

Race Pro

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Sunday, 19 April 2009

Simulation games are fairly commonplace on the PC these days. Whether it's a flight simulator, train simulator, driving simulator, or even a life simulator in *The Sims*, there are plenty of options out there for simulation fans on the PC. However, console owners are often left to wonder what they're missing out on, as simulation games are very rare outside the PC market. Whether it's due to the complexity of the software, the lack of a standard keyboard (used heavily for many simulations), or simply because there is a lack of demand from console gamers, they really are few and far between. However SimBin, the makers of many PC driving sims such as the GTR racing games, are now making their first console appearance with *Race Pro*. Aimed directly at the hardcore driving fans, this is as true a racing simulation as you'll find on a console. However, this still leaves us with a question – is it actually any good?

SimBin have an excellent pedigree with racing games and the GT games, especially with *GTR 2* which was voted best driving game of 2006 by IGN and Gamespot. The games are uncompromising in their realism and SimBin's devotion to the physics side of racing has gained them a devoted fan base. As you'd expect then, the focus of *Race Pro* is in the physics of racing and SimBin have nailed it as well as any game you've played on a console to date. All of the cars on offer, from the Mini you drive in your first career race, to the Caterham and the Audi R8 and the Aston Martin DBR9, all drive differently to one another, and you can really feel and appreciate the differences between the cars the more you use them. Some are heavier than others, so even at a slower speed you need to brake earlier so you don't overshoot the corner. Some have much better turning circles than others, allowing you to attack corners with a bit more speed than with other cars. Having cars that handle so differently to others will often mean that even on a familiar track you'll spend a fair amount of time re-learning all your braking and turning points as you attempt it in an unfamiliar car. When playing on the Professional difficulty level you also need to be very careful when approaching and leaving bends, as braking too hard will cause your brakes to lock up, and accelerating too early on the way out can easily end up spinning you and cause you to end up facing the wrong way. You'll feel the car starting to slide if you're too quick into or out of a corner, just as you would expect to. Everything about the physics when you're driving is as good as I've experienced in a driving game, and I've played a lot of *Forza* and *Gran Turismo* over the years.

SimBin have taken a slightly different approach to the career than other driving games I've played recently. Rather than simply working through a career by selecting what races you want to take part in, you have to make your way through the career by earning contracts and you have two ways of doing this. You can simply buy out the contract, giving you the opportunity to do the race series associated with that contract. Alternatively you can do a try out, which requires you to beat a set lap time. Should you manage it, you can buy the contract at a vastly reduced price. It makes sense to do this for every contract, as it'll give you a chance to get used to the car you'll be using for that series, and also because the cost of buying the contract outright is so high that you will quickly have no option but to do the try outs if you want to progress further into the career. Your performance in the series, alongside your chosen difficulty level will affect how many credits you are awarded at the end of each contract. Race at the highest level and win all the races and the payout will be much higher than racing at Amateur and coming in 3rd in every race, just as you'd expect.

Also different to games like *Forza* is that as you go through the career you're given no choice over what car to use for a particular series. Before you pick a contract you'll be told what car you'll be using for it, which is the same car that your opponents will be using. This means that each race becomes a real test of skill as you'll have no direct advantage over the competition by having a more powerful car. Before you go through each contract you'll be presented with a choice of 3 difficulties, with additional options for customising the races, with options to turn off assists such as the racing line and ABS, as well as choosing whether you want to include a qualifying session before each race. Should you decide not to have a qualifying session, you'll be assigned a random place on the grid for each race. As previously mentioned you'll start the career in a Mini, and as you progress through the career you'll slowly move onto the more powerful cars such as the Audi and Aston Martin.

To compliment the career mode, you can also take part in various Championship Series, which are also completely customisable, but even more so than the career. You can set the number and difficulty of your AI opponents, how many laps per race, whether you want to have qualifying on, and more. You can also take your racing online, and there is also the somewhat strange Hot Seat racing mode, for 2 people sharing the same console. Rather than split the screen so both people can race at once, you have to play a Hot Seat mode whereby one player will race, and then the other will take over after a set amount of time (which you can select yourself). It's an interesting idea but doesn't work as well in practise as I would have hoped. You'd be better off just doing individual Time Trials and setting goals for each other that way.

