

the digital life

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▶▶ BITS & BYTES



All-in-one printer

TOP of HP's latest A4 home printer line-up is the Photosmart Premium All-in-One (above) with a 3¼-inch touchscreen control panel and wireless connectivity. The printer has a "piano black" finish to match HP's current PC and laptop lines and supports both the latest Mac operating system (10.6) and Windows 7. Connect via wi-fi, ethernet, Bluetooth and USB.

■ For more information, check hp.com.au

Multipurpose remote

THE Harmony 900 (right) is Logitech's latest top-notch universal remote. Suitable for serious couch commanders, trickery includes sculpted, backlit buttons for night operation, a colour LCD touchscreen, radio frequency extender module for controlling hidden devices (inside cabinets), USB cable for online computer set-up (Windows only) with customer help, a row of dedicated Blu-ray player buttons and a charging dock. But given the strong Aussie dollar, the local price, \$899, seems a bit steep – the Harmony 900 sells for less than \$US400 in the US and controlling a PS3 requires a \$99.95 adapter.

■ For more information, check logitech.com



Digital video recorder

STRONG Technologies' SRT 5492 high-definition twin tuner terrestrial receiver and digital video recorder (above) outguns and undercuts the better known TiVo DVR, which has a 160GB hard drive and a \$699 rrp. Besides being \$100 cheaper, Strong's SRT 5492 has a 500GB hard drive and all the features you need, such as the ability to record two programs at once while watching a third, an electronic program guide (including Ice TV) and a LAN connection.

■ For more information, check strong-technologies.com

Getting fragged has never been this fun

In the outlaw world of online gaming, co-operative play adds a whole new element of challenge, writes

ROB FARQUHAR

TOP-NOTCH, million-dollar budget shooter games have frustrated me since the days of *Wing Commander*.

I love their well-crafted, single-player campaigns.

Stellar graphics and compelling storylines aside, the designers work damned hard ensuring the challenges are hooky enough for me to want to master, yet not so tough to put me off.

They're so much fun that I think: "Buddying up with a friend through this would be awesome!"

That's the frustrating bit.

While shooters have let friends co-operate to complete their campaigns since 2001's *Halo: Combat Evolved*, the pacing and challenges are less tense with another person.

Until recently, the other main option was a competitive multiplayer.

This has its own issues. Most other humans online drop the F-bomb (and worse) as often as they press Fire.

Network delays and player skill mismatches can turn a tough challenge into a slaughter.

If the game lets me play against computer-driven enemies, they're clones of me, not the varied enemies of



the campaign.

Thankfully, game designers have come up with interesting compromises.

Last year, Valve published *Left 4 Dead*, in which four survivors flee to safety from hordes of computer-controlled zombies.

It's campaign only, but designed for teams. Adding players actually improves it.

Other games have featured team modes separated from the main campaign.

Activision's fifth Call of Duty offering, *World at War*, included "Nazi Zombies", while Epic's *Gears of War 2*

included "Horde".

Just last month, Bungie released *Halo 3: ODST* with "Firefight".

These modes are like the best bits of *Aliens*, *Starship Troopers* and *Dawn of the Dead*.

I only need one to three other gamer mates with the game.

The action starts within seconds and rarely lets up.

The types and numbers of enemies in each wave are random. We're never quite sure what we'll face next.

Limited ammunition, heavy weapons in enemy territory and choke points aplenty force us to think quickly, communicate

and work together to stay alive.

Some games allow us to set the skill level of our opponents, so we can take the day's frustrations out on some evil pushovers.

On low difficulty, I can play solo, blowing stuff up without the campaign's drama.

Lastly, it's great to, in the words of *Castle* star Nathan Fillion, "Go hard against a tremendous amount of very skilled enemies and never once get teabagged or called a b----".

On the outlaw frontiers of internet gaming, that's a luxury.

I'm glad my friends and I aren't alone in our taste for got-your-back action.

Left 4 Dead's popularity spawned a sequel that hits shelves mid-November (although at this stage we won't be playing it here in Australia due to the Office of Film and Literature Classification refusing to allow it on to the market) and another co-op shooter, *Borderlands*, has just been released to rave reviews.

Even real-time strategy games, which pit armies against each other, are getting in on the trend.

On October 14, developer Relic released a free add-on for *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II* called "The Last Stand" giving three players control of individual, customisable heroes instead of armies.

I can't wait to see what wonderful new ways game designers create to team up.

Maybe, next year's *Aliens: Colonial Marines* will fit the bill.

Short, controlled bursts, guys?

▶▶ GAME ON!

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FIFA Soccer 10

(360 / PS3 / PC – Electronic Arts)

IT'S tough for sports game developers to outshine previous efforts substantially enough to emerge as something special.

NHL 09 was able to do it, *NBA Live 10* was able to do it and now the folks at EA Canada have miraculously created a

FIFA title that is markedly better than the impressive previous effort.

When it comes to sports games people are always crying out for some genre-defining feature addition or a graphical upgrade that blows the doors off of anything that you've seen before. *FIFA 10* is devoid of those giant leaps forward, yet still manages to impress in every one of the traditional aspects of the sport.

Let's start with Virtual Pro which, in my opinion, should make its way into every EA Sports game in the coming year or two. It starts similarly to the standard Be A Pro modes (which are also included). You create a player, design his attributes to fit your play style and sculpt his look to match your own – or some disgusting alternative rendition. You can even use GameFace to upload a photo of yourself into the game.

After you're done sculpting your future footie star, it's time to take to the pitch. Here's where Virtual Pro differentiates itself from the Be A Pro modes of the past.

You can take him into the new practice arena and work on drills, you can hop into a Play Now match, you can play in Manager Mode or you can hop online and play in the Pro Club Championship mode with a galley of other Virtual Pros.

When you're done wading through the list of single-player modes and actually do make your way to the hallowed ground known as the soccer pitch, you'll notice the subtle, yet sweeping changes that have been made to this year's game.

FIFA 10 is the definitive soccer experience if there ever was one.

It packages a list of modes that perform in wonderful harmony with one another, thanks to Virtual Pro and the fact that the gameplay lives up to this praise should only sweeten the deal.

Taking the game online is as awesome as it was last year and with Live Season 2.0 kicking off once the US version ships on October 20, soccer diehards are going to have even more to sink their teeth into.



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