y Joshua D. Rothman

ack when the Atari 2600 was the height of home entertainment technology, it was the arcade version of Pole Position that got me hooked on video games. As primitive as it was, Pole Position got me hooked on racing. It was fun, it was fast, and it didn't have a brake pedal. Al Unser, Jr. Arcade Racing is the best racing game I've ever played on the Mac -- not because it's realistic, but because it's fun.

Open the Door, Sit in the Seat, Turn the Key, and Go
Al Unser's chief asset is speed. There are no pit stops. There are no red flags. There is no pace car. Instead, you'll find yourself "braking" by releasing the gas pedal, flying off the track at 220 mph, bounding off walls as a means of passing, and so on.

The game is very straightforward. Pick from a time-based mode in which you have to clear checkpoints to continue the race, a practice mode where you race solo, and a championship mode where you run a series of races. Pick a track if you can. You're dropped into the game, racing towards the starting line at a relatively low speed. Wait for the countdown to finish and the computer to relinquish control of the car and lean on the accelerator.

You can play either with automatic or manual transmission; several difficulty levels are offered. Play is possible either with the mouse or the keyboard, and the graphics can be customized from flat polygons to full texture mapping. On my PowerMac 7500, full texture-

mapping screams. The road texturing is incredible; the asphalt flies under your car and you can practically feel the adrenaline.

Sound control is straightforward allowing you to configure options from stereo to music. You can race to anything from hard rock to excellent Moby-esque techno. Unfortunately, the sound interface is somewhat unnecessary; you configure your sounds through manipulation of a single button, clicking it to cycle through options. This approach is somewhat counter-intuitive. Why not simply have radio buttons?

 Few Flat Tires
Al Unser certainly gets the adrenaline pumping, but it does have a couple of problems.

The complete lack of crashes makes this game just a bit too unrealistic. Let's face it. We don't watch auto races on TV because we like to see a bunch of cars go around a track. We watch auto racing to see cars spin out and slam into other cars at 200 miles per hour. The fact that you don't crash makes the game somewhat detached and objective. It would be more fun if you had to worry about crashing into things.

The learning curve for Al Unser is very steep, but after you reach the point where you can beat the first track, you can beat them all. The game doesn't lose its appeal, but it loses quite a bit of its challenge.

Perhaps the biggest problem is the way cars seem to pass through you. You may think you're clear, but suddenly a car will spontaneously pop up in front of you. This is extremely aggravating particularly because you crash into the back of the offending car after it passes through you. Other than this, the racing is flawless.

The Finish Line

All things considered, Al Unser is a fine racing game that's well worth the money. It has a few problems, but that doesn't change the fact that this is one of the better racing games I've played.

Pros
• Great racing
• Runs incredibly fast
• Easy to get into the game

Cons
• A few minor design flaws
• No networking