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We popped along to Virgin Megastore on London's Oxford Street to get a glimpse of Shigeru Miyamoto aka Mr Nintendo – the man responsible for Donkey Kong, Zelda and a certain Italian plumber called Mario. ■



Praetorians

Spanish developer Pyro travels back in time to the Roman era for Praetorians. Across 24 missions your forces must travel through the main Gaul, Egyptian and Italian regions with you playing the General.

As well as taking command of the Roman forces, you also have the ability to conquer the ultra-violent Barbarian troops and frenzied Egyptians, each with their own set of missions, strengths and weaknesses.

Village to village you'll need to recruit more troops to supplement your forces as the attacks get bigger and the losses mount. Honour points won in battle give you sway over a town's population but the Centurion has to be kept alive otherwise

← The winning formula: you must travel to hostile lands recruiting dedicated troops as you go



it's game over for the Romans. Remember, of course, this makes him an asset and a target.

You'll need the right units for specific terrains if the enemy is hidden. Historically accurate weapons of war can be employed; among them you'll find ladders, catapults and battering rams, pikes and familiar archers.

Graphics are detailed yet demanding on the specification. You can't fully rotate the camera but you can still choose the level of close zoom or bird's-eye view.

If you can't face all 24 levels, don't forget there is the customary multiplayer and skirmish option for a free-for-all with up to eight players.

Praetorians is, at last, a total departure from Cryo's bread-and-butter title World War 2. It's also stolen the march on main rival Rome: Total War, which still won't be released for several months after you read this review. Praetorians is an ideal buy if you're wanting an RTS (real-time strategy) game where the quality of programming isn't solely limited to the graphics. Just wait for the Command & Conquer Generals hype to die down first. ■

Kenneth Henry

PC CD-ROM



GAMES CHART, ALL FORMATS

- 1 The Sims
- 2 Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance
- 3 Command and Conquer: Generals
- 4 The Getaway
- 5 Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
- 6 Fifa 2003
- 7 Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers
- 8 Dancing Stage Party Edition
- 9 Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets
- 10 James Bond 007: NightFire

PC GAMES CHART

- 1 Command and Conquer: Generals
- 2 The Sims
- 3 The Sims: Unleashed
- 4 I.G.I 2: Covert Strike
- 5 SimCity 4
- 6 Unreal 2: The Awakening
- 7 Dark Age of camelot: Shrouded Isles
- 8 American Conquest
- 9 The Sims: On Holiday
- 10 The Sims: Hot date

Positions correct for week
22/02/03-01/03/03

Praetorians

- Eidos Interactive: 020 8636 3000
- www.praetoriansgame.com
- £29.99

System requirements

500MHz Pentium III (700MHz for web play); 128MB RAM (256MB Windows 2000/XP); 600MB hard disk space; 16MB or 32MB DirectX 8 graphics card

Overall rating





Unreal 2: The Awakening

PC CD-ROM

The bigger they are the harder they fall. Legend co-partnered with Epic and went big for its latest Unreal instalment – The Awakening. The hype machine has been pedal to the metal since it began development, creating a huge target by aiming so high.

As a result, this excellent FPS (first-person shooter) is currently suffering from a backlash of cynical punditry in mixed reviews. Some of the charges levelled at this game may hold water but ignore them. I say, go forth and buy.

The game is a huge departure from the first edition and though it takes place in the same universe, the only characters that survive from its predecessor are the evil Skaarj. Unreal 2 unfolds at a much more considered pace, the onus being on the interactive story built up through brilliant atmospheric developments.

Distress call

You play Marshall John Dalton, an ex-marine trying to get his military status back. He is a member of the Terran Colonial Authority – the sort of man who'd say "ass end of nowhere" and expect you not to laugh.

It's your responsibility to keep the peace in the far reaches of human space but the monotony is shattered by an unexpected distress call. Aided by the pixel-perfect Aida, Isaak the recovering alcoholic and pilot Ne'Ban, it's your mission to track down alien artefacts while unleashing a veritable plethora of damage.

As plots go it's extreme B-movie fodder and reviewers have panned the generic nature of the

↓ In the far reaches of human space, all seems peaceful until the silence is shattered by an unexpected emergency call

story. Big deal. It's a game. If you want a decent plot, read a good book. For the purpose of setting you up against a series of enemies it does the trick perfectly well. Nothing more, nothing less.

