

Review

Xpand Rally

by Jens "McGonigle" Lindblad



Introduction

With the advent of Richard Burns Rally and Colin McRae Rally 2005 (as of yet neither of these titles have been officially released in the U.S.), and FlatOut which is set for U.S. release in April, one wonders if the demand for PC simulations, or games, can support one more offering for European Rally Fans.

What makes Techland's **Xpand Rally** interesting (it has not yet been released in the US either) is the expandability that is hinted at in the title.

Xpand Rally (or XR) cannot boast of a license to the *World Rally Championship* cars and venues, but it does offer a very interesting solution to these licensing issues and this should also be of interest to flight simmers, because what Techland has done is to ensure that all the necessary core elements are present and accounted for in terms of game structure, rally stages, and car shapes with skins that are not exact reproductions of their real-life counterparts, but are close enough.



Polish developers Techland also shipped an editor (a map or level editor) with the retail version, thus allowing users to make their own rally stages. A tool for importing 3D car models into XR has also been released.

New skins, cars and rallies are readily available at sites like **Blackhole Motorsports** and **R.E.G.**. As such, the community is taking to the modding of XR. Before going too much into the modding, let's take a closer look at what you get out of the box and with the official patch 1.1.0.0.

Cars

All cars are "look-a-likes" with made up names and in-game you can choose from a number of available different skins. Here's what I think the cars are meant to represent in real life:

- Fiat Punto
- Peugeot 206
- Mini Cooper
- Ford Focus
- VW Golf
- Seat
- BMW SUV
- Mitsubishi Lancer
- Subaru Impreza

Rallies

All-in-all, you have rallies in the following locations:

- Poland
- Kenya
- Arizona
- Finland
- Ireland

Additionally, specific stages for multiplayer and "freestyle" stages are included. According to Techland, these total 46 stages.

Installation

XR comes in the popular DVD-sized box and the box-content consists of two CD's. No problems were encountered during installation and a quick launch of the game to ensure satisfying functionality before patching was also trouble free. My Driving Force Pro was easily recognized and I assigned the control-functions where I wanted them.



To install the game you must enter a 27-digit code. In order to activate the game you then have to enter an activation code, consisting of 25 digits. Add to that the fact that XR uses the controversial Starforce protection scheme. It's very sad that a few bad apples spoil the fun for the legitimate user and force developers and publishers to add such cumbersome protection schemes.

User Interface

When launching the game, for some reason, my system activates the dialogue box usually seen when I place a DVD or a CD-R/W in the disk tray, and asks me if I would like to view the CD in Media Player, open an Explorer window, or do nothing. I cancel this misplaced dialogue box and select the "play Xpand Rally" option from the

Windows start menu.

That being dealt with, I would like to give top marks to Techland for making a user interface that actually supports the mouse consistently and in all menus.

Recently we have been swamped with PC games and sims that *force* the user to make do with arrow keys and enter buttons. To such an extent that we had just about begun to doubt if the device called a "mouse" was ever really invented and that perhaps we were just the victims of a mass illusion in thinking it existed. But Techland proves that it is in fact possible to program a user interface (UI) that supports the mouse. Thank you for that, Techland.

In the background of the main menu there is a nice video running, making the menus quite pleasant to look at and use.



Manual

The manual is 36-pages with some pages being used for the usual items: an epilepsy warning, credits and copyright stuff.

It does a fairly decent job of guiding you through the different game modes and options in Xpand Rally, as well as taking you through the first tentative steps towards creating your own track. But there is nothing in the way of driving technique, strategy or a rundown of the different cars or rallies that are included in the game.

Graphics

The graphics I find quite pleasing. There is a sort of ambiance to the colors and lighting that is slightly "artsy" and a subtle haze makes the visuals soft in their appearance. The car skins are very reflective when they receive the full light from the sun in open areas and subdued when in shadow. Speaking of shadows, when driving in shadows it is very dark and at times I find it very hard to see the road ahead. I would have liked stronger headlamps as the ones installed remind me very much of ordinary short-beam headlamps.



Lots of tall grass is placed alongside some of the stages, and it moves in correspondence to the wind and when you drive by, adding to the details. Some of the surrounding terrain, like the mountains on the Grand Canyon stage does seem a bit flat and underdeveloped to me at times though.



The in car view is pretty basic in the sense that you see very little of the inside of the car, just very top of your steering wheel, and this view is the same in every car.



Car Skins and Shapes

Although Xpand Rally is not licensed, the cars are named differently than in real-life and have skins that are variations of real-life paint schemes. I find that this does not detract from the overall experience and I have no trouble in identifying a "Tiny Hooper" as a Mini Cooper, a "Monsoon" as a Subaru, A "Lion" as a Peugeot, and a "Cord" as a Ford. The car shapes are very close to their real-life counter parts.

Sounds

The engines do sound a bit monotonous and artificial in-car on the test system. Listening from the external viewpoint during replays sound better. There are nice variations to the sound when the engine is under different loads. The sound of the transmission whine is very well done.

