

FlatOut: An Interview with Bugbear

by Jens "McGonigle" Lindblad



Despite being self-proclaimed hardcore sim racers, there's a title coming up on the radar that we've been eying for some time now. It's **Bugbear's "FlatOut"**, and hopefully it will be as fun and innovative as it looks. Many of us still enjoy Bugbear's Rally Trophy with its selection of classic rally cars. *Jussi Laakkonen*, Business Development Director with Bugbear was so kind as to offer this interview especially to SimHQ readers. Jussi talks about balancing the game experience, cross-platform development, and provides other interesting insights.



Q. Can you tell me a bit about Bugbear, the company, and perhaps some of your previous titles?

A. Bugbear Entertainment was founded in March 2000 by two Finnish game-veterans, our managing director Janne Alanenpää and our technical director Tatu Blomberg. Janne and Tatu had similar visions about how to run a company and how to make games, so they decided to start the company and see how far they could go. And we are still going and growing.

Our previous titles are Rally Trophy and Tough Trucks. Rally Trophy is a historical rally simulation, which was released in November 2001. It went on to gather a lot of critical acclaim including GameSpot award for the best PC racing game of 2002. Tough Truck is a PC driving game with huge pick-up trucks going around in dirt arenas. Tough Trucks was developed for the US market and released in mid 2003.

Q. What was the most important source of inspiration that shaped the development/direction of FlatOut?

A. In Finland there is a class called the "everyman's class" where Joe Averages drive banged up Beetles, Ford Escorts and the like and really battle it out for the finish. It is quite popular in Finland and we have done it with the team too. I think this has a lot in common with FlatOut as it is also every man for himself low down gritty sports 😊

Q. What are the features that you as a developer are most proud of, or like the most in FlatOut?

A. I like the gameplay a lot, but even more important to me as a developer are the technological innovations we succeeded in bringing to PC, Xbox and especially Playstation 2. The physics engine in particular in the game is something that hasn't been in racing games before. When you drive 200 kph straight into a tire wall and see this amazing show of each of those 100+ tires reacting individually to the impact and flying through the air, you will understand. Old style racers simply feel outdated once you have been going around destroying the tracks and cars in FlatOut.

Q. The readers of SimHQ are simmers, what does FlatOut offer them?

A. FlatOut is an ambitious effort to marry cutting edge physics, damage modeling, environment damage and other innovations into fun and enjoyable driving. The technology will be quite impressive to anybody who is into racing games and the ease of play and the rewarding game style will offer a nice way to unwind from all those hours of mastering Richard Burns Rally or LFS.

Q. FlatOut is meant as a fun game, yet it promises to feature very detailed car damage and interaction with the environment. What was Bugbear's approach in terms of making it look convincing?

A. It is a very fine balance that you have to create. You want to feel that when you hit a fence or a barrel, that the impact is as convincing as possible. Barrels should feel heavy and bounce and fences should splinter. Then again, if you get stuck every time you hit a barrel, or a crumpled fence creates an impenetrable wall, then you have destroyed the game play.

Basically the approach is to ensure that regardless of the damage your car will always go forward (albeit more slowly and awkwardly than before) after an impact, that you don't get stuck too easily and that heavier objects are arranged so that it is a bit harder to block the road. A lot of this happens behind the scene so the player can simply go and enjoy the destructive racing 😊

Q. Please tell me a bit about the gameplay / different modes of play in FlatOut. Single player as well as multi (is there a multiplayer?)

A. In single player mode there are three game play modes: career mode, quick race and time trial.

The game comes with 16 cars, which you unlock during your progression through the single player career mode. You gain cash by either placing well in the race or by crashing into trackside objects (and the AI cars). So if you are a poor driver (*like I am*) you can make up for it by indulging in a crash frenzy!

You start off with a relatively under-powered, battered-up car, which you can upgrade with many different parts including the engine, transmission, exhaust and suspension. Once you have accumulated enough cash you can also purchase a completely new car.

