Review

Red Orchestra: Combined Arms
A Total Conversion for Unreal Tournament 2004

by **Cat**

IL-2 On The Ground? You Bet!

I've spent this weekend being reeducated to the fact that simulations aren't just in the air. Some of the best of the current generation model land combat, such as the acclaimed **T-72 Balkans In Fire** and the excellent **Steel Beasts** series. But we really haven't seen this applied to the ubiquitous first-person shooter. The vast majority of these cater to a crowd that's alien to simmers. In most FPSs, the player becomes John Rambo, the killing machine. You don't get the "feel" of a true military reenactment. Have you ever seen military re-enactors? Civil War buffs have been doing this for years. They collect period-correct reproduction uniforms and weapons, and reproduce the feel of fighting in the Civil War. They also have a lot of fun doing it, unlike the real thing. We can't all afford to do this; military reenacting is really expensive and time consuming.

We've all seen the explosion of first-person shooters and multiplayer FPS style games. I lump games such as **Everquest** and **World of Warcraft** into this genre along with **World War II Online** and **Operation Flashpoint**, because the main things separating most of them are the period of time they're involved in and whether magic is or is not a feature. **Unreal Tournament** is such a game. Unlike the subscription-based multiplayer-only role-players such as EQ, though, UT is all about — I should say ONLY about — killing your enemies in style. It is highly developed and has a lot of fans. Unlike the traditional RPG / FPS games, there is no subscription fee, making it attractive to gamers on a budget. It has modes ranging from deathmatch to cooperative squad-based fighting, and I think it was probably inevitable that military simulation fans would discover its potential. Military simmers all over would like to get into a realistic and persistent first-person world that encourages use of real-life tactics and teamwork. Don't believe me? Take a look at the phenomenally successful Operation Flashpoint. Many industry-watchers think that OFP is the model for future military games. Unreal Tournament, as a sci-fi shooter, has potential out of the box for using actual squad-based tactics in the game environment.

Making UT even more attractive to military gamers is its potential for modification. Recently, video-card manufacturer NVIDIA even had a competition called "Make Something Unreal," where mod-makers using the Epic Games provided SDK for UT were given the chance to compete for a one million dollars prize for best mod out there. Thanks to the above-and-beyond efforts of Red Orchestra team PR mogul Alan Wilson, I've spent the weekend taking a look at the winner of that competition.

Did you like the movie Enemy at the Gates? You will love **Red Orchestra: Combined Arms**. RO is a total-conversion mod of UT, and it has so far been more than two years in the making. Versions of RO came out for the award-winning Soldier of Fortune and Medal of Honor FPS games, in fact; military gamers have been wanting a team-based, objective-based combat game for an awful long time. The original idea for RO was a single-player role-play type-game, based on the activities of a Soviet spy ring

