

ECTS special

The European Computer Trade Show is a huge gathering at London's Earls Court for developers and distributors in the games industry to showcase their wares. Last year the event was a low-key affair because the buying public was waiting for Xbox and GameCube consoles to hit the shelves. This time around there was plenty to shout about on the hardware and software front. I dutifully avoided the ECTS bar to bring you the lowdown.

Sony's expensive experience

For the first time this trade-only show threw its doors open to the general public who were there to see one thing only: The PlayStation Experience. Sony's event took up over a third of the floorspace at Earls

Court, put in miles of London road and you get what should be an excellent gaming experience. *PC Advisor* had a sneak preview of *Hitman 2* many eons ago so it was good to finally see proof that its release is imminent.

Graphic design

Graphics card manufacturer nVidia covered up its lack of announcements by putting dancing girls on the large stand and hoping everyone's attention would be diverted, while ATI spent the gross domestic product of a small banana republic on showing off the Mobility Radeon 9000. ATI claims its notebook's graphics technology surpasses the performance of nVidia's GeForce4 Go.

known as Gaz Top. Best overall game went to *Splinter Cell*, the Tom Clancy gaming juggernaut that's still going strong.

Voters who registered at the ECTS website made *Medal of Honour: Allied Assault* the best PC game of the year – *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* didn't even get a passing mention. Having played both I wholeheartedly concur with the voters' sentiments. For best console game of the year there was only ever one contender: *Grand Theft Auto 3*. Despite its morally dubious nature it's already hailed as the next step on the evolutionary ladder for game playing. Conceptually it's simply head and shoulders above the competition.

If you were worried about the amoral content of any games you could discuss it



Court and cost a series of begrudging mums and dads £8 to get in. I popped in and smugly flashed my press pass to knee-high 10-year-olds to see what all the fuss was about and, on the whole, was glad I hadn't paid the fee.

There were rows of consoles where punters could play upcoming releases but it was mainly a smoke-and-mirrors affair. There were two saving graces – we managed to get a look at *The Getaway* and the enigmatic *Hitman 2*. Though *The Getaway* is a PS2-only release it's shaping up to be a classic and will no doubt soon be announced on other formats. Take the cool of the *Driver* franchise, add a touch of

The Radeon 9000 has an on-chip 64MB frame buffer and uses several proprietary technologies to provide top-notch graphics performance. The software takes advantage of the latest features in Microsoft's DirectX 8.1, so it gets the best out of the most recently released 3D games. We haven't had a chance to put the Radeon 9000 through its paces in our benchmark tests yet but watch this space.

And the winner is...

ECTS also held its own 'prestigious' awards ceremony and the lucky winners were pinned with a badge of honour by TV's Gareth Jones, the presenter formerly

over a cup of tea with a nice man from the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification). The BBFC chose ECTS to explain its process for classifying digital works and we spoke to senior examiner Gianni Zamo about assessing games for certification.

Playing games is an interactive rather than passive activity so the BBFC's assessment of digital works differs from that of judging films. With graphical performance now offering visceral depictions in life-like realism and an increase in games being tailored for the adult market, we think the BBFC has its work cut out. ■

Spencer Dalziel

Mafia



If I can get through this Mafia summation without using pejorative terminology like 'Grand Theft Auto 3 clone' then... damnation and hells bells! Mafia has picked up this dismissive status in review after review and it doesn't help that it came out of the same publishing house as GTA3. The comparisons are understandable and it's an easily digestible soundbite to say Mafia is GTA3 set in the 1930s, but that would also do this beautifully flawed game a great

→ Tommy starts to wish he hadn't told the bad-taste Italian joke he heard down the pub

disservice. Despite some glaring problems I found myself dragged back to a Mafia life of venal exploits in realistic car chases of the 1930s.

You're introduced to Mafia through a classy CGI intro with omnipresent camera sweeps taking you through the city streets of Lost Heaven. Your Mafia career is accidentally started when Tommy (your taxi-driving character) finds himself saving some mobsters from a rival gang and soon ends up taking jobs from his new boss, the downright dirty Don Salieri. As you progress to respected henchman the name of the game turns to revenge. As plots go it's all firmly B movie standard, but it's presented with some real directorial savvy so it's hugely immersive fun.



