's more important than ever to know how good the game is, so I'm giving *Assassin's Creed II* the score the game itself deserves. Only you know how much Ubisoft's copy protection spoils that for you.

In most other respects, *Assassin's Creed II* is a textbook example of how to listen to your fans and address their concerns. It expands the faltering first game into a huge and beautifully formed world, riddled with satisfying things to do.

In both games you're an assassin, but *Creed II*'s Ezio is a lot easier to get along with than the awful douchebag they asked you to play in the first game—he's fiery, but rarely a jerk.

The world is Renaissance Italy, soft-lit and etched out in fetishistic detail. You prowling it with a freedom and fluidity unique to the series: Run in a straight line and you'll hop fences; spring off barrels, and scramble up sheer walls, snatching sills, beams and grills until you wriggle onto the roof.

Take it, Ezio

What's different here is that these huge and ancient urban playgrounds are full of secret tombs to find, guarded gold to steal, personal contracts to perform, pickpockets to chase down, forgotten weapons to appropriate and, oddly, cheating husbands to pummel.

The pummeling, and the armed combat, are both hideous fun. Standard attacks do little; instead it's about distraction, backstabbing, disarming and counterattacks. Each is exquisitely animated: The warhammer killing moves, in particular, ap-

ply a grim mix of golf, cricket and hockey strokes to an enemy skull.

It's broadly a good conversion to the PC. It looks delicious at 1920x1200, it's stable and fast to Alt + Tab from and there are a few nice tweaks, such as enemy health indicators. But control prompts don't actually tell you what key to press ("Press [legs] to move your legs"—thanks, man), and it really chugs on a 2.6GHz dual-core with an 8800GT (the recommended spec).

The game itself has two additional problems. The first is the control system—one that requires you to hold down three separate keys to sprint, where "grab enemy" is the same button as "drop weapon," where turning with the mouse is sluggish and turning with the keys is imprecise. The second is a general clumsiness with scripted sequences, most notably some dismal chase scenes where your quarry repeatedly blocks your route with nonsense traps, only to wait for you to catch up around the next corner.

The general spirit is marvelously silly. Leonardo da Vinci is your arms dealer. You can become invisible by hiring four hookers. And when you cleave a particularly hefty guard's skull in two with his own battleaxe, Ezio gives him a gentle prod on the chest to pitch him over.

The first game was a miracle of animation and movement, but it's *Creed II* that worked out how to turn that miracle into fun. It's enormous, free-form and packed with stuff to chase, stalk and kill. It's sad that we each now have to decide whether its ridiculous copy protection method negates a genuinely great game. ■

VERDICT

Tactile, bloody and substantial. One of gaming's most exciting open worlds—but only when you're online.

PC GAMER
86

The circle of death

Accessing the assassin's tools

Poison blade

Drives your victim berserk, making him start fights.

Fists

Use them to disarm an enemy, then kill him with his own sword in one blow.

Hidden blades

With two of these in your wrists, you can do instant double-kills.

Blank slot

Hm, what goes here? A gun. No kidding, you get a freaking gun.

Throwing knives

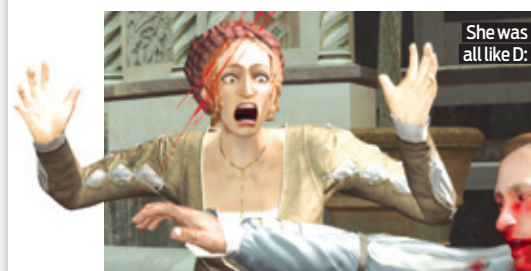
Instant death at range. Disabled during some scripted sequences, annoyingly.

◆ Price \$60 ◆ Release March ◆ Publisher Ubisoft ◆ Developer Ubisoft ◆ Multiplayer None
◆ Link assassinscreed.com ◆ ESRB M

Leonardo da Vinci is your arms dealer.



"Give back my—ow! Jesus! Not like that!"



She was all like D:



There's nothing in the Creed about not stabbing girls.



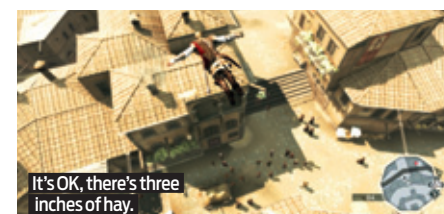
Ezio's powers include "Eagle Vision."



"Wait, I can explain! I thought it'd be funny!"



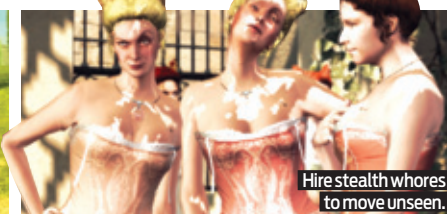
In platforming, this is a stalemate.



It's OK, there's three inches of hay.



See Tuscany on horseback.



Hire stealth whores to move unseen.

RIGHTEOUS

The Space Marines of **WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR II-CHAOS RISING** drive out the corrupt forces of repetition *By Dan Stapleton*

Need to know

What is it?

A stand-alone expansion to the sci-fi RTS-meets-action-RPG set in the Warhammer 40,000 universe

Influenced by

Warhammer 40,000, Freedom Force

Play it on

Dual-core CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/Radeon 4870

Alternatively

Company of Heroes (96%)

Copy protection

Steam



It's games like this that make Relic one of the best PC developers operating today. When I reviewed the outstanding *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*, my chief criticism of the campaign was the excessive repetition of simple "fight from point A to point B, then fight a boss" missions. *Chaos Rising*, the first stand-alone expansion, addresses that issue and then some, building on the strengths of the first game (including post-release enhancements like the addictive Last Stand survival co-op mode) with crack mission design and a new over-the-top evil faction.

Chaos Crusades

Rooting out a demonic Chaos uprising and unmasking a traitor among your ranks is the goal for your team of elite Space Marines (import your crew from *DoWII* save files if you've got 'em). *CR*'s opening battle sets the tone for the next 14 consistently complex and excellently-paced missions: multiple kill-and-capture objectives climax in a defensive holdout against huge waves of Imperial Guard turncoats and artillery barages. The second is just as good: a fight through a winding corridor of

ice to reach a battle with the new Eldar Wraithguard heavy infantry, followed by a timed mad dash back to the starting point to rescue a squad member left to guard the remains of a fallen Marine.

Nearly all of the campaign are this exciting. Most missions are set on the bleak-but-gorgeous ice planet Aurelia, where glaciers crumble around you and white snow contrasts the blood from gory kills. Two missions take you inside an ancient abandoned spacecraft infested with Tyranids, where support abilities that drop from orbit are disabled, making you shuffle your equipment to compensate. Mix in a few skirmishes from the three previously visited locations—jungle, urban and desert—and *CR* has scenic variety to spare.

Doing battle with the Chaos Space Marines is, at first, very much like fighting Space Marines...until they unleash the Bloodletters: tough-to-slay, flame-sword-swinging split-tongued devils, and Bloodcrushers, the demonic cavalry. As a faction, Chaos puts up a great fight that's distinct from the style of the Orks, Eldar or Tyranids we fought before.

On the home team there's a new one-man squad: Jonah Orion, an ass-

kicking Librarian with incredibly powerful spells—my favorite, the Warp Vortex, can grind several squads of infantry into meat, making him especially useful in defense missions. He's ideal for co-op mode, where a friend takes over two of your squads so that you can focus on micromanaging his AoE (area of effect) and healing powers. My one gripe about Orion is that, like Davian Thule the Dreadnaught, his inventory items are mostly mutually exclusive with other squads, leading to significant inventory clutter as you rake in loot on the trip from level 18 to 30.

Incompetence points

Character progression is muddled a little by the new Corruption system, which adds some interesting choices (do you want to trade your goodie-two-shoes healing ability for some increasingly wicked offensive powers?) but doesn't explain any consequences of corruption beyond the kind of vague warning you get about masturbating too much. Another issue is that the game so often conflates "corrupt" actions with failure, such as letting too many allies die or friendly buildings be destroyed, that I often felt like I was earning incompetence points. It's also easy to remain pure via redeeming mission goals—you really have to *want* to be corrupt—which ends up downplaying the very clever and otherwise well-executed importance of corruption at the end of the campaign.

But if it takes a second playthrough to get the most out of it, so be it—I'm thinking about my super-chaotic round two already. ■

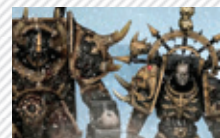
VERDICT

Not everything is perfect, but you'd earn incompetence points by missing a refined and reduced-price version of *Dawn of War II*.



Faces of Chaos

How the new Chaos faction manifests in three MP modes



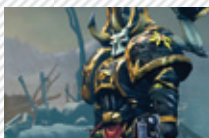
Campaign/Co-op

The evil-for-evil's-sake villains talk a lot of smack, kind of like sanctimonious interstellar pro wrestlers.