Most of the plot unfolds through an interactive menu system taken straight from the confines of the RPG (role-playing game) genre, and NPCs (non-playing characters) can be tapped for information in between missions. This is mainly done onboard your ship – the Atlantis – but the nature of the plot is a bit misleading.

You're only offered limited questions and regardless of what you choose to ask the conversation always ends up going in the same direction, so it's fairly linear. The ship section of the game also tests your patience, and if you're playing on an old PC you'll be balking at the loading times. But hang on in there because you'll be rewarded a great game.

Missions aplenty

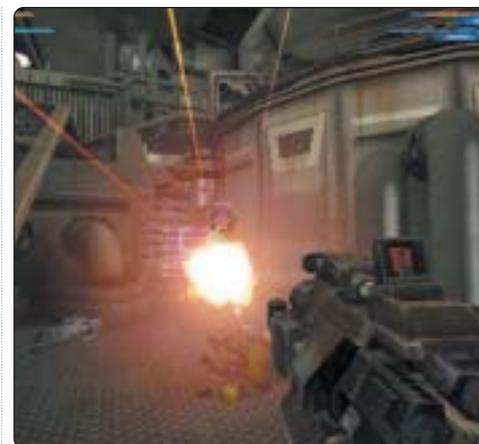
While the action never strays from the tried and tested, it's pulled off with such panache and attention to detail that it's easy to forget you've seen it all before. Besides, what makes this game really stand out is the best FPS engine ever built. Unreal 2 is simply breathtaking and the different worlds provide indoor or outdoor environments that'll leave you forgetting to play the actual game while you take in the stunning surroundings.

Different missions in various environments break up the gameplay nicely so you're not simply trying to slice through hordes of baddies, and this elevates Unreal 2 above the ordinary.

You really need a hefty rig to play this with everything turned up to the max. If you haven't got one then beg, borrow or steal – Unreal 2 played as its maker intended is a sight and sound to behold. There have been some issues with the EAX sound effect support causing system crashes but I've no doubt this will be resolved when the first patch comes out.

Who needs the innovation of originality when something so blatantly derivational is done so well? ■

Spencer Dalziel



↑ It's a tough call to keep the peace during your mission while unleashing mass gunfire



Unreal 2: The Awakening

- Infogrames: 020 8222 9700
- www.infogrames.com
- £29.99

System requirements

733MHz Pentium III or higher;
Windows 98/Me/2000/XP;
256MB RAM; 3GB hard disk
space; 3D Video accelerator card
with 64MB RAM

Overall rating



Alex Ferguson Player Manager 2003

PC CD-ROM

Player Manager 2003

- UbiSoft: 0870 739 7670
- www.ubi.com/uk
- £24.99

System requirements

360MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 150MB hard disk space

Overall rating



Alex Ferguson's management style is probably best described as 'old school' – the kind where you get seven shades of stuff beaten out of you for the most minor indiscretions.

Whatever you might think of him, though, you can't deny that his success is unparalleled and he is rightly mentioned in the same breath as names such as Shankley, Paisley and Capello.

But then there was the boot-kicking/flinging incident where Britain's most infamous

footballer, David Beckham, nearly lost an eye. Unfortunately for UbiSoft, it had already gone ahead with Alex Ferguson Player Manager 2003.

Packaging sporting Fergie's name and face – a face the hue of puce that Brian Clough could never have achieved even if he'd been mainlining diesel – could end up putting off the punters, not attracting them

← Back of the net and the crowd goes wild!

to buy. Ferguson's popularity is likely to be at an all-time low right now and could sink even further should Princess Beckham decide she'd like to move to Milan or Madrid and take her husband with her.

Alex Ferguson Player Manager needed to be an excellent game just to overcome the negative publicity surrounding its, ahem, main selling point. Unfortunately, though, it's just another football management sim in a sea of them. It's neither complex enough for data-obsessed control freaks nor realistic enough for those who want to watch or play a decent game of footie.

It also compares unfavourably to Eidos' Championship Manager 4 and Championship Manager: Season 02/03.

