NAG

SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING TECHNOLOGY & COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINE

PCX**box**Game**C**ube**M**obile**GBA**Play**S**tation**2

MADE IN SOUTH AFRICA

MEOW! CATWOMAN SHOWS HER CLAWS

112 PAGES OF PERKY PLEASURE

NINTENDO DS

SONY PSP

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The **SIMS 2** Body Shop

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july 2004

NAG

Games: Spider Man 2
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Rumble Roses   Sid Meier's Pirates   Silent Hill 4   The Battle for Middle Earth Trailer #2
Cheats: CheatBook Database 2004 Update   Current to June
Anime: [PDF U] Magazine Volume 2   July 2004
Add-Ons: Battle for Middle Earth Wallpapers   The Sims 2 Body Shop

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ed's note

As a rule I hate complaining - it never gets anything done, but I also make exceptions to most of my rules.

Building the case:
So people do a job because they are trained, some have learnt the art of their craft under the watchful guidance of a mentor, others simply have a knack and mostly everyone else is doing what they do because that's where they've ended up, and then there are some jobs any idiot can do...

Refining the point:
Bearing the above in mind, you certainly wouldn't find a situation where an air traffic controler asks the janitor to keep an eye on things while he pops out for a burger and Coke and you wouldn't find a neurosurgeon asking his patient to hold a tricky flap of skin out of the way while he was operating.

Statement:
There are some jobs that are best left to the professionals.

Dramatisation:
Unskilled personnel attempting these jobs might lead to serious mistakes occurring or in the case of a nuclear power plant more dire consequences for humanity. Save our souls.

The point:
I recently read an article in one of the largest SA newspapers about E3 - a lead up article and then a report back article and I was amazed and amused to see that the Xbox was due for an upgrade [?] and Snake Plissken [from Escape from New York fame] will be starring in the next Metal Gear Solid game. Minor errors I know but the whole flavour of both the articles was incorrect, focussing on the wrong things and painting a slanted picture about the biggest entertainment expo in the world. Annoying! Or am I being bitchy?
NAG always has and always will be in favour of games, in all forms, enjoying more attention from the mainstream media, but for pity sake get the facts straight [and I'm not talking polygon counts and fill rates either]. Try talking about how real the game looks and how the character responds to the controller or even how the experience went from beginning to end. Keep it simple and stick to what you know, not what you've heard. Phew... So, let's keep the

perspective here - just because games are becoming big business everywhere doesn't mean you're an expert simply because your kids own a PlayStation and you had a couple of goes over the weekend.

Disclaimer:
Despite my cheery tone here, I've always felt that mainstream media exposure can only ever benefit gaming for everyone. Even if ten people read an article in the newspaper about the next Lord of the Rings game and then only three actually buy the game it's a good thing for this magazine and more importantly the game publishers and distributors in South Africa and then [as we all know who really benefits from gaming], indirectly, all the hardware distributors because there's nothing like inadequate performance to get people to buy new hardware and this indirectly creates jobs and so on and so on. So, by all means plug gaming until you're blue in the face but please just spend 10 minutes on the Internet or ask someone who knows their stuff to fact check the copy.

Without you we are nothing but paper and ink...
I must once again thank our E3 sponsors Intel, Nu Metro and Vivendi Universal [if I don't suck up now getting the dough next year is going to be tricky... ;)] - you all automatically get an extra 20% for all reviews in this issue! No. Hang on what am I thinking, where's my integrity? Let's call it an extra 10% then and I'll indicate in a subtle way to the NAG readers that your products are the best... do we have a deal?

I say this is the nicest way possible - you better enjoy this issue. It was hell on Earth putting it together, but [not a PR line] it was fun doing it so at the end of the day I guess it wasn't all that bad [then again it wasn't really me that did all the donkey work]. The funny thing is that by this time next year all the pain and suffering is forgotten as we jet to E3 again. If we had better memories we would do what sensible people do - nothing. A sincere thanks to the staff at NAG for all the hard work on the supplement - you can all be employee of the month!

"This is a big issue - treat it well and it will treat you well" - Polish Proverb

Michael James
[Editor]

Here Kitty...
No story this month - the cover on this magazine was planned at least a day in advance.

Me too!
The E3 supplement also has an interesting cover - a cover that had to be sent backwards and forwards a few times to Intel for approval. Now I know why they make the best processors - exacting standards in every area of their company... just like us! ;)

Read all about Catwoman on **page 34**

Caption of the Month

Each month we'll select a screenshot from one of the games in the issue and write a funny caption for it, well... we'll try and make it funny...
Your job is to see if you can come up with an even funnier caption and send it to: **ed@nag.co.za**
Subject: **July Caption**
If you use the wrong subject in your e-mail it'll get deleted...

Your prize: Our sponsor for the screenshot of the month competition is Vivendi Universal Games. They said they'll give us something interesting each month... if we don't want it we'll be sure to send it along to the winner mentioned under this block of text.

NAG's July Caption

'Is that the time!' - **NAG's [97.362936363636363636363^{10000}% lame] effort**

May winner

"They seem to be putting less and less in the packets these days" - **Ian Campbell**

On The Wire
Jason and the Licenses

words james francis

In January Warner Brothers surprised us all (a little) by announcing their own game section. And to add some credibility to the division, they employed Jason Hall, former CEO of Monolith, to be the division's Senior Vice President. WB's plan is to create games off their licenses, not unlike what Fox has done quite successfully, as well as keep closer control over them, especially after the Matrix fiasco.

Back then Hall already insisted how important maintaining the quality of licenses is - "Everything's going to be driven by what's best for the content," he told IGN the day after the announcement. And recently he put more to that statement with a new idea: that licensed game developers could see their royalties increase or decrease according to review scores.

This might sound dubious at first, but it's obvious that, at least according to Hall, making games that sell well but are essentially rubbish is not good enough. He claims it damages the brand, resulting in long-term negativity, and I agree with him on this. Forcing developers and publishers to look beyond the quick-buck factor is an important element in development, both in gaining credibility for licensed games amongst more hardcore gamers as well as reducing the amount of drab games that dominate the market sales.

There are two problems with his plan, though. Firstly, game reviews are very subjective and it's no excuse that a lot of top magazines seem to favour certain publishers or titles, creating a bias. Reviewers are also often all too eager to stick with the crowd and not publish a contradicting review, so scoring tends to stay within a certain range - but with the size of the Internet's gaming community alone, grading still varies wildly. But I suppose you could have a list of publications you rely on to gauge a game's critical success.

The second problem is WB's model - they can develop and publish their own games or outsource it to other companies. Sega, for instance, handles Matrix Online and EA has the Harry Potter development and publishing rights. And in this case these companies might not agree with Hall. Still, even though his plan seems idealist, on the other hand are the licenses games bereft of any decent quality? So between the two we might find some middle ground from which to move forward - developers get paid well and we get decent games. Everyone's happy.

> Interplay shut down by Labour Department

The California State Labour department shut down Interplay early in June because the company had no workers compensation insurance and failed to pay their employees. Five employees filed a complaint with the Department of Industrial Relations, citing that they are owed several thousand dollars. This comes after two other employees filed similar charges when their April salary cheques bounced. The company was fined for every employee. **Interplay** CEO Herve Caen said that the company hasn't been shut down and that the labour department can only stop Interplay's employees from working.

DS and PSP on sales clash course

Both the Nintendo DS and Sony's PSP are slated for the same release date in Europe: 18 March. But neither company can confirm who was aware of the clash in dates before the time. Mid-March is the traditional time for consoles to launch in Europe, and the GBA, GBA SP and Xbox all launched before Easter. The PSP will retail for at least **$300** and the DS for only around $180.

Meanwhile, Microsoft has denied that Rare are working on a game for the new DS platform. In a statement they said the company is focused on Xbox and windows platform games, but an article in Windows magazine hinted that one of Microsoft's subsidiaries are working on the DS. With Rare's past with Nintendo, that would make them the ideal candidate.

Sega plans new arcade board

Sega is rumoured to be working on a new arcade system, using technology from British firm Imagination, the company that also owns the PowerVR brand of graphic accelerators. This is the first time since the Dreamcast's Naomi chips that Sega is developing their own technology - the company is currently using the Xbox-based Chihiro boards.

The move makes sense since Sega's chairman, and owner Sammy's President, Hajime Satomi wants the company to focus more on its Arcade division. This does mean, though, that Sammy's own Atomiswave boards won't be their only focus.

GTA causes bomb scare

In a bizarre case of misunderstanding, a resident of Jacksonville, Florida, in the US is being held responsible for a **bomb threat** made to his place of employment after a phone call to them on a late Sunday night. Apparently Anthony S. Jones, aged 27, was instructing someone else how to do something in GTA: Vice City while he was on the line with another person at his work. The employee on the other line apparently misunderstood the instructions as directed to him and as a bomb threat. Unfortunately the Police are regarding his exclamation of "There's a bomb in the building. There's a bomb in the building. Everyone needs to get out!" as serious.

Xbox 2 PC hybrid coming?

Apart from the Xbox 2, tentatively called the Xbox Next, Microsoft are rumoured to be looking into another version of the console as well. According to CNN's Gaming column Game Over, the hybrid will be PC compatible, **feature PC monitor and HDTV support**, as well as ship with a CD burner, mouse and keyboard, Windows installed and built-in Live support. All this will cost you around $599. It's not that unlikely a scenario. Sony did something similar with the PSX, a PlayStation 2 console that also has TV recording and DVD burning capabilities. Microsoft hasn't commented on the rumour, but it is known that focus groups have been shown slides of a speculative model.

> E3 gets award

Adding to its list of achievements, E3 now can add the "most **Buying Power**" award to its list. This is from a survey by Exhibit Surveys Inc. According to its survey, based on the US market, E3 contains the largest percentage of attendees who will buy products on show within six months of the event.

The show also received Best Show Daily, for the event's magazine, and Best Show Website awards from the International Association of Exhibit Managers. Currently it's ranked as the 31st largest trade show in the US.

> P2P in Italy can be costly

If you share copyrighted work over a Peer to Peer network in Italy, you are breaking the law and can end up in prison for up to three years. The law was passed in the Italian senate with the Lista Prodi, Green and Communist parties abstaining from the vote.

A move prompted by Italy's film industry, sharing copyrighted work can land you in nearly as much hot water as selling **pirated CDs.** You can look at hefty fines, between 6 months and three years in jail as well as the confiscation of your hardware. The government has agreed, though, to revise these sentences.

Anything for G-Mail

It might be a marketing ploy, but it seems that a lot of people will do just about anything to get their hands on a **GMail address.** The free mail service from Google is currently in its beta stage and is being tested by Google, friends of Google employees and journalists. Members also have the option - though limited - to invite other people to join. This has prompted a lot of strange offerings, from lending someone's car for a week to kung-fu lessons and an autographed picture of a Swedish champion yodeler to be offered in exchange for a GMail address. Meanwhile, Google are also working on software called Puffin, which will run on Windows desktops and make searching for content both locally and on the Internet a lot easier.

Greece turns to jailing pirate buyers

Keen to buy a pirated game, music CD or DVD in Greece? It could spell **jail time,** like what recently happened to a man who was convicted for buying two pirated CDs and sent to three months in prison. This is thanks to the efforts of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industries (IFPI) who have been pushing for prosecution of buyers. Greece is at the top of the IFPI's list for piracy and after failing to deal with the problem at retailer level, the organization is turning towards those who support the piracy industry by buying illegal goods.

Mythic and Microsoft settle

Mythic Entertainment, developers of MMORPG Dark Age of Camelot, have settled with Microsoft over the software giant's own online game titles Mythica. The case stated that the game's name is too close to Mythic's own. As part of the settlement, Mythic received trademarks and domains pertaining to **Mythica from Microsoft.** The game itself, though, was scrapped earlier this year, with Microsoft stating they don't feel the market can sustain more MMORPGs.

IN 1972, NOLAN BUSHNELL KICK START-ED VIDEO GAMING BY FOUNDING ATARI AND DEVELOPING PONG. NOW, OVER 30 YEARS LATER, HE'S STILL INNOVATING IN THE FIELD OF ELECTRONIC ENTERTAINMENT AND HAS GOT A THING OR TWO TO SAY ABOUT THE CURRENT STATE OF GAMING…
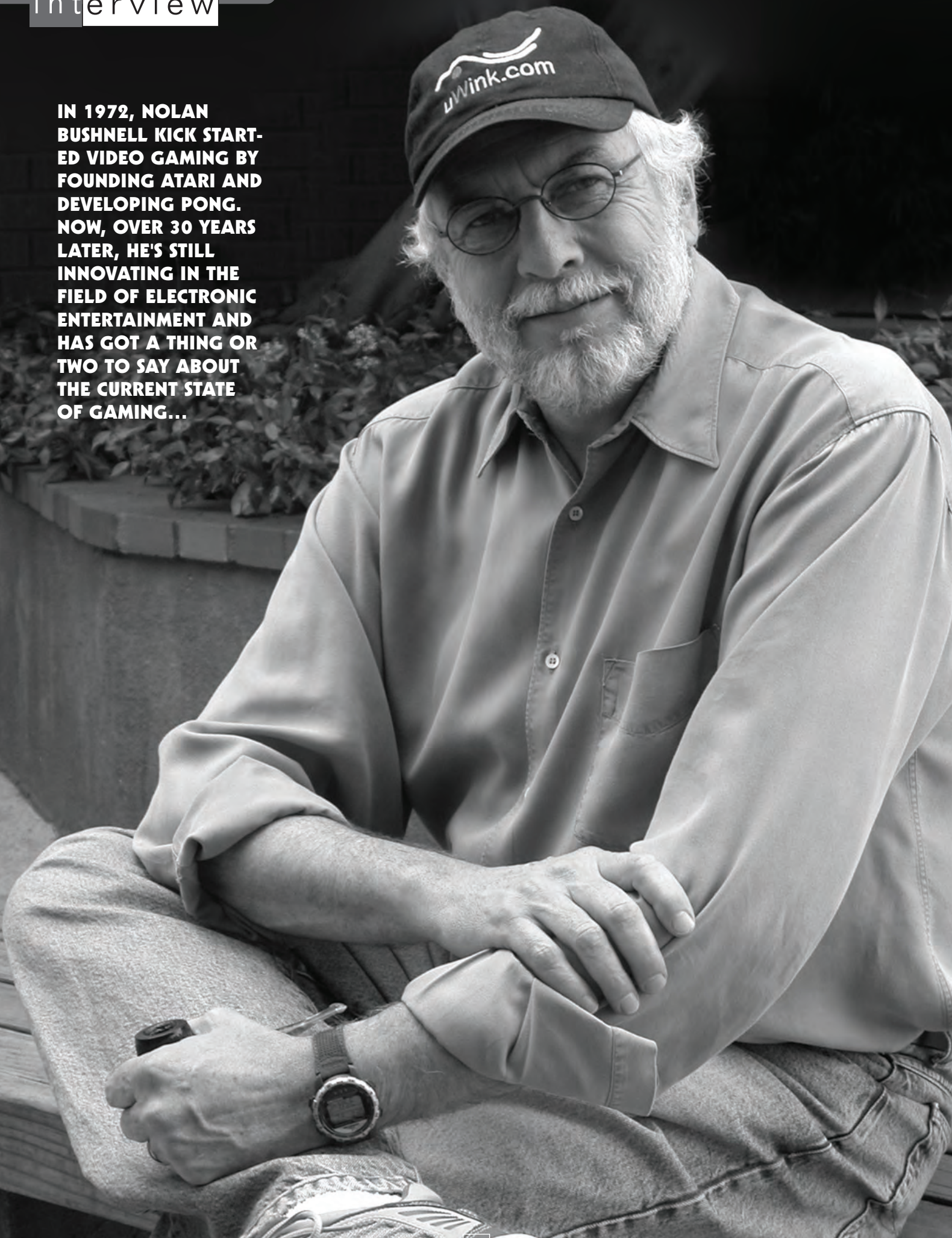
"ATARI DID NOT DESIGN VIOLENT GAMES. WE ACTUALLY HAD A RULE THAT SAID YOU COULD BLOW UP A TANK OR A CAR, BUT YOU COULDN'T SHOOT A PERSON"

NOLAN BUSHNELL, CEO, UWINK

UWINK

Nolan Bushnell

Nolan Bushnell's story has been told many times, not because it culminates in a snappy punch line but because the legacy he left behind at Atari lends his tale a certain gravitas - it was Atari's 1972 title Pong that provided the first spark for the gaming revolution.

With arcade manufacturers showing little interest when Atari founder Bushnell and his VP of engineering, Al Alcorn, finished making Pong, the duo decided to set it up themselves in a small California bar. The next day, Alcorn received a frantic phone call asking him to repair the coin slot, which was overflowing - the success of Pong was swift and immediate. Little wonder Bushnell describes the early days of Atari as chaos. "That was a time when I was young and dumb," he remembers. "I was trying to figure out how to build and run a company. I was trying to do everything at once, all with very little experience. We knew that what we had was very important technology. There was also a growing market at that time. What we had were lists of games that we wanted to do, but at that time the technology wouldn't allow us to create them."

Although technology hindered Bushnell's vision (Pong was a secondary idea to the driving game he wanted), he knew what made them successful. "They were all very well tensioned," he explains. "What that means is that there was a good balance between the risk that you took to lose a life or a game piece with the score that you got. All the best games had an excellent balance between risk and reward."

Since selling Atari in 1976, Bushnell has kept gaming at a tactful distance, concentrating instead on ventures such as the Chuck E. Cheese Pizza Time restaurants (which combined pizza parlours with arcade gaming) and a Video Music project that plugged into your television and played images depending on the keys you pressed. Ironically, both projects were deemed failures even though the music software available for consoles today and the convergence of modern arcades suggest Bushnell was ahead of his time.

Bushnell finds it hard to wax lyrical about contemporary games, pointing to the lack of innovation as a reason for his indifference. "I think that games now look pretty much the same," he laments. "True innovation is diminishing. The only way that game developers have been able to differentiate themselves from one another is to slap a licence on what is really the same game. It is interesting from a marketing perspective, but I think it's really boring from a game and innovation perspective." He even struggles to think of a game that truly impressed him in the last year. "There have been some well-executed games," he says. "I have always been a fan of the Sims games, and WarCraft and Halo. But they are basically refinements of things that were done 15 years ago."

One significant recent industry development has been the expansion of online gaming, which is even threatening to usurp modes designed for lone gamers. Yet Bushnell feels that the development of online games will complement rather than replace single-player titles. "I think that games are basically multi-formed," he explains. "There will be solitaire games for the rest of existence, there will also always be good puzzle games that you just want to play alone. But of course there will be other games which require you to play against people. Different types of games will still be out there, it will be your choice which you play and when."

These days, Bushnell heads uWink, a company specialising in entertainment technology. At the moment, he's moving towards touch-screen games, and Bushnell still has big plans for the firm he founded in 1999. "We currently have the Snap! terminal that is shipping worldwide, including the UK," he explains, talking about uWink's new counter-top pub machine containing 58 games. "We also have a new product called Bear Express, which is an animated entertainment system that also vends you a customised bear that you just designed." Intriguing…

Some 32 years after Pong exploded onto the scene, time hasn't diluted Bushnell's enthusiasm for technology, or his drive for innovation, which bodes well for touch-screen games. If a tiny Californian bar is anything to go by, pub landlords should reinforce the coin slots and have Bushnell's number on speed-dial, just in case…

THE REVOLUTION

the Nintendo DS

The people over at Nintendo have a lot to be excited about, but they tend to get excited over just about anything. While the company is slowly collapsing in terms of an innovative developer, instead sticking largely to the safety of its licensed titles and stable of characters, when it comes to handhelds, few can teach the company a lesson. So it was with a lot of fanfare that the DS was finally unveiled.

The DS, unofficially at least, now stands for 'Dual Screen' (at concept stage it was originally 'Developer System'), thanks to the two TFT LCD screens on the unit. The whole thing measures around 150 mm in length. The two screens, each 64 mm by 44 mm in dimension (the same as the SP screen), closes neatly in a clamshell design, not unlike that of the SP. Apart from that there is a D-Pad, four action buttons instead of the traditional two (plus two shoulder buttons) and the usual select/start buttons.

Inside it's powered by an ARM 9 processor (similar to most powerful mobile devices) and has 4 MB onboard RAM.

Each screen does 16-million colours at a resolution of 256 x 192 pixels, each capable of doing advanced 2D graphics and good 3D displays. The screens are also touch-sensitive and can be triggered using your finger or a stylus, plus it's possible to render 3D on one screen while displaying 2D graphics on the other. The DS will use a new form of media to house its games, capable of carrying up to 1 gig of info. The handheld will also be backward compatible with the GBA and other models from the Nintendo family. Wireless also features prominently, both to play online and for gaming against other DS owners in your proximity. It's possible for one DS to act as a node, immediately notifying you if there is another DS owner in the area willing to play.

16-bit stereo sound completes the package.

Game-wise a lot of developers and publishers are already onboard, though an exact figure doesn't exist. Still, this includes the likes of all the major Japanese publishers and Western big shots like Activision and Electronic Arts. Nintendo is obviously also throwing its weight behind the console with first party titles starring their ever-popular characters. From this batch we already know of several Mario titles plus a Metroid title.

what we think...

There's a lot here to be excited about, but the last thing on Earth you should listen to when it comes to the DS is Nintendo itself. The company has produced frightfully unimaginative examples on how one could use the dual screens (being able to see the overhead track while you drive has never been that much of an issue in the past), so the console's grace is really left to what other developers can do with it. In that view, there's a lot of light at the end of the tunnel. The DS is also bereft of the loads of features the PSP and other contemporaries boast, but it is a handheld geared at pure gaming. And the missing features ensure for a much better battery life.

It's hard to fault the DS at this stage of the race, but it's definitely okay to get a little excited about it.

WILL BE TELEVISED

Whoever said that might not have had the handheld wars in mind, but these devices are going to attract a lot of attention. Sony and Nintendo are leading the pack when it comes to media exposure, but which unit is really the best? As things usually are in gaming hardware, this is a very subjective topic, so instead here are just the facts. And, of course, our opinion. We wouldn't be in this job if we didn't have something to say.

the PlayStation Portable

Sony quickly got the hype on this one going. Without even showing it to crowds last year (and thus leaving a lot of room for speculation) they managed to create a huge amount of hype around just an idea: the walkman of the 21st century. And there's good reason to watch Sony, because they are probably the best company around at the moment when it comes to straddling that thin line between hobbyist gaming and consumer entertainment.

The PSP, finally unveiled this year, is a bit bigger than most thought – at 170mm x 74mm x 23mm and weighing in at 270 grams, it's very wide. This is largely to accommodate the massive TFT LCD screen that displays at the 16:9 ratio – ideal for widescreen movies (one feature Sony hinted at early in the handheld's development process).

Alongside the screen is a D-Pad along with the four buttons familiar from the PlayStation design. This is complimented with two stereo speakers and the host of smaller buttons you'd expect on a hand held. The volume control also sits on the face.

Under the hood you can expect the PSP CPU (System clock frequency 1~333MHz) along with 32 MB of RAM and 4 MB of embedded DRAM. The device uses Sony's own Universal Media Drive (UMD) technology for the media discs which, despite only measuring 60 mm in width, can hold up to 1.8 GB of data and supports movie and music formats as well.

The PSP will support Sony's Memory Stick and also has a USB 2.0 port. It will ship with Wi-Fi built-in, allowing gamers to play against each other or connect online. There will also be accessories geared towards this, such as a prototype USB camera that was on show at E3, keyboards and GPS devices.

Sony didn't mention how long the battery life will be, but knowing them it should be substantial at least. Graphically it can handle over 16 million colours at 480 x 272 pixels and boasts being able to do 3D graphics that rival the PlayStation 2, sometimes surpassing it.

Scheduled for release this year in Japan, the PSP is only due in the middle of next year for the US and Europe and probably late 2005 for us. The good news here is that gives more companies time to develop titles. Thirty four companies are already onboard to develop PSP titles in Japan and twenty four (including all the big ones) adorn the US list.

what we think...

Don't get us wrong – on paper the PSP sounds like a damn cool idea. And it could easily turn out to be the next big thing. But the sheer size of the console alone is daunting – one thing a few hand held manufacturers, most recently Nokia, have learned is that people don't like big things they have to carry around, even if it means watching a movie on it. And no matter how hard you try, you won't be able to carry over the sense of a console play style to a hand held machine, so there's no reason yet to get excited about any massive 3D power. The PSP has a lot going for it, but apart from Sony's reputation and experience there's not a lot separating it from the cluster of PDA hybrids like the Tapwave and Gametrac.
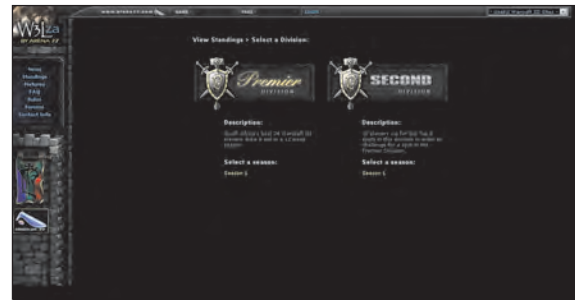
Arena 77 Online WarCraft III League

Website: http://w3l.arena77.com

What started out as a simple idea to improve the standard of play amongst the local WarCraft III community has now evolved into a fully fledged project that literally promises to take South Africa to the next gaming level. With a view to transforming the community into a professional environment, one man with a vision, known to the community as BC-Rigby, approached Arena 77 with the league concept. After discussing it further with the top players, it was clear there was more than enough support for the endeavour to succeed. With prizes sponsored by Arena 77, and hosting costs covered by Mexcom SA, the league launched officially on Friday the 21st of May, 2004. Community.za got in touch with the W3lza administrators, Rigby and StanDarsh, to find out more.

"Our most important goal is to create a healthy competitive gaming community for WarCraft III in South Africa, where players can get experience competing regularly against other players of similar skill," said Rigby. "Gaming is big business overseas. Major companies spend millions in sponsoring leagues, tournaments and individual clans. That kind of financial support definitely has a positive effect on player skill. But in order for companies to invest money in gaming, an official, legitimate structure has to be in place. Hopefully with this league, we are establishing a platform that is viable for sponsors."

There are two divisions to the league. The Premier Division consists of the top 16 players from the ESWC qualifier and a further 8 nominated players. The Second Division was opened to the rest of the community on a first-come, first-serve basis, and consists of 32 players. Premier Division participants play four matches per week, while those from the Second Division play six matches per week. There is a promotion system in place, where the most accomplished players of the Second Division stand to move up to the Premier Division, and so players must continually work to keep their place. The current season will run until mid-July, when final player standings will be determined. NAG will continue to provide updates as the league progresses.

As for their website, Dylan "StanDarsh" Smith had the following to say: "The site manages both divisions of the league, generating season fixtures and player rankings automatically. Possibly the most notable feature is that result capturing for games is done by the players, by uploading the WarCraft Replay file that you can save after each game. The website can interpret these files, and determine the game information automatically. Since it was thrown together in such a short space of time, I'm constantly working on new features. By the end of the season, it will be one of the more advanced gaming league sites in the world."

Zero Effect Disbands

With the imminent departure of their leader, James "Prem" Schwikkard, who is on his way to the United Kingdom, the players of the popular team Zero Effect have now decided to go their separate ways. Harry "Incin" Apostoleris, Julian "Raumas" Bales and C.P. "Light" Ungerer have teamed up with former Synergy players Daniel "Gandalf" van Flymen and Chris "Apocalypse" Lautre. This new team will be a resurrection of the great historical team Damage Control, who won Worfaire 2002 and represented South Africa at the World Cyber Games. Zero Effect's other two players, Mark "Nitros" Soden and Graham "Rebs" Schwikkard have not as yet joined any new teams.

Online Football Management

Website: www.hattrick.org

Hattrick is a web-browser-based game which focuses on all the aspects of club football management - trading players, coaching your team, running your stadium, etc. Thousands of players from across the world come together in order for their teams to compete. Matches are played twice a week, league games on Sundays and friendlier games on Wednesdays. The South African division already has approximately 140 users and the community is growing steadily. For those interested in football management, Hattrick is a well-made game, running on a very established worldwide network. It's fun, free, and definitely worth a look if you are even remotely interested in this sort of thing.

Arena 77 nabs WCG

www.worldcybergames.com

Having recently attended E3 in Los Angeles, where most major game companies make grand announcements to the hundreds of media representatives that flock there, Samsung took full advantage of this opportunity and hosted a press conference the day before E3 began.

It was a modest affair in comparison to some of the other press conferences that we attended and didn't really yield much more information than what was already available on the internet.

The focus appeared to be more centered on the commitment of Samsung towards developing gaming and how they would be utilizing all of their resources to make it as accessible to the general public as possible. "As a global digital leader, Samsung is proud to again support the World Cyber Games, one of the world's most exciting digital entertainment events," said Peter Weedfald, Senior Vice President of Samsung Electronics America. "Samsung has been a worldwide sponsor of the World Cyber Games since it's inception in 2000 because we are committed to promoting a fun and challenging digital entertainment culture, and to building greater friendship and harmony among the youth of this world."

With over a million gamers from around 60 countries expected to participate in this event, it was with little surprise that we were recently informed of South Africa's participation in this event. As was expected, Arena 77 will be running the competition side of things while Penquin International will be co-ordinating the entire event on behalf of Samsung SA. This mini road show of sorts will be travelling to the three major centres around the country, setting up shop inside major shopping centres in a bid to create brand awareness for Samsung and expose some of South Africa's top gamers to the public at large.

Encompassing three regional preliminaries and one final event, the World Cyber Games kicks off in South Africa on 16 July at the Eastgate Shopping Centre in Gauteng. Running through till 18 July SA's top players will be pitting their skills against their opponents in a bid to secure the limited top spots which are available for them to progress through to the final event.

The action then moves down to Durban from 6 - 8 August at the Gateway Shopping Centre in Umhlanga and from there on to Canal Walk Shopping Centre in Cape Town from 13 - 15 August.

The three games that players will be participating in are Counter-Strike: Condition Zero, Unreal Tournament 2004 and WarCraft III. The first place winners of these three events will be flown to San Francisco in October to take part in the finals, courtesy of Samsung.

If you think you have what it takes to beat SA's current best then go to www.worldcybergames.co.za and register to play.

Electronic Sports League WC3L Series

www.wc3l.de

It appears that local event company Arena 77 is making good on its promises this year to improve the local standard of competitive gaming by giving the players more opportunity to compete and practice against international players.

With the assistance of Rigby and StanDarsh, Arena 77 have had a WarCraft III team accepted into the Electronic Sports League WC3L series. For those not in the know, this is one of the most prestigious online WarCraft III leagues in Europe, if not the world which attracts some of the top clans.

The A77 Team, as they will now be known for this series, will compete online in a series of scheduled matches, with bandwidth being provided by Mexcom, Arena 77's online hosting partner.

