# lifestyle

Loading…

Big is most definitely beautiful

This week, we grabbed a sneak preview of two big upcoming games from Eidos Interactive. Big is an apposite description for both titles but it's being used in two entirely different senses. One game is multimillion-pound global icon penetrating the very fabric of our lives; the other is vast-scale biblically epic.

Jeremy Heath Smith, one of the founders of Core Design, demoed the latest incarnation of the most famous cyberbabe, Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness. And what a spot-on job the development team have done.

Due to be released on PC and PlayStation2 at the end of June, Angel of Darkness utilises a gorgeous new engine and manages to iron out the creases that made some of the gameplay so frustrating previously. There's a fantastic new camera system and a couple of new abilities but Core Design won't alienate Lara aficionados because this is a Tomb Raider game through and through.
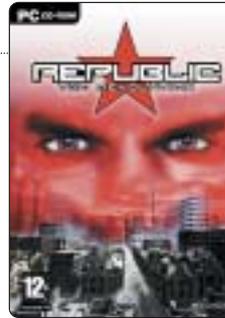
Next up was Demis Hassabis, CEO of Elixer Studios, demoing something so vast in scale and content that it just has to be seen to be believed. There has already been plenty of glowing comment from the games press about Republic: The Revolution but, after a huge development cycle, it's finally ready for public release.

A bewilderingly massive real-time strategy title where you must kill, threaten, manipulate, bribe and cajole in order to create a revolution to oust the President. It's all set in the best ever 3D engine we've seen on a strategy game and, to give you an idea of the size of this thing, there are literally thousands of non-playing characters to interact with. ■

Spencer Dalziel

GAMES CHART, ALL FORMATS

1	Enter the Matrix
2	Socom: US Navy Seals
3	The Sims: Superstars
4	Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
5	Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell
6	The Sims
7	Def Jam Vandetta
8	Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Operation Resurrection
9	The Hulk
10	Championship Manager 4

PC GAMES CHART

1	The Sims: Superstars
2	Championship Manager 4
3	Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
4	The Sims
5	Rise of Nations
6	The Sims: Unleashed
7	Enter the Matrix
8	Colin McRae Rally 3
9	Vietcong
10	Command and Conquer: Generals

Positions correct for week 08/06/03-14/06/03

Breed

While PC gamers have been drooling in anticipation of the release of Halo, there's an upcoming game that won't just sate their appetite but will leave them positively stuffed. We've had a play of Breed, the soon-to-be-released title by homegrown UK developer Brat Designs, and it's a fantastic achievement.

Sure, Breed is a first-person shooter where players can command an array of sci-fi vehicles. But this title's implementation gives it a different edge from Halo and it also has some of the biggest playing fields we've ever seen. Breed is definitely one to watch out for and could well be a surprise hit on its release.

The setup is simple. Humanity is under threat from an alien race known as Breed and Earth sends two motherships to retake some lost colonies on Mars. While this happens, the Breed have taken over Earth and started to terraform our planet to suit their requirements because they really are very, very naughty.

Naturally it is your job, with the help of five team mates that can be individually controlled, to eradicate the Breed and save survivors using pretty much anything at your disposal.

There are several features the development team has included that literally make this game a breed apart. First, there's the seamless transition between the dropships in space and Earth – there's no ugly loading times. Second, it's the huge well-designed environments that contain more than enough detail to compete with bigger developers' titles.

The artificial intelligence is particularly impressive for both your team mates and the Breed. And there are innumerable ways to complete missions thanks to the wide array of weaponry and usable vehicles in the game, giving the player a certain amount of freedom.

The single-player missions were fun but you should really take Breed as the multiplayer entity. With so many types of vehicles and a co-operative options to choose from, there's no doubt Breed will rock. ■

Spencer Dalziel

↑ Breed has massive landscapes for you to conquer in each mission

Breed

☐ CDV: 02 08880 4144
☐ www.cdv.de
☐ £29.99

System requirements

TBA

Overall rating

■■■■■■■□□

Colin McRae Rally 3

This latest version of the standard-setting rally game has been eagerly awaited by virtual racing aficionados, and rightly so. Colin McRae Rally 3 provides an exhilarating dirt-track experience with the best physics, finest car detail and hardest challenges. If you can beat the rest of the field in this championship then you will rightly feel like the best driver in the world, although personally I can only dimly imagine what that pleasure might feel like.

