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Fancy placing a bet on this year's Oscars? *PC Advisor* has hit on a dead cert. Her name's Maya and she's got some pretty impressive credentials to support her nomination. But hang on, where's the waif in the revealing designer dress?

Sad to say, this particular Academy Award recipient won't be making any sobbing speeches, for Maya is the name of the software used to create many of the best known animated films of the past five years.

Recent credits include *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, *Spiderman* and *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*.

Maya is not just restricted to film animation – it's also used by video and games developers. It was the foundation for the game *Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets* as well as Sony's forthcoming release *Primal*.

Movie masterpiece

We now take for granted our PC's ability to create and render 3D animation and the unprecedented level of processing power available means we can enjoy film-grade graphics within our desktop gameplay.

So what's stopping any of us with half an ounce of talent rushing out and grabbing this award-winning package to create our own



movie masterpiece? Money, quite frankly. Maya costs about £4,000 which puts it beyond the reach of gifted amateurs.

But would-be Maya customers and those who want to be able to hone their skills can get their hands on the Personal Learning Edition of the software, often found on magazine cover discs or available as a free (but hefty) download from www.aliaswavefront.com/mayapple.

The 10 Second Club

Primal developer Rob Starr has put the widespread availability of Maya PLE to good use. He set up a website called The 10 Second Club (www.10secondclub.org) which provides a way for animators to share ideas, techniques and tips, provide feedback and critique each other's work.

Contributors range from keen students to professionals working in Hollywood's cutting-edge animation studios and share their knowledge by posting tutorials on how to achieve particular effects.

A monthly competition invites animators to come up with the most innovative and well executed 10-second clip (hence the site's name), with the best entries posted online. At present, competitors are being asked to focus on character design.

If animation is something you're hoping to get into, or you are simply interested in a behind-the-scenes look at how incredible effects are achieved, The 10 Second Club is a great place for inspiration. ■

Rosemary Haworth



GAMES CHART, ALL FORMATS

- 1 *The Getaway*
- 2 *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*
- 3 *SimCity 4*
- 4 *Fifa 2003*
- 5 *Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets*
- 6 *James Bond: Night Fire*
- 7 *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*
- 8 *Dancing Stage Party Edition*
- 9 *Dancing Stage Euromix*
- 10 *Harry Potter: The Philosopher's Stone*

PC GAMES CHART

- 1 *Sim City 4*
- 2 *The Sims: Deluxe Edition*
- 3 *The Sims: Unleashed*
- 4 *Age of Mythology*
- 5 *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault Spearhead*
- 6 *The Sims: On Holiday*
- 7 *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*
- 8 *The Sims: Hot Date*
- 9 *Mafia*
- 10 *Combat Flight Sim 3*

Positions correct for week
18/01/03-25/01/03



SimCity 4

PC CD-ROM

The long-awaited successor to SimCity 3000 has finally been released and, since I unwrapped the cellophane from my review copy, I've found it hard to prise myself away. For any fans of the previous versions SimCity 4 adds plenty of new features to refresh gameplay and newcomers are in for a treat.

SimCity is the RTS (real-time strategy) game that spawned the most popular title in this genre, The Sims, and in this release the two finally get to meet.

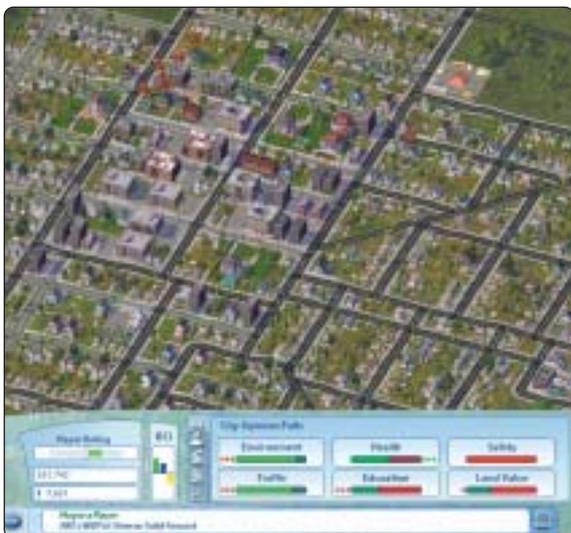
City dwellers

One of the new additions to this latest version is the ability to import your Sims to live in your city. This brings interaction with your townsfolk down to a very personal level, as your Sims also import their capacity for moaning with them. They are quick to let you know if jobs aren't plentiful, pollution levels are high or if their commute to work is too time-consuming.

