the digital life

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BITS & BYTES

Nokia gets smart

Nokia's latest entry into the smartphone market offers the best of both worlds with a touch-sensitive screen and a slide-out qwerty keyboard. The N900's 3.5-inch screen is very responsive and the keyboard lets you type messages, tweets or status updates quickly. The downside of having both is the added weight (181g) and thickness (1.6cm) of the device. The N900, which is due for release next month, also runs a new Maemo operating system that makes it easier to multi-task and browse the web. For nearly all of its functions the N900 needs to be held in landscape mode like a laptop, but it can be flipped sideways to make calls.

■ **$899 from www.nokia.com.au**

Innovative SLR

Ricoh has a new way to shrink the SLR camera with this unique camera system. The GXR arrives in two parts: the camera body and the rectangular lens unit that also houses an image sensor and processor. If you don't like using this camera's 25-72mm lens and 10-megapixel processor, you can slide it out and swap it for another, such as the 50mm lens with 12.3-megapixel processor. Built-in features include a popup flash, tilt indicator, manual mode and light sensitivity up to 3200 ISO for photos in dimly lit rooms. Not for beginners, but a truly creative creation.

■ **Ricoh GXR is $999 with A12 lens from Ricoh on 1300 363 741 or tasco.com.au**

PS3 glitch repaired

A worldwide online meltdown that hit Sony's PS3 game consoles last week was caused by a date-related software glitch. Sony said yesterday the machine's internal clock incorrectly recognised 2010 as a leap year, severing millions of users' connection to the PlayStation online service across the planet. If the time displayed is still incorrect, Sony says users can adjust the settings manually or via the internet.

New networks keep LAN alive in Cairns

LAN is not a forgotten artform just yet, writes our resident gamer ROB FARQUHAR

BEFORE broadband connections were widely and cheaply available to the public, playing "real-time" games (where players act simultaneously instead of taking turns) over the internet was almost impossible.

Instead, gamers would hire school halls and community centres, link their PCs up directly via a local area network and hold a gaming party.

Even modern broadband hasn't dulled the popularity of LAN parties.

Internet gaming is still subject to synchronisation delays ("lag") and drop-outs due to maintenance issues. Being virtually lag-free, LAN gaming allows players to compete with each other properly.

The benefits of LAN parties are numerous.

Playing with opponents in the same room encourages good sportsmanship, a state of mind often discarded when the only contact with other gamers is via microphone or keyboard.

In addition, a little friendly competition encourages gamers to indulge their creativity via the hobby of "case modding."

The goal is to transform dull, off-the-shelf CPU cases into painted, glowing confections that would look at home on the streets of *The Fast & The Furious*. This requires that gamers learn and employ practical skills such as metalworking.

A hot case can score major bragging rights.

LAN parties have birthed gaming tournaments, which, with the right equipment, can be fantastic spectator sports.

Dedicated gaming TV channels run in South Korea, the spiritual home of professional gaming, and US outfit Major League Gaming streams video of its quarterly Pro Circuit tournaments, complete with audiences, hosts and commentators, live across the web.

The recent flourishing of game retail stores in the Far North is certain evidence of hobbyists in the region.

Yet in the past few years, the local LAN party scene has taken a downward turn.

The FNQ Gamers' Lounge, a website dedicated to organising LAN parties, and Sanity Computers, a Trader's Lane store that supported LAN parties and case modding, both shut down last year.

But Angelo "DJ A.N.G" Saliba still believes the Far North has LAN potential.

The turntable maestro who helped bring Cairns' urban music scene to the public eye with Stomp the Nard is also a long-time gamer who has organised massive events in southern states.

"I was an admin for Big Day In in Melbourne, which has the record for the largest LAN in the southern hemisphere," Angelo said.

The 2002 event boasted 1000 gamers.

In 2008, Angelo set up CairnsLAN.com, a web forum dedicated to gathering Far North Queensland gamers together and re-igniting the passion for LAN parties.

Despite early setbacks, Angelo reckons it still has life in it yet.

"I'm still very keen to work towards a LAN gaming event ... even starting from 50 players onwards," he said.

When asked what establishing a thriving LAN party scene in the Far North would take, Angelo replied: "50 regular gamers, sponsors, a venue and someone with lots of network cable. It's still within reach."

■ **If you want to play LAN games in Cairns, head to www.cairnslan.com and get involved.**

GAME ON!

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Dante's Inferno

(PS3/360 - Electronic Arts)

WHEN planning a video game, classical literature isn't the first source material that comes to mind.

For centuries, the Western concept of the afterlife has been framed by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which terrified and enraptured people with its journey through the lands of the dead.

After all, wandering through bleak environments and simply talking to suffering people doesn't sound like engaging video-game material.

Then Visceral Games and Electronic Arts came along, adding an action premise and some poetic licence to create the game *Dante's Inferno*.

While it is a visually striking tour of Hell itself, the gameplay feels derivative, like a weaker version of *God of War*.

This repetitive quality, combined with significantly flawed combat, keeps the game from being a truly great experience.

At its core, the story of *Dante's Inferno* is about a man's fight to save the woman he loves.

Dante is a young crusader who becomes disenchanted with war and returns to his fiancée, Beatrice, in Florence. When he arrives, he finds his house destroyed and Beatrice lying dead outside. Even worse, as he approaches, Lucifer appears and steals away her soul, dragging her screaming into the depths of Hell.

Dante chases them through the circles of Hell, trying to save his love before she is lost forever. He faces his own sins and mistakes before a final showdown with the fallen angel.

Dante's Inferno takes a bold, visually impressive take on a literary classic and adds in an intriguing action focus to create a different kind of action title.

Unfortunately, some derivative combat sequences and a shallow combo system prevent the title from becoming a truly great experience.

The ending is obviously setting up a fully-fledged series, but *Dante's Inferno* suffers from unoriginal gameplay features that action fans have seen before, which keeps it from making its true mark.

■ **Read the full review by Jeff Haynes online at www.ign.com**

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