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The Game Room

Space Colony, Total Immersion Racing, Big Bang Chess, Tapwave Zodiac, and More

By Peter Cohen

IN BRIEF COMPLETE SUMMARY OF EACH PRODUCT BELOW

★★★	Space Colony	Price as rated: \$30	Best Current Price: \$15.25 (via ProductFinder)
★★★★	Total Immersion Racing	Price as rated: \$45	
★★★★	Big Bang Chess	Price as rated: Free	
★★★★	Battlefield 1942 Deluxe Edition	Price as rated: \$50	
★★★★	Tapwave Zodiac	Price as rated: 32MB Zodiac 1, \$299; 128MB Zodiac 2, \$399; The Missing Sync software (for Mac compatibility), \$40	Best Current Price: \$224.88 (via ProductFinder)
	First Look Rise of Nations	Price as rated: \$50	

Boy, running your own space colony sure is a lot of work. There are aliens to fend off, minerals to collect, and grumpy employees who'd rather sleep than repair the force field. For detail-oriented gamers, Aspyr Media's **Space Colony**—a new strategy game that lets you control almost every aspect of your very own intergalactic mining town—offers the ultimate in micromanagement.

Space Colony makes you balance two different levels of management, each of which could be a game within itself. On the one hand, you're responsible for the day-to-day operations of a colony in outer space—managing the collection, refinement, and use of resources. On the other hand, you're manipulating the interpersonal relationships of the people who inhabit your station, as in *The Sims*. It's an interesting—although ultimately unsatisfying—combination of challenges. In trying to offer both, the game ends up missing what's most fun about each genre.

Space Colony starts out by giving you a series of goals—for example, raising money or building a certain number of structures. To carry out your goals, you'll need to assemble a crew from the residents of your colony. The colonists need to be happy, healthy, and active in order to thrive and do their jobs well. If they're too unhappy, they may refuse to help. The key to success is to find colonists who are good matches for both their jobs and their surroundings, and then to make sure they're taken care of.

In addition to a regular mode, which gives you no control over your assignments, the game includes a Galaxy mode, which lets you specify a strategic interest—for example, a military or an economic focus—and then assigns missions based on that interest.

The game gets progressively more difficult as you play. Each success leads to larger, more-complex missions, which in turn require larger crews. Hostile aliens occasionally buzz in and start zapping your colony, so you need to build force-field generators, laser towers, and the like. Not all tasks are fun, and you sometimes have to make the colonists do things they don't want to, which seriously affects both their mood and their job performance.

Space Colony renders its graphics in a fixed isometric (or three-quarters) view. It's effective but looks a couple of years old—especially considering the current prevalence of OpenGL 3-D graphics. Space Colony's techno soundtrack and repetitive voice samples grated on my nerves after a while; fortunately, you can turn them down or off.

In case you don't want the responsibility of managing colonists or completing missions, the game also offers a Sandbox mode, which lets you focus on simply building your mining colony. It essentially turns the game into a construction set. It's a fun intellectual exercise, but it's the least satisfying option in terms of game play.

You'll need a 733MHz G4 or better running Mac OS X 10.3. The game doesn't offer a multiplayer mode—but, then again, there's little need for one.

The Bottom Line The combination of simulation and strategy gaming offers some interesting possibilities that Space Colony doesn't fully exploit. As a result, it doesn't completely satisfy on either level.

Hit the Road

Total Immersion Racing, by Feral Interactive, puts you behind the wheels of more than a dozen real-world, licensed racing cars—including models by Audi, BMW, McLaren, and Panoz—as you climb your way to the top of the GT-racing circuit. Your career will take you to some of the best-known tracks in the world, such as Monza and Sebring, as well as a few imaginary tracks. But you'll need to win—and keep winning—to unlock all of the cars and tracks the game has to offer.

Total Immersion Racing is more of an arcade game than a simulation. The game's physics engine will probably disappoint racing purists. Despite an extensive setup process, my cars responded with unrealistic ease when drifting through turns or braking. This did make them more manageable, however, and will probably help new drivers get up-to-speed quickly.

The game's AI is uncommonly good. The drivers in other cars actually remember when you cut them off—or drive them off the road completely—and they'll take you to task for such behavior the next time you're out. This is a nifty way of making sure that you drive as carefully as you can. The game also does a beautiful job of rendering cars. Each vehicle glistens in the game's sunlight and kicks up realistic dirt, dust, and debris from the tracks.

The game doesn't support online competition—network latency is a killer in such fast-paced games—but it does let you go head-to-head against someone seated at the Mac beside you with a second game controller.

