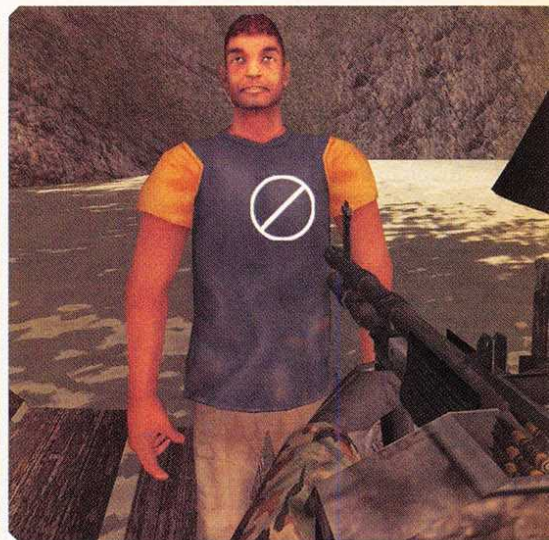
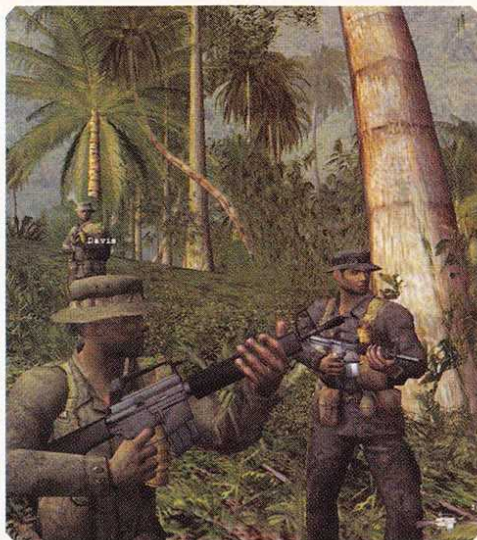


Tactical

Shootout

Five tactical shooters go in, only one comes out alive BY STEVE BAUMAN



Tactical games aren't about running and gunning, which is why they're ultimately more intense than supposed horror games like *DOOM 3*. When you don't have a rocket launcher, you're way more afraid of what lurks behind that door. It's not the tension of knowing tons of stuff will come at you from all directions; instead, it's the fear that some guy will open up that door you just passed and shoot you in the back.

Most tactical games feature military settings, and you can usually tell them at a glance by their "colon" names. Take **Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30** (Ubisoft/Mature ★★★★★),

for instance—it's an excellent game with way too much name. Somber and serious, it's the only one of this bunch to be set in WWII. Its single-player, crafted with skill by Gearbox Software and with definite nods to the *Medal of Honor* series, is significantly more elaborate than any of the other games here.

Close Combat: First to Fight (2K Games/Mature ★★★★★) is an excellent first effort from Destineer. Putting you in charge of Marines in Beirut, it suffers some from "too much Middle-East" syndrome; yes, there are more dusty roads full of brown people to kill. Like *Brothers in Arms*, its sin-

gle-player feels like a puzzle game, where you whip out "Tactic A" in one area and then move on to "Tactic B" in the next. Still, this attractive game is the best modern military tactical shooter available right now, with solid teammate AI.

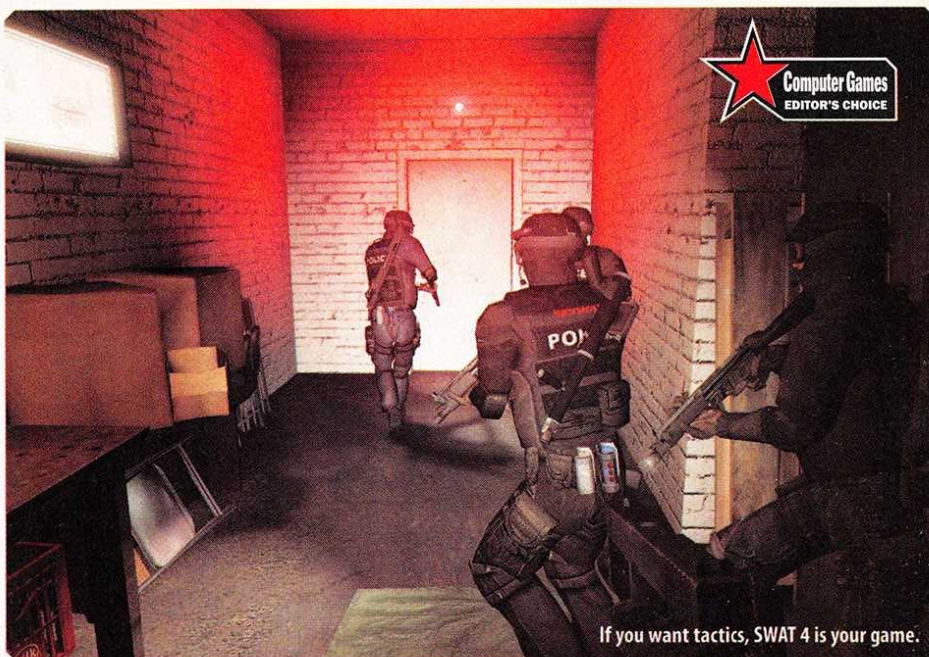
Combat: Task Force 21 (Groove Games/Mature ★½) puts you in the boots of a member of Task Force 21, a group of Navy Seals, Green Berets, Army Rangers, and USMC Recon personnel. It has the requisite "years of unrest have led to rebels taking over something or other" type plot and promises all sorts of authentic weapons, but it's really just an incredibly boring corridor

