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Intel Masters Gaming Championship

The weekend before Christmas saw around 1,000 people give the shops a miss in favour of the free Intel Masters Gaming Championship at London's Science Museum.

Intel's belated recognition of gamers – the earliest-adopting market for its 3.06GHz processor with hyperthreading – is welcome, as is the creation of a UK gaming program manager. Hopefully they both herald a longer-term commitment to gaming by Intel, previously content with its strictly business-like approach.

Battle stations

The Imax cinema, based inside the Science Museum, was taken over by Intel for the day and played host to 24 of the UK's top gaming teams (commonly known as 'clans') battling it out for a share of the £25,000 prize. *Red Dwarf* star Chris Barrie fronted the event which lasted a gladiatorial 13 hours and saw at least 10 of the cutting-edge PCs overheat as they were played into the ground.

The Championship was divided into three tournaments: CounterStrike, Return To Castle Wolfenstein and WarCraft III. Competition was fierce as the clans determinedly ploughed their way through the group stages and knockout phase, hoping to be crowned the ultimate games champions. Iain 'Tillerman' Girdwood won a £1,000 prize after victory in WarCraft III, but Clan One were beaten by Infinity E-Sports in the intense CounterStrike final.

The most fun to be had, however, was in watching the final of Return To Castle Wolfenstein. Visible tracer fire allowed spectators to get deep into the action and the presence of a rocket launcher made the game seem like a movie.

In the end red-hot favourite clan (Intel-sponsored) 4 Kings walked away with the £6,000 prize and silver plaque. Although their bitter rivals Lemmings didn't make it easy, the home team's defence was solid and the opposition couldn't score enough successful captures.

Better luck next year

It's now predicted that games will end up a spectator sport, something already suggested by CounterStrike's ever popular Spectator mode. For next year's event it would be great to see games that already have a history of attracting audiences. Motor-racing with Grand Prix 4 or EA's F1 Championship series would be a fantastic choice. If we're talking about visually spectacular gaming, Command & Conquer Generals will also be a strong option for the strategy category.

The only other recommendation would be to lay on a few free machines to give spectators something to do other than just mill around. Ultimately, the day beat Christmas shopping and hopefully Intel, will soon host another games championship. ■

Kenneth Henry

GAMES CHART,
ALL FORMATS

- 1 Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
- 2 FIFA 2003
- 3 Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets
- 4 James Bond 007: Nightfire
- 5 Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers
- 6 Tony Hawks Pro Skater 4
- 7 WWW Smackdown: Shut Your Mouth
- 8 Dancing Stage mix
- 9 Medal of Honor: Frontline
- 10 Pro Evolution Soccer

PC GAMES CHART

- 1 The Sims: Unleashed
- 2 The Sims: Deluxe Addition
- 3 Medal of Honor Allied Assault: Spearhead
- 4 Age of Mythology
- 5 The Sims: On Holiday
- 6 The Sims: Hot Date
- 7 WarCraft III: Reign of Chaos
- 8 Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets
- 9 Medal of Honor: Allied Assault
- 10 James Bond 007: Nightfire

Positions correct for week
01/01/03-08/01/03

Medal of Honor: Spearhead

PC CD-ROM

It's great. It's brilliant. It's finished? That's the rollercoaster of emotion we experienced while playing Spearhead, the long-awaited expansion pack for Medal of Honor: Allied Assault. It's such a short update it scrapes the very bottom of the "I can't believe you released a quarter of a game for £20" barrel.

This is a terrible shame because it's a brilliantly devised FPS (first-person shooter) and a great addition to the high-quality Medal of Honor series. It adds some fantastic gameplay and levels to what is probably the best World War II game ever designed, but just when you think you're in the midst of battle it's all over. This left us feeling slightly used, soiled and wondering if production had been halted halfway through after the accountant saw the bill for Gary Oldman's voiceover services.

Mission mayhem

Past protagonist Mike Powell this time passes the baton to Sergeant Jack Barnes, a lantern-jawed American who collaborates with both British and Russian forces in this chronologically accurate, three-mission, nine-level add-on.

