



PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Bohemia Interactive GENRE: Tactical Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.sprocketidea.com) ESRB RATING: Mature
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512 MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-100+ players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

Any game that bets the farm on its "realism" faces a difficult challenge. After all, real life is what we play games to get the hell away from, right? But when you're talking about military simulations like Bohemia Interactive's *Arma: Combat Operations* (formerly titled *Armed Assault*), you're talking about a fan base that's hardcore enough to almost join the service—and that's a different breed of gamer. To be sure, *Arma* has a company's worth of realism boxes checked: branching, open-ended missions, massive multiplayer potential (support for 100-plus players, including true co-op), destructible terrain, and even some pretty decent A.I.

Nevertheless, *Arma* is, at its core, a computer game. At some point, it has to be conscious of the line between entertaining realism and boring old reality.

SHOOT FIRST

And if you're looking for an example of a game that walked the line like Johnny Cash, you need look no further than Bohemia's 2001 sleeper hit *Operation Flashpoint*. As with that game, *Arma* (which Bohemia bills as an "official sequel") follows a small U.S. garrison defending a fictitious island nation. This time, the Americans find themselves guarding against an invasion by the island's much larger, commie-fied neighbor to the north. At various points throughout the game, you take on the role of grunt, squad leader, lone-wolf sniper, tank commander, demolitions man, and even helicopter pilot for the American forces. Every piece of ordnance you encounter is authentically simulated; from the ballistic properties of the rifles to the engine growl of a Humvee, *Arma* tries to present you with the real soldier's experience.

Unfortunately, the "real" experience isn't all artillery and flashbangs—and that's where the

issue of realism versus entertainment really comes home to roost. On some missions, you spend the equivalent of an entire *Command & Conquer 3* match just schlepping around in the back of a truck, waiting to get inserted. And *Arma*'s extremely stingy with save games, so if you die (and you will), prepare to repeat those schleps till you just can't schlep no more. Of course, military buffs should appreciate that sort of verisimilitude, so it comes down to what melts your butter.

ASK QUESTIONS

Arma's graphics, on the other hand, won't melt anything except your expectations—they suck (not your expectations, Mr. Dangling-modifier-noticer-man). The writing and voice acting, too, are as subpar as a Tiger Woods scorecard—in one hilarious instance, a U.S. soldier inexplicably switches to a thick Australian accent. No one seems to notice. Worse, though, is *Arma*'s control scheme: vastly overcomplicated, poorly organized, and more counterproductive than a counter factory.

Are these problems endemic to any FPS that aims for authenticity? Does cleaving to "realism" limit the amount of entertainment you can get out of a game? Can you ever really please the casual gamers and the former SAS guys at the same time? I can't answer these questions for you yet (still waiting for my SAS diploma from the University of Phoenix), but I do know this: *Arma* is a game best left to guys who know how to disassemble a .223 rifle.

• Eric Neigher

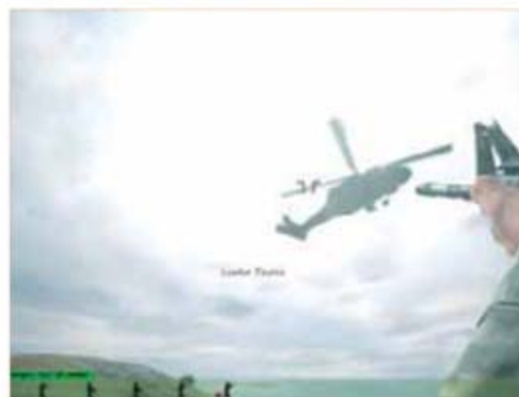
VERDICT

Wide-open gameplay; realistic depiction of modern combat; lots o' replay value.

Weak graphics; chintzy production values; horrible interface; a little too realistic.

6/10

AVERAGE



• War is hell...except when you snipe some unsuspecting dumbass from a distance of 500 meters. Then it's totally awesome!

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"HELL, IT'S ABOUT TIME!"

