26 **REVIEWS:** Shogo · NHL 99 · Dune 2000 · IAF · Voodoo Banshee

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1998 Reviews Round-Up
The Bottom Line on 200+ games and all the year's hardware

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only serious simulation at all, is back.

And it looks as though the wait has been worth it — *Falcon 4.0* boasts incredible hardware-accelerated graphics, a truly dynamic campaign, and the rigidly accurate modeling we have come to expect from the series. The action, set in and around the Korean peninsula, is being brought to life with highly detailed terrain and object graphics. The world has a dynamic feel, due in no small part to the hundreds of aircraft and ground vehicles moving about. An elaborate campaign system creates a constantly changing battlefield situation, and there promises to be a real feeling that a war is going on, as you choose which missions to fly and then execute them in an evolving environment.

Avionics, flight, and AI modeling should be top-notch, which is no less than we would demand from a Falcon game. Plenty of missions modes — instant action, single missions, custom missions, the campaign, and multi-play — promise to provide all the gameplay sim nuts could want. This, major last-minute catastrophes aside, could be the flight sim of the year. Considering how long we've been waiting, it has to be.

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Stocking STUFFERS

If you're stumped for a gaming gift idea this Holiday season, LucasArts has a new non-game title on the market that every PC owner is sure to love. *Star Wars: Behind The Magic* is a feature-packed multimedia encyclopedia of everyone's favorite movie trilogy, and much more besides: Aside from scene-by-scene breakdowns of all the movies and guides to *Star Wars* characters, locations, events, spacecraft, and weapons, *Behind The Magic* also features a behind-the-scenes look at the making of the movies (and a sneak preview of *Star Wars: Episode 1 — The Phantom Menace*), lost footage from the original movie, a testing lab where you can try out various *Star Wars* weapons on an unfortunate stormtrooper, a *Myst*-style first-person walkthrough of the Millennium Falcon, and a trivia section consisting of 300 questions aimed at all levels, from the casual fan to the devotee. It may not go into as much depth as the recently released *Star Wars Encyclopedia*, but *Star Wars: Behind The Magic* is a treat that any *Star Wars*-loving PC gamer would love to unwrap. It's available now.

As the dead travel agent Manny Calavera, you'll get to interact with bizarre demons and even more bizarre machinery in Grim Fandango.

Grim Fandango

Stemming from the creative mind of design guru Tim Shafer, *Grim Fandango* is LucasArts' latest and most innovative entry into the graphic adventure market. Set in the fabled Mexican Land of the Dead, the game casts you as skeletal travel agent Manny Calavera, who's been fired for his unintentional involvement in a travel package scam. Out of work and without friends, Manny must make his way out of the dangerous, art-deco Land of the Dead.

DEVELOPER
LucasArts

PUBLISHER
LucasArts
(800) 782-7927
www.lucasarts.com

Grim Fandango's interface varies greatly from the tried-and-true system that LucasArts has used in the past. Adopting a more *Alone in the Dark*-style feel, you directly control Manny's movements and actions inside the the 3D environments via the arrow keys. As Manny approaches an item of interest, he smoothly turns his head to look at it, so you no longer have to run your mouse over every pixel on the screen to find something you need. The inventory is handled through Manny's coat; with one press of a key, Manny reaches into his jacket and pulls out whatever happens to be on his person at the time. The illusion is seamless, seeming more like an animated film than a typical adventure.

Grim Fandango will support Direct3D-compliant cards to smooth out the visuals, and the dozens of character voices are being performed by a Latino Shakespeare troupe. If you enjoyed Shafer's previous offerings, *The Day of the Tentacle* and *Full Throttle*, make sure to drop plenty of hints about this one to your friends and relatives.

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Half-Life

You know you want this.

Designed by the Seattle-based startup company Valve, *Half-Life* takes the first-person genre to the extreme. Loosely based on the *Quake II* engine — with improvements and optimizations aplenty — *Half-Life* is set in the Black Mesa research base, a hush-hush government facility. You play Gordon Freeman, a scientist with a Ph.D. in theoretical physics who's about to have a very bad day at the office. After a unique science experiment goes hideously awry, a dimensional gate is created, opening the door for untold horrors to spring forth.