There's one or two nice touches – you can talk to players using a whole range of phrases from "I never want you to leave this club" to "sometimes I feel like booing you myself". There was no 'assault player with football boot' option though. This isn't enough to save the game – Player Manager 2003 won't figure high on the list of Fergie's greatest achievements. ■

Ben Camm-Jones

GI Combat: Battle of Normandy

PC CD-ROM

If you're still not convinced that war is a bad thing, you might like to try a couple of campaigns in GI Combat: Battle of Normandy. This strategy simulation pitches you into close combat directly after the D-Day landing. In a series of battles you choose your force, deploy its units and command them as you storm (or defend) a German position.

Having mastered the controls, your all-seeing eye swoops around the carnage from ground level to 30 feet in the air. You can plot your moves from a bird's-eye view or hover at the shoulder of one of your troops as he sprints straight into the line of fire.

It's this human aspect of war that GI Combat tries to factor into its gameplay. Pretty much as soon as the gunfire starts, so do the anguished cries of pain. Even more disconcerting is the effect that the rain has on your troops' performances. Injuries, fallen comrades and breaks in the chain of command send your crack squad sliding down the scale of morale from good (when they will still obey orders) to berserk, to an irrational state of pitiful inhumanity.

Once this happens there's little you can do. And even when they're still in fighting form you only have six commands to give them, so much of the action is left to the game's AI (artificial intelligence), which in our review copy was still a bit ropery.

However, there are more than enough engagements to keep you entertained, wiping the smirk of your face as they move from easily attainable to suddenly impossible.

So go on – experience the realities of war as you challenge the might of the Third Reich with a bunch of highly trained but ultimately rather fragile pansies. Because that's what it's really like. ■

Simon Easterman

→ Bloodshed on ground level: you watch as one of your troops runs straight into the line of fire

GI Combat: Battle of Normandy

- Mindscape: 01293 651 708
- www.gicombat.com
- £29.99

System requirements

500MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 256MB RAM; 200MB hard disk space

Overall rating



Freelancer



Freelancer seems to have spent less time in development than it has waiting for a release date.

But with the launch of this epic space opera finally approaching, Microsoft gave us a look at the beta copy. Its epic proportions mean a lack of instant gratification when you're playing Freelancer, but if you have the patience of a saint you'll find this game stupendously involving.

The opening sequence sees Earth in chaos with two warring factions heading towards destruction. As one group gets the upper hand, the other flees to form colonies on Sirius. Wind forward 800 years and you play Edison Trent, a colonist, fab pilot and one of a handful of survivors from a spacestation destroyed by cloaked ships.

Now unemployed, the backplot slowly unfurls as Trent takes on jobs from various sources but the jobs you take and the way you play them affect the way the game unfolds. You can be a good pilot and protect jump gates from pirates or you can make dodgy pacts with lowlifes and prey on the innocent. All the time you're trading

with those you encounter and every action you perform has a knock-on effect in the entire Freelancer universe.

Developer Digital Anvil tried to make the game accessible for everyone so it decided to control flying with a keyboard-and-mouse combination. Initially this is disappointing but persevere and you'll see it's like the inventive vehicle control system in Halo.

Freelancer looks good, sounds great and will provide you with a generous amount of gameplay – even after you've finished the main mission. ■

Spencer Dalziel

→ Flying the skies: watch out for those chimney-like structures when landing



PC CD-ROM

Freelancer

- Microsoft: 0870 601 0100
- www.microsoft.com/games/freelancer
- Price: TBA

System requirements

TBA

Overall rating



Rails Across America

Railway-related titles don't get anything like the coverage as, say, aeronautical ones, but there are plenty of train simulations out there.

In much the same way that we Brits have an enduring affection for the pioneering days of steam, the Americans recall their frontier-busting years during which thousands of miles of track were laid down and the vast country gradually became connected.

Rails Across America spans these groundbreaking decades, giving you the chance to buy into this spirit by employing a workforce and running your own railway, all the while eyeing far-flung but economically important cities.

Like any big business, railway chiefs must contend with petty bureaucrats who, for largely selfish reasons, may block your track-building application.

Profit will result from creating these crucial connections, but it's an expensive business and you must balance the books while ensuring your workforce forges on.

