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The Multiplayer Future is Now

jen-kon, n. 1) a frenzied gathering of thousands of game players, industry professionals (and amateurs), and those who make money off them. 2) held every year in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. 3) Derived from GENeva, as in "Lake GENeva, Wisconsin" and "CONvention," as in "Big party where people wear funny hats." 4) Operated by TSR, Inc., inventors of "D&D" and formerly the most profitable hobby gaming company in the U.S. 5) Where an intrepid IMG reporter found lots going on with computer games....

The Computer Arena
This year, GenCon devoted about 1/3 of a football field in floor space to networked computer games. It was pay to play: you bought tickets from the registration booth and traded 'em for playing time. This section of the 'con was busy, busy, busy eight hours a day for the entire convention.

Kompu-Kombat
Take two guys, a truck, and a whole bunch of PC's and some network wahr, uh, that's "wire." Call them "Kabal Gaming Systems," and let them loose on an unsuspecting world.

These guys have about 64 computers all told. At GenCon, 32 of them were devoted to running MechWarrior 2. Others ran Doom, Duke Nukem, Descent, and so on. If you wanted to play, you paid a few bucks and sat down.

The din was tremendous. Kompu-Kombat has no plans to add Macs to their repertoire, however. Of course, neither of the owners has ever played Marathon II, which explains everything.

Milwaukee Computer Society
You aren't going to believe this one, folks. A hobby group, MCS brings...get this...ATARI

computers to the 'con, networks them, and people pay to play. Yep, no kidding, this is not April Fool's Day. Originally sponsored by Atari, the machines are now donated for the duration of the show by local Atari enthusiasts.

What's the game? "Midi Maze," which runs equally well on Atari 520ST's through Atari Mega ST's. A 1986 game that uses the Midi port on the Atari, the group used to have two clusters of 24 machines running the game, but this year only managed one.
Isn't it nice to read about a platform that gets even less industry respect than the Mac?

Makato
Take a bunch of poles and stick lights and sensors in 'em. Stand someone in the middle and give 'em a stick. Have a computer randomly flash the lights. If the sensor attached to a particular light doesn't register a thwack from the staff, bzzzzzz! Gradually make the lights flash faster.

The Makato Warlord Tournament has become a GenCon tradition. And it's no couch potato game, either.

Other Tournaments

GenCon attendees could also pony up a few dollars and play in competitive tournaments of Warcraft II, Necrodome, and Descent II.

Multiplayer Internet Stuff
For those folks thinking of what to do on long lonely nights at home after the 'con, there were lots of glitzy demos running. I personally got in about ten games of on-line Battletech (a la Kesmai), and just about got the whole weapon selection while walking and chewing gum bit down pat.

Here is a review of current and upcoming internet multi-player computer games. Some require a front end or client, others require you to use an on-line service such as AOL, and some require both. Sadly, more than a few are not accessible unless you're using a PC.

AOL
AOL had a booth at the 'con, with demo computers set up so 'con goers could play Kesmai's MultiPlayer Battletech, Interactive Broadcasting's Federation, and a few other games--against AOL types in from the Internet and also from Compuserve's demo booth about thirty yards away.

AOL's current on-line game offerings for Mac users include games in the following categories, with some examples:

Sports: sports Trivia, iGOLF Challenge
Simulation: Air Warrior (coming soon)
Role Playing: Gemstone (text), Gemstone Dragonrealms (text), Modus Operandi

(interactive mystery novel, text), Federation (economic, text)
Knowledge: NTN Trivia (lots of these)
Persona: Antagonist ("Dark Digital Mosh Pit of Gaming," live chat games, cool new gaming product info, industry news, contests, and "The Black Bayou," a vampire role-playing game)
Classic: Bingo, card games, crossword puzzles
Action: this categories includes links to other services such as DoomGate, etc.
Strategy: MetaSquares, President '96

Gamer's Den
This company runs internet-based "thinking man's" games. One is called"Odyssey," and is text only. Another is "Phoenix," a military space conquest game for PC's only. These aren't real-time games, however: they are PBEM, or Play By EMail. At GenCon they used their hardware to run short solo games to introduce new players to the system and also to run short tournaments.

Compuserve
Worlds Away, developed by Fujitsu, is a MUCK for Joe's that's graphical. The more time you spend in it, the more credit you accrue, with which you can purchase a prettier graphical face, a virtual apartment or house, and so on. Not a game, but available for the Mac. It's a 12 meg download. In a few months Compuserve will produce a hybrid CD-ROM containing clients and software relevant to the service (including stuff you can play only if you have a PC, such as Air Warrior and Legends of Kesmai).

