

LAUNCH No. 30

GAME REVIEWS

AUSTIN POWERS

Operation: Trivia

(Sierra/Berkeley Systems)

System: PC/Mac

It wasn't long ago that a little game from Berkeley Systems called *You Don't Know Jack* came out and revolutionized the computer trivia-game genre. A brilliant interface, commercial success, rave reviews, sequels--*YDKJ* had it all, and rightfully should have spawned an entire world of computer trivia games. But after the initial sparks over *Jack* fizzled out, it seemed as though trivia games as a whole dried up right along with it. No new entries, no innovations--hell, not even any direct knockoffs came in its wake--until now. Leave it to *Austin Powers* to unearth the past without apologies and turn the old into something fresh and new.

Austin Powers Operation: Trivia, from the same Berkeley Systems, now a division of Sierra, looks and plays identical to *You Don't Know Jack*, but of course gets all its flair and personality from Mike Myers's famed "international man of mystery" and the film series that bears the *Austin Powers* name. For those unfamiliar with this type of trivia game, here's the drill: one or two players compete in a TV quiz show-style game, fielding a quick barrage of questions and buzzing in before your opponent (or the computer timer). The player with the most money at the end of the round wins the game, simple as that.

Gamers playing against the computer can choose to play alongside either *Austin Powers* or his archenemy, Dr. Evil, and compete as teams on a

fictional TV show called *Win, Lose Or Die*. Questions are rooted in '60s, '70s, '80s, and '90s pop culture, as well as *Austin Powers* movie themes, many of which are expectedly off-color. Like *You Don't Know Jack*, the graphics that serve as backdrops to the written questions in *Operation: Trivia* are simple yet flashy, with lots of crazy colors and swirly typefaces. Music is psychedelic '60s, and typical *Austin Powers* catch phrases and lingo are everywhere--it all adds up to one groovy presentation, baby.

Operation: Trivia is good as a one-player contest, but thrives as a two-player battle of pop-culture knowledge and *Austin Powers* trivia. About the only things missing are the shagelicious Austin babes, Liz Hurley and Heather Graham. Oh, behave.--
Jeff Kitts

STAR WARS:

EPISODE ONE -- RACER

(LucasArts)

System: PC/N64

The podracing scene in *The Phantom Menace* is widely hailed as the film's most thrilling action sequence. Now, thanks to LucasArts's new *Episode One-Racer*, you can strap yourself into one of those twin-engine chariot-hovercraft things and compete against the best in the galaxy.

Reminiscent of *Wipeout* but without the weapons, *Racer* is an arcade racing game featuring hovercraft-style vehicles traveling on long, winding tracks at speeds in excess of 500 mph. If you like it fast, you've come to the right place, as the action here is downright blinding--but if you want variety and lasting replay value, *Racer* may be too one-dimensional. Sure, there are loads of options, tracks to race on (20 on seven planets), *Phantom Menace* characters to assume, and ways to upgrade and repair your pod after a

contest--but the racing is the same no matter how you tweak it. Once you've seen the individual circuits and planets a few times and sampled the different pods, droids, and drivers, the game quickly loses its pizzazz. It looks nice and plays well, and the big, booming *Star Wars* music and sound effects are always a joy, but underneath it all, you'll find a pretty standard arcade racer.--
Jeff Kitts

CIVILIZATION: CALL TO POWER

(Activision)

System: PC

Since its debut in 1991, Activision's *Civilization* has been widely hailed as one of the premier strategy game series. With *Call To Power*, the latest *Civilization* installment, Activision hopes to increase its domination over the competition and bring its franchise line into the next millennium.

And if Activision is looking into the future here, it's appropriate, as *Call To Power* is a unique world-building strategy game in that it lets would-be rulers command an empire from the primitive beginnings of 4000 B.C. all the way into the sci-fi future of 3000 A.D. Gamers will strive to achieve one of two ultimate goals: world domination or the technology to clone alien DNA--not your typical strategy game objectives by any means.

Other innovations include different types of warfare: in addition to a lethal military arsenal, players can take advantage of economic attacks, propaganda attacks, biological terrorism, or religious conversion to weaken and destroy enemies. *Call To Power* also features a new time-saving interface that simplifies empire management. Additionally, gamers can, using the standard point-

and-click interface, build orbital space colonies and harvest vast oceanic resources to grow underwater empires. Multiplayer options are also available, either through Internet, TCP/IP LAN, or IPX.

Civilization: Call To Power offers just about everything one could ask for in a world-building strategy title, and is perfectly suited to bring strategy gamers into the next millennium.--*Jeff Kitts*

TENDER LOVING CARE

(Digital Leisure)

System: PC

Despite the rather uninviting title, *Tender Loving Care* is just about the most gripping and well-crafted interactive movie ever burned into a CD-ROM--or in this case, CD-ROM and DVD-ROM. Starring veteran actor John Hurt and a couple of no-names, *TLC*--from the creators of *The 7th Guest*--is a compelling interactive adventure game that's bound to raise the bar for all such products. The story goes like this: a man and his wife recently lost their daughter in a car accident, causing the wife, who thinks her daughter is still alive, to lose her grip on reality. Hurt stars as a noteworthy psychologist guiding the couple's lives, and Beth Tegarden is the seductive nurse who is hired to help the couple through these troubled times.

