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IN THE BATTLE OF PC GAMING'S GREATEST HITS

PC PowerPlay

AUSTRALIA'S #1 GAMES MAG

TORCHLIGHT 2

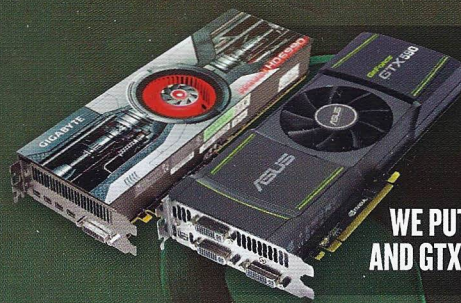
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A next MAGAZINE

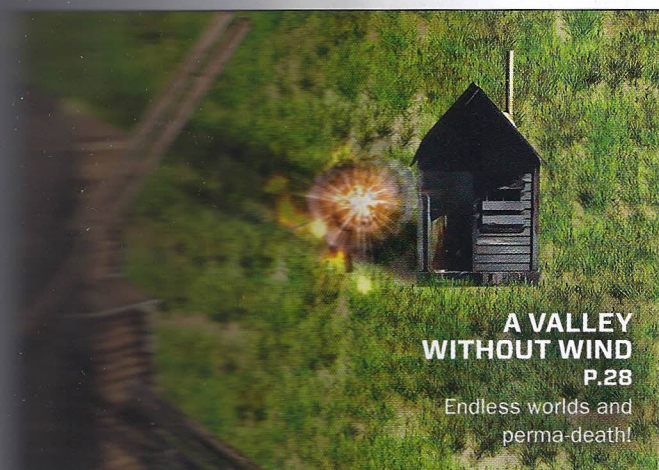
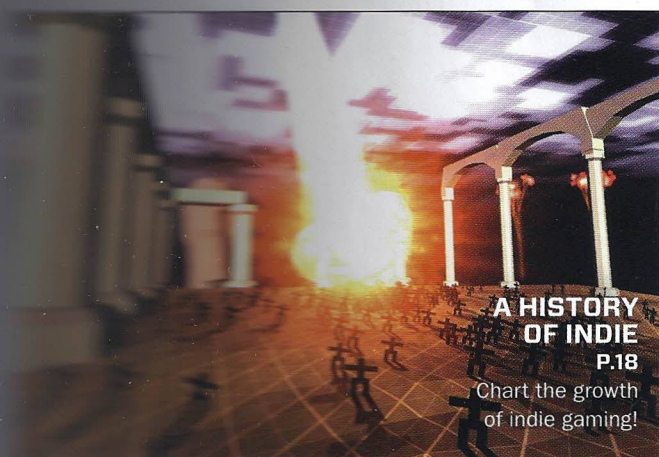
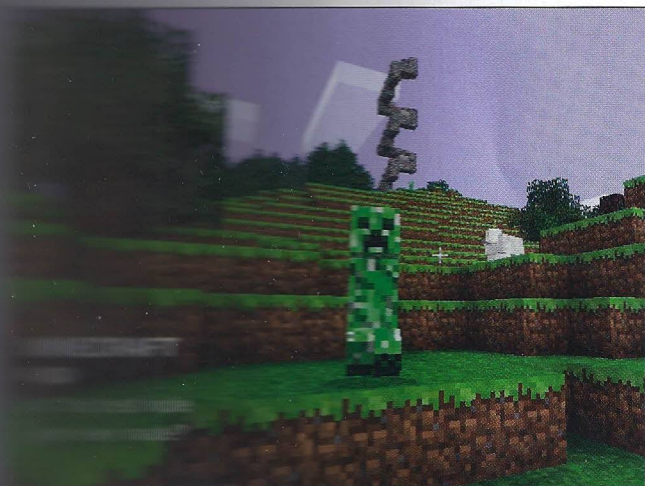
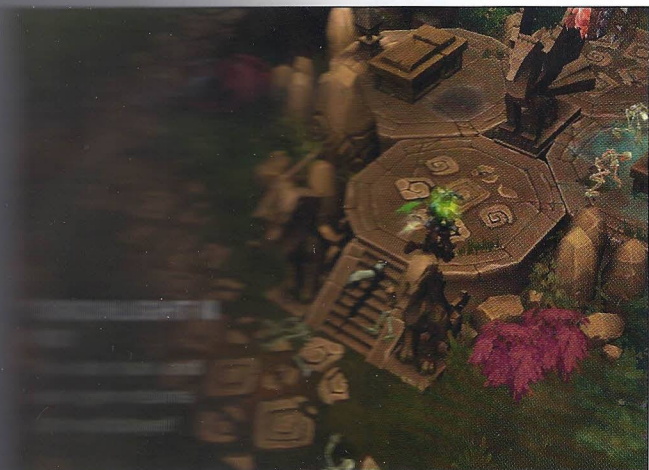