operating in German-controlled areas up to about 1944. It morphed after that into an infantry fighter, and has expanded farther still. In its current incarnation, RO follows the Eastern Front fighting of World War II. As you will see, the team has modeled period-specific soldiers, weapons, and even vehicles into very realistic maps. It's an enormous amount of professional-grade work.
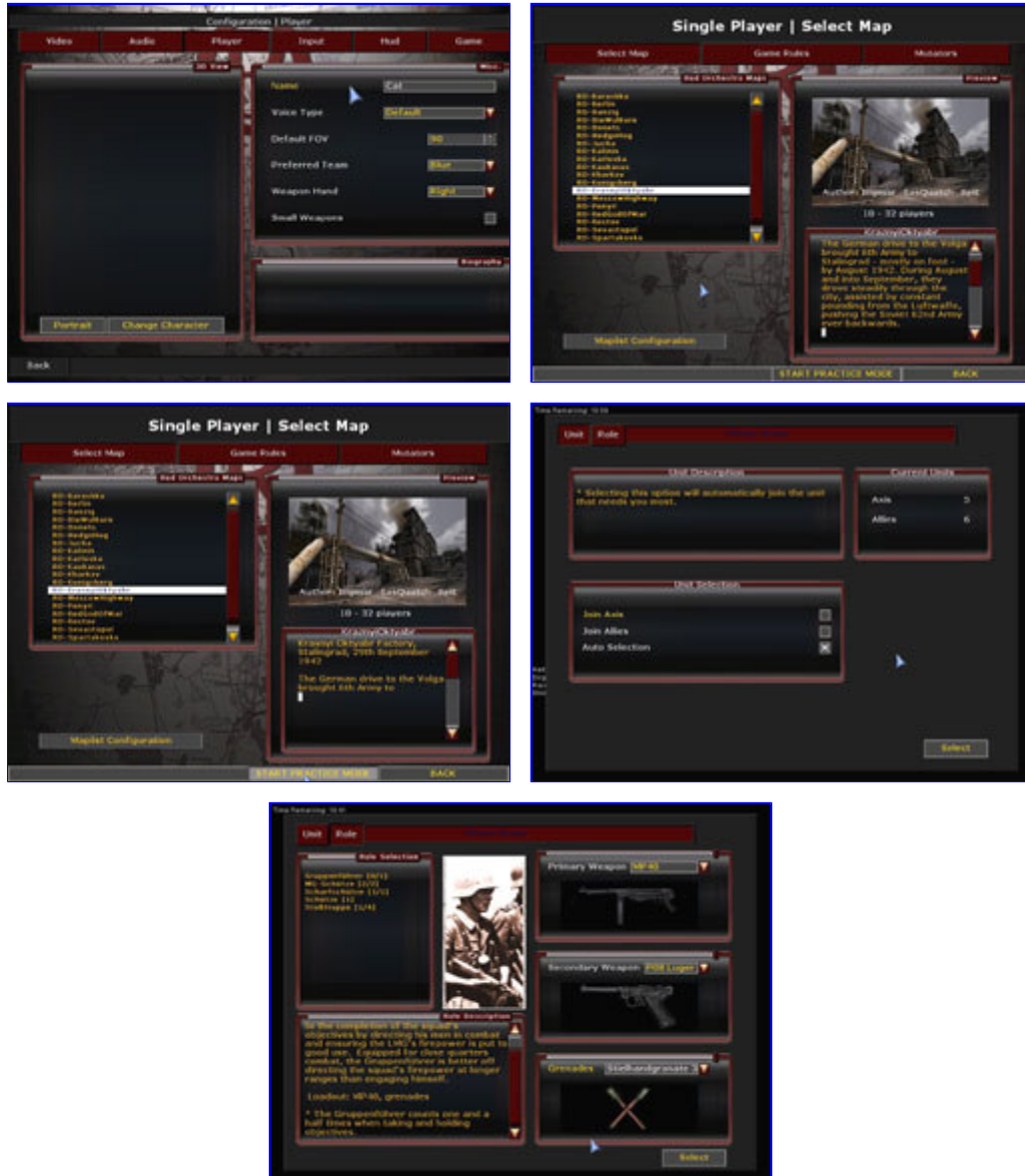
We've included a link to the well-done trailer based on the Krasniy Oktyabr (Red October) map within the game, that the team sent me as part of the press kit. Download the trailer **here** from their web site and take a look. I defy any corporation out there to do a better trailer for a game. This is actual in-game footage and it's better than any FRAPS movie I could give you.

I took a closer look at the Red October map in both practice and in actual online fighting. This is set during the siege of Stalingrad in 1942. The map itself is large, and covers the environs of one particular factory, the Red October factory, hence the name. Take a look at the screenshots.

In game, the team has spent a great amount of time with environmental factors. Mood lighting and weather are present and they make the maps very immersive. In another map, it is snowing; in a third, raining. Music is there, hovering in the background, unobtrusive. The maps are well detailed, with radios playing as you enter some rooms, or voices being heard down the hall. Sound effects sound like gunfire and the maps' tight, urban claustrophobia brings to mind Half Life 2's better levels for me.

You can manipulate doors and pick up items, and use them regardless of your nationality. If your weapon is out of ammo, pick up the weapon and ammo belonging to the guy you just killed! If you like someone else's gun better… shoot him, drop yours and pick up his!