Spearhead provides the ability to use a machine gun and Russian sniper rifle from the WWII era during those collaborative missions. Extra weapons and a variety of new enemies are thrown into the mix to create an interesting offshoot from Allied Assault. It's not simply more of the same; it significantly enhances the already excellent gameplay.

The developer has done its best to come up with an introductory mission to equal the stunningly realised Omaha beach level from Allied Assault. The result is a re-enactment of the WWII Normandy invasion, Operation Overlord.



It starts aboard a large plane flying over enemy territory, in which you nervously wait in line before a mass parachute drop in Normandy. It's after the leap from the plane that Operation Overlord momentarily equals the impact of landing on Omaha beach. Men are shot dead in their chutes and planes explode in balls of flames around you while you look on in awe at the attention to detail, helplessly hoping you don't get taken out. Once down you're thrown right into the thick of the fighting and, while the intensity doesn't measure up to Omaha beach, it's a great first mission.

True grit

The Medal of Honor game has Mr Spielberg's stamp of approval and draws heavily from *Saving Private Ryan*. The well-grounded historical battles of the Bulge and then Berlin in Spearhead play more like the gaming equivalent of *Band Of Brothers* and it manages to convey the same sense of fear that pervaded the TV show. This is the edited highlight of the original game (reviewed June 02) minus the stealth and super-lethal snipers, but with the same on-rails and freely negotiable gun-muzzled tank levels.

The intensity of the attacks and the German soldier AI (artificial intelligence) is still excitingly challenging. You have to reload after every kill, and your NPC (non-player character) buddies actually help you out by returning fire more often than in the full game.

While we're used to big moneymakers from EA, not even the Sims add-ons have been so criminally short that you could complete the single-player game in four hours. While there are 12 new multiplayer maps, the mod community will be beaver away to produce much of the same for free.

This has been subtitled the First Edition but in the cut-throat retailing of the games industry you know in time all editions will be boxed in one. So wait until the packs are half price or bundled before buying any of them to avoid disappointment. ■

Kenneth Henry

← Barrelling along: shoot to kill and move quickly if you want to complete the missions



↑ Military training: it's boxcar blues for this forlorn locomotive

Medal of Honor: Spearhead

- EA: 01932 450 000
- Website: www.ea.com
- Price: £19.99

System requirements

450MHz Pentium II; Windows 9x; 128MB RAM; 1.2GB hard disk space; 16MB Direct3D/OpenGL graphics card; DirectX8a-compatible sound card.

Overall rating



preview

Toca Race Driver

PC CD-ROM

On the strength of the past Toca titles you could be forgiven for thinking that Toca Race Driver, to be released by Codemasters in March 02, would be pretty much the same game but with new cars and drivers. Well, that isn't the case at all.

These games are generally just about driving, but Codemasters has given an extra dimension to Toca Race Driver by adding a storyline. You're not just any old driver, you're Ryan McKane, son of a racing legend who tragically lost his life in an accident. The desire to finish the work your father began led you on to the Toca circuit, and now you're competing against some of the world's best racing drivers. But let's just stop right there. Cheesy plots don't sell racing games.

Need for speed

Petrol heads aren't interested in sentimental rubbish, just adrenaline and speed. Someone who's going to buy Toca Race Driver is only going to be interested in driving fast cars, not adopting the role of a young man out to avenge his father's death. Forgive me if I'm starting to sound like Jeremy Clarkson, but I just don't see the point in even bothering to try and add a storyline to this kind of game. So I'm going to ignore it, pretend it doesn't exist and concentrate on what's really important.

The Toca series has always been popular, with four million games sold and counting. This latest addition to the family looks as if it'll be every bit as successful. Even though the preview code we saw was only about 80 percent of the finished article, it still looked absolutely stunning. The tracks have been accurately rendered with every hairpin and chicane in place. The cars are all up to date and the current Toca drivers provide the competition. Believe me, the driving is pretty hard work with Tim Harvey and Yvan Muller breathing down your neck while you're keeping a nervous car on a thin strip of tarmac.