While it's a nice idea to be able to keep tabs on those dwelling in your city, sometimes listening to all their complaints and comments can be a bit irritating.

If you hadn't already guessed, the aim of SimCity 4 is to build and manage your very own city nurturing right from its early days, a two-bit frontier town into a gleaming metropolis complete with air and seaports, links with other towns and a wealth of wonderous landmarks. While this might sound simple enough, anyone who has ever had to balance needs and

↓ City nurturing: build and manage your town carefully as your choices have an impact on its future development



desires with tight budgets (and let's face it that's pretty much all of us) will know this is far from straightforward. Right from the early planning stages you have to bear in mind what impact your choices will have on the future development of your city.

For example, you might pick a cheap power plant to conserve funds. However, as it churns out energy it will also chuck out pollution which will put people off from moving in nearby. Equally, you might want to build up industry to boost profits, but again you will be faced with pollution problems and you must ensure there's enough townspeople to work in your factories.

Landscape your horizon

These problems just get worse as your city grows. Traffic, power, garbage disposal, health, education and emergency service provision all require constant attention lest your city descend into disorder and bankruptcy.

This really tests your mayoral muscle, separating the Giulianis from the Livingstones of this world.

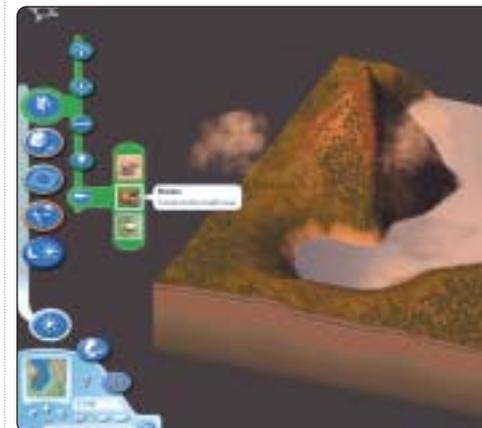
Another addition is the ability to not only influence the manmade landscape of your city, but to actually mould the terrain on which it sits. You can create your own landscape of towering mountains with deep lake-filled valleys or flat, wind-blown plains populated by wild animals. In fact the landscaping is now almost as much fun as the city building.

Other changes include the ability to micromanage – for example, you can individually change taxes depending on the wealth of your citizens and more complex dynamics behind the development of your city.

One criticism we would make is that SimCity 4's system requirements are a little crippling. It's all well and good having updated sound and graphics, but it's a bit crazy to require a top-of-the-range PC to play a slow-paced strategy game.

Overall this is a welcome, if not groundbreaking, update. It will provide long-term fans with enough extras to make the upgrade worthwhile, while new players can't fail to be hooked by the demanding challenges and intricate graphics on offer. ■

Ursula Seymour



↑ Posh pad: this could be your only chance to own a swanky Kensington mansion (top)

↑ Wild horses: groom your two-bit town into a city to be proud of (bottom)

SimCity 4

- EA: 01932 450 000
- www.simcity.com
- £29.99 from www.amazon.co.uk

System requirements

1GHz Pentium III or Athlon; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 256MB RAM; 1GB hard disk space; 32MB VRAM on Direct3D-compatible graphics card; DirectX 7.0.

Overall rating



Impossible Creatures

PC CD-ROM

Impossible Creatures was developed by Relic – the maker of the once ground-breaking Homeworld, where real-time strategy into outer space allowed you more freedom of movement that was rich in top-quality graphics and audio. With a track record like this, we expected Impossible Creatures to be something special.

But rather than taking RTS (real-time strategy) to new heights like its predecessor, this title rather disappointingly sticks to a tried-and-tested formula. If you have played Cossacks or Nations, or indeed any of a whole host of similar titles, you will immediately recognise the key components of this release.

