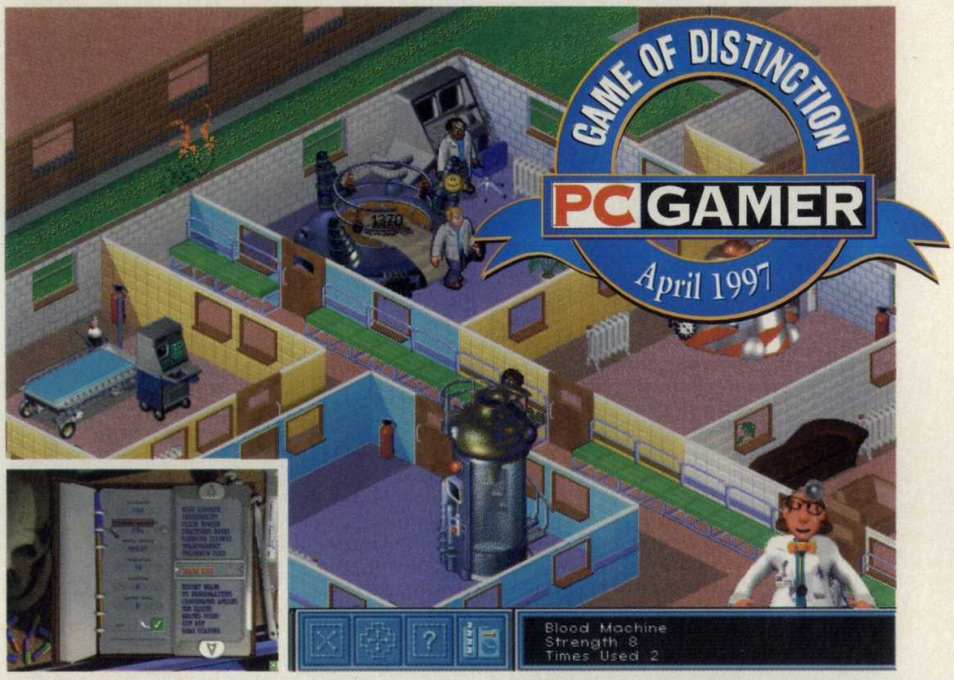
Theme Hospital

Publisher	Electronic Arts
Developer	Bullfrog
Price	£45
Minimum System	486DX2/66, 8Mb RAM
Recommended	P75, 16Mb RAM
Graphics Accelerator	None
Sound Support	All major cards
Multi-Player	Four-player Internet/modem/network
Web Address	http://www.bullfrog.co.uk
Release Date	Out now

Must confess to being a little sceptical about the whole hospital bit, but Bullfrog's latest is surprisingly engaging.



Ah ha, an excellent choice of screenshot here that demonstrates a few of the more interesting machines - giant hair defolicaliser and decontaminator, for instance. Set the cost of treatment at the screen shown in the inset.

SEXISM IS STILL RIFE IN THE games industry, then. Lara Croft, the first tough female lead since Ms Pacman, had to expose thighs and have large breasts. And although there is a variety of skin colours, it's surprising to see that all the doctors and caretakers in *Theme Hospital* are men while the nurses and receptionists are women. This almost certainly reflects the majorities in real life, I'm sure, but it comes as something of a surprise.

So let's keep the sexism going for a bit longer. Women will love *Theme Hospital*. Not only does it involve caring for people (although there are no fluffy-wuffy bunnie-wunnies), but there are lots of plant pots, which can be moved around endlessly.

Theme Hospital, a nonsensical name, is shameless corporate branding reflecting that it is a sequel to *Theme Park*. And it is very *Theme Park*. Not better or worse, really, although certainly a little more surprising and structured, but at its basic level it's *Theme Park* with different graphics.

Instead of a plot of empty green land, you have an empty building, and one that's quite constricting at first. With some cash in the bank you can purchase new plots of land which magically sprout empty, roofless buildings and sometimes connecting corridors. Inside these immaculately tiled buildings you drop any objects that you think might make your hospital that much more hospitable, such as bins, the aforementioned pot plants, radiators, benches and drinks machines. Such objects keep your visiting guests just that little bit happier, fickle idiots that they are, thus improving your reputation among the burgeoning medical community.