DEVELOPER
Valve

PUBLISHER
Sierra
(800) 757-7707
www.sierra.com

Gordon's job is to escape from the tattered leftovers of the underground base. But he isn't alone; a handful of personnel have managed to survive, and security guards and scientists will be happy to help out whenever needed. Don't expect any aid from the military forces that have been sent in, though; they'll wipe you out without a second thought. The rich, cinematic atmosphere and the number

Yee-ikes! You'll run into waterbound critters whenever you take a dip in the depths of Half-Life.

of scripted cut-scenes keep the game from ever becoming boring; in fact, there's so much going on, there's no way to catch it all in one play-through.

"After two years working on *Half-Life*, it's very gratifying to finally be able to put it into gamers' hands and hear what they have to say," says Valve's Managing Director Gabe Newell. "Watching someone go through the disaster sequence and take their hands off of the controls, turn around, and say 'I didn't do that,' or hear them scream the first time they blow someone up in DeathMatch using a laser claymore just puts silly grins on all of our faces."

OpenGL support, colored lighting, amazing map design, fantastic AI, and a skeletal animation system should combine to create the often-heralded — but never before realized — interactive movie. If the full version is half as good as the pre-release OEM version (which was bundled with several 3D cards released in September), there's no doubt that *Half-Life* should be the first and foremost must-buy title of the season.

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Heavy Gear II

Even though *Heavy Gear* limped to PCs on an outdated engine, it managed to look and play well, proving that Activision has some innate ability to make masterful battling 'bot games. The anime-flavored world and deep source material (based on a popular pen-and-paper RP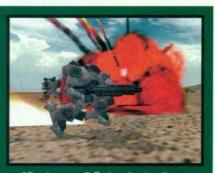G by Dream Pod 9) showed real promise. Now, Activision has tossed out its ancient *MechWarrior II* engine and built a new

one based exclusively on hardware acceleration and dubbed "Dark Side" — and it's *sweeeet*.

As leader of an elite deep-strike team, you command a force of small mechs ("Gears") on covert missions into a wide variety of complex battlefields. The game's swamps, cities, frozen wastes, and interior environments are all bigger and more complex than before with environmental effects like rain and lightning adding to the realism. The detail level of the new engine is extremely high, creating the same impact for today's systems that *MechWarrior II* did for yesterday's.

More complex squad tactics, improved AI, and more elaborate mission and campaign scripting should combine to give *Heavy Gear II* a slightly more satisfying feel than most 'bot games. The shift in focus from the original, which was really just MechWarrior-style gaming with smaller bots, to the more *Terra Nova*-like feel of small, maneuverable powered battle suits and squad-level tactics makes *Heavy Gear II* look like a substantially different and better prospect than its predecessor.

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They're not Mechs, *they're* Gears: *smaller, more maneuverable, and twice as deadly, with a new hardware-only engine to bring them to life. Welcome to* Heavy Gear II.

Myth II: Soulblighter

Myth proved two things: a real game *could* be made by a Macintosh developer, and something new *could* be done with the seemingly tired real-time strategy formula. Its combination of true strategy, incredible hardware-accelerated graphics and explicit carnage was instantly appealing, and it positively screamed "franchise."

Bungie has not disappointed. *Myth II: Soulblighter* is exponentially bigger, badder, and bloodier than the original. Gameplay begins 60 years after the player threw Balor's Head into the Great Devoid. Alric is now King, and his realm is facing new threats. The world maps are substantially larger with more town battles and several indoor levels. The object detail has been almost doubled, and the terrain mesh quadrupled, creating much sharper maps.

Grab a sword and let the decapitations begin: Myth II *is bigger and bloodier than the original, with an improved graphics engine to render every brain splatter in awesome detail.*

The big news is the addition of moving, destroyable terrain. Drawbridges rise, castle walls fall, and ships float while new units, fire, and magic raise the strategic bar. There'll also be more ambient life, such as chickens and birds, to make the world seem more real (and, of course, give you moving objects for target practice). Bungie says that the AI, pathfinding, and interface have all been improved, and the inclusion of the "Fear and Loathing" level creator finally gives *Myth* gamers something they'd been crying out for since the original. All-in-all, *Myth II* looks set to be a brain-splattering good time.