Kudos to Feral for offering a game that still runs in OS 9. But the company's minimum system requirements—a 500MHz G3—may be a little optimistic. It was just barely playable on my 800MHz G4 PowerBook running OS X. For optimal performance and reliability, be sure to download the latest patch from Feral's Web site.

The Bottom Line Total Immersion Racing effectively straddles the line between simulation and arcade racing. Although it may disappoint players looking for a true racing experience, the game offers plenty of good fun.

Check, Mate

If you're a chess fan and you're not already play-ing **Big Bang Chess**, a free offering from Freeverse Software, open your Web browser and download it right now. Seriously.

Big Bang Chess, which won two Apple Design Awards at this year's World-wide Developers Conference, is a 3-D chess game that lets you take on the computer or live players. The game provides plenty of luscious eye candy, including pretty reflections, particle effects, and animations. More important, it offers built-in support for Apple's i-apps. You can use iChat to start a game with a friend, for example, or fire up your favorite iTunes playlist for background music. You can also play via e-mail with friends and colleagues who aren't online at the same time as you. Big Bang Chess supports Rendezvous, Apple's zero-configuration networking technology, so finding local network games is easy. But since Big Bang Chess lacks support for GameSmith, Freeverse Software's game-finding service, there's no easy way to pick up a quick game with other online players.

The game's built-in AI may not sufficiently challenge proficient chess players. Unfortunately, there's no way to adjust its skill-level settings to better match your abilities.

The Bottom Line Apple should include Big Bang Chess on all shipping Macs. Despite a few flaws, this 3-D chess game is stellar—especially considering its price.

War Zone

There's certainly no shortage of World War II-themed first-person shooters on the Mac. But if you crave online multiplayer action, none of them holds a candle to Aspyr's **Battlefield 1942 Deluxe Edition**.

If you've played Halo or Unreal Tournament 2004, you've already gotten a taste of what Battlefield 1942 offers. In fact, when it was originally released for Windows in 2002, Battlefield 1942 introduced many of the features that have since made these games such hits—including vehicle control and expansive outdoor maps.

Battlefield 1942 lets you play as either Axis or Allied (American, German, British, Russian, or Japanese) soldiers in 16 different battles from World War II. However, your nationality is largely window dressing; each side's weapons and vehicles are more or less evenly matched. At the beginning of the game, you choose a specialty—for example Medic, Engineer, or Sniper. Each specialty has its own abilities (medics can heal the wounded, for example). But Battlefield 1942 doesn't lock you in—you can switch careers after being killed. So if your team needs another sniper instead of a medic, you can oblige. Battlefield 1942 requires strategy as much as it requires a quick trigger finger. So finding other teammates with decent skills is part of the challenge, and you'll be rewarded for developing those skills yourself.

You can command almost three dozen different vehicles, including a B-17 bomber and armored tanks. Many vehicles also support multiple positions—you can be the gunner or the driver, for example. Maneuvering an M3 half-track armored vehicle filled with troops around the battlefield is certainly fun—but it's also surprisingly challenging. And since each vehicle handles differently, it's important to match the vehicle and the mission to the task at hand. You may fill up an armored personnel carrier with troops only to find that you're the target of an air strike.

The game supports as many as 64 cross-platform combatants, making for some fierce online game play. There are several multiplayer modes, including Deathmatch, Capture The Flag, and Conquest. Although there is a single-player campaign, it's not nearly as satisfying as the multiplayer options. If you're looking for a World War II-era shooter with a very strong storyline, I'd recommend Aspyr's Call of Duty instead.

To compensate for the fact that Battlefield 1942 is so late in coming to the Mac, Aspyr has packaged the game as a Deluxe Edition. The game includes The Road to Rome expansion pack, which was originally sold separately for the PC version. While the theaters of war in Battlefield 1942 cover locations throughout the world, The Road to Rome specifically covers events in Italy, as Allied forces made their way through Sicily and up the boot through Anzio and Monte Cassino. The expansion pack adds new vehicles, fighting forces, and weapons, as well as other changes to the original game.

To install and play Battlefield 1942, you'll need an 867MHz G4 or faster with a DVD player, and an ATI Radeon 7500 or Nvidia

GeForce 2 graphics card or better.

The Bottom Line Battlefield 1942 has taken a very long time to come to the Mac. But for online gamers looking for something they can really sink their teeth into, the game has proved to be worth the wait.

On-the-Go Gaming

Palm OS-based PDAs are a great way to stay organized while you're on-the-go, but they've never been ideal for gaming—until now. Tapwave's **Zodiac** gaming console is a PDA with a distinct flair for letting loose. In addition to running most of the programs compatible with Palm OS 5, the device includes 3-D-graphics hardware, which lets you play sophisticated games such as Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4.