91

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FRONTEND

- 10 The Big Picture
- 18 A History of Indie
- 21 QANTM Tournament
- 22 Nidhogg
- 24 Monaco
- 26 Jason Rohrer
- 28 A Valley Without Wind
- 32 Number Crunching
- 36 State of Play
- 44 PCPP Interview: Frictional

10 TO WATCH

- 33 InMomentum
- Execute
- Hawken
- Solar 2
- Swimming Under Clouds
- Blocks That Matter
- Cargo!
- Cobalt
- The Spire
- Marian

OPINION

- 38 Issue 18
- 40 JAM
- 42 Generation XX

FEATURES

- 12 Torchlight II
- 47 The Top 100

INDIE REVIEWS

- 60 Minecraft
- 62 Dino D-Day
- 64 Gemini Rue
- 66 Sanctum
- 67 Atom Zombie Smasher
- 68 Fate of the World
- 69 Trapped Dead
- 70 Post-Apocalyptic Mayhem
- 71 Revenge of the Titans
- 72 Tricky Truck
- 73 Hoard

TECH

- 78 HD 6990 vs GTX 590
- 82 Hotware
- 83 My PC
- 84 The NBN
- 86 ASUS NC1
- Pantronics 777
- 88 Mionix Mouse & Pad
- 89 Thermaltake Black Element
- Gigabyte Aivia
- 90 AMD 6970
- 91 Edifier M1380
- ASUS VK278
- 92 Menagerie

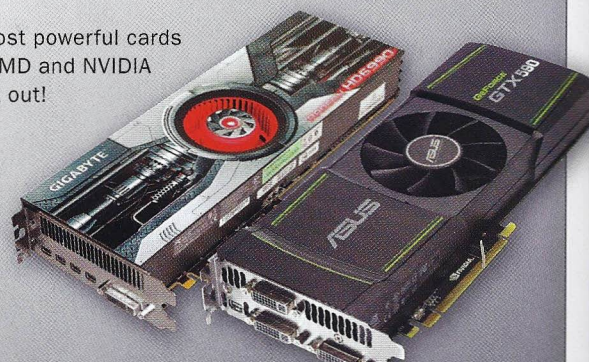
REGULARS

- 08 Inbox
- 74 Subscriptions
- 94 Flashback: Uplink
- 98 Yellow Boots

THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE

P.78

The most powerful cards from AMD and NVIDIA duke it out!



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183

MANAGER Leiani Reardon

MANAGING DIRECTOR Carole Jones

1-800-361-1466

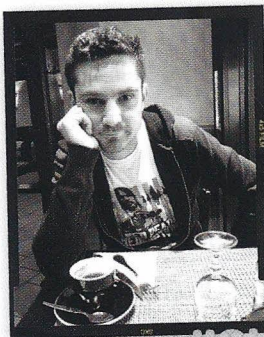
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Welcome to PC PowerPlay's first ever "Indie Issue".

