

Review

FlatOut

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Introduction

I can't remember when I had more fun with a PC racing game, any game for that matter, than I'm having with **FlatOut**.



When I first learned about a title called FlatOut, I noticed that the developer was the Finnish **Bugbear Entertainment** of **Rally Trophy** (RT) fame. This was good news as Rally Trophy is one of my favourite games/sims and is on my disk drive to this day.

Then, subsequently I learned that FlatOut was to be an arcade racer with something called ragdoll physics, where the driver can be thrown out of the car, and that it would have no in car driving view.

At this point I was beginning to regret that I had agreed to reviewing FlatOut. Frankly, there are three things in this world you would never, ever tell a hardcore sim racer and hope to get away without being rhetorically torn to shreds:

1. Driving arcade physics can be fun
2. Driving in bumper or chase cam can be fun
3. His (or her) driving sucks!

Could a hardcore sim racer possibly find any enjoyment in such a game?

Upon it's release, I received a review copy of the game. The package is nice-looking and the game comes in a DVD-box and is on two CD's. The manual is as sparse and slim as is the norm these days. Still, the basics are covered.

Installation went smoothly and I did not experience any trouble with my Geforce 4 Ti 4200 as the drivers I run agreed completely with the game. There are reports of users having trouble with some of the Geforce drivers, and developer Bugbear has announced that they are working on a patch to fix the known issues.

The short intro movie re-litged the hope in me that this game might be worth playing after all. It's fast, very well executed and features of of the greatest songs in the game.

Interface

If there is one reason to hate the consoles it is because of what they have done to the PC interfaces. FlatOut is released simultaneously for PC and consoles, and all menus on the PC version which I'm reviewing are controlled by the arrow-keys, Esc and enter.

Early in the eighties something called a personal computer was introduced to the world and if I recall correctly, from the very beginning these PC's came with a pointing device called a mouse and menu's in PC games should support the mouse. Anything else is not user-friendly. After the initial moan and groan about the menu navigation, I must admit that once I got into the game itself, I forgot all about the menu interface, and after playing the game for a few days I must admit that the interface works well, is relatively intuitive and easy to use.

Controller setup is a breeze as all is done in-game this time, as opposed to RT where you had to set up the wheel outside the game in a separate application. No problems whatsoever, in assigning split axis for my Momo Wheel and in assigning all the buttons and shifter paddles. Right shifts up, left shifts down.

The Concept

In Finland and many other countries there is a type of motorsport where you can bring along your old but souped up motor and race others for a reasonably low budget. Competitions are held on dirt-tracks, in gravel pits or in suitable sections of forest.

In FlatOut you will race on forest tracks, in mud- and gravel pits, on tarmac and on snow so just about every surface you can think of is represented.

You start out by buying a car and through wins and prize money you can upgrade the car with refurbished or new parts for the engine, drivetrain, clutch-assembly, filter, and a host of other items. Some of these parts will give your car more horsepower, some of the parts will improve handling. When you are done with one car you have 15 others to try out!



There are no setup options in terms of adjusting brake balance, tire pressure, differentials or any of that business, but in all honesty, such options are not needed in a game like this.

In FlatOut-land the sun always shines, so don't expect weather changes, snow or rain.

Game Modes

At the start only races designated "bronze" are available, and you have to place at least 3rd in the races in order to unlock more tracks and after you're through "bronze" you can move up to the "silver" mode. Same procedure in the "silver" mode, until you have unlocked "gold". Each mode has 12 tracks, making 36 tracks in all. This should provide for hours of entertainment!

In addition, there are a number of bonuses in each game mode; a figure-eight track where the crossover section can become very scary as the race progresses; Demolition dashes where the object is to be the last car running; or a dirt oval, listen up dirt track fans, yes he said a dirt oval, and it is really one of my favorites. Even has the "safer walls" in form of old tires lining some of the outer wall!

The game is named FlatOut because you accumulate nitro as you hit things, and this nitro you can then use to give you a bit more speed for as long as the nitro button is pushed, or as long as you have some nitro left in your tank. With this nitro-boost, you go "FlatOut" and it is looking a little bit like good old Star Trek; Warp Speed 8 Mr. Zulu!

The Graphics

The graphics are stunningly beautiful, with cars, tracks, skies and surroundings rendered in great detail, and the game runs perfectly silky smooth and fluently.

There is no slowdown at all, not even with the maximum 8 cars on screen and literally hundred of objects flying around: Oil cans, logs, fences, tires, wooden towers and assorted structures will destruct and scatter when you hit them, and debris will stay on the track for the duration of the race, thus creating new obstacles in different places.



These obstacles can cause you to loose momentum if you hit them subsequently, in worst case they can cause a huge wreck, throwing your driver out of the car.

If this happens, either through hitting an obstacle, or being hit hard by another car you can tell your driver to get back into the car by hitting the reset button.

During races that usually last from 3 to 8 laps, doors, bonnets and bumpers will depart your car as you are constantly in a furious scrap for position with the AI, and at the end of the race your car will look like it has been in several huge accidents. Which it has!!



Once the race has completed you can watch the instant replay of the mayhem, accompanied by the exquisite soundtracks which IMO fit the game perfectly. It is great fun watching the mayhem unfold as the cars get smashed to pieces. The running game looks even better, even more exciting than the screenshots can document. For some reason I find it hard to catch the right moment when making screenshots, so bear in mind that the running games looks far far better than my measly screenshots.

Sadly there is no option to save the replays and thus documenting your stunts. This is a great shame, especially when considering the ragdoll olympics. Just what this is will be explained in greater detail elsewhere. It would have been very beneficial for players to be able to exchange replays of high- and long jumps, comparing achievements.

