



Halo: Combat Evolved

Once upon a time Halo was slated for PC development by Bungie Studios and all was good. But Microsoft's secret agents were sent out to find good games for its upcoming console and they returned to big Billy Gates with word of a triple-A title that might help shift a few units of his big black box.

Billy bought Bungie so that he could hijack Halo as an exclusive launch title for his Xbox. This proved to be a great coup, with Combat Evolved establishing itself as the best FPS (first-person shooter) ever seen on any console format.

Meanwhile, PC gamers shook their fists in envious frustration because they'd been denied a truly great game. Their only consolation was a token pleasure: there was no online multiplayer component for Halo. PC gamers said to themselves: "If only someone could port Halo to a PC and supply a built-from-the-ground-up network architecture for a sublime online multiplayer experience."

In a flash of magic stardust, Randy Pitchford from developer Gearbox Studio answered the call of the weary. Under the watchful eye of Microsoft Games, Randy and his team of fairies worked to bring us a bigger and better Halo for release in late September 03.

Yeehah, cowboy

What has Gearbox done to Halo? Is it any good? These questions needed immediate answers and there was only one way to find them: take my hard-bitten integrity to Dallas and visit Gearbox Studio itself. So it was with much rawhide that I went to the land of the Ewing, trying to balance my journalistic objectivity with the fact Mr Bill Gates had indulged in a bit of chequebook PR and financed my excursion.



↑→ Halo sailor: Gearbox and Randy's team have created a bigger and better Halo

Selected journalists got the chance to try their luck against the development team with some Beta code – the only difference being DirectX 9.0 support and the ability to play at 1,600x1,200. Gearbox ensured that the single-player campaign remained the same, instead concentrating its efforts on multiplayer.

Gearbox has added six new maps designed to incorporate different styles of play and increased firepower with two new guns – a flamethrower for up-close melee fighting and a green mortar for shelling the enemy from a distance. Undeniably cool but pretty inconsequential.

What Gearbox has done that really elevates Halo's online multiplayer experience is incorporate all of the vehicles from the single-player campaign and some more besides. Halo was always so much more than a simple FPS game and this release takes full advantage of the superb physics engine powering the Warthogs jeeps, Ghosts and flying Banshees.

This adds elements of gameplay previously unseen in most FPS games – it is spectacular watching three of your team sitting in a rocket launcher heading straight for a crowded enemy base. As we saw from the demo, Gearbox has added a multitude of game types for online play to ensure versatile gaming that will keep many coming back. Halo for the PC is so much more than just an Xbox port. ■

Spencer Dalziel

← Virtual wilderness: Halo's excellent multiplayer campaign keeps you on your toes



PC CD-ROM

Halo: Combat Evolved

- Microsoft: 0870 601 0100
- www.microsoft.com
- Pre-order from Amazon.co.uk for £25.99

System requirements

TBA

Overall rating



GAMES CHART, ALL FORMATS

- 1 **Pokemon Ruby**
- 2 **Pokemon Sapphire**
- 3 **Eye Toy: Play**
- 4 **Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness**
- 5 **Grand Theft Auto: Vice City**
- 6 **Enter The Matrix**
- 7 **The Sims**
- 8 **Aliens vs Predator: Extinction**
- 9 **Formula One 2003**
- 10 **Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets**

PC GAMES CHART

- 1 **The Sims: Superstar**
- 2 **Flight Sim 2004: A Century of Flight**
- 3 **The Sims**
- 4 **Championship Manager**
- 5 **The Sims: Unleashed**
- 6 **Grand Theft Auto: Vice City**
- 7 **Warcraft III: Frozen Throne**
- 8 **The Sims: On Holiday**
- 9 **Rise of Nations**
- 10 **Medieval: Total War**

Positions correct for week 03/08/03-09/08/03

Midnight Club II

PC CD-ROM

I don't believe in illegal street racing. Not that I think it's wrong, I just believe it only exists in bad American films like *The Fast and the Furious* or it's equally unwatchable sequel *2Fast 2Furious*. *Midnight Club II* perpetuates this ridiculous notion that young people like to take to the streets of Tokyo, Los Angeles or somewhere similar to race each other in souped-up motor cars. Forget the fact that most of these young 'uns don't even look like they could afford their next meal, let alone a customised roadster, and you'll be in for an entertaining arcade-style ride.

Beef it up

The PC version of this game has been lazily ported from the console. Nothing has been added to utilise the superior power of current systems and the developers haven't even thought of including scalable graphics for those with older machines. If you can't meet the minimum system requirements, don't even think of buying *Midnight Club II*.

You're up against experienced street racers. They're dressed in baggy trousers, baseball caps, have evil-looking tattoos and preposterous amounts of gold jewellery. They speak the language of the street, referring to each other as 'homey' and 'bro'.