Conventional RTS

Chaos troops are vicious damage-dealers that sacrifice their own units for power boosts and healing.

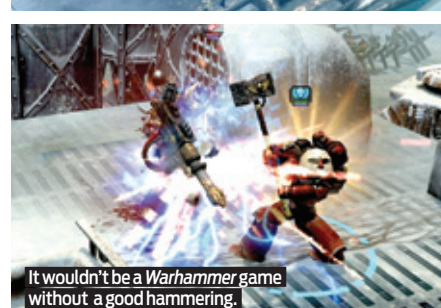
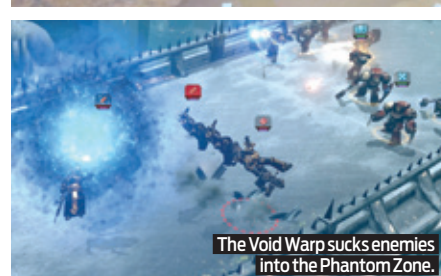
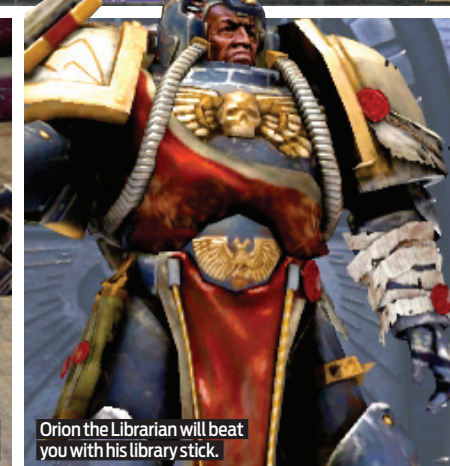


The Last Stand

The new Chaos Sorcerer and Tyranid Hive Tyrant are both powerful summoners. LS could use a new map, though.

◆ Price \$30 ◆ Release March 12 ◆ Publisher THQ ◆ Developer Relic
◆ Multiplayer 2-player co-op, 3-player Last Stand, 6-player battles ◆ Link dawnofwar2.com ◆ ESRB M

Chaos puts up a great fight that's distinct from the Orks, Eldar or Tyranids.



ILLOGICAL

The promising universe of **STAR TREK ONLINE** holds more disappointment than wonder *By Josh Augustine*

Need to know

What is it?

An MMO based on one of the most popular science-fiction universes of all time

Influenced by

Star Trek, Guild Wars

Play it on

Dual-core CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce GTX260/Radeon 4870

Alternatively

EVE Online (55%)

Copy protection

Subscription

As I took to the stars with The PC Gamer Armada (a mix of *Trek* faithful and agnostics), I observed simultaneous expressions of delight, sadness and anger at our adventures in *Star Trek Online*. My sensor readings indicate that there is just enough enjoyable gameplay and fan service to keep you hooked into *STO*—at least in the short term—in spite of its many deficiencies, limitations and obvious flaws.

Core breach

At the heart of *STO*'s problems lies a bizarre contradiction in its design. It's clear that the game is desperate to make itself accessible to the non-MMO-playing Trekkie masses—so much so that it removes all challenge from the first 25 hours of play, and even if you manage the remarkable feat of getting yourself killed at the hands of your flimsy resistance, you suffer a mere 10-second time out before respawning. Long before the difficulty begins to ramp up, you'll start to wonder if you might be able

to train your dog to level for you.

At the same time, *STO* completely fails to explain its mechanics and skills, even to experienced MMO players. The game neglects to divulge the benefit of diverting power into your starship's Auxiliary function (as opposed to the three other obviously important systems: engines, shields and weapons); the skill tree is a mess that makes informed character development impossible; and after dozens of hours in game, I still have no idea what the deflector upgrade that gives +14 to my "starship deflectors" and +21 to my "deflector dish" actually does for me. How are those two stats different and what do they do? There's nothing to tell me besides crawling around in the forums.

Of course, our resident *Trek* fans have a laundry list of nerdy complaints: It doesn't let us crew one ship together; it thinks nothing of having us defeat the Borg, the most feared of *Star Trek* enemies, in the opening tutorial; it has us soloing Negh'Var warships, the most powerful vessels in the Klingon fleet, in our starting

Miranda-class light cruisers. Good grief, the bridge of your starship isn't even interactive, so loading into it completely strips away the illusion of being in command.

All good things

And yet in many ways, it's a strangely captivating game. For example, despite the mission designers' best attempts to break me with repetition, I have yet to get bored with the space combat. Vaguely reminiscent of the *Starfleet Command* games, the combination of strategic pace and complexity of weapon firing arcs, allocation of power and reinforcement of weakened shield facings results in plenty of opportunities for skill and strategy—and enemy explosions are mighty satisfying. Fighting on the ground can be fun as well—pausing and positioning your AI officers for flanking damage bonuses give it a unique flavor, even if that flavor doesn't necessarily taste like *Trek*.

As a result, Federation versus Klingon PvP is great when it works, which is about half the time. All too often, matches are unbalanced and ground map design is far from ideal, with too much distance and not enough focal points.

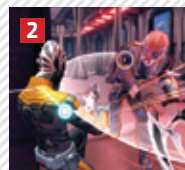
It wouldn't be *Star Trek* at all without an iconic ship and crew, and *STO* delivers on that aspect—at least most of the time. The character creator is superb, allowing you to choose a canon race (like Vulcan, Bolian or Andorian) or create your own variety of bumpy-headed alien. But while your first Federation starship looks pretty good, thanks to *STO*'s lighting effects (notable exception: the ugly damage textures), you'll be struck by déjà vu as you pass other players. Each ship class is limited to mixing and matching parts from just three similar-looking ships, and lacks Cryptic's usual zeal for options, options and more options. Since you spend the majority of your time in space, traveling or engaging in ship-

It's a good day to die 25 times

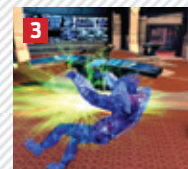
At level six you can create a Klingon character, but with so little Klingon content, we can fit it all into this tiny box! Klingons get quests to do four things:



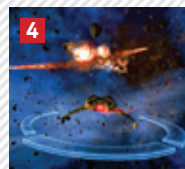
1 Kill other players in space
Klingons ships are fairly overpowered, with a tight turning radius and cloaking abilities.



2 Kill other players on the ground
Klingons are fierce here, too, with access to powerful melee abilities that ignore personal shields.



3 Die in a bunch at the hands of those players
Ridiculous, but at least this works within the fiction—Klingons love an honorable death in battle.



4 Kill NPCs in a few repeatable, randomized missions
The one scrap of PvE content. Savor it.



Risa, the pleasure planet—not much to do here but relax.



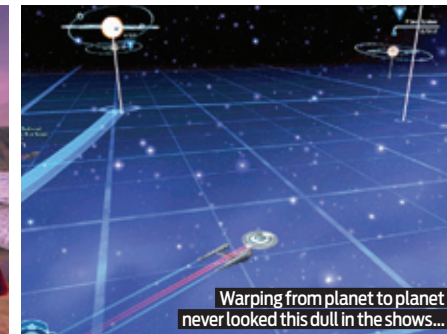
This Warbird may be huge, but if the number next to its name is less than or equal to my level, it's a pushover.



Back off, Klingons, that asteroid is mine!



The time travel episodes with the Guardian of Forever are nutty, but fun.



Warping from planet to planet never looked this dull in the shows...



New, lax Starfleet dress codes take the "uni" out of "uniform."

In many ways it's a strangely captivating game, and I have yet to get bored with the space combat.



Ground weapons have some flashy effects, but character animations are stiff and jerky.



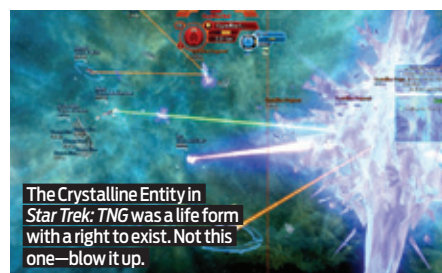
Using the right combo of attacks will inflict a painful-looking incineration death.



Your planet was like that when I got here, honest.



Battleground fights have an epic feel, but they go on way too long.



The Crystalline Entity in *Star Trek: TNG* was a life form with a right to exist. Not this one—blow it up.

to-ship combat, ship customization should've gotten more love.