Chosen from amongst the top WarCraft III players in the country, the team is made up as follows:

Players:
A77.Stealth (Captain)
A77.sWoop
A77.Juvenile
A77.Zick
A77.Gamp
A77.TreNd
A77.Black
A77.Spike (aka gX-DeaN)

Reserves:
A77.AvatarX
A77.m4ni
A77.Zzniper

Player of the Month

Name: Clayton Nieuwenhuizen
Nick: Destroyer
Age: 20
Occupation: Student
Clan: Evolve
Games: Quake 3, Counter-Strike
Achievements: • Member of SA Team for the Electronic Sports World Cup 2004
                 • Member of SA Team for the World Cyber Games 2003
                 • 1st place in Quake 3 at CTI 2001
                 • 1st place in Quake 3 at @lantic eXtreme Lan Party 2001
                 • 2nd place in Quake 3 at Top 32 Invitational 2004
                 • 3rd place in Quake 3 at Worfaire Prelims 2001
                 • 5th place in Quake 3 at Worfaire Finals 2001
                 • 1st place in Counter-Strike at ESWC Qualifier 2004
                 • 1st place in Counter-Strike at the Mayhem Offline League 2004
                 • 1st place in Counter-Strike at WCG SA Finals 2003
                 • 1st place in Counter-Strike at Gamers Gate Eastgate 2002
                 • 1st place in Counter-Strike at Gamers Gate Carousel 2002
                 • 2nd place in Counter-Strike at ESWC Qualifier 2003
                 • 2nd place in Counter-Strike at Worfaire Prelims 2002
                 • 2nd place in Counter-Strike at Worfaire Finals 2002
Quote: "WHAT LUCK!!!"

It's quite rare for someone to play both Q3 and CS, why did you choose these games?

I started off with Quake III Arena and played it for 2 years. Then the game "died" in South Africa. Not many people played it anymore, so I started playing Counter-Strike. I got asked to join Bravado and won my first CS competition at Gamers Gate Carousel in 2002.

How do you view Evolve's chances at the ESWC in Poitiers this year?

I don't know, I am not going to say anything because that will just put pressure on myself and the team, so we are just going there to do our best and have fun. But we are striving to get past the group stages, as no South African team has done so. With our full line up and no substitutes we hope to be able to achieve this.

Can anyone get good enough to play for a top team, or is it only within the grasp of a select, talented few?

When it comes to a game that has been around for some time, like Counter-Strike or Quake III Arena, it would be very difficult for someone to get to the top level. But players such as Light have proven that a lot of practice definitely pays off, since he has made it to a top team.

When do you think Counter-Strike will die?

If Counter-Strike 2 is not such a great success then Counter-Strike in general will die very soon.

Mayhem Offline League

After four months of intense qualifying, the best 16 Counter-Strike teams in Gauteng gathered for a day of intense double elimination at the Casa Dos Poveiros Centre in Boksburg - Mayhem's legendary headquarters. Several big names were in attendance, such as the infamous Evolve Aim, and their arch rivals Zero Effect (formerly Evolve Ignite). This was to be their first meeting since the ESWC qualifier, and their second clash since Zero Effect departed from Evolve. With teams like Bad Habit Boyz and Infinity waiting for their chance to claim an underdog's victory, the tournament got underway.

Unfortunately for spectators, there were no major upsets over the course of the competition, and sure enough, Evolve and Zero Effect met each other in the final match. The first map, de_train, resulted in a comfortable 16-8 victory for Evolve, and at that point, many predicted somewhat of an anticlimax for the day. However, on the second map, de_dust2 (which was rumoured to be Evolve's strongest map), Zero Effect played like a team possessed, using innovative strategy to force the advantage into their own hands and winning 13-7. In the final map, de_nuke (rumoured to be Zero Effect's strongest map), Evolve narrowly scraped through by the same margin (13-7) to win the tournament. All ten players gave outstanding and entertaining performances, leaving Counter-Strike fans with a sweet taste in their mouths until the next Offline League. For his incredible consistency and composure under pressure, Warren "Dr4k" Medcalf (from Evolve) is NAG's Most Valuable Player for Mayhem 2004.

Final Standings:

1)   Evolve Aim
2)   Zero Effect
3)   Bad Habit Boyz
4)   Infinity
5)   Chickenhead

For more details concerning Mayhem events, visit www.mayhem.co.za.

WOLVENOID'S LAIR

Greetings all you gamers, in the realm where possibilities are limited only by your imagination and the nagging girlfriend seeking a bit more attention than the dust on the furniture is getting. As with so many of the joys in life, the Carousel LAN is now only a distant memory to reflect on with a wide smile and a sense of accomplishment.

There was some very positive feedback regarding the event, from sponsors to gamers and even including the trusty gofers (gofers here refer to the people that sacrificed their time and energy to ensure that everything went as smooth as it did). But even with all the positive energy that surrounds an event such as this, there are still always things to be learnt and improved upon. My musings this month thus meander in the direction of where the state of gaming and the gaming community is at this point.

The most troublesome aspect of a large scale event such as the ESWC at The Carousel (and one which still does not have a viable solution thus far), is the trusted old virus. Now this will, without a doubt, have affected most of you at some stage at work or at the LAN you frequent or at home while surfing. Ignorance, a lack of education or a lack of opportunity may all contribute to this little annoyance. Some may feel that if they have their firewalls up, patched their systems with all official and beta versions of patches, do not share anything and generally keep to themselves they will not be affected. Personally I think that you may be missing the point. By encapsulating yourself with all these defences, you may lose out on the spirit of LAN's (please read beyond the obvious as I am not saying don't protect your system :). You are affected by staying in your little war dungeon. The network response is affected as these little creations of a bored mind seek ways to infect the unsuspecting. The staff are focusing on halting the spread, not focusing on ensuring that everybody has a warm fuzzy feeling and not a confused player because this is the first big event that they attend.

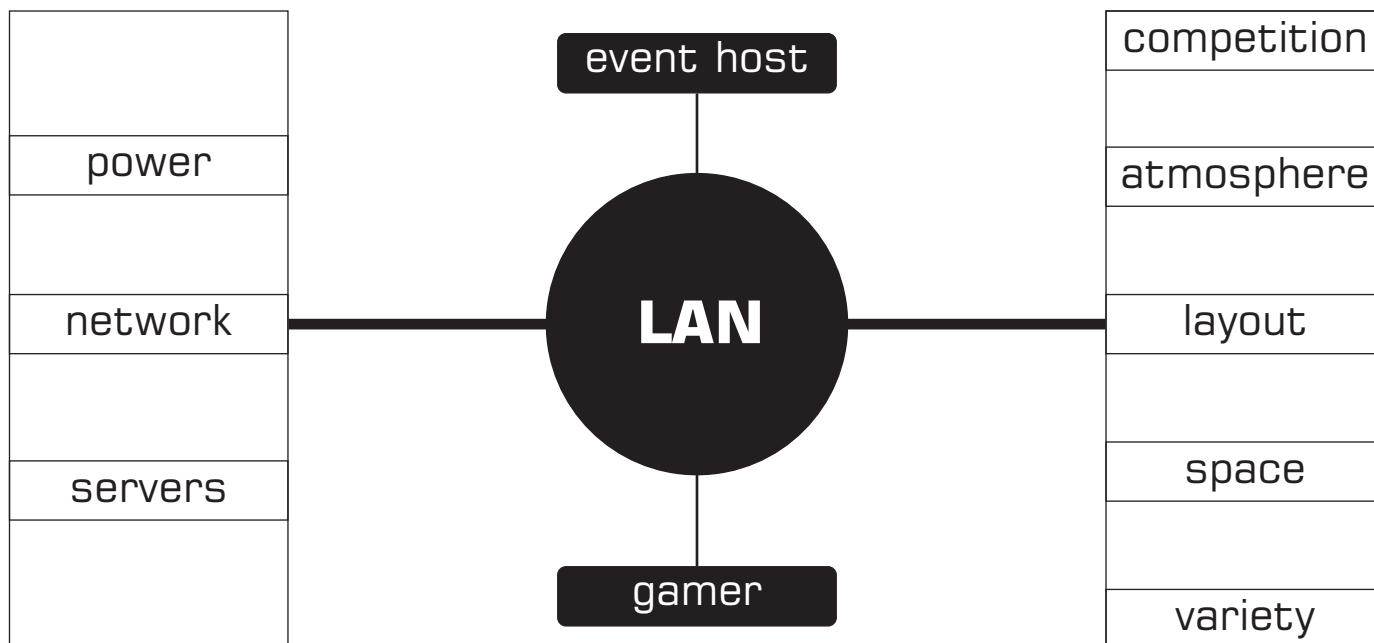The perfect solution still eludes me. What did strike me though as a possible way forward, was the comment from a 9 year old girl "I've learned that when I wave to people in the country, they stop what they are doing and wave back." Maybe helping somebody fix their system and educating them will benefit you in the long run, maybe even in the short run by adding a name to those that you consider friends. To those that feel it's not their problem and Microsoft should solve the issue, I mean, how difficult could it be to ensure that a billion bright minds out there cannot crash an operating system? Here is their strategy: "Microsoft is working with anti-virus vendors to ensure that in the future its software will be able to verify a user's desktop is secure and updated anti-virus signatures are in place before granting access to corporate resources. With its forthcoming security-policy compliance strategy, that's expected to be announced in the next few weeks, Microsoft is looking to make sure its patches are in place before a user is allowed onto a network. This will be accomplished by allowing for a period of "isolation" while security updates are downloaded to the user, sources say." So the freedom that we take for granted will become more restricted to ensure that these little annoyances become more difficult to execute.

And now for another issue that has been bugging me for quite some time.

With any successful LAN, there are layers to success. The foundation is power. If this is not working, the gamers will have a hard time keeping themselves occupied. The second layer is the network. If that fails, most can still watch the movie that they are reviewing for Ster Kinekor, since they won't have anything illegal on their PC's. Maybe finish the game of solitaire that you haven't

> "By encapsulating yourself with all these defences, you may lose out on the spirit of LAN's"

had the opportunity to do yet. With the power and network in place, the next layer is made up of different segments. One such segment is servers. What a powerful yet misunderstood word. Servers imply providing a service. So what is this service that is required? Here is where I have to whine a little. I would love to see easier manageable dedicated server offerings out of the box. Some games have defi-

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                    ┌──────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────┐
                    │  event host  │                    │   competition    │
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                    ┌──────────────┐                    └──────────────────┘
                    │    gamer     │
                    └──────────────┘
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nitely made some huge strides into helping the community with this aspect. UT2004 for instance has a 700MB dedicated server that you can download with a serial key to set up your server. The problem here is that there seems to be a lack of standards. We have all the major gaming events throughout the world, yet we always have difficulty in knowing what exactly the setting will be. Is the tick rate for a LAN server at 35 the standard, or should it maybe be 45 if the standard of clients machines and the network topology allow? The Counter-Strike community I think is a shining example of this confusion with the Steam validation, and the move to Condition Zero.

What is my solution to these rumblings, as I prefer to try and contribute to the solution, not just add to the chaos. One solution that might be a bit ambitious would be to expect the software companies to develop batch files and config files after collaborating with the major events. Thus as a standard with the software that ships, is included files needed to run a LAN server for all the different modes, as well as an Internet server. Now if you don't like the 15-minute death match option, you go to the commented config file, read the understandable English comment, and modify to your hearts content. If you are however not inclined to fiddle with the unknown, you still have a decent server that works the way the software companies intended. If the need arises to modify these config files, the software companies can release them along with the normal patches, or as a

separate patch. Please keep in mind that the servers used for dedicated servers do not always have the capability to run games and start a server from the menu, as their design was not with graphical power in mind. The alternative solution is for the big players in the field to make available their config files for all to copy and use at the smaller events. Thus maybe Arena 77 or Mayhem making available their files for use at all the smaller LAN's, so that when a player or Clan attends these bigger events, the server reacts the same as they did at their practise sessions. The benefits should be obvious. I do understand that not all hardware was created equal. But even this is not that difficult to anticipate and plan for.

So in this layer the other components that are required to ensure success, is competition, atmosphere, layout, space, variety and a host of other small little issues. When the first layers are no longer contemplated because they are always well executed, the LAN's that will be remembered are the LAN's that manage to master these.

One other aspect that was once again raised from the ashes is that of Clan names and Nicknames. A lot of suggestions have come forth in the past and more recently on how to resolve this tricky issue. If some dude or gal decides that maybe Wolvenoid is cool, they now make their nick WolveDroid. Is that acceptable? Can't stop it really, but at least if we have a central database, there won't be two Wolvenoids.

Everybody obviously won't register his or her names. But if Arena 77 or any other organization takes it upon themselves to manage such a list, events could eliminate duplicate names by insisting that the duplicate name that is not registered has to be changed for the event. A R5 annual fee is required to register, and this money goes to a nominated charity. Maybe it works, maybe it's not needed. But I do think that we will need to address this issue as gaming is growing in SA and the newbies without imagination will have an increasingly difficult time coming up with a nick. Or as another suggestion had it, maybe we should play under our Christian names to lend more credibility to gaming as a sport. Although it is an option, I fail to see the added credibility that a commentator will give a match by commenting on the game that Fanie is pixilating Gerhardus with a BFG while playing as a virus infected humanoid seeking revenge for not being allowed a BIOS update while still an alpha version of the ZX-Spectrum.

Sure hope your winter months will be filled with hours of fun in front of the PC, and someone to share the joy with. As I soak up the winter sun, a thought to leave you with …

"Competition is a by-product of productive work, not its goal. A creative man is motivated by the desire to achieve, not by the desire to beat others."
- **Ayn Rand** (1905-1982)

Wolvenoid | www.vc.org.za

INBOX

*NAG Forums [**www.nag.co.za**], copied verbatim with no spelling, formatting or grammar looked at or cared about.*

eXCheez
With the NAG forums really growing do we still need the INBOX / Letters page?
Sure the forums are lacking the ED's witty remarks and insight but the letters that are printed are so utterly lame that it feels like a total waste of space - nothing of importance or relevance gets discussed.

EnCh4rM3d
I personally like the NAG magazine letters page. Here on the forums anyone can say something and it gets seen by lots of other people.
In the NAG Magazine though, only the **CHOSEN** letters get printed in the magazine which in my opinion is an Honour. Not everyday do you get your letter printed in a **NAG** Magazine. I yearn for the day that one of my letters get's printed in **NAG**. (Hint). NAG should keep the INBOX letters page in the magazine. People will appreciate it more **IF** their letters get chosen by **The Ed** to be printed in **his** magazine.

Ramjet
You also need to keep in mind that, realistically speaking, the NAG Forums only represent a very small percentage of the reader base. Many of the letters we get are sent to us by people who don't, or even can't, get access to this site. For that reason, keeping the letters page is important. Besides that, there is a certain relevance "filter" that gets applied to the letters printed in the INBOX, whereas, on the Forum, people can just spew on about anything.

eXCheez
Granted Ramjet but this month there were about 5 letters from Morgue [something] - not one of them were worth printing nor replying to. It just feels like a huge waste of space.

EyeScream
But people were complaining about the **Ed** not being sarcastic enough, so he chose letters where is replies would really be sarcastic. Well I guess you can't keep everyone happy.

SkullHozer
Yeah, what's up with that??

EnCh4rM3d
I would say that's a matter of opinion eXCheez. Understand that your opinion isn't the only one, but rather that there are other opinions who think that the letters chosen for that month are cool.
Ramjets' points are very valid as well. So the letters page in the magazine should and **MUST** remain in the **NAG** magazine.

bRaZeD
No offence encharmed, but the ed himself said last month, that often the letters are chosen to showcase how bad they are. He said that he does get some great letters that he can't reply to sarcastically, and they're just left out. I'm sure a lot of that was said in jest, but there might be some truth behind it.

EnCh4rM3d
You're right bRaZeD. Maybe the problem lies with the **NAG Ed**. Maybe he should re-think his way of choosing the letters in the magazine for that month. What I don't get is when the Ed chooses a letter that's good and he can't reply to it sarcastically, but publishes it in the mag anyway, people complain that there's no sarcasm in the magazine anymore. So what's the **Ed** to do but publish letters to satisfy all the sarcasm hungry readers of **NAG**. Then they complain about the quality of the letters again. The problem could also lie with the sarcasm hungry readers as well. Like why do they read NAG: 1.) To find every bit of sarcasm. **OR** 2.) To read about all gaming news.

Thanks to some comments on the NAG website [*see left box*] I thought I'd let everyone see just what I get in my inbox during a typical month from NAG readers [note that during the months of May things were a little quite, you can usually add a hundred odd letters to the list below]. Also between August and January the volume increases a lot for some reason I still cannot fathom.

So, I ended up with **243** sorted letters in my June letters directory for publication consideration from a total of **221** letters received for this period - all addressed to letters@nag.co.za and a further **36** addressed to ed@nag.co.za about NAG Magazine from readers [these should have been addressed to letters@nag.co.za]. So a total of **256** letters were address to me from readers during May. This doesn't count any viruses or malicious content as these are caught by Norton and deleted before I even see them. This also doesn't count any business stuff, spam, rAge stuff etc. just letters. The missing **13** letters from above were replies to my replies and duplications.

From the remaining **243** I eliminated the following items:

1. Release Date Requests [16]
2. 'Which product is better' questions [8]
3. 'When is DOOM 3 coming' questions [12]
4. 'When is Half-Life 2' coming questions [10]
5. Complements about the magazine [44]
6. Images, drawings, poems, amateur reviews, stories, desktops etc. [4]
7. Job requests [2]
8. Students requesting a temporary position for school [1]
9. Links to websites [8]
10. Suggestions for the magazine, Cover CD and website [25]
11. Information about pirates, piracy and suspect Internet sites [8]
12. Letters about how cool a new movie is [2]
13. Letters about how terrible The_Basilisk article was in the June issue [14]
14. Badger questions, rumours, trivia, etc. [10]
15. Questions about advertisements in NAG [30]
16. Requests to sponsor events, teams or schools [6]
17. Tips, cheats and Easter Eggs in games [6]
18. Technical hardware issues [20]
19. Letters from nutcases about a. End of the world b. Satan and games c. Evil corporations d. Conspiracy theories e. Jam donuts and gaming culture [3]
20. Comments on old topics from previous months [1]
21. Letters about how bad piracy is [2]
22. Fake letters from the competition fishing for ideas [6]

This leaves **5** [serious] letters and the only ones worthwhile publishing, which you can read below. [*Please just spend a moment considering how much effort this whole process took… that's all I ask - a moment, Ed ;)*].

Letter of the moment

FROM Donovan
SUBJECT More Gamers Good?
A few years back the slightest murmur of the two words I'm and gamer in the same sentence could've cost you your life in terms of social standings in high school. Things have changed drastically in terms of stereotyping gamers as being nerds or geeks since then over the years, well at least where I live. Every second guy on the street has some sort of connection to gaming these days, either being PC or console based, somewhere. Rival LAN Parties is nothing new around here and gaming has sort of become a cult like thing similar to illegal street racing. My concern is that I'm not sure if this is really a good thing. Sure those people's pathetic excuse for a brain has finally comprehended the sheer brilliance of gaming but now gaming is being exploited and commercialized just like everything else revolutionary before it, rock music for example. I mean do these people really appreciate the games they play or is it a case of just another toy developed for their amusement and an opportunity for them to say, "Wow what will they think of next? My point is gaming was something sacred and I'd hate to see the essence of it die.
I agree in one sense that the mass market will ultimately change the face of gaming forever but disagree because there will always be a select few who take it a little more seriously and these are the folks that usually make the games - the hardcore gamer culture will never die, just modify itself to accept whatever gets thrown at it. This is the essence of a hardcore gamer adaptability. NAG Ed.

FROM Ghislain
SUBJECT The High and Mighty
In response to Ramjet May 2004 - The wonder, the irony, a gaming magazine giving tips to readers on how to write, next thing I know, NAG is going to be giving me ten steps to a healthy life. Come guys, game reviewers you are, grammar critics you are not. I am sure that it is not beyond even your perceptive qualities to realise that the many hours spent playing games, advertised and reviewed by you, could otherwise be better spent by gamers learning how to write. If you are struggling to fill space in your publication try emulating current magazine formats, where the last page is used for feature articles, reader artwork, (why not attract some more advertisers), etc... Ridiculing your readers' intelligence may win you a few well typed letters, but a loss of readership especially in print media is not a good thing. If its coherent feedback you want try directing reader response to specific subjects. I do not intend to bash gaming in any way and I maintain that it is an exciting and exhilarating form of entertainment, as well as an emotional and real world release. However as a medium for gaming corporations, hardware manufacturers and the like, you must remember what type of industry and activity you support here, and the responsibility that comes with this. My concern is for the future of your publication in SA media, the industry is tough, don't screw up. Protect your readers, they ensure you get paid.
Hey, don't take everything so personally, we enjoy giving as much as we get given - and no we're not terrified of loosing a few people with no sense of humour - everyone is better off without them. NAG Ed.

FROM Isendil
SUBJECT The_Basilisk's June article

While reading your June issue, I stumbled on an article written by The_Basilisk. I was shocked by the writer's strong pessimistic feelings about South Africa. It is sad after 10 ten years of democracy, after the near eruption of one of the bloodiest civil wars in history that we still see such ardent pessimists. Unlike the writer, I see the creation of the game Chase as a massive achievement for the South African game industry. I agree it won't win any bestseller awards, but it is a step in the right direction.

Some people expect results too quickly, ten years is a short time and people don't realise that firstly, training and infrastructure take a while to put in place and secondly, when the systems are put in place they don't pay dividends immediately. The writer also finds only our unoriginality as a problem and I quote, "Instead of putting in the effort and arriving at a revolutionary idea for a television program, South Africa does Big Brother", unfortunately the writer fails to mention that numerous other developed countries, like Germany also copied Big Brother. Even America copied the British Pop Idols.

For a nation with so many bigger problems, such as unemployment and poverty, one can't help feeling how lucky we are just to have such internationally recognised figures, such as JM Coetzee and Charlize Theron. I was dumbfounded by the sweeping unjustified generalisations the writer makes, "Laziness pervades the South African workforce", such a statement trivialises the situation of millions of workers in our country who have to wake up every morning and put in a hard day's work just for their family's' to survive. The writer dubbed our country's attitude as the "African attitude" an obvious attack on the African people, the writer fails to mention the impact of the stripping of both the natural and human resources by our colonial countries, he fails to mention the impact of endless droughts or the impact of illiteracy when coining this, if I may, stupid term.

No doubt our country still has a lot to do. Perhaps now we have the 2010 World Cup, it will give us something to work towards. We will receive rich remuneration for it, perhaps even the game industry can produce a World Cup game or something like that. I am extremely proud of our country. We have been dubbed the "miracle nation" and that is something to be proud of. Our country is definitely not just a dirty spot on the rear of the world, an extremely offensive term if I may add. So many other countries and world figures have hope in our country, so why do the select few of us have our

heads buried underneath the sand? We have achieved so much in such a short time, so why do we have such party poopers? If you don't have hope in the country, then why stay? South Africa has already had its fair share of negative energy, we don't need anymore. Let's cut out the negativity and start showing some self-belief.

You make a good point, just please, let's not bring racism into the equation - we'll never get anywhere if we keep looking at the future from the past. More below... NAG Ed

FROM Matt
SUBJECT The_Basilisk's June article

While The_Basilisk's column each month is usually a reprehensible load of rubbish that I avoid reading, I read it this month due to someone mentioning a comment on local developer I-Imagine. I have to say, I am disgusted that NAG allows dribble such as this to be printed. I am by no means opposed to free speech, but the author seems to actively look for something to complain about each month. This time his chosen target was what he sees as South Africa's lack of creativity and bad work ethic, with a few special attacks on I-Imagine.

First of all, a little research would have shown that Chase is, in fact, a rather original game. At the time that I-Imagine began development, the idea of a 3D arcade stunt driving game was a new one. A lot of hard work went into the development of the game, as well as securing financing and a publisher for the title. The game development industry is one of the toughest industries to break into, even with a genre-clone that is guaranteed to make sales. A totally new and inexperienced development house managing to get in with an original title is practically unheard of, no matter their country of origin and everyone involved in that endeavour deserves a lot of respect for what they accomplished!

As for South Africans and their 'lazy' work ethic, allow me to remind the author that South African specialists in the IT, mining, utility, medical and educational industries (among others) are in massive demand internationally, specifically due to their dedicated work ethic. South Africans in many industries regularly work far longer work hours and far harder than their colleagues in many other countries. South African creativity is also well recognised internationally, be it in corporate industries for our creative service products, in the art world for our distinct creations or in academic circles for our

active participation in and contribution to many disciplines.

The 'South African Attitude' that needs attention is the one that the author demonstrates in all of his writing, it is that of unnecessary negativity. South Africans have so much to be thankful for and proud of, we are a wonderfully diverse nation, full of innovation and exciting developments. We have 'first world' transport, utility and communication infrastructures and a strong economy and international presence. We have a fantastic climate and some of the most diverse and beautiful ecologies in the world within our borders. We have higher average living standards than most countries in the world. Yes, we have problems, so does any country on any continent. Rather than complaining about these problems and (worse yet) encouraging your readership to do so, try to be positive and make an effort to correct some of those problems.

You, as a journalist, hold a privileged position in which you influence the thinking of your (often young) readership, don't abuse that, make good use of it.

I've always been a big fan of South Africa and it was great to see such a strong response to this article - it's good to know that some people take things like this very seriously. I personally agree with you that this country is one of the best in the world and one of our problems are people, who live here, who spread negativity because they [incorrectly] think it's better everywhere else. Keep in mind though that The_Basilisk's writing every month takes the form of an opinion based column and is exactly that - his own opinion. As is the case in most other magazines, columns do not necessarily reflect the view of the publication. NAG Ed.

From NAG

Just for the record, letters from readers is lifeblood to any publication because they more often than not let us know that there are other humans in the real world who enjoy what we do. Now and again, late at night when you're just about ready to go to bed after a long weekend behind the PC, not playing games mind you, but putting the issue to bed and adding whatever polish you can before deadline, you hit send / receive one last time in your e-mail programme and while rubbing your eyes you hear a little tune that means new mail and up pops some reader who just wrote in to tell you how much he loves the magazine and then goes on about how excited he is about some upcoming game and then finally wraps up with a few words of encouragement, telling us to keep it real because he needs his fix every month. It's those kinds of moments that add the fuel that keeps things ticking over and ultimately no matter what is said and done at the end of the day the only reason we do this magazine is for the money and seeing that you pay money to buy the magazine we have to put up with your letters because we want more of your money every month. ;) Admittedly, we also love doing this job - it's better than farming a cubical all day with an hour's lunch and 2 tea breaks. So thanks for all the letters over the years, keep them coming and we'll keep it coming.

Keyboard - After much debate, giggling and laughing we decided this image was just too funny to be the bigger person and not put it in the magazine. Snigger, giggle… ALT_beas7 sent us a rendered image of the PC Format Editor's Keyboard… Please note that NAG Magazine's editors, management and staff do not find this image funny and don't encourage readers to send us more. This we swear on DOOM 3's life.

Did you know: Badgers eat all snakes

Badgers love slimy things...

Badger Hunt #6 Winner [May Issue]
[*Ed: May was the toughest Badger hunt ever, only 3 people manged to find the secret location of the Badger. Below is the winner and his letter*].

The badger is very cleverly hidden on **Page 64** in the top centre picture. It is on the centre dial which is shaped like an airplane. Anton Botha

Badger [new rules]
Some rules: The winner will be picked at random; only send in E-mail (transferring SMS entries onto my PC is painful); the subject line must read: Badger <Month> [example Badger May] I use a mail sorting system, competitions, Caption of the Month, Badger, Spam, Personal etc. so using the wrong subject line will result in accidental deletion or misfiling and you'll never win anything.
Send to: ed@nag.co.za.

This is what you're looking for each issue - a badger hidden inside a screenshot inside the magazine. Happy hunting!

The Domain of The_Basilisk

A SPORTING CHANCE

There is often talk about the prospect of gaming becoming a fully fledged sport. We constantly make comparisons to physical disciplines such as tennis and rugby, and we imagine that competition in the cyber realm might work in a similar fashion. However, gaming as a profession is only possible in a single country (this obviously being South Korea). Other nations are slowly starting to follow in their footsteps, but for the most part, one cannot make a proper living playing competitive computer games. True international competition is rare, as it is largely between groups of people who are nothing more than hobbyists. In this sense, the World Cyber Games and the Electronic Sports World Cup are really misnomers, since very few of the participating countries have nationally sanctioned teams. Gaming is still not recognised as a sport at a governmental level, and will probably not be for a good few years to come.

This is not, however, going to be another column debating the pros, the cons, and the viability of professional gaming. Rather I am going to assume that it will, eventually, succeed in becoming a regular sport. This leaves us with a rather interesting set of propositions - the transition from hobby to profession is a larger one than many people believe. When it does all become formalized, and the "sport" is run by a network of associations, governing bodies and players' unions, where does that leave our current rules and conventions? Will gaming in ten years time look anything like it does today?

Looking at the way sports are approached the world over, we are going to have to consider the crucial triumvirate of national selection, coaching and management. The first is of special interest, since the way we do things now is quite different from that in any other formalized sport. For all international competitions, we hold qualifiers, and the winners in each game type are sent overseas to compete. This is not merely a South African way of doing things, instead it is the natural evolution of the "clan-based" model of competitive gaming, and is found just about everywhere. In fact, it's not even a convention restricted to gaming. Up until structuring at a national level, every sport starts out like this. The difference is that gaming still follows this route, even at the national level.

Sporting clubs and gaming clans are really the same thing, apart from the fact that clubs have a physical location, whereas clans are based in an abstract

reality. The similarities are endless - one could think of clans as having home maps instead of home grounds, and before the advent of contracts and the involvement of money, I'm sure there were as many "club-hoppers" as "clan-hoppers" - but, club or clan, when it comes to matters of national pride, everybody wants the best possible representatives. In sport, this is where the selectors come in. Trials are held, performance is considered, and the selectors put together a team of what they consider to be the best players. Would this method be beneficial for gaming? On paper, yes, putting all of the best players into one team would surely result in the best overall performance. But one must remember that personality also enters strongly into the equation, especially when most of the players are between the ages of 15 and 21. Where teamwork is in question, the sum of a team's parts doesn't necessarily equal its whole. Often there will be clashes of play style, opinions, attitudes or clan loyalties, and regardless of what people think about these "petty" differences, they affect the performance of the team. The ability of a team to play under pressure is also noteworthy. Without qualifying tournaments, there are no "proving grounds" for a team, so to speak.

The duty of the coach is to solve all of these problems. He would have to take the players he is given by the national selectors and turn them into a cohesive unit. In South Africa, it is standard practice to fire our coaches when our teams fail, hopefully gaming coaches are not destined for the same misfortune. But, this aside, I believe coaching can only be a

good thing. Every team can improve significantly under the direction of an objective observer. Ethereal, a Counter-Strike clan based in Durban, demonstrated this by finishing third in the recent ESWC qualifier event, despite general predictions of failure by the community and a lack of practice against the "stronger" Johannesburg-based teams. They were the only team in the competition to have a coach.