Touring car racing has a big following and it's easy to see why. The races are closely fought and the cars vaguely resemble vehicles you might see on the road, albeit with the addition of low skirting, powerful engines and freedom from rules of the road. This is something that Formula One just can't compete with – real motor-racing fans would rather watch Toca any day.

No easy ride

The driving experience itself is incredibly immediate and lifelike. Every time you lock a



wheel, bump another car or let the rear slip out you can feel it. This makes the game very different from less realistic programs. That familiar urge to attempt every corner flat out will soon wear off when you realise just how careful you have to be to keep the car in one piece. Mind you're not too careful, though, or you'll be left eating everyone else's dust.



Toca Race Driver is tough to get to grips with technically, so if you're not prepared to spend time learning and can't accept that you're not going to win – or even come close to winning first time out – then don't bother. Some racing games cater for those of you who want your thrills quick and easy but Toca Race Driver just ain't that kind of girl.

A word of warning: you're going to need a powerful system to run this game. The full hardware requirements haven't been confirmed yet but don't expect to be able to run it on any old PC. The system we used had a 32MB GeForce2 graphics card and an 800MHz Pentium III processor yet had trouble running the preview code, so make sure your PC is up to scratch to avoid disappointment.

If you want a simple but satisfying driving game I wouldn't recommend Toca. However, if you want a challenging but ultimately rewarding racing experience, you'll love it. ■

Ben Camm Jones

↑ Torquing loud: the pros will be asking you some serious questions

Toca Race Driver

- CodeMasters: 01926 814 132
- Website: www.codemasters.com
- Price: £34.99

System requirements

TBA

Overall rating





Splinter Cell

Xbox

I get my gaming kicks from high-speed racing on bikes and fast cars. I don't get on well with mass murder on screen. My perception of Splinter Cell before I played it was that it was the 'shoot everything that moves' kind of game. Well, I wouldn't make a good clairvoyant.

Splinter Cell is about a world of shadows and light. Mix this with stealth and more than a touch of danger and you get an idea of what it's all about. Set in the near future, you play the character Sam Fisher, a commando working for a top-secret military organisation, Third Echelon, whose aim is to combat high-tech terrorism.

Before you get to see any real action you have to pass challenges set to you in the training stage. This is a great way to learn the controls and understand the abilities of the operative. Learning to climb, jump and crawl will allow you to manoeuvre around obstacles – you even get to use zip lines.

To progress through a mission and reach your objective the trick is not to kill everyone in sight. Taking out guards will not always work. You need to use all your skills of stealth, crawling in shadows and avoiding all ambient light. Equipped

with thermal and night vision, you see where your enemies can't.

Your gun is better employed shooting surveillance cameras and overhead lighting so you don't give your location away. Silently approaching guards is the key to success. Grabbing them from behind you can use your hostage to get information such as door codes, use them for a retina scan or even as a human shield against unfriendly fire. Once you've got what you need, knock them out with an elbow strike and hide them in a secluded corner.

The animated graphics are amazing and to add to the drama there's the constant interjection of haunting sounds that will definitely increase your heart rate.

Splinter Cell is a very good reason to invest in Xbox. I just hope I can make it to the end. ■

Oliver Dell

→ Light entertainment: you'll need to be a stealthy and vicious killer to get what you want

Splinter Cell

- UbiSoft: 01932 838 230
- Website: www.ubi.com
- Price: £34.99

System requirements

Xbox

Overall rating



Minority Report

Xbox

Minority Report

- Activision: 01753 756 100
- Website: www.activision.com
- Price: £34 ex VAT

System requirements

Xbox

Overall rating



Welcome to 2054, where people ride jetpacks and crime doesn't just happen, but instead is stopped before it actually occurs thanks to some awfully useful (if a little ugly) mutants that can predict the future.

You're John Anderton, head of the Precrime unit that acts on the premonitions of the three little critters, stamping out crime before people even knew they were going to do it. It's all going swimmingly until a vision shows a murder committed by you. Your colleagues aren't happy: not only do they shun you in the cafeteria, but they want to take you down as well.