Mix 'n' match

The basics of the game require you to create henchmen (read peasants or workers) to collect the two vital resources, coal and electricity, and to construct buildings. These resources must be constantly collected and your buildings maintained in order to create and prolong the strength you need to fight off invaders and conquer neighbouring settlements.

Putting your army together is the one area where this game does differ from the norm. You create your own fighting force by combining the characteristics of real animals to make the eponymous impossible creatures. For example, you can combine a chimpanzee with a giraffe to form a 'chimpaffe' or a 'girzee'.

↓ Fishy business: those cheetah fish can run but, with fins like that, they can't hide



Animal magic

You decide which features from each animal you use, so you can take a giraffe's long legs and combine them with a chimp's flexible body. The characteristics you decide upon affect the strengths and weaknesses of the final creature. You might, therefore, want to stick with a gorilla's body as this can withstand damage, but combine it with a cheetah's legs to provide speed.

Each animal is rated according to its strength, speed and the damage it can inflict – for example, a rhino would be slow and strong, while a panther is fast and ferocious.

As you play you collect animal blueprints which provide a whole menagerie of beasts to choose from, some of which have special powers. The electric eel, for instance, can shock and kill anything within its radius. As the game progresses you can choose from land, sea and air animals and ultimately you will be able to carry out attacks from anywhere.

While it's quite fun putting together mad combinations, the idea isn't as revolutionary as it might first appear. Battles are quick and relatively simple to complete, while the unimpressive graphics don't allow you to zoom in close enough to see much detail.

There are several different ways to play – either as single player in campaign mode, multiplayer or playing against the computer. In campaign mode you have to carry out specific missions but these tend to be rather boring, requiring you to steal your enemies' research time after time. Equally, each time you have to start from scratch which means you have to keep doing the same thing time and time again.

Creating various animal combinations is amusing, but this concept isn't enough to hold your interest in Impossible Creatures long term. ■



↑ Chimpaffe or girzee: play God and create your own animal hybrids

Impossible Creatures

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

System requirements

500MHz Pentium PC; Windows 98/Me/XP/2000; 128MB RAM; 1.5GB hard disk space; 16MB DirectX-compatible video card and sound card.

Overall rating



Ursula Seymour



Silent Hill 2

PC CD-ROM



Prepare to play Silent Hill 2 while crouched behind the sofa armed only with your wits and twinpack of loo-roll. Without equivocation, this is the scariest game ever devised. The original Silent Hill was slated as Konami's answer to the Resident Evil series and was categorised as Survival Horror – a bit of a misnomer. Silent Hill isn't about horror, it's all about fear. Macabre, paralysing, chilled to the bone, psychological torment.

The gore-splattered Resident Evil games took their influence from George Romero's 'dead' Schlock zombiethon films whereas Silent Hill has an altogether more cerebral sway. Imaging the literary gothicism of Edgar Allan Poe combined with the disorienting suspense of Hitchcock and you have an idea of Silent Hill 2's privileged heritage.

The game starts with James Sunderland receiving a letter from his beloved wife who's writing from the sleepy American town Silent Hill. The problem is she died three years ago from a serious illness, so naturally you set off in a confused stupor to discover what's going on.

Psychological torment

Expect lashings of dark imagery as you try to find out Silent Hill's secrets and I dare you to play at home on your own with the lights out – see how long you last. Be warned before you play: Silent Hill 2 hails from Japan, a country

↓ **Man in the mirror:** facing a dark and tragic mission, you know what lies ahead won't end happily



adept at exploring adult ideas through popular cultural outlets, and it covers some psychosexual themes in the plot. These aren't superfluous because they're entirely key to understanding aspects of the storylines.

Action takes place from a third-person perspective and, though the control system is better with a gamepad, you soon get used to the keyboard combination. Fortunately the control system was designed with fluidity in mind so it's easy to pick up. As you progress through the game you collect clues and the plot unfolds through excellent CGI (computer-generated imagery) sequences.