There are no sounds as far as I can tell that lets the driver know that a skid is in full progress. Taking corners sideways on the gravel surface does not produce a single sound of gravel, stones or dirt being thrown about. This is a bit disappointing and as we shall see later, it has some influence on the overall driveability of the cars.

Force Feedback

Force feedback is implemented and the kind of forces you experience are of the rattling variety. In fact it rattles so much that my letter tray starts shedding its contents! I was not able to discern other forces through the wheel on the regular stages, but I did detect some subtle forces informing me of weight transfer when driving round my very own custom made mud-track. In the regular stages, there was little in the way of forces apart from the rumble effect and the driving felt detached from the road surface, especially on tarmac. I'm wondering if mud is the easiest surface type to simulate and gravel and tarmac being harder to get right.

Single Race and Career Mode

You can drive any car and upgrade it with any part in the single race mode. This is nice as a way of letting you sample all the possibilities from the start without having to go through the career mode first to unlock cars and car parts. The downside is that you can only compete in the 3 stages of the Grand Canyon event, as only they are unlocked and initially available to you in the championship mode.

In order to gain access to more rallies, you must start a career and here you have to earn prize-money by participating in events. Hopefully you'll earn enough to pay for the repair of the damage your car takes during the competitions, as well as leaving you with some monetary means so you can save up for upgrade parts and eventually go to bigger and better cars.

There is a very long list of upgrade parts to every car so you should be occupied for a long time to come if you want to compete in all classes.

You can upgrade your engine, your brakes, your transmission including the gearbox and clutch, your suspension and bodywork, to name but a few of the many options. A very good thing is that there is a notable difference between driving the car with the standard locked differential and a limited-slip diff. You will feel a difference in terms of handling and power as you upgrade parts.

Once you are done upgrading, you have the option to test the car on a tarmac track where you can drive as many laps as you like. When doing a particular rally however, I would think that it would be more logical to be able to test it on a road surface that is similar to the stage you are about to drive though.

If you buy a GPS, you will be able to see the route ahead on a small part of the screen. This in effect is the "radar" that is often set to "on" per default in many racing games.

Multiplayer

Xpand Rally ships with a working multiplayer mode for up to four players and connecting to a server is pretty straightforward. The game comes with an in-game browser that shows which Internet games are available, if any of them are password-protected and the ping to the server. I experienced pretty good pings in the region of approximately 60 to a maximum of 140.

The game does a good job of putting you into an existing session as it simply waits for any ongoing races to finish and then it counts you down to the race you are in. You can make a quick visit to the garage to tune the car you selected for this specific race while you wait and there's a chat function as well.

First surprise when you start the multiplayer race is that the cars that participate may be fully drawn, i.e. you are not seeing ghosts but fully rendered cars. It turns out that the host of the multiplayer session can alternate between two modes; "collision", i.e. fully rendered, and "ghost" which is the more well known way of doing multiplayer in rally games.





Having your opponents' cars fully rendered in game during a race at first seemed like a major attraction to me, but as the race started the frame rates dropped through the floor. From normal fps of about 50 to 60, I was down in the 20's — or worse. At times it was impossible to drive like that. Not quite a slideshow but pretty bad. This slowdown continued even as the cars spread out and the other cars were not in sight, and it seems that even if you try out a multiplayer session with yourself only, you will experience some slowdown.

Fraps was used to measure the frame rates.

Setting up a multiplayer sessions is as straight forward as joining a session. You have good control over the settings. As far as I could determine it is not possible to view nor save replays of multiplayer sessions. The option simply does not exist.



Replays

Xpand does not forget those of us who like to view our best, or perhaps rather "most spectacular" drives and crashes. The game lets you save and review replays. Apart from offering a lot of different camera angles you can change through yourself or just let the game handle a "director's cut" selection of views. You can also add special effects filters like black & white, motion blur, soft-focus etc.

AVI files

Yet another good idea that made it into the game is the built-in AVI video format capture. Start a previously stored replay and then push a button that will capture the replay and turn it into an AVI file which you can then load into Windows Movie Maker, or other video-editing software. If you wish to keep the very high graphical quality in your movie and start the AVI capture using a high-resolution replay, be prepared to go watch a ball-game while the replay is being turned into an AVI. I tried converting a replay which was in 1280x1024x32. After 20 minutes of

work, the resulting AVI file was 93MB and it lasted all of 41 seconds. No doubt you can speed this process up considerably by selecting lower resolutions when you wish to turn some of your replays into movies.

Track Editor

Xpand seems to be filled with extremely good ideas. The game comes with a fully-equipped track editor that lets you try out your talent for building new tracks and rally stages. You can build closed tracks as well as regular, open rally stages.

You can have your first track working within the amount of time it takes to go to the manual's correct page and follow a few brief and simple instructions. When you have done that, that particular track is available in the game for you to drive.

The reason why it is so quick to make your first custom track is that whatever you call the track, it will be a small oval with a mud surface, if you select the track type to be of the closed sort. I searched for a way to make an open, rally stage type of track but failed to find where or how to tell the editor to do this operation.