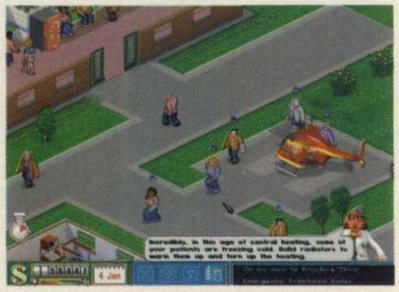
Around such furnishing trinkets you must build rooms of varying purpose, by dragging out a blueprint with a trowel cursor. At first you need a GP's office, the first port of call for your patients, but you'll soon need further specialist diagnosis rooms to compensate for the GP's somewhat restricted knowledge.

Treatment rooms should be popped somewhere, the first of which is likely to be a pharmacy for the dishing out of various liquid cures. A psychiatrist comes in handy to

Better

Nee naa, nee naa

If you feel properly equipped, you can opt to receive emergency cases, for which you will be appropriately rewarded. Such patients are dropped off by chopper and easily recognised by the flashing lights hovering above their heads. By all means push them to the front of the queue as they must be cured within a strict time limit.



My beautifully built hospital here demonstrates the concept of operating theatre and ward. Notice cunning product placement adorning cold drinks machine.

"It's only a matter of a couple of levels before things get exceptionally hectic."

convince patients with too much money that they are no longer ill. £500 please, thank you very much. As you discover new ailments and their required treatments, new rooms must be built to house scanners and X-ray machines, surgeries, wards, toilets, staff rooms and the machines that go 'ping' that take care of *Theme Hospital's* myriad of bizarre illnesses. Slack Tongue, a disability where the tongue drags along the floor, requires a mangle and cutting equipment; Bloaty Head must be popped and pumped back to normal; Hairyitis demands a giant electrolysis machine. And if you are of the opinion that these diseases are inherently tragically unfunny, then you aren't alone in your thinking.

So you have buildings, rooms, patients and pot plants, all of which require the presence of staff. Receptionists check everyone in, doctors take care of the diagnosis and most treatments and nurses staff the pharmacy, fracture clinic and wards. Meanwhile caretakers clean up litter, water the plants, fix machinery and wipe up sick.

Theme Hospital borrows plenty of ideas from *Theme Park*, and the consequence is that you have a great strategy game that's also good for a laugh. Eased in gently, it's only a matter of a couple of levels before things get exceptionally hectic. Three other hospitals start at the same time as you, all gunning for business in a universe that is surgically cut-throat. Of course this style lends itself rather nicely to the multi-player options, with up to four people playing the same level at the same time, where only one can satisfy all of the criteria necessary to complete a scenario. It's necessary to watch your cash, the contentment of the staff and 'customers', keep the place tidy (or be infested by rats) and make sure there are no hitches when a local dignitary comes to visit.

To be honest, this whole premise is starting to look a little dated. I feel like I want more in 1997 than a cute strategy game, and some of *Theme Hospital's* annoying interface problems (a cluttered screen masked by other open windows; it's also very easy to accidentally cancel a room you've just built) prevent it from enjoying a score in the 90s. Nevertheless, there are few strategy games that offer such a challenge while surrounded by such delightful bon-homie and cute graphics. It's an exceptionally pleasant surprise. *Theme Hospital* is considerably better than I feared it might be, and a very amusing way to drift into the early hours of the morning. STEVE OWEN

A funny thing happened on the way to the operating theatre

Allegedly based on a real hospital just outside Dorking, *Theme Hospital* finally exposes the more unusual things that go on within our health service.

A visiting dignitary checks the facilities.

An epidemic results in puke at reception.

A doctor relaxes with a game of pool.

A rat in the hallway. What am I gonna do?

(Left) A spot of hospital construction in progress. Notice the blue print that I've stretched out. I'm just deciding on door and window positions at the moment. (Right) The bloody customers are moaning about the heating again.

PC GAMER – THE VERDICT

A superbly entertaining strategy game, but one that is looking just a little long in the tooth.

85%