

# The Big Chill

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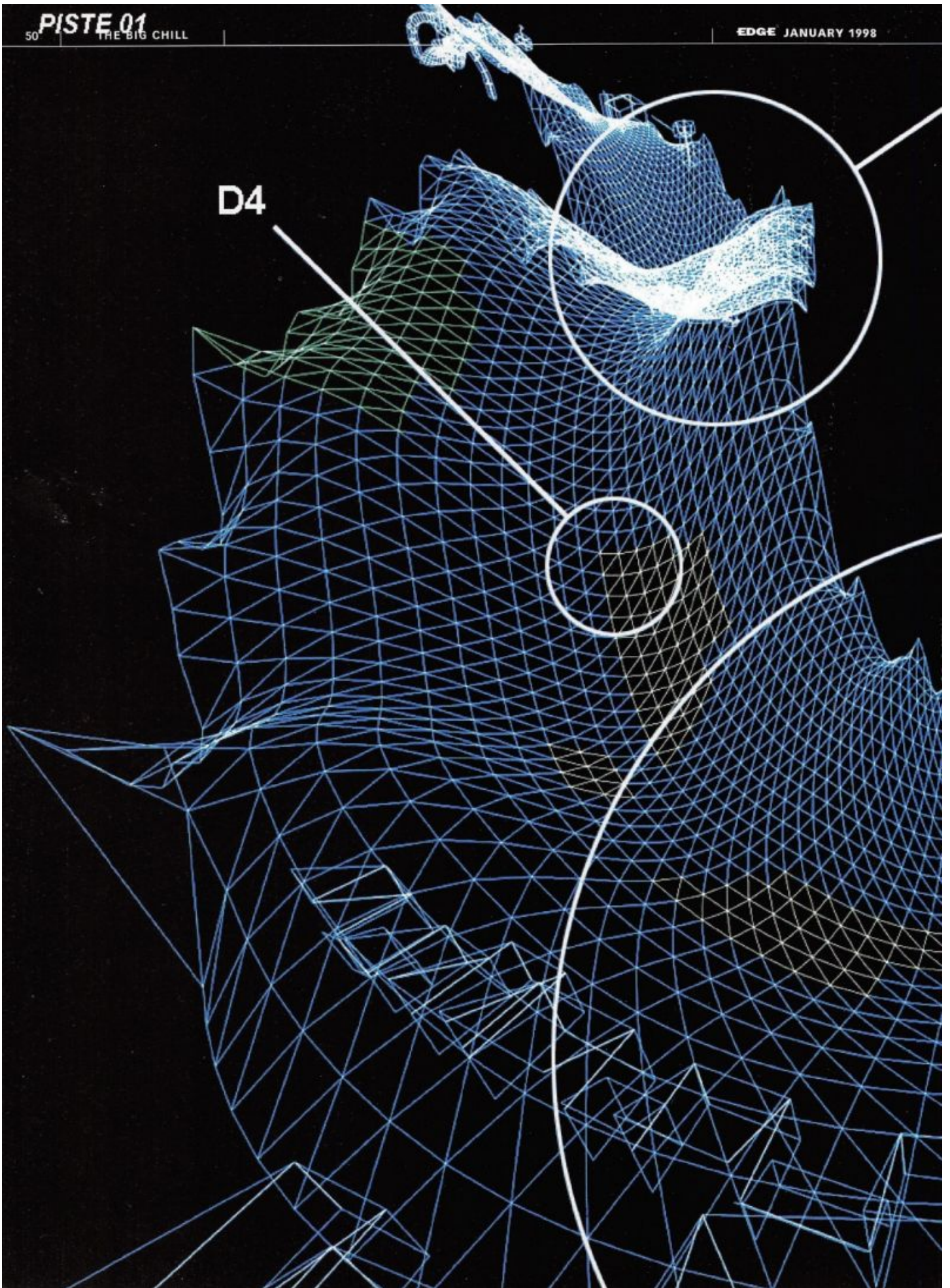
Sujet de l'article : Video Games Show (\*)

Un article sur les jeux de sport d'hiver.

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# THE BIG CHILL

The snowy season has brought with it a slew of winter sports titles, from a new Nintendo 64 title from the team behind *WaveRace* to what seems like a hundred and one other variations on the theme. Edge takes to the slopes...

As expected, Nintendo's *1080° Snowboarding* (aka *Vertical Edge Snowboarding*) has shot to prominence within its genre at such speed that its competitors have found the track melting before them. Early impressions of this, the product of a crack team of NCL coders (see overleaf), are of a game that sets new standards for control and visuals within the winter sports genre, at least on home formats. But *1080°* is just one event within the massive renaissance of a long-dormant genre.

