

Clive Barker's Undying (EA Games)

PC

Clive Barker has long been a dominant force in the field of horror/fantasy book writing, and *Undying* is the British author's first foray into computer gaming. As you might expect from a Clive Barker interactive adventure, *Undying* puts you in a world laden with horrific creatures, howling winds, dark environments, creaky old doors, floating apparitions, and deep storylines. There's bloody gunplay, puzzle solving, items to collect and manage, and spells to cast.

The game is set in Ireland in the 1920s. Players take on the role of Patrick Galloway, a young man who has been summoned to an ancestral estate by its lone descendent, Jeremiah. Jeremiah's four dead siblings have all been reanimated and now intend to bump off their living brother, the last of the family. It is Patrick's duty to save his friend and unravel the mystery of Jeremiah and his family. Patrick's journey will take him to 10 different gameplay environments, including the estate, a destroyed monastery, the Eternal Autumn and the cursed city of Oneiros.

Undying uses a first-person perspective and features a host of different weapons (revolver, Molotov, speargun, shotgun), items (amplifier stones, health pack, dynamite, ether traps) and spells (scrye, ectoplasm, skull storm, lightning). Patrick's journal is updated regularly to keep up with the evolving plotline, and his inventory is always active. Movement is typical of a first-person game like *Quake* or *Unreal*, and the graphics are especially nice. The environments are vast and there's plenty to explore and do in these supernatural worlds. Obviously, there's nothing particularly new or inventive going on here; this type of game has been around for ages. But if you're into such magical, mystical adventures, *Undying* is about as good as they come.

—Jeff Kitts

Serious Sam (Croteam/Godgames)

PC

There was a time when simple, single-player first-person shooter games—like *Doom*, *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Quake*, and *Unreal*—were all the rage in computer games. Today, first-person games are almost strictly of the multiplayer variety, with team-based Internet play being their primary attraction to most gamers, particularly those with broadband connections. For those who prefer the single-player, man-against-computer experience, there's *Serious Sam*, new for the PC from Croteam and Godgames.

Certainly, there's nothing revolutionary here—in fact, *Serious Sam* is as traditional and old-fashioned a 3D shooter as you're likely to find in today's market. As Sam "Serious" Stone, you wander through ancient and futuristic worlds, shooting enemy creatures with an assortment of weapons, picking up necessary items, and getting past obstacles. There's nothing overly complicated or confusing—it's all right in front of you, and the tasks you need to perform are obvious. But that's how many of us like our gaming—fast-paced, blood-filled and action-packed, with maybe a little brain power required to make it to the next stage.

Graphics are clean and detailed, the creatures are unique and interesting in their behavior, and Sam struts around with the same cocky attitude as Duke Nukem, clearly his primary influence. There's also a level editor to make your own *Serious Sam* environments.

If *Serious Sam* has one major flaw, it's the lack of good mouse support. While the mouse can be used to fire your weapons and to move *either* left to right or up and down (not both), you can't use it to look around and aim—a major disadvantage when playing a first-person shooter. Dying because you get shot before you can properly line up your crosshair with your target is a common problem, and it may affect your enjoyment of the game. If you can get by with just the keyboard or a joystick, you're in for an old-school treat with *Serious Sam*.

—Jeff Kitts

Black & White (Electronic Arts)

PC

Plagued by runaway hype and countless delays, Lionhead Studios' epic god-game *Black & White* has finally arrived. As a fledgling deity in the land of Eden, players enact miracles and disasters to earn the faith, and power, of nearby villagers. But players must also recruit an animal avatar to serve as a spiritual ambassador to the villagers. These magic creatures (including tigers, horses, and more) provide a physical manifestation of the player's moral alignment; if you let him eat villagers and wreak havoc, your cuddly ape will quickly mutate into a snarling King Kong. These ethical considerations turn *Black & White* into a fascinating interactive morality test—given absolute power, would you pamper or punish your subjects?

Creature training is the backbone of *Black & White*, and for good reason: thanks to revolutionary artificial intelligence, creatures will imitate actions, learn miracles, and make simple decisions. Over time, you'll even form a bond with your childlike avatar, which can make dealing out punishment an emotional strain.