shooter. It also has the dulllest implementation of the *Unreal* engine imaginable; what would have been a stark and unattractive game in 2000 is seriously homely in 2005.

Elite Warriors: Vietnam (Bold Games/Mature ★★½) is the latest in a string of budgetware releases from developer nFusion. From the surprisingly good *Deadly Dozen* to last year's ludicrously difficult *Line of Sight: Vietnam*, the developer is all over the map when it comes to figuring out ways to handle this type of game. Less narrative-driven and more open-ended than *Line of Sight*, *Elite Warriors* has some interesting ideas—an overheard tactical map, a new radial interface, and most interestingly, a single-player game that has you moving your units around on a large map, only pulling you into the action when engaging the enemy. It's like the old *Ultima* games, but with more guns. But the combat itself is dull and unsatisfying, and the less said about the enemy AI the better.

Not all military shooters are tactical, and not all tactical games are military. You can easily tell **SWAT 4** (Vivendi Universal/Mature ★★★★★½) is going to be different because it has no colon in its title; it also has cops instead of soldiers, though its close-quarter combat isn't all that different from what's found in *Close Combat*. But overall, *SWAT 4* is a better game, and the most serious tactical experience of the bunch.

There are a number of reasons why *SWAT 4* is better. First off, its levels are superbly crafted for maximum tension. Doors are your biggest enemy in *SWAT*. While the other games, save *Close Combat*, focus more on outdoor tactics, the claustrophobic real-world urban locations in *SWAT* provide amazing challenges. All of the levels revel in



urban decay, showing a very nihilistic view of city life. Then again, if all cities were just peaches and cream there'd be no need for *SWAT*. There's nothing to connect the missions in *SWAT*, as there's no overarching plot you'd ignore that gets in the way of all of the tactical goodness. (It doesn't make sense for there be any plot anyway; *SWAT* just sort of shows up when something bad goes down.)

The levels in *Brothers in Arms* and *Close Combat* are somewhat restricted by their locations. Both feature excellent graphics, but they feel like places you've been to dozens of times. There are few surprises. And there's only so much you can do with jungles, and *Elite Warriors* does as little as possible.

In single-player, *SWAT 4* and *Elite Warriors* are the only ones that feel like they have an organic single-player. The others are like *Full*

Spectrum Warrior, where you spend most of your time figuring out how the level designer expects you to flank your opponents. You're given all of these cool tactical tricks that you can only use when the designers deem them appropriate. There's nothing inherently wrong with this approach, but it's very game-y. (Load times are a serious issue for *SWAT* and *Brothers in Arms*; they are as long as those for *Close Combat* are short.)

What *SWAT* in particular does better than any of the others—and, in fact, it still does better than any game other than its predecessor *SWAT 3*—is give players different options of how they handle every situation. It throws you into its environments and says, "Do as you please." You have a wealth of gear for outfitting your team, giving all sorts of interesting decisions—do you go for heavy metal guns or less lethal weapons,

[left] *Close Combat* is all about shooting brown people in Beirut. [right] Though it has some interesting ideas, the actual gameplay in *Elite Warriors: Vietnam* falls short.



pepper spray and tasers, or door wedges and charges? As squad leader, you can merely direct everyone else, popping in to supply an occasional grenade or help with restraining bad guys or hostages. Or alternately, you can try to lone wolf the game, taking charge as a dynamic leader and sticking your head through all of those open doors.