Those with long memories (and maybe grey hair) will recall previous attempts at bringing snow sports to various computer systems, stretching all the way back to *Horace Goes Skiing* on the ZX Spectrum. While the antics of Horace were pretty risible, American developer Epyx created several credible winter and summer *Olympics* titles for 8bit systems, interpreting, in many different fashions, the classic Olympiad format set down by Konami's seminal *Track & Field*. The current resurgence includes two new winter *Olympics* titles, both utilising the time-honoured *Tracks & Field* play system. As previewed in E53, *Nagano Winter Olympics '98* and *Winter Heat*, from Konami and Sega respectively, will cover all major formats between them – except for the PC. The exclusion of the PC from the scene is curious, given its massively popularity in America, although Sega's recent penchant for PC versions of its arcade titles could lead to *Winter Heat* appearing on that format.

*Winter Heat* is primarily an arcade game, as was Sega's summer *Olympics* title *Decathlete*. But while both of those games use the ST-V board, Sega announced a new downhill skiing game at JAMMA that uses the Model 3 board to build superlative scenery. In many ways *Ski Champ* is a back-to-basics title, returning to the style of game that kickstarted the current interest in the genre, as seen in Namco's *Alpine Skier* and *Alpine Surfer*. These were the first to place skiing action in true 3D settings, and followed the ongoing trend for arcade machines to become more like fairground rides. Control was restricted to no more than pushing either two 'skis' or a 'board' left or right. It took a home game, albeit a lacklustre one, *Cool Boarders*, to show the way forward.

The arrival of the two *Olympics* titles was to be expected. This winter's event is to be held in Nagano, Japan, so it was inevitable that at least one of the major Japanese developers would base a game around it. The real core interest (in terms of the wider picture for the games industry) is the current crop of snowboarding games, for they show a strong link between videogaming and another popular youth activity. When *Cool Boarders* arrived, it allowed PlayStation owners to simulate something they did (or aspired to do) themselves, a facet few other genres could offer. Gamers undoubtedly want to drive F1 cars, as sales of Psygnosis' licensed title illustrate, but snowboarding games let fans of the sport integrate the PlayStation into a lifestyle that dictates the style of everything from clothes to music. Whether *1080°* has arrived too late to do the same for the N64, given snowboarding's waning 'lifestyle' credibility, remains to be seen... ▶

## 1080° Snowboarding



Aside from the obvious magnetic effect *1080° Snowboarding* will have on snowboarders, the game is bound to attract fresh followers to Nintendo's cause. Few would dispute that as games have become more visually accomplished, wider society has found it easier to relate to the videogaming experience...

◀ This latest of the current crop of snowboarding games stands a good chance of setting the benchmark. Having played the 80% complete version of *1080°* at Nintendo Space World, it's already clear that it sets new standards for play mechanics and graphical finesse, significantly upping the ante, not only in the burgeoning snowboarding arena, but among racing games as a whole.

Recent attempts at creating snowscapes on home formats have yielded some fairly angular results. But by using a development of the engine that gave *WaveRace* an edge – even over similarly themed arcade machines – Nintendo's team has built smooth, believable landscapes with fast, winding courses that draw far into the distance while masking pop-up. Just as in *WaveRace*, the N64's controller is perfectly suited to the dynamics of snowboarding, resulting in an intuitive and rewarding level of control.

Although the tracks are currently limited in number, the finished game should at least match *WaveRace* on this count.

Detail, both in the courses and environments, is impressive. While most recent titles using lens flare have elicited a 'not again' reaction, the almost blinding effect in *1080°* has wowed onlookers. Also of note is the trail left behind the boards, coupled with the most realistic snow flurry yet. It would seem NCL's programmers are finding genres in which their machine is visually untouchable – for the time being.

As yet, *1080°* has only four characters to choose from, although the final version will include more. Early impressions are that the fantastically subtle control nuances of *WaveRace* have survived the transition. Much anticipated? *Edge* already has new pairs of Oakleys on order...



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NCL's game is easily the most visually accomplished snowboarding title yet, boasting lush scenery drawn suitably far into the distance (above), well-implemented snow trails (top right) and a swift twoplayer mode (above right)

## An interview with Giles Goddard

Entertainment Analysis & Development, NCL, Japan

It is always unusual for western programmers to be found working under the corporate auspices of a Japanese games developer. And few come more corporate than Nintendo's internal development division in Kyoto. **Edge** recently spoke to **Giles Goddard**, an ex-Argonaut programmer now living in Japan, and one of the lead programmers on *1080° Snowboarding* – the company's flagship snowboarding title recently unveiled at Space World '97.

**Edge:** So who's working on the *1080°* team?

**Giles Goddard:** To be honest, it's a bit of a mish-mash, really. There are two programmers – myself and Colin Reed – and we both worked on the Super FX SNES title *Wild Trax* [aka *Stunt Race FX*] for Argonaut Software. I also worked on *StarFox*. We have a designer, who worked on the *WaveRace* project, and our director came from Namco where he worked on *Tekken 2*. Shigeru Miyamoto is the producer.

**Edge:** When is it scheduled for completion?

**GG:** Our deadline is February 1998, and we should be able to make it on time. As of today, all we have to do is put in three more characters and add some more maps and then we're pretty much done.

**Edge:** Everyone seems very impressed with the way it looks – can you tell us a little about what's going on under the hood?