Fortunately, they are wise in the ways of driving and it won't be long before you seek other 'bling bling' drivers for different challenges on the roads. This is done by flashing fellow racers with your headlights. Your macho challenges are never turned down as all forms of life in *Midnight Club II* have the intellectual capacity of single-cell amoeba. Fortunately, this makes for some great racing.

To start with your vehicle is roughly equivalent to a Ford Capri with go-faster stripes – you're going to have to drive out of your skin to win any races. As you beat the other drivers you win their respect, although during the race you'll hear them threatening and abusing you over the CB radio. This is more amusing than disturbing as the language they use makes my local vicar sound positively foul-mouthed.

Pole position

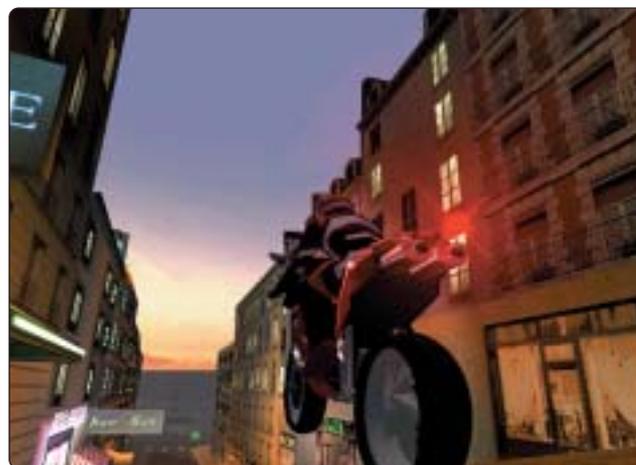
The Los Angeles cityscapes are absolutely vast and attention to detail in the backgrounds is particularly impressive given that, in effect, this is only a PlayStation2 game. The handling of the vehicles is also incredible. Although it differs slightly from car to car, you'll find yourself sticking to the road even round the tightest turns at well over 100mph.

Not that this makes for an easy game – you'll have to squeeze through the narrowest gaps at breakneck speeds. Keep crashing and you won't win the races, something you have to do to progress. There's no such thing as second best in this game. This is where *Midnight Club II* gets difficult – you'll find yourself repeating the same course until you get used to the layout.

Even then you'll notice that, regardless of how well you're doing, the other racers pretty much stick with you all the time, making it virtually impossible to get a good distance between you and the pack. On the good side, this makes the overall driving experience much more enjoyably frantic.

Another bonus for this PC conversion is multiplayer support – it automatically finds other players for you to race against online when you select the internet option. With several race modes, this is where *Midnight Club II* comes into its own. Fast and furious, this is a guilty pleasure for those of you who normally prefer dry Formula One racing sims. ■

Ben Camm-Jones



↑ It's no good admiring the sunset – keep your eyes on the road and your tyres on the tarmac to win



← Load up *Midnight Club II* and you could be behind the wheel of this purple monstrosity

Midnight Club II

- www.rockstargames.com/midnightclub2
- £24.99 from Amazon.co.uk

System requirements

800MHz Pentium III; Windows 98/2000/Me/XP; 128MB RAM; 1.6GB hard disk space

Overall rating





Aquanox 2: Revelation

PC CD-ROM

A couple of years ago the original Aquanox set the benchmark for graphically endowed games. We were waiting with bated breath to see if the follow-up could surpass such high expectation.

The look of Aquanox 2: Revelation is nothing short of remarkable and there's an excellent game lurking in its depths. That said, the gameplay is an acquired taste. Get sucked into this underwater world action adventure, though, and you'll view Aquanox 2 as a masterpiece. I know I did and this game isn't just breathtaking because it's underwater.

Set in the year 2666, players follow the story of a young freighter pilot, William Drake, who sets out to search for the heritage of a mythical ancestor. He is looking for adventure but along the way finds greed, ruthlessness, merciless hatred and unexpected help. Drake soon realises that he is not the only one hunting for his ancestor's legendary treasure.

Revelation is deeply evocative of an underwater *Bladerunner* and plays very similarly to *Freelancer*. Though it's an action-based game, there's a story to unfold and certain elements of

roleplay gaming get chucked in. The plot begins aboard a mercenary ship called the Harvester, but if you haven't any time for the occasionally tedious plot you can skip most of the text and move headlong into the action.

Though laid out with the look and controls of a first-person shooter, you're actually sitting in a submarine for most of your missions. If you have a joystick and want the luxury of total control you can switch to a complicated controls system, which takes a lot of practice but really elevates this game above others.

