If the NHL is still looking for open ice, it can find it here

Electronic Arts went into development of *NHL 2005* (rated Everyone, for PS2, Xbox, GameCube and PC), already an excellent game as *NHL 2004*, with one overwhelming goal — create open ice. A weekend at the controls of Canada's top-selling console sports game showed that with some practice (OK, in some cases, a lot of practice), the goal can be reached. Add to that some other additions designed to bring more of hockey's inside nuance to the gaming fan, and you have a package that's worth lightening your wallet. Especially since it looks like either this or Sega's *ESPN NHL 2K5* are

going to be it as far as getting your big game fix for this season. Players are notorious for tossing the instruction book aside and plowing straight in. This year, we'd suggest you take a look at *NHL 2005*'s book, or at least the in-game tutorials, before venturing forth; otherwise you're going to miss some things. For example: ▮ You can now create open ice by pressing a designated button as you go on offence, which will switch the puck carrier to the artificial intelligence and allow you to play as one of the streaking wingers. Find a good spot, call for the puck with

the same button, and hopefully the AI will find you. We say hopefully because it takes a lot of practice to recognize when and how to use it. (Hint: Turn down the game speed.) ▮ Another new feature that mysteriously hasn't appeared before now is the ability to take the defenceman behind his own net without being constantly threatened, and once there set up and wait for teammates to get in position for an outlet pass or a rush. This also works well once you learn what to look for in front of you. Other discoveries include: No more cutting straight down the opposing

blueline with the puck (Don Cherry's famous "railroad tracks") in order to get a good scoring position. You'll get crunched, every time. The goaltenders also seem much sharper and better positioned. A wraparound goal is now possible, offering varying degrees of success depending on the skill of the NHLer trying it, but once you master it, this can be an almost automatic goal. And finally, a new faceoff playbook gives the option of using different plays at the puck drop — aggressive, standard or conservative. Overall, an excellent product that gives enough to the casual fan, and a lot to the aficionado. ★★★½ (out of four).

Malcolm Kelly, National Post

START MENU

WIN WIN WIN

This week at www.nationalpost.com, we have four copies of *Myst IV: Revelation*, one of the most anticipated PC games of the year. Fill out the form. Also, extra reviews and features by Marc Saltzman and Patrick Kelly.
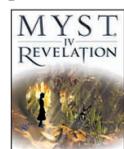
Civilization's Hall of Fame designer is looking to the past to find the future

The Circle of Sid

BY MALCOLM KELLY

While other interactive game designers forge ahead in a straight line, Sid Meier is calling on one of the oldest military tactics in the book and circling back behind them.

One week after Atari and Meier's Firaxis Games published *Sid Meier's Civilization III Complete* — which includes the original game and two expansion packs — the hall of fame designer is hard at work putting the finishing touches on his newest project: a complete reworking of *Pirates* (out for PC in November), one of his breakthrough titles from 1987.

Just to be clear, this isn't *Pirates II*, or *Pirates: The Sequel*, it's just good old *Pirates*. With 21st-century graphics and wizardry, of course.

"We've had great success with *Civilization* by kind of refreshing that every five or six years, and we've gotten so many requests from our players to kind of bring *Pirates* back to life that we're doing that," says Meier, not only considered a gaming genius but also one of the nicest people in the industry. "There's so much [more] we can do now than we could do 20 years ago, with graphics and that, but the essential gameplay experience really stands up."

Sid Meier is bringing back Pirates, after 17 years, using the same gameplay married to 21st-century graphics and presentation.

FIRAXIS GAMES

Redoing classic titles might seem like taking a chance, until you remember the motion picture industry has been successfully doing it forever. *Ben Hur* has been done three times; *Beau Geste* four times; *Stepford Wives* twice; and so on. So remaking famous games seems an intuitive response to the passage of game-design time.

"A lot of the ideas that we pioneered 20 years ago are still great

ideas, it's just that the evolution of presentation and game technology has come so far that they look antiquated visually. But the core gameplay experience is still quite compelling."

And it helps that Meier and his people have been around so long (in interactive gaming terms) they have a nice library of titles to try this with.

Meier is something of an anachronism in today's gaming

world. He's 50. He grew up at a time when war games using paper maps and cardboard markers (in some cases, thousands of them) ruled the world. *Blitzkrieg*, *Panzer Leader*, *Drang Nach Osten* and *Terrible Swift Sword* were among the big sellers in a small pond of fanatic customers. Meier played and loved them all, but when he got to the University of Michigan in 1972, he discovered computers. Ten years later, having graduated to a programming career, he realized the future of gaming (especially after the invention of the easily programmed, graphically advanced Atari 800) lay not on the flat map, but up on the screen. Besides, you could get a job in computer gaming the easy way.