Sometimes you'll need to make local allegiances with other railway owners but don't be surprised if they later steal a march by

tacking a profitable stretch of line on to yours to create a shorter route.

If you prefer, you can jump ahead to the 20th or even 21st century and concentrate on the day-to-day operation of a modern railway and run the type of locomotives found in such whimsical movies as *Stand By Me*.

An encyclopedia section compares contemporary models and provides a bit of background on each.

No doubt other railway-themed titles provide more depth than this, but Rails Across America has a good mixture of information and interaction, is easy to pick up and comes with a good range of preset scenarios. The online option is another bonus. ■

Rosemary Haworth

→ Help is at hand in the encyclopedia: compare models and learn about their backgrounds

PC CD-ROM

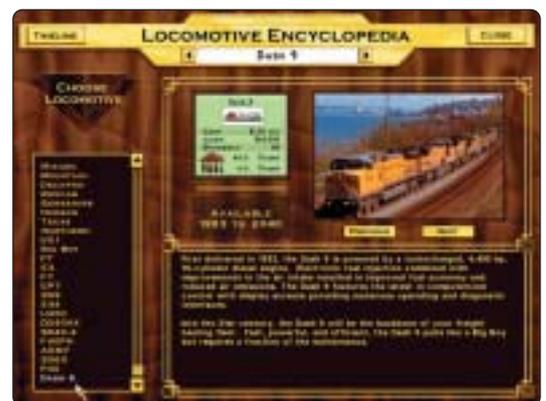
Rails Across America

- Mindscape: 01293 651 708
- www.mindscape.com
- £10

System requirements

200MHz Pentium or faster;
Windows 9x/Me/2000; 64MB RAM;
24bit colour; 2MB graphics card;
DirectX 8.0

Overall rating



Lexia Reading System

PC CD-ROM

The Lexia Reading System is an educational software package designed to help users, age seven through to adulthood, to acquire and improve basic reading skills. It's an excellent aid not only for teachers but also for home users. Though it may seem expensive, you can't put a price on helping someone learn to read.

Lexia's main focus is on developing phonological awareness – tasks that involve understanding isolated sounds and their corresponding written symbols.

Working independently through voice prompted activities, you are continually assessed and your results are recorded.

One of the main advantages of the package is that it has a branching system which, depending on performance, moves levels or offers additional practice until you improve, so it's great for tutors to target individual needs.

The format is extremely user-friendly and within anyone's grasp. Voice prompts can be repeated as necessary and the pace of work is dictated by you with feedback provided.

Our only niggle is that its application is probably suited to older students rather than

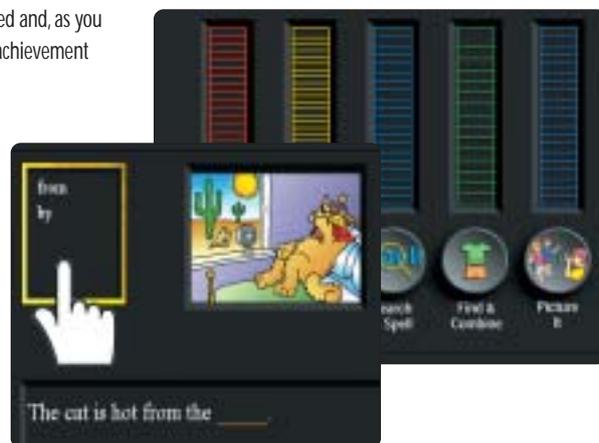
→ Your progress is recorded and, as you develop, gives a sense of achievement

children. The game-like activities, graphics and feedback are a bit dry and might prove uninspiring for juniors.

In terms of the breadth of reading it's fairly comprehensive and also caters for a wide range of abilities, becoming increasingly complex as you progress. We did find some of the more contextual work to be slightly obscure with poor graphics, but this is a small aside.