You'll have to do that, because the name of the game in RO is "realism." Yes, folks. This is probably the first FPS I have ever seen that was designed ground-up by realism hawks. And it works!
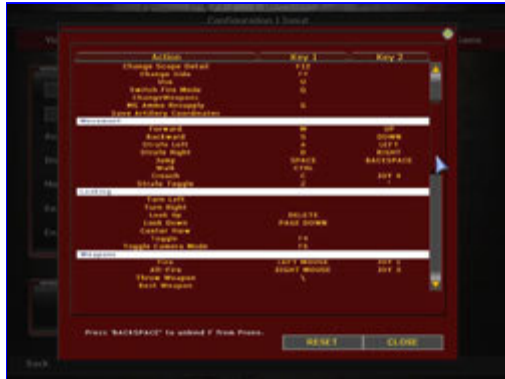
Bolt-action rifles like the Moisin-Nagant M1891 and Mauser 98-K require the player to jack the bolt after every shot, which the character does automatically, but it takes time. And the team has integrated realistic animation for cycling that bolt, too! Although some of us might disagree with the time it takes to work that action… it's not machine-gun fast, just as you'd expect in real war.
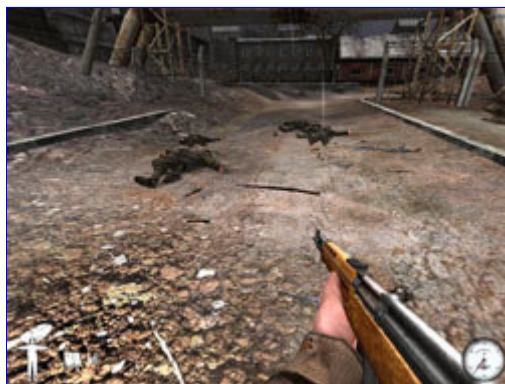
You can't carry six rifles and a truckload of ammo, either. Load limits are as they would be in real life. Stamina is present. You run around and jump around a lot and your character will get tired. No "bunny-hopping" in RO, either.
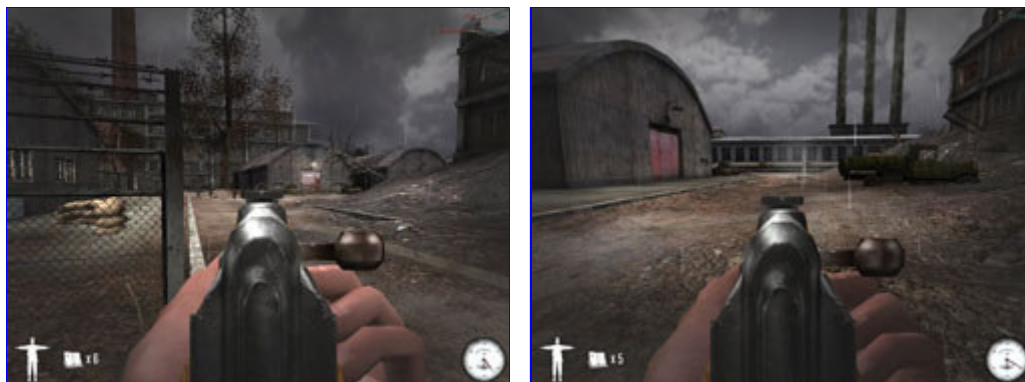

Lots of infantry weapons abound in RO. Pistols from the Luger and P-38 to the 1911 Colt and the Tokarev-33. The SVT-40 rifle has a realistic loading sequence where you can see the soldier release the bolt forward after you slap a magazine in it!

You can watch the bolt cycle on submachine guns like the PPSh-41, PPD-40, and MP-40, and you have to be careful with those bullet-hoses… because the RO team has factored in recoil. Watch the PPSh-41 reach for the sky during a long burst and you'll see what I mean. Control is the name of the game. You can deploy squad-automatic weapons like the MG-34 and Degtyarev DP-28, and they all have realistic reloading routines too. The DP is faster, I think, because of the flat pie-pan magazine. The MG-34 has an assault drum and you can even do the Rambo thing from the hip with it, though it won't be real accurate when you do. In RO 3.2, the feared MG-42 will be on the battlefield. Hand grenades such as the German Stielhandgranate "potato-