The Zodiac features a beautiful 480-by-320-pixel screen that renders thousands of colors and crisp 3-D graphics. It's Bluetooth-ready, has two slots for Secure Digital (SD) media cards, and comes equipped with an analog thumbstick (a thumb-activated joystick similar to the interface of a game-console controller), which vibrates in response to the on-screen action. The console is available in two flavors: the Zodiac 1, which includes 32MB of internal storage, and the Zodiac 2, which has 128MB.

If you're accustomed to a run-of-the-mill Palm PDA, the Zodiac will be a horse of a different color. First of all, you hold it sideways. Within easy reach of your left thumb are the thumbstick, the power and home buttons, and a function button whose purpose changes from game to game. On the right side is a cluster of four action buttons. A stylus, for use when you're running normal Palm software, clips to the back. The console includes built-in stereo speakers and a headphone jack.

The Zodiac connects to your Mac via Bluetooth or a USB cable. However, as with many current PDAs, you'll need Mark/Space's The Missing Sync software (\$40; www.markspace.com) to transfer files to and from your Mac. With The Missing Sync installed, you can drag and drop purchased games to the Zodiac and upload high scores back to Tapwave's online service. The Missing Sync also lets you import iTunes music and iPhoto images, share your Mac's network connection with the Zodiac, and even mount the Zodiac's SD cards on your desktop.

You can purchase games and other software at Tapwave's online store. There's a fair selection of stuff to keep you busy—including classics such as Doom II and Duke Nukem, and the 3-D version of SpyHunter. All the games I tried worked great, with the exception of a few Sega-branded games that appear to be emulating Sega's Genesis console. Even some classic arcade games I bought from Handmark, a PDA game retailer, ran much more smoothly on the Zodiac than they did on my aging Palm IIIc. Tapwave also promises that by the end of 2004 it will offer at least ten new original titles.

The Zodiac tends to chew through a battery charge. If you're playing a game that vibrates the thumbstick or if you're competing with another Zodiac gamer via Bluetooth, the battery will probably last only a few hours before it runs out of juice. To squeeze more life from it, you can tweak the screen's brightness, turn off Bluetooth, and nix vibration in most games. It takes about two hours to fill up the built-in rechargeable battery when its tank is completely empty—and twice that long if you can't keep your hands off the Zodiac while it's juicing up.

The Bottom Line If you want a handheld gaming system that also functions as a PDA, look no further: the Zodiac is the device you've been looking for.

First Look| Rise of Nations

MacSoft will soon release a new, real-time strategy game called **Rise of Nations**, which should appeal to fans of Civilization II and Alpha Centauri.

In Rise of Nations, you're the leader of a modest empire. As in most strategy games, your job is to expand your empire's borders while ensuring that your citizens are well cared for. Your nation's borders are determined by the size of its cities, and you can build only within your borders, so you'll need to be strategic about how and when you build new cities. Rise of Nations also requires that you manage resources adequately, fund research into new military technologies, and develop your civilization's civil, commercial, and scientific endeavors.

However, there's a lot more to the game. You'll also have to combat other empires as you come into contact with them—raising armies, using technology to overwhelm your opponents, and capturing your foes' territories. Scenarios change depending on which territories you're holding, so there's a lot of variability to the game play.

Rise of Nations' historical scope runs from the Dark Ages straight through to the Information Age, so you'll have plenty of time to develop the resources you need in order to come out on top. But there's short-term gratification, too—you can usually complete a mission within an hour.

Although the centerpiece is the single-player Conquer The World mode, the game also offers a multiplayer option, called Quick Battle, which lets you challenge other online players to short skirmishes.

MacSoft should be ready to release Rise of Nations by the time this issue reaches you.

The Bottom Line Rise of Nations combines the things I've come to love about real-time and turn-based strategy games, and the result is a new and unique take. It's sure to please gamers from both camps.

Recently Reviewed

Shrek 2: The Game (●●●; Aspyr Media, www.aspyr.com; \$30)

Aspyr Media's Shrek 2 (which I previewed in the [August 2004](#) issue) is a third-person action-adventure game based on the

blockbuster movie by the same name. In the game, you get to take on the roles of Shrek and his friends as you make your way through the kingdom of Far, Far Away—and other locales seen in the movie—to rescue the big green ogre’s new bride, Princess Fiona.

Shrek 2 is strictly casual fare—the graphics are relatively bland, and the action, including platform hopping, rope climbing, and basic brawling, is nothing I haven’t seen in a hundred other games. Still, it’s fun and family-friendly, so your whole gang can relive some of the movie’s entertaining moments.

[MacCentral.com Senior Editor Peter Cohen is handily beaten at chess by his nine-year-old son—which is a testament either to his son’s skill or to Peter’s mediocrity.]