W Inside you'll find the Frontend pages full of interviews with today's leading lights of independent game development, along with previews of many of the most interesting upcoming indie games, and a reviews section packed with a diverse selection of recent indie releases. On this disc, too, for those picking up our DVD edition, we've crammed 100 of the best indie games from the last few years, the majority of which are free, full version games for you to enjoy from start to finish.

There was no grand plan when we sat down to work out what would be in this issue. We didn't say, right, PCPP#191 is going to be our "Indie Issue" and then look to fill the entire mag with indie-related content. In fact, perhaps like many of the biggest successes of the indie scene - from id Software's pioneering days when they were uploading the first shareware episode of Wolfenstein 3D to bulletin boards right up to the astonishing viral phenomenon that is Minecraft - this issue happened pretty much by accident.

It began with commissioning the Frontend stories on Monaco, the winner of the grand prize at the 2010 Independent Games Festival, and the wonderfully ambitious and fascinating A Valley Without Wind. We then realised that almost all the games we'd lined up for review this month - Gemini Rue, Fate of the World, Hoard, Atom Zombie Smasher, to name the first four we'd locked in - were all from indie development studios.

From there, in part thanks to a tight deadline that sadly precluded us from squeezing a review of Valve's Portal 2 into this issue (instead, you'll find that verdict on our website), it slowly dawned that maybe - just maybe - we could do an entire issue devoted exclusively to indie games.

We needed a cover star, though. A quick email to Torchlight developers Runic Games convinced them to give us early access to their upcoming sequel - and we were on our way. We extended Frontend to feature a look at the history of indie development, an interview with art game designer Jason Rohrer, and a whimsical look at Messhof's one-on-one swordfighting romp, Nidhogg, which will surely be one of the year's most memorable multiplayer experiences. Filling the reviews section swiftly followed, but we knew it simply wouldn't be complete without us giving our definitive verdict on Minecraft, the most significant indie title in years.

At the same time, we were also busy compiling the return of the PCPP tradition that is the Top 100. Sprinkled throughout the list are a number of indie games, including one placed in the top five. Such success is testament not only to the quality of indie development but to the strength of the PC platform. The PC delivers the best big-budget, big publisher funded “blockbusters” every year and, at the same time, also fosters the most innovative, experimental and creative minds of the indie scene. We think that’s worth celebrating. And we hope you do, too, as you enjoy the “Indie Issue”.

D. Way

David Wildgoose
Group Editor
dwildgoose@next.com.au

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"That's not
Pokémon. It's
weird-anqlé-mon"

"I punched a lot of sheep to get where I am!"

"There were Nazis before Wolfenstein, you know."

A WIND FOREVER VOYAGING

INDIE SPECIAL

TRACEY LIEN EXPLORES THE INFINITE WORLD AND PERMANENT DEATH OF ARCEN GAMES' UPCOMING SURVIVAL ADVENTURE A VALLEY WITHOUT WIND



Setting a game in a post-apocalyptic (or in this case, post-ice age) world where the task at hand is to survive against the odds is not new. Despite the huge leaps that have been made in videogame innovation and the multi-million dollar budgets that have gone into game development, there remains a strange repetitiveness in many survival videogames: if it's not high resolution, 3D, realistic zombies then it's the next wave of high resolution, 3D, realistic infected civilians who may as well be zombies.

For the team at the indie development studio Arcen, best known for the space strategy of A.I. War, their ambitions lie not in creating a game that already exists that looks better than the rest. Instead, in their latest game, A Valley Without Wind (AVWW), they're scaling things back, playing to their strengths as a studio that can produce a quality 2D game, and pushing that 2D into a world that goes on endlessly; where the focus is less on the shaping of your character and more on the shaping of the world itself, where understanding how things came to be is just as important as where you will go, and what you will be doing next.