Management is the third factor, and another aspect which can only improve the burgeoning sport. Gaming clans, at present, are disorganised and unprofessional. Even amateur cricket clubs have established policies, which we do not see at all in gaming. When we finally get our act together, there will be procedures for joining and leaving clans, set practice and match times, and a certain level of conduct expected from players. This is the function of management. A formalized sport is just what the name suggests.

There is much more that may change in the course of gaming's development. For example, if the others sports are anything to go by, nicknames will fall by the wayside, most likely to be replaced by player surnames (this was attempted by the Cyberathlete Professional League - it didn't catch on). Teams might be named after their sponsors, or after websites, networks or servers. Or perhaps gaming is so different from anything the human race has seen before, that none of the sporting conventions will fit. Maybe the standards will have to adapt to the game, not the other way around.

I suppose we'll find out in a decade or so.

Software Satan?

Digital Devil Saga: Avatar Turner is a gritty sci-fi role-playing cel-shaded world; devour enemies to gain their abilities, unleash them during battles, switching between human and demon counterparts to take advantage of your enemy's weaknesses. TBA [PS2]
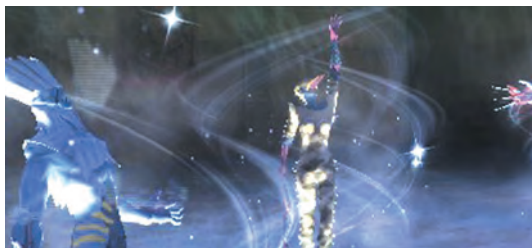
How to hug trees and be an Alternative Russian (and we aren't talking about sausage either)

The Roots is a third-person fantasy role-playing adventure from Tannhauser Gate that doesn't contain hobbits or rings, but does contain copious amounts of combat, puzzles and plot-exposition. As you follow the trials of a boy and his friends trying to save an important tree you'll engage in interesting arena-based combat, summon monsters to your aid as well as explore a detailed fantasy world and participate in arcade-style mini-games. Arduous weather and helpful NPCs add some body to an already impressive looking title. Q4 2004 [PC | Xbox]

It's ok to kill monsters, but not trees...

Pretty surroundings to explore

A vast world complete with weather and everything

And still not a drop of Vodka in sight...

Set in an alternate Russian history, **The Red Star** flawlessly blends the fighting and shooting genres, offering innovative high-action, character-driven game dynamics. Players can even interact cooperatively, boosting each other's attacks. Q4 2004 [PS2 | Xbox]
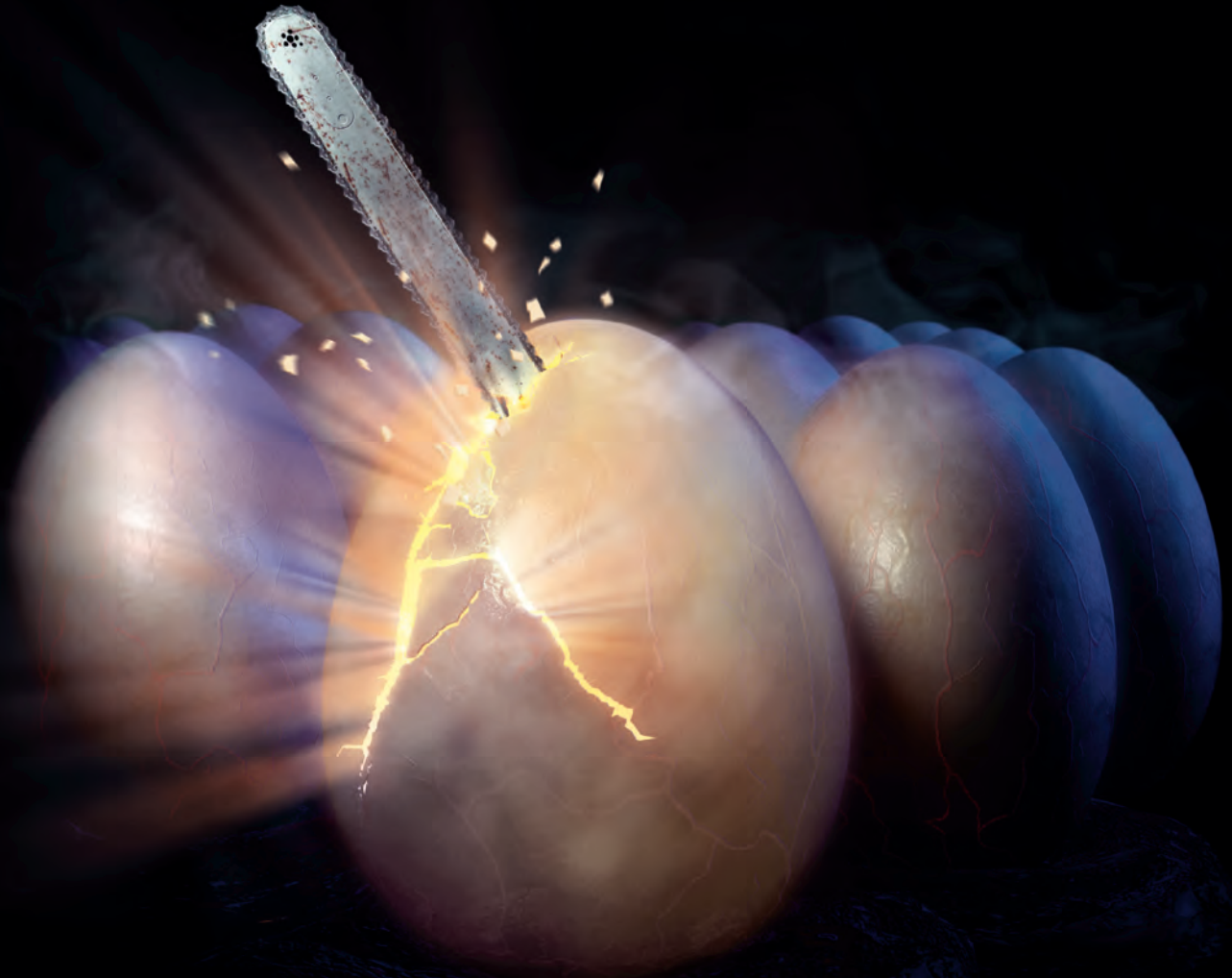
Athens 2004

PS2

Developer: Eurocom Entertainment · **Publisher:** SCEE · **Supplier:** Ster Kinekor [011] 445 7900 · **Genre:** Sports
Release Date: Q3 2004

Button-mashing Olympic-themed games hark back to the glory days of cheap arcade games in odorous [*must have been you, Ed*] street corner cafes but it's nice to see that the only thing that's changed in today's incarnations is the location where we can enjoy destroying joysticks and buttons. Athens 2004 is, as the box tells us, the Official Video Game of the Olympic Games. What this means to the end user however is debateable. Regardless, Athens 2004 is a detailed and comprehensive Olympic licensed video game that will endeavour to capture wafts of the spirit and emotion of the Olympic Games.

Getting right to the action, the Arcade mode allows you to play or practise any of the events singularly, alone or with up to 4 friends if the event allows. There's even an option to use a Dance Mat for certain events, though admittedly we didn't feel up to running the 100m dash ourselves. The Competition mode encompasses the Decathlon and Heptathlon combined, allowing you to choose from one of 64 countries and over 800 different characters. Even South Africa is there in full force, ready to take on the Athletics (Track & Field), Aquatics (Swimming), Gymnastics, Shooting, Archery, Weightlifting and Equestrian. There will be over 25 events including Hurdles, Long Jump, Pole Vault, Shot Put, 100m Butterfly, Floor Exercises Men, Floor Exercises Women, Rings Men and numerous other Olympic events.

Each event will have its own unique way of converting the sport into an action based input; Track & Field will involve the expected button-mashing of pressing alternating buttons quickly while the more Gymnastic events will require precision timing and a sense of rhythm, either holding positions on the analogue controllers or pressing a sequence of buttons when required. Each event promises to be a lot of fun but may be quite frustrating, especially the more technical events which will require major hand contortions to achieve anything higher than a bronze.

In terms of an Olympic based game, Athens 2004 looks to raise the bar for every facet and even introduces a few of it's own.

It was just before the race started that Oscar noticed the suspicious object floating in the pool...

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PC Zone (February 2004)

"We're calling this a winner... Epic in scale, glorious in foresight, and superlative in technology - its a hit"
PC Format (March 2004)

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Catwoman

PC | PS2
GCN | XBOX

Developer: EA Games · **Publisher:** Electronic Arts · **Supplier:** EA Africa [011] 516 8300 · **Genre:** Action
Release Date: Q3 2004

Great excitement surrounds the EA multi format title Catwoman due later this year. Based around the film staring Halle Berry, who plays Catwoman, gamers will be able to control this feline-inspired character that utilises all of her unique cat-like skills, senses and cunning to defeat her enemies.

With some added input from Richard Leinfellner, Executive Producer & Vice President at EA, we were able to get the inside scoop on this well-guarded movie game.

"Because the game tracks the story of the movie, we've focused deeply on what makes Catwoman a compelling game character and designed the game from her point of view. The game is being designed and built by a talented EA team that has previously worked on games with cumulative sales of 30 million plus units. Ensuring we get the perfect persona for her is one aspect we are working towards. Catwoman is a sexy, highly athletic character; we have really worked on her movement in minute detail so even just walking her around is intrinsically fun. Add to that her whip and combat moves and you'll be blown away."

Catwoman has a plethora of incredible acrobatic skills. She can leap across roofs, run up walls, pounce on prey, and avoid enemy bullets with feline grace. In addition, she can use her whip to swing through the air and utilise the fully interactive environments to trap or knock her foes unconscious. Catwoman will toy with her enemies, rendering them helpless, scaring them into submission, and trapping them by using her tools and the environment around her before defeating them.

"The art director, John Miles, was on set every 4 weeks and we have a great working relationship with Warner Brothers which allows us access to cast and crew." Richard added, "The primary cast are very much in the approval loop and have been great to work with."

Every game has its own unique qualities and look - although donning a cat suit may be one eye-catching feature of the game there are a number of subtleties that need highlighting. Some of the many camera views are seen from a lower eye level, a feline's perspective, add to this some 'cat' moves and actions and it gives the game an interesting atmosphere.

Richard explained that much of the game is done, and was reluctant to talk about locations as he does not want to give the plot away. The game will take players through numerous levels set in seven different locations from the movie, including the jewellery store, the Hedare Factory, and Hedare's mansion and grounds.

Yes, she is very agile...

FlatOut Developer Diaries [part 2]

PC | PS2
XBOX

Developer: Bugbear Entertainment · **Publisher:** Empire · **Supplier:** WWE [011] 462 0150 · **Genre:** Driving
Release Date: Q4 2004

In the second edition of our FlatOut Developer Diaries, Bugbear's Ilari Lehtinen takes us through the steps in making a track in FlatOut - from the concept to the building to the fun part - driving it to pieces. We told you all, working for a gaming magazine isn't the best job in the world...

Hello, and welcome back to our article describing what it's like to stand in the middle of the creative, bubbling chaos of the game development process. The game we're giving birth to is FlatOut, and I expect you have heard of it by now. Last time I gave you a brief glimpse into car creation process, and now it's time to look at the surroundings you'll drive in. Below is a very broad description of track creation. Explaining all the details would require an article several times longer than this, and it could get boring.

Track artists begin by brainstorming an interesting race track profile and sketching it on the paper, including some of the defining features such as forest areas, ponds and hills. If the sketch doesn't cause any complaints, the respective track artist begins modelling the route. No frills there, only good old fashioned manual labour. With the texturing process comes a neat trick worth mentioning: a big cover-all base texture, or colour-map as we call it, is painted with all the respective ground colours defining the road surfaces, sandy areas, asphalt etc. On top of this comes the small detail maps. The result is magnificent - smooth colour transitions between landscape features without unexpected and abrupt texture changes or seams, and above all, easy to adjust and change if it's needed.

At this point the basic track makes its way to the current build of the game so that other team members can test it and give useful pointers and opinions to whoever is working on it. In essence, it's driving around as hard as possible while still staying on the marked track. After a short while a picture forms: On this bend it's easy to overshoot, this jump here covers the following turn from view until it's too late, and so forth… Basically we look at all the quirks and surprises of the track design

so it can be taken into account when placing objects and other features later on. "If in most cases the driver ends up in spot X after this section, let's have something waiting for him there!"

After the basic groundwork comes the environment. On forest-based tracks, several thousand trees and bushes are placed and lush grass thrown all over. For the next task a separate team has created a massive library of objects ready to go into the game, with all textures and physics parameters in place. Audience stands, race controller towers, ad stands, fences, and all the other stuff you could imagine relevant for the particular track in question comes from there, and everything is easily replaced and updated to the latest version if any changes occur. An exhausting stack of reference material is used for this to

keep things looking realistic in relation to the theme. Also, it helps in avoiding any overshooting with colours and other potential mistakes. From there on, it's polishing and bug-hunting. Some changes according to observations on the play dynamic are repeated until everyone's happy.

Next time I'll try to cover the most notable and talked-about aspect of FlatOut in detail - the physics!
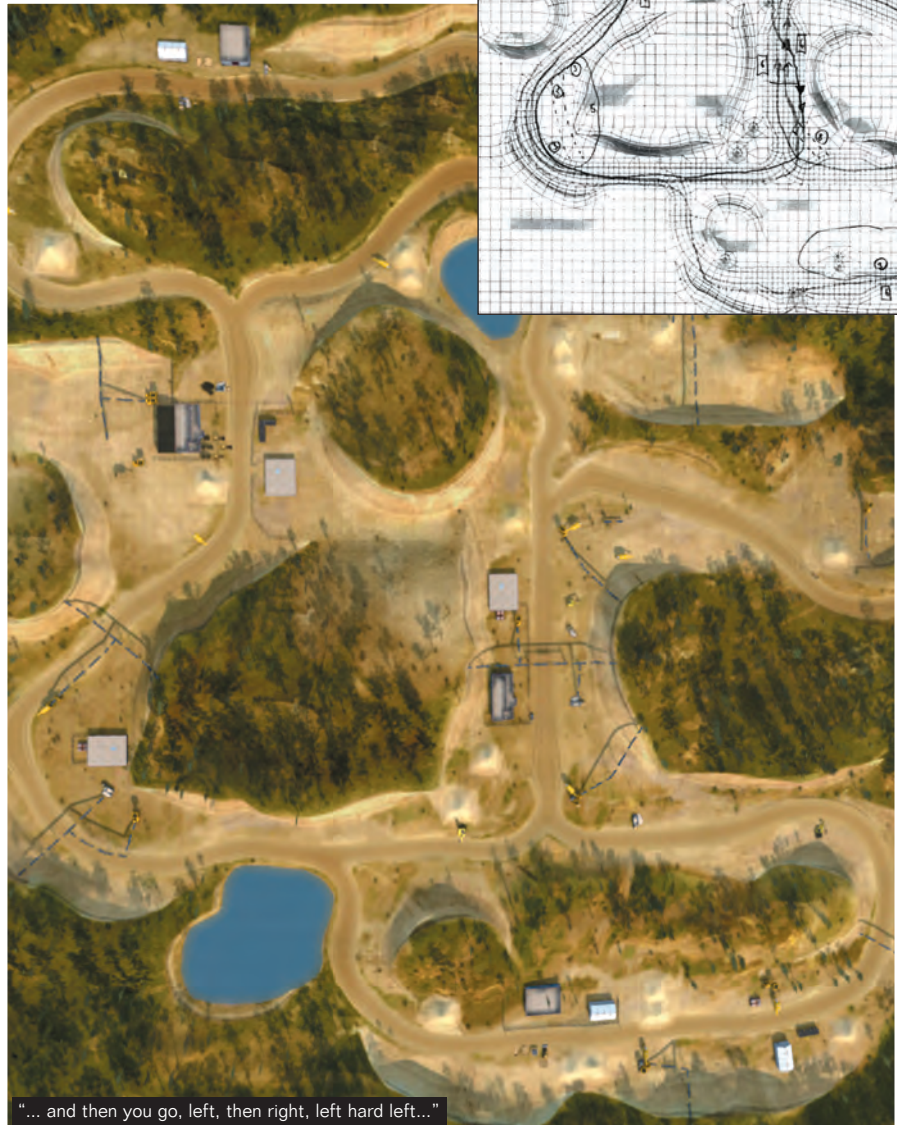
"... and then you go, left, then right, left hard left..."

PlayStation 2

DRIV3R

DRIV3R

"THE GETAWAY...TRUE CRIME...
VICE CITY...STEP ASIDE.
THE DADDY IS BACK IN TOWN."
PLAYSTATION 2 MAGAZINE

ATARI

Controlling the stars ...

words ed dracon

How does this sound? A game, where you have an entire universe to explore, countless planets lie in wait, ready to have their surfaces explored. You come across exotic alien creatures, some sentient ones even form part of an intricate plot spanning generations. As you explore you'll improve your ship, better your defences and purchase more fighters which you use to directly combat enemies in an intense one-on-one duel. The further you progress, the more you discover the more alien technology you find. Each piece of technology improves your ship, improves your relations with alien species and even allows you to travel further and faster than before. We're talking a game that contains months of play-time, insane amounts of solar systems to explore, interesting characters and plots. Some of the plots are even dynamic, your actions determining whether entire alien civilizations live or die.

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Sounds like something that would be a lot of fun, considering the depth, the action-packed combat, the storyline. Makes you wonder why developers don't make games like that.
I myself, wonder why developers don't make games like that anymore.

Not only does the game I've described exist, it has existed since 1992. Star Control 2 was hailed as "one of the most innovative and technologically advanced games of this century", and rightfully so. It was ahead of it's time in countless ways, its combination of arcade-action and exploration adventure making it an all-time favourite among the veteran gamers. Today's generation of polygon counting, eye-candy consuming gamers have mostly missed the landmark title, though this need no longer be the case. A recent 'upgrade' to the game, completely free and capable of running on modern computers has shed new light on Star Control 2. Titled 'The Ur-Quan Masters' and downloadable from http://sc2.sf.net/ this new incarnation removes all excuses the 'modern gamer' may have for not having played this sterling title already. Star Control 2 defined gaming for its era, before the developers became slaves to an ever-growing market focused only on eye-candy instead of depth and the ever-elusive concept of fun. If you're a self-professed gamer, you have no reason not to play it.

> Enthusia

Konami is at work on a racing game for the PlayStation 2, to be available next year, titled Enthusia Professional Racing. Special attention has been paid to car physics, performance and motion to give the player as realistic driving experience as possible. Look out GT4. You can follow the progress of this game at www.enthusia-racing.com

> Massive Assault Expansion

An expansion to the turn-based strategy title Massive Assault is on its way, titled Phantom Renaissance. The add-on will feature extensive enhancements, including a new play mode, new multiplayer functionality, additional planets, larger maps, new campaigns and scenarios and a number of other new features.

> id news

Fans of id Software will be happy to know that the company is applying the finishing touches to Doom 3, and the game will ship later this year. id has also made it known that it will be embarking upon a new project immediately thereafter, and that it will not be related to any previous products.

> Metal Gear comic

Konami and IDW Publishing have signed a deal to publish a comic book series interpretation of Metal Gear Solid. Ashley Wood will be rendering the artwork, and Kris Oprisko is the story-writer.

"Personally, I have always been a fan of Mr. Ashley Wood," said Hideo Kojima, director and producer of the Metal Gear Solid series and vice president of Konami Computer Entertainment Japan. "I am very glad that Metal Gear Solid will be made into a comic with his talented artwork. I have a lot of confidence in the people at IDW Publishing, who understand the world of Metal Gear Solid. I have great hope for this new development of the series through the work of these people"

> King Arthur game

Konami and Buena Vista Interactive have teamed up to publish a game based on the upcoming film King Arthur, to be developed by Krome Studios. The game will feature combat on foot and on horseback, though currently its specific format or genre are unclear, and will make use of footage from the film. It will be released on PlayStation 2, Xbox and GameCube. The movie, which is being produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, will be released in July.
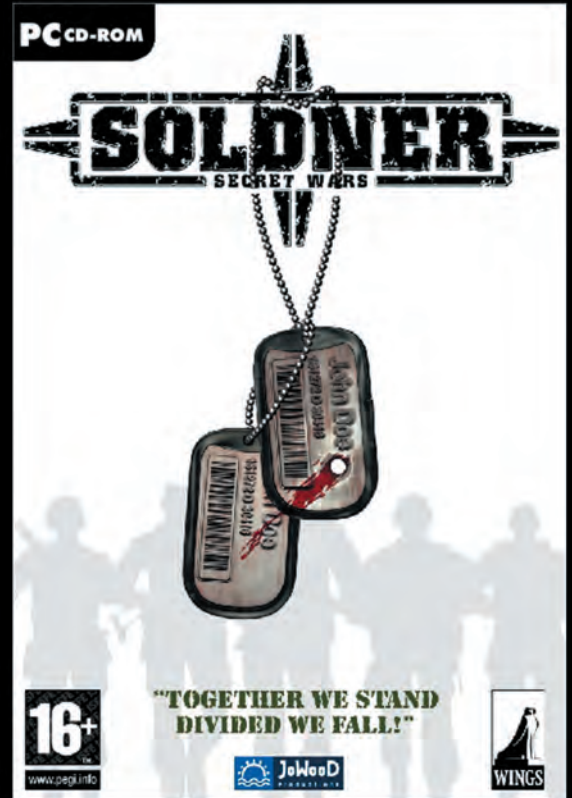
Praetorian Concept -
Biomechanical Armor
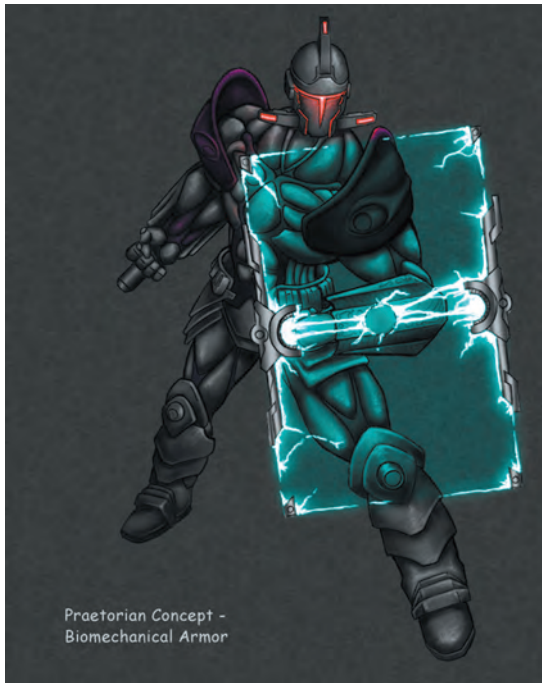
< Imperator and other MMORPG items from Mythic

Mythic Entertainment unveiled two expansion packs for Dark Age of Camelot and a new massively multiplayer online role-playing game, Imperator, at this year's E3. The Camelot expansions are New Frontiers, planned as a freely downloadable add-on that upgrades the game's realm vs. realm combat system, while Catacombs will be a retail expansion pack adding underground areas as well as various new classes and other such elements. Imperator, which has been in development for around two years, is set in an alternate history wherein the Roman Empire did not fall, and continued as the dominant political power right into the space age. No release dates for any of the above have been fixed as yet. www.imperatoronline.com

International Release Dates

Donkey Konga 2: Hit Song Parade	GCN	Music	July 1
Final Fantasy I - II Advance	GBA	RPG	July 1
Kid Ninja	PC	Platform	July 1
Kim Possible 2: Drakken's Demise	GBA	Platform	July 1
Spider-Man 2	NGE	Action	July 1
Train Simulator 2	PC	Simulation	July 1
Combat Elite: WWII Paratroopers	Xbox PS2	Action	July 5
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow	GCN	Action	July 6
Richard Burns Rally	PC Xbox	Racing	July 9
Room Zoom	Xbox	Racing	July 9
Athens 2004	PS2	Sports	July 13
Crash Nitro Kart	NGE	Racing	July 13
Crimson Tears	PS2	Action	July 13
Ice Nine	GBA	Shooter	July 13
Karaoke Revolution Vol. 2	PS2	Music	July 13
Samurai Warriors	Xbox	Action	July 13
Sudeki	Xbox	Action	July 13
Tales of Symphonia	GCN	RPG	July 13
NCAA Football 2005	GCN PS2 Xbox	Sports	July 14
Kid Ninja	GCN	Platform	July 15
I of the Dragon	PC	Action	July 19
Catwoman	PC PS2 Xbox GCN	Action	July 20
Growlanser Generations	PS2	RPG	July 20
Operation Shadow	NGE	Action	July 20
Puyo Pop Fever	GCN	Puzzle	July 20

> Spider-Man 3

Activision has secured rights to publish games based on the Spider-Man franchise. Spider-Man 3 is already going into development, even though the film of the same title is only expected out in 2007.
Activision is also at work on a game based on the comic's 40-year history. This latter is expected to be ready next year; no release date has as yet been fixed for Spider-Man 3.

> Movies

Film: All the Invisible Children

Seven directors will team up to produce the film All the Invisible Children. The likes of John Woo and Ridley Scott number among them, and each will be responsible for a segment of the film, each of these being geographically themed. Current info refers to "child protagonists", without revealing much about the nature of the film or its story. Other directors include Stefano Veneruso (Italy) and Katia Lund (Brazil) as well as Mehdi Charef (Africa) and Emir Kusturica (Serbia).
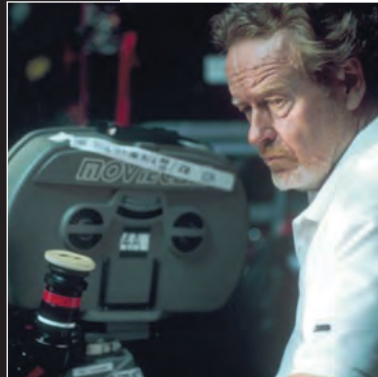
Anime at Cannes Film Festival

The first Japanese animation film to compete for the Palme d'Or best film award at the Cannes Film Festival is Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence. The movie, which took four years to be made, combines computer generated imagery with two-dimensional animation, and explores a cyborg character that investigates malfunctioning androids that kill.
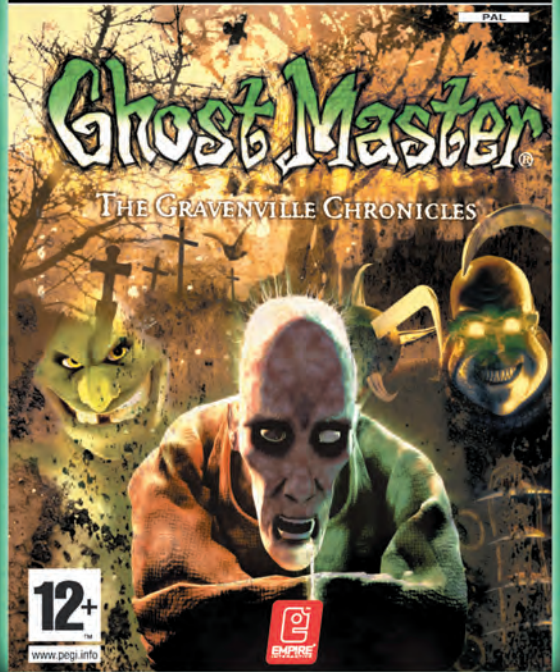
> Club Football 2005

Codemasters have expanded their Club Football range of games, with several new clubs being signed for this year. Club Football 2005 is also the first version of this series that will be available on PC in addition to PlayStation 2 and Xbox.

> Imperial Glory

Imperial Glory, once completed by Pyro Studios, will be a strategic game set in the 19th century, featuring Great Britain, France, Russia, Prussia and Austro-Hungary as the main powers. The game will involve players in political, mercantile and diplomatic activities as well as military engagements. Imperial Glory will be released by Eidos in Q1 2005. >

> EyeToy: Chat

Sony has announced a software product called EyeToy: Chat, which allows various forms of online chatting. The application supports text-based, voice and video chatting, as well as video-mail capabilities. Several games will also be released that make use of Chat's features. Currently, EyeToy: Chat is expected to debut later this year.

Web Scores

PC Games	Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots	Hitman Contracts	Lords of the Realm III	Gangland
NAG /100	70	85	61	68
gamespy.com /5	4	2	3	3
gamespot.com /10	9	7.6	8.4	6.9
pc.ign.com /10	8.9	8.4	6.2	5.8

Console Games	Fight Night 2004 [PS2]	Fire Emblem [GBA]	Pokemon Coloseum [GC]	Mario & Luigi [GBA] Superstar Saga
NAG /100	90	71	69	90
gamespy.com /5	n/r	4	3	4
gamespot.com /10	8.8	8.9	7.3	9.2
ign.com /10	8.6	9.5	7.5	9

> Possession

Possession is an inversion of the horror survival genre, wherein a player controls the bad guys. Its developer, Blitz Games, also claims to have developed an innovative game mechanic for online play. At present, no release details, including supported platforms, have been revealed.

> Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile

Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile is Tilted Mill Entertainment's upcoming first title, a historically based city-building game set in Egypt around 5000 years ago. The developers claim this game will break the mould within its genre.

> The Settlers: Heritage of Kings

Ubisoft has announced The Settlers: Heritage of Kings, the fifth title in the company's successful strategy series. The action will once again take place in a medieval setting. The game is scheduled for release toward the end of the year.

> Online auctions in World of WarCraft

Blizzard is setting up a set of in-game auction houses for its upcoming online role-playing game. These virtual locations will allow players to buy items from other members of the same faction. One neutral auction house will also allow players from opposed factions to transact.
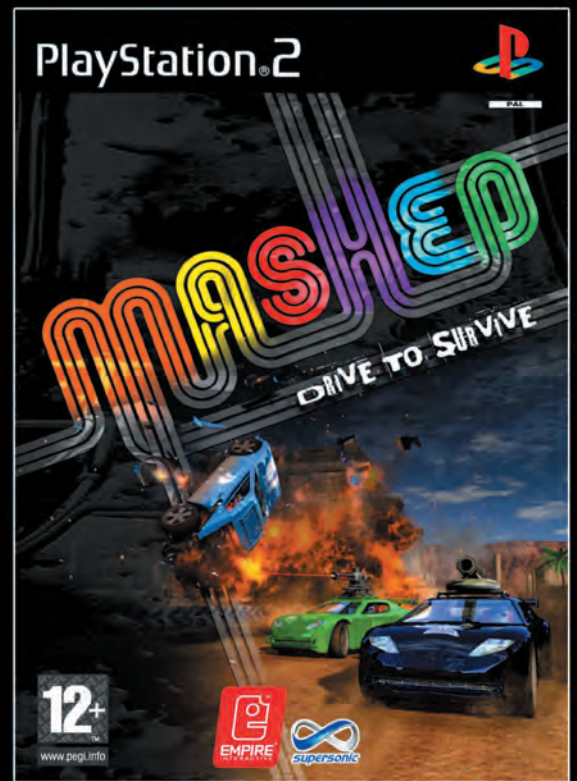
What wasn't there

While E3 shows the biggest and best the industry has to offer, there are a host of great games a phone call away...

