2004 in Review

by **Doug "guod" Atkinson**

Another year has come and gone in sims. What were this year's highs and lows and which sims were the year's best?

Fact is, in a gaming environment proliferated with a near obsession of grabbing the last visual effect from $300-500+ video cards, many of us spent the year playing sims that have been available for quite a while and have been regenerated with terrific mods and add-on developments. Many of these mods would rival the quality a major developer could provide. So above all else, 2004 was "another" year of the mod and add-ons.

The SimHQ Staff was asked: What is the one thing that affected or impacted simulations the most in 2004 — good or bad *and* what are your favorite sims from 2004?

Here are the SimHQ Editors thoughts about the year 2004 in simulations.

Tom 'WKLINK' Cofield first commented on the positives. "The latest video cards. Some of the new stuff coming out is simply amazing. The stuff is looking more and more photo-realistic." And then Tom spoke about the *negatives*... "The continued dominance of the perfection whiner. You know the type — this feature, that plane, yada-yadda isn't in this game so it isn't worth the $39.95 I paid for it."

If you haven't already done so, read Tom's editorial "The Future of our Genre" **here** and the follow-up thread **here** in which several interesting ideas and points-of-view were discussed.

'Chunx' found the following as the high points of the year: "New PC games are still the driving force in technological improvement in PCs — specifically the new video cards that have come out recently.... I got a GeForce 6800GT and it really improved the visual quality of my games." In regards to simulation titles, he said, "Dedicated developers like 1C / Maddox continued to provide quality products and upgrades. Dedicated 3rd party modders like Project WildFire's NR 2003 add-ons, Ralph Hummerich's RH2004 Season mod for F1 Challenge and FreeFalcon3, not to mention some of the great historically accurate skins for IL-2FB / AEP / PF are reaching (or exceeding) the level of professional development studios in product quality within their scope of effort, and really added a lot to the sim community's enjoyment of new and existing titles." Finally, "It was good news for simulation fans that some great and highly profitable non-sim PC games have helped stop the tidal surge of developers towards mindless console games and back to PC games (such as Doom 3, Half-Life 2 and Far Cry)."

According to 'Chunx', the big negatives this year were, "Continual shrinkage of the high-dollar, big producer, retail simulation genre. Every month this year we heard something bad. Like Papyrus getting shuttered. Or LOMAC being dropped for support (with the exception of v1.1 in Russia). Falcon 5 / OIR getting canceled.

Problems with product licensing and 1C / Maddox, not to mention the hostile takeover attempt of Ubisoft (our last great sim producer) by console-oriented rival EA. Even RedStorm's Ghost Recon 2 was developed more with the casual console gamer in mind and less of a 'tactical simulation'... unless the delayed PC version gets an infusion of "hard core" life based on PC game profitability this year."

"Although there are a few potential bright spots out there like Wings Over Vietnam and the upcoming releases of GTR and NASCAR Sim Racing, sometimes it seems like the days of finding a thinking man's electronic entertainment title at a retail store are over."

Technology Editor John Reynolds believes, "The best graphics technology that began to see use in 2004 is *normal maps*." The SimHQ ATI X800 XT PCIe Review **here** has a brief description of normal maps on the 3rd page.

When asked his thoughts on 2004, Scott 'Blade124' Gentile said, "The only things I can really speak confidently about are flight simulations, since that's all I've been doing during 2004. All in all, I think 2004 was a pretty bad year for flight sims. Several fell far short of their potential in more ways than one. The best release, IMO, has to be LOMAC, and it only received a lukewarm reception at best."

"Technically, what slipped in during December 2004 was NaturalPoint's TrackIR six degrees of freedom known as Vector Expansion™. This allows the player's head to move up, down, left, right, forward and backwards. Now pilot's can look over the nose, lean their head out the window during a taxi, or even move their head right up to and look through the gun-sight. This may dominate in 2005."

"Some cool water rendering technology is also coming about with the more powerful video cards."

"Too bad Silent Hunter III didn't make it in for 2004 — I think that would have stolen the show. It looks to be a little more than evolutionary."

"Perhaps the biggest thing, IMO, are these games depicting huge armies made up of individual people, like Rome: Total War. I haven't played the game, but the in-game videos show something quite new this year."


In closing, 'Blade124' said, "Not a sim, but Sid Meier's Pirates looks *amazing*."

'Cat' saw the year this way... "Simming-wise, I think FreeFalcon 3 was a big thing. Also, Pacific Fighters's release. Lock On 1.1 should get a mention, though it won't be actually out till the first part of 2005". 'Cat's' Preview for Flaming Cliffs is **here** and **here**.

Read Chris 'BeachAV8R' Frishmuth's Combined Review and Mission Report on FreeFalcon3 **here** and Tom 'WKLINK' Cofield's Pacific Fighters Review **here**.