The cityscape is stunning, but the superbly rendered vehicles are very unresponsive to drive. The realism could have taken a dive in favour of an easier arcade-like style but further accusations of GTA3 clone would be sure to surface. Mafia has more in common with Max Payne, with the same noir outline and attention to detail. Did I mention the indoor environments for third-person missions and sublime Django Reinhardt-style Paris swing jazz? Buy this game. Capiche? ■

Spencer Dalziel

Mafia

System requirements: 500MHz Pentium III; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 96MB RAM; 1.8GB of free hard drive space; 16MB 3D video accelerator card.

Take 2 Interactive: 01932 838 230

Website: www.take2europe.com

Price: £29.99

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Overall rating **9**

Medieval: Total War

Two years ago Creative Assembly exploded on to the scene with Shogun: Total War. Since then all eyes have been on the team to match it with their second release. The result is a complex game with a 75-page manual, but the wait has been worth it – Medieval: Total War delivers some great strategy gameplay.

Once you've trained up it's time to start mining and taxing to raise money to maintain buildings and an army to carry

out conquests. You have two sons to succeed your general and it's a matter of life or death for your dynasty to protect them. You also have to ensure your peasants' morale is high, which you do with food and other basic comforts, and absorb the effects of natural disasters and internal feuding. Rival provinces that you conquer stay unstable until you placate the people or occupy the province to increase the loyalty factor to you as the conqueror.

Of course, you have to be on your guard for assassination attempts in your homeland, though you can also despatch your own killers.

Meanwhile there are other things to manage other than straightforward raising of resources through taxes. You have to keep an eye on your dread rating, dictated by how

badly you treat your prisoners and you may have to buy back good soldiers captured by other armies if you don't want them killed. Any time you feel the need to polish up your combat technique then you can jump into an instant battle.

The soundtrack and dramatic voice prompts do not grate or distract you from the gameplay. In fact, it's the icing on the cake for this follow-up to Shogun. The lack of a multiplayer option stops Total War from getting a higher score, but publisher Activision is banking on gamers staying hooked until the add-on is released. ■

Kenneth Henry



← The mammoth game of soldiers was going well until someone let off a stink bomb

Medieval: Total War

System requirements: 750MHz processor; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 1.9GB hard disk space; 16MB 3D accelerator.

Activision: 01753 756 100

Website: www.totalwar.com

Price: £34.99

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Overall rating **8**

Neocron



If you enjoy RPGs (role-playing games) but have yet to try online gaming, it's probably because you're afraid of being shown up by pubescent German schoolboys who should be doing their homework. I know I am. Online gaming has always pandered to obsessive gamers who have become bored

of blowing holes in AI opponents and fancy stiffing characters controlled by someone sitting at a PC thousands of miles away. Neocron is the latest offering in this genre and promises to be massive.

Neocron is a 28th century city that suffers from problems that any modern city-dweller would be familiar with – crime, deprivation and inhabitants who are out to make money regardless of who stands in their way. Don't expect an easy ride here as the other players will want to stitch you up like a kipper – just keep reminding yourself that it's nothing personal.

The overall aim of Neocron isn't just to kill opponents; you will have to co-operate with other members of this online community if you really want to prosper in this game. You must decide what faction you want to represent and this will determine the missions you embark upon.

← The guys had failed to grasp the concept of hide and seek



Neocron

System requirements: Pentium II processor; Windows 95/98/2000/XP; 32MB RAM; 1.2GB hard disk space; 56.6K modem.

Amazon: 0800 279 6620

Website: www.neocron.com

Price: £27.99

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|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Overall rating | | | | | | | | | | 10 |

There are more than a dozen factions to choose from, but you don't have to spend all your time working for the common good – you can set about earning some dough for yourself and collecting powerful weapons. Neocron has taken three years to put together and it shows – the attention to detail is mind-blowing and the city and wastelands are absolutely vast. Neocron will be one of the biggest games this year, if not the biggest, and deservedly so. ■

Ben Camm-Jones

Command and Conquer: Generals

PREVIEW

After the epic Medieval: Total War, it was a refreshing contrast to be invited by EA to see the latest progress of Command and Conquer: Generals. What we saw was already playable but developer Westwood is sitting out the Christmas bloodbath of big releases, working towards a launch at the end of January 03.