I t's that time of year again: everyone who has anything to do with gaming is grinning like the cat that ate the canary at the prospect of all those hot new titles that are on the way.

Yes, E3 has rolled around yet again, and after seeing the game listing, we must say that it looks like there is a bumper year for gaming up ahead. Hopefully you will spend a little time reading these reviews instead of just going through the E3 Supplement again and again.

Of course, a number of those games will only be coming out very late in the next twelve month period - or even after the next E3 - but we can still look forward to some very hot titles in the near future.

The next year will be more or less as revolutionary as the last one and, thanks to all our wonderful South African game distributors, we should get to see a lot those products on our shelves.

One big method of game distribution the world over is one that many gamers in this country seldom make use of, though. It is the Internet, and a vast number of games are distributed via this conduit. We're not talking about demos and trailers, though, as you might think, but rather games that are available from smaller and weekend developers who find the Internet to be the easiest way to distribute the products of their labour.

One such game, for example, is Gish, in which the player undertakes a plaform style adventure playing the part of a tar ball. Yes, a tar ball.

Another is Starscape, a space shooter with some RTS elements (like resource harvesting and base upgrading.)

These games don't push the technological envelope, and they don't come with fancy packaging and a manual, but they are often highly original and well priced. Purchasing the games involves using a credit card and a download, of course, but the prices are generally more than competitive, and the downloads are relatively short.

These games are not for everyone, however - those wanting high end graphics and performance munching games may be disappointed. But they are well worth looking into, even if just for the distraction value that they offer.

In case you didn't know yet...

Award of Merit
A silver award is given to a game that achieves a score of 85 to 90. It's a good thing.

Award of Excellence
A gold award is given to a game that achieves a score of above 90. It's a better thing.

Editor's Choice
Every now and then, when the Ed sees a game he likes, he gives it this special award. He sleeps a lot though, so this is a rare thing...

Platform
Platforms are described using icons rather than just plain old words. For those of you who don't know (shame on you) they are, left to right, top to bottom: Game Boy Advance, GameCube, N-Gage, PC, PS2 and Xbox.

Scoring
As we said, our scores range from one to one hundred, with a score of fifty being considered average - because we can. Live with it.

Counter-Strike: Condition Zero

PC
Review

Counter-Strike began its life as a lowly third-party modification for the Half-Life engine back in 1999. At that stage, the modding community was starting to take off at a surprising rate, supported on a large scale by the gamers. Despite its extensive list of bugs and play dynamic problems, players chose to give Counter-Strike the benefit of the doubt, and its popularity grew steadily. The allure of a realistic, team-based, tactical shooter, where strategy played an absolutely crucial role, and where individual skill was not as important, swept the online gaming community. Almost everyone already had a copy of Half-Life, and the mod itself was initially free, which boosted its popularity still more. A year later, Valve (the developers of Half-Life) brought Counter-Strike's creators into the company officially, and published the game as a stand-alone set. It is now going on five years old, and is still the most popular online FPS game in the world, occupying 88% of the player market. In a bid to consolidate their number one multi-player standing, and to give their creation some valuable single-player appeal, the team at Valve have now released Condition Zero.

Since this is a new release, and will cost the consumer money just like the next game, there is no place for nostalgia. Apart from the single-player campaign, not much has actually changed since the last update of Counter-Strike (version 1.6). Let's not kid ourselves here, these graphics are essentially five years old, and not anywhere even remotely near the high standards expected today. The engine is still that of the original Half-Life, which is very restricted in terms of both eye candy and play dynamic. Of all the problems in this department, one of the biggest is the lack of scalability in the settings. Resolution, colour depth and smoke grenade quality are essentially all that can be tweaked, everything else remains the same. This would not be such a problem if the game did not demand relatively high-end hardware (it is quite unplayable on its recommended specifications). Considering the ancient graphics technology on which it runs, I find this unacceptable. With each new release, Counter-Strike becomes more resource heavy and this results in, I'm afraid, almost no visual improvement. Sadly, frames-per-second still determine weapon recoil. Furthermore, there are no such things as anti-aliasing, anisotropic filtering, shading, dynamic lighting, or even detailed textures. The classic maps have been visually "revamped", but the textures are still of the same low quality. They do not, also, offer anything new in terms of play dynamic. Player

Rodney was well known for his complicated Pictionary sketches

Harold was up for a fight, but he didn't expect the Slovakian Synchronised Break dance Team

models have stayed the same, as have the gun models and in-game sound effects. The terribly buggy hit-boxes remain.

The artificial intelligence is another serious drawback. One of the main selling-points of this game, a focus of its new content, is the "official CS bot". A lot of work was evidently put into the coding, which can be seen by the bot communication (they use radio messages frequently), and the differing levels and types of bot skill. The problem, though, is that they're still remarkably stupid. Their aiming is inconsistent and completely unlike that of human players, sometimes hitting impossible head-shots, with a single bullet, across the map, and other times missing an entire clip in places where a human would never make a mistake. They will run circles around each other for minutes and minutes after you have died, and watching their machine-like stupidity after you die gets frustrating very quickly. I am appalled that most of the technical problems in Counter-Strike have

carried over to Condition Zero, but on the upside, the good points have come with as well. There is still no wider scope for strategy in a first person shooter. Counter-Strike's worldwide competitive adoption means aspects such as map and weapon balance, the money system, and game modes have been refined to near-perfection. In many cases, the community makes the game, and Counter-Strike's community is huge and diverse. This will continue to be the world's preferred competitive title, and as such its re-playability is unrivalled. Players will be getting exceptional value for money in terms of time spent playing.

By contrast, much has changed for the purposes of the single-player. The graphics engine has been stretched to its limit, and the model animations are actually quite impressive. A number of new-look atmospheric effects have been added to improve the game's ambience, there is far more making up the scenery, and it is all more detailed. There are moments where one is

reminded of the age of the visuals (mainly texture-related issues), but they are concealed much more effectively than in the multiplayer. An entire new sound library has been compiled; most easily noticeable are the gun sounds, but the soundtrack feels a lot more complete in general. The look of the weapons have also been changed, and their handling is different from the multiplayer. It often feels as though the hit-boxes here are a lot more consistent, and leaves one wondering why Valve did not apply these improvements to the entire game.

There is no overall story. Rather the designers have chosen to keep the missions independent of each other, which works well, making the player feel like an operative being called out at a minute's notice whenever there happens to be a world crisis. The levels are a little mundane to start, but from the third mission onwards, they become challenging and engaging. There is nothing revolutionary about Condition Zero, but I would not go so far as to brand it a waste of money. The single-player gives some dimension, and as for the multiplayer, how can I argue with the World Cyber Games, the Electronic Sports World Cup, the Cyberathlete Professional League, and the hundreds of thousands of players worldwide who consider it their favourite?

Martin got to experience the devastating effects of a jalapeno tortilla up close...

A reasonable attempt to add another year or two to Counter-Strike's lifespan.

76

Origins

The original creators of Counter-Strike were two young Americans, Jess Cliffe and Minh Le. Jess was still in high school when they completed the first beta release, which initially took four months. Before Counter-Strike, the two worked on a mod for Quake 2 called "Action Quake 2", which was also realism-based, but a lot more fast-paced. Minh Le's first mod was "Navy Seals" for Quake 1. Both are now full-time employees at Valve, and are involved with several of the company's new generation projects, including Counter-Strike 2.

Fight Night 2004

PlayStation 2
Review

Gold
Award
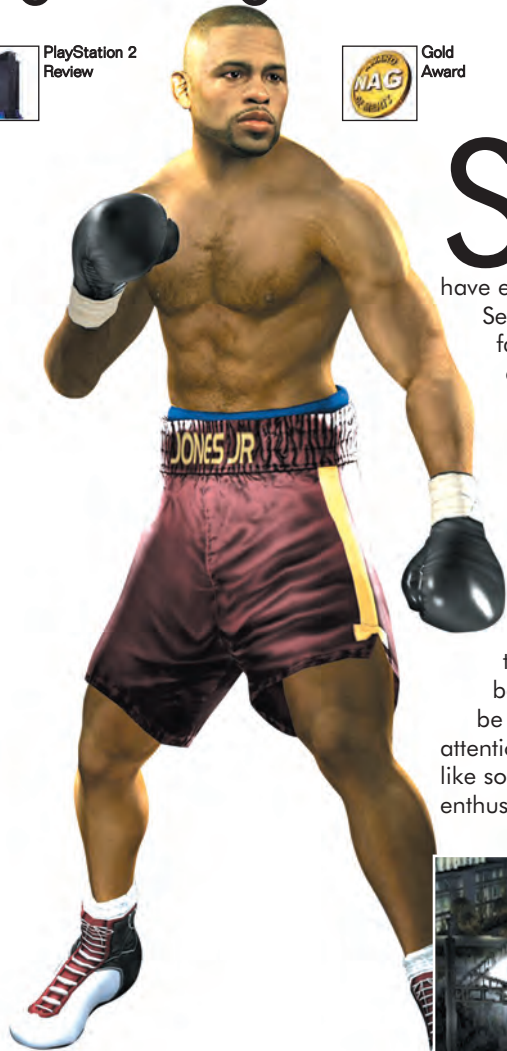
Sports titles are incredibly popular, as everyone knows, and are almost guaranteed of a successful reception based purely on the fact that they have everything to do with sports.

Several times in the past, though, fans have been sorely disappointed by these titles, which sometimes feature poor game dynamics, terrible AI set ups and poor control systems. EA Sports, the undisputed heavyweight champion of sports titles though, is setting things straight with a new game that will have fans begging for more.

While we see a lot of EA Sports titles coming out on a yearly basis, the sport of boxing seems to be on the back foot, with a lot more attention going to other kinds of sports, like soccer, rugby and cricket. Boxing enthusiasts will have to sit up and take notice, though, because the boxing game genre has just been revolutionised; Fight Night 2004 has stepped into the ring and it's a heavy hitter.

The title features a control system that is unique and revolutionary. In fact, many other sports and game genres overall may benefit from the ideas put into play by this game.

> **" ...and it gets progressively harder with each visit to the canvas. "**

Called Total Punch Control, the idea behind the system is to allow the player to easily perform any of the three mainstay punches of boxing (jabs, hooks and uppercuts) with either of the boxer's hands - without having to per-

Selected fighters

It seems that EA Sports were very picky with their choice of fighters to include in this title. Here's a list of some of the fighters included in the game:

Roy Jones Jr.
Evander Holyfield
Lennox Lewis
Muhammed Ali
Rocky Marciano
Sugar Ray Leonard
Roberto Duran
Joe Frazier
Sonny Liston
Shane Mosely
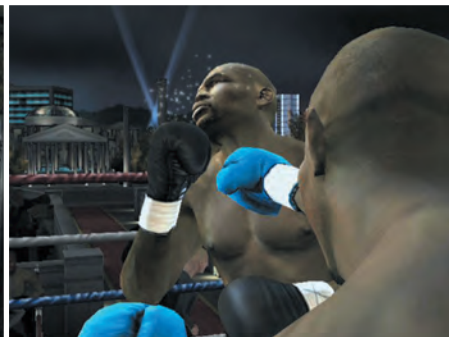
Upper body movement is vital to success in this game

form something of a thumb style tap dance. EA used the right analogue stick to this end, allowing the player to throw any of these punches with just one control button. Jabs are performed with a sharp diagonally upward movement, hooks with a move to the side and up movement and uppercuts with a diagonally down and round movement. These can be made to either the left or right, depending on which fist you want your fighter to throw the punch with. The movement of the analogue stick mimics the direction the fighter needs to move his hands to execute the punch, and stronger punches that take longer to throw take longer to perform using the control system.

In addition to punching, the player can block in various directions by holding down the R1 button and moving the right analogue stick accordingly, or can "plant" his feet and use upper body movement to avoid punches by holding down the L1 button and moving the left analogue stick (which also controls movement.) Using this method, both body and head shots can be made. Additionally, holding down the L1 button allows the player to switch between body and head blows. Specialised punches and illegal blows can also be performed, although the latter will get you disqualified, should they be used too often.

The player has five weight divisions to choose from - featherweight, lightweight, mediumweight, welterweight and heavyweight. Within each of these, several well known boxers have been included. During the career mode, the player may use one of these boxers, or may create their own, using a very thorough character creation system. The career mode allows the player to move from 50th ranking right through to number one. Fights are grouped into four a year (with years awards like Fists of Stone going out to the best boxers) with a training session (alternating between heavy bag, sparring, target mitts and combo dummy) before each fight to allow the player to improve his boxer. Tons of locked content, including special punches and entrance effects (like fireworks) are also available to the player.

Fight Night 2004 looks very pretty (or at least as pretty as boxing could be.) Punches cause sweat to spray (and occasionally some disappointingly handled blood) and fighters get bruised and cut up as the fight progresses. The motion of the boxers is superb, including the way their bodies react to being punched. A knock-out blow results in the opponent almost turning to jelly and collapsing (sometimes a little unrealistically.) The camera can be adjusted to one of several views, to make the game easier for the player. The referee is nowhere to be seen (probably a good thing) until the player gets laid out on the canvas. When this happens, a blurry triple image of the referee fills the screen as he slowly counts to ten; it is up to the player to align the images into one image before being counted out, using both analogue sticks… and it gets progressively harder with each visit to the canvas.

The good graphics are complemented by great sounds. The excellent selection of hip hop EA Trax aside, there is a competent in-fight commentary, as well as useful (applicable) hints given to each fighter by their corner crew after every round. Because not every fight ends in a knockout, paying attention to the advice from the corner may help the player to win by a points decision. Believable crowd sounds (with a few funny comments) are also included.

Earlier fights last for six three minute rounds. As the odds go up, so do the fight times - even as long as twelve rounds.

Fight Night 2004 is a celebration of boxing, allowing the player to rely on movement as well as well placed punches, and to approach each match tactically. Stylish boxing is preferred (which is probably why big hitters like Mike Tyson and George Forman have been left out of the title) and the game expects the player to perform well in order to win.

Fight Night 2004 takes a bit of getting used to, but it is a brilliantly rewarding title. It is one of the most unique sporting titles to come out in years, and it certainly captures the spirit of boxing.

Roy Jones Jr. may not be a heavy hitter like Tyson, but you still don't want to get smacked in the mouth by him...

An original and revolutionary boxing simulator, this game is one of the best sports titles around.

90

Hitman: Contracts

PC Review

Now Available

Silver Award

Suggested Retail Price: R 299.00 · **Developer:** Io Interactive · **Publisher:** Eidos
Supplier: MegaRom [011] 234 2680 · **Genre:** Tactical Action · **Reviewer:** Walt Pretorius

Minimum Specifications: Pentium 3 800MHz · 256 MB RAM · 4 x CD ROM · 32 MB Video Card · 2 GB HDD

The third instalment of the Hitman series has finally arrived, and this time around 47 visits the dark side of human nature. Pretty much just like before.

Eidos certainly had a hit with the Hitman franchise, but sustaining that success is not going to be easy. Thankfully they've put a lot of thought into the whole thing, and have come up with a great story to support the game dynamic that has made the series so popular with gamers.

For those not familiar with the Hitman series, the player takes the part of a contract killer known only as 47, a professional to the bone who loves what he does and is considered one of the best in the field. Succeeding in any of the Hitman titles requires stealth and tons of thought. So much, in fact, that the game requires each mission to be replayed several times as the player makes plans and new strategies with every attempt. It has nothing to do with being a great gamer and everything to do with getting it right through trial and error.

Many people may not enjoy this game, purely due to the fact that it can get incredibly frustrating, and doesn't feature the more popular kind of run and gun action that other third person titles feature. In fact, running around and blowing the bad guys away will result in you never completing a mission at all.

For those that are familiar with the Hitman series, expect more of the same great "puzzle" style gaming that you have come across before. The story begins with a mortally wounded 47 taking refuge in a small hotel room. Thereafter, the missions are made up of his memories as he lies dying - a series of flashbacks. Let's leave that there, so as not to spoil too much of the title's story.

The game has had some slight upgrades - the camera is further back now, for example, allowing the player to see more of 47 than before. Graphics have been trimmed up a bit, keeping the game on par with other titles.

As far as the missions go, players can expect the usual complex and varied tales that are incredibly challenging and everything but simple. Covering exotic locations ranging from England to Siberia to Rotterdam and beyond, Hitman: Contracts carries the same cosmopolitan flavour of the other titles. It may have questionable content, but it is a great game!

This collection of 47's greatest hits (excuse the pun) will keep you busy for a good long time.

85
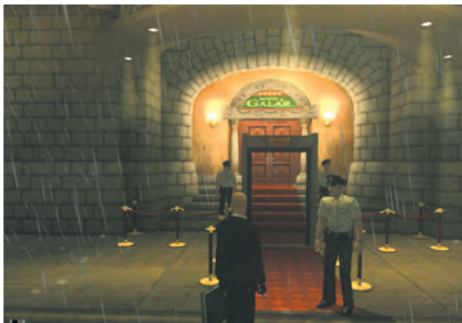
Second Opinion

Bald-headed assassin with an attitude Agent 47 returns in the stylish Hitman: Contracts. This latest offering from Eidos is a big step up from the previous Hitman. This is not to say that the original was bad. No, Contracts is just so much better.
From the first mission where you have to escape from an asylum, the player is exposed to a twisted world that would have made Lewis Carol proud. This is not a game for the squeamish or those looking for an all-out action fest. Contracts is more refined than that and will surprise many with its twists.

Iwan Pienaar 90%

With a view like that, you have no option but to open fire!

Blade and Sword

Blade and Sword is the type of game which would, initially, make people believe that it's exactly the game they wanted. With 'back of the box' promises of combining Street Fighter style combat with the 'depth' of Diablo 2, how could Blade and Sword do wrong?

Occasionally entertaining, though mostly without meaning due to the poorly translated dialogue, Blade and Sword 'borrows' so heavily from Diablo 2 that a lawsuit about 'copy and paste' wouldn't be too far fetched. Everything from the interface to the inventory system to the graphics seems eerily familiar. You cannot create your own character, but rather have to choose from three 'classes'. Swordsman, Twin Blades heroine and the hulking Great Blade Warrior all represent levels of difficulty rather than actual changes in game dynamics. Dated and 2D, the animations in Blade and Sword recall the days before 3D, overshadowed by modern cRPGs like Neverwinter Nights. In its defence, it doesn't take a powerful machine to play Blade and Sword, but despite its dimensionally diminutive status, it can still lag incredibly in places. Despite the rich Eastern sounding music which fades in and out as action happens, the rest of the sound effects seem scant.

The game dynamics and control scheme can only be described as tepid. The major flaw in the combat is that even the weaker enemies take too long to defeat, adding unnecessary repetition. On the plus side, battles are incredibly gory; blood sprays and limbs go flying.

A title like this might have had a major saving grace in the form of multiplayer, which is noticeably and unfortunately missing. No cooperative mode where you can team with friends, no banding together to defeat the ultimate evil. You're better off playing with yourself, without the game.

An uninspired attempt to add to the Hack 'n Slash genre.

58

"Ha! I shall now defeat you by casting my 'Ray of Rubbish Game' spell!"

TOCA Race Driver 2

PC Review

Codemasters revisits the world of championship racing in TOCA Race Driver 2, a fast paced and incredibly eclectic blend of racing action. In a very saturated market, this kind of game has a lot to prove to achieve any kind of status, but Codemasters have long been known for pushing an envelope or two in their quest for sales

TOCA Race Driver 2 is something of a racing celebration. It allows the player to use virtually any kind of vehicle (with four wheels) in a variety of conditions and locations - including a very nicely done Kyalami race course. From production cars to formula one style single seaters, from four by fours to big trucks, TOCA Race Driver 2 challenges the player in a variety of ways.

Much of the game's realism comes from the superb level of graphics used by the developers. Vehicles are beautifully handled, with huge polygon counts assuring the best possible look for them. The surroundings are excellently handled too, although sprite crowds are a little disappointing - if highly understandable.

To support the good looks, Codemasters have used very good physics and damage models. The cars can be literally picked apart crash by crash, although big accidents will result in a car that is no longer driveable. The cars also handle well, with realistic physics varying according to the type of vehicle driven.

This brings up the biggest problem that players will face when playing this title; control. Because of the high levels of realism used within the game, the developers have made heavy use of analog style control systems. This means anyone wanting to play the game is going to want to make use of a game pad or a steering wheel. The reason for this is that TOCA Race Driver 2 relies heavily on the amount of acceleration and braking desired by the player. Over-accelerating can result in wheel spins, over braking in wheel locking. This desire for control precision adds to the game's realism, but makes it nigh on impossible to play with a non-analog controller like a keyboard. Throw a pad or wheel into the mix, though, and you have one of the most realistic and varied racers around.

TOCA Race Driver 2 is a very fine title for enthusiasts. Weekend drivers may find the title a little frustrating, but hard core racing fans will enjoy the overall realism and wide variety that the game has to offer.

A very realistic and eclectic race simulator that demands a lot from the player.

82

Damn...

Preparing for a trip around Kyalami

SpyHunter 2

PlayStation 2 Review

Suggested Retail Price: R 499.00 · **Developer:** Angel Studios · **Publisher:** Midway
Supplier: Ster Kinekor [011] 445 7900 · **Genre:** Racing Action · **Reviewer:** Adam Liebman
Minimum Specifications: 1-2 Players · 283kb memory · Analog: Sticks only · Vibration compatible

Midway's original remake of the almost forgotten arcade classic, proved to be quite entertaining, despite its flaws. The sequel attempts to maintain the concept of the first title, while rectifying its errors, but although it succeeds in some areas, it fails in just as many. You assume the role of Alec Sects, who chases down evildoers by both land and sea, in an inarguably cool vehicle known as the G-8155 Interceptor, capable of transformations between a sports car, 4 x 4 and boat, and is, needless to say, kitted out with an array of weapons capable of scaring the boots off Stalin. The play dynamic largely involves speeding around levels whilst destroying enemies who swarm you from all sides, in typical arcade style. It's not cerebrally taxing in even the vaguest sense of the phrase, but it can be entertaining.

Unfortunately, though, there is little consistency in the difficulty of the levels, and though they're short, failure always results in having to start from the beginning of the stage again, which can be frustrating. The visuals are certainly an improvement on the original, but though the vehicles are nicely detailed and animated, graphical glitches are far from uncommon. On the whole, it could look worse, but SpyHunter 2 lacks the visual flair to compete with other titles currently available. Ultimately, SpyHunter 2 is a fair attempt at a sequel to a not-altogether remarkable game, but a lack of distinct improvement over its predecessor makes it feel like little more than an exhibition of wasted potential.

Fun at times, but ultimately a very inconsistent action title that could have been so much better.

64

Jerome discovered a novel way to deal with rush hour traffic...

Perimeter

PC
Review

There is very little room left to move in making games original. Virtually everything has been done - at least twice. It certainly cannot be easy for developers to manoeuvre within the strictures imposed on them by concepts like genre combined with a gaming public baying for originality at every turn. Often it seems the only way forward is to bring in all the new ideas possible while still remaining in the preconceived boundaries of any given genre.

Perimeter is a game that does just that. It is, for all intents and purposes, a real time strategy title, but it has a few new concepts that will prove very interesting to the player.

The first obvious difference within the game is the lack of resource variety. Only one resource - energy - is ever used, and it is generated by the player rather than harvested. The entire base needs to be linked by these power generators. Additionally, the whole base needs to be built on terra-formed land. Virtually every inch of building space needs to be prepared by the player before it can be used. The power generators also create the Perimeter, the player's primary form of defence. It's a force field that envelops all buildings near each generator, but it eats energy reserves very quickly.

Another big difference is the way units are used. A limited number of squads can be created. These squads can be made up of three basic unit types (soldiers, officers and engineers) which determine the various kinds of fighting units the squad can be turned into. These changes are achieved through a morphing process, and the entire squad is changed into the chosen weapon - numbers of the new weapon are determined by the amount of basic units available. The real beauty of this idea, though, lies in the fact that squads can (after a sufficient recharge period) be morphed repeatedly, into different weapons each time. The only requirement is that sufficient numbers of basic troops are available for the weapon chosen. The result is a game that changes its tactical approach - each player has a lot more variety in each squad, as they are never committed to being only one kind of soldier.

With a compelling story line, good graphics and sound, as well as a very original approach to unit use, Perimeter breathes an element of freshness into the RTS market.

An RTS with some very original ideas, Perimeter is challenging and fun to play.

82

Lots of sparkly lights and impressive effects

Battle Mage

PC Review

There's an addictive quality in the quest based real time strategy that is Battle Mage. It is not the first of its genre, nor will it be the last, yet behind its relative simplicity lies a well thought out and entertaining endeavour.

As a Mage, you have access to three spheres of magic; effectively Fire, Nature and Air/Water. There are 5 tiers of each sphere, and each spell requires enough experience points and sometimes pre-requisite spells in order to be learned.

Battle Mage removes everything but the bare essentials of resource management, giving you more time to focus on quests and fighting. There is a beautiful ascetic in the simple process of walking over a chest to gain gold, wood or stone. Any gold is stored for you to use in towns to hire more troops, replace units killed in action or to upgrade existing troops. Wood and stone stays in the inventory of the units that picked it up until you reach a town, where you can trade it for gold. The more you trade with a town, the quicker that town will upgrade itself, granting you access to more troops.

Units are formed into squads, each squad comprised of 6 - 8 units of the same type. This is done for you, and cannot be altered, giving Battle Mage a more militaristic feel. When squads kill enemies they gain experience, and once they reach Elite level they need to be escorted back to town to upgrade them. Your Mage also gains experience, from fighting and solving quests. These experience points can be used to learn new spells, improve various statistics and learn some useful skills.

The only heavy thinking and strategising you need to concern yourself with is when it comes to battle. As you progress the enemies you face become tougher and more numerous, requiring more tactical approaches. Simple controls and ease of play makes this title a refreshing change from the more hardcore RTS games out there. With atmospheric music and more than decent graphics, Battle Mage allows you to simply load up your game and play.

Multiplayer, though available, is sadly lacking and uninspiring. Nor are there any ways to make your own maps or quests. Regardless, Battle Mage holds its own as a very entertaining single player game, the success of which has already prompted its developers to begin production on a sequel.

An entertaining game for those who enjoy fantasy strategy titles.

73

Big green guy kills little guys... standard fantasy fare

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and then there's
obsessive perfection.

and then there's
our staff

If you ever happened to catch a glimpse of the inside of an Emerald PC, you'd be looking

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Rise of Nations: Thrones and Patriots

PC
Review

One of the most remarkable real-time strategy titles in recent months has been Rise of Nations, a game borrowing much from the Age of Empires game mechanic, and yet transcending it utterly. It is to be expected, then, that an expansion pack was to come out.

The title of the add-on reflects the fact that the game now allows government type selection at various technological development points. The government type selections are irreversible, so choose wisely, as they confer diverse benefits that affect a player's civilisation as a whole. A new building, the Senate, must be built in order to set government types, and it produces a unique general unit that can accompany an army. The new government types essentially comprise the extent of new technologies introduced in this expansion.

As expansion packs go, this one is nothing spectacular, but is worthwhile because it enhances an already excellent game. As is to be expected, new nations have been added, and these possess an interesting variation of unique units and abilities. Also, some factions don't behave entirely in the standard fashion. One side, for example, uses no farms or granaries, but rather gathers food proportionally to the number of citizens and cavalry units the player commands.

The soundtrack remains rather boring - seems that game developers are in love with orchestral-sounding scores that are more reminiscent of classic film soundtracks. Whatever happened to the Command & Conquer-style tracks that were upbeat with a little vibe? Visually, the game remains very appealing, boasting highly detailed models, particularly of buildings. The playability has, of course, been somewhat enhanced by the addition of even more variety.

New Conquer the World campaigns have been introduced. They are historically based, one of them being the Cold War campaign. This campaign features an interface addition - a DEFCON state meter. This readout indicates how likely it is for nuclear war to break out. Of course, as in the original, unexpanded game, it is highly undesirable to start one of these, as after a finite number of nuclear strikes, Armageddon comes, and everyone loses!

If you enjoy Rise of Nations, this add-on should prove a worthwhile investment.

Building upon a successful game, this expansion offers little that is truly new, barring variety.

70

A heavy artillery barrage in the information age

Lords of the Realm III

PC
Review

Strategy players looking for a title with depth and both strategic and tactical elements should take a look at Lords of the Realm III. This latest offering from Impressions is set in medieval Europe, and the single player campaigns reflect this by having a historical flavour. The game is played on two levels - the strategic view and real-time combat. In the strategic view, players are required to assign administrators to various tracts of land belonging to a particular region. Each region has a fortified capital, and this must be conquered before the adjacent regions can be ruled. Each region can be assigned a knight, serf, priest or burgher as administrative vassal, and each brings with it certain benefits. Knights field armies, so franchising a knight leads to greater military might. Serfs farm their land while burghers establish towns, which generate monetary revenue. A region that is turned into a church by being allocated a priest increases the efficiency of neighbouring regions, and adds to the player's Christianity rating, which influences morale, among other things. Wise placement of various vassals is key to victory, as this game is fairly subtle and deep - changes to administration result in slow economic changes, and it becomes difficult to rectify any specific oversight quickly. Also accessible from this view is the diplomacy screen, and players will find that many of the campaigns cannot easily be won by military means alone.

The tactical view is used in battles. The action takes place simultaneously with whatever is happening on the strategic level, so often it becomes necessary to switch back and forth in order to both micro-manage a battle and continue running one's kingdom. It is not mandatory to micro-manage battles, as they resolve regardless, but it's advisable to personally command important engagements. The graphics in this view are quite pretty, although they suffer from some flaws. For instance, troops tend to clump up atop each other, not only resulting in a visual mess, but also detracting from the plausibility aspect. One particularly amusing such glitch is evident when a company of footmen attack a garrison - because all the models end up occupying the same space and each is wielding an axe at a different point in its swing, it ends up looking like a buzz-saw! Nevertheless, the graphics aren't ugly, and some of the animation is engagingly detailed, such as that of the trebuchet crew securing the siege engine before starting to operate it. The soundtrack is orchestral in nature, and so while quite good, can get quite boring after the hours that a single game can consume, so I found it best just to disable it and run Winamp in the background. After a couple of days of learning the game, having not understood it at first encounter, I revised my opinion from this being a boring and outdated game to finding it very involving. However, I can't help but think that the series hasn't really moved forward appreciably.

Has great strategic depth and is bound to fill many hours with sedate fun.

61

In the beginning...