In the quick race mode you have all tracks and cars you have unlocked available, and you go for a quick spin around the tracks. In the quick race and career mode you will always have seven AI opponents battling you to the finish line.

The time trial mode is for perfecting your skills and it is identical to the quick race mode except that there are no AI

cars on the track.

On the multiplayer side there are some variety depending on the platform.

On the PC up to eight players can join in for multiplayer mayhem over a LAN connection. The online play support was dropped due to lack of time (there is never enough time to do everything unfortunately).

On the Xbox you can have up to eight player carnage over Xbox Live or system link. You can also play in four player split screen mode.

On the PS2 the multiplayer fun is available in two player split screen mode.



Q. Do you plan any official add-ons after the release of FlatOut?

A. At the moment there are no plans for add-ons, but we are not ruling anything out.

Q. Any thoughts about the possibility of allowing or opening for user-created add-ons, either by providing a "moddable" game-engine, or by selecting a number of user-created add-ons and offering them in future official add-ons?

A. The game engine itself is quite "moddable" as it is based on the same technology as Rally Trophy, which had a moderate amount of fan created content. At the moment we haven't yet planned whether we can put in the required time to release modding tools. If we do release them, we will definitely endorse the best fan created add-ons e.g. on our web site.

Q. What driving views will be available to the player?

A. There are three views: two from behind the car and one bumper cam. We had to unfortunately drop the cockpit view due to the lack of time.

Q. Will we be able to save and replay the most awesome moments in FlatOut?

A. FlatOut was created as a multi-platform game (PS2, Xbox and PC) and with the team of our size (averaging at 18 developers), we had to make the decision to make each platform as similar as possible in order to get the game out in time. Given the limitations of Playstation 2 storage media, we couldn't include a replay saving feature in the game.

Q. FlatOut is released on several platforms. Have the system requirements for the PC version been determined yet?

A. Yes they have. Here are the official minimum and recommend specs:

Minimum:

1.5GHz Pentium 4 or AMD equivalent
256MB RAM
64MB graphics card
DirectX compatible sound card
1.1GB of free hard drive space
Windows 98 / ME / 2000 / XP
DirectX9.0c (included on the disc)

Recommended:

2.0GHz Pentium 4 or AMD 2000+
512MB RAM
128MB graphics card
DirectX compatible sound card
Gamepad or steering wheel
Windows XP SP2

Multiplayer (LAN 1-8 players)

Q. Can you hint at any future plans for Bugbear?

A. Bugbear is a dedicated racing game developer and we will continue to focus on developing cutting-edge racers for PC and consoles. We have also an upcoming project on the mobile side, and we will be announcing that soonish.

Q. Is there any area we haven't touched on, or something that you would like to mention to the SimHQ readers?

A. One of the very visible features of FlatOut is the ragdoll driver, which of course reserved for the most spectacular crashes. If the player or the AI e.g. hits a concrete wall at 200 mph, the driver will be flung out of the car in slow motion flying through the air, hitting other cars and trackside objects. During the flight you can flip back and forth to normal and slow motion to enjoy all the details of the crash. Once the driver comes to a rest the car and the driver are reset back to the track, and of you go "destruction racing" again 😊!

There are also mini games which we call the Ragdoll sports. These revolve around using the car as the launch vehicle and the driver as the sporting equipment. The Ragdoll sports mode consists of the High jump, Long jump, Darts, Bowling, Bullseye shot and the Clown's face accuracy shot events. Just imagine the sheer craziness of speeding down the lane at 200 mph and hurtling your driver at a giant darts board 😊. Yes, it is that crazy, and it is amazing fun!

Q. Thank you very much for your time, and the very best of luck with FlatOut and Bugbear's future projects.

A. Thank you for the interview!



FlatOut is set for release in Europe on November 5th 2004. The North American release is handled by Vivendi Universal Games, and the game is due out in the first quarter of 2005.

So, if you crashed your model cars, or set fire to them as a child, and if you enjoyed the Monty Python sketch with executives falling off tall buildings, stay tuned for our FlatOut review.