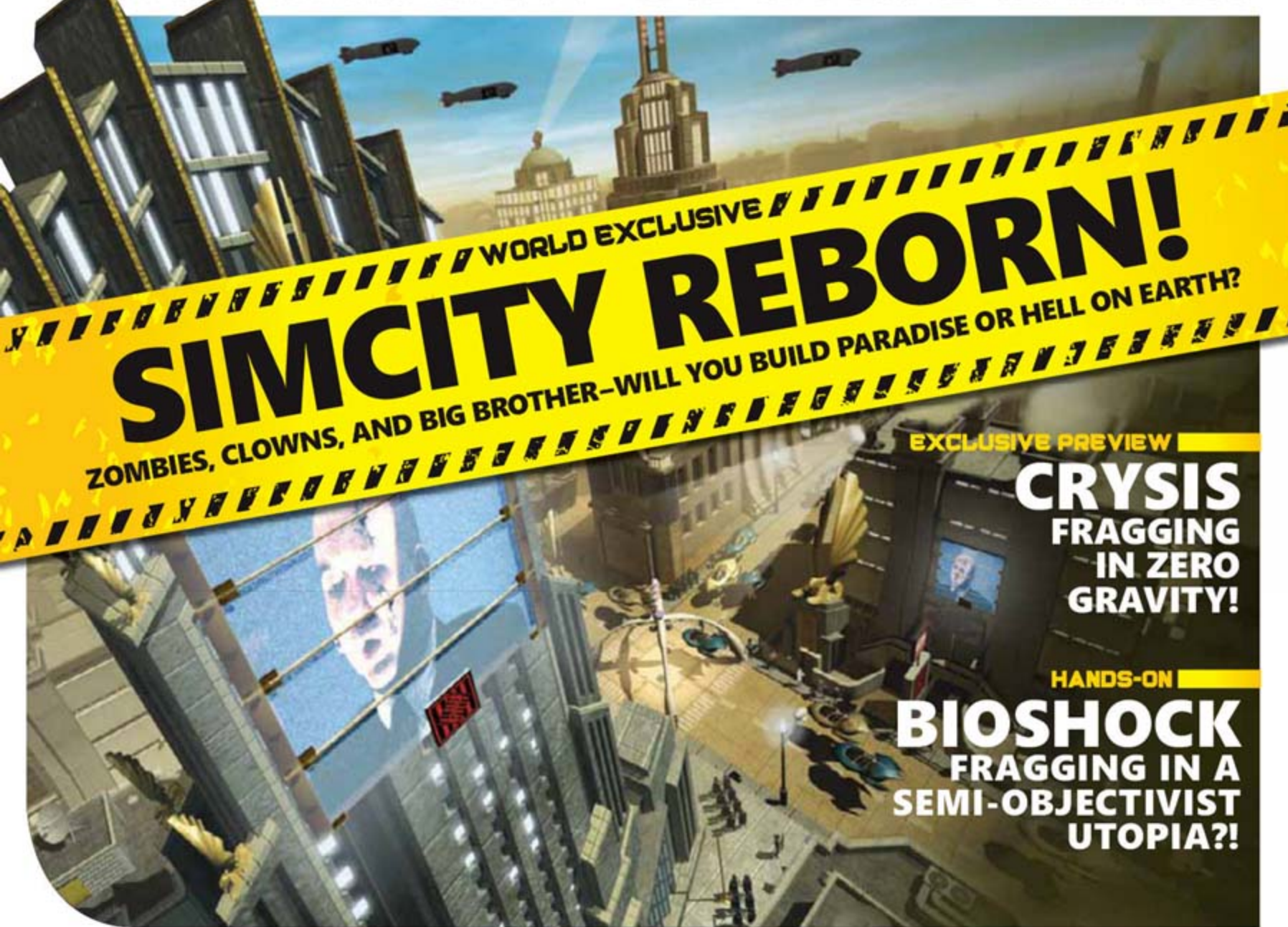
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