"AVWW is the coming-together of a lot of ideas that I've wanted to explore for a long time, but I suppose the most central idea is that of the

infinitely-explorably world," says Chris Park, the founder of Arcen and leader designer and programmer of AVWW.

"Most of my games explore the idea that the world might seem overwhelmingly scary and huge, but you do have power.



"In AVWW, it's your power in the face of infinite, unrelenting wilderness. A focus of the game is on the deeds that you've accomplished in the past and the impact that has made on the world around you. That ability to find your own ways to affect the world, even though you're in a situation that feels hopeless, is something that I always really admire in literature, movies, and a few other games," he says.

But to simply describe AVWW as a game with an expansive world that gives the player power to affect change would still be leaving out a long list of things that the game aspires to achieve. While still in its pre-alpha stage, AVWW is already proving itself to be incredibly ambitious, with the Arcen team pushing the technical boundaries of a 2D game and then layering on more content than could be imaginable in a 3D game.

"[If AVWW wasn't an indie production], it would have to be in 3D, with next-gen graphics, which would kill the whole thing right there, I think," Park says.

"The amount of manpower it takes to create each asset of that kind, and the mount of RAM it takes to store all that stuff in memory, would just make it absolutely unfeasible. It would wind up being an adventure game that isn't

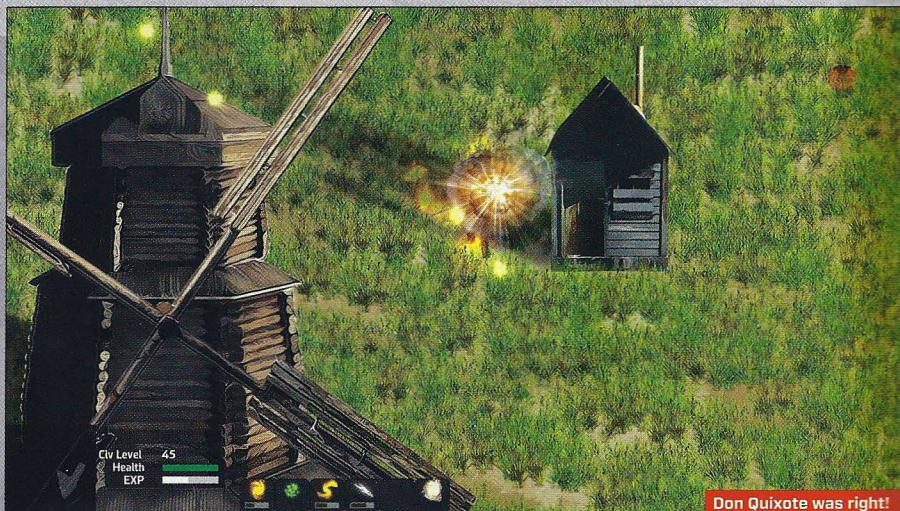
that much larger than any average 3D adventure game on the market. They're all similarly sized for a reason!"

Park says that while he thinks 3D graphics are great, it's not possible for such a small team to make high-definition 3D graphics on a level that could compete with the larger studios.

"So instead, we're going the other direction to make a content-rich game on a scale that the big guys can never match because of their very nature," Park says.

So what can players expect from AVWW? The premise is simple enough: you're lost in the wilderness in a post-ice age world where magic has emerged. Crafting spells and tools for survival, you try to stay alive as you explore and interact with NPCs, all of whom are in a similar situation to your character, have their own story to tell and goals to meet. From here you move from place to place, working together with NPCs and discovering all the different ways you can interact with the world, help others, and piece together the bits and pieces that will tell the stories of the places you visit.

There are strong elements of adventure, some elements of an RPG, and while



Park admits that the graphics may not be cutting edge, Arcen make up for their lack of shiny 3D with content that they believe will engage players, which is ultimately the most important thing for the studio.

"Immersion is really why we make games with so much content," Park says.

"If a player can think of some clever combination of game elements that nobody else has ever thought of before, that's a really exciting feeling, and something that doesn't come up much in most games."

