

The Game Room

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By Peter Cohen

IN BRIEF COMPLETE SUMMARY OF EACH PRODUCT BELOW

- ☹☹☹ **Delta Force: Black Hawk Down** Price as rated: \$40
- ☹☹☹☹ **Worms 3D** Price as rated: \$45
- ☹☹☹☹☹ **Blades of Avernum** Price as rated: \$25
- ☹☹☹☹☹ **PistolMouse FPS** Price as rated: \$70

Team-based tactical games typically require as much strategy as reflex: you have to think about where your team is and what each member is doing while keeping the enemy at bay. But while Aspyr Media bills its new *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* as a serious tactical shooter, the game largely eschews strategic challenge in favor of arcade-style action. It also arrives more than a year behind its Windows counterpart.

Like the *Black Hawk Down* film and book, the game's storyline is based on the U.S. military's involvement with Operation Restore Hope, a failed 1993 United Nations peacekeeping effort in the East African country of Somalia. However, the events in the game are largely fictional. The action in *Black Hawk Down* picks up a few months before the conflict's dramatic climax in October 1993, and only the last third or so of the game focuses on real events.

For adrenaline junkies, *Black Hawk Down* offers copious amounts of nonstop action. You'll start the game from the gun turret of a Humvee on your way to rescue a convoy from certain doom. By the end of that first mission, you'll also have taken on the enemy with your own rifle and manned a minigun bolted to the side of a helicopter. And missions get more hectic from there. There's no training mission to help you get acclimated to all this action, so expect to spend some time during your first mission trying to figure out what everything does. That said, the game play is fairly straightforward, and you should be sufficiently comfortable with the controls by the time the action truly heats up.

In many ways, *Black Hawk Down* is similar to the first-person shooter *Medal of Honor*. In each mission, you'll be given tasks, such as destroying a bridge or taking down a radio tower. The main difference here is that you're not alone. Unfortunately, you'll find that your fire team is woefully stupid and incapable of helping you most of the time. One exception to this rule is the room takedown feature: just click on a button to send your team in to clear an enemy-controlled room.

Collateral damage—the death of innocent civilians—is something that's always paramount in the minds of soldiers when they go into combat. It also figures dramatically into this game. Much of *Black Hawk Down* centers around urban combat where civilians are almost always underfoot. To succeed, you'll have to be careful to keep them out of your line of fire. Unfortunately, the game's design strips some of the challenge out of tracking down and killing enemy gunmen. Extensive use of scripted actions means that the bad guys pop up in the same place and at the same time in each mission. This reduces much of *Black Hawk Down* to a simple matter of remembering sequences and patterns.

In addition to a 15-mission single-player campaign, *Black Hawk Down* includes multiplayer cross-platform support through Novalogic's NovaWorld game-finding service. You can choose from a number of game modes, including Capture The Flag, King Of The Hill, and Attack And Defend. There's nothing revolutionary here, but the modes add fun for online gamers.

Black Hawk Down looks and sounds great—assuming you have the horsepower to run it. You'll need at least a 1GHz processor, as well as an ATI Radeon 8500 or Nvidia GeForce2 MX graphics card or better with at least 64MB of VRAM. These requirements exclude a lot of consumer-class Macs.

The Bottom Line The unusual setting and fast-paced action give *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* a unique twist. Too bad the game's poor AI and flawed game play reduce it to mediocrity. Fans of team-based tactical games should look at Aspyr's *Call of Duty* or Tom Clancy's *Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield* first.

Worm Food

Worms 3D, from Feral Interactive, is the latest addition to the legendary strategy-game franchise featuring cartoon worms that are hell-bent on blasting each other to smithereens. It's a tongue-in-cheek take on games like *Scorched Earth*, in which two players square off on opposite sides of a battlefield and calculate the necessary trajectories and velocities to blast their opponent—while

avoiding their opponent's blasts.

Worms 3D is the first game in the Worms franchise to feature true 3-D graphics. This adds a new challenge—players must take this third dimension into account when they aim projectiles. Although the game play has been tweaked, the game's charm and basic premise largely remain intact. The wise-cracking worms still have a formidable arsenal of projectiles—such as bazookas and sheep (yes, sheep)—and the scenery retains the cartoonish whimsy that has made the Worms series so endearing to so many people.

If you're new to this series, a tutorial mode will help you get your bearings. Solo players can choose between a Campaign mode, which sends you off on a series of progressively more difficult missions, and a timed Challenge mode. There's also a multiplayer mode, which lets you take on two to four players in a variety of games and battlefields. Worms 3D supports the online GameRanger service, but it doesn't support cross-platform competition. Unfortunately, a bug currently prevents you from playing over a LAN unless Worms 3D can connect to the Internet. Feral Interactive is working on a patch that will address this issue; it should be out by the time you read this.

The game's system requirements are relatively modest—you'll need a 600MHz processor and a 3-D graphics card with 32MB of VRAM. This should cover anyone with a two-year-old or newer machine. A lot of folks with upgraded Power Mac G3s should be able to join in as well.

The Bottom Line Worms 3D's cartoonish landscape and comical characters disguise a turn-based strategy game that's both varied and challenging. I recommend downloading the demo and trying it out.