Ford Focus

Colin McRae Rally gives you the top job of driving a Ford Focus through the gruelling course of an entire world rally championship. Perhaps the only unrealistic element of the game is that any old incompetent (like me, for example) is shoehorned into this demanding position. Otherwise the simulation is remarkable.

In each country you must complete three stages in a day, which leaves your backup team little time to repair the damage you've inflicted on your beleaguered vehicle before you're off again. You can easily end up crawling over the finishing line with several minutes to make up on the next stage. In one of my early attempts I limped home backwards on three wheels. Early retirement beckoned.

The driving experience in this version is as exciting as ever. The simplest set of key commands puts you in control of an entirely convincing high-precision, souped-up skid-mobile that will, if you're good enough, stick to any road, track or path you throw it at.

And you are pitched against a dazzling array of terrains. Just running through the single-stage practice courses, you are forced to deal in quick succession with tarmac, gravel, mud, grass, snow and everything in between.

Luckily, sticking with you through rough and smooth is your navigator Nicky Grist. The implacable Welshman informs you of the approaching curves and pitfalls, patiently repeating his commands when you've gone round in a circle and are approaching a bend for the second time. Ever the pro, not once does he lose his cool and say "I thought you were the world champion, Colin," or, "If we don't start spending more time on the track I'm getting out of the car."

Enjoy the ride

As far as the rest of the Ford team goes, you have the support of the best mechanics the multinational can buy. They'll patch you up as best as humanly possible after each punishing stage and give you an impressive range of car options besides.

For the thinking rally driver (if there's such a thing) the various brake strengths, suspension types, steering qualities and power balances add a further dimension to your campaign and a chance to shave precious seconds off your time. There are also telemetry readings, which compare speed to revs and gear changes, so you can work out what's working in, or missing from, your performance.

Alternatively you can throw yourself into it and enjoy the ride. Watching the bonnet fly off and your chances of raising the cup dwindle, you'll still have a great race. That's the beauty of the game – all levels of prowess and clumsy hopelessness are catered for (though I can only vouch for the latter).

As much or as little as you bring to the table, you'll be rewarded with an engrossing and addictive game. Completing each stage unlocks further functions, which is an incentive to the dullards and means the pros are less likely to get bored. At the end of the day, though, it's the driving action that keeps you going. Or in my case, the simple desire not to be the worst ever performer on international rally driving. ■

Simon Easterman

← Hammer your motor but watch for those corners if you want to stay on the track

↑ Burn baby burn: your paintwork stands no chance

Day of Defeat

Day of Defeat

☐ Activision: 01753 756 100
☐ www.activision.co.uk
☐ £19.99 ex VAT

System requirements

450MHz Pentium II or higher; Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 535MB hard disk space; 3D video accelerator card with 16MB RAM

Overall rating

■■■■■■■■□□

On a first-look basis there are several reasons why you shouldn't buy Day of Defeat. It's yet another action shooter set in the Second World War, it's based on a graphics engine that's four years old and, lastly, you can download it for free online. However, look beyond this cursory inspection and you'll notice Day of Defeat offers some of the best gameplay we've seen for a long time.

Like the hugely popular CounterStrike, Day of Defeat started life as a home-brew modification of Half-Life. It became such an online success that Activision decided to knock it out as a separate retail game. It's worth buying as you don't need the original Half-Life and there's some additional professional touches such as better skins, volumetric fogging and a brilliant array of sound effects.

← Keep your lifeline high to blow enemies away

The game is an online-only experience that pits Axis against Allied with heavy emphasis on team-based play and here it really shines against its newer peers. Day of Defeat simply oozes gripping gameplay.

Playing couldn't be easier. There are several classes of soldier to pick from, each with a different set of weapons and this affects your tactics in the game. Running around like a headless chicken with a gun will get you nowhere and those responsible for this mod sensibly added features to stop people trying to mindlessly frag the enemy.

When you jump or run not only do you get tired but you also can't use your gun, which leads to more strategic gameplay. If you have a microphone you'll also see built-in support for voice communication and this becomes an essential requirement once you've mastered the basics.

Sure, it looks a little dated. But you don't need a powerful system to play Day of Defeat in its full glory and it only requires 535MB of hard disk space. ■

Spencer Dalziel

Hulk

Everyone loses their temper from time to time but Dr Bruce Banner seems to have a shorter fuse than most. Getting hacked off causes a freakish transformation in him that makes Mr Hyde look like a fluffy bunny rabbit.