The first thing *STO* does is give us the keys to our own starships and let us face the classic on-again-off-again enemy: the Klingon Empire. Your combat role in space is defined more by your ship and Bridge Officers' abilities than your own player class. A Tactical Captain, for example, can command any type of ship (science/support, escort/DPS or cruiser/tank), and man its stations with officers of varying space and ground-based powers that can be trained up and swapped out almost at will. The system's flexibility facilitates solo playing well, but delegates too much character development to my crew, killing much of the "I'm the hero" sensation. It makes me feel weaker when I join a group where other players replace my crew and most of my powers are unavailable.

Temporal loop

This galaxy is not a persistent world that you live in—it's a combat game, strung together in a series of repetitious, instanced missions, more akin to *Guild Wars* than *World of Warcraft*. A few hours in, you'll have played most of what it has to offer in terms of quest variety: kill five groups of enemy

ships, beam down to a planet and kill five groups of ground troops, scan five anomalies, repeat until level cap.

A few missions try to keep things fresh with non-combat objectives, such as one that had me listen to miners' grievances and then pass a quiz to prove I understood their concerns. But others are less interesting with a "talk to guy A, talk to guy B, talk to guy A again" formula, or the dismally dull "run around an empty planet looking for flashing objects to scan." Mission design hit rock bottom (pun intended) when I was ordered to shoot giant asteroids for roughly 10 minutes straight.

There's little of substance outside the missions—your ship warps between solar systems (mission locations) through "sector space" as a token on a map of the galaxy. It's an efficient and effective means of getting around, but it's not the least bit immersive—I never felt the sense of wonder that comes from exploration.

Engaged

Some missions string together the typical space and ground objectives into multi-step, episodic experiences modeled after traditional *Star Trek* episodes. In one such episode, my ship was ordered to investigate reports of

raiders stealing medical supplies—the trail led (via killing enemy ships, killing enemies on the ground, and then scanning a flashing computer terminal) to a mad scientist performing genetic enhancement experiments. The story—traveling from one star system to another in pursuit of, and ultimately battling with, a buffed-up super-Gorn—made it much more engrossing than usual. These episodes are, by far, the highlight of the *STO* experience, and the game's strongest redeeming feature.

It's a mixture that will keep *Trek*-inclined gamers entertained, in spite of themselves, for at least the better part of a month. After that you'll probably want to put it down for a while, possibly returning down the road to see what Cryptic has done to improve it. Don't expect to get new planets and new civilizations for free, though. Cryptic charged *Champions Online* fans for an extra zone and they'll likely do the same for *STO*'s next batch of content, which would further diminish the appeal of a game that limped out of space dock. ■

VERDICT

With all the potential of a *Star Trek* MMO, it's a shame to see such a lackluster implementation of the coveted license.

PC GAMER
60

◆ Price \$50 + \$15/month subscription ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Atari ◆ Developer Cryptic
◆ Multiplayer Massively ◆ Link StarTrekOnline.com ◆ ESRB T

Episodes are the highlight of the *STO* experience, and the game's strongest redeeming feature.

ROBOWAR

When mommy MMO and daddy shooter had a special hug, **GLOBAL AGENDA** was born *By Craig Pearson*

Need to know

What is it?

Third-person shooter with jetpacks and territorial fighting

Influenced by

Starsiege: Tribes

Play it on

2.4GHz CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850

Alternatively

Fallen Empire: Legions

Copyprotection

Online authentication

I'm happy for games of different genres that settle down, marry and have mixed-genre babies. *Global Agenda's* parents, the shooter and the MMO, can take pride in their child: it's not going win any beauty contests, but at least it's got all of its limbs.

When you buy *Global Agenda*, you get a fun, team-based third-person shooter with MMO-ish character creation, leveling and guilds. Optional monthly payments let you take part in a larger world-conquest meta-game where you fight as part of an Agency (guild) or Alliance (many guilds) for control of a world map.

I selected the Recon class: speedy and agile, she's used to infiltrate, snipe and force the other team to worry about their backs. The other classes are as you'd expect: Robotics

have turrets, Medics heal and Assault uses big guns to kill everything. Every character has a jetpack, melee option and gun. Your character unlocks weapons and skills as you level, which you have to select before you head into battle. I grabbed an invisibility buff and dived in.

There are two kinds of fighting to choose from: PvE, where you and a small team take on disappointing AI in weary instances; and PvP, where people make smart choices in interesting levels.

In my PvP battle, the Red team was holed up in a building, guarding the control point with turrets that covered the exits. However, they'd forgotten to cover a large skylight opening. No problem for a jetpacking, transparent femsassin: you can't fly and be invisible at the same time, but you can easily shift between the two. Taking the jetpack high above the building and switching powers, I dropped undetected through the roof hole.

Whoops

Then I ran out of invisibility juice and uncloaked just as I landed. Not good. Instead of invisibly and calmly mining all the turrets, I panicked—throwing a mine at a Robotic expert's face—and then ran around whacking people with my glowing sword until I could power-up and cloak again. That was in Control, the simplest game mode.

All the arenas encourage movement with tall, open areas and multiple points of attack of. Control and Breach have you fighting over control points. In Demolition, you deliver an explosive robot (oh yes) to the enemy's base. In Payload, you need to push or block a deliverable cargo container, while Scramble creates randomized control points to fight over.

The paid-for content is incredibly complex: it's a global fight for resources with teams buying up hexagons on a world map and defending them against other Alliances. It's a bit like the MMO shooter *PlanetSide*, but only renders the arenas you fight on, not the entire globe.

Those fights can take place on multiple hexes, though, so you can launch an all-out assault, pouring into a rival's arenas to wrest control of their territory. Conquest battles only take place at certain times of the day to ensure the that defenders are available. So it takes time, resources and teammates to make any headway in this world.

Overhead

With the *EVE Online*-level of obsession it requires, I can't see *Global Agenda* gaining the consistent player base it needs to shore up its metagame, particularly when the interface is so shoddy. For example: *Global Agenda* doesn't provide an easy way to join Alliances and Agencies from the conquest map (you have to go to a different menu and search). It didn't tell me when players were waiting to join our Agency, either, and it doesn't provide any information on any Agency that tries to recruit you.

Global Agenda could be grand, but the metagame is built on such unstable foundations that I fear it'll become a withered limb, stealing vital life-blood from the fun shooter. I hope I'm wrong. ■

VERDICT

It's lots of fun as a straight team-based shooter, but the MMO side of things needs polish to make it more accessible.

PC GAMER
70



In *Global Agenda*, Red and Blue are fighting. Again.



Of course, electro-swords have a counter: electro shields.



Fighting the computer is tragically dull...



...but the game comes alive as an MMO.



Everyone has a jetpack. Wheee!



Evil: dropping mines on the enemy teleporter.



Control points are serious business.

To fee, or not to fee

Should you subscribe to *Global Agenda*?



No problem for a jetpacking, transparent femsassin.

◆ Price \$50, \$13/month optional subscription ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher High-Rez ◆ Developer High-Rez ◆ Multiplayer Massively ◆ Link globalagendagame.com ◆ ESRB T

THE ENBLIGHTENMENT

A world rebuilds and the Darkspawn wise up in
DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS—AWAKENING By Desslock

Need to know

What is it?

An expansion to the already-huge *Dragon Age: Origins* RPG

Influenced by

Baldur's Gate, post-war reconstruction

Play it on

Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850, *Dragon Age: Origins*

Alternatively

Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer (84%)

Copy protection

Disc check

The Darkspawn Blight, which justified your crackerjack Grey Warden's reason for existence, was blotted out at the conclusion of *Dragon Age: Origins*. So what's left to do? Rebuild and move on, apparently, and those are the dominant themes of *Awakening*. Many RPGs have been set in worlds under siege by diabolic forces, but almost none have explored the devastating aftermath of their wars. *Awakening* offers a pensive extension of the original story and a pithy adventure.

+1 to Intelligence

A story set after the epic climax of *Dragon Age* risks diminishing that victory if an even graver threat emerged without respite, so *Awakening* wisely scales down the menace. You're given the modest goal of reestablishing the Grey Wardens by rebuilding a distant fortress, conscripting members and protecting nearby settlements, only to discover that remnants of the previously mindless Darkspawn threat have mysteriously evolved intelligence, and now stubbornly refuse to disperse to their subterranean lairs. Once again, you have to gather a

band to expunge evil, only this time you'll also have to exercise newfound feudal responsibilities wisely, or your subjects will suffer additional carnage.

It's disappointing that the personable characters you so diligently courted in *Dragon Age* only have a couple of brief cameos. Also absent are any promotional magic items and gear from previous DLC; that equipment is annoyingly stripped from imported characters, and there's no opportunity to purchase replacements for a couple of hours—so plan ahead, or you'll be stranded with crappy, salvaged accoutrements.

Echoing the original game, there are three primary locations that can be tackled in any order, and each hosts a potential companion. Character arcs are abbreviated and less dramatic than those of your original followers, but the five new companions are serviceable alternates, including a metrosexual mage apostate and a benevolent spirit forced to roleplay a zombie.