Gamers are well familiar with the new way that developers render their corporate logos these days - instead of a mere picture, we are usually treated to a short animation. Lords of the Realm III is no exception to this trend: Impressions Games has rendered a short computer-generated video sequence that plays at game start-up. Players familiar with an excellent fantasy real-time strategy game that will remain unnamed will have a good laugh at this one. The logo video starts with a footman running in a field, apparently with considerable alarm. The scene switches to the sky, and we see a meteor streaking down - no doubt at the hapless footman's location. He runs into a latrine and peers out worriedly. Then the meteor hits. Some time later, the soldier's helmet lands…

A wooden fort starts to smoulder after some fighting

Gangland

PC
Review

Suggested Retail Price: R 299.00 · **Developer:** MediaMobsters · **Publisher:** Whiptail Interactive
Supplier: WWE [011] 462 0150 · **Genre:** Strategy · **Reviewer:** Iwan Pienaar

Minimum Specifications: Pentium III 600MHz · 128 MB RAM ·12 x CD ROM · 64 MB Video Card · 1 GB HDD

The premise of Whiptail Interactive's latest offering, Gangland, sounds simple enough. You have been sent to the American city of Paradise City to track down your three brothers and kill them. Things are rarely that easy and along the way you have to complete 26 conquests and challenges in order to be the last man standing.

While this sounds like your typical first-person shooter style offering, Gangland is actually a combination between real-time strategy, role-playing game and simulation. Well, that is what the box would like you to believe. In actual fact, Gangland tries to be a jack-of-all-trades and only succeeds in being the master of none.

Firstly, the role-playing aspect is woefully lacking. True enough, the main character can reach up to 17th level but it must be remembered that your skills are fairly limited to advance in as there are only three skills in the game, Business, Leadership and Combat.

My biggest gripe is yet to come though. Gangland does not have a save game feature. Yes, that is right. You have to play through some lengthy missions and hope you do not die otherwise you have to start from scratch. Even a limited number of saves would have been something. That said the graphics and the sound are not all that amazing either. It is not the ugliest looking game I have ever played, but there is nothing inspiring about it.

On the plus side, Gangland does offer quite a bit of extras to make one turn the occasional blind eye to its faults. For one, the game play is a lot of fun. Imagine anything a real mobster could do and you can do it in this title. You can set up extortion rackets, be involved in drive-by shootings, open brothels and even get married and have children.

It is therefore more the pity that this offering fails to pull through on its promises. Even though the game is fun purely out of the relative uniqueness of it, it does lack the finishing touches. For example, mobsters are at least known for hiding their weapons. In Gangland, every man and his cat is displaying some kind of weapon in public without even the slightest stare from the police.

Developers MediaMobsters should at least win points for trying something new. Just a shame it is a game that will soon be relegated to the bottom drawer.

Gangland offers players an interesting alternative to the normal strategy fare.

68

This doesn't look like anything we saw in Starsky & Hutch?

Fire Emblem

GBA Review

Suggested Retail Price: R 399.00 · **Developer:** Intelligent Systems · **Publisher:** Nintendo
Supplier: Futronic [011] 315 0079 · **Genre:** Turn based strategy · **Reviewer:** Miktar Dracon
Requirements: 1 Player

The Gameboy Advance has seen its fair share of turn based strategies; the portability of the unit and the situations it's used in usually lending itself to the concept of lengthy battles, each turn taking some time to complete.

Fire Emblem presents itself as a different take to how the sterling Advance Wars (by the same developer) presents turn-based strategy. Focusing more on a strong plot rather than isolated and seemingly unrelated missions, players follow a rag-tag band of adventurers through a light-hearted story segmented across interesting and varied scenarios. The combat itself injects strategy into the mix in the form of the weapons triangle, each type of weapon having its strengths/weaknesses against other weapon types. Overall the interface is free of any kind of cumbersomeness while the battle animations themselves are stylish and graphically crisp considering the nature of the platform. Each unit contains ample smooth animation, keeping in line with the general high-quality of the artwork throughout the game. As the plot progresses vibrant and enigmatic characters join or leave your party to keep things fresh and interesting. While not as complex as other titles of the genre, Fire Emblem's approach is appealing and refreshing.

Stylish if slightly distilled strategy title that will appeal to fans of the genre.

71

A Superman outfit always makes you hit harder... really...

Mario & Luigi : Superstar Saga

GBA Review

Silver Award

Suggested Retail Price: R 399.00 · **Developer:** AlphaDream · **Publisher:** Nintendo
Supplier: Futronic [011] 315 0079 · **Genre:** CRPG · **Reviewer:** Miktar Dracon
Requirements: 1 Player

Vibrant, colourful, hilarious, animated, fun, polished and interesting. A perfect review of this game would contain only these few words and a reprimand to anyone who even considers passing it up. Naturally, the name of Mario in the title alone could put off the more 'mature' gamers out there, though careful inspection of the game presents an amusing RPG with all the trimmings one could want from the genre, packaged into a known brand. This time around, Mario teams up with the usually absent Luigi to participate in a whirl-wind plot filled with interesting twists and turns, all the while managing to present a fresh outlook on the RPG genre. Inseparable, you control both Bros at the same time, the A and B button tied to their actions respectively allowing for some interesting mini-games and facets to the combat system. The turn-based combat allows for gorgeously animated team-moves, even hidden Advance moves that are quite difficult to discover. Enemies take advantage of the action-based attack/defence concepts, as players have to actively participate in defending as well as timing their own attacks to produce maximum damage. Side-quests break up the main plot, intelligent use of abilities gets you access to new areas to explore. Superstar Saga brings a sparkling shine to the franchise.

The Bros. are back in one very fresh and funky Role Playing game.

90

Mario suddenly regretted ordering a bowl of raspberry jelly

Pokémon Colosseum

GameCube Review

Suggested Retail Price: R 499.00 · **Developer:** Nintendo · **Publisher:** Nintendo
Supplier: Futronic [011] 315 0079 · **Genre:** Action · **Reviewer:** Miktar Dracon

Requirements: 1 - 4 Players · 48 Memory blocks

Take the Pokémon you've captured in either Pokémon Sapphire or Ruby, put them in a 3D arena and let them brawl it out in single, double or multi battles. If you don't own the GBA titles, there is a new Story mode that lets you run around as a slightly more mature Pokémon trainer, 'snagging' Pokémon (a change from the usual taboo on stealing other people's Pokémon) from characters as you progress, all the while trying to uncover the nasty plot behind Pokémon misuse. Fans of the series will be happy to hear that Pokémon that weren't capture-able or found in Hoenn, can be found/snagged in Colosseum. The battle animations for the Pokémon are much improved over its predecessor though the sound-effects and voices seem uninspired for the usually vocally vibrant series. Very little is wrong with this title in the eyes of those who would want it for exactly what it is, a way to experience your Pokémon battles in a more exciting and detailed way. In addition to the usual controls, players can opt to use a Gameboy Advance as a controller instead, allowing quicker access to battle commands, though this feature seems less than functional and more of a novelty. Newcomers to the series (is that even possible?) will welcome the Story mode, but will find it pales in comparison to other titles.

A decent upgrade, the new Story mode helping those who don't own the GBA titles.

69

Dillon lights a fart after a big curried bean dinner

Tak and the Power of Juju

PlayStation 2 Review

Suggested Retail Price: R 499.00 · **Developer:** Avalanche Software · **Publisher:** THQ
Supplier: Ster Kinekor [011] 445 7900 · **Genre:** Platform Action · **Reviewer:** Walt Pretorius
Requirements: 1 Player · Analog: Sticks only · Vibration compatible

There are so many platform games out there that it makes one think more than twice about buying yet another one. After all, there is only so much that can be done in this genre; while it is not all that limited, there are a huge number available on the market already. Thankfully, certain developers have realised that quality can beat quantity, and Avalanche Software is such a company. Their new PS2 title, Tak and the Power of Juju, is a fun game full of preconceived notions and utter hilarity.

The player makes use of Tak, a young tribal villager whose mission it is to help restore all the elements needed to fulfil the Prophecy of the Pupanunu People - while actually unwittingly fulfilling the prophecy himself. From the word go, the good graphics and humour inherent in the game are apparent. A funny intro movie opens this action packed game, and dumps the player into huge play environments with lots of interactivity and variety.

Unfortunately the game does not do enough to set it up as a new standard or trend setter in the platform genre. The level of environmental interactivity is great, and the variety held within the game keeps it entertaining. The overall quality is excellent, but in a genre that is so well represented in the market place, it's very difficult to be a trend setter. It is a very fun game, though.

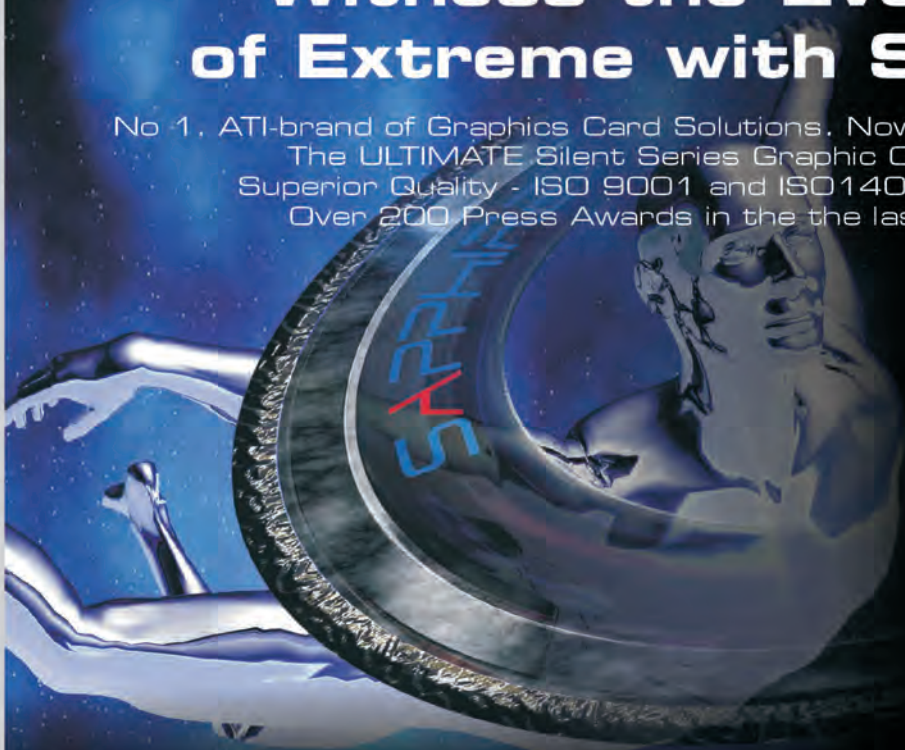*A fun platform game with a few original ideas that could have been better used.*

80

No, you can't have my coconut. Now bog off, monkey-breath!

This Is Football 2004

In the realm of arcade-football, the FIFA franchise has long reigned supreme, and with the might of a company like Electronic Arts behind it, it's no surprise why. Though many might have dismissed their efforts so far as dismal, Sony Computer Entertainment has had FIFA in its sights for some time now, and with their latest offering, This Is Football 2004, they have finally mounted some serious competition to the FIFA juggernaut.

This Is Football 2004 boasts an officially licensed roster consisting of upward of 900 teams and 18,000 players, each of whose skills feel realistically translated into the game. The control set-up is functional, without being complicated, making it quite easy to simply pick up, play and enjoy. In addition to the hereditary aerial and ground passes and shots seen in all football titles, various trick moves are available, reminiscent in their simplicity of some of the earlier FIFA titles. Also on offer is the option to dive, but this is best used sparingly, since an astute referee won't think twice before yellow-carding you if he's suspicious. Various levels of difficulty, ranging from "Amateur" to "Master-class" are on offer, and the learning curve is gentle enough that you won't even initially be thoroughly thrashed on the lower difficulty levels, though the higher ones are immensely challenging, sometimes to the point of being downright frustrating. Sadly, though, despite the relative simplicity of the play dynamic, it manages to feel stilted and disjointed at times, with the direction and power of shots and passes seemingly arbitrarily determined, though after spending some time with the game, this effect seems to be less pronounced, though moments of uncontrollable stupidity still occur, contributing to the annoyance factor. One of TIF's biggest draws internationally is undoubtedly its much-touted online multiplayer capabilities, which sadly bare little relevance to the South African market. Visually, TIF 2004 is impressive, with faithful recreations of high-profile players, and well-detailed kits, though don't expect to see any sponsor branding on them. Traditional celebratory cut-scenes after goals have been scored are also present, as one would expect. Commentary too, is accounted for, in the familiar repetitive monotone form typical of football games. It goes without saying that This Is Football 2004 is not a game directed at the purist fans of the genre, who are certainly better off with something more akin to Pro Evolution Soccer, but for the casual gamer, or anyone looking for an arcade-style football experience, TIF 2004 should definitely be short-listed for consideration. Whether or not it can compete with EA's latest FIFA outing is largely a matter of personal preference, though in its own right, TIF is certainly a solid and entertaining title.

"I wonder if I turned the sauna on before the game..."

Officially licensed arcade-style football simulation - fun to play and great to look at.

75

R-Type Final

PlayStation 2
Review

I t was an innocent year 1987 - aside from a Unabomber bomb exploding in Utah, Prozac debuting in the US and a little revolutionary arcade shooter called R-Type being released. Instead of a graceful fade, Irem have opted to let the R-Type series end with a rather large (but still graceful) bang. Everything that made R-Type a classic is back, but bigger, better and more beautiful. As per usual, the threat of an alien race (the Bydo) prompts a counter-attack in the form of a single (but not ordinary) ship. Aside from rather insane amounts of firepower, the unique Force System lets you absorb bullets to charge up a super bomb. You can also attach the Force Ball [a unique power-up] to the front or back of your ship thereby changing the direction of your bullets - helpful in a tight spot.

Each ship (over 99 to unlock) has its own type of weapon and Force Ball, you can swap your ship after each mission but you can only maintain a list of 8 ships to swap out with. Not every ship is suited for every mission and choosing a good selection of ships plays a key role in defeating your opponents. You can modify the look and feel of your ships with the available selection of weapons, power-ups and even colours.

Each mission is difficult and contains a variety of enemies, at the end of each mission waits a boss that will probably hammer you into a tin pancake the first few times until you've learnt its firing patterns and how it moves. Bosses are enormous and oft confusing, taking up the entire screen and leaving you little room to manoeuvre. Key to surviving these areas, are the shoulder buttons on the controller that speed you up and slow you down, allowing quick dodges or pinpoint precision manoeuvres. It's worth noting that you cannot save mid-game, only the progress of unlocked ships.

A welcome addition, something different to do if you're particularly frustrated with a mission, is the AI Mode where you can customize a ship and send it off to battle head-to-head against the computer or another player who's saved his ship onto a memory card. The AI Mode is quite confusing since you don't control the ship directly but rather 'influence' its choices.

Despite the stunningly polished leap into 3D, the classic 2D game dynamic does not suffer, remaining faithful to the series but gaining so much more due to the nature of 3D.

A stylish and stunning, unforgiving and unforgivably difficult shooter in a delicious 3D wrapping.

82

99 Red Balloons

While each ship may not be completely unique, there are over 100 ships (or variations thereof) for you to unlock through various conditions (finish a level with a certain ship, under a certain time, etc.) which adds an insane amount of longevity to the title, if you're willing to put up with the sheer willpower it would take to unlock all the ships.

"I'll blast you back to the last Robotech series, you mecha reject!"

Singstar

PlayStation 2
Review

It doesn't matter if you're an extrovert, introvert or a drunken tone-deaf karaoke enthusiast - Singstar manages to appeal to a kind of base human need. The need to sing seems to be rooted in the foundations of the psyche and it doesn't take more than a few minutes with Singstar to realize this. Two sturdy high-quality microphones are included with the game and function perfectly, although the people singing into them might not be of the same calibre. As far as it's recognition of 'ability' goes, Singstar can be both lenient (on easy) or unforgiving (on hard, naturally). Relying mostly on tonality and not pitch (people with lower voices can still get points for the higher notes in songs as long as the tone is similar), Singstar manages to extract a game from the idea of singing quite well.

As you sing, the lyrics are displayed at the bottom of the screen and fill up as the song progresses, showing you where in the lyrics the song currently is. Bars on screen show the tone you need to achieve and you quickly realize what the tones are, as you sing, your own voice 'tone' is drawn over the bars. If your voice and the song don't match, you don't get points. You don't have to sing the actual lyrics to the songs (especially if you don't know the lyrics) since humming does the trick. As with most karaoke involved activities, it's always more fun with friends. Pass the Mic mode lets multiple people take a shot at different seconds of a song while the Duet and Battle modes are perfect for finally settling the argument about who is more the Pop star. If you're short on friends [do dogs count? Ed], you can either practise the songs yourself or attempt the Career mode. Basically, you sing at clubs and other such events until you garner enough points to try and net a record deal.

While this sounds good in theory, in practise it's quite bland and fails to remain interesting, mostly due to the lack of any kind of interaction or choice on your behalf aside from choosing what song to sing next.

More depth to the Career mode or locked songs would have added much needed longevity to the title, since there is only a limited amount of songs and only so many times you can sing your favourites. EyeToy support is there for those who'd prefer to see themselves instead of the original music video to the songs - this is up to personal preference.

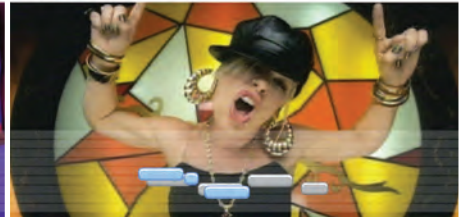*Great party game and fun concept, lacking little touches to make it last.*

71

The Songs

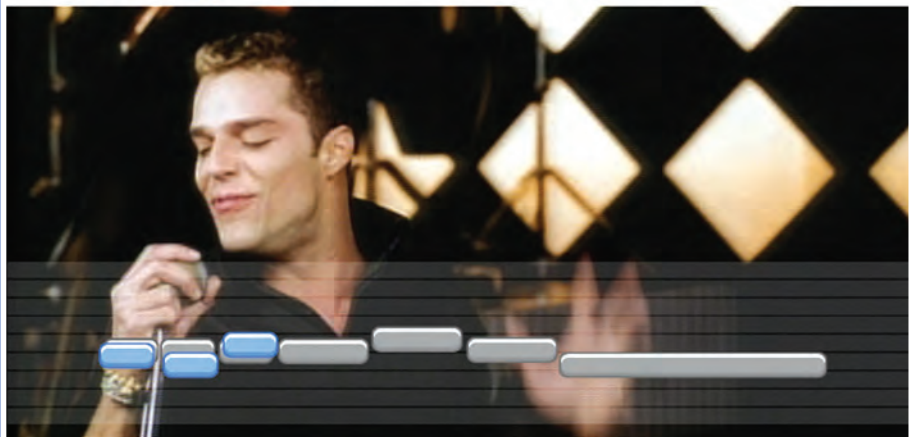Liberty X - *Just a Little*
Mis-Teeq - *Scandalous*
The Darkness - *I Believe in a Thing Called Love*
A-Ha - *Take on Me*
Pink - *Get the Party Started*
Jamelia - *Superstar*
Motorhead - *Ace of Spades*
George Michael - *Careless Whisper*
Avril Lavigne - *Complicated*
Petula Clark - *Downtown*
Sophie Ellis Bexter - *Murder on the Dancefloor*
Daniel Bedingfield - *If You're Not the One*
Carl Douglas - *Kung Fu Fighting*
Rick Astley - *Never Gonna Give You Up*
Westlife - *World of Our Own*
Ricky Martin - *Livin' La Vida Loca*
Bill Withers - *Ain't No Sunshine*
Madonna - *Like a Virgin*
Roy Orbison - *Pretty Woman*
S Club - *Don't Stop Movin'*
Deee-Lite - *Groove Is In the Heart*
Sugababes - *Round Round*
Elvis - *Suspicious Minds*
Busted - *Crashed the Wedding*
Village People - *YMCA*
Good Charlotte - *Girls and Boys*
Blondie - *Heart of Glass*
Dido - *Thank You*
Atomic Kitten - *Eternal Flame*
Blue - *One Love*

It was at that point that Ricky realised there was a booger on the microphone...

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eidos

Tech Musings:
Watch the mobile undercurrent

words james francis

Nokia took a second stab at the gaming market this year with the much-needed QD - a fresh breath of air the Finnish cell phone manufacturer needed if it had any chance of surviving the gaming hardware market and making a mark. At least, that's how I thought of it and it's mostly true. But something hadn't dawned on me, stupidly so since I'm always in line to speculate over Microsoft's plans with the Xbox - you don't just spend half a billion dollars on marketing just because you want to be in gaming.

Nokia, it seems, might have more up their sleeve as well. Analysts are closely watching the company, because rumour has it Nokia plans to introduce their gaming technology to more of their phone models. This doesn't seem that far-fetched a move, since G3 is finally beginning to show itself in Europe and Japan is also getting more comfortable with the high-bandwidth technology. Cell phones are very functional in our society, so adding more bells and whistles in the line of streaming video, decent picture messaging and a lot more is a small step for games to appear on that list as well - especially since larger files will be downloadable and that means you don't need to buy and swap cartridges just because you fancy a quick game of football.

Mobile gaming is the slumbering giant that seems destined to break gaming into the true mainstream. And not the retro games popular on handsets these days - with ever-increasing power in mobile chips and batteries, your average phone can be very powerful. The N-Gage already is.

Imagine sitting in a crowded waiting room. You can quickly download a game from an online catalogue and play it while waiting, then upload your score to the game service and keep the savegame data on your phone, only to pick it all up again later. Some of this already exists - all that is missing is wide-scale availability and acceptance of gaming cell phones and broadband cellular networks.

Nokia is the leader of this market. And if it goes ahead and puts the gaming technology into a lot of its models, the N-Gage, or at least its technology, will be the biggest gaming platform in the history of gaming - and by a very wide margin. You can bet its competitors won't be left behind either.

D-Link DCS-5300 motorized cameras
D-Link introduced two new digital video cameras that feature motorized pan and tilt control. The models dare identical except for the fact that one of them is wireless. The devices also sport software that allows the imaging to be streamed over the Internet, without need for a paid DNS service. The software allows users to remotely control the viewing angle of the camera, which offers security related applications. These possibilities are further enhanced by a built-in microphone and motion-sensing capability that can be used to trigger an alert, complete with attached video clip of the event that triggered it.

Eve mobile gaming console
VIA has unveiled a mobile gaming console named Eve. The unit is powered by a 533MHz Eden-N processor, which is x86-based. It also carries a 20GB hard drive and 128MB of SDRAM. Graphics are provided by an S3 UniChrome Pro core, and sound output is via up to six channels. The system supports DirectX versions ranging from 7 through 9, as well as EAX 1.0 and 2.0. The display is 4" LCD with a resolution of 640x480. Networking is by means of 802.11b wireless, which is crucial to a mobile platform. Interestingly enough, the Li-ion batteries have been implemented in a hot-swappable fashion. Given that this is a mobile design, the specifications are fairly impressive.

v Infinium Phantom specifications

Infinium's upcoming Phantom PC gaming console, which is to debut by the end of the year, will be powered by an AMD Athlon 2500 or faster processor and will render graphics by means of a 128MB GeForce FX5700. The console is unusual in that it has been designed to download PC games from a subscribed online distribution system, and has no external storage media (in order to prevent piratical abuse). Infinium will be introducing the Phantom in November (in the States) and will supply a free unit to every initial subscriber. Given exchange rates and local telephony costs, it is unlikely that this system will make a great impact locally.

PSX feature list trimmed down

Sony has announced that its upcoming "all-in-one" entertainment system, the PSX, will lack some of the features originally proposed. This has been decided in order to allow development of the system to be complete in time for this year's Christmas season. The PSX will no longer support playback of CD-R and DVD+RW discs, though DVD-RW will be supported. MP3 support has been axed too, in favour of Sony's proprietary ATRAC3 format. The system's image handling will no longer include GIF or TIFF formats, but JPEG will be supported. DVD writing speed will be 12X instead of 24X. One puzzling change is the fact that PSX will not have a broadband Internet socket, which means it will be unable to access Sony's online music services.

> Controller meets action figure

Gemini Industries has launched a gimmicky range of PlayStation 2 and Xbox controllers. The full-featured Freak controllers are basically action figures of grotesque beasties that can be held relatively comfortably and which feature all the required buttons and controls required for gaming. The varieties that will soon be available are Berserker and Fleshy for PS2, and Alien for Xbox.

Thrustmaster's Ferrari wheels

Thrustmaster has announced a range of Ferrari-licensed steering wheels. The range supports PC, PlayStation 2 and Xbox platforms. The wheels are high-quality replicas of Ferrari steering wheel and pedal arrangements, right down to the materials used in their construction. The range includes the following: Enzo Ferrari Force Feedback (in wired and wireless variants), F1 Force Feedback and 360 Modena (wired, wireless and force feedback variants). Several related accessories are also set to make a debut, including the 360 Modena Upad Force, a force feedback game-pad styled in Ferrari red.

Esquire displays at Futurex

At the recent Futurex exhibition in Sandton, Esquire exhibited a number of products. Their primary display focused on the Esquire range of desktop PCs, with models to suit every sort of computer user, from gamer to professional. The company also exhibited a host of products including ABIT motherboards, Altec Lansing sound systems, TEAC optical drives, BenQ Joybook notebooks. Bluetooth, infrared and wireless networking products were also prominent, as well as optical media and various memory products.

Sony VAIO Pocket VGF-AP1

This rather involved product name denotes Sony's new portable player. The device compares well against the iPod in most regards, except for weight. It carries a 20GB hard drive and supports MP3, WAV, WMA and Sony's own ATRAC3. The unit also features G-sense controls, which suggests that it can be controlled by means of gestures.

IT'S OUR PARTY...

DFI's LanParty boards have quickly become a favourite of the hardcore elite – the gamers who love building up PCs, pushing them for performance and just making them look good. Louis Yang, Sales Specialist at DFI, recently visited the country, we decided to probe his mind a little about DFI itself, its plans for the PC specialist market and what they expect to happen in the future of hardware...

How old is DFI and how did it start?

We've been in the technology industry for nearly 25 years, having started in 1981. Right now we have 800 employees and several factories, specifically six production lines - four in China, the rest in Taiwan.

Are gaming boards your only business?

No, we have two markets and two product lines, all of which use Intel and AMD. We develop customized boards for the military. Commercial motherboards are strong business in Asia, Europe and Eastern Europe, so for now we want to be more accessible and try to get close to the gaming market. The LanParty series was developed for this market, a market that demands high end specifications. Next we have the Infinity series, for power users, like Overclockers.

What do you attribute to LanParty being one of the strongest brands?

Well, for one, we only use the top chipsets, such as Intel and AMD – this is particularly true with the Infinity series. We use at least 50% of our research and development resources on these motherboards - we have to make them extremely easy to overclock. The LanParty boards are more presentable, but with all these features added on. That and the accessories make for a good package.

Also, we were trying to be a pioneer in every market. In Singapore, we organized the first LAN party there, with media coverage as well as sponsorship from AMD. In Korea we give a lot of sponsorship to gaming events. Through all of this we've tried to bring the LanParty boards to gamers. We believe this series is the first in the world - targeting the LAN gamer and PC modding fan. It covers most of the things gamers like to show off at LAN parties. That's the strategy.

Gamers in the West generally consider the Far East as a console-heavy market, but a lot of PC manufacturers are based there. How strong is the PC market in Japan and the rest of the territory?

PC gaming is very strong in Asia. Consoles

are strong, but that's a worldwide thing, especially for the PlayStation 2. But PC gaming is really, really strong in Taiwan, China, South-East Asia and of course South Korea.

Looking at both your LanParty and Infinity boards, how much co-operation was there between your R&D department and the Chipset and CPU manufacturers? Does a high level of communication exist?

We keep very close relationships between chip makers - we need to do that to get first hand information and the most updated insights. So we need to work really closely with Intel and AMD; whenever there is a new CPU coming out, we need to get it first. We work quite closely, especially on LanParty designs. As with all our boards there is strict quality control to ensure reliability and compatibility. But for LanParty, we have actually invested a lot of human resources on the testing part. We have to make sure it's easy to overclock and that it outperforms other brands. We need to make sure that every component and feature on the board is good and those that aid overclocking, such as the capacitor, the heating and the thermal control are included in this scrutiny. This is also how we separate ourselves from the lower-end boards.

This is an interesting year for motherboards: Intel pushing standards, PCI Express being introduced into the market and so on. What's DFI's strategy for the coming period?

DDR2 and PCI Express, as with all new technology, will go through a process where everyone in the market has to get used to them. Not just the new specs, but the prices as well. Take PCI Express as an example. AGP is already pricy enough, but PCI Express will be even more expensive than what we have now. We know that from a gaming board perspective PCI Express cards are available already – it's just not the time for the market to completely move that way. The motherboard is the same. We used to have SDRAM and DDR together on the board, and for the new technology we will have old options and new options on the board together. But we still need to get to that stage to have that option.

When do you plan to roll out the next generation of boards?

We recommend maybe after Q4. Intel had an official launch date - end of June. But it takes a couple of months to phase in the new products. Manufacturers tend to be quite scared at the beginning and it will take a while for all the manufacturers to get in sync.

The street advice at the moment is to wait a year or so before getting PCI Express.

It won't be that long, but it's frustrating when you have bought a whole new system but don't have the memory for it. For the first month or so the prices will be very high, but these will drop quickly.

DFI with its gaming boards are really working in a niche and specialist market when you consider your LanParty and Infinity boards. Where do you see it going in the future?

We think that this market has a lot more to offer - DFI has really big expectations for it. Apart from the boards we're launching our new system – a customized box. We have a long plan in this market, because this is a niche market, these enthusiasts, they

> ## "Enthusiasts have really strong ideals when they are upgrading their machines"

have really strong ideals when they are upgrading their machines. It's not just motherboards, memory and graphics, but the casing and power as well. It's a very productive market. Apart from the branded PC like Hewlett-Packard, DELL, Acer and so on, the real interest in the market is to make your own changes and customizations. Naturally we are expecting growth in this area.

Soon, our LanParty 2 will be coming to the market and it will be even better with more accessories including cable sleeves and lots of cosmetic enhancements. It'll make for nice, neat arrangements in the case, especially see-through ones.

We have this new slogan. It used to be "It's Party Time". For the LanParty 2 it's "No UV, no fun".

Tell us more about Infinity. It's obviously not aimed at the same modding market.

With Infinity we're looking at a wider base of power users. Not every user likes to mod; they just want speed and performance. They're going into hardware. That's why we have these boards, specially prepared for this. We have a special

feature in the CMOS: normally you can only have one setting profile, but now you can have four. That means you can have four different setups and speeds for your machine.

How does the South African market compare to the other markets?

It's been very good that we have our distributor Axis working with us for these 2 years. We've had really good success as a result, but it's time for us to do more. Here in SA, the market is relatively small compared to the US, Australia and the UK. We're expecting big growth in the home and gaming market. No longer will the ugly beige box dominate.

What else can we expect from DFI in the future, will you ever move into the graphics market?

Do you know what DFI stands for? Dedicate, Focus, Inspire. The reason we have this meaning, for a long time, is because we want our stuff to be professional in focus, especially for a motherboard maker. The applications may vary - maybe two years later we'll have another kind of product, but for now the motherboard is key. We're trying our best to stay focused. For graphic cards - that business is about memory. And the pricing of memory and the GPU. It's not good to be distracted into different markets. We did try several times to do graphic cards, but we found that it's not complimenting our business. Instead we're trying to do better and better in the motherboard business.