Old-School RPG

Computer-based role-playing games (RPGs) have come a long way since the early days of text-based, multiuser dungeons. Today the genre is filled with sophisticated 3-D adventures and huge online multiplayer worlds that make reality seem shabby by comparison. But one company that has largely remained untouched by this evolution is Spiderweb Software, whose line of classic RPGs has seen only minor changes over the past decade. The company's latest game, Blades of Avernum, features a storyline recycled from an earlier game and an updated graphics system that still manages to look old-fashioned.

Blades of Avernum is a collection of three RPGs co-opted from the company's classic Blades of Exile game. But whereas the earlier game used a 2-D tile-based graphics engine, Blades of Avernum features isometric 3-D graphics—essentially a three-quarters view of the game play. This is certainly an improvement, but it will likely disappoint some RPG fans who have grown used to seeing full-blown polygonal 3-D characters.

Still, there's plenty to keep you busy. The game features a rich and detailed story line; complex, challenging game play; a detailed skill-building and inventory-control system; and intriguing nonplayer characters who offer missions and tasks that can really extend the game. You'll need weeks to play through every possible journey in Blades of Avernum. And the game's low system requirements make it a good companion for older laptops and home machines.

After you've played through the three scenarios that come with the game, you can use its included scenario editor to create your own levels. You can play scenarios that other users build, too.

If you've played the Baldur's Gate series, Neverwinter Nights, or other recently released RPGs, you'll probably find Blades of Avernum's interface quaint and anachronistic. Its graphics have a rather homespun appeal that will underwhelm eye-candy junkies looking for sophisticated visual effects. And although it runs natively in OS X, the game has many obsolete interface elements that make it look like a relic from earlier iterations of Mac OS.

The Bottom Line If you're an RPG fan who relishes substance over style, Blades of Avernum can keep you busy for weeks—if not months. But if you've already played Blades of Exile, there's not a lot that's new here. Check out the demo, which you can download from Spiderweb Software's Web site.

License to Carry

MonsterGecko has come up with such an obviously good idea that I'm amazed no one thought of it sooner: a gun-shaped mouse, called the PistolMouse FPS, designed specifically for first-person shooters (FPSs).

The PistolMouse is an optical USB mouse that you keep planted on your desktop—you don't point it at the screen to shoot (as you do with a light gun). Its grip rises out of the base of the mouse, and it's equipped with two triggers and an oversize, clickable scroll wheel that's perfect for quick thumb action. This makes the PistolMouse well suited for most action games that use the mouse for aiming and firing.

Navigating an FPS with a traditional mouse normally requires that you sweep your hand around the tabletop. But

the PistolMouse's design lets you pivot with your wrist, as if you were pointing a real gun. It's a much more realistic motion that translates into faster response time. Although the PistolMouse's 800-dpi optical resolution is lower than that of some high-end controllers, it's noticeably more precise than a standard optical mouse.

A removable gel-pad grip keeps your hand firmly in place and free of sweat during furious firefights. If you have a glass tabletop or another surface that works poorly with an optical mouse, I recommend picking up an oversize mouse pad for use with the PistolMouse—it will save you from having to pick up and reposition the mouse midgame.

No drivers are necessary to get the PistolMouse working, but you may need to fiddle with the mouse's sensitivity settings within individual games to optimize response time. About the only thing the PistolMouse lacks is a recoil to simulate the action on screen. I found it a bit unsettling in some games to see my hand jerking back when firing but feel nothing in my hand. According to

MonsterGecko, the developers are working on this issue, so maybe we'll see the feature added to future releases.

The Bottom Line The PistolMouse FPS is a cool novelty mouse that really works. It's definitely worth a look from demanding FPS gamers.

Dragon Drop

Dragon Tales is a PBS animated series with colorful, nonthreatening dragons; cheery music; and straightforward life lessons in each episode. It's a huge hit with the preschool crowd; in fact, my own four-year-old child loves the show. Now Scholastic has tapped into this market with a new game called Dragon Tales: Learn & Fly with Dragons, which hones preschoolers' early math and logic skills.

In the game, players are whisked off to the fanciful world of Dragon Land, where they'll help Cassie—a young, headstrong pink dragon, and one of the show's stars—teach her siblings how to fly. To do that, players will need to help them with their activities, which include sorting, grouping, and logic tasks. In one game, for example, players must sort junkyard objects by shape, making some objects larger or smaller depending on how they fit. In another activity, players must identify objects from a toy chest by color or marking. Since preschoolers can't always read, all of the game's activities rely on visual and audio cues. For parents or teachers who have more than one child working on the same Mac, Dragon Tales features a sign-in screen that lets each player return to his or her own game.

As a reward for completing all of the learning activities, kids get to play a game where they control each of Cassie's three siblings in an aerial relay race. In it, kids must avoid obstacles, such as flying flutter-bys, while grabbing fruit.

The Bottom Line Dragon Tales: Learn & Fly with Dragons is a simple but fun tie-in to the popular PBS show. The activities don't follow a strict curriculum, but they're enough to keep the little ones entertained as they develop basic math skills.