Characters can now level into their mid-30s and there's lots of new *crunchy* content, as each class gets two new specializations and existing talent/spell lines are expanded an additional tier. The additions are suf-

ficiently potent to transform characters into one-man armies. Rogues, in particular, are significantly upgraded. Specialty class talents, such as Strength of Stone, allow them to completely avoid damage, while Flicker simultaneously backstabs an entire room of enemies. There are so many abilities that many seem superfluous, or of limited utility, but it's now possible to respec and experiment.

Armed loiterers

The increased power level of your antagonists is justified, about as plausibly as possible, to keep fights challenging without feeling absurdly artificial. The original game's battles almost universally felt like scripted set pieces that a dungeon master had labored for days to plan. In *Awakening*, battles often feel more generic and less designed—as if you stumbled across a bunch of randomly arranged dudes bearing battleaxes. But important confrontations are still memorable tactical challenges.

That observation effectively sums up *Awakening*: its story, combat, choices, characters and dialogue are all *almost* as good as in the original campaign, but sometimes they're less successful emulations that lack depth. At about 23 hours of additional gameplay it's a substantial expansion—though for \$40, it's considerably less adventure-per-dollar than you got in the main game. Even if it doesn't radically improve or evolve the original game like *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer* or *Baldur's Gate 2: Throne of Bhaal*, it's still an excellent adventure module that recaptures most of its parent game's strengths. ■

VERDICT

A shorter, shallower and less sexy version of *Dragon Age: Origins* is still long, deep and sexy. Unlike the DLC, this is quality content.

PC GAMER
81

Your Filthy Foes A Rogues' gallery without any Rogues



The Architect

An evolved Darkspawn with a serious Jon Irenicus (of *Baldur's Gate*) complex



The Baroness

A French snob who eats souls instead of letting us eat cake.



The Children

These refugees from Carpenter's *The Thing* even terrify other Darkspawn.



Oghren

He's technically a companion, but his lechery and belching will test you.

Its story, combat, choices, characters and dialogue are all *almost* as good as the original.

◆ Price \$40 ◆ Release March 16 ◆ Publisher EA ◆ Developer BioWare ◆ Multiplayer None
◆ Link dragonage.bioware.com/awakening ◆ ESRB M



There are several new dragon battles, and they're all terrific.



Yeah, he's evil... but not as evil.



Except for big boss battles, combat is generally easier and needs less micromanagement.



With a couple of vicious new attacks, your bowmen are far more deadly.



Sorry, a little exposed thigh is all you get.



I berate Oghren, but it's really good-natured ribbing—I truly love that destructive little moron.

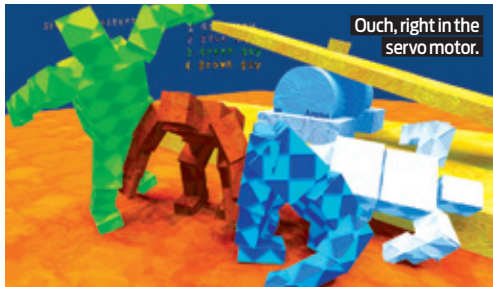


BOB CAME IN PIECES, but he could use just a few more

You're Bob, an alien who crashes on a mysterious planet while traveling to his menial job, scattering his ship's parts on impact. Your goal is to recover those parts (engines, tractor beams, etc.), and use them to solve some unique and clever physics puzzles. Building a ship that will not only solve puzzles, but can also be maneuvered well through the levels (added components have weight that can make this a tricky feat) is challenging fun. Unfortunately, there aren't enough different puzzle mechanics to keep things interesting to the end, but the first few novel hours of *BCiP* make \$10 well-spent for puzzle fans. ■ **Erik Belsaas**

PC GAMER
72

◆ Price \$10 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Link bit.ly/aFtst3 ◆ ESRB NA



Slapstick robots battle in the stupidly fun **SUMOTORI DREAMS**.

Most fighting games demand precision, dexterity and dedication to get the most out of them. Robo-wrestler *Sumotori Dreams* needs none of that to achieve greatness.

You have only nominal control over your combatant, and you're basically your own worst enemy—one missed push and you've condemned your unsteady robot. I'm not sure what's funnier: watching your robot wrestlers move slowly towards each other like they have inner-ear problems, the inevitable crumble, or their attempts to stand up, which look like some sort of cuboid orgy.

You can almost just sit back at this point and watch—it's one of the funniest things you'll ever see. ■ **Craig Pearson**

PC GAMER
80

◆ Price \$4.50 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Link bit.ly/8v6w7h ◆ ESRB NA



RESISTIBLE

STARGATE: RESISTANCE opens a portal to the *SG-1* universe, but the grass is greener on this side **By Eric Belsaas**

For more than a decade, *Stargate: SG-1* fans have been clamoring for a game based on the long-running world-hopping franchise. *Stargate: Resistance* fits that criteria in that it pits humans against Goa'uld adversaries in a fast, class-based third-person shooter, but poor execution and lack of content sucks harder than a *Stargate* wormhole connected to a black hole.

The make-or-break aspect of *Resistance* is the six player classes. The Earth forces of *Stargate* Command have soldiers, sniper commandos and scientists who provide healing and build turrets. The Goa'uld System Lords have energy staff-wielding Jaffa, cloaking and backstabbing Ashrak and Goa'uld, who can drain the life from enemies. But the classes in *Resistance* are unbalanced—SGC glaringly lacks a counter to the stealthed Ashraks other than spraying bullets at thin air. Yes, that's how it worked in that season-six episode of *Stargate SG-1*, but in a game, it's just no fun.

More than anything, *Resistance* suffers from feeling unfinished and untested. Balance problems aside, the game lacks any form of single-

player or auto-balance. Longevity is hurt by the inclusion of only three similar-feeling maps, so after just a bit of play you'll know where every sniper and Ashrak is hiding. While FireSky has said that more content will come via expansions, at launch it simply isn't enough.

Where *Resistance* does succeed is in capturing the atmosphere of the *Stargate* universe. The environments such as the SGC Gate Room, are inspired directly from the show, and they are visually delightful. Though the animations and details of the characters may be rough, they are all immediately recognizable from a distance. Weapon fire is distinct and faithful to the show, but for some bizarre reason FireSky decided to throw in canned battle audio. Although this eliminates awkward silences, it's extremely disorienting to follow the sound of gunfire, only to find an empty room.

Other than the *Stargate* look and feel, you're far better off with any number of more polished, better balanced team-based shooters. I hear there's a good one that has both teams and fortresses. ■

PC GAMER
49

◆ Price \$20 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher FireSky ◆ Developer FireSky ◆ Multiplayer 16 players
◆ Link stargateresistance.com ◆ ESRB T



DETHRONED

Return **DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS—RETURN TO OSTAGAR** to sender **By John Walker**

Well, here's an insult. If you've completed *Dragon Age*, or even if you've just played the opening Grey Warden story, you probably want to know more about one particular character: Duncan. When I played it the first time, I was frustrated because I couldn't go back to Ostagar, site of the battle at which King Cailan Theirin was betrayed and where the Darkspawn made their most significant move. I wanted to see if I could find out anything about Duncan's fate.

So making this paid-for DLC all about returning reverentially to the site of Cailan's death, gathering his belongings and disposing of his body is an odd angle. The king was poorly established in the main game, and his Christ-like depiction here, crucified and stabbed with spears, feels wildly inappropriate for his role. By contrast, we were repeatedly encouraged to care about Duncan, through the example of Alistair's love for him. There's only one reason to return to Ostagar and it's not King Blondie. Oh, and making *Return to Ostagar* complete crap probably wasn't a good plan, either.

For your \$5, you have the pleasure of

running around a snow-covered version of where you've been before, the sprawling town of Ostagar, only this time with a constant supply of regular Darkspawn to kill. And, er, that's it. In fact, in order to convert it from open hub to a battleground, it's been fenced off awkwardly into a bendy corridor, with barriers a four-year-old could scale, forcing you to trudge the long way around everywhere you go. There's no story, there's no twist, there are no moving, emotional scenes. Nothing.

Worse, the pacing is all over the place. At one point halfway through, the enemies become one-hit kills (emulating the main game's climactic battle), but then suddenly switch back to normal a couple of minutes later. Huh? There's no challenge at all throughout the game, and the final battle is perfunctory—just another ogre.

With barely a word of original dialogue, no moments of unique interest and the insane neglect of Duncan's fate, this is an absolutely worthless addition to the game. All you'll get from it is some new equipment, meaning the entire quest could have been replaced by an unlocked chest. ■

PC GAMER
30

◆ Expect to pay \$5 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher EA ◆ Developer BioWare ◆ Multiplayer None
◆ Link dragonage.bioware.com/addon/rto ◆ ESRB M

PC GAMER

How we review

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

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable

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

31-45% Weak

Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre

A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair

A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good

Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice

Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sir!