She continued, "I got a GeForce 5950 Ultra in 2004. I also got a new monitor, a Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 19" flat screen CRT, and I can't believe the difference from my old monitor. I can see things in Lock On I'd never seen before. It's killer bright... and so clear! I went from .28 dpi to .25 and wow".
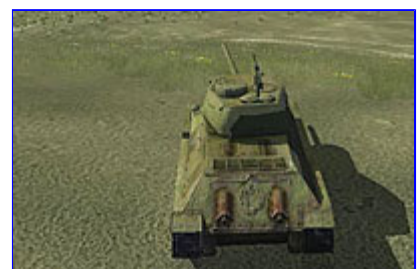
"Oh, and I'd like to point out T-72 Balkans in Fire to get the "Unsung

Hero" Award this year. Read her Preview **here** and **here** of T-72 Balkins in Fire.

During 2004 'Cat' and guest writer Eric 'Flanker56' Johnson gave us some great LOMAC stories through the eyes of Sacha and Alexi. You can read their reports **here** on the LOMAC Week page.

Also in Armor sims, the development work on Steel Beasts II continues and it's looking better and better. The recent announcement of the Hind addition has brought more excitement to the king of armor sims. Expect a John 'Spoons' Sponauer Preview early in 2005.

Guest writer Chuck 'Magnum MGG' Ankenbauer showed us what's ahead in tactical shooter sims in his SWAT4 Preview **here** and the State of Tactical Shooters **here**.

Jens 'McGonigle' Lindblad and Doug 'guod' Atkinson agreed that one of the year's worst moments was when we all found out Knights Over Europe's development was shelved. We can only hope that it arises again sometime in the future. What a shame.

In Motorsport sims, it was an especially diametric year.

According to 'McGonigle', "the best included the birth of First Racing and the best sim of the year — Richard Burns Rally". RBR is a rallying sim done right. Unfortunately, unless it's special ordered from Europe, RBR remains unavailable through North America retail channels. It's North American sales will surely be one of the highlights of 2005 when it becomes available. Read 'McGonigle's' Review **here** on RBR.

Another "yet to arrive" in North America sim is GTR. Read the SimHQ Preview **here**. GTR's press demo set the racing world on it's head and has everyone anxiously awaiting the worldwide release. For now, Germany has the pleasure of motoring in GTR while everyone else waits. It should make it's worldwide release in early 2005.

Other notables include the GPL 65 mod package, the iGor Internet matchmaking utility and the GEM front end. All good candidates for Motorsports add-ons / mod of the year.

On the bad side of 2004, racers were distraught at the loss of Papyrus and Project Wildfire. Fortunately, the talent that these teams encompassed have joined together and will be part of the future and not just the past of racing simulations.

'Chunx' took some time earlier this year to give us an updated look at the mods and add-ons for Papyrus' NASCAR Racing 2003 Season in his article NASCAR Racing 2003 Season: Still Going Strong in 2004. Read it **here**. Throughout the year, he enjoyed racing off-line when at sea (read his article Simming At Sea **here**) and on-line at Sierra.com with his racing buddies. As 2004 ended, he was spending NR2003's on-line "off-season" happily downloading road courses and whittling away at his lap times while driving the PWF Trans Am mod. And as the new year begins, he got hold of a copy of ISI's F1 Challenge and the RH2004 mod (thanks to a very helpful on-line driving buddy), and has now fallen in love with the mod's great physics and the immersive challenge of driving a modern F1 car.

We will be seeing the much-anticipated NASCAR SimRacing from EA Sports in early 2005. It promises several innovations in sim racing.

Alex 'Zander' Keep, reflecting on his huge preview of the entire 2004 F1 Season, "Worst moment of the year — realizing how much work was involved in keeping the race previews coming on time!" The Previews showcased the terrific F1 Challenge mod, RH2004 Season by Ralph Hummerich and EMACF1. You can find all the F1 articles **here**. Not surprisingly, 'Zander' voted RH2004 Season the best racing mod of the year. 'Zander' added, "Positively, I would have to say that the best thing has been the continued support of all the simmers and developers — we have seen some cracking mods and games this last year... and more are on the horizon. Negatively, I think it is pretty obvious what I am going to say — the increasing restrictions placed on developers and modders due to restrictive copyright laws. I can see both of these facets continuing in 2005 with a face-off likely in early 2006."

Near the end of 2004 we saw controversy about this topic in the flight sim world. This is new to flight simmers, but certainly not new to sim racers who have dealt with tracks, sponsors names and car marquees being excluded over the past several years. In fact, this past year one of the premiere racing sims was pulled due to the licensing agreement expiring. The licensing agreement that EA had elapsed and so did F1 Challenge '99-'02. It came and went too quickly. If you haven't already grabbed it, do so now. It has become very difficult to find and what is *currently* available is all there *will be* available of F1C.

