● NFORCE4 SLI PC

Mesh Matrix Fireblade SLI

PRICE £1,276 (£1,499 inc VAT) **DELIVERY** £39 (£46 inc VAT)

INTERNET www.meshcomputers.com **SUPPLIER** Mesh Computers 0870 046 4747

VERDICT Another great system from Mesh: superb performance, a tidy case, and it's ready for any upgrades you care to add.

S LI is perhaps the most exciting technology to appear in 2004. With two already powerful cards running in tandem, you can enjoy games as never before. It's commonly seen as a high-cost, high-prestige option, but there are models available for those with less money to throw around. This Fireblade SLI machine from Mesh shows you what to expect from the 'budget' option.

The graphics cards bridged by the SLI connector are two 128MB GeForce 6600 GTs from Leadtek, representing the cheapest SLI-capable cards currently available. These slim cards also have the advantage of not taking up too much room in their PCI Express slots. Unlike the Evesham machine (*see p52*), which leaves little room for expansion, the Fireblade has a single PCI Express and two PCI slots free and accessible, even with the PCI 56K modem. They also don't require the cooling power of higher-specified systems: a single rear-mounted 120mm fan quietly does the job.

Broadly speaking, the performance of the twin 6600 GTs is comparable to that of a single 6800 GT (*see p67*). We skipped our usual tests and went straight into benchmarking with the more extreme games. With both anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering turned off, Far Cry ran so fast that only the CPU limited it, the score at every resolution being 60fps. Doom 3 is less CPU-dependent, and managed to score 67fps at 1,600 x 1,200. The slightly less demanding Halo ran at 74fps at 1,600 x 1,200.

Frame rates only improve the smoothness at which a game plays, and it doesn't really matter much once you're over 30fps. We therefore conducted another series of tests
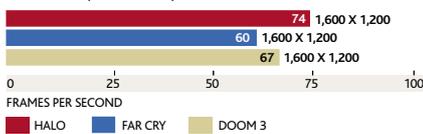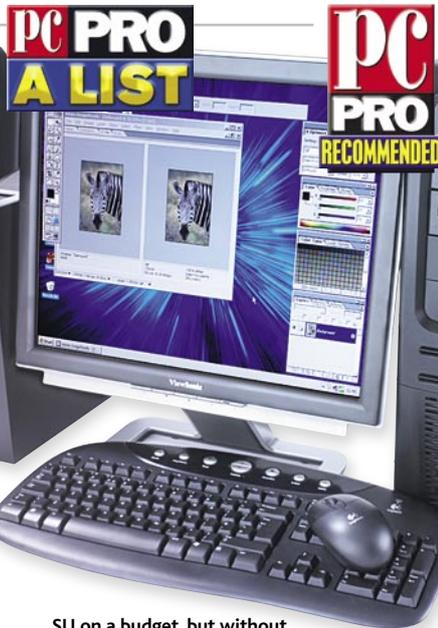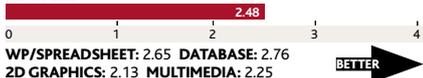
SLI on a budget, but without compromising on performance.

with 4x anti-aliasing and 8x anisotropic filtering at 1,600 x 1,200 to improve the quality of the images. Even at these high settings Far Cry ran well; 32fps resulted in a smooth-running game that looked gorgeous. Doom 3 proved the worth of the dual 6600 GTs equally well, returning the same score.

The CPU bottleneck in Far Cry's results merely shows the 3D power on offer, with the processor itself a very fast AMD Athlon 64 3800+. It was quick enough to speed the system to an application benchmark score of 2.48, thanks also to the 1GB of PC3200 RAM. Should you need them, there are two further DIMM sockets free.

Some of the results can also be attributed to the fast Maxtor DiamondMax 10 hard disk. With a capacity of 300GB, it will provide enough space for the foreseeable future. Should it get clogged up with games and other 'essentials', the Sony dual-layer, dual-format DVD writer can alleviate matters. Usefully, Mesh has also included a DVD-ROM drive to allow for speedy disk-to-disk copying.

All this is housed in the usual Mesh case: black and relatively unobtrusive, it will tuck away with minimum fuss. It's the smallest SLI-based system we've seen so far, yet still provides plenty of room for tinkering with the internals. The 550W PSU provides enough power for you to take advantage of the free external and two internal drive bays, and any cards you may buy in future that require more

power than a PCI Express slot can give them.

The black case is complemented by the black and silver ViewSonic VX912 panel (*see issue 124, p72*). It's great to see a 19in TFT rather than a 17in TFT, as this makes the screen just that little bit easier to read. It's bright and sharp too, while a response time of 12ms means that games should be blur-free – in reality, we saw some lag, but it wasn't too distracting. More concerning are the slightly narrow viewing angles, particularly in the vertical; tilting the screen back or forward leads to colour distortion. Nonetheless, this screen is a great addition.

We have mixed feelings about the Creative T7900 7.1 speakers, with a booming sub that doesn't keep to the sub-100kHz frequencies it should. It tends to overpower the weak satellites, leading to constant fiddling with the bass setting to compensate. As such, it's not a great choice for listening to music, but it certainly helps to add atmosphere in games and movies.

Otherwise, this system is hard to fault. The Athlon 64 3800+ is a powerful chip that will stand its ground, backed up by the 1GB of PC3200 RAM and twin 6600 GTs. Mesh has also considered the future: the spare drive bays and RAM sockets, not to mention the 550W PSU, won't leave you wanting any time soon. It's all backed up by a three-year on-site warranty. But the icing on the cake is the SLI-capable Asus nForce4 motherboard; in a year's time, when you're bored of having to turn game settings down from 'stupidly high' to 'standard', you can drop in a couple of GeForce 6800s, which will have dramatically decreased in price. To get all this performance now, with the path made clear for upgrades, £1,499 inc VAT is a steal.

CLIVE WEBSTER

● RESULTS

3D SPEED (AA OFF, AF OFF)

74	1,600 X 1,200	(HALO)
60	1,600 X 1,200	(FAR CRY)
67	1,600 X 1,200	(DOOM 3)

FRAMES PER SECOND
0   25   50   75   100

■ HALO ■ FAR CRY ▨ DOOM 3

2D SPEED

2.48	

0   1   2   3   4

WP/SPREADSHEET: 2.65 **DATABASE:** 2.76
2D GRAPHICS: 2.13 **MULTIMEDIA:** 2.25

BETTER ▶

PC PRO RATINGS

PERFORMANCE	★★★★☆
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★☆

SPECIFICATIONS 2.4GHz AMD Athlon 64 3800+ processor; 1GB PC3200 RAM; 300GB Maxtor DiamondMax 10 hard disk; dual Leadtek WinFast PX6600GT graphics; 19in ViewSonic VX912 TFT; Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard; Sony DW-D22A DVD writer; Sony DDU1612 DVD-ROM drive; integrated audio; Creative Inspire T7900 7.1 speakers; integrated dual gigabit Ethernet; V.92 modem; Windows XP Home SP 2; Microsoft Works 8; 3yr on-site warranty.