PC GAMER
EDITORS'
CHOICE
★★★★

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

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Mass Effect 2 (90%)
March '10

BioShock 2 (90%)
March '10

Left 4 Dead 2 (92%)
January '10

Dragon Age: Origins (92%)
Holiday '09

Batman: Arkham Asylum (93%)
December '09

Resident Evil 5 (93%)
November '09

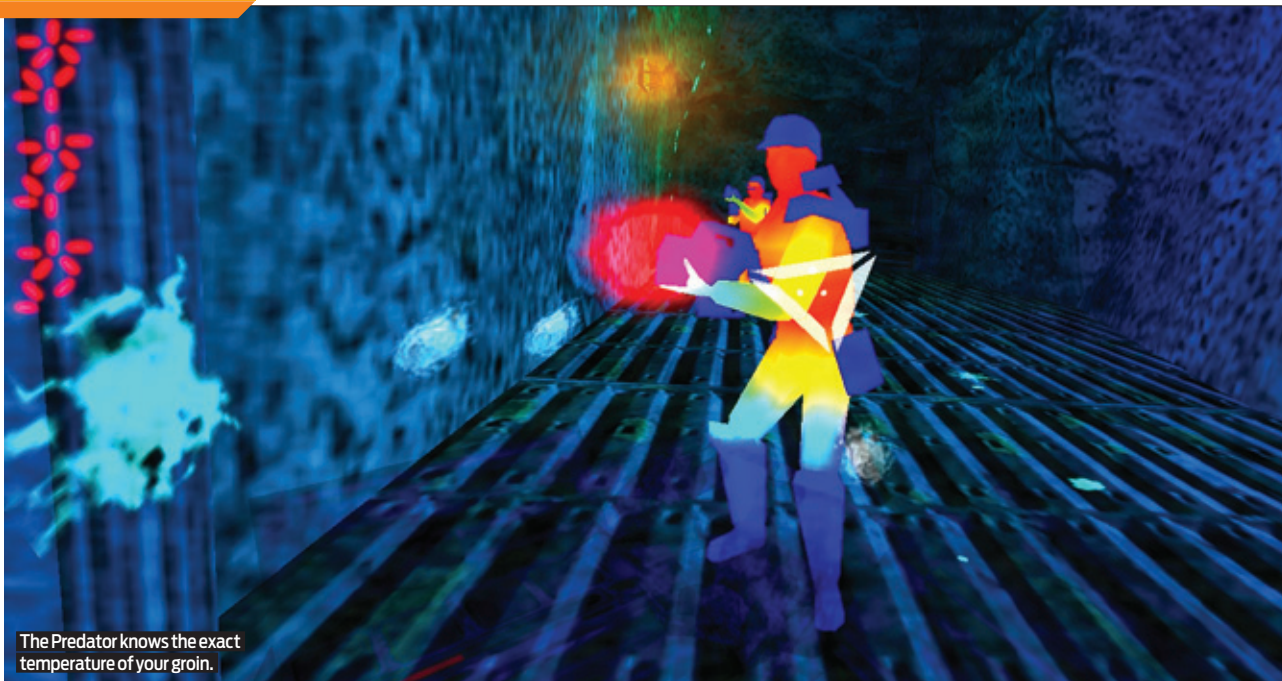
Streetfighter IV (92%)
October '09

Fallout 3: Broken Steel (90%)
August '09

The Sims 3 (92%)
July '09

REINSTALL

CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED



The Predator knows the exact temperature of your groin.

Classic Game Club

OLD-SCHOOL **ALIENS VERSUS PREDATOR** PROVES TOO FAST, TOO FURIOUS

Team *PC Gamer* tackles the multiplayer mode in the Steam re-release of the original 1999 *Aliens Versus Predator*.

READ ME

PUBLISHER
Fox Interactive

DEVELOPER
Rebellion

REVIEWED
August 1999 (79%)

WHAT WE SAID THEN
Action fans can't go wrong with *Aliens Versus Predator*—just don't expect anything as suspenseful as *Half-Life*.

REQUIRES
Netbook friendly

GET IT FROM
Steam, \$5 (as *Aliens Versus Predator Classic 2000*)

Dan: Gameplay that's faster than *Quake III* and darker than *Doom 3* is breaking my brain. I immediately regretted choosing to play as a Colonial Marine, being limited to one usable weapon and a worthless side-arm. Playing as Alien was much better, but trying to get the drop on people makes me feel like a cat chasing a laser pointer—I'm getting too old for this crap.

Erik: Quiet gramps! I've been a fan since the original. Ah Predator, it's been too long—

but like riding a bicycle, I've never really forgotten how to bifurcate people with your many blades. The insta-kill Smart Disk is the bane to all who oppose me. What other game lets you express yourself with a Death Frisbee? It takes four seconds to lock on to a target, but time flies when you're cloaked.

Dan: What about the exploding Frisbee gun from *Starsiege: Tribes*, the Spinfuser?

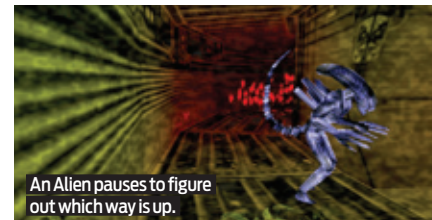
Erik: I stand corrected. But this one's *smarter*. Also, being the only class with a self-healing power is an awesome advantage.

Evan: Yeah, self-healing is great, but you know what's better? Being able to see. The Marine can choose between being utterly blind in the dark and having his night vision whited-out by a single muzzle flash. The Alien can either choose to see the environment or enemy's

outlines, but not both. The Predator is the only one who seems to be able to effectively move and target simultaneously.

AvP seems like Rebellion's attempt to one-up *Descent* as the most disorienting game ever.

Prentice: And the level design certainly doesn't help that. *AvP* is a classic example of antiquated design: it's a corridor shooter with gameplay that doesn't quite fit its map architecture. Only twitch-based pros could work together with other Marines and Aliens—it's impossible to gang up on a Predator when he's slashed a whole squad to bits two seconds after they've spotted him. Where are Schwarzenegger and Ventura when you need them?



An Alien pauses to figure out which way is up.



The Marine can't see much, but he'll see this a lot.



You missed the donkey.



Pred vs. Pred

Erik: Okay, so maybe the balance isn't perfect... The Predator has a massive starting arsenal of weapons and tools to slay with compared to the Marine or Alien, and they give the Alien a big health boost compared to the other races. That pretty much leaves the Marine as fodder.

Evan: The Alien's ludicrous running speed makes it the fastest-feeling game character I've ever controlled. Annoyingly, there is nothing to tell you if your flailing claws are doing any damage to your targets as you zip past them, so I gave up on actually trying to kill people and took to messing with them by destroying lights and health kits. Also, crawling on the walls and ceilings is way too confusing: Would a simple up/down indicator have been too much to ask for? (That's one thing they've added in the re-make.) Mostly, *AvP* seems like Rebellion's attempt to one-up *Descent* as the most disorienting game ever.



The eternal enemies, reunited at last. It's good to have LeChuck back.

All the monkey in one barrel

RICHARD COBBET EDITS OUT THE GAPS IN THE EPISODIC **TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND**

Telltale's gamble paid off. The five episodes of *Tales of Monkey Island* hit monthly deadlines, and the finished game was great—though definitely not up to those unattainable rose-tinted memories of the original *Secret of Monkey Island*. *Tales* was the first *Monkey Island* to really try to tell a story, and the first to really focus on character—to the point where the casts of the older games feel bland by comparison.

Starting on an island where the winds only blow inland, the quest ranged from androgynous mermaids to the inside of a giant manatee, the brain of the Voodoo Lady and even the afterlife. This constant forward motion had its downside: as the series went on, you could increasingly see the time pressures crushing down on Telltale in the form of obvious padding and silly puzzles. Still, the writing was more than enough to make up for it.

Thanks to the use of subtle tricks, *Tales* is the first episodic adventure I've ever played that benefited from the gaps between episodes. Consider

the best of the new cast, pirate hunter Morgan Le Flay. In real terms, she and Guybrush barely spend any time together between her chopping off his hand for money and the two of them becoming allies. But spread it out over three months, and by the time they're talking like old friends, they are.

Despite all this good stuff, *Tales'* greatest achievement by far is how much it fixes LeChuck. There's an important line between "comedy antagonist" and "joke villain," and poor LeChuck's been on the wrong side of it too long. In the first two games, he was a rampaging force of nature. After that, it all went wrong. *Tales* turns him human, initially seeming to continue his humiliation from *Curse of* and *Escape from Monkey Island*, but that's just the start of a concerted effort to rebuild him as a threat.