In 2004, SimHQ added it's first full-time Naval Combat Editor, 'Teddy Bär', to keep up with all the activity on the new seagoing sims. No doubt about it, Naval Combat sims have jumped to the forefront. Several new projects will be arriving soon including S.C.S. Dangerous Waters, Silent Hunter III, PT Boats: Knights of the Sea, The Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905, Pirates of the Burning Seas and others. The Harpoon community is going strong in spite of the loss of Harpoon4, a bitter disappointment to the community.

'Spoons' sees the bright side of sims through the modding community, "Considering that I recall hearing a chorus of a few years back that "SIMS ARE DEAD!," I guess my vote is more of a macro, big-picture view that not only are sims not dead, but we're seeing some of our best products emerge from dedicated developers and the fan base."

Vince 'Beer Camel' Putze agrees with 'Spoons'. "I really see 'our world' in a macro sense... ESPECIALLY about Flight Simulations... 'Flight Sims are DEAD!... Long Live Flight Sims!'" The biggest story of 2004 is that the genre continues to steadily improve. Maybe not in the big steps we would all love to see. We may not have the same vast selection our FPS 'brothers' have, but what has been accomplished is remarkable. A game like Pacific Fighter's would have been a pipe dream a few years ago."

"New titles are on the near horizon. BoB by Oleg Maddox, BoB and B-17 II being re-released / developed by Shockwave. Currently released titles like FS2004, IL-2FB, Pacific Fighters and others continue to be supported and improved by professional developers and / or the respective user communities."

"A special 'Atta-Boy' goes to the outstanding freeware add-ons / patches by folks like FreeFalcon and the BDG. It is hard to ignore that kind of dedication. The hardware improvements currently fielding will bring a significant improvement in the reality, quality and performance of current and future sims. A great example of

this is the new NaturalPoint TrackIR 6DOF unit and CH Products new multi-lever USB Throttle Quadrant."

The bad according to 'Beer Camel'...

First, the cost to develop a serious flight simulation, civilian or combat flight sim, is staggering. Our community, relatively speaking, is small and cannot support very many serious game developers. I don't think we will see numerous competing products. Economic realities prohibit it. I do think that there will be enough demand for a small number of capable companies to prosper by meeting the relatively steady demand of our dedicated flight sim community... but that is it.

Second, the largely unsubstantiated rumor I've heard about the ugly possibility of trademarking issues that could be devastating to PC flight simulations. To date I have not seen any official confirmation this is an issue, but if it becomes one, well it was fun while it lasted.

In 2004, we saw some sims coming into their own after some rough starts. As 'Weasel_Keeper' says, "Wings Over Vietnam and Strike Fighters: Project 1, Service Pack 3 are doing very well. 'Cat' and Andy Bush were on the original beta team and probably wouldn't recognize SFP1 and WOV since they moved on to other projects."

Mark 'Boxer' Doran saw 2004 like this, "It's been a dual-focus year for me with regard to sims. Meaning exactly *two* only: Falcon4 and Harpoon3. Driven mostly by circumstances of time available to throw at sim stuff in general... i.e., *not a lot*."

"Harpoon3 makes the cut because this year I ended up doing a *lot* of travel and it's the most satisfying game (for me) to play which I need nothing more than my laptop to play (OK, I confess to having a CD soft copy of "Combat Fleets" for reference)."

"Falcon4 makes the cut because it's the one flight sim that I still find fascinating and that, for me, is still growing. That of course is based on the fact that I wangled my way onto one of the mod development teams so now I really get to give back something to the F4 community."

"All of which is a round about way of saying these two games and communities around them are pretty much the only thing I've had time to play this year."

"Perhaps this is the "silo" year: certainly I've had no time and little reason (for lack of interesting outside stimulus in the rest of the flight sim community to draw my attention) to look outside the Falcon4 silo at home and Harpoon3 silo on the road."

"In these communities, the real key to sustained growth and interest is all about the users feeding back into the game materials."

"With Harpoon3 it's the database guys over at HarpoonHQ.com. With the Falcon folks it's the ever fractious but infinitely creative and talented people of the SuperPak and FreeFalcon teams."

"There's also one pretty interesting consolidation trend in the game coding universe too. For instance, did you know that the graphics engine for the shortly-to-be-released BoB was actually written by an "amateur" who

retained use of the IP for himself? He fully intends to put the DX9 engine and the shiny new weather in a completely separate first-rank sim project. Expect that work to show up shortly. I discovered that the TrackIR support in over 25% of the games that have TrackIR support according to NaturalPoint was also written by a single amateur. Commercial development of games that we like may be dead but maybe a few talented amateurs is more than we in fact need to keep the lights on."