So far everything has been positive about the game, but unfortunately there are some problems which stop it being the ideal racing game. While the racing physics are exceptional on the track, they're not quite so good in other ways. Should you go off the track a bit, you'd expect to lose some traction as your wheels start to touch the grass. Not so here apparently, as you can maintain full control and pretty much full speed should you go on the grass a bit. Not as realistic as I would have hoped for, especially when you watch racing and witness cars struggling when they go on the green stuff. Also poor from a physics point of view are collisions, which seem to be fairly random. Some crashes will do nothing but slow you down slightly, while others will send you spinning or even flip your car over. This can occur in some very odd circumstances too. As an example, a misjudgement of a corner meant I slammed into the back of another car doing nearly 100MPH, yet I received no car damage, didn't spin out, nor did the car I hit. I merely slowed down and he carried on. Yet in another race, I was taking a hairpin corner and someone drove into the side of me, probably doing less than 30MPH, and I ended up being flipped over onto my roof. The physics for collisions seem random and inconsistent and although you should obviously not be crashing that often, it does happen and you'd like it to happen with some sort of predictability to the way the cars react.

Another poor point from a racing point of view is that the AI can be overly aggressive at times. On more than one occasion I would find myself going into a corner in first place, only to find that one of the trailing cars would bang into me and try to knock me off course. I even once found myself being intentionally spun by another car on the final bend as I was leading (I watched him move across the track and into my driving line). In almost all forms of racing contact like this would never happen, so I was surprised to see it here in a game intending to be a true racing simulation.

One of the driving aids in the game also brings an annoyance with it. The racing line, which is available on the 2 lower difficulties, will show you the right way to drive around the track for maximum speed, with the line being green to indicate driving as fast as possible, and turning red when you should be braking. It's a common feature in driving games nowadays, but unfortunately the way SimBin have implemented it means it can at times prove to be more a hindrance than anything. In most other racing games, such as Forza, the racing line will change colour depending on your speed. So if you approach a corner too slowly or too quickly, the colour of the racing line will reflect this. This isn't the case in Race Pro. The colour of the line doesn't vary on your speed or the car you're using, so you will often find yourself braking too early for a corner, or if you're using a car that doesn't brake as well, perhaps too late. My assumption for SimBin making the decision to do it this way is to have the line purely as a guide, so that the player has a rough idea of where to brake without holding their hand. In itself it's not a bad idea, however there will be players out there who are used to following the line as they would do in other racing games, and they will likely be very frustrated as they find themselves being overtaken as they hit the brakes too early. I'm sure SimBin could have included an option to make the racing line behave in a way similar to other games, giving the player more choice in the level of assistance they get.

The career side of the game also scores fairly poorly for me. The progression is very linear, and without any real glitz or fanfare as you go through it. Win a race, and you'll be treated to a voice saying "You won the race, very well done" in a somewhat bored tone. That's pretty much it. Complete a series and you'll be presented with a trophy, again with no fanfare or real celebrations. As there are no means of buying cars or choosing what cars to use for any given race, all the money you win is spent on getting new contracts to do more races. It might be a personal thing, but I love the collection aspect of Forza. I loved winning new cars as I won races and series, and I liked being able to choose what car to use for each race. As your car choice in Race Pro is restricted, you're left feeling pushed through the career with no real choice over what you're doing, other than selecting which particular contract you wish to attempt. More variety in the career and the ability to pit different cars against each other would have been very welcome.

The worst negative has to be the online multiplayer. The game doesn't have a lobby system, so if you choose to create and host a race, you'll pick the details of the race (the cars, the track, etc) and then you'll start to race around the track on your own until enough people join your race, and then off you go. The problem is that as people join your race and see that there are only 1 or 2 other people there, they then leave, so the race never gets going. The same is true when you try to join other people's races as well. Despite trying for over an hour, I simply couldn't get into a race at all, and in the end I gave up and went back to the career. If SimBin can patch the game and create a proper lobby system then these problems will obviously disappear, and I can only hope that they will do it at some point. Despite the various problems I found while playing Race Pro, I did find it to be an enjoyable game, and very challenging at the Professional difficulty setting. If you are a fan of racing games, especially the more hardcore types, then you will likely enjoy Race Pro. However, if you're looking for the ultimate driving game then this isn't the game for you. Forza 2 has a deeper and more enjoyable career mode, comparable driving physics, and a much better multiplayer side. Race Pro is good, but unfortunately there are better games out there.

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