I know my talent is very limited with editors so I'll recommend **R.E.G.** as a good place to look for new tracks and they are certainly the place to go for help with your track projects. There are already some tutorials posted on their forum.

Car Importer

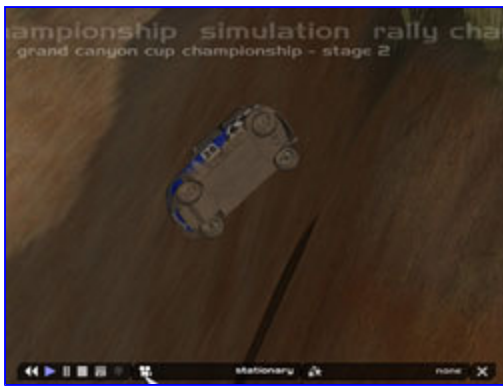
A car importer is not on the CD, but it was released shortly after Xpand went onto the retail shelves upon it's European release. Clearly, Techland supports modders who wish to create new tracks and new cars by making these tools available.

As implied by its name, the car importer lets car modelers import car shapes from 3D modeling tools to Xpand.

Damage Modeling

Car damage seems to be a weaker aspect of the game, You will suffer cracked or completely broken windshields and the bonnet will occasionally fly off, but even major crashes involving rolling the car and sending it headlong into assured destruction at the bottom of the Grand Canyon hardly leaves any dents in the bodywork.

Yes, you can even experience the free fall into the deep crevice. In car the effect is great, but when you check the replay afterwards it doesn't look quite as spectacular because the bodywork is hardly damaged and the most worrying aspect is that quite often you are respawned after a couple of seconds and can continue on your merry way. In reality, the car ought to be considerably damaged and undriveable after such a fall.



Xpand Rally features yet another innovation in the way it mimics and displays information regarding the health of the driver. After a major crash the driver will be experiencing anything from a mild dazed state to severe trauma. It is even possible that the driver-injury sustained will be so severe that it means retirement from the stage.



When recovering after a major crash, it is difficult to tell if it is the damage is to the car, if it has injured the driver, or if it's both factors combined to make the car drive differently and make the control of the car more difficult. Whether this is hot or not, I'll let you decide. In a way it must be said that Techland have done a great deal to bring new things to a racing title, but I probably prefer car damage alone.

Physics

With all the good points to Xpand Rally like well organized menus that work with the mouse, good graphics, a very well laid out and exhaustive career part that will keep you occupied for a very long time, easy to use multiplayer, editors that most certainly will help keep the game fresh as new tracks, stages and cars will be added by modders, it would be absolutely brilliant if Xpand had good physics as well to complete the list.

Sadly this is where the game stumbles a bit. I have tried every possible combination of simulation-mode and arcade-mode, using the slowest cars and the fastest cars, driving with no add-on car parts and with all add-on car parts, switching between 900 and 200 degrees of steering lock. I used slow steering and ultra-fast steering, and although Xpand Rally seems to be very generous in the numerous ways that you can adjust saturation, linearity and dead-zone, I haven't found a completely satisfactory setup.



One thing I noticed is that the speeds with which you can enter the corners on tarmac are way too high, probably due to large amounts of grip.

A very nice thing that I want to commend Techland for is for not putting in any gizmo's to artificially enhance the speed-sensation.

One other producer of rally games (who shall remain nameless) quite happily announced that they had "overclocked" their game engine by one third in order to "up" the speed sensation. As I tried their demo I was horrified. But that is another story and we had better get back to Xpand Rally.



Conclusion

A lot of creative and innovative ideas are packed in this title. It's sort of a first person shooter meets racing because a lot of elements known from fps are available in Xpand Rally. Many of the ideas are great, and Techland have done some things differently from what other developers of racing sims do — like turning the the radar-map that is usually a driving aid that can be removed into a driving aid that costs you money to upgrade.

The map editor and car importer support the modding community and this is what makes this game interesting for driver/modders and modders. The driving physics are clearly not what could be termed a simulation, but who knows if the modders will find a way to improve upon this? Only time will tell.

While not up to par with Richard Burns Rally, I feel that Xpand Rally is a competitor for Colin McRae 2005. Xpand offers a solid career-mode which will take a long time to complete, good graphics, great stability and performance (apart from the multiplayer slowdown). Not once did I experience any CTD's or hardware incompatibilities.



Good Points:

- Graphics
- Performance
- Stability
- Career mode
- Multiplayer
- Replay system with AVI support
- Menus support the use of mouse
- Track editor and car importer

Could Be Improved:

- Physics
- Controller precision
- Multiplayer slowdowns

Reviewer's System Specs

- Intel Pentium 4 2.53GHz CPU
- 512MB RAM
- 128MB Geforce Ti4200 / NVIDIA drivers v61.77
- AC97 onboard sound
- DirectX Version 9.0c
- Windows XP Home with SP1
- Logitech Driving Force Pro