Originally a comic book, *The Incredible Hulk* was also a successful television series and this game has been timed to coincide

with the release of the movie. It's not just available on the PC, either, with a PlayStation2, GameCube and Xbox version due for release. However, Hulk is best suited to console gameplay. If you want to play it on the PC you'll need a decent joypad or joystick as trying to control Bruce Banner or the Hulk with the keyboard is near impossible.

Hulk is a huge game – it spans three discs – and if you persevere with it you will find hours of entertainment. Sadly it isn't of the highest quality. The graphics aren't particularly stunning, either, with developer Vivendi Universal keeping the original comic book animation style. I guess this title will please the purists, but if you're after lifelike visuals then this isn't going to do it for you – expect ridiculous plotlines and naff-looking baddies.

Overall Hulk is difficult to play, visually disappointing – there were better-looking games on the market five years ago – and it's a bit boring. If you insist on buying this game then get the console version rather than the PC title. ■

Ben Camm-Jones

←↑ The graphics are too cartoon-like to take this game seriously

Hulk

☐ www.vugames.com
☐ £29.99 from Amazon.co.uk

System requirements

700MHz Pentium III; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 256MB RAM; 1.5GB hard disk space

Overall rating

■■■■■□□□□□

Vietnam Med+Evac

It's the summer of 1964 and the location is the Gulf of Tonkin, Vietnam. Your job is medical evacuation of your troops and your mode of transport is a helicopter. Developer Just Flight really knows its business when it comes to decent flight simulations and Vietnam Med+Evac is no exception.

Novice flyers may baulk at the intricacies of learning to fly a difficult helicopter but a bit of patience pays enjoyable dividends and it won't be long before you're swooping on enemy territory with the skill of a real pilot.

Vietnam Med+Evac gives you full control of the famous uh-1 Huey aircraft. And when I say full control I mean it, so you'll have to devote a lot of time to practice. For a result it's best to jump into the free-flight option before you take on any of the campaign missions, but when you think you're ready you can choose from 100 rescue missions.

← Sea rescues are tricky, but you're supplied with all the equipment you need for a successful drop

The detail that has been included in these rescue missions is formidable. There is every type of equipment you would need to perform various tasks such as a mountain or sea rescue, an airlift or dropping troops into a battle zone and keeping them topped up with vital supplies.

This sim is probably the nearest you'll ever get to flying a helicopter like this (unless of course you're in the air force) and it's one of the most realistic chopper simulations we've ever seen. The realism settings can be changed to make it simpler but, even on the easiest setting, Vietnam Med+Evac never feels like an arcade game.

We should point out that Med+Evac is impossible to play without a decent joystick. Trying to use the keyboard alone is a quest in futility and, even with a joystick, you'll use practically every key for commands.

Med+Evac takes up a hefty 1GB of disk space and it also requires a decent graphics card. It's worth it, though, as the imagery is superb. If you fancy yourself as a helicopter pilot then this game is a must. ■

David O'Connor

Orion Platinum

The Tory Party may have tried to snuff out the nation's love for repetitive beats in the 1990s, but if the number of dance music packages on the market today is anything to go by then the youth of today are still just as much in love with the genre as ever.

Orion Platinum is yet another dance music production tool that allows you to create tracks using an arsenal of built-in synthesisers, samplers, drum machines and effects. Orion's integrated pattern-based sequencer lets you create smaller patterns and then link them together to build a full song – it's a bit like the musical equivalent of Lego. Unlike some other pattern-based sequencers, Orion has a visual-arrange page, so it's far easier to string patterns together into complex arrangements.

Orion is certainly easy to use. It's a cinch to get decent drum loops up and running and easy to then start experimenting with the piano roll editor to create synth melodies over the top. There's also plenty of interesting effects to help you bring your tunes alive.

However, the software's built-in instruments lack the kick-in-the-teeth punch of those that you'll find in Reason, its main competitor.

→ Anyone who has used a sequencer such as Cubase will feel right at home with Orion's user interface

It's not that Orion sounds bad, it's just that the synths lack the depth and warmth that dance music aficionados crave.

Orion also suffers from some stability issues. We found that the audio tended to skip when you're maximising or minimising windows, even when using a relatively high-spec P4-based system. While this was acceptable a couple of years ago, it's not good enough in this day and age. The audio would also start to splutter for no apparent reason, forcing you to stop playback, twiddle your thumbs for a while and then restart it, whereupon it would agree to play ball again.