Andy Bush had an interesting year in simulations... but not the desktop kind. Andy responded to our questions with, "I've been so busy with *real simulators* that I haven't given much thought to what's been happening in the hobby. The real thing is *much more* demanding!" Look for Andy's extensive article discussing his new job about real life flight simulation training in the first part of 2005.

Ever the comedian, when 'BeachAV8R' was asked about one thing that affected or impacted simulations the most in 2004, he quipped, "I'd say the release of Doom 3 and Half-Life 2... those two games took away most of our sim "players" <g>."

Maybe add Far Cry along with those two games, Chris?

He continued, "I agree with all the statements about the user communities out there making these sims so much "better" than they are out-of-the-box. The Falcon4 improvements are a great example of this (also a great example of how WORLD WARS can get started... hehe). The Strike Fighters / Wings Over Vietnam crowd are really turning that sim into a looker. Granted, not a study sim, but it sure is nice to see all those pretty explosions and so many new 3D aircraft flying around in a virtual world."

"LOMAC and Pacific Fighters are incredible. I attempted four carrier landings in PF before I finally managed to NOT crash. Both of these sims (maybe LOMAC more than Pacific Fighters) seem to be examples of sims that are almost driving hardware requirements. I really need a new rig to get the best bang for the buck out of these sims. I'm sooo far behind the times."

Nearly everyone feels the same way about the hardware changes in 2004 and how fast they're coming about. Many new system components have changed and will change in the next several months. It's a major decision to decide *when* to purchase not just *what* to purchase. Still, the sim community has a high ratio of builders amongst their populace who do their research before buying.

'BeachAV8R' followed, "I do think it is worth mentioning that we are becoming spoiled though. The nit-picking about rivet placements and degrees-per-second of roll rate at X weight is pretty tiresome. Simming, for me, is about fun. Writing about the missions I fly is fun — like a hobby. Picking apart a sim for all it's deficiencies is NOT fun. Reading legitimate suggestions for improvements or about GROSS errors is fine with me — but nit-picking has really picked up exponentially with the features of new sims. I personally chose fun over criticism."

It's been a great year. *My goal* for this upcoming year is to use my TrackIR2 more. I've had it for almost a year now and have only used it a few times."

Regarding the web site itself, 'guod' wanted to thank the Daily News Contributors who spend their time

collecting information on sims and the hardware / software it runs on. "In 2004, we added a permanent team of news contributors that has made the daily news one of the best on the Internet for simulation fans".

Tom '20mm' Hayden summed it all up well. "I'd like to talk about something that really isn't new, that has always been the basis for the creation and continuing development of our simulation hobby, and that's the community we're all a part of. Any community, any organization is only as good as the people involved in it make it."

"It's a global community, brought together in large part by the internet. Each and every day, people throughout the world are involved in developing and modifying simulations, making terrain sets, cockpits and panels, "skins", weapon packs, sound packs, all kinds of tweaks and add-ons. Some of this is payware, but so much of this work is done for free and made available for anyone to download. It really is mind-boggling."

"There are "how-to" guides, help with hardware and software, instructional videos, humorous videos, After Action Reports, screenshots, "I was there" stories and much more."

"We are no longer in the golden age of simulations, but thanks to the efforts of thousands of people, the hobby continues to progress and evolve. It always interests me to see a member in one of our forums announce the release of a project he or she has been working on and all the excitement it generates."

"We are a relatively small group — a niche of the gaming universe — and yet we have a passion, a fire for this hobby that is unmatched by any other. It is this passionate interest that drives people to work insane hours for little or nothing and to create everything produced in 2004."

"No SimHQ year-end Review would be complete without a look back at the site itself. We made a lot of changes this year. Not without angst to be sure, but that is the *very essence of change*. It does not make human beings feel comfortable. I believe much of this change is clearly beneficial now, while some is still work in progress. That work will continue and we'll be making periodic adjustments as we go forward in 2005."

And now our picks for the best of 2004.

The SimHQ Best of 2004 Winners

Air Combat

Simulation: Pacific Fighters

Add-On / Mod: Firepower for CFS3

Land Combat

Simulation: America's Army

Add-On / Mod: Call of Duty, United Offensive

Naval Combat

Simulation: N/A (this will change in 2005!)

Add-On / Mod: Subsim's Silent Hunter II Pacific Aces

Motorsports

Simulation: Richard Burns Rally

Add-On / Mod: RH2004 Season

Technology

Best Hardware: Athlon 64 CPU

Best Software: http://hyperfighter.jinak.cz/

Best Non-Simulation Game: Half-Life 2

Best Technical Achievement: Rome: Total War

Best Simulation of the Year: Richard Burns Rally