

Computer Gaming

YES, MY LORD

Computer-based and online games now fuel a billion dollar industry where the complexity of a game's strategy may only be surpassed by the detail of its graphics

BY DINAH TOLTON

"FOR THEM, IT WAS A GAME."

~Johanne Sebastian Bach, referring to musical games he wrote for his children

COMPUTER GAME DESIGNERS TODAY MAY NOT BE CREATING SOFTWARE as intricate as the music of Johanne Sebastian Bach, but the games they produce demand a combination of many skills that would baffle Bach and all his children.

Game design requires a multitude of talents: music and sound, texture painting, modeling, animation, computer programming — and quintessential youth.

According to the Ron Carelli Report, the estimated market for online games last year was \$165 million. It is expected to grow to \$1.26 billion by the year 2001. What this means is that those in the forefront of computer game design and development stand to earn serious bucks.

Or, to put it another way: who has a two Ferraris, three BMW's and a Hummer?

The answer is John Romero, the creator of *Doom* and *Quake* and CEO of newly formed Ion Storm.

This 29 year old, a veteran of 17 years in computer game design, is often referred to as the father of computer gaming. *Dominion: Storm over Gift 3*, Ion Storm's first release coming out this spring, will offer "intelligent" real-time strategy, military style, with 100,000 frames of pre-rendered animation.

Strategy game players need patience, interactive awareness, and a good sense of speed and timing. Action games, on the other hand, require fast reflexes, a keen eye for textural differences in finding secrets and bugs and an adventurous spirit. The Cheat Gamer needs to experiment and have access to magazines, web sites and booklets. And, of course, designers must constantly fix bugs that can wreak havoc in cyberland.

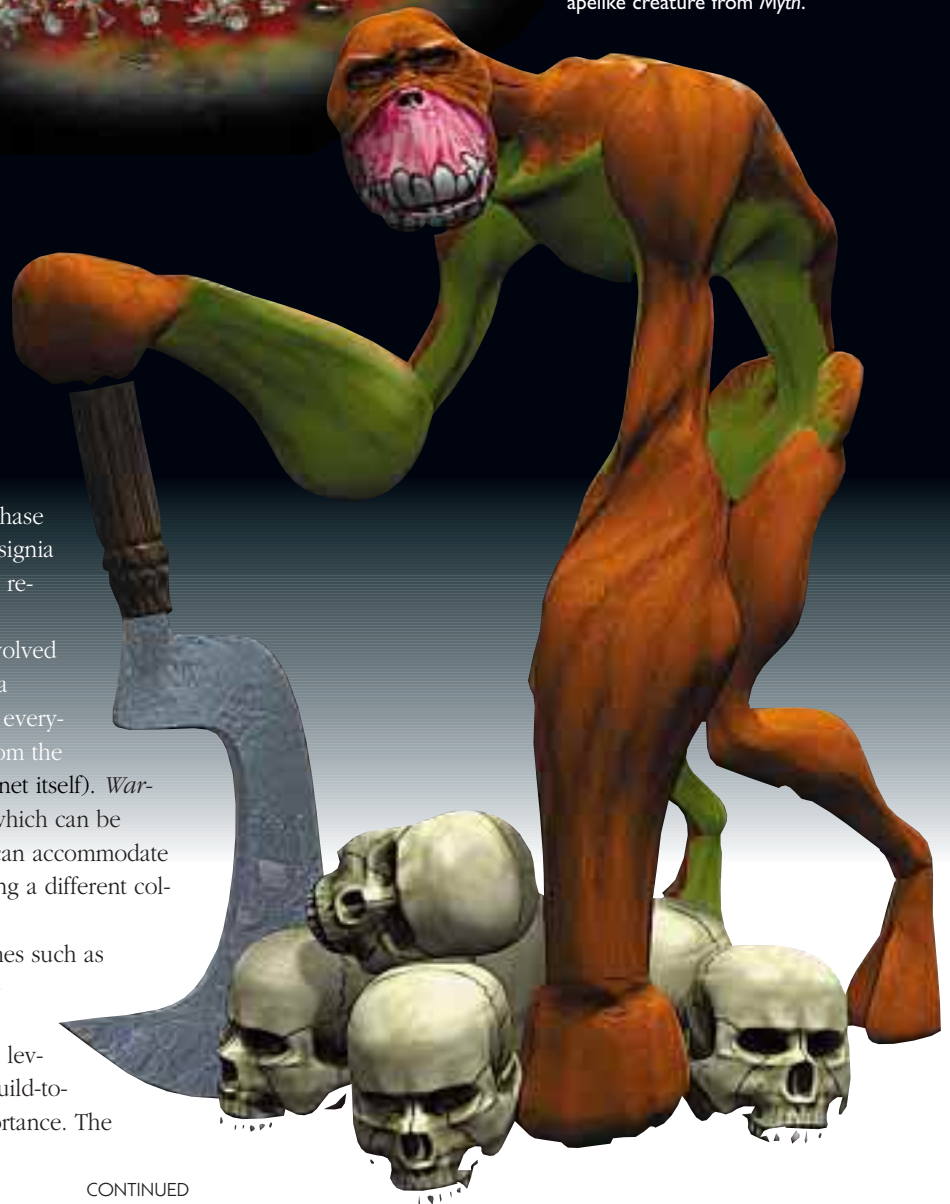
SHOOT-EM-UP OR TRACK-EM-DOWN

Finding a favourite computer game format can be quite a trip in itself.

