Innovative gameplay powers *Morrowind*

Campanile File Photograph

With excellent architecture and visual gameplay, Bethesda Software's latest RPG, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, is expected to be one of the best games of the year.

BY ANDREW DAVIDSON
Technical Editor-in-Chief

Bethesda Software has taken the computer gaming world in a new direction with its latest game, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, a first-person role playing game with the heart of a classic RPG and the look of a modern shoot-'em-up.

Many gamers have waited years for a game that would provide a world within their own computers. Such a game would not simply have a few levels, each with a slightly different theme, but rather a large and continuous landscape without rules put in place to push the plot forward. *Morrowind* is precisely such a game, with complete open-endedness and the freedom to do essentially anything possible within the physical limits of the in-game world. This game is by no means perfect, but its sheer magnitude and attention to graphical detail make up for any areas in which it lacks.

Morrowind is the third installment to Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* series of large-scale RPGs, but it, unlike its two predecessors, brings true bliss to one's eyes. On a computer equipped with a modern graphics card, *Morrowind* is definitely the most beautiful game to ever hit the market.

Just one of the game's many small towns could earn the game praise, and the fact that its world includes multiple towns with a diverse array of stunning styles is amazing. There are Victorian houses and medieval castles as well as sea-front villas equipped with boats, lakes, rivers and trees, all accessible by simply walking over land, swimming or paying for transport.

From shadows projected onto the floors to the dimming effect following the extinguishing of a candle, *Morrowind*'s lighting is far ahead of any other games' out there, and its weather effects are awesome, to say the least.

When a slight breeze picks up, small details like hanging lanterns and flags swaying slowly in the wind to add realism. As more intense weather comes in, great dust storms can pick up in a surprisingly believable fashion. All the while, the game's ambient lighting changes, and the sky constantly moves at a slow, realistic pace.

The attention to detail in *Morrowind* is unprecedented, with every kind of object one can think of realistically littered across the tabletops and floors of the game's many environments. There are items everywhere and nearly all of them are actually part of the game, rather than simply nonmovable props.

Due to the game's complete freedom, players can choose to become thieves and simply steal any and all of the objects they see — from candles, cups and pillows to swords, shields and books. The choice to become a thief, however, is but one of the limitless paths one can choose to take, as *Morrowind* allows the player to craft his or her own style.

Most RPGs have players earn skill points through finishing required quests or fighting the required monsters, but *Morrowind* does things slightly differently. In *Morrowind*, players choose their own skills by using their characters in any way they see fit; as the character spends time doing something, it naturally masters that skill. To become a great swordsman, one must simply fight a lot of sword battles, and to become the ever-so-popular evil, murderous thief, one must spend time deceiving, stealing and killing.

Morrowind does follow a nonlinear plot line, and goals are attained slowly, but the real fun of the game is the exploration of its vastness. The game itself actually includes thousands of pages worth of text, including information obtained through talking to any of the fellow people found in the game or reading the books. Books are all over, and some rooms have shelves full of them; most books have a few pages of text about any number of subjects related to the in-game world.

Morrowind's greatest downfall is its often-inescapable combat; fighting entails walking up to an enemy and clicking one's mouse, followed by the thrust of one's weapon. A red, blood-like image is conjured up if the hit is a success, but this process goes on for many minutes and throughout the entire process, the player never knows how much damage is being inflicted or how much health the opponent has left. This means that a battle could, in theory, go on forever without the player realizing that nothing is changing. Basically, fighting is quite boring in *Morrowind*, as with most RPGs, and a fastforward button would be a welcome addition.

Considering this game has a good one to two hundred hours of gameplay for true RPG fans, the musical score and sound effects are definitely its most disastrous technical aspect. The score is extremely short and therefore repetitive; after hearing it repeat a few hundred times, the game becomes difficult to play with the sound on. The sound effects are even worse and could have been taken from any generic older RPG; they are simple sounds that repeat over and over again during any of the game's multiple activities.

Morrowind is a great step for the RPG game industry to take as it moves away from the simple number-obsessed *Dungeons and Dragons* root that most RPGs relate to and becomes a much more believable fantasy experience. Its open-endedness allows any player to have a distinct experience with an unlimited replay value. The freedom to be anyone or do anything is what computer games are really about, and *Morrowind* seems to have finally attained this goal.

Morrowind	★★★☆
Developer: Bethesda Software	
Price: $50	
Platform: Windows PC	

LiveJournal's many features make it best on-line diary

BY KELLY THAKER
People Editor

On-line diaries are storming the Internet with the same prevalence that free e-mail providers and web page hosts had a few years ago. Sites such as The Open Diary (**www.opendiary.com**), LiveJournal (**www.livejournal.com**) and Diaryland (**www.diaryland.com**) let users post daily messages in public journals where readers can post either anonymous or signed responses. Part of the purpose of online diaries is to anonymously communicate with others. Users use their diaries for various forms of creative expression, be it art, short stories or stream-of-consciousness rants. However, since the diaries are in the public domain, diary services forbid the use of objectionable material and reserve the right to delete or archive members' diaries.