Shooting the enemy isn't fast and furious – there's enough time to assess your every move. It's truly beautiful to behold the bewildering array of accomplished environments, ships and breathtaking explosions. ■

Spencer Dalziel

→ Shoot from the hip: get ready for an action-packed underwater adventure

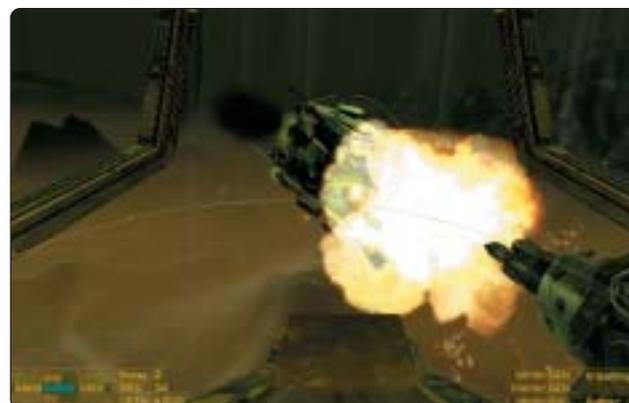
Aquanox 2: Revelation

- Koch Media: 01256 707 767
- www.kochmedia.co.uk
- £29.99

System requirements

7500MHz Pentium III or higher;
Windows 98/Me/2000/XP;
128MB RAM; 1GB hard disk
space; 3D video accelerator card
with 32MB RAM

Overall rating



Flight Simulator 2004: A Century of Flight

PC CD-ROM

Another flight sim to add to Microsoft's already generous collection, but this one puts the others to shame. The graphics are brilliant and the 'lastability' factor has been vastly improved. Microsoft's previous offering was okay for just flying around taking in the scenery but after a short while it got monotonous. It's therefore a relief to see so much more going on in this update.

The all-new historical missions are a brilliant addition, giving you real incentive to fly. And should it prove too difficult, Microsoft has added more multimedia content to stretch the value of the game. You get to watch historical flight events and there are more than 120 articles in the learning centre, offering a wealth of information about Flight Simulator itself.

There are three ways of finding out information: key topics presents a visual way to explore major themes; the site map offers a table of contents; while the index allows you to find articles by topic.

One of the most challenging elements of real-world flying comes alive in Flight Sim 2004. An improved weather system offers

→ Let's go fly a Wright: experience plenty of new and exciting aircrafts in this latest Flight Sim

realism never seen before in a simulation – either play weatherman yourself or let the computer do it for you. It's certainly worth it after flying four miles in the pouring rain to see rays of sun running through a thundercloud. Beautiful.

There are new aircraft to experience including the Wright brothers' plane and the spirit of Saint Louis. All planes now include a 3D interactive cockpit and this time the Millennium Dome is in the right place!

This instalment of the flight sim saga will take up a greedy 2.8GB to install and you'll need a powerful video card. It's worth it though as the great gameplay will have you hooked for hours. ■



Flight Simulator 2004

- Microsoft: 0870 601 0100
- www.microsoft.com
- £29.99

System requirements

450MHz Pentium III or higher;
Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB
RAM; 2.8GB hard disk space; 3D
video accelerator card with 16MB
of memory

Overall rating



David O'Connor

Republic: The Revolution

PC CD-ROM

After having waited what seemed like months, but was in fact a mere blink of an eye compared to the amount of time this game has spent in development, I was pretty excited when my review copy of Republic: The Revolution finally turned up on my desk. Having been under construction since 1998, I expected something truly special.

The idea behind the game is clever and original. It is set in a fictional state – Novistrana – shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union. The aim is to replace the current, corrupt dictatorship by imposing your own brand of politics on its beleaguered citizens.

What sort of leader you're likely to be is determined early in the game. You answer a set of 10 multiple choice questions to create the character of your avatar. Your responses will set you up as an opportunistic capitalist pig, a revolutionary thug or a shiny-eyed idealist. Whichever turns out to be your nature will establish your strengths and weaknesses.

Feels like homework

So far, so intriguing. But this is where things start to go downhill. To play any further than this requires you to read the entire detailed manual from cover to cover – lest you find yourself completely foxed by the many menus and options required to manage gameplay. This is a bad start in my book as not everyone has the time or inclination to wade through instructions before they start playing.

There is a tutorial game but this doesn't automatically launch even when you say you are a first-time player. Instead of holding your hand

as you play, it simply pops up graphics and text to explain the various menus – not much different to reading the manual.

And even when I put in the hours and read the manual, the game remained stultifyingly dull – perhaps because of its impenetrable complexity. I'm all for a challenge but the only thing Republic challenges is your boredom threshold.

Welcome to dullsville

Gameplay is in the third person either from a bird's eye view or by using a camera to follow your character through his actions, so you never get control over him or interact with the surroundings. Actions are the heart of this game, as these are the means by which you cajole people into becoming your followers or put a spanner in the oppositions' works. Now that sounded a lot more fun until I realised that once again it was all menu-based.