There are three factions, the Americans, the Chinese and the anarchic GLA (Global Liberation Alliance). Each has their own campaign and, of course, their own large-scale special weapon. As the Americans you can negotiate using your heavy weapons, whereas the Chinese rely on relentless waves of soldiers. This is fine if infantry is all

you're fighting, but added vehicle support is a must if they're to succeed against tougher foes. As the GLA you'll be expected to think on your feet to achieve your aims and take the surroundings into account when planning your attacks.

The C&C series has never shied away from nuclear warfare, but seven years ago graphics cards didn't possess the power to depict a mushroom cloud in all its lethal glory. The US reaction to this aspect of the game will be interesting given the post-11 September atmosphere.

Catching up with RTS (real-time strategy) classic Ground Control, the Generals engine is fully 3D and has optional mouse-controlled rotation. Field unit upgrades continue in this game with the ability to add an artillery-firing drone to American tanks, for example. Paratroopers can be deployed



↑ I really shouldn't have had that extra-hot prawn madras last night

to sterilise buildings garrisoned by the enemy. All sides have timed special weapons such as daisy cutter bombs and chemical warfare attacks. We'll let you know whether the early promise results in a game that justifies the sales it is bound to get. ■

Kenneth Henry

Command and Conquer: Generals

System requirements: TBC

Electronic Arts: 01932 450 000

Website: www.westwood.ea.com

Price: £34.99 (released January 03)

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Overall rating | | | | | | | | | | 7 |

Aliens Vs Predator 2: Primal Hunt (add-on)

A summer supplement to the acclaimed hit from last Christmas, *Aliens Vs Predator 2: Primal Hunt* presents nine more levels of action for 20th Century Fox's two classic science fiction-horror movie creatures. Although it's more of the same, the fact that the story's structure revolves around a single mysterious artefact that everyone's prepared to kill for rounds off the homage to *Pulp Fiction*.

The artefact in question can control the aliens, so it's little wonder the little xenomorphs want desperately to destroy it and the Predators want it just as badly as your boss.

Ready, set, fight

Playing as Corporate mercenary Dunya, you start with backup from two other company troops as you rush in to grab the mysterious artefact – until all hell breaks loose from the second door you open. The best way to enjoy *Primal Hunt* is to turn the music off otherwise you will have an early warning of every single danger and attack.

The melee combat drops you right back into the full flow of *AVP2* and you have to work with NPC (non-player character) troops to stay alive. Eventually, of course, the NPCs fall bravely, handily leaving their weapons, and you're left alone. You also have remote sentry guns, a feature long-demanded by fans to help wear down large-scale attacks. The dual pistols in this add-on actually do some damage, unlike in the previous release, which proves useful when they are your sole backup weapon.

Merciless killing

The Predator is also pursuing this must-have object and his new weapon is the energy flechette, wrist-based and faster-firing than the rocket launcher-style plasma pistol. Indigenous planet-based life threatens him from the start, whereas the mercenary will only meet such creatures in her second mission.

As ever, the Alien is a weapon in its own right, so you must create the predalien by facehugging your chief rival in the first Alien mission as in *AVP2*. From then on (as any Predalien multiplayer fans know) you're tough enough to stand a chance, although stealth isn't ruled out from part two onwards. It's true that the Predator's new weapon can be more effective than any previously seen, but you'd miss out on scalping skulls for the trophy rating.

Only the Alien campaign presents a real challenge because of the perennial lack of weapons other than physical strength. The Corporate and Predator campaigns follow a 'move, strafe, slash/shoot, reload, repeat' pattern. The latter doesn't even have a story you can get involved in and care much about.

As the mercenary your mission peaks in the middle of level two when running and gunning for the APC. From then on there are two key moments (which I won't spoil) when the excitement level makes *Primal Hunt* frustrating yet addictive – but that's all. Meanwhile the Predator's campaign throws in hive hunting and platform jumping over an acid lake to pad out its brevity.