masher" and the Russian F1 are in game. You can "cook" them off! All you do is click the right mouse key, which pulls the F1's pin or unscrews the cap from the "potato masher." The fuse is burning, so don't hold it long before you throw! If you get shot, the grenade'll wipe out YOUR pals too, so throw it! One of the most detailed animations in the game happens with the "potato masher," where you see the hands on screen unscrew the cap and pull out the bead that lights the fuse inside. These guys don't miss a trick.
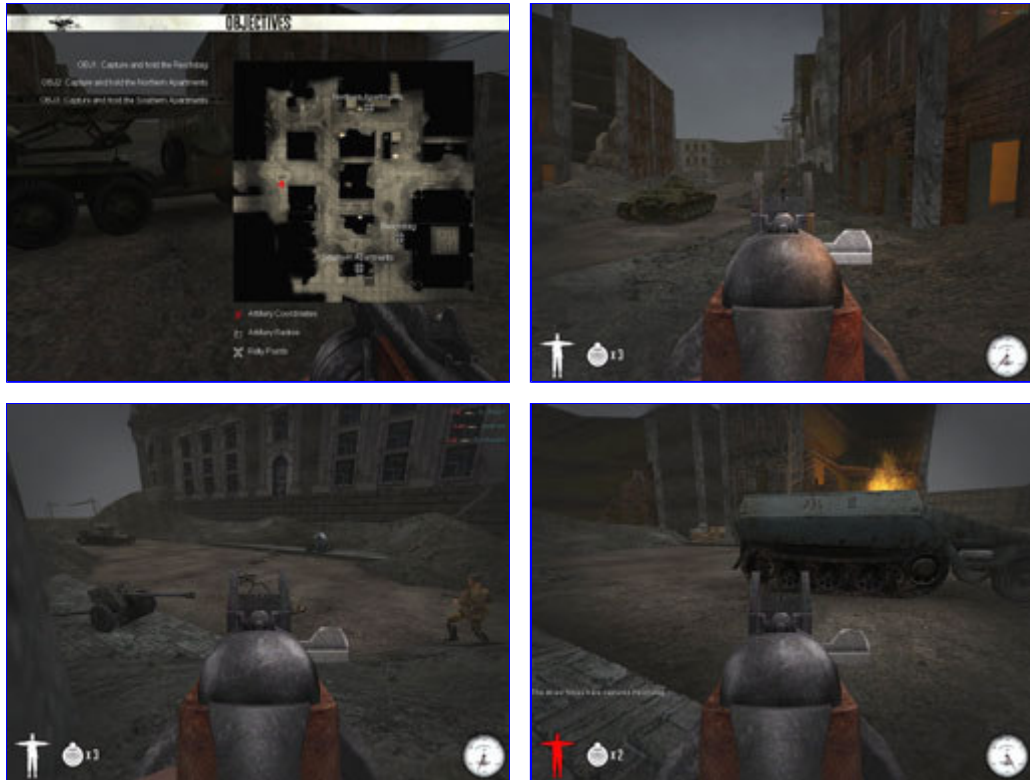
Speaking of realistic, forget crosshairs. If you want to draw a bead on that target, hit the "shift" key to crouch (you're harder to hit that way) and click your middle mouse button or the "i" key to put that weapon to your shoulder. Use the iron sights, just like with a real gun! And look out… even crouching you're not going to be rock steady. The sights will wander, as when you're aiming a real gun. In the prone, you're even harder to hit and your weapon is more stable, but it's harder to get up and run. And you will need to be able to get up and run, too. Cover is important, and if you stand around in the open you will get very dead.

You CAN fire from the hip, but it's hard to aim. It is handy to be able to do that for snapshots, especially with submachine guns. One of the kills I got in an online game happened this way. I was part of a Waffen SS

squad tasked to assault a mortar pit. I was armed with an MP-40 and was first in. Inside the mortar pit itself, a Russian soldier armed with a Moisin rifle bounced me. He was kneeling by the exit into a trench network, and I just saw his upper body. He missed with the first shot, and hearing the Moisin's flat bark-distinguishable from the Mauser if you listen- I spun, spraying the area where he was with 9mm fire. He pulled back, and as he concentrated on me he didn't see another SS soldier sneak up above him, with his Sturmgewehr 44 rifle. I kept the Russian pinned down by peppering his hiding place with my MP-40. While he was immobilized, my teammate got the drop on him, and blasted him with 7.92mm "kurz" rounds. I suppose I could have tossed over a Stielhandgranate, but if I'd done that I'd have had to sling the MP-40 and opened myself up. RO rewards teamwork and use of cover, and it punishes recklessness with a vengeance.

RO lays the foundation for the ground-part of a full-on battlefield. It's greatly reminiscent of Operation Flashpoint in one central regard: vehicles. I'm playing the 3.1 version here, and in it you can drive trucks, crew half-tracks, and even tanks! The T-34 and German Panzer IV are in the game, among other vehicles. Look at the shots of the interiors. The green one is the driver's position of a T-34 tank. The more detailed one is a German SdKfz half-track, and in the half-track you can pan with the mouse to see out of the side windows as well as the windshield! And then your pal can get in the back and man the heavy machine gun the 'track carries for even more mayhem… unless the enemy's got hold of certain antitank rockets, or can get close enough to toss in an F1 hand-grenade. In the release that is about to come out, you can even get access to the Stalin II heavy tank in some maps! Cooperation is important in driving the vehicles. You can't do a tank all alone. You need a crew-in the T-34/76, two others beside yourself. And where you end up in the tank depends on the role you're playing in the game. You can't drive vehicles you aren't qualified for! See what happens when a sniper tries to take over a Panzer?

