



LIFELIKE: iRACING REPLICATES EVERYTHING FROM THE CAR'S COCKPIT TO THE TRACK'S SURROUNDINGS IN NEARLY EXACT DETAIL.

## IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

WHAT'S IT LIKE BEHIND THE WHEEL OF A SPRINT CUP CAR? FANS CAN FIND OUT WITH IRACING, THE ULTRA-REALISTIC NASCAR SIMULATION GAME

On a Tuesday in April, Dale Earnhardt Jr. was going three wide on the high banks of Talladega Superspeedway. But he wasn't racing alongside his usual NASCAR compatriots. Instead, he was tangling with Brad Davies of Wachula, Fla., and John Gorfinsky of Manasquan, N.J.

Welcome to the world of iRacing, a simulation program (or "sim," in gamer shorthand) that is so realistic, some NASCAR drivers use it to keep their skills sharp during the off-season.

iRacing membership numbers 20,000 people, who compete in simulations of 17 different racing series.

As it has grown, iRacing has offered two key benefits for NASCAR, which is an official partner and sanctions the top-level NASCAR iRacing.com Series World Championship. First, the game has helped the sport connect with its fans. "Everyone has tossed a baseball or shot hoops," says iRacing founder Dave Kaemmer. "But very few

people have driven a race car. This gives them the chance to understand just how much skill it takes to drive a Sprint Cup car in the draft at Talladega."

Second, iRacing has helped NASCAR gain notice abroad. Roughly 40% of iRacing's users live outside North America, and there are 10 countries represented among drivers in its top series. "A lot of people from England, France and Australia tell us they knew nothing about NASCAR," says Tony Gardner, iRacing's president and chief financial officer.

"Then they got into iRacing, and now they're NASCAR's biggest fans."

The sim's roots stretch to the late 1970s, when Kaemmer was a teen-

ager programming his own games. After Kaemmer left his previous company, Papyrus, he started iRacing with John Henry, an avid sim racer who also has ownership stakes in the Boston Red Sox and Roush/Fenway Racing. Less than

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two years after its 2008 debut, iRacing is creating hundreds of daily races online. CFO Gardner expects membership to top 50,000 users in the next few years.

What makes iRacing unique is the incredible detail in both the tracks and the cars. Technicians use a sophisticated laser scanner at the speedways to painstakingly copy the track and its surroundings. It takes an hour to scan just 300 feet. Back at the iRacing studios in Bedford, Mass., programmers and artists use the scans, plus some 5,000 photographs, to re-create a digital image that's accurate to within two millimeters.

The re-creations, which include every bump, turn and tree, are so good that some NASCAR drivers use iRacing to prepare for upcoming races. "Because iRacing is so realistic ... it helps me remember important aspects, like where my braking points are," says Sprint Cup series driver Joey Logano.

Perhaps no driver has embraced iRacing like Earnhardt, who volunteered to be an unpaid consultant. "Ninety-nine percent of the time it mirrors real life," he said in an interview last year.

Well, almost. Earnhardt finished third in the online Talladega race. In the real world, that wouldn't happen against guys who've never driven a Sprint Cup car. But in the virtual world of iRacing, anything's possible. —Mark Yost