More than anything else, that's why I'm glad *Tales of Monkey Island* exists: It left the series prepared for new adventures like it hasn't been since 1992.

READ ME

FIRST REVIEWED
Various

PUBLISHER
LucasArts (original)

DEVELOPER
Telltale

REQUIRES
2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard

LINK
Telltalegames.com

INFLUENCED BY
Secret of Monkey Island

GET IT FROM
Telltalegames.com



For all the added fantasy elements, *Tales* is easily the most piratey of the series.



Has the evil LeChuck really turned over a new leaf? Hint: No.



1 The Mod With the Golden Gun

MOD GOLDENEYE: SOURCE ONE-UPS THE ORIGINAL

For 13 years, fans of the Nintendo 64 classic shooter *GoldenEye* still haven't seen a retail sequel or remake. Why? 007 is in licensing limbo: Activision currently owns the rights to games based on James Bond; Nintendo only has the rights to distribute the original game on its original platform; and Microsoft bought the original developer, Rare, years ago. The modding community's response to all this corporate nonsense? "Let's just make the damn thing ourselves."

GoldenEye: Source is the most faithful recreation of Rare's couch classic imaginable. The mod nails the tense-but-leisurely pace of

original game, modernizing familiar shootout spaces like Stack, Facility, Library and Temple with the Source Engine's lighting tech and higher multiplayer capacity.

The millimeter-level details of the original game's map, weapon and game mode design are well-preserved enough that tactics of old (like filling the bathroom spawn point in Facility with proximity mines to trap enemies) still stand up. Hop in for quick reminiscence, then be swept away by the mod's incredible polish and iconic touches like the "da-duh-da-dunnn...twang!" jingle between every death. **Evan Lahti**



SIZE 508MB **LINK** goldeneyesource.net

2

WEBGAME

BLOCK LAND

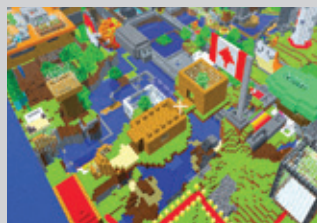
CREATE AND DESTROY IN MINECRAFT'S SHARED WORLD

Minecraft is LEGOS-meets-geology. In a randomly generated world made of cubes of earth, rock, trees and water, you can run around placing and deleting blocks at will. It's a sandbox/toolset for remarkably complex structures.

But it's not a lonely one—you can log onto multiplayer games, joining fellow *Minecrafters* in communal building escapades. Assemble castles and inverted pyramids out of the world's floor, or, like one weirdo did, carve a subterranean tunnel system containing nothing but floating profanities carved from stone.

Anything you put in the world can be seen by everyone else, and you can delete anything anyone else makes—a griever's paradise. So watch out for the block-wield-ing crazy-men. **Evan Lahti**

SIZE Browser-based
LINK minecraft.net



3 Destroy all prostitutes!

MAP ARMA 2'S "CROOKS" GAME MODE COMBINES HARLOTTRY, COMBAT

My finest gaming moments so far in 2010 have come from a community-created multiplayer map that mods the miles-wide open-worldness of *Arma 2* into an intricate take on cops versus robbers. "Crooks," created by modder Icebreakr, sets a serial killer and two common criminal accomplices against up to 30 police, all controlled by players.

The fun of the scenario lies in its asymmetry. The serial killer has to eliminate 10 prostitutes that are scattered in small towns across *Arma 2*'s verdant countryside. The criminals' objective is to cause havoc and harass the lawmen: they can

rob a bank, collaborate with arms dealers to secure illegal weapons and even assassinate the police chief's wife.

Playing as police is like trying to find three AK-47-totin' psychotic needles in a haystack of forested terrain. Your tactics for apprehending the three fugitives are completely open: set up roadblocks, guard the prostitutes at close range, ask AI civilians for tips or if they've seen anything unusual, or just wait to be notified of crimes and converge on the village where they occurred.

This structure forms a blend of dramatic moments, evoking *The Fugitive*, *Grand Theft*



Auto, backyard play-army and an episode of *COPS* all at once. If that isn't enough, there's *simulated judgment*—if the police accidentally kill too many civilians in the pursuit, the "evidence" against the serial killer is considered unclear and he's released back onto the streets. **Evan Lahti**

SIZE 260KB **LINK** bit.ly/armacrooks

Take the helm of a Federation starship

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy

TIME 20 hours (!)

VITAL LINKS

Star Trek Online homepage
StarTrekOnline.com

Star Trek Online manual
startrekonline.com/manual

Directory of Federation ships
bit.ly/9hd1cJ

Star Trek Online forums
bit.ly/4Rq8qf

JAZ MCDUGALL'S GUIDE TO EXCELLING IN STAR TREK ONLINE

Star Trek Online isn't perfect. Far from it, in fact. But like many of you, we find ourselves caught in its tractor beam, anyway. We're here to help you overcome the game's greatest enemy. No, not the Borg Collective—it's a lack of information on how to create and effectively manage a character, starship and crew.

What's a tachyon, and how do I

get one? Where is the bust slider? How do I fish for dilithium? Can I use science vessels if I'm an Engineering Captain? Will I boldly go? Does it mean I'm less of a man if other men have gone before?

Slow down, Cadet! Assuming you navigated the tutorial without incident, you should already have one bridge officer and a Light Cruiser at your disposal. But without

guidance, you could easily squander hundreds of bridge officer points before you realize what they're for, or accidentally swap a leveled-up move for a new one. You could be shot to pieces because you didn't divert power to your shields, or inadvertently sell your underpants.

Between leveling, PvP, gearing up and picking your build, there's a lot to know. Read on to find out.



1 Choose wisely

An Engineering Captain is a strong choice for your initial foray into space. The Engie is the champion of survivability: spending skill points anywhere in his Lieutenant skill tree will eventually unlock the excellent Rotate Shield Frequency, which regenerates all shields within 30 seconds. This operates on a separate cooldown from the Bridge Officer's Emergency Power to Shields ability.



2 Number one

Your first ship can have one of each Bridge Officer: Tactical, Engineering and Science, at the lowest rank. Officers can only use one power at this stage, and points can't be unspent, so upgrade wisely. Try Tachyon Beam, which drains all target shields at a flat rate, for your science officer, while the aforementioned Emergency Power to Shields is a must for Engineers. Plus, it's great fun to say.



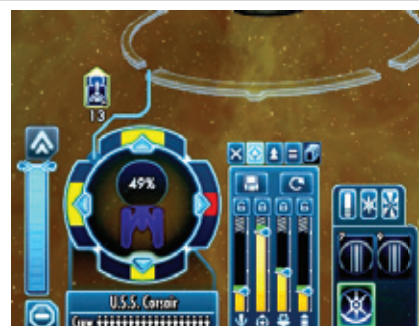
3 Refit

On visiting a starbase, you can purchase ship upgrades and equipment for ground battles, hire Bridge Officers, and then train them in a wide variety of abilities by visiting the right NPCs. Need cash? Selling the common battery drops goes a long way towards boosting your initial funds. Equipment you can buy is ok, but you'll get the best gear as rewards for completing missions.



4 Battle stations

Fighting other vessels in space can take a while to get the hang of. First thing's first: configure your power tray. Hit P to bring up your list of abilities and drag them into the hotkey slots on the interface for easy access. That'll make it easier to access the control configuration and map "Fire All" to the spacebar. Firing phasers and torpedos separately will matter later on, but not in these early levels.



5 Emergency power!

Your ship's performance relies heavily on your power configuration, displayed to the right of your shields on your HUD. By clicking the right-side icon next to the "=" and selecting 3, you can configure up to four presets for power distribution. Boosting Weapons increases DPS, Shields affect repair rate, Engines boost speed and Auxiliary boosts special abilities and turning speed.



6 Anomalous reading

As you acquire more interesting equipment, you'll be scratching your head more and more. Dig into the stats here: bit.ly/9dfFdI, and remember that a tiny bonus in damage or shield strength is amplified by pouring skill points into the skill it uses (press K). Phasers and Disruptors are basically the same, but some shields can guard better against one or the other.



7 Using the consoles

While your tactical console that boasts +20 Photon Torpedoes is simple enough to understand, the science panel that boosts emitters by +3.8 is hardly blowing its own trumpet. Emitters are responsible for non-weapon beams, like the tachyon beam and sensor jamming.



9 Phone it in

Your first rank-up will take you roughly 20 hours of playtime to achieve: to get there, you'll need to focus on missions, mostly patrols assigned by Commander Sulu. They're repetitive, but they have some good XP and loot rewards. Remember, you can hail mission contacts from almost anywhere in the universe, so don't warp back to Earth just to cash-in your quests.