We loved seeing the sensible inclusion of Windows 95 support – with Lexia knowing full well that most educational infrastructures can't afford to upgrade their operating systems to 98 – let alone XP. ■

Natasha Hart, primary school teacher



Lexia Reading System

- Lexia: 01969 640 364
- www.lexialearning.com
- £95 for home use; £140 for trade ex VAT

System requirements

Windows 95/98/2000/NT/XP;
16MB RAM; 15MB hard disk space

Overall rating



Dogz 5

PC CD-ROM

Dogz 5

- Focus Multimedia:
01889 570 156
- www.focusmm.co.uk
- £9.99

System requirements

400MHz Pentium II or higher;
Windows XP/Me/2000/98; 128MB
RAM; 600MB hard disk space

Overall rating



Remember Tamagotchi – the handheld electronic 'pet' that was the obsession of all nine-year-olds for a season back in the mid-90s? Dogz, now in its fifth generation, is a similar concept, but running on your PC.

Simple huh? Select, adopt, name and nurture your dog from pup to hound in the rooms and garden the software provides.

Dogz, with its cutesy cartoon canines, is clearly aimed at children and throws into

the mix elements of the surreal and random.

I select a Great Dane pup and call him No-zed, in honour of the software's annoyingly misspelt title, but sadly Great Danes don't have a great sense of irony. Then the weirdness begins.

← Bath time: perhaps the bubble-bath fun should wait until after you've taken him for a walk

Before adopting No-zed, I go to the kitchen and find some dog food. When I go back with No-zed, the food has gone. So I leave the dog in the garden while I look for the food and come back to find the dog playing with a pig. Where did the pig come from? I didn't sign up for a pig.

So I take the dog upstairs for a bath. Next time I look in the garden, the pig has changed colour. I'm impressed but also scared.

So I take No-zed and walk to the castle to clear my head, but in the castle I'm challenged to a game of scissor-paper-stone by a knight in armour. When I win, I get a goldfish as reward. Hang on! Dog. Pig. Goldfish. That's another mouth to feed.

Once your dog is adult, it can meet a mate and have a litter of puppies. In the virtual world of Dogz this is a cause for celebration, whereas in real life this would possibly be followed by a furtive midnight trip to Battersea Dogs Home while the kids sleep soundly in their beds.

Maybe I'm a cat person, maybe the Koreans have the right attitude to dogs, but Dogz doesn't do it for me. ■

Andrew Charlesworth

Scrabble 2003 PC CD-ROM



Another year, another Scrabble release. And this one's not much different to the last version. Most notably, UbiSoft has added support for XP and internet tournaments and, thankfully, dispensed with the annoying animations that popped up between turns in the previous edition.

As well as the plain-vanilla Scrabble game and the Conundrum and Anagram options already available, now you can play several point-scoring word games. In Word Challenge the PC dares you to make a specified number of words from your letters, while in Making the Point you must achieve a predetermined score in a limited number of moves.

While any Scrabble fan knows strategic moves are the way to win, Duplicate Scrabble is the tactic-free alternative to the traditional game. Thought up by the impossibly named Hyppolite Wouters, Duplicate Scrabble gives all players the same tiles. Each must place a word using them, however scores are kept hidden until all four have had their turns. The highest scoring word stays on the board and the player who placed it takes the points.

Word lists are on hand if you want to check a word before you play it; you can even ask the PC to give you a hint or two if you're stuck. Playing in Championship Mode gets more serious – you'll be playing five games against the timer and any invalid words will automatically lose you a turn.

This edition of PC Scrabble is definitely an improvement on the last, though not enough of a leap for owners of the 2002 version to upgrade. And there are some niggles. Placing tiles on the board one at a time is a chore, especially with long words. There is an option for typing your word, and we suggest you use it as manoeuvring the hand to pick up and drop the tiles is fiddly.

Our final tip is to kill the background animations. These random effects really add nothing to the game which runs a whole lot faster with them turned off. ■

Emma Northam

↑ Hold on to your tiles: animated scoring is about as multimedia as this game gets

Scrabble 2003 Edition

- UbiSoft: 0870 739 7670
- www.ubi.com/uk
- £17.99 from www.amazon.co.uk

System requirements

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

Overall rating



"One of the strategy hits of 2003" PC Zone
"A truly epic game" Eurogamer

FROM THE MAKERS OF GOSSAIGS

AMERICAN CONQUEST

Eurogamer 9/10
PC Gameplay 8/10

IGN 8.2/10
Gamespot 84/100

cdv www.americanconquest.com **GAME WORLD**