You get the "not qualified" message. You have to be conscious of who you are on the battlefield. And that goes for whether you're a grunt (be it Soviet or Heer) or a unit commander. Commanders get great things like binoculars and the ability to call for artillery. Now, the vehicles are pretty primitively modeled in their operation. Inside the T-34, you get in the driver's seat and push the forward button, and away you go. Also, armor and penetration values are pretty minimalist, and the main gun ballistics are basically a good guess. Mostly, this is because the vehicles are still a work in progress, having been introduced only one RO version ago. As the team has time to introduce new features, this will improve.
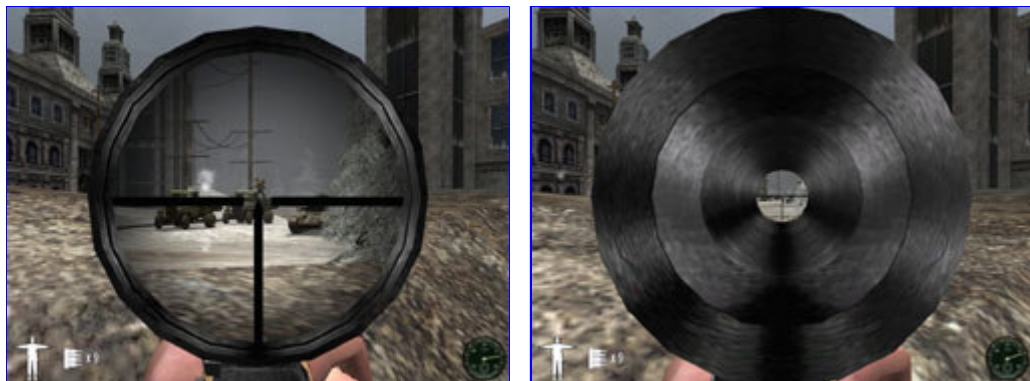
One neat thing I discovered is that practice mode within the UT framework and actual online games aren't too different from the player's perspective. Once I resolved some connectivity issues and managed to get into the usually swamped UT master server, I was able to find several Red Orchestra multiplay servers across the world. Most of the players I ran into online are friendly and are into the roles they play, and you don't usually find the cheating and team-killing problems that plague games like America's Army in RO servers. I joined two in-progress games, both as simple Heer grunts, toting a 98 Mauser or MP-40. I found that with a good

connection, lag issues aren't as prevalent as I have found in flight sims such as IL-2. Chat is in the interface and it's well designed. The only problem I had was the fact that I got killed, a lot, and always by unseen enemies.

I also found that at any range but pointblank, it's awful hard for ME to hit anything, but enemies I never see wax me easily. I don't know if a sniper was just acing me or if something else was going on.

I do know (from wargames in the real Army when I was in) that often in real life you get killed just like that-and never saw what hit you. I can say that you respawn fairly quickly, which greatly lessens the frustration for newbies like self. But be careful: in some games, reinforcements are limited. Again, that's realistic.

As for ease of play, I found the game stable, as befits a modification based on evolving, but thoroughly player-tested underlying code. I also didn't see many problems with clipping or artifacts that plagues many online games. It does lack air support, and easily-called-for artillery unless you're the right character. That's going to change as time goes on. Part of the hoped-for plan for the team is to go retail and make an actual, licensed consumer product out of Red Orchestra. There, assuming they have the resources, we will see a lot of the wish-list come to life. Alan Wilson tells me that they already have things such as realistic optics for the Russian tank guns planned out, as well as better ballistics for heavy weapons and better damage effects/penetration values for armor. Some of these upgrades will be in the next release of this modification, along with improved artificial intelligence for the 'bots, which will make for a more fun practice experience.

If you're into realistic military ground-fighting with and against other people as opposed to in single-play, Red Orchestra is going to be a good fit for you. As it evolves, the RO team plans to add more and more vehicles, weapons, and features. It's a worthwhile modification for what it otherwise a simple deathmatch shooter. Its realism and setting in World War II's Eastern Front will deter most of the types of players who cause problems in more modern games.

If their hopes work out and it is released for retail, we will see more and better vehicles, which will create an Operation Flashpoint type world, only more so, and set in an unusual setting besides. My hat's off to the RO team, who has done an enormous thing with a limited set of tools and group of enthusiasts. It reminds me greatly of the work done with Falcon 4.0, only much more focused and with much more support from the original developer.

If you like shooters and multiplay, give it a try!

System Specs

- AMD Athlon 3000+ processor

- MachSpeed N2PAP-Lite motherboard with onboard Aureal AC97 sound

- PNY Technologies Verto GeForce FX 5950 Ultra / NVIDIA v66.93 drivers

- 1GB Kingston PC2700 DDR DRAM

- Creative 12x CD-ROM

- Maxtor 40GB main drive

- DirectX Version 9.0c

- Windows XP Home with SP2