↑ Anthea Turner without her makeup on is a truly frightening sight

Alien to me

Some issues from the parent game have not been resolved. Even when backtracking and firing/clawing back at an enemy, the Alien's slashing action can cause damage regardless of distance and you won't always see the biting animation, leading you to believe the AI is cheating when it skips frames. The predalien can now leap further than Jonathan Edwards in gale-force winds and be taken out with dual pistols where in *AVP2* they were hard as nails.

Releasing an add-on at the same time as map and mod tools helped the original *AVP*. With *AVP2* the tools are already available, so this add-on has less value and is destined to be supplied along with the full game in time. Wait for the price reduction or search for ready-made mods and extra levels to prolong *AVP2*, because at full launch price *Primal Hunt* is poor value to all but the hardcore fans. ■

Kenneth Henry

Alien Vs Predator 2: Primal Hunt

System requirements: 500MHz PIII/Athlon; 128MB RAM; 600MB hard disk space; full version of *AVP2*.

Vivendi Universal: 01189 209 111

Website: <http://avp2.sierra.com>

Price: £19.99

Overall rating 6



← ↑ You see, you shoot, you kill. It's quite simple when you think about it

Beach Life

Summer may be over, although if you live in the UK then it didn't even start, but Eidos hopes to bring a bit of sunshine into your life with the release of *Beach Life*, timed to hit the shelves just as the autumn blues kick in. To stave off pangs of sunshine deprivation this game transports you back to your holiday, allowing you to manage your very own resort islands.

We're lovin' it, lovin' it, lovin' it...

How would you describe *Beach Life*? Well, it's a bit like *The Sims* on holiday in Ayia Napa: you're in charge of managing a dream resort, keeping it packed to the rafters with holidaymakers and, more importantly, ensuring they stay happy.

In *Beach Life* there are two modes: one is Freeform, allowing you to develop your own resort in your own time with the only challenge to remain solvent and keep packing in the sun seekers. The second mode pits you with specific challenges, completion of which sees you promoted up the resort manager food chain. Basically, you start off at the level of handing out buckets and spades on Blackpool beach, and work your way up to pampering celebs at an exclusive Caribbean hideaway.

The Campaign mode has 14 different island challenges for you to complete and these teach the skills required to develop a five-star destination. Initial tasks are simple – you just have to build the basics to keep holidaymakers safe and amused – but later islands prove

→ By the thirteenth rendition of *YMCA*, some campers were losing interest

more of a problem: you are asked to attract more babes in order to keep the blokes happy, or to keep at least 75 of your guests drunk at any one time. Well, we did say it was like *Aiya Napa* didn't we?

Like most *Sims*-style games keeping your guests content isn't a simple task as they are a disgruntled lot.

A banner runs across the bottom of the screen at all times – like the one in *Sim City* – telling you what is required and where problems lie. It is important to keep a full complement of cleaners and mechanics on duty at all times or else litter mounts up and buildings fall into disrepair – all of which adds up to lots of complaints.

Unhappy campers

There are quite a few ways of gauging your guests' moods: you can visit the complaints office, where the number of happy and unhappy guests are logged by gender, or you can click on the Mood button in the bottom lefthand panel. This allows you to check on each guest individually to see what they like and dislike about the resort and what they are planning on doing next.



A built-in MP3 player provides an upbeat soundtrack; you can even add your own tunes for a bit more variety. There is also a Camera mode that allows you to take snapshots of your guests, although we couldn't really see why you would want to.

Eidos boasts that *Beach Life* allows you to 'watch your guests as they get up to all kinds of debauchery, drunkenness, brawls, romance, overindulgence and cutting shapes on the dance floor'. However, we were disappointed with this aspect of the game. Interaction with guests is minimal – due to the size of the graphics it is hard to see what they are all up to in any detail. The design has more in common with *The Nations* or *Cossacks*, where the screen is filled with mini figures, than *The Sims* where you really do get to know the characters personally.