Sporting an intricately detailed 3D world and colorful characters, *Black & White* proves that God is in the visual details. Better yet, the "Hand of God" interface relies on simple mouse movements and gestures. Part *Pokemon*, part *Sim City*, *Black & White* represents the Second Coming of the god game genre. PC gamers, your prayers have been answered.

—Sid Shuman

The Bouncer (Square) PlayStation2

A bare-knuckle brawler in the tradition of *Streets Of Rage*, *The Bouncer* brings kung-fu kicks to the PlayStation 2. After the nasty Mikado Special Forces kidnaps a buddy, three club bouncers—Sion, Volt, and Kou—team up to rescue their comrade and unravel the secrets of the Mikado Group corporation. Along the way, players will butt heads with the requisite cyberpunks, storm troopers, and garden-variety scumballs while earning experience points and new skills.

Graphically, *The Bouncer* is a masterpiece. From the fluidly animated martial artists to the detailed environments, this game pushes the PlayStation 2 graphics to new levels. Between fight scenes, *The Bouncer* treats players to stunning full-motion video cinemas. Unfortunately, behind the game's dazzling graphics lurks an uninspired *Double Dragon* clone. With sluggish pacing, bland special attacks, and dull enemies, there's little reason to replay the story mode to unlock hidden features. The multiplayer battle mode extends the replay value a notch, but also becomes a tedious affair.

Sure, the cinemas look gorgeous, but most players will plow through the core game in an afternoon. If you're dead-set on playing this underwhelming brawler, stick with a weekend rental.

—Sid Shuman

Onimusha: Warlords (Capcom) PlayStation 2

Onimusha: Warlords—Capcom's latest survival-horror franchise—offers yet another thematic variation to the tried-and-true *Resident Evil* formula. As master samurai Samanosuke, players will combat the legions of hell while tracking a kidnapped princess. Though the gameplay is familiar, there are more than enough twists to entice jaded *Resident Evil* fans.

Aside from solving the usual array of puzzles, Samanosuke must battle undead ninjas, towering ogres, and other hell-spawned demons. Luckily, *Onimusha*'s responsive controls make combat a breeze: Samanosuke can slash, kick, and dodge his demonic foes with effortless grace. For added punch, matchlock pistols, enchanted swords, and elemental spells are available. Plus, Samanosuke's Ogre Gauntlet adds a new gameplay wrinkle, forcing players to absorb enemy souls for spiritual ammunition. Overall, *Onimusha*'s sword-swinging action plays like a fast-paced *Resident Evil*; unfortunately, those awkward camera angles can make Samanosuke's life extra difficult.

Boasting intricate characters and gorgeous environments, *Onimusha* nicely showcases the PlayStation 2's graphical horsepower. Sound-wise, *Onimusha* relies on eerie audio effects, like

haunting wind chimes and rustling leaves, to enhance the already creepy atmosphere. Though its brevity keeps it from achieving true perfection, *Onimusha* still offers the best zombie-bashing action since *Resident Evil: CODE Veronica*.

—*Sid Shuman*

Zone Of The Enders (Konami) PlayStation 2

Forget *Slave Zero* and *Virtual On 2*—Konami's *Zone Of The Enders* best captures the joy of giant robot combat. After strapping into a high-tech cyborg warrior, players must defeat a legion of rebellious robots with guns, swords, and missiles. Of course, players will uncover better weapons and skills as they advance through *Z.O.E.*'s 21 missions.

Aside from some repetitive environments, *Z.O.E.* boasts unique and arresting visuals: the anime-styled characters, gargantuan robot bosses, and slick special effects look particularly polished. In the sound department, *Z.O.E.* pumps out thunderous explosions, blazing techno tunes, and respectable voice acting. Gameplay-wise, players seeking complex strategies may scoff at *Z.O.E.*'s simple arcade action. But thanks to the responsive controls, even novice players can easily track, pursue, and blast their robotic adversaries.

Though the hidden features—including several secret levels and a 2-player Versus mode—extend the game's longevity, *Z.O.E.*'s single-player missions are short and somewhat shallow. Despite these flaws, *Z.O.E.*'s adrenaline-pumping combat and lavish graphics should keep action fans glued to their controllers. If you're looking for a worthy time-waster, give these battle 'bots a shot.

—*Sid Shuman*