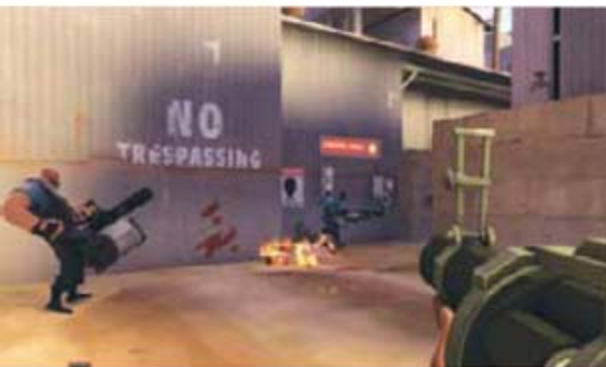




I'M ALT-TABBING
BACK IN THE
SECOND I FINISH
THIS SENTENCE.

• TF2's talkative characters trade barbs while battling.



THE ORANGE BOX

Team Fortress 2, *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, and *Portal* are available individually over Steam—or as part of the retail *The Orange Box* package, which also packs in copies of *Half-Life 2* and *Episode One*. For the download-adverse, the latter's a steal at a mere \$50.



• Medics "übercharge" allies for limited indestructibility: Valve's solution to stalemate and stacked defense.

TEAM FORTRESS 2

Class act

PUBLISHER: Valve Software/Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Valve Software GENRE: First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: 2-24 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW



Grenade-free Team Fortress? Ain't that a teatless Holstein (as the red-vs.-blue FPS's hayseed Engineer would word it)? A refresher in two shakes for the rusty: Each and every class in 1999's *Team Fortress Classic* packed pineapples and—Sniper excluded—a second, role-specific bomb. The latter individualized kits and gave the game a fingerprint identifiable in any suspect pool: ultramobility on maps blueprinted to act as both runway and launching pad. To blow the lid on my bias, this is mostly a Scout- and Medic's-eye view. But then these were "my" classes. If you played, you had yours, too, because just like an arcade fighting game—*Street Fighter II*, *Tekken*, whatever—that's how it worked. Nine years (as Valve managing director Gabe Newell reminds us in *Team Fortress 2*'s rich commentary mode) is a whole hell of a lot of time to wear one pair of sneakers. No replacement's a comfier fit, no matter how much nicer it is.

Although an officially published follow-up to the original *Quake* total-conversion mod called *Team Fortress, Classic* too was foremost the work of modmakers, the product of übercore gamers writing code in a time at odds with today's trendy all-inclusiveness. Then, privileging hand-eye Olympians was a target to shoot for; with today's megabudgets and need to break even by appealing to wider audiences, it's a taboo. So while *TF2* doesn't demolish entry barriers, it absolutely installs less-resistant paths. Now, for instance, the Medic asks that you smooch a button, sweep a first-aid hose in a buddy's vicinity, and not much more. In addition, a new "critical hit" feature multiplies attack damage at random, at times equalizing long odds. You read that right: critical hits—what dungeon raiders and dragon slayers roll. No, these are definitely not my shoes. Or so I thought. Forty-hours experienced at the time of writing, I no longer know what I did without 'em.

FORTRESS FOREVER

Even in the supreme skepticism of that reactionary day one—not knee-jerk, just genuinely alert—I loved, loved *TF2*'s cosmetic makeover. "Cartoon come to life" isn't compliment enough. Some cartoons are better animated, more distinctively stylized than others—and, by analogy, this is among the best. The game's piss-and-vinegar crew snarls, winces, bellows, and sneers. From the Road Runner Scout to the Wile E. Coyote Engineer, they back-pedal and leap with human momentum, and their absurd flag quests and wall-to-wall bases become a kind of Cold War Merrie Melodies. (To best appreciate the achievement here, think of the last online FPS of *TF*'s nature to visually justify its barbarians in gang-colored clothing with anything other than "outer-space blood sport." I'm drawing a big fat blank, *Shadowrun* included.)



• If *Counter-Strike* and *Day of Defeat* (Valve's other online FPSes) are any indication, more *Team Fortress 2* maps are on the way.

Before day one, I understood the wisdom in nixing frag grenades. Throw 'em when you're near death, throw 'em anywhere anyone's likely to be—they were always the stuff of wasteful carpet bombing as often as they were tactical aids. But by day three or four, even caltrops and concussion, nail, and electromagnetic-pulse grenades no longer seemed as necessary. Valve's rebalancing and outright revamping of key classes works; each actor in *TF2*'s cast of nine owns his role with less overlap than ever. The football-like match flow is intact, too—Heavy Weapons Guys and Soldiers wrestle at congested lines of scrimmage; now and then Scouts and Spies slither through for Hail Marys (expressive in-game taunts substitute for high steps). And the metaphor stretches further: *TF2*'s maps are tailor-made for CTF, Control Point, or Attack and Defend modes. In other words, no baseball on the gridiron, no football on the diamond (see *Call of Duty*, *Halo*).

I can't hold truck with critical hits yet, but honest to god, I'm Alt-Tabbing back in the second I finish this sentence. • **Shawn Elliott**

VERDICT

- Compulsively playable; world-class art direction.
- Too few maps (although more are on the way, gratis).

9/10

EXCELLENT

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