Considering all that has been going on since PC boards were first introduced, would you say we are at the high point of motherboard evolution or really just at the beginning?

We're at the beginning. Talking about 64bit environment, we've not seen the right OS in the market. AMD and Microsoft have been working on this for quite a while. Intel has its 64 bit solution for the conventional market; it's said to be the secret that everyone knows in Silicon Valley. AMD has taken the first step and Intel are trying to move focus a different way, using the P4 Extreme to get further into the market, especially for gaming. Where we're standing now is just the beginning, especially the motherboards. And not just with DDR2 or PCI express.

In the last 2 years we've seen acceleration in technology. People are pushing the envelope further. The environment is growing. We're also going to see an increase in desktops, due to their usage in digital homes. We'll see more interesting factors coming out.
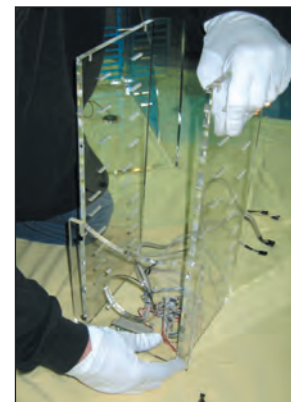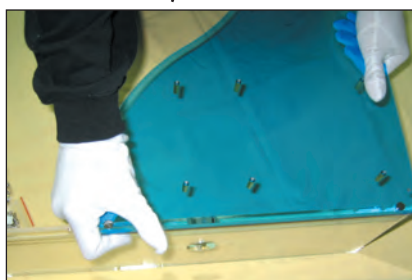
Aerocool
Acryclear II
Plus Version

Fancy building your own Perspex case, without sawing panels or severing any vital limbs in the process? Aerocool might just have the answer…
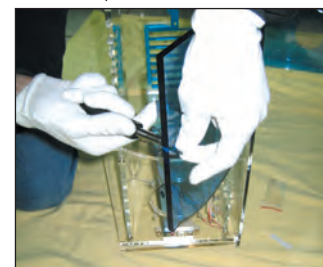
1

2

3

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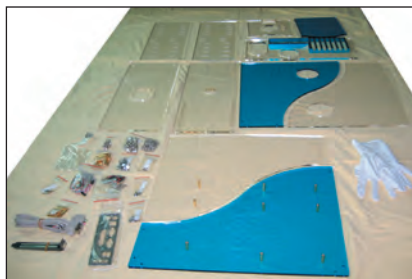
5

1. Aerocool's build-it-yourself Perspex case. After you're done building it, you have the perfect opportunity to fill it up with modding gear to compliment your hardware inside. Because of the Perspex, it doesn't hurt adding a few extra lights that give the case a glowing effect. Sadly it's more expensive than most Perspex cases and ships with no extras.

2. The kit itself only contains the case without any fans, fan covers or a power supply. Aerocool also supply all the nuts and bolts you'd need to mount anything in the case, including fans. The instructions on how to put it all together are also, thankfully, very straight forward and not full of bad English, as we've grown accustomed to when you get a manual from the Far East.

3. Assembly will take you around two to three hours and it's a good idea to have someone to help you. The white gloves - part and parcel with any Perspex case - are meant to make sure you don't mess up the surfaces with finger smudges. And be careful with that screwdriver - it might just slip…

4. The case boasts five fan spots - only one of which can be closed. That means that if you're out for a fan-light case or something to build a water-cooling system into, this isn't it. The case isn't meant for hot-swappers either - once built it's a bit of a chore opening the case again. This is a matter of building a PC and letting it stand somewhere to look good.

5. A door fits on the front face of the case and uses a small magnet (which in our opinion could have been a bit stronger) to keep it closed. There are also connectors for front USB, Firewire and Audio, as well as a PC speaker.

RRP: R999.00 from The Naked IT - www.nakedit.co.za
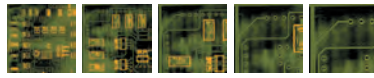
H@RDCOR3

Wireless LAN

writer: Tom Taylor

Imagine you walk into a LAN event and there are no network cables lying all over the place. As you boot up your PC it immediately picks up the LAN's wireless network and without setting a single IP address, you are hooked up to the network. Yes, the time has finally arrived where wireless networking, or 802.11 as it is formally known, is becoming a standard in networking environments. Let me first state though that even though wireless networking is currently at 54Mbps (or in some cases at a theoretical 108Mps) it cannot yet carry enough bandwidth to sustain a resource intensive LAN gaming scenario. The actual throughput of a 54Mbps (802.11g) wireless network is round about 30Mps while the pumped up version of it, rated at 108Mbps, is only able to produce around 35Mbps to 40MBps.

But setting up a wireless network can save you a lot of trouble, especially from laying CAT5 (network) cable; it can also help to link two computers where it was previously impractical to do so. Sadly our Law is limiting us to what we are legally allowed to do. The Telecoms act no. 103 of 1996 states that "LANs shall be confined to the same premises/buildings and between the computer systems of the same user". According to the telecommunications act it is illegal to cross municipal boundaries with either voice or data signals. A municipal boundary can best be explained as a piece of land which, according to a municipal address is one entity, for example, a townhouse complex will be one municipal entity if it falls under the same street number as most of them do.

Legal issues aside, the future for wireless networking seems very promising. As the technology develops we will start to see much better data throughput and lower latencies.
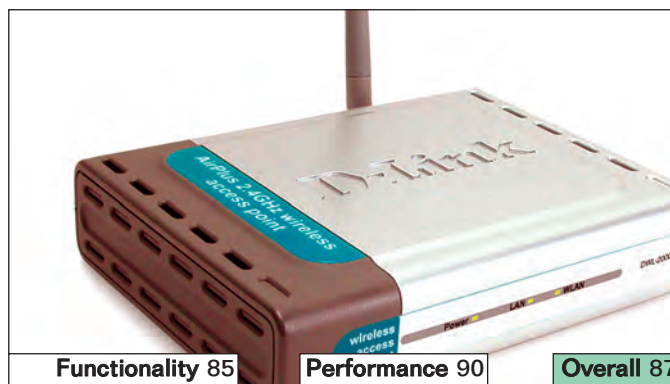
D-Link

D-Link has been one of the most popular wireless hardware manufacturers around as they always seem to be on the forefront of innovation. Their 802.11g specification hardware is very impressive to say the least and I was pleased overall by its performance. Looking at the DWL-2000AP access point its small form factor should be a plus point for many consumers but the lack of a built in network switch is a feature that will make me look elsewhere. The configuration menu of this device is easy enough to master and set up, the only drawback was that the configuration screen was a tad on the slow side. Functionality is the name of the game, and this D-Link access point can keep up with the pack. Not only is it able to function as an access point, but also a wireless bridge, and it can be setup as a wireless client, meaning you can use it to connect to another wireless access point and use it to connect to a network. This access point includes all of the standard features one would want in such a device including an operation mode which allows it to operate at 108Mbps. In order for it to function at that speed you obviously need a compatible client device. The DWL-G650 is a PCMCIA card which allows just that. The drivers bundled with this card allow you to view signal strength and the link quality to an access point as well as the ability to search for wireless networks in its surrounding area.

Both the access point and the PCMCIA card offers sufficient security to keep your network safe, these include WEP, MAC filtering, and the ability to hide the SSID. Even though the D-Link products are great, they are for the most part, standard and do not offer anything extra ordinary.

|	
Value for Money 87	**Functionality** 85 **Performance** 90 **Overall** 87

Plus: Data throughput **Minus:** Configuration screen **Supplier:** D-Link SA [012] 665 2165
Internet: www.d-link.co.za **RRP:** DWL-2000AP - R1099 | DWL-G650 - R699

X-Micro

X-Micro is a fairly new Taiwanese based company which has been producing graphics cards, Bluetooth devices, and other digital devices since 1999. They have recently started producing wireless hardware and this year they released their 802.11g range of products. The X-Micro 11G WLAN Broadband Router is a great device, not only is it a four port switch but also a firewall and wireless access point. Another feature I liked was that the antenna on the back of the router is removable thus allowing for a high gain antennae to be added. The configuration screen for the 11G WLAN Broadband Router is web based so you can log into it from a web browser and configure it to your preference. There are various connection types that this device can be used with, this includes setting it to have a fixed IP address, assign it as a DHCP client or connect via an ADSL modem using PPPOE. In a wireless environment this device can also be used to connect to other access points and it can be used as a wireless bridge. The firewall is quite powerful and supports IP filtering MAC filtering, port forwarding, and DMZ hosting. The 11G WLAN Broadband Router also sports the standard wireless security protocols such as WEP. You are also able to block URL's and domains and there are various IP and protocol filters. The PCMCIA card was also quite impressive and its driver software allows for an array of various functions to detect and monitor wireless networks. Both the 11G WLAN Broadband Router and the 11G WLAN PCMCIA Card supports the 108Mbps Turbo mode which allows it to transfer data at an accelerated speed.
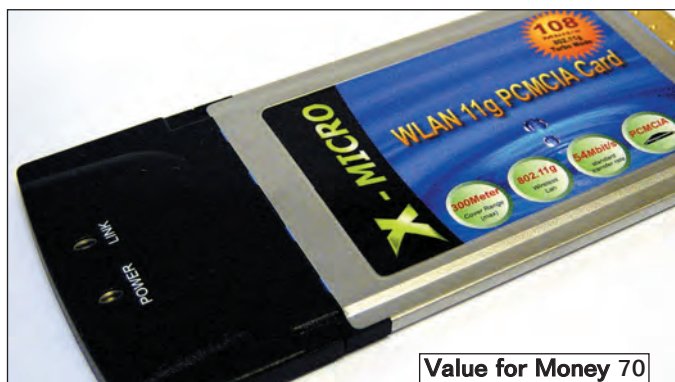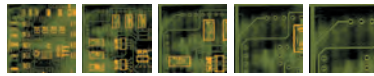
|	
Value for Money 70	**Functionality** 80 **Performance** 70 **Overall** 73

Plus: Features **Minus:** Data throughput **Supplier:** Genex Solutions [021] 551-8887
Internet: www.x-micro.com **RRP:** XWL-11GRAG-R999 | XWL-11GPAG-R769

Planet

Many people have never heard of Planet and that is largely due to the fact that it is not a brand that is widely available in retail stores. The company is very well known amongst network administrators locally and overseas because of their switches, IP telephony hardware, and bandwidth managers. This was the first time I had worked with Planet products and I am pleased to say that their popularity in the networking field is well deserved. The WAP-4000 wireless access point sports a removable antenna but sadly there is not a network switch built into it. Configuring this unit can be done either via a web browser or the installation utility found on the bundled CD-ROM. Either way the same configuration options apply. Not only can the WAP-4000 be configured as an access point but it can also function as a repeater, bridge, or wireless client. The repeater mode is very handy if you wish to extend the range of your wireless network as it is capable of repeating the wireless signal from the client, such as a PCMCIA wireless card, to the access point. This device can also be configured to only allow 802.11g wireless clients to connect which is great if you do not want a 802.11b client to slow the entire network down. It is also has a function that allows for compatible devices to operate at 108Mbps. The WL-8310 is a PCI card which sports a removable antenna and is also compatible with the 108Mbps specification. The software drivers allow you to do a site survey (scanning the local airwaves for other wireless networks) and it graphically shows you the quality of the signal to the access point as well as the signal strength.
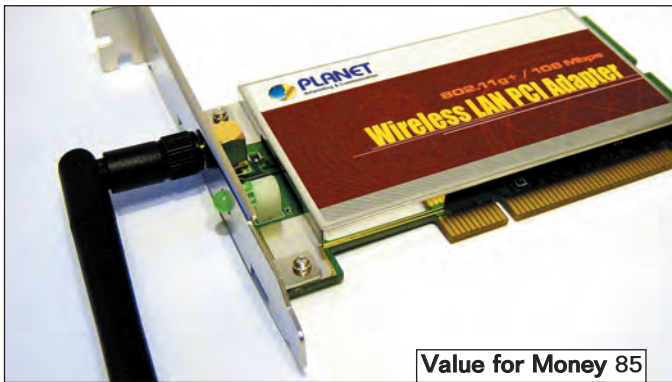
| Value for Money 85 | Functionality 80 | Performance 88 | Overall 84 |

Plus: Data throughput **Minus:** Nothing **Supplier:** Scoop Distribution [021] 555-4740
Internet: www.planet.com.tw **RRP:** WAP-4000 - R1399 | WL-8310 - R739

Gigabyte

Gigabyte is one of the most well known brands in South Africa and I am sure that most of you are familiar with its hardware. I was quite surprised when I heard that this company also produces wireless networking hardware. Upon opening the package I fell in love, the Gigabyte GN-A17GU access point is one of the sexiest units I have seen to date [*you really need to get out more, Ed*] and it sports one feature which is not just unique to it but also very functional. The feature in question is the ability to plug a PCMCIA wireless card into it. This will allow you to, say, connect an 802.11b PCMCIA card and thus allow you to provide wireless access to both 802.11g and 802.11b independently. About the only downside of this product is that you must use the bundled configuration utility to access it and change its configuration. The configuration utility allows you to set every aspect of this access point including the IP address, encryption method, and operation mode. The latter allows you to set this access point to connect directly to other access points, these two operations are called point-to-point and point-to-multi point. I am also pleased to report that the PCMCIA slot was compatible with all of the PCMCIA wireless network cards I reviewed in this month's roundup, the only disappointment was that it was not able to make use of the 802.11a specification that the Senao PCMCIA card offered. The GN-WMAG is Gigabyte's PCMCIA wireless network card. For the most part it is much the same as the other PCMCIA cards in this roundup and the driver software allows you to scan for wireless networks and set the encryption settings. The one feature that I really loved though was the LED signal indicator on the antenna part of this card. Traditionally this feature would only be available by looking on the software.

| Value for Money 90 | Functionality 84 | Performance 90 | Overall 88 |

Plus: Functionality **Minus:** Need to upgrade firmware to make use of 108Mbps **Supplier:** Rectron [011] 203-1000
**Internet:** www.gigabyte.com.tw **RRP:** GN-A17GU-R1195 | WMAG-R495

CNet

At the time of writing this month's H@rdcor3 Roundup Rectron did not distribute any CNet based access points or wireless routers. So I decided to look at the client hardware available from CNet. First up is the CWP-854, this PCI wireless card is really small in comparison to the other PCI cards in this month's roundup. The antenna of this device is corded which is great as it allows it to be placed in such a way that you will get better reception. This wire is about a meter in length and should suffice for most placement scenarios. The CNet PCMCIA wireless adapter is called the CWC-854, both the PCMCIA and the PCI card makes use of the same software. This software allows you to check the current status of the link quality and signal strength and allows for you to do a site survey, which is basically a scan of the local airwaves for a wireless access point. A feature I par-

ticularly liked was the driver's ability to switch the radio link on or off. This is handy if you, say, move your pc to a location where you either do not want to scan for networks, or you do not want someone to scan you. The last CNet product I am looking at this month is quite an innovative little device. The CWD-854 is a USB dongle which is actually a wireless network card. The dongle itself is not much bigger than a normal thumb drive and is capable of connecting to 802.11g networks. This is a great product if you want to quickly setup a PC with a wireless connection. In the box you will find a USB extension cable so you would not have to try and install or remove it by crawling behind your PC.
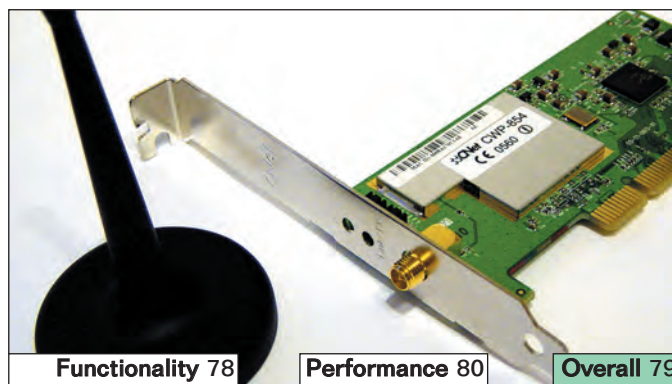
| Value for Money 79 | Functionality 78 | Performance 80 | Overall 79 |

Plus: USB dongle is innovative **Minus:** Nothing **Supplier:** Rectron [011] 203-1000
Internet: www.cnet.com.tw **RRP:** CWD-854-R795 | CWC-854-R645 | CWP-854- R795
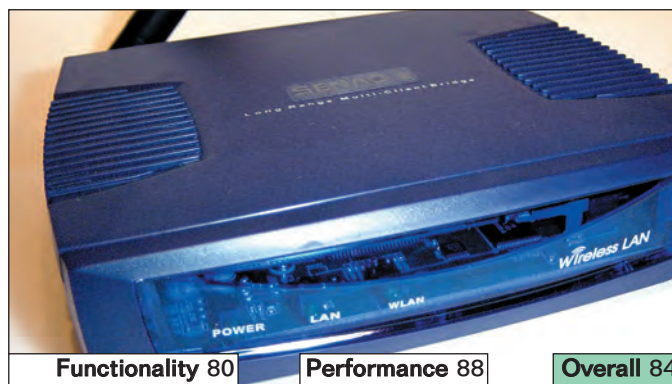
Senao

As with the Planet range of hardware, you do not see much Senao on the retail shelves but Senao has been around for a while and they have developed some pretty amazing network related hardware. The SL-3054CB3 Plus is an access point which can also be setup as a wireless repeater, and a multi-client bridge. This unit features a removable antenna and its RJ45 port is compatible with power over Ethernet. This is a great feature to have as it allows you to send power over your traditional network cable (a special device is required to connect power over Ethernet) which in turn results in you only having to lay one cable to the device as opposed to two. Logging onto this unit and configuring it is very simple as its setup screen is easy to navigate. All of the common wireless and security related features are available such as WEP encryption, a DHCP server, and

a MAC filter. If there was to be a single PCMCIA wireless Ethernet card that needed to be singled out, it would be the NL-5354CB Plus Aries2. The reason for this is mainly because it is a dual band wireless Ethernet card, this means that it is capable of connecting to 802.11b, 802.11g, as well as 802.11a networks. The 802.11a wireless standard is not really that popular for home or office use as its works on a much higher frequency and has a lot less penetration capabilities. In other words 802.11a's frequency will battle to give decent reception when there are a lot of walls between the access point and the client. Even though this is the case it is great to have a card that you know will work on all wireless networks. The software allows for basic access point searching as well as displaying the link quality and signal strength.
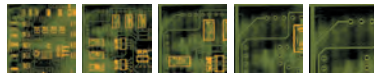
| Value for Money 85 | Functionality 80 | Performance 88 | Overall 84 |

Plus: Data throughput **Minus:** Nothing **Supplier:** Miro Distribution 086 123 1232
Internet: www.senao.com.tw **RRP:** SL-3054CB3 Plus-R1599 | NL-5354CB Plus Aries2-R799

SMC

As with many of the other manufacturers in this month's roundup, SMC is a big player in the networking field and its hardware is quite popular among local enthusiasts. The BarricadeG SMC2804WBR is one of the most function rich wireless devices I have seen to date. To start with it is a router, firewall, and access point. It also features a 4 port switch and is capable of connecting wireless devices at 108Mbps. What impressed me the most about this product is its configuration capabilities. You can log onto this unit via a web browser and it even has the ability to integrate with Zone Alarm, a freely available software firewall. It also features all of the standard encryption features and access control capabilities. Traditionally with access control, products such as this only allow you to specify which MAC address or IP address is allowed to connect to the Internet. The BarricadeG access point and router allows you to specify different privileges for different IP addresses on a network, it also allows you to set time based access control. A great example of this is in an office environment where you can set this device to only allow users to connect to the Internet during lunch hours or after work hours, but allow e-mail access throughout the day. You are also able to filter certain websites and keywords which you do not want people to view. The SMC PCI wireless network adapter is called the EZ Connectg SMC2802W, this card is much the same as some of the other PCI cards in this roundup and the software that it is bundled with allows you to do a site survey as well as view the link quality and signal strength.
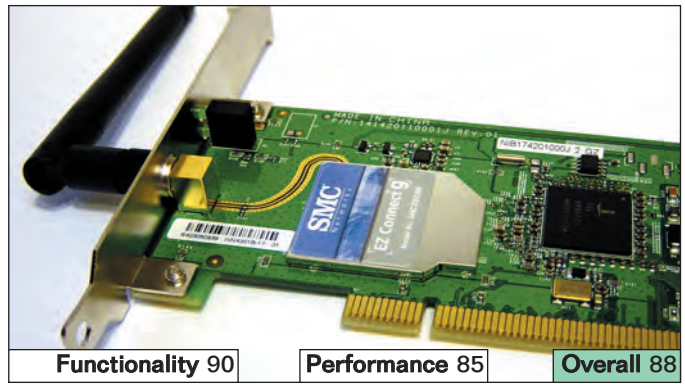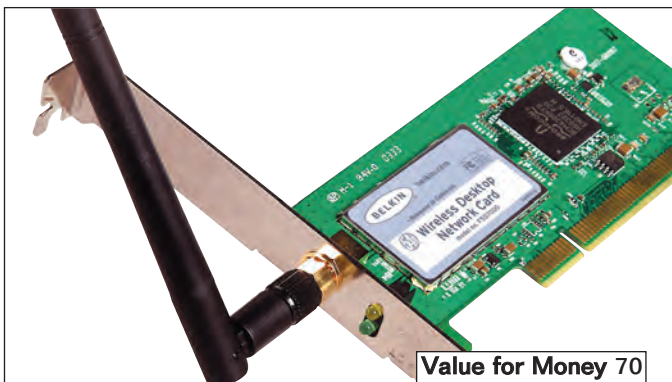
| Value for Money 89 | | | |

| Functionality 90 | Performance 85 | Overall 88 |

Plus: Functionality | Data throughput **Minus:** Nothing **Supplier:** Light Edge Technology [021] 510-8270
Internet: www.smc.com **RRP:** SMC2804WBR - R1199 | SMC2802W - R 899
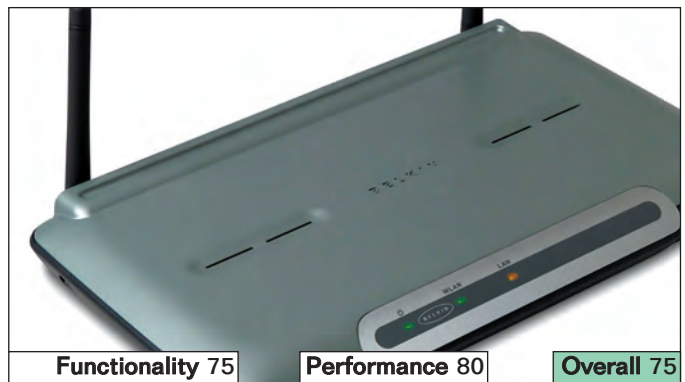
Belkin

Belkin is probably the only brand of wireless networking hardware in this entire roundup that is widely available in some of the larger computer retail stores. The first product from this manufacturer I had a look at was the access point. Even though the unit itself is very smart looking its feature set lets it down, such as the fact that it has two fixed antennas, the negative point being that you cannot add long range antenna's to it. Configuring this access point can be done by logging onto it via a web browser. It sports the usual features such as WEP encryption and MAC address filtering and it can also be set up as a DHCP server. It also supports the capability to connect to other wireless devices at 108Mbps, which is handy but not essential to have. I was disappointed to see no bridging or repeater functions, especially when considering its price is much higher than any of the other access points and routers in this roundup. The PCI card from Belkin offers pretty much the same features as most of the other PCI cards in this roundup. Its antenna is removable which is very useful as it allows you to add a long range antenna. Looking at the software, you are able to scan the local air waves for an access point and it also has the ability to show you the signal strength and noise levels that interfere with the wireless signal in the surrounding area. This PCI card can also be set to communicate with an access point at 108Mbps.

| Value for Money 70 | | | |

| Functionality 75 | Performance 80 | Overall 75 |

Plus: Nothing **Minus:** Access point price **Supplier:** Tamasa Trading [011] 230-7432
Internet: www.belkin.com **RRP:** F5D7000 - R1299 | F5D7130 - R2499

Benchmarking

I thought of doing a more practical benchmark test with the wireless products this month. Seeing that there is no real way to test the performance capabilities of these units exactly, I did some file transfer benchmarks. The first data file I copied was exactly 35 MB in size and I copied the file firstly without anything running in the background. I ran this test 3 times to ensure consistency - I also rebooted the computer after each copy. The second benchmark I ran was using the same data file but this time I had a game of Battlefield Vietnam connected to the SAIX server while I ran the test. This was basically to see how the product performed under load. For each manufacturer I setup its access point and installed its PCMCIA card or PCI card and only ran the benchmarks on the same hardware, except for the CNet products.

For the CNet products I ran the same test, but I set up each device to connect to the Gigabyte access point.

Glossary

802.11a
The weakest of the three specifications, 802.11a operates at 5 GHz which results in it having much weaker penetration than the other two. The bandwidth that this specification is capable of providing is 54Mbps.

802.11b
This is the specification which "commercialized" wireless networking - it operates in the 2.4 GHz band and has decent penetration capabilities. This specification is limited to 11Mbps.

802.11g
This specification is by far the most popular one to date, it contains all the benefits of 802.11b but has a much higher bandwidth, 54Mbps theoretically. It also operates on the 2.4 GHz band.

Access Point
An access point is basically a device which connects wireless clients to a wired network. An access point can be seen as an extension of a wired network.

Bridge *
A device that connects two local-area networks (LANs), or two segments of the same LAN that use the same protocol.

Router *
A device that forwards data packets along networks. A router is connected to at least two networks, commonly two LANs or WANs or a LAN and its ISP's network. Routers are located at gateways, the places where two or more networks connect.

SSID *
Short for service set identifier, a 32-character unique identifier attached to the header of packets sent over a WLAN that acts as a password when a mobile device tries to connect to the BSS (Basic Service Set). The SSID differentiates one WLAN from another, so all access points and all devices attempting to connect to a specific WLAN must use the same SSID. A device will not be permitted to join the BSS unless it can provide the unique SSID. Because an SSID can be sniffed in plain text from a packet it does not supply any security to the network.

WEP *
Short for Wired Equivalent Privacy, a security protocol for wireless local area networks. WEP is designed to provide the same level of security as that of a wired LAN. LANs are inherently more secure than WLANs because LANs are somewhat protected by the physicality of their structure, having some or all part of the network inside a building that can be protected from unauthorized access.
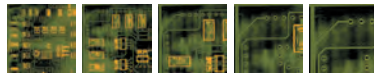
Repeater *
A network device used to regenerate or replicate a signal.

Source: Webopedia

Product	35 MB File Copy (seconds)	35 MB File Copy with Battlefield Vietnam online game running in the background (seconds)	202 MB File Copy (seconds)	Overall Score
D-Link	15.25	39.68	77.32	80
X-Micro	16.98	40.32	84.35	73
Planet	14.25	37.55	76.21	84
Gigabyte	14.12	36.08	74.21	88
Cnet CWD-854	14	38.75	77.96	79
Cnet CWC-854	14.56	38.92	78.21	79
Cnet CWP-854	15.22	39.1	78.62	79
Senao	14.63	37.45	75.51	84
SMC	14.69	38.69	76.28	88
Belkin	15.24	39.12	80.78	75

ASUS A8V Deluxe and Athlon 64 3500+

Once again, I find myself needing to speak about two pieces of hardware in this, the review for the latest ASUS offering to hit our shores, the A8V Deluxe AI Series Wi-Fi Edition motherboard. A serious mouthful of a product designation if ever I saw one.

The thing is, when ASUS place the word Deluxe behind a motherboard product code, they really mean to make a mouthful of a product, packing in extras by the pound. Feature-rich becomes an understatement, rather than simply an oft-used catch-phrase.

Of course, without a CPU to run, even a board as impressive as the A8Vs on-paper specifications can't prove its mettle. Fortunately, this is the other part which I might mention a few times in this review, this A8V was supplied complete with a brand-new Athlon 64 3500+.

This ASUS offering is short of absolutely nothing. Being the Wi-Fi edition, although WLAN is not integrated onto the board itself you do receive an ASUS 802.11g Ethernet adaptor and newly-designed WLAN antennae in the motherboard box. The signal is now sent and received through an antenna which can be placed almost anywhere, with a wire running down to the back of the WLAN card itself. I found this solution worked well, adding a few more metres of highest-performance full-strength wireless link radius than other antennae I've tested.

For even more value, ASUS have included a software-based wireless access point which turns the wireless link into a central wireless communications bay station.

There are no less than 8 high-speed USB 2.0 ports supported, and 2 IEE 1394 Firewire connectors. The A8V Deluxe is doubled up in every area in fact, including 2 RAID controllers on-board. The first VIA controller features two SATA and one ATA133 connections and is part of the VIA KT800Pro chipset itself, and the second is a Promise device provided purely for more flexibility, performance and reliability in the storage arena.

The A8V supports AMD Cool&Quiet technology, a trick similar to SpeedStep which alters the CPUs power consumption (and therefore heat generation) depending on the load. And as for audio, Realtek have incorporated an 8-channel audio system with auto sensing jack technology and three Universal Audio Jacks (UAJ) for ultimate flexibility.

With the Athlon 64 3500+ installed and running Windows XP, let me admit right up front that it was very impressive. The combination of this chip and this board yield an unparalleled demonstration of desktop computing power. It made me think of a comment I read recently in a motoring publication, which goes something along the lines of that the new Bugatti Veyron has more power than it actually needs, invoking what was dubbed the Superman effect on its driver who no longer needs to prove to people with less well-endowed supercars how fast his vehicle really is.
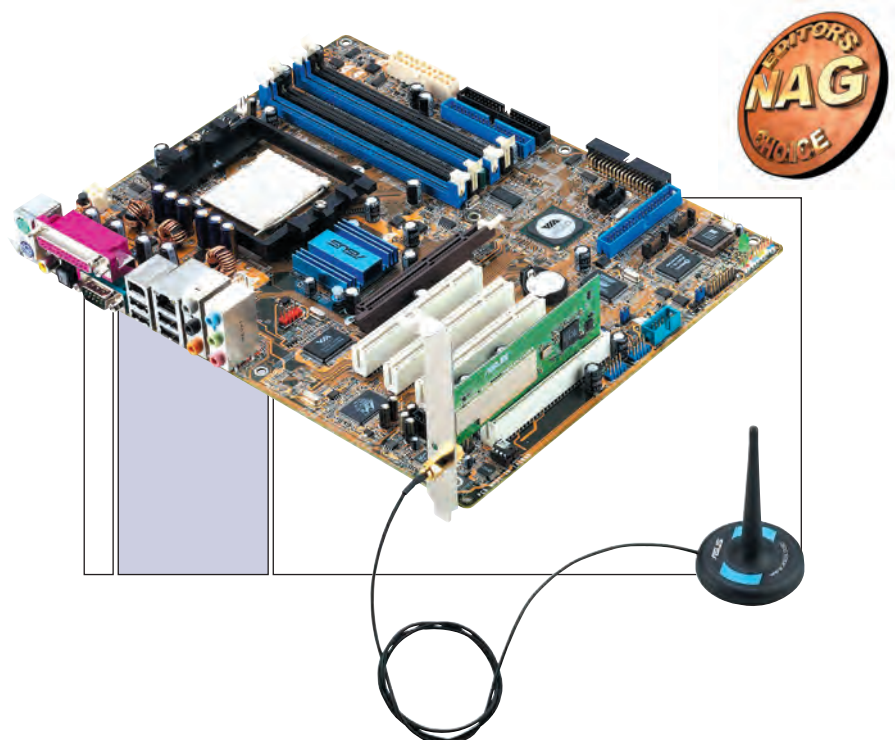
Of course, utilising all the grunt on offer from an Athlon 64 3500+ is nowhere near as frightening as pushing a 400 km/h supercar to its V-max, but the indomitable way this system monstered through every test I could throw at it has left me quite in awe, something which hasn't happened to me over any new IT equipment in many months.

