

recently had the pleasure of hopping on an airplane to travel from my igloo in Calgary to the sunny climes of LA (and I don't mean Louisiana), where the spectacle of the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, was about to begin. Yep, three days of the biggest names in computer and console gaming trying to ram their products down your throat with glitzy booths, scantily clad women, free stuff, and yes, even scheduled appearances by Alex Trebek. This show just has to be seen to be believed. It's a good thing that the show is limited to trade people and press, because if E3 were open for public consumption the LA Convention Center would be overrun with 2 million 15-year-old boys.

y far the most in-your-face and spectacular layouts came from the console companies. Sony, Sega, and, most of all, Nintendo had layouts spanning 10,000 square feet minimum, with seemingly thousands of monitors displaying hundreds of games and promo videos. The sound in the South Hall was deafening at times, and the challenge of carrying on a conversation can only be compared to trying to discuss Shakespeare with a hearing-impaired person in a nightclub. Sony had a 'video tunnel' with screens all around you and mist jetting in from all directions, while people lined up to get admittance to a huge elevated platform where the latest Playstation sports games were being displayed on a giant screen.

Of course, there were hundreds of demo machines with all kinds of games ready for your testing pleasure. From sports games to the new polygon-based adventure games to the frankly stunning Nintendo 64 games, it was all there. Do computers have to worry about machines like the Nintendo 64? You bet your ass they do! Some of those games ranked amongst the best I've ever seen, but even with that bold statement, the computer is far, very far from dead in the electronic entertainment realm.

any people wonder if the Mac would be represented by more than just a small token group of hardcore Mac companies. I'm here to tell you, the Mac gaming scene is exploding, and any nay sayers are really out of touch. I went expecting there to be a small but visible Mac contingent of exhibitors. But what I found was a surprising number of major companies entering the Mac market, and quite a few Mac-only companies that have started to push into the PC realm. The result was a feeling of much greater respect for the Mac as a gaming machine. Frankly, it was very, very refreshing.

It's hard to explain the feeling that comes over an old Mac gamer like myself when I listen to companies like Blizzard, Interactive Magic, Activision, 7th Level, and yes, even Microsoft (with Close Combat) say that they are really excited about getting right into the Mac gaming market. It was astounding. That may sound lame, but remember, I'm one of the faithful that went through the days when Dark Castle was just about the only good Mac game available.

Perhaps the most surprising company was 7th Level, who have released a couple quirky but entertaining titles for the Mac (Battle Beast, Monty Python, Arcade America). Before the show I kind of thought of 7th Level as a smaller, fringe game company, but I'm here to tell you that 7th Level is going to become a serious contender in both the Mac and PC markets. One of their upcoming titles, Dominion, is bound to be a big hit. It's sort of a Mech Warrior meets Warcraft type game, and will definitely be coming to the Mac, although several months after the PC release.

Blizzard Entertainment also appears to be considering the Mac a serious platform for their titles. I got a chance to see the Mac version of Warcraft II (which is due out in the next couple months), as well as a couple of their PC titles currently in the works. There's Starcraft, which at first glance looks like a space game with the Warcraft engine, but there's actually a lot more to it, specifically, many more layers of complexity in gameplay. The other major title nearing completion is Diablo. This game is going to be a very, very big hit, and will be well worth the wait. Although Diablo and Starcraft are not officially slated for the Mac yet, a little birdie told me that there is a good chance that we'll see those titles ported.

These are the two of the bigger game companies, and both have a major impact on the Mac market. LucasArts was showing their new games in a special enclosed room that could only be accessed by people that had appointments. There was always a large crowd of annoyed-looking people milling around outside the plain blue door labeled only with an 8 1/2 by 11 piece of paper reading LUCASARTS: APPOINTMENT ONLY. Fortunately, yours truly had an appointment, and as I was ushered past the smoldering crowd into the inner demo sanctum of LucasArts, I realized that I was in for something special. The first special news was that every new title Lucas was showing (X-Wing vs. Tie Fighter, Jedi Knight, Outlaw, Mortimer, Afterlife) was going to also be produced on the Mac. Lucasarts has made a very large commitment to the Macintosh, and I almost couldn't believe my ears. The most stunning thing Lucas had to show was Dark Forces II: Jedi Knight (see picture below). This game looked absolutely incredible with polygon enemies, ultra-realistic 3D modeling, the ability to use the Force, and yes, even a Light Sabre. The other title that looked good was Outlaw, which can best be described as Dark Forces meets Full Throttle.

Interplay/MacPlay is the other major company that is embracing the Mac with a greater enthusiasm. It was in another 'invitation only' area at the Interplay section that I saw the game that is going to make Star Trek fans everywhere salivate heavily. Interplay is developing StarFleet Academy simultaneously for the Mac and PC, and yes, they should make it out together in time for Xmas. StarFleet Academy is best described as a space flight-sim with ships from the original Star Trek series. It was so good, I'm not even going to bother trying to describe it. However, many associates who saw this game were uniformly impressed, and many thought that StarFleet Academy was the best preview of a computer game at the show.

h yes, there was more...so much more. But instead of rambling on, I'm going to save some content for future columns, and let your imagination fill in the blanks. But no matter what the individual games looked like, the most important thought I came away from E3 with is that the Mac gaming scene is healthy, strong, and growing. Yahoo!

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