eview by Marc Messer

Title: Virtual Game Station 1.1
Developer: Connectix
Price: $49
Contact Info: http://www.connectix.com/
Genre: PlayStation Emulator
System Requirements: Factory original G3 PowerMac, Mac OS 8.x or later, 10 MB free RAM, 3.5 MB free hard disk space

omebody Had to Do It

How many times have you seen some really cool console game advertised on TV and wished that you could play it on your flashy new G3? There are lots of emulators out there for playing all of those old games, but you want something new, right?. Connectix (online at http://www.connectix.com/), the makers of Virtual PC, heard your anguished cries and went to work. Suddenly, Mac users aren't just limited to the Mac aisle of games! Now we can jump over to the massive library of games available for the Sony PlayStation.

But how well does Connectix' Virtual Game Station (CVGS) really work? What are its limitations? Is it worth spending the money for an emulator rather than just shelling out a little more for the real thing? What's the story with this Sony lawsuit?

hat is the Virtual Game Station?

If you're not familiar with the Sony PlayStation, let me make a single statement: it's the most popular game console on the market today, with a library of over 400 games. Utilizing a 32-bit processor and CD quality sound, all games run from a standard CD to yield an amazing gaming experience. Of course, some think the Nintendo 64 is better, but that's just hogwash (and a little opinion too *wink*). The Virtual Game Station (more info can be found at http://www.virtualgamestation.com/) emulates the PlayStation environment so that you can play many of those same games (about 150, so far) with decent performance on any factory-original G3 Macintosh.

etup

Connectix shows its Mac roots by making installation as easy as possible. After installing new ATI drivers (found on the CD-ROM) and then CVGS itself, you're ready to go. Installation even includes a mini-extension that automatically launches CVGS upon insertion of a PlayStation CD.

ontrols

CVGS is designed for use by one to two players, either in keyboard/game pad or gamepad/gamepad combinations. The Virtual Game Station allows you to customize the buttons for both controls (see graphic below) with an easy-to-understand representation of a PlayStation controller. It recognizes ADB and USB controllers and utilizes Game Sprockets to make setup even easier.

his is actually a pretty nifty feature. Suppose you don't like NHL '99's controls on the PlayStation: because you can assign the buttons to any key or button on your keyboard and gamepad, you can essentially set up the controls the way you like. Ah, the joys of having a Mac!

ame Performance

A list of games that Connectix recommends after thorough testing on an original iMac with 32 MB of RAM can be found on their website at http://www.virtualgamestation.com/games.html . I did a little testing of my own on a Revision-A iMac with 96 MB RAM. I was able to test 11 games: seven were on Connectix' list and four were not. I found all but one of the games from the list to be perfect. Jet Moto 2, Bio Freaks, Rogue Trip, NCAA Football '99, Gran Turismo, and Destruction Derby behaved well in every way. I didn't notice many frame drops (skipping a frame or more of animation — the PlayStation itself does this occasionally as well). Only one of the five games on the list had a problem, Tekken3. Although the game play was smooth, the audio was choppy.

he four games that I tested which weren't on the list were Mortal Kombat 3, Pitfall, Tenchu Stealth Assassins, and Final Fantasy VII. All of them played

great — in fact, I think that games like Tenchu and FF VII played better on the Mac than on my PlayStation due to the enhanced cut scenes. Cut scenes are prerecorded video snippets that are added to the game to give it an enhanced plot. Because the PlayStation uses a CD (capable of handling about 650 MB of data) it allows the programmers to add lots of video to improve the game experience. My Mac, with CVGS, seemed to handle the video better than a real PlayStation with its faster CD-ROM and higher-quality monitor (as compared to a television). CVGS is also capable of displaying movies in more colors than your friendly neighborhood PlayStation.

emory Cards

Sony PlayStations come with two slots for inserting memory cards.

A memory card allows you to save games, replays, and high scores.

The problem is that they get to be pretty expensive. A 15-block card can cost about $10 (games normally need 1-2 blocks to save their data). This becomes even more expensive when games like Gran Turismo ask for 15 blocks to save a race replay and NCAA Football '99 asks for 13 to save your season.

roblem solved. Connectix offers a memory card feature in CVGS that is sure to save your wallet some stress. You can create as many memory cards as you wish and swap them in and out in the preferences window. Each

memory card takes up a measly 125k on my hard disk! With a virtually unlimited supply of memory cards, you should be content to save just about everything! Go ahead, be a digital packrat!

iscellaneous Thoughts From a Game Junkie

There has been a lot of controversy since the CVGS was introduced to the public at Macworld San Francisco in January. Sony is noticeably upset by it, although their reasons are not clear. CVGS is the first commercial emulator of a currently selling console, and though Sony loses money with each PlayStation sold anyway (the real money lies in the sale of games), they don't like giving any control of the platform away to other companies.

Unfortunately for Sony, a court denied them a temporary injunction against the release of the CVGS. To improve security, Connectix has released version 1.1, which helps further prevent the use of illegally-burned games on the CVGS. With decisions like these, Connectix is keeping their product as clean as possible, and that should guarantee you many future updates as they improve performance and compatibility.

lso, in case you haven't read all of the news about this product, it's for factory-original G3 systems only. Why is that? Because even with a high-speed G3 upgrade card in your 603- or 604-based Power Mac, your system is still limited by a slow bus speed. This restricts CVGS performance considerably: since your computer probably doesn't have enough RAM to

load a whole CD into memory, it must constantly access the CD-ROM drive, and to do this it must pass through the bottleneck of a slow system bus; additionally, even RAM access is limited by the speed of the system bus (although this should be less of a problem, since RAM is much faster than any CD-ROM drive) In any case, you'll need a G3 with a speedy system bus to get the job done. While some games may indeed be playable on a G3-upgraded system, what's the point? Connectix has done a good job of creating a base system and discovering what games run well on that. By running the CVGS on unsupported systems, you will have no idea what kind of performance to expect from any game. Besides, why haven't you bought an iMac yet? :-)

he Last Cut Scene

If you already have a G3 Mac and a game controller, you're set. There is no reason that you shouldn't go out and buy this, unless you really want to play a game that isn't on Connectix' list, and you haven't seen it perform under emulation. I was truly surprised with the performance I saw on a little iMac. Isn't it nice to see something else a $1000 Mac can do that a $4000 Windows PC can't? I haven't seen any problems with the Virtual Game Station, aside from the high minimum requirements. Connectix gives you more than you'd think. Because I can't see any reason why a G3 owner should not buy the CVGS, I've got to give it Apple Wizards' highest rating — 5 stars. I'm a PlayStation owner, and having a G3 and a controller is preferable to the real thing in many cases. If only Sony would release a dual shock control for the Mac…

Marc Messer
macjunkie@applewizards.net

http://applewizards.net/