Having said this, though, *Beach Life* is still a lot of fun to play and watching your resort grow and win stars is satisfying. While the early campaign challenges may seem easy, persevere as they do get more engrossing once you have mastered the basics. ■

Ursula Seymour

Beach Life

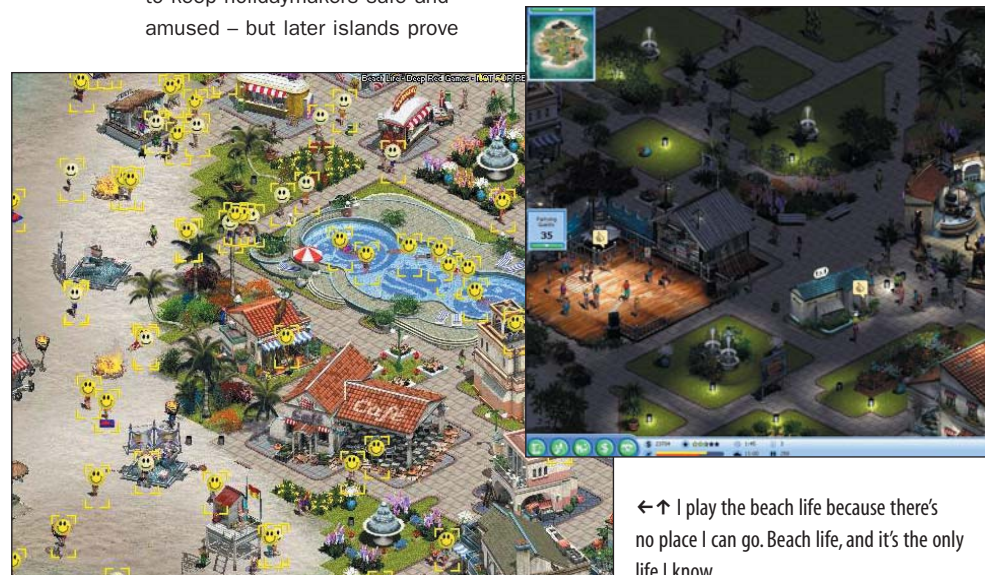
System requirements: 450MHz Pentium II or equivalent; Windows 98/2000/XP; 128MB RAM; 950MB of hard disk space; DirectX 8.1-compatible sound and graphics cards.

Eidos: 020 8636 3000

Website: www.eidosinteractive.co.uk

Price: £29.99


Overall rating 8



← ↑ I play the beach life because there's no place I can go. Beach life, and it's the only life I know

Barbie Explorer



 This Lara Croft and Indiana Jones-style Barbie adventure has finally made its way from PlayStation to PC. For once, Barbie takes a step outside of her pink world and shows us her true colours. She is a 'world class explorer' on a mission to find the missing jewelled pieces of an ancient mirror. While working as a reporter for a newspaper she visits a local museum and interviews a

Barbie Explorer

System requirements: 266MHz Pentium II; Windows 98/Me/2000/XP; 64MB RAM; 100MB hard disk space; DirectX 8.1-compatible graphics and sound card.

Vivendi Universal: 0118 920 9100

Website: www.vivendi-universal-interactive.co.uk

Price: £19.99



→ Is Barbie going to give Lara Croft a run for her money? Judging from this shot, yes

professor who shows her a priceless mirror that he discovered as a young explorer. The mirror is incomplete, as he was never able to find the other four missing jewels. He tells her that mystical powers and secrets will be unlocked when all five jewels are put in the correct places.

You must guide Barbie on her worldwide adventure and explore exotic locations to find the jewelled treasures – search deep into the African jungle for a lost city, ancient temples in Tibet, the Valley of the Kings in Egypt and a mystery location.

There are four levels in each location. You use simple keyboard controls to make Barbie run, jump, swing, dive, climb and collect the extra chances, power-ups and



gain special powers you need to complete the levels. There are also traps to avoid and puzzles to solve.

This is a vast improvement on Secret Agent Barbie, with smoother controls, better graphics and challenging gameplay. It can be played alone or with a friend and can definitely help a younger child develop and improve their keyboard skills. Installation was easy and a detailed manual is included on the CD-ROM under the Help section. ■

Faith Wardle