

y Chris Breen

kay, I might as well fess up. I own a PC. I know, I know. As an IMG subscriber, you expect to be sheltered from the rabid opinions of those tainted by Wintel boxes. But wait, it gets worse. Our Founder in Chief, Tuncer, and brand-spankin'-new Editor and Chief, Bart, are likewise afflicted. Why expose my own shame in this public fashion as well as "out" two individuals who've never done me harm? IndyCar Racing II, that's why. Allow me to explain.

I can think of two good reasons for using a PC:

1. To play games currently unavailable on the Mac.
2. If you're suffering from a life-threatening malady and the hospital uses a PC as a vital link for delivering restorative fluids through your IV, you have my permission to refrain from quibbling over the medical facility's choice of computer platforms (although once you're feeling better I'd hope you'd send a strongly worded letter to the hospital steering committee.)

Let's examine point one. It's no secret that the Mac holds a tiny share of the computer market and therefore software publishers of every stripe are more likely to develop their products for the PC first. Some of us who could easily qualify as poster boys for a gamers' twelve-step program get a bit twitchy when an awesome title appears on the PC and no Mac version looms on the horizon. IndyCar Racing II is just such a title.

What's all this have to do with the price of oil in Houston? Simply this: I've spent considerably more time with the DOS version of this game and the fact that I have makes for a finer and nobler review. Why? Because I understand how terrific a game IndyCar II is under DOS and what a generally wretched experience it is under the Mac OS. Without putting too fine a point on it, there are only two ways to play this game satisfactorily on a Mac:

1. Buy a DOS compatibility card containing a Pentium chip and run the DOS version instead.
2. Spend a fortune on a Power Mac that carries a 601 or 604 processor clocking well over 100 MHz.

In other words, ignore the system requirements on the box that state that the game runs with any "Power Mac series" computer. Technically, it does run with first-generation Power Mac, but that's like saying my 92 year old grandfather runs when you push him down a steep ramp. He goes, but the performance is anything but graceful.

But rather than turn this review into a carp-fest, let's examine what those with the hardware to handle it will experience with IndyCar Racing II.

[The Scoop on Papyrus](#)

"Ancient paper technology" probably comes to most Mac users' minds when they hear the name Papyrus. But on the command-prompt side of the globe, this company is known for making some of the finest driving simulators in the business. Comparing these sims to those quarter-gobbling boxes at the Family Fun Center or the considerably-long-in-the-tooth Mac program, Vette, is like comparing real IndyCar racing to those clandestine go-kart rallies you used to hold after-hours at the local abandoned parking lot. Fun, sure, but hardly the real thing.

What makes IndyCar II so different? Realism. The first time you put the pedal to the metal in your racer I absolutely guarantee you'll slam into the wall or spin out in the dirt before completing two laps. Driving a real race car isn't a simple task, why should driving a realistic sim be much easier?

[Start Your Engines](#)

You'll begin a typical IndyCar session by selecting one of the 15 included tracks. These tracks cover all of the real courses included in the 1995 IndyCar season and range from the hair-pin nightmare, Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course, to the "only-babies-lift" Michigan International Speedway. Once you've selected a track you have the option to practice, qualify, or enter the Championship Season.

Unless you've previously customized your car, you'll be placed behind the wheel of the default racer. From here you'll propel a fully-fueled, high-performance vehicle around the track at speeds that can — and should, if you expect to be doused with champagne — exceed 200 mph. After dashing your car against the wall, into other cars, and through your pit crew a few times you may determine that it's time to read the manual and apply some customization to your set up.

[In the Pits](#)

Your first stop should be the computer store if you don't have a joystick. Although the sim allows for keyboard and mouse input, you'll never have much success with them. Controlling the cars requires fine adjustments and absolute control that normal input devices just can't provide. Now here's where some of my DOS experience pays off: To garner the checkered flag in IndyCar, you must have a controller setup featuring a steering wheel and pedals. I used the ThrustMaster T2 setup — pieces of hardware currently unavailable for Macs — and I wouldn't go back to a joystick if my brother-in-law's life depended on it. Although I have friends who've grown accustomed to joystick control, they've absolutely flipped with the steering wheel. If you're serious about this game, figure the T2 into IndyCar's purchase price once it becomes available later this year.

Next, you'll need to slap on the overalls and move to the garage to tweak your car. Other than driving technique, setting up your car properly in the garage is the single most important aspect of the sim. Unless you've fine-tuned your brakes, wing adjustment, tire pressure, fuel level, wheel stagger and camber, and gear ratios, you're in for a rough time on the course. And because some tracks demand a car that will drive as fast as all heck while their curvier counterparts require a vehicle more nimble, expect to custom configure a number of cars — each tuned to a particular style of track.

Other customization options include the brand of tire you use, body style, and engine. If you like, you can even go so far as to provide your car with a personalized paint job via the included PaintShop program. Once your car is fully tweaked it's time to hit the circuit. Pick a course (Michigan is a good starting point for most virtual racers — darned fast with no hairpin curves), select your car, tank up, and take her for a spin.

You begin each race in the pits — surrounded by the four members of your crew. From here, you tool down the pit lane at a leisurely 80 mph. (Exceeding 80 in race situations exacts a penalty, so get used to holding down the speed. Should you be unable to draw the lead from your foot there's a speed-governor option that restricts pit lane speed to 80.) Now that you're on the track, floor it and see what happens. More than likely, you'll skid, kick up some dust, and careen across the track into a wall. Cutting down on the car's 40-gallon fuel load

during setup helps in these situations. A fully tanked car with cold tires handles like a pig.

Like A Pig?