Better yet, everything is randomized in *SWAT 4*. You don't know that there's a guy standing on the other side of a certain door every time through; if he is there, one time he may fire at you, or another he might turn tail and run away, taking cover somewhere else on the level. It's the unpredictability of *SWAT* that makes it a considerably more interesting single-player tactical game.

By comparison, the bad guys in *Elite Warriors* tend to run right past you, but at least your own troops will gun them down whether directed to or not. You can hop into any teammate at any time, which is often easier than issuing commands. (A new pop-up interface is worlds better than the keyboard orders from *Line of Sight*.)

The enemy soldiers in *Brothers in Arms* and *Close Combat* take cover and react to suppression fire (which is one of the tactical options available to players), but every level is designed to give you an obvious way to take out an entrenched enemy. In the former it's usually a flanking position; in the latter, you get the occasional option to call in a mortar or helicopter strike. These options are only available in very specific instances, leading to their puzzle-like feel.

While the bad guys in *SWAT 4* run away to find safe spots and generally engage in criminal-like behavior, they also go from gun down to up in a fraction of a second, making it nearly impossible not to violate the rules of engagement. But this AI is challenging, which also serves the game well in multiplayer, particularly if you play co-op against the AI. It better mimics the unpredictability of other players, though it's rare when you find an opponent that actually decides to run. But there's a fundamental problem with tactical shooters online—they're only as good as your friend's list. That is, unless you find a regular group of players willing to put in some effort, you're stuck with a bunch of yahoos thinking that co-op is the same as team deathmatch or that everyone needs to be the hero so it's perfectly acceptable to Rambo each level.

All of the games but *Task Force 21* offer



[top] *Brothers in Arms* emphasizes teamwork (hence the name) [bottom] The less said about *Combat: Task Force 21*, the better.

co-op modes. The biggest weaknesses of the *SWAT 4* multiplayer are its omission of a team-leader in its co-op and lack of 'bots; both were there in *SWAT 3*, and should be there in the sequel. Co-op teamplay is the only multiplayer that *Brothers in Arms* offers. It gives you a sampling of maps, all with different objectives, and fills out each team with 'bots, so two players can have an 8-player game. *Close Combat* offers up the ability to play the entire single-player in co-op, but like *Full Spectrum Warrior*, it's not as interesting as it could be if the design offered more tactical variety. (It also offers deathmatch variants.)

Ultimately, what helps makes *SWAT* stand out is the difference between police and military tactics. Since we've been inundated with "shoot everything" military games for years, having a game where that style of play is punished is radical thinking. The ideal *SWAT* mission—in co-op multiplayer or single-player—is one where no one fires a single shot. It's not easy to play it like that, but if it was, what would be the point?

Close Combat has some of this dynamic as you hang out in the streets of Beirut trying to help the locals, but for the most part it's a slow-paced run-and-gun type of game. Both it and *Brothers in Arms* are good choices; *SWAT 4*, on the other hand, is the pick of this bunch, and the best tactical shooter since *SWAT 3*. ■

TOP SELLERS



1 Sims 2 University
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
Holy Sims, Batman. It looked like Sims-mania was dying down a bit after the release of *The Sims 2*, but it's back in full force. Who's still buying the expansions for the original?

2 World of Warcraft
Vivendi Universal ★★★★★

3 The Sims 2
Electronic Arts ★★★★★

4 Brothers in Arms
Ubisoft ★★★★★

5 Half-Life 2
Vivendi Universal ★★★★★

6 The Sims Deluxe
Electronic Arts ★★★★★

7 Republic Commando
LucasArts ★★½

8 The Matrix Online
Sega ★★★½

9 Halo
Microsoft ★★★★★

10 Knights of the Old Republic II
LucasArts ★★★★★

11 RollerCoaster Tycoon 3
Atari ★★★★★

12 Seaworld Tycoon
Activision Not Rated

13 Sims Unleashed
Electronic Arts ★★★★★

14 MVP Baseball 2005
EA Sports ★★★★★

15 Zoo Tycoon 2
Microsoft ★★★

16 Lemony Snicket
Activision ★★½

17 Sims Superstar
Electronic Arts ★★★★★

18 Flight Simulator 2004
Microsoft ★★★★★

19 Call of Duty
Activision ★★★★★

20 Rome: Total War
Activision ★★★★★

Source: NPD Group/NPD Funworld. The March list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.