Orion is fun and intuitive to use, but it's still too rough around the edges to make it a true must-have for budding noise terrorists. ■

Niall Magennis

Rise of Nations

Rise of Nations is the latest RTS (real-time strategy) game from the creators of Civilization II, and its experience with this genre shines through. The game is so multifaceted it would be hard to get bored, as there are so many ways to reach victory.

You can choose multiplayer gaming, play in teams against one another online, or one of the many single-player options. Often with a title like this you find that you exhaust the latter pretty quickly as unless you have lots of like-minded buddies to play against, things can get pretty repetitive.

That is where the beauty of Rise of Nations lies. It has so many different single-player games, all of which can be highly customised, that it should take months to tire of it. You can pick your level of difficulty – from the easiest setting, where we were pleased to find we beat the computer every time, to the hardest that we were too scared to attempt.

When you select your game you can either go for a preprogrammed scenario or tailor one to your liking. Then there's deciding on the stance of your enemies – either a tech race to see who progresses fastest

or an aggressive war-mongering battle to see who's the toughest.

Gameplay is similar to most RTS titles. You must gather resources, carry out research, build military units – and do all of it better and faster than your enemy. Your strategic talent will also be put to the test as you decide where to build and what, how to deploy your armies and weapons and how to deal with your enemies. There are plenty of tutorials to help get you started with all of these skills.

Rise of Nations is an engaging and attractive game. It may not be groundbreaking, but it's innovative enough with a popular genre to ensure a wide audience. ■

Ursula Seymour

↗→ Rise to the challenge: be put to the test and prove your worth

Rise of Nations
☐ Microsoft: 0870 601 0100
☐ www.riseofnations.co.uk
☐ £34.99

System requirements
600MHz processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 800MB hard disk space; 16MB 3D graphics card

Overall rating
■■■■■■■□□

DigiMask Head Wizard

Ever wanted to have a 3D version of your head on your PC screen? Personally it was never a thought that crossed my mind until the arrival of DigiMask Head Wizard, a piece of software that falls into a strange void between graphical application and game. There's more than a touch of Max Headroom influencing the results but it's fantastic fun.

The interface is simple and all you need to get started is two decent quality digital photos of your head (one face-on and one profile) and a basic knowledge of anatomy – for example, where your nose, ears and mouth are.

Within five minutes you have the slightly disconcerting experience of having a small 3D version of your head looking back at you and

following your cursor around the screen. Once you've got to this stage you can start playing using the suite of bundled applications. You can create animated pictures (GIFs) for use on websites or Outlook signatures, screensavers, joke greeting messages using slightly unconvincing humour and movie clips.

This is a gem of an app but it's not without its flaws. To stop you using the software commercially, your DigiMask head has a worrying purple tattoo of the company logo on its neck and instead of your own voice you have to use the text-to-speech feature.

My only gripe would be that they didn't take it one step further. If you could use Head Wizard for inserting yourself into games (such as The Sims or Unreal Tournament) then it would be flying off the shelves. Having checked the manufacturer's website, this facility could be on its way in future releases. ■

Matt Leach

← Once set up, you can send yourself via email as a joke greeting message
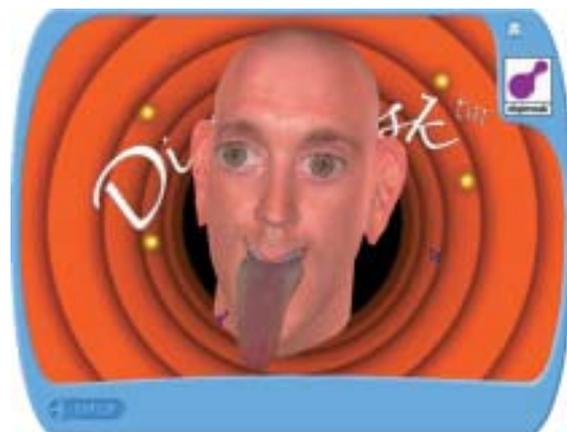
DigiMask Head Wizard
☐ Head Wizard: 020 8939 6442
☐ www.digimask.com
☐ £19.99

System requirements
450MHz Pentium II or higher; Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 535MB hard disk space; 3D video accelerator card with 16MB RAM

Overall rating
■■■■■■■□□□