11 Ship shape

At the rank of Lt. Commander, you may choose a new ship for free. Take note: your Captain can take command of any ship. Combining the excellent damage resistance of an Engineer with a fast and capable escort ship, or sticking a Science Officer in a Constitution-class cruiser produces some startlingly effective tanking, healing and damage-dealing at the mid-level range.



8 Advancement

Be sure you understand STO's leveling process. Your level increases as you gain skill points, but your rank (such as Lieutenant or Commander) only inches you towards that next, tempting tier of ships when you spend those skill points. Each rank is equivalent to 10 levels.



10 Final frontier

Exploration missions are also a viable way to grind your way to your next tier of ships. Certain sectors, such as the Delta Volanis cluster, are full of nebulous gases and uncharted star systems. Complete three randomly generated missions and you'll get skill points, bridge officer points, and exploration badges that can be traded for decent equipment at starbases.



12 Away, team!

You'll have the most fun grouping with friends—there's plenty of room for strategy development and encounters. Scale up to flood the asteroid belts with Birds of Prey when you bring a fleet. Try having a designated healer, a strong shield-killer, and a torpedo boat for the killing blow. To really test your strategy, head to Klingon space for delicious player-vs-player space combat.

SKILLS

WINNING THE WAR IN HELL SOLVING DIPLOMACY WITH STEEL IN SOLIUM INFERNUM



1 In a game of secrets and lies, it's nice just to stomp all over everyone. Start as a Prince of Hell with the Playing for Keeps perk, and stick your Charisma at 3.



2 Capture or block as many Places of Power as you can. Increase your Martial stat to 2 and Cunning to 4. Pick fights with weaker players.



3 Focus all your attacks and demands on one player and, as soon as possible, claim a blood feud and attack their stronghold (provided you can win).

BONUS SKILL

THE PRESTIGE

You can alter your threat list for free until turn 10. If in doubt, put the player with the most prestige on top—it'll be cheaper to undermine them.



The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

TESTED

Sentinel-XK

Ballistic Gaming PC

The ominous red telephone was a centerpiece of the last presidential campaign on television—when it rings, you know there's trouble, and it's serious. I suspect more than a few red telephones are going to be ringing soon, when gaming PC vendors find out that relative newcomer Ballistic Gaming PC is stomping into their territory and clearly intends to do some ass-kicking.

With the Core i7-920 proc overclocked to a scorching 3.57GHz and twin Radeon HD 5870s, it's hardly a surprise that the Sentinel-XK blew through our 3DMark06 record and treated our benchmarks like baby wipes (including 35 frames per second in *Crysis* at 2560x1600—on High settings). What's remarkable about the system is its level of craftsmanship and refinement—unusual in an upstart. Although the CPU enjoys a closed-loop watercooling kit, the videocards are air-cooled, assisted by the Cooler Master case's team of five fans (including a massive 200mm spinner on the left side). The fans run astonishingly quiet on their own, but if you care to be a little more hands-on, you can adjust fan speeds and temperature alarm settings on the touch-sensitive front panel (which is not an LCD). The wiring is expert, artfully swept away but never sadistically tightened.

You get all the accoutrements you'd expect in a rig that costs over

three grand, such as a 128GB solid-state boot drive, 6GB of RAM, a top-shelf X-Fi soundcard, Blu-ray player and sweet interior lighting.

What's remarkable about the system is its level of craftsmanship and refinement.

My favorite is the hot-swappable, front-loading drive bay, which can boot from an OS installed on another drive, or even throw your steamapps folder on a solid-state drive for faster loading. Now *that's* fancy.

High-end components are so popular these days that manufacturers see no value in making exclusive deals for their debut. So the onus is on gaming rig builders to compete on other characteristics, such as price and craftsmanship. The Sentinel-XK isn't cheap, but Ballistic Gaming PC scores at the top of the charts in the latter. Do you hear that sound? Somebody better pick up the phone.

\$3,142, ballisticgamingpc.com

VERDICT

A well-designed, perfectly tweaked gaming rig with some fine extras and tank-like stability, despite a heavy overclock. Bravo.

PC GAMER
91

PC GAMER
EDITOR'S CHOICE
★★★★★



SPEC ♦ CPU Core i7-920 (overclocked to 3.57GHz) ♦ RAM 6GB DDR3 GPU ATI Radeon HD 5870 (x2)
♦ Storage 128GB SSD; 1.5TB 7,200RPM HD ♦ OS Win 7 Home Premium 64-bit
♦ 3DMark06/Vantage 24530/18818 ♦ Crysis 73.45 fps ♦ SupCom 59.8 fps (at 1680x1050)

GEAR FILTER

**Vespula Mousepad \$35**

Flip-flopper! The Vespula's big feature is its double-sided tracking surface, which lets you swap between the super-glide speed surface and a layer with more friction. Use one or the other—or both, if you live in a mixed shooter/adventure game household. But the *real* reason to adopt this mousepad is the awesomely comfy slab of wristpad affixed to the baseplate. That said, if you've already got a mousepad you like, you could just buy a separate wrist rest. But it wouldn't be called a "Vespula." **78**
www.razerzone.com

**Zero Surge 8R15T \$249**

If you suspect that the frequent brownouts or power outages in your area are behind a history of mysterious system lockups and blue screens, you're probably right. In these cases, I don't hesitate to recommend enlisting a heavy-duty surge suppressor. Forget the flimsy, light, powerstrip suppressors—the Zero Surge models (of which there are many) weigh a ton and their electronics don't burn out after a surge. So while it's very expensive at the start, it may be a whole lot cheaper in the long run. **B4**
www.zerosurge.com

**Microsoft X4 \$60**

The lack of risers to adjust the typing angle in Microsoft's otherwise spectacularly comfy X6 keyboard was a deal-breaker, so I was stoked to find them at the rump of the sturdy X4, along with other features including programmable macro keys, swappable profiles, and the ability to recognize up to 26 simultaneous keypresses (exactly six more than I will ever need, even barefoot). In order to avoid making the perfect keyboard, however, Microsoft cleverly omitted USB ports or audio passthroughs. Why oh why can't we have it all? **B4**
www.microsoft.com/hardware



TESTED

Battalion Touch CZ-10

Ibuypower

It's always heartbreaking when I get the sense that a PC isn't going to score very high—before I get to the benchmarks. But that's the fate of the Battalion Touch, the first PC laptop with a multitouch display (like that on the iPhone), as well as a logo so ugly it may permanently blind you.

But setting aside a cosmetic element that only the people sitting across from you at Starbucks are going to notice, the 15.6-inch display appears grainy and doesn't render small text well, and the lowly screen resolution of 1366x768 suggests that gaming isn't the first thing on this laptop's mind (understandably so, in that *R.U.S.E.* is at this time the only game to support multitouch displays). Which is all too bad, because the

machine is thoughtfully equipped with 4GB of RAM, ATI's Mobility Radeon HD 4650 and a 7,200RPM hard drive. The palm rests and the uncommonly accurate trackpad are comfortable, even luxurious. But the benchmarks won't exceed expectations, and the most I can say to gamers about this multitouch lappy is that I'd rather look at the screen than the logo.

\$1,249, ibuypower.com

VERDICT

There aren't many touch-screen games yet, so why should gamers buy an ugly, low-resolution touch-screen laptop?

PC GAMER
47

SPEC ◆ CPU Intel Core 2 Mobile P8700 ◆ RAM 4GB DDR3 ◆ GPU ATI Mobility Radeon HD 4650 512MB ◆ Storage 320GB ◆ OS Win 7 H.P. 64-bit ◆ 3DMark06/Vantage 6902/WNR ◆ Crysis 16.3 fps ◆ SupCom 14.5 fps

TESTED

Mach V

Falcon Northwest

Uniquely among PC manufacturers, Falcon Northwest hasn't changed its style or approach much over the years. The latest Mach V looks like the last Mach V, which looked a whole lot like the one before that. The difference is that they get faster—much faster—every time. And once again, the Mach V does not disappoint in the benchmarks.

But here's the interesting bit: the Mach V has a single HD 5970 versus the Ballistic Sentinel-XK (reviewed on page 91) which had *two* in CrossFire config, yet it either beat or came damn close to beating that rig right out of the ring—with no overclocking! But then again, the Mach V's magical new brain, the six-core (I will not say "sex-core") Core i7-980X, hardly needs overclocking. So the Mach V is well-positioned to take advantage of the multi-display Eyefinity technology built into the HD 5970 (Falcon offers a Mach V bundle with three displays, which I cover separately below).