SiSoft Sandra 2004 shows this system to be quicker than many dual-CPU systems using P4 3.2 GHz parts in most areas, both in multimedia and arithmetic calculations. And every gaming benchmark I ran at it yielded the same soon-to-be predictable results. This is a class all of its own, the ultimate power in silicon available to consumers right now.

Certain game titles can be used to measure the top whack of a CPU, although these are limited. One favourite of mine is to use an Empires - Dawn of the Modern World save game I created with a ludicrous number of units, which on my P4 3.06 was causing massive lag when I created the save. A P4 3.2 EE I tested later pushed the unit cap before CPU limitation up from just over 3000 to almost 6000, at which point it was struggling to maintain. The Athlon 64 3500+ on the ASUS A8V Deluxe motherboard only started showing strain when I reached 9000 units, where I called it quits due to a distinct shortage of land mass on the gigantic class map.

The awesome scale of the performance of this solution, combined with the incredible number of value-added features included with the ASUS A8V left me a little dumbstruck. An excellent board and peerless CPU make for a great system, startlingly fast and one of those things that can reaffirm a passion for technology.

Plus: Too many to mention **Minus:** I'm not that pedantic **Reviewer:** Russell Bennett
Supplier: ASUSTeK [011] 781 4204 **Internet:** www.asus.com **RRP:** TBA

ASUS WL-330 portable 802.11g access point

ASUS are experts at hearing the demand of the users out there and responding with innovation to these needs. The ASUS WL-330 is exactly such a product.

The WL-330 is called a pocket wireless access point on the international ASUS website, and that's exactly what it is. Although flipping a small toggle switch underneath the slightly larger than credit-card-sized device (and just a bit thicker than an RJ-45 port), changes the WL-330 into Ethernet mode, in which the device will act as simply another wireless connection searching for a network link.

With its own leather carry-case included in the purchase price of the WL-330, this product is one of those little things which any well-prepared IT expert or LAN gamer should always have with them.

It makes communications between wireless and wired systems infinitely more applicable in moments. Plug the WL-330 using the short LAN cable included in the stylish case into a standard wired Ethernet port on any system, and any devices with only a wireless link available are suddenly able to communicate with these more traditional network communications interface.

Full driverless plug-and-play functionality as well as administrator-less LAN configuration make using the WL-330 an absolute joy. Leave the device in access point mode and all wireless links within range will detect a new wireless network and be able to communicate with each other and the LAN device to which the ASUS box is attached, be this a single PC or a switch distributing this link data to a variety of wired workstations.

Power for the unit can be pulled from a wall socket through the included adaptor, or from an available USB port using the USB power cable, also included in the leather carry-case. There's also a built-in Web management interface for control over security settings and more advanced LAN setups. This WL-330 is a genuine little hassle-free, fully portable carry-along wireless connectivity solution!

ASUS scores full marks for this little gem. It works beautifully, is as hassle-free as you could possibly hope for, and completely bypasses mixed-infrastructure connection problems in seconds. What's more, it uses the 54 Mbps 802.11g wireless standard, relating to a useable transfer rate while maintaining backward-compatibility with the older and slower 11b standard.

Plus: A portable WLAN solution **Minus:** None **Reviewer:** Russell Bennett
Supplier: ASUSTeK [011] 781 4204 **Internet:** www.asus.com **RRP:** TBA

ATi X800 Pro - in ASUS and Sapphire flavours

High-end consumer focussed technology is a space which was somewhat short on news up until a couple of months ago. The beginning of this year saw few momentous releases to this market, but since the end of April a host of new kits to get enthusiasts drooling has exploded onto retail shelves.

AMD recently delivered a raft of new processors, with Intel retaliating by promising an extensive range of new offerings to be launched in the very near future. Intel themselves revealed a strong push towards PCI-Express in its latest range of motherboard products. And fortunately for gamers everywhere, NVidia introduced its newest high-end offering the GeForce FX 6800 series at the end of April.

Just two weeks later, ATi introduced its new R420 GPU to reclaim the title of fastest graphics card in the world today. The company assured short-term availability of the new boards in retail outlets across the globe, and sure enough here we have the first two X800 graphics cards to hit SA shores. The range-topping X800 XT Platinum is still scarce in all markets, but the X800 Pro flavours have begun streaming out to power-crazy gamers everywhere.

On test here are the Sapphire X800 Pro and ASUS AX800 Pro. Both feature 256 MB of GDDR-3 frame buffer RAM as well as all the enhancements of the R420 GPU itself. These, then, represent the highest echelon of 3D graphics cards available to consumers today, competing directly with cards based on NVidia 6800 Ultra designs.

The offering utilises the latest TSMC 130-nm low-k silicone manufacturing process to fit in excess of 160 million transistors on its core. ATi first tried this process out in the R360 GPU on which 9600 XT offerings are based. And similarities to this chip do not end there…

In fact, rather than the revolutionary leaps forward in technology envisioned with the shelved R400 development, R420 extends on the capabilities of the older GPU range, adding key features and enhancements to provide the necessary performance. The number of pixel pipelines has doubled from 8 to 16, and Vertex Shader pipeline units have increased from 4 to 6.

Normal mapping, a technique widely used to add detail to a conventional texture through lighting and reflection characteristics, benefits from the new 3Dc compression technique. This method allows the hardware to generate textures with three times the detail of uncompressed normal maps or the same detail at higher frame rates. Finally, the Pixel Shader unit is capable of handling far greater instruction lengths than in previous models. Core clock speeds are increased and GDDR-3 memory units are supported for faster memory frequencies as well.

The two boards on test here are both X800 Pro variants, meaning that 12 of their 16 pipelines are enabled. Both also feature a core clock speed of 475 MHz, with GDDR-3 memory running at the equivalent of 900 MHz.

The Sapphire X800 Pro looks like an ATi reference board design, right down to the "Monster" cooler graphic, because it in fact is one. Sapphire has not made any changes to this specification, although retail offerings will at least feature a different sticker on the heatsink. The boxed, retail AX800 uses the identical reference specifications with its own unique cooler graphic.

Both cards posted benchmark scores underscoring their aims

of re-affirming ATi as the fastest graphics card manufacturer in the world. I haven't yet tested a 6800-based board myself however, so I'll reserve a definitive judgement on whether ATi have succeeded or not until I have.

The ASUS offering proved to be the quicker of these two, possibly due to minor enhancements in the driver. Sapphire's X800 Pro reference board came without drivers in this case so all I could use were the standard Catalyst 4.5 series. All excuses aside, the AX800 scored 8776 3DMarks at 1024X768 with no FSAA compared to the Sapphire offering's "mere" 8349. With 6-sample FSAA enabled, it is still the ASUS leading with 5353 compared to 4879.

In this benchmark we see that the X800 suffers less performance degradation when running at high resolutions than older 9800 offerings did, but overall the results across the board reflect a performance improvement of greater than 50% over the older model, itself the fastest graphics card available to man or beast just a few short months ago.

In a P4 3.06 GHz system, both of these offerings easily breach 60 000 in the DX9-targeted Aquamark 3. Once more the ASUS stays a nose in front with 63 448 versus 61 870 for the Sapphire.

As for GL-based gaming performance, at the moment there are really no titles available with which to test the R420-based offerings properly. Using the Quake-3 engine driven Call of Duty revealed that while 9800 boards used to slow down only under higher resolutions, the X800 offerings remain CPU and RAM limited even with filtering fully utilised at 1600X1200 resolutions. Serious Sam - Second Encounter, my other OpenGL benchmark title, showed the exact same problem.

ShaderMark V2 demonstrates that these cards are not only capable of amazing feats of geometric calculation but also incorporate a high speed pixel shader engine, a feature essential for playing modern game titles at their best. Ranging from 431 fps in the per pixel environment mapping test to a low of 21 fps in the fur shader with anisotropic lighting measurements, once again nothing I've tested even competes.

Far Cry is one title which makes extensive use of shaders to create its rich and detailed environment, and with all detail to very high and FSAA enabled still this title remains playable. Both offerings did demonstrate some major texture problems on Far Cry however, with large masses of landscape suddenly
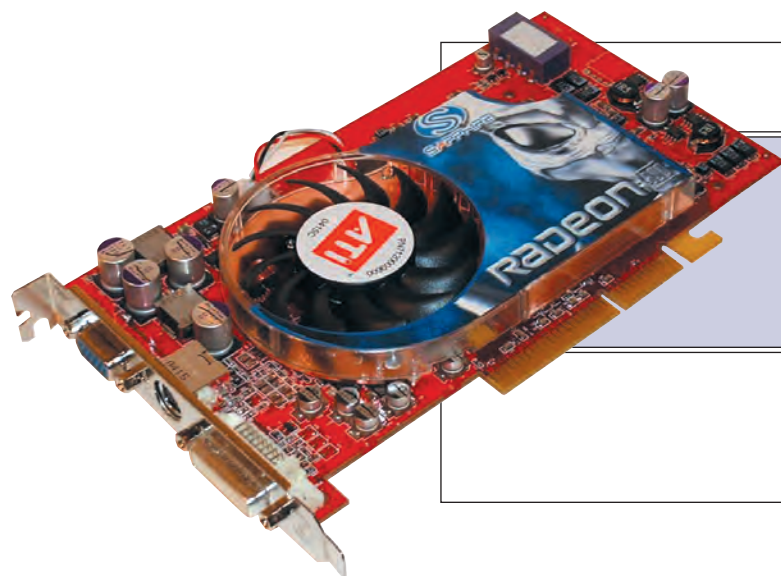
becoming invisible at random. These issues are likely driver-related and I expect the next Catalyst release will resolve them.

X2: The Threat managed to get an average of 63 fps in benchmark mode, running on the ASUS AX800 with FSAA, shadows and bump mapping all enabled. The Sapphire card only just stayed over 60 here, but both are excellent scores. Watching the benchmark run its loop as many times as I have you get used to where lag is expected to crop up even on the previous generation of high-end cards, and where tearing occurs in each scene. With these cards in place there were perhaps three instances where mere moments of visually perceptible lag cropped up.

In UT2004 the benefits of the new chip really show up. 9800-based boards could almost maintain a CPU-limited frame rate without quality-enhancing filters, at even higher resolutions though these did betray some fill-rate limitations. On the X800 offerings, even with full anisotropy or FSAA filtering methods turned on for the best quality image, still the limiting factor is the system and not the GPU, and only when both of these techniques are combined at 1600 X 1200 do the frame rates fall off.

RTS games are generally under-represented in benchmark runs these days. WarCraft III is performance-capped at 64 fps, so performs exactly the same on these new boards as it did on the 9800 XT. Command and Conquer Generals shows some performance gain, with an average frame rate of 30 fps at the highest resolution and max detail, compared to 20 fps for a 9800 XT.

The X800 has already had some criticism leveled at it for shader optimizations, a trick which NVidia were taken to task about in its 5xxx series of GeForce FX products. In short, the ATi X800 uses brilinear filtering, a combination of trilinear and bilinear techniques, to lessen the number of samples needed and therefore increase performance. Pure trilinear filtering provides a significantly improved image, although the method employed by the X800 shows very little quality degradation in fact.

In this respect NVidia may have got one up on the X800. Although the 6800 uses the same brilinear method by default for the best framerates, it can be turned to pure trilinear for those who insist on the absolutely best image.

Based on the powerful new R420 GPU, both of these X800 offerings from ASUS and Sapphire are deeply impressive cards, and even though they're essentially re-architected and enhanced R300 chips, the R420 really does move the game along, just like NV40 has taken significant strides forward for NVidia. Don't expect such leading performance to come cheap though, and if you must have one of these high-powered boards in your gaming machine, your wallet will take quite a hit, somewhere in the region of R6000 incl. VAT in fact.

Plus: Best graphics available **Minus:** Some driver issues **Reviewer:** Russell Bennett **Supplier:** Esquire Technology [012] 657 1111 (Sapphire X800) | ASUSTeK [011] 781 4204 (Asus AX800) **Internet:** www.esquire.co.za | www.asus.com **RRP:** TBA

Kingmax DDR 500 RAM

While DDR memory may be somewhat stuck at the 400 MHz mark thanks to the system-bus limitation of 200 MHz, this fact doesn't stop memory manufacturers from releasing memory technology products rated at higher frequencies for the power-hungry enthusiast market.

Taiwanese memory manufacturer Kingmax calls this range the Hard-core! Series, and supplied NAG with two DDR 500 DIMMs of 512 MB capacity each to be put through their paces.

This Kingmax Hard-core DDR 500 is also rated as PC-4000, although in my opinion this is actually an understatement of the throughput this product actually has available. These PC ratings on RAM above regular DDR 400 are really academic, as they aren't standards-based and it is left up to the manufacturers of such offerings to decide on a performance-related figure to use in the nomenclature.

Sheathed in a double-sided, full-length metal heat sink the Kingmax DIMMs look suitably armoured to maintain their huge performance for days on end. The chips themselves utilise a proprietary packaging technology developed by Kingmax itself for maximum transfer efficiency called TinyBGA.

Without even delving into any over clocking, which is really what DDR 500 products like these Hard-core chips are made for, it's clear that these DIMMs outstrip the throughput of even the biggest-name "conventional" DDR 400 parts. SiSoft Sandra 2004 confirms this emphatically when it shows up a memory bandwidth in excess of 6000 Mb/s, comfortably faster than any of the RAM solutions in the programs database of reference systems.

To put that into perspective, the DDR 333 I use on my older 533 MHz FSB system is rated as PC 2700, and I get just about exactly that figure as available bandwidth. Even the latest 875-chipset Intel boards with PC-4800 RAM from an unnamed manufacturer can only manage 5700.

Apart from the extra headroom that this performance provides for over clocking, such available RAM speed coupled with how cool those plates keep the parts provide higher levels of data integrity and superb system stability.

The Kingmax Hard-core series chips are the quickest DDR 500 parts I have tested to date, and if you're looking for some RAM to run an extensively tinkered-with system safely on, or just want the extra boost in performance and stability these parts offer, I'd have to say you can't go wrong with this particular series of offerings.
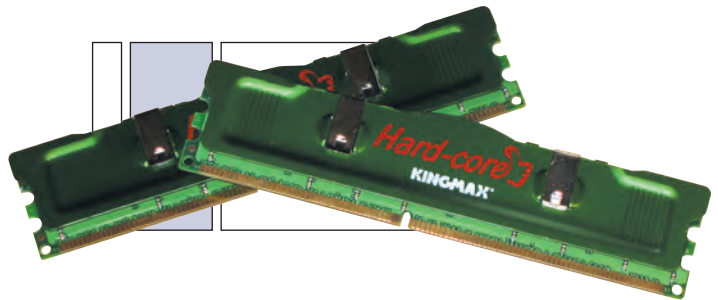
Plus: Excellent performance **Minus:** Expensive **Reviewer:** Russell Bennett
Supplier: Esquire Technology [012] 657 1111 **Internet:** www.esquire.co.za **RRP:** R1360

HP iPAQ h4150

For a change a PDA did a real amount of travelling with me - this one had the tough job of accompanying us on an E3 trip, so there wasn't time to fiddle with it or have it break down on us. Luckily PDAs have become extremely reliable and the iPAQ is part of this generation. Unfortunately that also means that it's not all that different from other PDAs in this league.

Of course, Hewlett Packard are not new to the PDA game, so at least you have an assurance of quality. The h4150, reviewed here, might remind you of slimmer models, but inside it packs the power of the bigger and bulkier h4350. The unit ships with its docking bay, the software required and a carrying pouch (sans any kind of clip) plus an extra stylus in case you lose the first one. HP do stock memory and other accessories, but that's what you've got for now. Onboard it has 32 mb of flash memory, which is fine for brief voice recordings and keeping your notes and schedule, but you'll need a MCC card to expand on storage space.

Since it is Windows CE powering the PDA, all the software online available for the OS seems to work fine. In fact, CE, as with all other PDAs that use the OS, provide the main features. The iPAQ itself gives a nice, high-colour screen, recording facilities and wireless connectivity (including Bluetooth) - all packaged in a very sturdy and light design.

The battery life was really good and the little PC held out a lot longer than I expected it to. The power cable that connects to the docking bay can also connect to the PDA directly, so it's ideal for travelling. And with a proper wireless setup you don't need the bay at all.

It's not a cheap buy, but it certainly is the most feature-rich PDA on the market, with a good enough battery to back it up (though there are models out there with more running life). If you're not on a budget and you need something with so many additional lineaments, it's a good purchase.


Plus: Feature rich **Minus:** Not cheap **Reviewer:** James Francis **Supplier:** Axiz [011] 237 7000
Internet: www.axiz.co.za **RRP:** R4029

VideOH AVC2010 PCI

Consumer grade video capture devices have flooded the market of late, MPEG-II (a type of hardware-based compression to speed up capturing of video streams) being the latest buzzword to attract prospective home-cinema enthusiasts. As mentioned in another review, the VideOh! CD (the USB version of this product) was quite the disappointment. The VideOh! PCI manages to narrowly miss the same fate. On lower spec machines (500 MHz, as per minimum requirements) the video stream was blocky and had bad dropouts when it was utilizing 100% of the processor. Stability issues in detecting a video signal also caused much frustration. On high-spec machines (2 GHz and up) the card performed a great deal better, but still not nearly as good as it should have. In both the better (5.5Mb/s) and best (6.5Mb/s) modes the video was choppy and suffered from a great deal of pixelation. The processor utilization in this case was about 40% during the best

quality capture. The bundled software includes Sonic's MyDVD and ShowBiz. MyDVD has quite a few bugs whereas Showbiz worked very well, allowing you to create video-clips easily. The quality of video after decode/encode through Showbiz was noticeably bad, making the conversion of videos into DVDs a second rate option. If you need to convert video for use either on the web or for low-quality consumption, the price of the VideOh! PCI moves in its favour, but remains overpriced for a capture card of this quality.
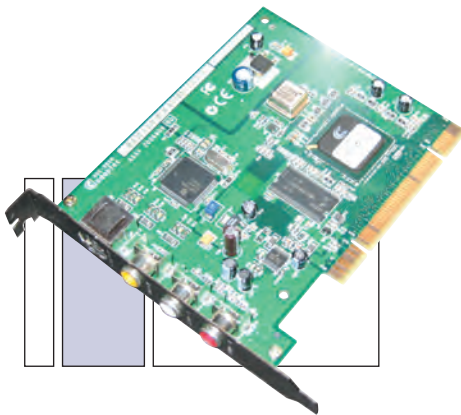
Plus: Fast capture **Minus:** Questionable quality **Reviewer:** Miktar Dracon
Supplier: Drive Control Corporation [011] 887 8927 **Internet:** www.drivecon.net **RRP:** R1250.00

RatPadz GS

Yes, it's a mouse pad. But it's a mouse pad with a difference. Basically, what makes this pad nice to work on is its unique non-stick surface.

The mouse pretty much glides over this pad incredibly smoothly, and the rough surface finish makes for an excellent optical surface. One might think that, while the surface is rough and would interfere with the mouse movement, this is not the case at all.

The pad is quite heavy (for what it is)

and relatively thick. Also, it's not flexible at all.

It's a great pad for home use and, while it does not transport as easily as other pads do, it won't go amiss at a LAN either.
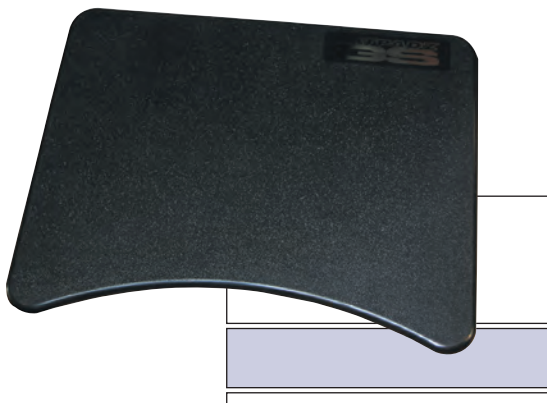
Plus: Great surface **Minus:** Very hard **Reviewer:** Walt Pretorius
Supplier: Revo-Tech **Internet:** www.revo-tech.co.za **RRP:** R135

RaveStation Dance Mat

Dancing with your fingers is not only boring, it's quite silly. Playing games like Dance Dance Revolution on a Game Pad defeats the point behind the game, that point being to dance, of course. So far, finding a decent Dance Mat for the PS2 involved trekking down to the far reaches of the Oriental sections of malls in the hopes of finding something that you can dance on that actually won't explode on you, but that's all changed. The Rave Station mat from Bowline may have a silly name, but it's a quality mat with no ergonomic flaws aside from being unavoidably soft. The surface of the mat is a wonderfully roughish texture, making sure you don't slip and break something. The actual pressure areas of the mat is close to perfect, each arrow and button, including the extra buttons at the top, has a good area of sensitivity and responds perfectly, even to lighter steps. The cable length from the mat to the PS2 connector is a good length, letting you put the mat the right distance away from the TV. Like most soft mats, the RaveStation is prone to slipping on surfaces, especially carpets and such. Stepping hard on the left or right arrow can send the mat skidding in that direction, which is no fun. Included with the mat, are 4 little 'feet' you can stick to the bottom of the mat to try and avoid the slipping, but they don't work so well mostly due to the flexible properties of the mat itself. If possible, fixing the mat to a piece of wood the same size of the mat is the ideal situation, giving you a good quality hard mat. Only attempt to attach the mat to wood if you know what you're doing, however, as the entire inside of the mat is filled with electrical bits that you could possibly damage if you start hammering nails through the mat haphazardly. If you're interested in Dance Dance Revolution at all or an avid fan, the RaveStation is a more than decent mat at a very affordable price.

Plus: Great value **Minus:** May warp with hard stepping **Reviewer:** Miktar Dracon
Supplier: Bowline [021] 550 9700 **Internet:** www.bowline.co.za **RRP:** R200

VideOH AVC1100 CD

Part of the large range of the VideOh! Product family, the USB incarnation may seem like the most appealing choice of the range yet it manages to become the black sheep of the family. Supposedly capable of capturing DVD quality video/audio, the VideOh! CD (as the USB version is called) not only has a hard time with just basic quality video/sound, it struggles with utterly terrible quality video/sound. On anything less than a USB 2.0 capable machine the quality achievable borders on horrific. Using a high-speed USB 2.0 port, the VideOh! CD can capture at reasonable speed and with standard quality but nothing to write home about. When in use, any other USB devices become un-useable. The included capture software (Sonic MyDVD) had problems with an audio-synched capture, the video and audio would often become mismatched. The bundled software was prone to sporadic crashes, only luck of the draw deciding if you'll make it through the entire video you want to capture. Considering its price it's hard to believe that a product like this could have so many downfalls. The recommended system requirements include an 800-MHz processor and 128MB RAM, though the test machine of 2.4 GHz and 512MB RAM struggled to achieve workable results, especially without USB 2.0 (which is not a requirement, only USB 1.1 is listed as a requirement). As far as video capturing hardware goes, the VideOh! CD represents the darker, less appealing side of the whole ordeal and should be avoided at all costs. The allure of an easy USB device should not (as yet) replace the use of a proper capture-card.

Plus: Easy USB plug-n-play **Minus:** Just about everything else **Reviewer:** Miktar Dracon
Supplier: Drive Control Corporation [011] 887 8927 **Internet:** www.drivecon.net **RRP:** R899

Xtreme Mouse Pad

When the Pro Pad first hit the market, it was met with some scepticism. Some said it was too big, and others said it wouldn't last. But the South African based producers of the huge and very flexible mouse pad had decided that they were on to a good thing, and they would stick it out. And with good reason - the Pro Pad fast became one of the local gaming community's favourite mouse pads.

But that's no reason to rest on one's laurels. The creators of the Pro Pad have returned with a new product, called the Xtreme Pad. At a glance, there doesn't seem to be much difference between this product and its predecessor. However, the new Xtreme Pad features a much more refined trilobal surface, due to the process used in the creation of the pad. Additionally, the pad is softer than its predecessor, meaning that it is far more flexible.

Another great aspect of the Xtreme Pad is that it can now feature any design on it. Where the Pro Pad could have a single colour corner print, the Xtreme Pad allows for full colour, full pad printing. Customised printing jobs can also be arranged, thanks to the fact that the pads are produced locally.

Like the Pro Pad, the Xtreme Pad has an excellent mousing surface, and is very durable. The fact that it can be rolled, folded or scrunched up in virtually any way for transportation purposes makes it an ideal LAN mat.
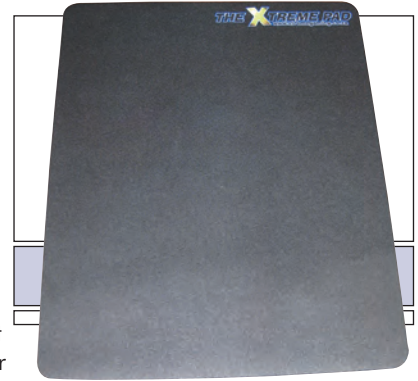
Plus: Durable **Minus:** Perhaps a bit too big **Reviewer:** Walt Pretorius
Supplier: Xtreme Gaming (084) 556 3317 **Internet:** www.xtremegaming.co.za **RRP:** R 120

Evercool Water Cooling System

Water cooling certainly is becoming the big thing. With CPU fan developers making bigger and more ridiculous fan cooling units, people who want to get the most out of their machines and have the sense to look at the logistics of plugging a half kilo fan to their mother boards will realise that using a water based cooling system really is the way to go. And no, arguments about it being a bad idea to put water inside a PC don't count here, because you would need to be a complete wally to bugger one of these systems up. Especially this one.

The Evercool Water Cooling system is by far the best of its kind that I have personally seen (and my obsession with water cooling means that I've seen quite a few.) From the word go, the Evercool system makes the end user's life as easy as possible.

The installation of the system is, by water cooling standards, a snap. All pipes are pre-cut to standard lengths and instructions for cutting are also included. Each pipe end is capped with a washered screw cap, to allow easy, and more importantly water-tight, attachment to the various components. Obviously all components are fitted with screw thread attachment areas.

The system is made up of pipes (obviously) a CPU cooling block, a GPU cooling block, a fan radiator and a main pump unit. This pump unit takes up a 5 1\4" bay, and contains a pump (obviously again) another radiator, a fan control (for the radiator fan within this unit, as well as another compatible system fan) and an LCD display showing temperature, operation of the pump and so on.

The main unit also allows for filling of the water system. This means that the unit can be filled simply, from the front of the PC, without needing any additional pipes or parts. A supplied thermal sensor can be placed on the CPU, and attached to the main unit, and a backup shutdown temperature set, for extra safety.

Additional pieces (a HDD cooler and cross flow fan) can be purchased separately, and added to the kit.

The benefits of water cooling your GPU as well as your CPU are obvious, because you will be able to squeeze an overall better performance out of your PC as a whole. It's the trickiest part of the installation, but the fact that it is an option with this system makes the overall value of the Evercool Water Cooling system even greater.

If water cooling is something you want to get into, this is a simple and effective system to make use of.

Plus: Easy and effective **Minus:** Not idiot proof **Reviewer:** Walt Pretorius
Supplier: Naked IT [011] 482 5493 **Internet:** www.nakedit.co.za **RRP:** R999

powered by Unreal technology

a closer look at Epic's latest engine...

Unreal Engine 2 Technology Demo © 2004 Epic Games, All Rights Reserved.

It's got gamma-correct, linear colour space renderers, lenticular halos, normal mapped, parameterized Phong lighting, pre-computed bump-granularity self-shadowing using spherical harmonic maps...

But what the hell does it all mean? When did understanding the power behind gaming become something akin to rocket science, but seemingly even more complex? The Unreal Engine 3, not to be confused with the unannounced game Unreal 3, is a complete game development framework for next-generation consoles and DirectX9-equipped computers. A large piece of technology that sits behind the game you play, it provides you with the sounds, the visuals the developers created with the content creation tools. Why should developers licence engines such as the Unreal Engine? Well, more people would prefer to buy a car and drive somewhere without having to assemble it themselves. Engines such as the Quake 3 and the Unreal iterations allow developers to spend more time on creating the game itself, rather than the technology that drives it. Along with the engine, developers purchase support for the engine - help when they need it as well as future upgrades to the technology. This is a good deal for everyone involved, really, as it provides a reason for Epic to continue developing their engines as well as a solution for game developers who don't have the technical expertise required to create an engine that can run on every PC, every console and live up to the expectations of gamers. At the end of it all, more games for us. In the past, everything was about the polygon count, about the curved surfaces. The character models in Unreal Tournament 2004 contain more polygons each than an entire level from Unreal 1, much how the character models from Quake 3 contain more polygons than entire levels from Quake 1. It's an eerie similarity, really. These days however, it's all about High Dynamic Range and Shaders, stencil shadows and physics; the Unreal Engine 3 being no different, focusing heavily on such aspects. It all sounds really technical and it is, no doubt about that, but it translates into something much simpler for us gamers.

Visuals

The largest section, naturally. The most apparent part of any game you're playing is the bits you're seeing with your eyes. The Unreal Engine 3 has support for a 64-bit colour High Dynamic Range rendering pipeline. Basically, it means that the renderer takes far more into account when it comes to colour precision than any engine has before. This gives it access to a wide range of post processing effects (effects that are done on a scene after it's already been drawn) such as light blooms (the glows around bright objects) and depth-of-field (the blurring effect that occurs on the background when you're focusing on a nearby object). Alongside this, all the modern per-pixel lighting and rendering techniques are supported including virtual displacement mapping (which is just a fancy way of 'faking' geometry using lighting, i.e. bricks on a wall). Normal maps (also being hyped by the upcoming Doom 3 engine) allow character/enemy models or even props in a level to appear much more detailed than they really are.

With full support for seamlessly interconnected indoor and outdoor environments, artists can build terrain with blended materials (smooth transitions from rock to grass, etc) including vegetation layers that have procedurally placed meshes (the plants are placed according to a formula, dictating where they should go and if they should be bigger or smaller than normal). All objects in the environment as well as the environment itself, can cast either hard or soft shadows, whichever the developers prefer. Hard shadows work best for indoor environments where lighting is sharp and acute, while soft-shadows are usually used in outdoor segments where sunlight dissipates the edges.