Yup, like a big, fat oinker and that's one of the things that makes this game so cool. Unlike arcade racers that zip along with nary a thought for fuel load, tire temperature, or wing angle, the driving characteristics of these cars change over time. As you burn fuel the car gets lighter and becomes more responsive. As tires heat up, they stick to the track better. For this reason, it's wise to drive more conservatively at the beginning of a race when the car handles poorly, and become more adventuresome as the laps click by. Likewise, when you qualify for a race — and therefore only need to circle the track a few times — carry as little fuel as necessary. Relentless practice laps are your key to success. Once you're comfortable with each turn, qualify for the race, run your best time, and enter a real race against computer generated competitors.

Now, about those competitors: IndyCar II has an option for adjusting the skill level of the other drivers and you should take advantage of it. At a 100% level, the computer-controlled cars will leave you choking on their dust in each and every race (if you really want to feel inferior, you can set their skill level even higher). In a weekend-long, networked, IndyCar session, among my friends, I managed to set the highest qualifying time at Michigan with a lap speed of 235.78 mph. The 100% computer cars clocked well into the late 230s and I wound up in the last pole position. You'll find a strength setting of 92-95% to be far more reasonable. Other options that will make your job easier are automatic shifting, auto braking (slows you down a bit when you take your foot off the accelerator), spin control (when you spin-out the car ends up facing forward), and invulnerability (you can bash the hell out of other cars and only suffer minor tire-damage).

More features? How about replay of your race from the perspective of any of the racers and from as many as 12 angles. And then there's cross-platform networking. Yup, you can race against a DOS or Windoze weenie over modem, across a LAN, or through null-modem direct connect. Unfortunately, the game is currently limited to two networked players. Rumor has it that an update will provide networking supporting up to 32 players.

The graphics are of the same high-resolution quality as the SVGA DOS/Win versions. The dashboard is well laid out with gauges and readouts displaying speed, rpm, time of last lap, water temperature, fuel level, and anti-roll bar and brake bias settings. Skids and spin-outs raise a satisfying cloud of dust and crashes are spectacular enough that you may be tempted to play "bumper cars" with the other vehicles just to watch them explode in a shower of parts.

Reality Check

As I said, that's how the game works if you're living in hardware heaven. If you have a somewhat slower Power Mac (and I mean even an 8100/80) and absolutely insist on buying the game, there are a few things you can do to speed up gameplay.

First, switch off any extensions and control panels you don't absolutely need and run the game in 256 colors. Within the game, the Graphics window allows you to turn off parts of the scenery and limit the number of cars you see on the track. You can also elect to have these elements switched on and off automatically — IndyCar temporarily drops the eye candy when it starts to effect frame rate. Lowering your Mac's sound resolution to 22K will also help speed up frame rate as will pressing "W" to get rid of the windshield. These techniques will earn you a few extra frames per second but if they still don't produce smooth play, there's only one ugly option left: Drop the resolution.

If you've ever wondered what it's like to play games under DOS/VGA, you're about to find

out. Dropping to the middle resolution of 640 by 400 chunks the graphics up considerably. Flipping to the lowest resolution puts you in an eensy-teensy little window. Most Power Mac users will find that they can play the game reasonably well in chunk mode, but dang, it's unsightly. If it doesn't run smoothly under chunks, I'd return the game rather than resort to the minuscule 320 by 200 view — it's just too small.

Speak the Speech, I Pray You

Along with having a better interface than the DOS version, the Mac version is supposed to have this one huge advantage over either its DOS or Windoze counterpart: Voice recognition. That's right, rather than having to pause the game and muck with a bunch of keyboard commands that tell your crew what to do when you pull into the pits, you can shout instructions into your Mac. There's only one problem: although this feature is touted on the box and in the manual, I haven't been able to get it to work. Perhaps you'll have better luck.

The Checkered Flag

Let's drift into the future where we imagine these words wafting from the Papyrus/Sierra marketing department:

"No, we won't be making NASCAR Racing II for the Mac. Based on our experience with IndyCar Racing II, the Mac market just isn't big enough to justify the time and expense necessary to port the game over."

When you hear a statement to this effect I want you to remember this: The Mac market is plenty big enough to support any number of good racing simulations — we just need them to run well. Unfortunately, most Mac users just don't have the horsepower to drive a game that requires so much oomph. Rather than dump a product on the market that most Mac users will find unacceptably slow I wish the folks behind IndyCar had spent more time tweaking the game or — exhausting every programming trick in the book — had waited to release it until 200 MHz Macs were commonplace. Sure, it would have been a long wait, but I fear that we Mac users will once again be denied a fine suite of games simply because a particular company loused up its initial offering and reacted to poor sales by walking away from the platform. If you're listening Papyrus/Sierra, we Mac users will be lifelong customers as long as you release quality games that can actually run on our computers. Give us a fix for IndyCar that allows the game to be played on ALL Power Macs and follow it up with a good NASCAR port and all is forgiven.

Summary

If you've got the hardware muscle to play the game, a joystick (or better yet, steering wheel), and you're not too disappointed by the absence of voice recognition, IndyCar Racing II is a gas. You won't find a more richly detailed and satisfying driving experience outside of Indianapolis. If, like most of us, your Mac isn't up to snuff, give Al Unser Jr. a try instead.

Pros

- Ultra realism
- Cool crashes complete with flying car-parts
- Vast customization options
- Can network cross-platform

Cons

- Godawful frame rate on anything but the fastest Macs
- Voice recognition not reliable
- Difficult to play with anything but a dedicated steering wheel controller
- Currently can only network between two machines

Publisher Info

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