You can affect the outcome by selecting how to argue or fight, but once again the means of doing so are complicated. All conversation is carried out in Russian (or certainly something that sounds like it), with no subtitles, leaving you in the dark as to what's being said.

The Actions menu is one of many that you have to monitor to find out what the hell's going on. There is also the diary (with three subsections), faction map, resources, two city maps... Need I go on?

It is a shame that the execution of this game is so clunky. The graphics are gorgeous, the music evocative and the idea intriguing. It's just that trying to play it is so mind-numbingly convoluted. And to make sure it wasn't just me I gave it to my other half to have a go, thus proving it's not just us girlies that don't have time for Republic. If anything, he hated it more than me. ■

Ursula Seymour

← Taking over the current dictatorship of Novistrana is a risky business



↑ You might not understand his foreign rantings, so just nod and look interested



Republic: The Revolution

- Eidos: 020 8636 3000
- www.novistrana.com
- £29.99

System requirements

800MHz Pentium III; 512MB RAM; 32MB transform and lighting-enabled graphics card

Overall rating



Darkened Skye

PC CD-ROM

It's not a new theme – good versus evil – but it certainly is the stuff fairy tales are made of. And every so often a game comes along that puts a new spin on a tired genre. Darkened Skye is one such title.

You are Skye of Lynlora, a fiery redhead on a mission to defeat the evil Necroth who has outlawed rainbows in a greedy bid to keep all the Skittles to himself (don't you just hate it when that happens?). There I was thinking Skittles were tasty confectionery, but I was sadly mistaken. Turns out they fall from rainbows and are used for casting spells.

As Skye, you must search for five magic prisms that have been dispersed throughout the 30-plus levels. When combined these give you the power to defeat mean old Necroth. But you are not alone in your adventures. A demonic-looking sidekick called Draak hovers around you from time to time, dispensing advice and sarcasm in equal measures.

While this may not seem like the most compelling storyline, it's strangely addictive. In the same vein as Tomb Raider, you run around vast 3D environments, slaying baddies and solving complex puzzles. A good memory is therefore a distinct advantage, as is a sense of direction.

Seeing the invisible

But Darkened Skye has another edge to its sword. Just as the agile Lara Croft could climb cliff faces and swim underwater, Skye has some nifty supernatural tricks of her own. With the True Sight spell she is able to see things that are otherwise invisible, while Strengthen Sap knocks the wind out of her opponents.

Some of the landscapes have a definite storybook feel about them, particularly level one, with its towering trees and foreboding, jaundiced sky bathed in an eerie fog. The graphics aren't mind-blowing and there's some pixellation around the edges of objects. Even with the latest graphics card installed you're not going to get arcade-style quality.

That said, the fluid motion and responsive controls compensate for this minor imperfection. Another attractive feature is the dizzying 360-degree perspective that lets you scan the skies for winged creatures and peer round corners for impending danger.

Odds are something untoward is lurking around the corner so you'll quickly find this feature indispensable.

Not only must Skye contend with evil minions, she's also susceptible to drowning and falling off precipices just like the rest of us mere mortals. The multi-angle feature will also come in handy when she's on the verge of taking a nosedive.

Where's your weapon?

Unlike her Tomb Raider counterpart, Skye does not have a cache of hi-tech weaponry at her disposal. Instead she must make do with an old-fashioned wooden staff (well, if it's good enough for Moses...) that she wields with ferocity at anything remotely menacing.

Certain actions, such as the combo attack, push your dexterity to the max. It appears that the developers designed such manoeuvres with three-handed players in mind – two hands to brandish your staff and one to move out of the line of fire. It's not impossible, just tricky and requires good reflexes to pull it off.

The script is dripping with irony and tongue-in-cheek humour that blows the lid off the whole RPG genre. The jokes keep coming hard and fast, leaving a trail of pop culture references in their wake, from *The Wizard of Oz* ("I have a feeling we're not in Lynlora anymore") to *Jerry Maguire* ("Show me the bunny!"). As refreshing as all this is, the postmodern self-awareness shtick gets tiresome after a while and you wish they'd stop showing off and get on with the game.

It's easy to become immersed in the weird world of Lynlora and its even weirder inhabitants. While Darkened Skye may lack the originality of the first Tomb Raider, it surpasses it in other respects – namely the use of magic – plus it's genuinely funny. ■

Jonathan Hart

→ Brunette or redhead: is Skye Lara's successor? You decide

Darkened Skye

- Oxygen Interactive: 01933 391 999
- www.oxygenint.com
- £19.99

System requirements

350MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 400MB hard disk space

Overall rating



↓ Skye's the limit: use your staff and supernatural skills to outwit enemies