On-line diaries rely heavily on HTML, and users have the option of inputting HTML tags to format text, change background and font colors and include graphics and hyperlinks in the text area of their diaries. Diary services guarantee anonymity, at most revealing a user's name and location. In fact, The Open Diary prevents users from revealing identification information by deleting diaries .

The Open Diary

The Open Diary, founded in 1998, claims to be the first on-line diary. Its main page displays a list of recent entries, links to randomly-picked diaries and responses to its "Theme of the Week" prompt. The Open Diary diaries are book-like journals that show one entry per page. A table of contents lists entries by title and date. There is also an entry calendar displaying entry titles according to the day the entries were posted. A menu shown while members are logged on lets them read notes by time, entry or author and also lets users search all of the site's diaries by username. Users can also keep lists of favorite diaries or view a list of the 50 most recently updated diaries. Additionally, users can nominate diaries for "Reader's Choice," which the site will then recommend to readers.

Open Diary members can specify their diaries as being either public, meaning it is available to all site users, or private, allowing only the author to read entries. The site also provides e-mail accounts for members. The diaries can be downloaded and run off-line as well as on-line. The Open Diary focuses more on letting members read others' diaries than on making diary-writing fun. The site's visuals are somewhat boring, especially since the diary pages have a fixed layout. The site also posts impersonal, intrusive ads individual diary entry pages. Most are banner ads, but a new ad features a car that drives around the page before a flash of light obscures the page completely and the ad comes up in a separate window. Because the free diary site is losing money, they post the ads to generate revenue; however, it is a bad choice to post them on individual entry pages.

LiveJournal

LiveJournal requires new signups to supply an entry code before creating a free diary, and this code must be obtained from a current member of LiveJournal. According to its creators, this helps preserve the site's philosophy and keep the LiveJournal community small.

Once a user enters a code, LiveJournal creates a scrolling weblog-style journal that displays up to 20 entries per page. Each diary is linked to an entry calendar and to recent entries of those listed as friends in the owner's profile. Users also pick out signature graphics to help identify authors of entries in shared journals and of notes left on others' journals. The LiveJournal template includes fields that show the author's current mood and musical selection, and users can also pick a mood icon, similar to a smiley, to display in the corner of the text area. Some of these mood icons are animated. There are a few different templates to choose from and many combinations of text and background color. LiveJournal's many options make it more exciting to use than The Open Diary, but it also tends to be less serious, perhaps because the weblog format tempts users to post shorter entries than they would on a diary with only one entry per page. Poetry and serious writing are more likely to be found in Open Diary entries, whereas many LiveJournal entries just contain rants, graphics and links.

LiveJournal's journal pages are more attractive, though, and unlike with Open Diary, updating a LiveJournal doesn't feel like a chore. Like The Open Diary, LiveJournal can easily be downloaded.

Diaryland

Diaryland is the most HTML-reliant of the three diary services. On setting up diaries, members are instructed in how to set up a template and change background and font color using HTML. This diary includes an extensive optional profile, but like Open Diary members, Diaryland members can choose to keep their diaries private. Users can include graphics, links and even guest books in their journals — Diaryland doesn't let readers post comments on individual entries, but recommends guest books as a substitute. Diaryland links members to their friends' diaries through a buddy list and to communities through diary rings. There's also a "notify list," which lists frequent readers whom a diary owner can notify by e-mail when a journal is updated. Diaryland members can also chat with each other in chat rooms the site sets up. Diaryland's font choices make its entry pages look somewhat like a Hallmark card, which can be annoying. It is also a letdown that one must include a guest book to receive notes. Diaryland has fewer template options than LiveJournal and no gimmicks like mood icons or identification graphics, and these deficiencies count as points against it.

On-line diaries provide a forum for those seeking self-expression or just looking for advice. They can be attached to personal web pages; many web sites include technology, similar to that of LiveJournal and The Open Diary, which is known as blog or adaptive path technology. This can also be used to update web sites. Free on-line diaries give users a fun and easy way to express themselves to a mass audience without the risks of identification. They also allow members to pass around information anonymously, to entertain a large audience and to get feedback from a global community. LiveJournal achieves this most effectively, as it is more popular than Diaryland and equally, if not more, popular than The Open Diary, and because it includes more options than the other two, LiveJournal's online diary is more fun to use than Diaryland's or The Open Diary's.

Online Diaries	
The Open Diary:	★★☆☆
LiveJournal:	★★★☆
Diaryland:	★★☆☆