Part full-motion video and part rendered, explorable environments, *TLC* lets you be the director as the strange events unfold. Most of the action takes place inside the Overtons' spacious country house, and at certain times you're allowed to wander the premises, clicking on items and checking them out in the hopes of unraveling the mystery before you. While the interface is hardly original or unique (the navigational system is

typical point-and-click), what makes *TLC* so refreshing is that it takes place in modern-day America with (seemingly) regular people in a regular house. No aliens, supernatural creatures, or science fiction communication devices--just simple, everyday laptops, tape recorders, phones, desks, bathrooms, etc. It all makes for a surprisingly realistic adventure.

What is also unique about *TLC* is the fact that much of the game consists of developing a psychological profile of the user. Every so often you're faced with a series of multiple-choice questions designed to determine your psychological makeup; the questions are usually of a sexual or provocative nature, which is in keeping with the adult themes of the game itself.

The presentation of *TLC* is pure movie-quality, with acting that's better than most interactive CD-ROMs, even if it is about on a par with Cinemax late-night nudie movie acting. The image quality is decent (though sometimes awful) on the CD-ROM, but the resolution is better and the frame rate smoother with the DVD-ROM version. It's a long game that needs lots of time (and patience) to complete, but the whole experience is so rewarding you'll be glad you invested the time.--*Jeff Kitts*

ALIENS Vs. PREDATOR

(Fox Interactive)

System: PC

Great concept, pitiful game. Fox's new *AVP* is broken down into three separate 3D shooters, you can play as an Alien, the Predator, or a Colonial Marine (from the *Aliens* movie series, the grunts with pulse rifles, flamethrowers, and motion trackers). And while such variety is certainly an innovative idea in the world of first-person 3D shooters, *AVP* simply doesn't deliver the goods.

There are minor annoyances that appear throughout the game in all three modes, but the most inexcusable problems with *AVP* are the lack of a save-game feature, and the fact that death comes waaaaay too easily for all three characters. The lack of a save-game feature is not only a gross omission from a 3D shooter in this day and age, it also makes for a phenomenally frustrating gaming experience when you couple it with a system where you die just by falling 10 feet off a ledge. The programmers should be ashamed.

About the only redeeming quality of *AVP* is the Skirmish modes, where you play as a Marine or the Predator in a pseudo-death match against waves of acid-bleeding aliens. It's a race against the clock where survival is your only goal, and it's better than the actual game. Of the three regular game modes, the Predator segment is the best, if only because it's the least annoying. The design is better, the control is better, and the weapons are better, proving the entire game could have been better if the programmers had put more care into what they were doing.--*Jeff Kitts*

KEN GRIFFEY JR.'S SLUGFEST

(Nintendo)

System: N64

Ken Griffey Jr.'s Slugfest makes no apologies about being an arcade baseball game with a focus on hitting looooong home runs. Which makes it all the more curious that the game's default settings make it so that hitting is nearly impossible. When the game begins, the batting style is set to Arcade, which means there's a cursor that you need to line up with the ball as it crosses the plate before you can swing--try doing that in the split second it takes for a 103 mph fast ball to reach the plate. It'll frustrate you to no end--until you do what I did and take a chance on changing the batting style

to Classic. Suddenly, the game made sense. No more cursor, no more trying to determine where the ball's going to cross the plate--just time the pitch and swing. Even in All-Star mode, it's a hitter's dream.

Once you tweak the settings to make the game more user-friendly, *Slugfest* makes for a decent arcade baseball game. All the elements necessary for a solid baseball game are in place: fully licensed players, teams, and stadiums, a home-run derby, different camera views, and the ability to create, trade, and draft players. But the game is not without its problems--problems that, unlike the batting style issue, are not correctable. Weak in-game commentary, blocky graphics, unrealistic pitching, bad sound effects, and players that throw with absolutely no power all detract from the experience. These blemishes may not be enough to ruin the game completely, but they do keep *Slugfest* from competing on as high a level as, say, *Triple Play '99*.--Jeff Kitts

JANE'S FLEET COMMAND

(Electronic Arts/Jane's Combat Simulations)

System: PC

Products from Jane's Combat Simulations are usually of the military-flight sim variety. With *Fleet Command*, the Jane's people have attempted something different: the world's first comprehensive naval real-time strategy game. Taking place in the modern era--or, more specifically, since the downfall of the Russian ruble--*Fleet Command* gives strategy gamers complete control over cruisers, destroyers, subs, carriers, F-14 Tomcats, helicopters, torpedoes, and other naval vehicles and weapons. A campaign consists of four interrelated scenarios, taking your Carrier Battle Group to the Indian Ocean (where India is threatening to invade Sri Lanka), then to the Bay

of Bengal, the Strait of Malacca, the Taiwan Strait, and finally to the waters around the Kuril Islands for a final showdown with the Red Fleet.

Fleet Command uses a point-and-click interface to trigger all the action on the high seas across the globe, which the player views through a 3D window and a 2D map of the region. The gamer can change the position of the windows on the screen and also has control over the camera views within the 3D window. While there are a lot of keystrokes and controls to master, after a little practice it all becomes very intuitive and natural.

Fleet Command also allows gamers to create their own watery battlefields. Select your region, your vessels, set your waypoints and mission goals, decide how many planes you want in the air, and have at it--your very own international naval crisis at your fingertips.

Like most Jane's Combat Simulations products, *Fleet Command* is a complicated affair that's aimed at those gamers comfortable with real-time strategy gaming; but also like most Jane's products, the end result is a wholly rewarding experience.--*Jeff Kitts*