Puzzling it out

The puzzles can be unspeakably hard but not impossible and, interestingly, you get different endings based on your style of play. Silent Hill 2 is not a happy place – even endings are tinged with dark and tragic threads, so if you make it to the finish it's one of the few games that won't cheer you up.

Silent Hill 2 already looked good on the PS2 but this PC conversion gives an incredible amount of detail to its grotesque beauty. The volumetric fog and lighting are not only well applied but also vital to the ambience of this game and the overall soundscape adds brilliantly to the creepy atmosphere.

Konami has pulled off the abandoned town feel brilliantly and the fully exploratory 3D definitely elevates the Silent Hill series above Resident Evil. This Director's Cut version adds a chapter not seen in the original PS2 game and gives you the chance to play Maria, a character you meet in the main game.

SH2 doesn't quite pull off the hallucinatory descent into madness that made the first game so spectacular but it plays out with such panache that it's worth re-treading some of the same ground. Forget the morality issues surrounding games like Grand Theft Auto 3 – this really is a game you shouldn't let your children get their hands on. ■

Spencer Dalziel



↑ **The Director's Cut:** this version adds a new chapter where you play Maria

Silent Hill 2

- Konami: 01895 200 573
- www.konami-europe.com
- £29.99

System requirements

TBA

Overall rating



Treasure Planet: Battle at Procyon

PC CD-ROM

Treasure Planet is Disney's animated take on its classic adventure story *Treasure Island*. Though entertaining, the film substitutes the solar system for the high seas and bears little resemblance to the original Robert Louis Stevenson novel.

Battle at Procyon is yet further removed from the original plot, even if the basic premise of swashbuckling pirates against a hardpressed naval fleet remains. This may not sound promising, but Disney has put far more thought into this spinoff than previous PC games.

Having had a taste of the life on the ocean in pursuit of the eponymous treasure, Jim Hawkins joins the Navy and shimmies up the ranks almost as deftly as the mainsail. You get to join him at the helm of your own ship, taking on pirates as well as Procyon's most daring sailors.

It has a futuristic setting but the ships behave as if dependant upon wind power and the quirky cast are accustomed to come out with cracking nautical cliches such as 'Arrr, Jim lad!'

Using your sextant for navigation, you set your schooner's position and a virtual path

→ Swapping the solar system for the ocean waves, the scenery is amazingly colourful

appears. Manoeuvrability depends on how fast you're travelling, so to sidle up to an enemy to fire a broadside you'll need to be slow and stealthy. Assuming you stick with the civilised Navy (rather than jumping ship and throwing in your lot with the ne'erdoowell pirates), you cannot launch cannons at your enemy unless you come under fire yourself.

Of course, the sight of a fully-rigged battleship on fire is quite something to behold and the developers have rightly concentrated on letting players enjoy the full spectacle as reward for their high seas adventures, rather than being too concerned with fancy landscaping and character animation. And when you manage to batter your target ship sufficiently, it's definitely worth zooming in to gloat. A swashbuckling delight. ■

Rosemary Haworth



Battle at Procyon

- Disney Interactive: 020 8222 1413
- www.disneyinteractive.co.uk
- £19.99

System requirements

450MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/XP/Me; 64MB RAM (128MB for XP); 750MB hard disk space; 16bit DirectX 8.1-compatible sound card; 16MB 3D graphics card; internet connection for online gaming.

Overall rating



Hearts of Iron

PC CD-ROM

Hearts of Iron

- Koch Media: 01256 707 767
- www.kochmedia.co.uk
- £25.99

System requirements

300MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/2000/Me/XP; 64MB RAM; 200MB hard disk space.

Overall rating



It's generally accepted that the Second World War was a long, brutal and bloody conflict but a necessary one nonetheless.

With the benefit of hindsight it's easy to see where the major failures in the Allied offensive were, so why not try your hand at Hearts of Iron to see if you can do a better job than Montgomery, Eisenhower et al?

RTS (real-time strategy) games require a plan, and I took my ideas from none other than the current President of the United States, George W Bush. Bush Jnr is rightly credited as being the 'brains' (and I use the term loosely) behind the idea of the

pre-emptive strike. Choosing to take control of Britain in 1936, I decided that the best way to stop the Hun invading Poland was to get there first. Three years early. What I didn't count on was the Poles taking offence to this – I also managed to alienate many of my allies at the same time.