Physics

Half-Life 2 has promised us articulate physics; Far Cry has already delivered much of that. Physics is the current buzzword with terms like "rag-doll" already becoming commonplace. When a character dies and flops over a railing, when a vehicle turns too fast and rolls: these are all rigid body physic systems. When objects in a game behave much like their real-world counterparts, physically, that's when a complex system is governing how it reacts to impact, gravity and even virtual wind. Taking these ideas one step further, the Unreal Engine 3 also supports objects that can be dismembered (when an arm bends too far, it could snap off) as well as friction (cars will slide down icy paths but not sandy paths). Physics-driven sounds allow developers to specify detailed phonic reactions to objects colliding, so as to present the proper sound for metal-on-metal or wood-on-cement.

Content Creation
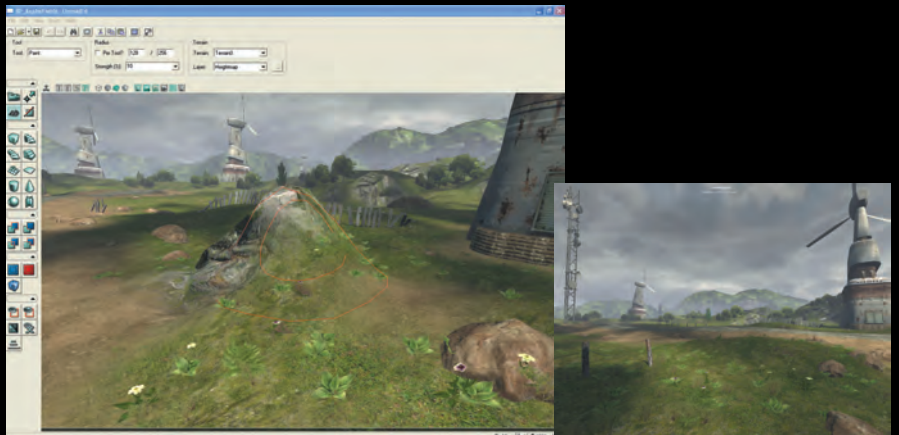
At the end of the day, it all comes down to how easily developers can get the game ideas they have out of their minds and on to the screen. The Unreal Editor is a pure "What You See Is What You Get" content creation tool, allowing developers to visually place and edit objects/characters/lights inside a level and tweak them in real-time. Every aspect of a level is created inside the editor, including materials and terrains. The powerful UScript editor allows the programmers to script objects, enemies and other components inside the editor and test their code right there and then.

Audio

Audiophiles out there will appreciate that the engine supports 5.1 surround sound Dolby Digital, a rarity in games. All the usual trimmings such as 3D sound positioning and Doppler shifts (how the pitch of a sound rises and falls as the object passes nearby) are there, the engine also includes support to stream sound on consoles (since on most consoles, not all the sound/music is pre-loaded like on PCs).

Artificial Intelligence

We've got the visuals, we've got things moving, but now we have to give them purpose. The Unreal series has been renowned for its advanced AI since the get-go, so the Unreal Engine 3 is not allowing for any exceptions. The AI system supports path-finding (finding a way from point A to point B) as well as complex level navigation, individual decision making and team-based activities. The path finding is aware of things like switches and elevators, understanding them and allowing for complex scenarios where the AI might press a switch to get the elevator to come down so it can go where it wants to. The team-based AI is very advanced, providing support for team coordination, objective management (doing this now, is more important than doing something else) as well as long-term goals (lose ground here, fall back but flank the player to surprise him).

Animation

Rag-dolls aren't the best way to achieve more convention animations, such as running or waving a hand in the air. In the past animations had to be created specifically for each action and were very rigid - if you attempted to run and then jump the switch between the animations were very noticeable. Skeletal animation systems aren't anything new but have been used to great effect so far. The Unreal Engine 3 elaborates on them, adding finer control and detail. A character's animation is driven by a set of 'bones', moving the 'arm' bone causes the geometry around it to deform along with the bone, much like our own muscle/bone system. Skeletal animations can be blended to achieve smooth transitions while specific bones could be attached to 'controllers', bits of programming that tell them how to behave, such as having an NPC's head and eyes track a player walking through a level. Entire animations such as an enemies walking animation can be changed dynamically depending on their health.

Anime Interest:

Anime Industry Treading on Thin Ice...

According to Professor Shuhei Kishimoto of the Japanese Institute for Economy, Trade and Industry Research, the anime industry is drawing nearer to a national crisis. The reason, he says, is a system whereby the many small animation studios are grossly exploited by larger distribution companies. These small studios work as sub-contractors, and are frequently not given budgets high enough to cover their production costs. They are thereby forced to rely on royalties from toys and other secondary products and international distribution to pay their expenses, and very often do not make profits at all. This has already resulted in the bankruptcy of a number of these studios, and Kishimoto warns that it could destabilise the entire industry.

What is needed, he asserts, is more stringent anti-monopoly and intellectual property laws which will protect the lower-end studios and allow them to share in the proceeds from their work. This will account for both producers of original content, as well as "in-betweeners" whose contracts involve drawing the many frames of animation from one "key frame" to the next.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry has taken this warning seriously, and is already following up on Kishimoto's recommendations. A committee to oversee and investigate matters in Japanese television and film, specifically the animation sector, was established in April of this year. Major commercial banks across Japan have also pledged their support, and promise to give more consideration to matters of intellectual property when extending loans to production and distribution companies.

Remember to take a look on the cover CD for the second issue of LO Magazine - it's an anime magazine in .PDF format. Please note this magazine is not created by NAG Magazine - we're just providing the vehicle...

Anime DVD

Read or Die
Format: Series [3 Episodes]
Availability: www.amazon.com - $26.96 excl. shipping

When a demure and seemingly innocent substitute teacher named Yomiko Readman is ambushed in the street by a man dressed in archaic clothing and riding a giant grasshopper, we discover that she is actually "The Paper", a secret agent for the Royal British Library. What sets Ms Readman apart from her common contemporaries is that she has the uncanny knack of being able to control paper, in any shape or form. During the course of the story, she is called in on special assignment by The Library to hunt down a group of literature thieves. The strange thing about them is that they all seem to be re-incarnations of famous historical figures. Under the command of her superior, Joker-san, Yomiko and her partner Nancy (a woman with the ability to walk through solid objects) discover that the plot goes far deeper, and that the entire world is at stake. (Who would've thought?)

The series is only three episodes long, which makes it a lot more like a film. A substantial amount of action is crammed into a very short space of time, and so the pace is extremely quick. While it tells a story that the audience will either love or hate, the show must be commended for its polished technical aspects. The animation is traditional, but extremely smooth and highly detailed, supported by a classically influenced but quirky and original soundtrack. Character development is also remarkable considering the short timeframe of the series, and the cast is extremely likeable. Empathy for the characters is created with such finesse that we feel for them even through events which are quite absurd and unrealistic. Read or Die is a perfect remedy for much of the formulaic and pre-determined entertainment we're constantly subjected to.

Bubblegum Crisis | Episodes 1 - 3
One of the first Japanese series release in the US, Bubblegum Crisis is an early example of cyberpunk that borrows heavily from Blade Runner and Robocop, Bubblegum Crisis depicts the adventures of the female vigilante group 'the Knight Sabres'. In form-fitting, high-heeled mecha suits the group fight the rogue cyborgs of the sinister Genome Corporation. A must-have for fans though the 'old school' art style and sparse features might not appeal to newer generations.

Cowboy Bebop: Shooting Star (Graphic Novel)
Tokyopop
R 68.95
Hajime Yayate's famous Anime makes its way to book form in this Manga written and drawn by Cain Kuga, who was employed by the series' creators long before it became famous to do this version. Fans of the series will be pleasantly surprised, since it's actually written to be an alternate version to that of the other Mangas and Animes. After being hired by Kai Lucas to find his doppelganger, Spike and Jet soon find themselves broke, hungry… and on the galaxy's most wanted list, with dozens of bounty hunters after them. A definite must-get for fans of the original series.

Nadesico (Graphic Novel)
CPM Manga
R 85.95
Originally published in Japan in 1997, the Nadesico series comprises of three books and revolves around the battleship Nadesico, which is part of Earth's fight against the Jupiterians. Built out of recently discovered extraterrestrial technology, the ship is put into action when the citizens of Jupiter amass a force large enough to destroy Earth's defences. This starts a rollercoaster of a ride for the Nadesico and its crew as they go up against impossible odds and discover things that they couldn't even have imagined.
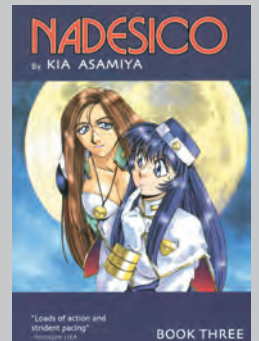
Dante's Equation
Jane Jenson • R236.95 (excl. delivery charge)
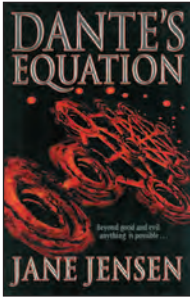
The name Jane Jensen will strike a chord with many of our older readers. She is the author of several computer games including the Gabriel Knight series. This franchise was considered to be one of the best at the time and features in many game reviewers' best titles of all time lists.

While she still works on computer games, Jensen is also a novelist. Dante's Equation is her fourth novel following two Gabriel Knight novels and Judgment Day.

If any of her upcoming computer games are anything like Dante's Equation, then we are in for a treat. This novel is an intricately woven story revolving around what seems like many disparate events. Yet, Jensen establishes patterns from the start of the novel and spurs her readers on to turn the page and find out what is going to happen next.

While trying to outline such a detailed plot will be useless, Dante's Equation ties together four narratives from around the world. The one revolves around a Rabbi in Jerusalem who has unearthed a disturbing pattern in the Torah. We also meet a young physicist in Seattle who is working on a wave-pattern theory that is set to revolutionise science. The third thread deals with a US intelligence operative who has discovered the biggest threat to national security. Finishing the quartet, we have a freelance reporter investigating missing persons.

This may seem convoluted but Jensen does an admirable job in moving the plot forward. Dante's Equation is definitely worth a read.

Freak Image • R 53.95

Welcome to the world of Max, a man incarcerated in the Bridgewyck Institute for the Criminally Insane. Max has a special power that he can't quite control and this has cost him very dearly in the past.

Throughout the graphic novel's 64 pages, Max investigates his powers, his past and the events that lead him to where he finds himself today.

Drawn in a far more simplistic fashion, Freak has a very independent feel to its storytelling and art. Creator Lee Ferguson is probably best known by fans of the X-Men Icons: Chamber mini-series and Mr. Keen comics and Freak is his first outing in creator-owned work. It's not everyone's cup of tea, but it's a nice blend of interesting art and an intriguing story that is not too heavy-handed.
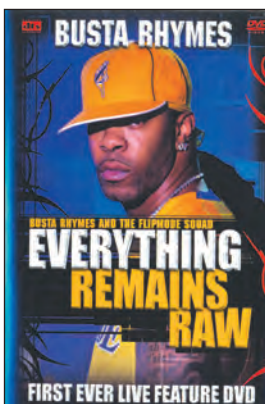
Everything Remains Raw | Busta Rhymes

While Busta Rhymes may not be the best hip hop artist around, but he does put on a good show. And thanks to the wonders and marvels of DVD, you can experience this show, performed at the Celebrity Theatre in Phoenix, AZ, in the comfort of your own home.

Said to be one of Rhymes' best performances, hip hop fans are sure to enjoy this energetic and entertaining show.

So-Called Chaos | Alanis Morissette

The once controversial Canadian songress is back with her fourth installment. This time round, people who enjoyed the angst of Jagged Little Pill and the moderate anger of Under Rug Swept are going to be sorely disappointed in the happy go lucky attitude that seems to pervade this album. Alanis works best when she's pissed off at someone, something which you're not going to find here.

Under My Skin | Avril Lavigne

Teenage rebellion has been replaced by the inevitable teenage angst that one would expect from an artist like Avril Lavigne. While her debut album featured some tracks that were a lot of rather irresponsible fun, this one seems to be crammed full of pubescent gloom and doom. If you're a fan, you might want this album for passing your Grade 3 exams.

Talkes of a Librarian | Tori Amos

This is basically a Tori Amos Greatest Hits collection, and about time too. This is one of the world's most accomplished female vocalists, and this album goes a long way to show off her ability. Of course, she's not the kind of artist that you go out and buy on a whim - her unusual vocal style and strange diction make her something of an acquired taste. But it is a great collection.
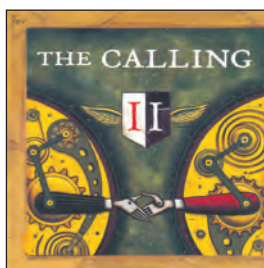
II | The Calling

The Calling is a two man outfit that presents light, easy listening adult oriented rock. While the musical ability of these two guys cannot be questioned, their music does seem to fade into the background a little, unless you actually go about making a point of listening to it. Of course, fans will probably love this one, but it's nothing that's going to convert a bunch of new ones.

Role playing review

A|STATE
Contested Ground Studios
RRP: approx. R 400.00

A|State is something of a strange role playing game. The game has a setting that appears to be both very vast and incredibly limited. It is set in The City, a place which is really never given any other name and is, for all intents and purposes, utterly massive. The City is broken up into a myriad of districts, allowing the players and GM to explore any of a large number of options. In the end, though, it's still just one centralised place, making the vast exploration potentials of games like Dungeons and Dragons or, more notable, Star Wars, impossible in this title.

That said, one must realise that A|State is not the kind of game in which exploration is a big thing. It is a far more cerebral title than your basic sword-swinging, spell-slinging faire.

A|State is a dark game, with a simple percentile based system that allows the players to concentrate on actual role playing, with a minimum of dice rolling to clutter up the game session. Somewhere between steam-punk and cyber-punk with a supernatural element, A|State introduces the player to a world that is both modern and primitive, with a good dash of the usual "evil corporations and Machiavellian governments" that one would expect to find in a dark future title.

Not everyone will enjoy this game. It brings a heavy atmosphere of doom and gloom with it and, although players who are serious about their gaming will thoroughly love it, the more light hearted role player will probably wilt in this sunless world.

A|State also deals with some pretty disturbing subject matter, so younger players should probably avoid it.

If you need a good indication of the feel captured by this title from newcomers Contested Ground Studios, watch movies like Dark City or Brazil.

This is an intense and very enjoyable game!

Making Players Feel

The role of the Game Master multiple. One of the lesser known areas where a GM is made or broken, though (aside from rule arbitration, plot construction and story telling skills) is in his ability to evoke emotion within his players. While this may seem a rather strange statement, the creation of emotion within the group is vital to the success of a role playing session, especially in the long run.

The most memorable games are the ones which get players excited, for example, which is an emotional response to the stimuli given to the players by the game master.

How exactly, can emotion be generated in something as abstract as a role playing game? The problem inherent is the fact that it relies almost entirely on the imagination of the player in terms of visualisation, making the creation of emotion more a response from the player than a direct influence of the Game Master. But it is still the Game Master's job to provide that stimulus to the players, and it takes the right kind of approach to do it successfully.

Joy, or happiness, is probably the easiest emotion to generate. After all, players are already doing something they enjoy when role playing, and are therefore open to positive feelings. Making a player happy is as easy as running an enjoyable game.

Excitement goes hand in hand with that, because most games have exciting moments; when a player sees his carefully constructed plan come to fruition, for example, or when a tense combat scene erupts. Two of the more difficult emotions to evoke are arguably fear and love.

Fear can be created by a versatile GM who understands a few basic concepts behind making people uneasy and who is willing to make the atmosphere of the playing area suit his intentions. Low light works well, and a little divine intervention by way of poor weather can make things all the more terrifying. Additionally, putting the players' characters in situations that may be unsettling to the players themselves also helps - isolation and confusion are two great ways to get that going. Putting a character in an unknown area, all on their own, is bound to make the player a little twitchy. Additionally, a combination of mystery and well timed revelation can also heighten this emotion; at first the players don't know what they're up against (letting their imaginations run wild) and when they do finally find out, it's far worse than they initially feared. Throw a sense of helplessness into the mix, as well as a couple of frightening situations, and you have a perfect starting point to scare the hell out of the players. The only thing to do then is take away control of the situation...

One of the greatest contributors to players feeling fear comes from the game setting and the way that the GM uses language to convey it. Games like D&D or Shadowrun are less conducive to fear than titles like Call of Cthulhu or Chill. Effective description works wonders as well, allowing the GM to form a more "concrete" picture in the player's mind.

Generating this kind of emotion in players makes for truly memorable game sessions, simply because the emotion felt is so primal that the events lock themselves in the player's mind.

And as for love? I have never heard of anyone that could get a player to fall in love with something inside the game. Who knows, though. Maybe, if you're really good...

MAGIC
The Gathering®

The world's best Trading Card Game will pitch your wits against your opponents'. You'll need all the help you can get: strong creatures, nerves of steel and some serious muscle – like the one between your ears. To start playing Magic: The Gathering, nothing beats the Core Game Starter Set. It has everything two people need to play their first game. The step-by-step demo CD-Rom makes playing the first game easy.

gaMes empoRium

Distributed in South Africa
by Games Emporium
www.geon.co.za
magic@icon.co.za

Conan Action Figures
R130

This series of figures coming in August has the heroes from the ever pop-ular Conan world. Based on characters from both the novels and the new comic series, like most McFarlane collectables they are exquisitely detailed, and closer to resin statues than real action figures. But if you have an empty space on your desk that needs to be filled by something well made and eye catching, order your Conan figures now. The series will feature six characters, two of which are different versions of Conan himself.
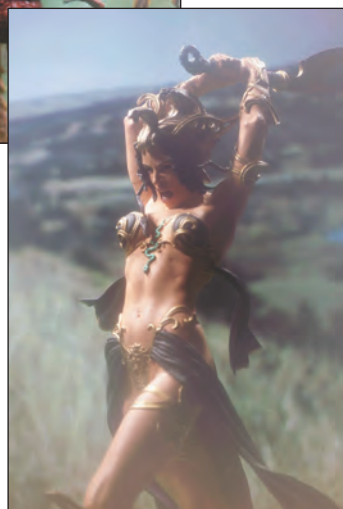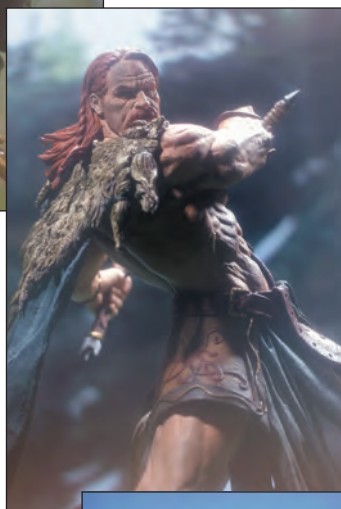
Firestorm
DC
R 19.50

First launched in the 70s, Firestorm is part of the new series of remakes DC has commissioned, joining the likes of Plasticman and Aquaman. But just like these two, it seems the appeal will lie largely with fans of the original series, and then just barely.

In a desperate ploy to raise money for College, Jason Rusch inevitably finds him-self with powerful nuclear powers. While the writing and art aren't that inspired, it's still not that bad and is a good place to start if you are interested in either Firestorm or the more traditional super-hero fare, even though it carries a lot of the elements of modern comics.

Scratch
DC
R 19.50

A five part mini-series, Scratch is another of Sam Keith's ventures over at DC, who seem to enjoy his strange art style and odd-ball characters. While the cover might sport Batman (who only stars in the first two pages of Issue 1, but will probably return later), it's really about a young werewolf called Zack. This teenager, already plagued by an abnormal finger that doesn't help him fit it, discovers on his 15th birthday that he is a werewolf to boot.

The artwork is highly original and enter-taining, though the story strains at times and could use a bit more originality. Still, it's a good alternative to pick up if you feel like something different, but don't feel like risking the independents shelf.

www.realultimatepower.net

Ninjas are by far the coolest, most lethal and deadly things on Earth. They also carry around lasers, flip out and kill people, and have lots and lots of sex with models and such. That is according to Real Ultimate Power, the official Ninja website on the web.

Unlike a lot of the people who wrote letters to this guy, we realize that the site is a parody. In fact, it's nearly impossible to not reach this conclusion when you peruse the Ninja Timeline or the page detailing how to commit Seppuku with a Frisbee.

There are also fan-made movies, "Ninja sightings" (including one of a Ninja attacking a wedding cake) and a load of other stuff that would make a Ninja fundie with no sense of humour prematurely turn in his grave.

www.garageband.com

MP3.com was originally created to help promote small bands and acts around the world, but it soon bulged to a music service, albeit one that eventually died. Garage Band is out to promote indy outfits, no matter what their genre. The point is to focus on unsigned bands out to get themselves heard, without the bloated studio politics that hurt a lot of big music sites.

Finding music is easy, though more obscure genres tend to have little representation at the moment. And downloading music to sample is a matter of registering for free.

www.metku.net/index.html?sect=view&n=1&path=mods/breezepad/index_eng

Ever felt that prolonged use of your mouse resulted in a hot, sticky and tired hand? Not really, but then again we haven't thought about it much anyway. Still, if you prefer your digits cool and comfortable while pawing their favourite peripheral, this guy might have an answer for you.

Known for making strange mods and constructions, he returns with the Breezepad, a mouse pad built to blow cooling air onto the mouse hand. The site details step by step how he built it, so that you can go about and make one for yourself. All it requires is a few fans, some Perspex, a few pieces of assorted material and the patience to read the whole page. Then you'll never have those pesky heat-induced hand cramps again. Send us a picture of it when you're done.

www.nightmarearmor.com

How much would you pay for your own set of Halo's Master Chief armour? Hundreds? Well, these chaps made their own sets at a few thousand dollars each - but it's really complete. In fact, we kept expecting them to announce that they are working on a full-scale Warthog next…

But making costumes to play real-life Halo isn't all these chaps are up to. The site has several other costume designs (including a creepy Final Fantasy one) and a spot to buy t-shirts and other stuff if you really want to say you've visited their site.

www.webcrawler.com

If you've ever used Webcrawler - not out of novelty or for change, but because there was nothing else - you've been on the web for quite a few years now. The famed search engine, since overshadowed by Altavista, Yahoo and Google, started over ten years ago and is still around, if only for the historical side of it.

These days the site with its famed Spider mascot doesn't do the work itself, instead searching other search engine databases for results. If you're tired of Google or you feel that Ask Jeeves is a bit below your intelligence, Webcrawler is still a great alternative and convenient for getting a lot more results.

www.halflife2d.com

Why wait for the final game? There are many ways to get your daily older-Gordon-beating-pulpy-aliens fix! You could try and hack the Valve servers - this has worked once before, so it's not all that absurd. Or you could scour the Internet's underground and find the originally stolen code. Or you could fly to an East Block country and buy it there off the shelf (the downside here is that you'll need to know some kind of provincial Russian dialect). Or, lastly, you could hop onto Steam and download Half-Life 2D for free!

This is the official site for the small game project - which is a lot of fun. They're also planning a patch in the near future. And if you don't like using Steam, a quick search on the net reveals dozens of mirror sites.

Classic Machine

THE HARDWARE WARS BETWEEN 8-BIT OWNERS WERE INTENSE, BUT THE ARRIVAL OF THE ATARI 520 ST MEANT COMMODORE'S 16-BIT AMIGA HAD A FIERCE RIVAL TO FACE...

Although Atari used to be synonymous with home consoles, the games industry crash of 1983 saw a number of other companies begin to gain prominence in a once monopolised industry. Unperturbed by the firm's collapse and eager to release his new computer that was based on the Amiga chipset (something Atari had already paid huge development fees towards), Atari's owner, Jack Tramiel, began to rebuild his empire.

Despite buying back the remains of Atari from Warner, Tramiel was furious to discover that Commodore had bought the Amiga. Realising that his new rival would soon launch a superior product, Tramiel carried on the development of a system that originally began at Commodore. Taking the key engineer of Commodore's project, Shiraz Shivji, with him, Tramiel set to work on what would become the Atari 520 ST.

Considering the machine arrived in shops within a year of its conception, it was unsurprising that the ST was unable to match the Amiga for sheer build or technical quality. However, thanks to being significantly cheaper than its rival - as well as coming equipped with built-in MIDI ports - the ST went on to become extremely popular (especially in Europe) and was of particular interest to musicians who used it as a sequencer and for controlling various instruments.

Of course, gamers were also well catered for and after early letdowns like Black Lamp, the likes of Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe, Xenon 2 and Carrier Command helped show that the ST was quite capable of playing the latest games. We've lost count of the hours we've wasted on the likes of Dungeon Master and Rainbow Islands (much better than the Amiga port, in our opinion) not to mention browsing through the huge amount of shareware that was available.

It might not have had the impressive specs of its nearest rival, but the Atari 520 ST still deserves a place in many a gamer's heart and is well worth pulling out from whatever dusty corner yours is currently filling. **N**

SPECIFICATIONS

Processor:	Motorola 68000
Speed:	8 MHz
RAM:	512K
Sound:	Yamaha YM2149
Operating System:	TOS (Tramiel Operating System)
Drive:	Single-sided 3 1/2" floppy disc drive
Display Modes:	320X200 (16 colour)
	640X200 (four colour)
	640X400 (mono)
	palette of 512 colours

⅄ ATARI 520ST

AROUND THE BACK

Turn round your ST and you'd find a baffling array of ports (unless you knew what you were doing...)

The first three ports provided you with access to a modem, printer and hard disc. Hardly revolutionary by today's standards, but then, this was the early Nineties after all...

Here you'd find support for an additional floppy drive and connections for either a television or monitor (like the Amiga, the ST could run through either).

You won't get anywhere without power, and Atari thoughtfully provided the 520 ST with a standard power switch and a reset button.

SHARE THE WEALTH

One of the great things about the Atari ST was the massive amount of public domain software (shareware) that was available for the machine. Public domain is basically software that can be used freely without the user having to worry about licensing or fees. The majority of shareware would often feature animated cartoons or pornography, but there were also a number of decent little games available. Even now, a healthy selection of public domain exists for both the Atari ST and Amiga and thanks to the advent of the Internet, getting hold of it is a lot easier.

One problem with Atari games was the amount of discs needed to store the games. You could tell how complex a title was by feeling the weight of the box.

"WHY I LOVE MY ATARI ST"

Although my Amstrad CPC 464 had pride of place for many years, it was inevitable that I would have to embrace the 16-bit generation. With Commodore's impressive Amiga being just outside my meagre budget, Atari's machine made perfect sense. So began an obsessive part of my life that saw me wasting far too much time on the likes of Speedball 2 and the outstanding Dungeon Master (which, incidentally, taught me how to draw meticulously detailed maps on square paper). The ST may now be gathering dust with a stack of shareware titles and old classics, but I'll never forget the glory years of '93 and '94. Ah, happy memories.

DARRAN JONES

人 ATARI 520ST

Classic Machine

LEGACY

Organised Crime Games

Why do a nine-to-five job when crime pays so well? But since we're not all cut out to be criminals, at least there are a few games to indulge a criminal's lifestyle...

Gangster Town
1987
Sega Master System

Grand Theft Auto
1997
DOS

Gangsters: Organized Crime
1998
Windows

Kingpin: Life of Crime
1999
Windows

Gangsters 2
2001
Windows

Hitman: Codename 47
2000
Windows

Grand Theft Auto 2
1999
Windows

Mob Rule
1999
Windows

Grand Theft Auto III
2001
PlayStation 2

Max Payne
2001
Windows

Mafia
2002
Windows

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
2002
PlayStation 2

The Getaway
2002
PlayStation 2
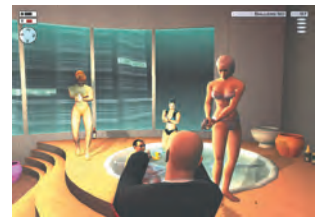
Hitman 2: Silent Assassin
2002
Windows

WIN FREEDOM

game over

Undefeated...

RAMPAGE

Will new games ever be able to unseat the old classics?

There are new games coming out all the time. An obvious statement, true, but it does pertain to my argument. They just get - technologically - better and better. The ways of making games have improved so much that games created today would never have been dreamed of even a year or two ago. The ability of developers keeps getting better and better, allowing for hardware to be used in ways that have never been thought of before. Everything is improving at such a rapid rate that it makes your head spin. Why, then, am I still playing Diablo 2?

We get bombarded with the news that the next big thing is just around the corner, at least in terms of gaming, on a daily basis. We get told that the New! Improved! gaming experience is unlike anything we have ever come across. We are promised that it will change our perceptions, our ideas, even our very lives, and that we will never look back. Why, then, am I still playing Diablo 2?

Working where I do, I get the opportunity to play any game I want, whenever I want. I can choose from the latest FPS titles, or RTS should the whim take hold, or even puzzlers and platform games. I can pick from virtually any platform, and have the cream of the gaming crop at my finger tips, ripe for the playing. Why, then… oh, you get it already. Diablo 2 is merely an example here, of course. There are a great many games that the same can be said about. They are the so-called classics of our culture, the must play titles that everyone should play to learn what computer games should really be. They are the titles that will always have a place in the halls of gaming fame.

However, there seem to be very few new games that qualify. Yes, one or two could be picked out, but the creation of classics seems to be slowing down. The reason? Who knows. Perhaps the money machine has finally overtaken the wants and desires of developers. Maybe games are produced so quickly, because of the ever growing demand that the good ones are becoming spread out by the introduction of so many inferior titles.

All we can do is hope that the new classics do keep appearing, and that the world of gaming doesn't spiral downwards into a mire of mediocrity. It's doubtful, but it might happen. Only the future will tell.

Next month

Soft Stuff: [geometry]
With E3 said and done it's time to turn our attention back to the normal business of magazine previews, reviews, features and so on. Let's start with one of the more interesting 'adult' games to come down the pipe in a long time - the next Leisure Suit Larry title will be disrobed, probed and examined closely in our August issue. We also look at Soldiers: Heroes of World War II, Rollercoaster Tycoon 3 [can we say yeah!], Pariah, Need for Speed 2, and one other interesting [but secret] preview. At this stage we're a little short on reviews but can confirm CSI: Dark Motives, True Crime, Harry Potter, The Suffering and even Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. We've also put together a cool Digital Art feature all about art that is digital or not painted, at least... There is more but no space left - damn!

Hard Stuff: [algebra]
PCI Express is upon us and even though we don't understand most of what goes on inside our computer cases we thought we'd read up on this, type it up all neat and present it for your consumption in the next issue - it's as exciting as it can be. But that's not the most exciting part yet... are you ready? Sitting down? Tired of reading this filler text until the punch line? We're taking a look at high-end 3D cards in our H@rdcor3 round-up in August. Make sure you get this if you want to know which cards will run what games and how well each card will run all of the games equally well and in the... anyway - get it!

Timing - The August issue will be on-shelf 29 July 2004.

Disclaimer: *What were we thinking by adding this block of text... now it must be filled each month?*

Sorry, we'd love to show you what's behind this curtain but Timmy's mom would have something to say...