The game is based on the movie of the same name, although notably

← Uncertain future: an exciting game of cops and cops begins when you discover you are the murderer

lacks any likeness to the real characters. Gameplay is simple – run around, hit, shoot, run some more – but controlling your character can be a little harder to master. Firing a weapon, for example, requires you to hold the trigger constantly while also trying to manoeuvre, aim and fire. Hand-to-hand combat offers numerous combos – with added variation if you hold the last button a bit longer. If you get bored with the stock moves then collect some money and buy extras on the black market – guns, ammo and, at a push, health.

Progress further and you get to use the jetpack which, it has to be said, is jolly good fun. I was also extremely impressed with the character ragdoll animation. It's brilliantly executed and makes Minority Report better than your average film-to-game generic conversion.

Minority Report looks good and should entertain you for a few hours, but it seems to be missing that something extra. The controls could be easier and the baddies get repetitive. The jetpack and ragdoll physics are great, but it's not enough to carry the whole thing. ■

Will Head





VFR Photographic Scenery

PC CD-ROM

Getmapping and Visual Flight have produced a brilliant add-on for Microsoft's Flight Simulator 2002, which is so detailed you can see your street, school or place of work.

VFR Photographic Scenery is the first in the history of flight sim games to enable players to fly over the landscape of England and Wales.

This first release is a look at the south east of England and, if you've got Flight Sim 2002, we heartily recommend this superb addition. It's a bit expensive but flight fanatics won't mind that when they see the impressive views on display.

The landscape has an incredible amount of detail thanks to the astonishing work put in by the design team – they must have taken a vast amount of aerial photographs to come up with the goods. You can look at towns, stadiums, your street or even the local pub.

It's not all plain sailing, though. To truly appreciate the developers' efforts, you have to lean out the window of your craft and this is no mean feat because flying in Microsoft's simulation is a task that requires all your

→ Aerial photography: buzz your best mates with this real-life flight simulation

attention. The simulation could do with a computer-driven tour plane so you can take a more leisurely look at the detail.

Even though the system requirements look fairly average you will need a hefty rig to play this without any hitches – the sim is power hungry, so if your graphics card isn't up to much then don't buy it.

You can have hours of fun flying around and looking at different places you want to see. Although flat in appearance, the scenery looks extremely impressive from a bird's-eye view. The simulation really is a must-have for all flying enthusiasts. Remember this, though: you need to be able to find your way around from a few thousand feet up, as there are no road signs. ■



VFR Photographic Scenery

- Just Flight: 01480 562 748
- Website: www.justflight.com
- Price: £29.99

System requirements

Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP;
Pentium II 300MHz; 64MB
RAM; 16MB graphics card;
1.8GB hard drive.

Overall rating



David O'Connor



Championship Manager: Season 02/03

Xbox

Championship Manager: Season 02/03

- Eidos Interactive: 020 8636 3000
- Website: www.eidosinteractive.co.uk
- Price: £34.99

System requirements

Xbox

Overall rating



There's an awful lot of guff talked about football and the vast majority of it comes from people who know absolutely nothing about the game. The man in the pub will fall over himself to tell you why David Seaman should have hung up his gloves years ago, and why England ought to play three at the back with two flying wingers and Joe Cole, the little magician, playing in 'the hole'.

Everyone has their own ideas when it comes

to football and everyone is convinced that they know best, myself included. In order to prove

← High table: will you be sitting down to a breakfast of champions, or eating your dinner in your room like a naughty boy?

the validity of my theories, I set about winning as much silverware as I could with Championship Manager: Season 02/03.

If you've played the previous game in this series, Championship Manager: Season 01/02, you won't notice a great many changes – the main difference being that you can now play music from your own collections, which is a definite improvement as without it the game is eerily silent. Oh yes, you can also manage a team in the Korean league as well, which I'm sure is a challenge you won't be able to resist.

The teams and players are as they were at the beginning of the season, drawing on a huge amount of data and allowing infinite possibilities. So, if you're the manager of West Ham United and you want to buy Ronaldo you've got a better chance of making it happen in this game than of it actually happening in real life.

If you have the last game in this series there's little point in buying this one unless you're desperate to have the most up-to-date teams. All in all, though, it is the best football management sim around and will more than occupy your mind over the winter months. ■

Ben Camm-Jones