There are a few head-scratchers here, such as the absence of a dis-

crete audio card (boo), a mere 80GB solid-state drive (for five grand *plus*?) in addition to a 1TB hard drive, and the bottom half of the front panel clumsily opens up to exposed whirling fan blades—poor form for anything but an *Indiana Jones* movie.

And yet, I undersold Falcon with my initial description of its conservative approach, because there benefits that aren't immediately apparent, such as confidence (a *standard* three year warranty for parts and service with free overnight shipping), intelligence (you get a binder that includes all the BIOS values written in), and dignity (no crapware). The Mach V remains a mighty deal—for a mighty price.

\$4,999, falcon-nw.com

\$6,388 including Eyefinity setup (below)

VERDICT

Stratospherically expensive, but that's what the latest hardware and top-of-the-line performance costs in life.

PC GAMER
90PC GAMER
EDITOR'S
CHOICE
★★★★★

SPEC ◆ CPU Core i7-980X (3.33GHz) ◆ RAM 12GB DDR3 ◆ GPU ATI Radeon HD 5870 ◆ Storage 80GB SSD; 1TB 7,200RPM HD ◆ OS Win 7 Pro 64-bit ◆ 3DMark06/Vantage 23395/23956 ◆ Crysis 74.56 fps ◆ SupCom 55.78 fps

Eyefinity

ATI

Most ATI 5000 series cards now have built-in support for up to three displays each (so *two* HD 5970s, for example, could treat six monitors as a single, contiguous surface). The technology is called Eyefinity, and all you need is a fast PC and infinite patience.

Despite instructions and troubleshooting tips from ATI, getting our three Samsung



SyncMaster 2443 displays to work together was a horror of trial-and-error, unpredictable behavior, lockups and blue screens. Once we got it working—four hours later—it was indeed impressive (the shot above was taken from our live setup). But even so-called compatible games demonstrated significant distortion on the side panels which peed all over what was left of

the flames of our already diminished hopes.

For the time being, I can't recommend Eyefinity as a serious, practical product. I'm thrilled to see something that plays off the considerable strengths of the powerful HD 5000 series of cards, but leaving the hard work of implementation and configuration to the gamer is a tech train wreck. *Phlbtt!*

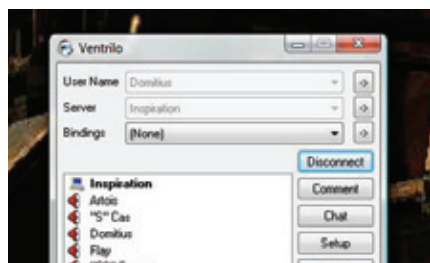
PLAY FASTER

SOUNDS OUT OF SILENCE

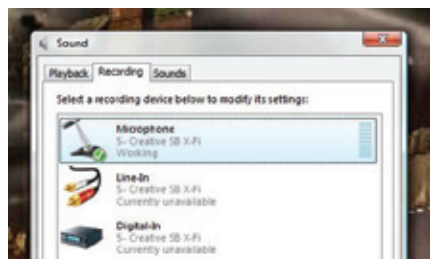
IS YOUR MIC GOING DEAF?
TRY THIS SIMPLE FIX

» Hardly a week goes by that we don't end up working out the mysteries of microphone and voice chat problems. Here's our protocol when somebody starts beating the headset on their desk.

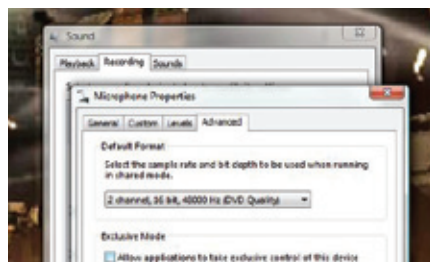
If you're running Vista or Windows 7 and find that your microphone input levels keep changing every time you log in, there's a good chance that your basic sound settings are wrong. Here's the way to keep your voice at a consistent level.



In all likelihood, there's nothing wrong with Windows' default sound settings; they're simply being overwritten by your mischievous voice applications. To fix the problem you need to change Windows' master settings so that you, and only you, can alter the input levels.



2 First, right-click the volume icon in the task bar. When the context menu pops up, choose "Recording devices." This will bring up a list of all the hardware on your system that can stream sounds into Windows. Choose "Microphone" and then select "Properties."



3 Now choose the tab marked "Advanced" and find the radio buttons listed under "Exclusive mode." You should find both of these ticked. Just deselect the top one, "Allow applications to take control of this device," and click OK. Now you're back in control, and that should solve your problem.

Q&A

Not too cool for school

Q: I have a Dell XPS M1530 with a 2.2GHz Core 2 Duo T6600, 4GB DDR2 RAM, and a GeForce 8600M GT videocard. I use my laptop mostly for school, and watching Hulu and movies in my room. But I also like flight sims and shooters. My laptop worked perfectly almost all the time, but lately when I play games like *Grand Theft Auto 4* or *Far Cry 2*, it starts chugging after less than fifteen minutes. Restarting doesn't help, but sometimes rebooting does, but then it just happens all over again. It's driving me crazy. Indexing is turned off, so I can't figure out what else could be slowing it down. I've attached a list of the stuff running in the Task Manager. Help! **Scott P.**

A: I don't even need to see the attached list to know what's grounding your flights. The GPU is heating up your laptop, and once the temperature goes over a certain point, the system ratchets down to prevent itself from burning through your desk and down through to the center of the earth. What you need is either a desk made of ice (a company called Ice Bulb in Newport Beach, California creates custom ice furniture, for example) or a laptop cooler. Antec's Notebook Cooler is simple and quiet (\$28, www.antec.com—psst, it's cheaper at Amazon.com) but I prefer the over-priced, extensible Z-Lift Notebook Desk Stand from LapWorks (\$80, www.laptopdesk.net).

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM	MID-RANGE	ENTRY-LEVEL
CASE AND PSU Cooler Master Cosmos; 850W PSU \$423	CASE AND PSU Nzxt Alpha; Ocz Gamexstream 700W PSU \$175	CASE AND PSU Generic Case; Corsair 450W PSU \$161
PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-950 3.06GHz \$555	PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-920 2.66GHz \$270	PROCESSOR AMD Athlon X2 6000+ 3.0GHz \$59
MOTHERBOARD Asus P6T Deluxe V2 \$270	MOTHERBOARD Asus P6T \$234	MOTHERBOARD Asus M3A76-CM \$68
MEMORY Corsair 6GB DDR3-1600 \$155	MEMORY Corsair 6GB DDR3-1333 \$165	MEMORY Corsair 2GB DDR2-800 \$69
OPTICAL DRIVE LG WhoaLS20Blu-ray \$179	OPTICAL DRIVE LG GH22NP20 \$31	OPTICAL DRIVE Sony DDU1681S \$26
HARD DRIVE Intel X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM \$311	HARD DRIVE WD 500GB 7200RPM \$50	HARD DRIVE WD 250GB 7200RPM \$38
SOUNDCARD Creative Labs X-Fi Titanium \$96	SOUNDCARD Onboard \$0	SOUNDCARD Onboard \$0
VIDEOCARD Radeon HD 5870 (2) \$814	VIDEOCARD Radeon HD 5870 \$407	VIDEOCARD GeForce GT 220 \$70
TOTAL PRICE \$2,803	TOTAL PRICE \$1,332	TOTAL PRICE \$491

STAR TREK STORY CREATOR

We weren't crazy about *Star Trek Online's* quest design (read all about it on p. 74), so we had our leading Roddenbologist develop a system for crafting plots that are more faithful to the sci-fi source material. Engage!

While

Making first contact with a friendly race

Stopping for routine maintenance

Conducting delicate negotiations

Exploring new space

Transporting an ambassador

Scanning an interesting nebula

Investigating a disappearance

The crew encounter

A distress call

An anomaly

A derelict planet

An inhabited planet

An old friend or relative

A hostile ship

Some new guests

Whereupon

The ship

Is attacked

Starts malfunctioning

Is taken over

And before long, the whole ship is disabled

One or more of the crew

Get kidnapped

Become ill/ crazy

Arrive in a mirror universe where everyone's facial hair is different

Are sent back in time to an era it's cheaper to make sets for

And before long, the whole crew is out of action

But when

The captain

The logical one

The emotional one

The non-human one

The bland first officer

Investigates, they find

A strange form of life was

Possessing someone

Trying to survive

Trying to communicate

It was a child

It was the quiet one

It was a holodeck simulation

Which means

This can be solved with violence!

This can be solved with tachyons!

This can be solved with niceness!

This can be solved with lying!

This doesn't need to be solved!

And the

Amazing piece of technology that would solve most future problems

Life-changing transformation of a key crew member

Pointless death of a brave young ensign

Massive violation of the prime directive

Irreparable damage to the timeline

Is never mentioned again