"It's more like real-world creativity, rather than the player just coming up with the solutions that the game developer intended. The only way I know of to allow for that sort of creativity is to have a lot of options on how to play – that's something that I always enjoyed about Magic:

The Gathering as a kid. There were so many possible combinations – a card that I always thought was useless could be the cornerstone of another player's

clever strategy," he says.

So important was it for Arcen to ensure that players had plenty of options to do things their own way that they built it right into base version of the game, allowing for the customisation of items, weapons, and crafting. But to extend this idea further, they also allowed players to change the world and for the world itself to remember the player's actions.

"The most important 'character' here is the world itself and what is happening to it, rather than whatever person you happen to be controlling at the time," says Park, who describes the player's own character as being randomly created and, once that character dies, they really are dead. Players are then assigned a new character and the story goes on, with the world still remembering the impact that the former character made.

"Having death be a permanent and realistic thing in a game is something that I've always wanted to explore, and



AI WARS

A Valley Without Wind may be their first attempt at creating a game world that goes on forever, but it isn't the first game Arcen Games have made that gives players a vast number of customisation options to allow them to play the game the way they want.

AI Wars is Arcen's strategy game with procedurally generated campaigns and single player to 8-player co-op options, with many campaigns lasting between 7 to 13 hours of play.

"This means your decisions – victories and blunders alike – have really long-term, interesting consequences," writes Arcen.

"This is foremost a game about cleverly picking your battles, evaluating scout intel for weaknesses and opportunities, and executing really long-term plans despite the monkey wrenches the AI is sure to throw into the works. It's about thinking on your feet and evaluating each situation, rather than memorising stats."

"Immersion is really why we make games with so much content... it's like real-world creativity, rather than just coming up with solutions the game developers intended"

the world of this game was a natural fit for that idea," he says.

"Normally death is a penalty, meaning that you lose progress, but that's not our goal here. Death is a story element, and that works because the focus is outwards – on the improvement of the world – rather than inwards – on the growth of any one character.

"Through the deeds of each character you control, you make material improvements to the world... so when you



Well. This is awkward.



"This isn't a game that tries to punish players for failure; it just weaves those failures into the ongoing story"

die, there's a grave for your character, and other characters might remember him or her fondly – or not. Despite the permanence of death, this isn't a game that tries to punish players for failure; it just weaves those failures into the ongoing story that you're building that's unique to your world."

Park says he finds this idea far more interesting than giving a player a thousand do-overs with the same character until they get it right, and it's elements like these that he hopes will keep the game going and retain player interest.

"Realistically, even an infinite world is effectively finite, because eventually things start getting unpleasantly repetitive," Park admits.

"Assuming that players of AVWW are interested, we very much plan to combat this through ongoing updates and free DLC, so not only is the world infinite, it's

also always growing in terms of variety," he says.

Park believes that the key to long-term engagement is by having fun and varied mechanics. He told PC PowerPlay that AVWW contains strategic elements alongside exploration and fighting, and while there is a focus on simplicity, the volume of content and variety of things to do is dynamic and will hopefully keep players immersed and interested.

For Park, being an independent developer at an independent studio represents the freedom to try ideas that no one has ever explored before, and much of this has found its way into AVWW.

"The idea of an infinite world has been talked about since the 80s, but to my knowledge it hasn't really ever been done except as wilderness or



dungeons before. You don't wind up with adventure games where there are NPCs and all towns and all sorts of terrain and buildings in an infinite world. Nobody else has done this that I've seen, but it's something I've always wanted to play," he says.

"To me being an independent developer means I get to take a crack at making all these sorts of games that I've always wanted to play."

If Park and his team at Arcen succeed, not only will Park's own childhood goal be met, but gamers will also be able to try their hand at a game that boasts an infinite world where our actions matter, and that's certainly something to get excited about. **TRACEY LIEN PC**

