

Preview: *Boarder Zone* PC

Developed by: Housemarque (<http://www.housemarque.fi>)

Published by: Infogrames (<http://www.infogrames.net>)

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A quick quiz: name a good skiing/snowboarding simulation for PC. Give up? Well, I can't think of one either. In fact, there are only a couple of them available and, to put it as politely as possible, they all suck. Okay, so snowboarding isn't exactly the most popular genre out there, but doing a little thrashing on your PC could be entertaining if it was done properly. Infogrames hopes to prove this point with *Boarder Zone*: the most comprehensive and advanced snowboarding sim ever to come to the PC.

If nothing else, *Boarder Zone* gets an A for ingenuity. The designers hired on a team of professional snowboarders to oversee their efforts—and the results are quite evident. Everything but the size of your thermal underwear is fully customizable and you'll be stunned by all the options at your disposal. You first select the type of game you want to play (arcade, championship, practice, etc.), then you choose your character and board (each with their own set of strengths and weaknesses), pick the venue, the weather conditions, the time of day, the...well, you get the picture. If all these options seem intimidating, you'll be happy to also see a quick start option that selects everything at random and allows you immediate access to the slopes.

Modes of gameplay include racing, time attack, pipe, big air mode, and one event exhibition. Racing and time attack are pretty self-explanatory—first one to the bottom of the mountain wins. On the pipe and in the one event exhibition, you receive style points for the various tricks you pull off. My personal favorite, big air mode lets you wow your friends with your aerial prowess. Points are awarded for amplitude and technical merit. There are nearly a dozen different stunts to attempt using various keystrokes. Some of the stunts seem downright impossible to pull off, but luckily, there is ample opportunity for improvement. A handy practice mode allows you to hone your skills under the tutelage of the guide rider who'll demonstrate proper form and control. With a bit of experimentation and practice, you'll surely find a game mode that's right for you.

A wealth of options is not Infogrames' only area of concern in *Boarder Zone*. A top-notch physics engine was another area of utmost importance and so far, it seems to be right on the money. Maintaining balance can be very difficult in icy conditions, and it's tough to really get going in the heavy powder. The gameplay engine isn't too forgiving, so if you try to be cute with a stunt during a race, you'll likely find yourself rolling down the hill. This attention to detail will make the game somewhat frustrating at first, but as you improve and begin winning races, the experience will be all the more gratifying.

Aesthetically, *Boarder Zone* is coming along quite nicely. Each character boasts polygon counts near 2300 so animation is as smooth as silk. The environments are equally impressive—featuring everything from ice-covered roads to rustic log cabins. You won't have much time to admire the scenery as you go careening down at speeds upwards of 100 kilometers per hour. The game does a really nice job of portraying the illusion of speed—you'll practically feel the wind in your face. About the only problem with the game thus far graphically is pop-in—and a whole lot of it. Most of the time, this isn't a problem, but occasionally, things appear without much time to react. It's frustrating when you're sailing along with a nice lead, only to be floored by a tree that just appeared. With such detailed backgrounds and characters, a bit of pop-in should be expected, but hopefully Infogrames can improve upon this before the final release.

With a bit of minor refinement, I see a bright future for *Boarder Zone*. The graphics are beautiful, the control is tight and responsive, and the staggering array of gameplay modes will keep even the most experienced thrashers busy for quite some time. On top of all this, the game is just plain fun. It's very easy to pick up and play, but will take a good while to master. That said, there's no excuse for you snowboard fans to be stuck playing lemons like *Extreme Winter Sports* this Winter.