Your docking bay could be storybook style (like *The Curse of Monkey Island* from Lucas Arts), plot-based mystery (still hot are *Myst* and its sequel *Riven*, from Broderbund), semi-plot-free action "shoot-em-ups" such as *Duke Nukem* and *Doom*, flight simulation (*X-Wing* vs. *Tie Fighter* or *F/A 18 Hornet* from Graphic Simulations Corp.), or "intelligent" real-time strategy games like *Warcraft* by Blizzard Software, *Command & Conquer*, *Myth: The Fallen Lords* by Bungie Software, and Blizzard's new release, *Starcraft*. (Mac players



Current hit computer game *Myth: The Fallen Lords* from Bungie Software gives players a movable "camera" point of view, a feature that's sure to be the standard for all games in the future. Crow's Bridge (left) is a shot from the game (yes, that's realistic looking blood covering the scene). (below) A glimpse of how game artists are indulging in creative fantasy is graphically demonstrated by this nasty apelike creature from *Myth*.



may be relieved to hear that the purchase of PC conversion software such as Insignia *Real PC 1.0* will let them jump on PC releases earlier.)

Original board game strategies involved waiting for the other player to make a move. But in real-time online games, everything moves simultaneously (aside from the latency and lag problems of the Internet itself). *Warcraft* is just one example of a game which can be played over a local area network. It can accommodate up to eight remote players, each taking a different color from a color wheel.

"Intelligent" real-time strategy games such as *Warcraft* or *Command & Conquer* involve the introduction of a historical plot outline, and increasingly difficult levels with editors, custom sound and build-to-win scenarios. Speed is of great importance. The

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faster you feed, build and upgrade your characters and forts, the more armed and powerful you are to win the battle.

Starcraft (Windows version to be released in February, June for the Mac) will include a campaign editor, taking the concept of level editors (the creation of new maps) one step further. With this release, Blizzard is making its library of design tools available to players. The campaign editor will enable players to mix and match the type of terrain and style of play to the objectives and the number of races. Players can string together a series of requirements with trigger points for multiple maps and events. To set victory parameters, they select from predefined lists of objectives.

Myth: The Fallen Lords, due for release in March,

doesn't require players to build or upgrade but relies purely on war tactics, with more realistic engineering of weather conditions, character footprints and bleeding. Online play includes 20 main rooms supporting up to 50 players each. After choosing a room, a player can determine the online speed of the game by noting the host's "ping". If the host has a 56K modem, the game will be played at the highest speed with no lag. Upon entering the room, players are assigned a ranking which helps guide them to gamers of an equivalent skill level.

MAKE ME AN OFFER

Total Entertainment Network (TEN) (www.ten.net) is currently organizing an online professional gaming league likened to the NFL. *Quake* players are being recruited now (bluesnews.com). Spectators will be able to watch matches via an Internet video simulcast and top performers will earn prize money.

Daikatana!, in development by Ion Storm and based on the *Quake/Quake 2* game engine from Id software, will boast 26 weapons and 64 monsters. Its environmental effects (snow, rain and fog) will vie with any Metropolitan Opera set design. The plot covers the history of mankind — and then some.

And online game characters are getting real. Literally.

You have to believe this when you hear that Lara Croft has actually had several marriage offers.

Lara, the star of *Tomb Raider* by Eidos Interactive, is described as a female version of Indiana Jones. Her game history recounts the story of how she was raised to be an aristocrat. However, finding herself stranded in the Himalayas after a plane crash, she is forced to learn the art of survival under hostile



Game artists keep pushing the bounds of imagination with stranger and more inventive characters, like this Roboco Battle Boar (left), a cybernetic killing machine mounted with machine guns and all-terrain treads for feet (from Ion Storm's future release *Daikatana*).

conditions. After being rescued, she manages to continue her education at Oxford while engaging in hair-raising adventures (see *The Croft Times* at www.ctimes.net, the online newspaper devoted to Croft and *Tomb Raider*).

Gamers are also anxious to raise the bar on hardware performance, and acceleration is now a big factor in gaming; 3D acceleration cards such as the All-In-Wonder (at a price of \$400) and the Nexus GA for the Mac (from ATI) are providing faster 3D graphics performance at a much lower cost.

But beyond CD-ROM lies a new generation of computer games running on television-based set-top devices, DVD players, and video game console systems tapping into online space.

You can bet that the next wave of computer game graphics will be music to the ears of developers. For multimedia designers and artists, it may even be Bach to the future. *

(below) Blizzard Software's *Starcraft*, due out shortly, is the successor to its popular *Warcraft* game. *Starcraft* will take the customization of game scenarios to a new level, with the ability to add your own speech, sounds, text and heroes. Not only that, but players get to do battle with creatures like (top to bottom) terrans, zergs, and protosses. *Starcraft's* campaign editor (bottom) will add split window editing, letting players look at two different areas of the map at the same time, as well as multiple undos and redos in editing.



Lara Croft (left), heroine of *Tomb Raiders*, has built such a cult following that her creators, Eidos Interactive, have contracted a model to portray her for press events and publicity appearances.

(below) *Daikatana* gamers will meet a host of strange monsters, including the jetpacking Flying Chaingunner, a character equipped with a long range machine gun and capable of attacking from above or below.