"I think for me, I was young, the computer game industry was kind of a new industry that you could kind of get in on the ground floor," he says. "The joke in those days was: How do you become a computer game designer? Well, you sit down and say, 'I'm a computer game designer,' and start designing games. There was no barrier to entry."

It also didn't hurt that the board-game industry was about to be crushed by interactives. According to statistics from Jim Dunnigan, founder of board-game giant SPI, in 1980 the tabletop style sold 2.2 million units. By 1990 only 459,000 sold.

Meier co-founded Microprose Software, near Baltimore in 1982, and immediately launched into publishing a stream of titles that would become famous: *F-15 Strike Eagle*, *Silent Service*, *Railroad Tycoon*, *Pirates*, *Civilization* and many

others. Along the way he was acclaimed as the creator of an entire genre: "God Games" (that is, the player gets to play god, not that Meier thought himself godlike). After selling his shares in Microprose, Meier moved to Firaxis Games as a partner in 1996, creating *Gettysburg* and *Alpha Centauri*.

Many board-game veterans were left behind when the computer craze began, though some caught the wave Microprose was creating and jumped aboard. What they found was Meier, and others like

Meier

him, were taking games off the hex-based map into a new dimension — thinking outside the hex, as it were.

Now, in an industry irony, Meier is also returning to the table-top, working with Eagle Games to produce a board-game version of *Pirates* (due out in January), a year after doing the same for *Civilization III*. "It's an attempt to again build on the strengths of the board-game medium — six or eight people sitting around a table playing a game where the social interaction and moving the pieces around is as important as the game itself," he says. "There's the tactile element. There's cheating ..."

He laughs. You can't cheat a computer, of course. But if you're Sid Meier, you can sneak up and surprise it.

And the industry.

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Technical niggles keep Fable from fabulous

FABLE

Xbox

Mature

BY MARC SALTZMAN

When Peter Molyneux makes a game, players take notice. The creator of such hits as *Black & White*, *Dungeon Keeper* and *Populous* has just released his latest opus, *Fable* (rated Mature), a game that took more than four years and 70 developers to create.

But does this one live up to both the hype, and Molyneux's name? Yes and no. While this ambitious fantasy role-playing game (RPG) is a wonderfully open-ended and deep adventure, some technical niggles hurt the all-important suspension of disbelief.

Fable begins like many other RPG — in a peaceful medieval village that falls under attack by an army of ruthless warriors. As a young boy, you take cover to evade harm and soon discover the invaders were searching for you. A mysterious figure then

whisks you away to the Heroes Guild where you begin your training as a fighter and magic wielder. The rest of the story depends on the decisions you make as you begin to explore the world of Albion and take on various quests.

Here's where the game gets interesting; depending on your actions, players will become a respected hero or feared villain. Should you help a poor woman find her stray husband or slay her to pillage what little she has in her home? Your reputation will precede you; characters may applaud your good deeds or panic at the sight of your presence.

Similar to *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Lucasarts), another RPG for the Xbox, your appearance will change over time to reflect your benevolence or malevolence. Enjoy a divine glow if you become a beloved hero or sprout horns and watch your eyes turn red and angry if you become evil.

There are many choices. Players can opt to purchase shops to make as much money as possible.

Your character can fall in love, get married and have kids.

Fable does a great job in making you believe you can do almost anything imaginable. It also offers a unique balance between action (melee combat, ranged weapons and spell-casting), puzzle-solving and exploration. The game has mandatory quests and

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SLOW LOAD TIMES

ARE UNACCEPTABLE

IN TODAY'S GAMES

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optional side-quests, plus other mini-games and challenges.

The biggest beef with *Fable* is the load times between areas of a map. For example, walking from one part of a forest to a nearby town may mean four or five separate load screens the player must sit through. This is unacceptable in video games today. Not only does this hurt the flow of the game but it affects the player's

immersion in it — an immersion that fantasy RPGs require for optimum enjoyment. Plus, Microsoft has touted its Xbox hard drive as a way to speed up load times yet we've seen PlayStation 2 titles such as the *Jak and Daxter* and *Sly Cooper* series offering virtually no load times, without a hard drive running them. A smaller issue lies in the bland-looking side characters that give you quests.

And the lip-synching looks horribly off as the side-characters' mouth movements are out of sync with their voices.

If you can get past these few annoying shortcomings, *Fable* will certainly satisfy RPG fans for its incredible depth, open-ended game-play and a good story that gets better from about half-way through the adventure.

Yes, Molyneux has done it again. It's just too bad the game isn't as technically impressive as the content it somewhat hampers.

★★★ (out of four)

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