⚜⚜

Fallout won PC Gamer's Roleplaying Game of the Year award for 1997, and with good reason; it's one of the most inventive, playable, and absorbing RPGs to come around in a long time.

Final Fantasy VII is the perfect way to sample the imaginative delights of the fantasy roleplaying genre without any of the hassle.

Fallout

If you're an RPG fan who's grown weary of traditional fantasy themes and settings, Interplay's post-apocalyptic *Fallout* is your ticket to a very different roleplaying destination. The pseudo-sequel to the 8-bit classic *Wasteland* thrusts you into a war-ravaged world where radioactive zombies, brutish mutants, and power-mad cultists are the new rulers of the land, and you're the guy or gal that's got to set things straight.

But first you've got your own problems to deal with. You're a vault-dweller, one of the lucky few who has survived the horrific nuclear war by hiding away in huge underground bunkers. Though the vault's been good to you, even that way of life is now in trouble. The computer chip that controls the vault's water purification system has given out, and without your help the vault dwellers will perish — you must venture out into the wastes for a replacement chip. But that is only the beginning....

As you explore the devastated ruins, you'll develop skills in vital areas such as weapons handling, survival, and healing, and if you're lucky, pick up a killer arsenal of explosives, firearms, and hand-to-hand weapons just in case things get ugly (which they do).

Thanks to *Fallout*'s fast-paced turn-based combat system and a great selection of weapons, you'll be blowing basketball-sized holes into mutants and caving in the heads of zombies in

DEVELOPER
Interplay

PUBLISHER
Interplay
(800) 969-4263
www.interplay.com

no time. While the combat is entertaining on its own, *Fallout*'s enthralling story and strong character interaction will keep you riveted to your seat from start to finish. With its lush pre-rendered graphics, deep gameplay, and involving backdrop, *Fallout* is a must-play for roleplaying fans in search of an original challenge.

Final Fantasy VII

This roleplaying game was such a huge hit on the Sony PlayStation that you probably heard about it long before it was released on the PC — even if you don't own a PlayStation. We certainly

Stocking STUFFERS

Quake II may be the Internet's number one fragfest, but there are still plenty of gamers out there who prefer the simpler, "truer" feel of the original. And for those people, Activision and id Software have just released the perfect gift. *Quake: The Offering* is a new box set compilation featuring the original game and both the official mission packs, *Scourge of Armagon* and *Dissolution of Eternity*. Not a bad package at all, especially when you consider that the whole kit and caboodle retails for the reasonable price of just $34.99.

heard about it; readers E-mailed us every day asking when and if they'd get to play *Final Fantasy VII* on their PCs. Naturally, their enthusiasm rubbed off on us, and by the time the folks at Eidos told us they'd be publishing *FF7* for the PC, we were pretty excited. We couldn't wait to get our hands on this game and find out for ourselves what all the fuss was about.

And while *Final Fantasy VII* may not be the finest roleplaying game ever made for the PC, its originality, unusual gameplay, and gigantic, compelling story line make it an excellent choice for anyone who loves a good adventure. If you've played a lot of more traditional PC roleplaying games (think *The Bard's Tale*, the Ultima series, or the more recent *Might & Magic VI*), don't let *FF7*'s videogame flavor keep you from giving it a look. You'll miss your chance to become a part of one of the most involving stories ever told in a computer game — and you'll miss the great scene where Red 13 learns that his father didn't die a coward after all.

DEVELOPER
SquareSoft

PUBLISHER
Eidos Interactive
(415) 547-1200
www.eidos.com

Flight Unlimited II

If you're shopping for a gamer who's played every iteration of Microsoft's *Flight Simulator*, consider giving him or her this stunningly gorgeous and engagingly authentic alternative.

Flight Unlimited II is the first flight simulator that can actually give Microsoft a run for its money in the civilian aircraft arena. Like the original *Flight Unlimited*, the sequel sports some of the prettiest graphics and most accurate flight models to be found in any simulation — and this time around it includes a whole slew of airports and real-world naviga-

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