Kesmai
Who the heck? Well, Kesmai is a little company that fills a narrow niche in the computer gaming world. They make games you play on-line. They hold the on-line Battletech license, for example. You can't play their Battletech game at home, by yourself.

Right now multiplayer Air Warrior is in free Beta testing via AOL, which is also sponsoring a Mac client for the game. Due to the popularity of Air Warrior, another company, Interactive Magic, is producing a "boxed" version of the game so people can fly at home.

Other games you can play on-line: poker, hearts, spades, bridge, chess, and so on. These games are all interactive. Previously, players who wanted a quick game often had to wait for opponents, but Kesmai's current offerings use an "AI shill" approach to help you pass the time until a real person logs in (either replacing the shill or starting a new game).

The "Legends of Kesmai," computer role-playing game, however, remains a PC only game. All the games listed here require a special front-end, and, of course, access to AOL or another on-line service that uses Kesmai games, such as Earthlink and Compuserve.

The on-line Battletech is interesting: the graphics and play are a generation behind MechWarrior 2, but it's a level playing field. It's unfortunate that there is no Mac client for this game to date.

If you're interested, check out Kesmai's www page at WWW.KESMAI.COM

Interactive Broadcasting's Federation
Another game available only via on-line services such as AOL, Genie, Delphi, and UK-online, but which does not require a client (and is therefore Mac accessible), Federation is a text-

based space fantasy aimed at serious kids and adults. It is not a shootem up, and there is a better ratio of women to men than in many such virtual environments.

Cooperation is the key to long-term success in this economically oriented game. There are PC and Mac pseudo-clients which enhance the text-only presentation.

Decipher, Inc.: Special Mention
Not a computer company, but a game company, Decipher rates mention because they were the only folks to drag a T1 connection into the dealer area. Their "virtual showroom" was accessible to 'con goers via one of the only Macs at the 'con. They make the Star Wars collectible card game, and they are emphatically a Mac shop. Just another bit of evidence that shows cool people use Macs. Look 'em up at WWW.DECIPHER.COM

Total Entertainment Network
Unless you've been living under a rock you've heard about this San Francisco company that's taking a big swipe at the on-line gaming market. A combination of Optigon and Outland, they sadly have no Mac plans for the coming year. They do, however, have an impressive array of on-line offerings in the works or already available. This service will cost you $1.25 an hour or thirty bucks a month, flat rate for unlimited usage.

Here are some of TEN's gigs, game you can access via any internet connection (AOL and etc. not required):

•Dark Sun On-Line: by SSI, this game was originally slated for an AT&T on-line gaming service. It's in free beta right now, due in October for real.
•Duke Nukem
•Warcraft
•Terminal Velocity
•CivNet
•Command and Conquer
•Shadow Warrior
•Blood
•Deadlock
•Deathtrap Dungeon
•Confirmed Kill
•Big Red Racing
•Total Mayhem
•SimCity 2000
•Magic, the Gathering (Microprose's dueling game)
•Jagged Alliance: Deadly Games
•Masters of Orion
•Top Gun
•Panzer General

With this impressive array of games, TEN would seem to be on the road to dominance in this area. Time will tell. They did have an impressive display on the dealer floor, however, including the biggest monitor/big screen TV, which featured Duke Nukem games in progress for the entire convention.

And in Conclusion...
GenCon's dealer area was very, very noisy. In addition, my handwriting, shaky to start with, didn't improve under the circumstances: standing, with a bag over one shoulder and a clipboard and pencil in hand, usually in a crowd...etc., etc. In any case, all errors in content are either communication errors (noise on the line) or outright fabrications on my part.

On the bright side, there probably aren't any significant content errors, so don't worry about it.

As you can see, the hobby gaming world is shoulder to shoulder with the PC gaming industry. It's sad, however, not to see Macs doing what they do well in an environment crammed with people who are all game players. How will this change?

Make some noise out there, people. I'm disappointed that Bungie didn't have at least a stringer at the 'con: they're from Chicago, and Milwaukee is just a quick drive to the north. Sure, GenCon hit the same weekend as some other convention, exposition, whatever, but they could at least have sent the Bungie janitor along with a big screen Power PC and a copy of Marathon II.

Hey, I would have played. And since that software is superior to that out for IBM compatibles, it would show the hardware's equal superiority as well.