So having turned the political map of Europe inside out and making myself look like the bad guy, I decided that maybe I had the wrong idea (Dubya – perhaps you might learn something from this too) and that I needed a better plan.

If you want something complicated and time-consuming to do then you'll enjoy Hearts of Iron. However, RTS games aren't everyone's cup of tea and if you're looking to get into the genre then this probably isn't the right game to start you off.

There's a lot to get to grips with and success, particularly in the military sense, is hard to come by. You'll need to use your resources wisely and plan your offensives and counter-offensives carefully if you want to save Europe from Jerry. ■

Ben Camm-Jones

← Master plan: are you up for the job? Choose wisely – you don't want to alienate your allies



Dark Age of Camelot: Shrouded Isles

PC CD-ROM

Shrouded Isles adds a new layer of missions to the Dark Age of Camelot series of online games. There are already over 500,000 Camelot addicts worldwide which, in theory, should mean you'll never have trouble finding someone to play against.

This game is extremely complicated and, unless you own one of the previous titles, you may wish to give it a wide berth. As with Dungeons and Dragons, if you don't start right at the beginning then you'll soon find yourself swamped by names, secrets and a history you have no knowledge of.

Shrouded Isles extends the previous stories by offering new character classes, races, three continents, an impressive set of graphics and a fantastic soundtrack. As well as the graphical improvements, there are hundreds of new monster models and weapons, but you will need plenty of time to experience them all.

Complex is the word that best describes Shrouded Isles, which is why its maker has added six extra classes (two per realm) to help you through. Newcomers to the game,

or those who haven't played in while, will find their character details are stored from the very beginning, allowing you to create a new character or continue the game where you left off which is a nice touch.

If you are a fan of MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role playing games) then you will definitely enjoy immersing yourself in this mythical land. But if you aren't prepared to put the hours in, then you might want to choose something a little more lighthearted. ■

Wendy Brewer

→ Snap dragon: this mythical beast is just one of hundreds of monsters on the Shrouded Isles

Shrouded Isles

- Website: www.mythicentertainment.com
- Price: £16.99

System requirements

1.4GHz Pentium PC; Windows 98/Me/XP; 256MB RAM; 32MB graphics card; DirectX 8.1.

Overall rating



Starry Night Pro

PC CD-ROM

Starry Night Pro

- Guildsoft: 01752 895 100
- www.starrynight.com
- £111 ex VAT

System requirements

500MHz processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 400MB hard disk space.

Overall rating



We've all made a big 'O' with our mouths at the beauty of a clear night sky. For some the fascination lasts almost 30 seconds, for others it becomes a lifelong passion. At £111 a pop, Starry Night Pro will probably only appeal to the latter group, but those keen stargazers will find more than their money's worth in this interactive, dynamic astronomical database.

Starry Night Pro brings the sky to your screen, complete with every star and system.

You can gaze at the heavens from any place in the world up to an almost indecent level of magnification. Rolling over a celestial object brings up its co-ordinates, name and basic information -- you can even blank out the horizon to see the parts of the firmament other telescopes cannot reach.

← Age of Aquarius: stargazing without the celebs

While this may already seem like an astronomer's dream, it's only the beginning of the interactivity this application offers. If daylight gets in the way of your observations, you can lose it. If you want to examine comets alone, you can dim or switch off the stars. You can also bring a specific object to the centre of your screen or highlight and label constellations, clusters or orbits.

The databases included in Starry Night Pro cover pretty much all known astral objects. If it's out there, it's in here -- as long as the astronomical community knows about it. If new objects come to light (which is after all the prize of keeping your eyes to the skies), you can easily add them to the program. This can be done by updating the database from the Starry Night website or entering the relevant information yourself, right down to a snapshot of the object's surface if you have it.

Starry Night Pro can be prone to crashing if your system isn't up to it and, as we've said, it's pricey. But if stargazing is your passion, we think you'll find it's worth it. ■

Simon Easterman