Pleeeeeease Bugbear, pretty please... would you consider fixing this in a patch, you graciously patched RT to include savable replays.

The AI: The AI will fight you all the way and will really give you a run for your money. I can't begin to tell how fun it is to battle it out with these AI as they take no prisoners and don't yield a quarter of an inch. It's side by side racing for several laps.

In the special events like the destruction derby and the demolition bowls the AI are only too painfully aware of where you are, and they seek you out in a cat-and-mouse game in order to render your car inoperable, and to be the last surviving car, thereby winning such an event.

The Physics

The physics can be divided into 3 parts: Driving model, damage model, and Ragdoll sports!

Driving model: You have two choices of physics; standard and pro. I have been driving exclusively in pro.

The driving model is arcade but surprisingly I find that it fits the game near perfectly. FlatOut is not intended as a very serious driving simulation. The emphasis is rather on racing the other cars and racing the tracks. Good driving habits like choosing the right line and maximizing exit speed will definitely help you, but the cars are easy to control and to throw around. I've tried modding the physics with one of the tweaks that are available on the net, to make the handling more sim-like but must confess to preferring the default pro-handling mode.

The game is developed around the Rally Trophy engine so the basic physics like tire- and suspension modeling are pretty accurate, it's just that the driving model has been tweaked to offer a more "arcadey" or relaxed driving model.

The force feedback is good, perhaps not exceptionally sublime but certainly more than adequate.

Mods are already appearing on the net so soon we could have several options to choose from. I'm on the lookout for a mod that gives just a bit more of a drifting experience while not sacrificing the drivability or fun-factor of the original model.

Damage model: The damage model is quite spectacular as the cars will resemble complete wrecks after they have been rolling, flying, turning, and banging into each other. Parts like doors and panels come unstuck and then they start flapping from your car until they are completely torn off, and the body of the car will deform convincingly with each blow that is dealt to it. Judged by FlatOut's damage model, this is definitely one of the "simmiest" sims.

Ragdoll sports: These ragdoll sports. Some say they are a gimmick, some think they are hilariously good fun. As hinted earlier, if your car is hitting something, or being hit by another car sufficiently hard, your driver may be thrown out of the car. The effect on me is that short moment of shock as it happens.

In Ragdoll sports, the object is in fact to let the driver be thrown out, preferably as high or as long as possible.

You control the point of ejection by pushing the nitro button a while before actually ejecting, and when you release the button the ragdoll



will shoot from the car. I'll admit that my skills are sadly lacking.

When reading about such a feature it may sound very silly, which, in fact, it is - but at the same time it really is a fascinating activity. Take the car down the ramp, accelerate, punch and then release the button and see if you can score a strike in the bowling alley, or place the driver into one of the holes in the face of a giant clown.

Go on! Let the inner looney in you get out for 15 minutes, it's only a game so thank goodness nobody gets hurt.

The Sounds

Engine sounds seem a bit weak but I suspect it might be my onboard AC97 soundcard that muffles the sounds a bit. Or the fact that the developers have tuned the engines down a bit to better mix with the music soundtracks. Basically the engine sounds seem to be pretty close to my expectations of what the real thing should sound like.

The Mods

As mentioned earlier, the game does not include an in car driving view however, you can have a very nice in car view, as well as roof and bonnet views with some of the mods that are already available. When using the modded in car view you can even get blinded by your own bonnet as it will obstruct your view ahead if it is knocked loose until it is knocked completely off. The windscreen shatters as well.

The in car modded view can be seen on the following screenshot:



The built-in LAN multiplayer function has been enhanced by a utility that let's you chat with other racers, join and host Internet multiplayer sessions.

The way to get these mods to work might at first seem a bit tricky, but once learned it's very easy to add these mods.

First, get "bfsunpack" from **Blackhole Motorsports**. Unzip the bfsunpack.exe to your FlatOut directory.

Open the DOS command-line box and type CD.. until you get the root directory where your copy of FlatOut is installed. If you installed FlatOut to your C drive, the root directory will be C:\

Now type (assuming you have installed the game to the default directory): CD programs\empire interactive\flatout.

Now type: "bfsunpack.exe common1.bfs" and watch as the common1.bfs file gets extracted.

Then type: "bfsunpack.exe common2.bfs" and wait for the common2.bfs file to get extracted.

Finally type: "bfsunpack.exe europe.bfs" and let the europe.bfs file get extracted.

Now rename the file "filesystem.ini" to "old_filesystem.ini".

This ensures that the game will use the files that will later be extracted into the data folder.

At this time, as a precaution you should back up the folders in the data directory that you plan to mod. If you are about to install the new driving views, back up your cars folder before installing the new views. This way you can easily revert to default if you regret the results.

The rest of the process is simply to extract the modded files to their respective folders. Using the driving views as an example, just extract the files to your cars folder. That's it!



Conclusion

FlatOut is a blast to play, even for a hardcore sim racer like myself. It's a game with personality and a crazy charm that will win you over. It's rock solid and I've not experienced one single problem or crash (PC-wise I mean!) with the game itself. Best advice: get this game now!

Pro's:

- Huge fun
- Great graphics
- Runs silky-smooth
- Varied challenges and 3 game-modes
- 16 different cars to drive and tune
- Great handling (of the relaxed sort)

Con's:

- No savable replays
- No in car view (but available through mods)
- No TCP/IP multiplayer (but available through mods)

FlatOut System Requirements

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

Reviewer's System Specs

- Intel Pentium 4 2.53 GHz CPU
 - 512MB RAM
 - 128MB Geforce 4 Ti 4200 / NVIDIA drivers v61.77
 - AC97 onboard sound
 - DirectX Version 9.0c
 - Windows XP Home with SP1
 - Logitech Momo Force steering wheel
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