**GG:** The 3D engine is, of course, the original N64 engine, but then we're doing various interesting tricks. For example, the characters are skinned, so there are no joints between the polygons. Also, all the character animations are interpolations between animation and inverse kinematics. So, basically, when your character hits something in the game his body is modified according to what you hit, from what direction, and at what speed.

**Edge:** Are you using motion-captured animation in the game?

**GG:** At the moment, there's no motion capture in it, no. But the motion is really smooth because we interpolate between frames and we have the inverse kinematics in there – so it has that motion capture feel.

**Edge:** To what extent is it a snowboarding simulation? Are the tricks in the game based on real snowboarding tricks, and to what extent is the interaction between the snowboard and the course terrain based on real-world physics?

**GG:** As far as the tricks are concerned, the animation needs quite a bit of tweaking and the tricks themselves are a bit dodgy at the moment. But as for the board dynamics, we basically modelled a real board with all the edge friction and underside

friction and so on. So, yes, the game does all of the applications to replicate the real physics of a real board. So when you're skating down in the game and, say, catch the edge of your board down a tree trunk, the game handles all of the calculations in realtime. It's not using any hardwired solutions or anything like that.

**Edge:** To what extent have you sacrificed simulation accuracy for arcade thrills and gameplay?

**GG:** Only a little; it definitely comes down on the simulation side of the fence. But having said that, there are certainly a great deal of little fudges in there that make it more of an enjoyable arcade-style experience.

**Edge:** Will there be a lot of features in the final version?

**GG:** There will be six or seven courses, plus a training course and a half-pipe for stunts. There will be seven or eight characters and a twoplayer mode.

**Edge:** What do you make of the other snowboarding games in development for N64? Are you worried at all?

**GG:** Um, I can't really talk about that. Let's just say that we haven't seen too much competition. We're not sweating too much.

**Edge:** How long have you been working on the project at NCL?

**GG:** We started work in April or May of this year.

**Edge:** So this is only seven months' work? That's pretty impressive...

**GG:** We're very fast workers [smiles].

**Edge:** How did you get started at Nintendo? And how difficult is it for a western game maker to be accepted in Japan?

**GG:** It takes a lot of luck, really. The first time I went to Nintendo I was working for Argonaut Software on *StarFox* and I suppose they don't go around freely employing gaijin programmers, or indeed any other programmers not straight out of the Japanese universities. But it's a matter of being at the right place at the right time, and of getting a reputation for yourself. Then, once they trust you, you're in. And from that point on they'll continue to look after you, regardless of the quality of what you produce. It's a Japanese thing.

**Edge:** Do you snowboard yourself?

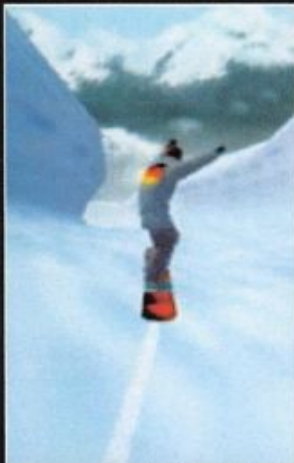
**GG:** Yes, I'm a snowboarder, and a couple of the artists are snowboarders, and what we're most enthusiastic about is the feel of the game. We know that this is what we've got to get right, and that this is the most important thing. We're trying to make it as real as possible, as opposed to going for the classic, cute, Nintendo look. You can even tell by the music that this isn't your average Nintendo game...



## Twisted Edge Snowboarding

◀ Of all the current contenders, Boss Game Studio's *Twisted Edge Snowboarding* looks to offer the most serious challenge to Nintendo's *1080°*. According to Boss's technical director **Rob Povey**, the main difference is that 'we're far more stunt-oriented than they are.' Performing tricks in the game increases speed, so the onus is on the player to trade off points against potential risks.

Having produced *Top Gear Rally* for the N64, Boss already has experience of the console. *Twisted Edge*, even at this stage, is looking remarkably refined, with track designs that include suspension bridges, falling trees and an underground river section. Multiple camera angles and play modes are also featured in the game. Whatever else, expect a release that avoids *1080°* like the plague.



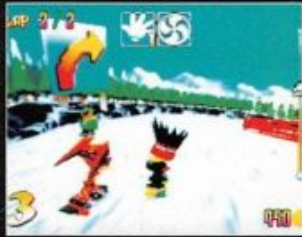
## Snow Racer

While others have focused on either snowboarding or skiing, *Snow Racer* (PC/PS) covers both. Based around traditional Olympic events, including Downhill, Giant Slalom and Ski Jumping, players are able to select characters from nine different nationalities. Although all characters can compete in every event, some will be naturally more adept at certain disciplines than others.

Developed in France by codeshop Power and Magic, *Snow Racer* looks fairly impressive, although polygon glitching in the PS version is currently a problem. Some stages take place at night, an unusual and promising feature. Expect more in the final version, including neat light effects and massively exaggerated jumps. As with its contemporaries, *Snow Racer's* release will coincide with the Nagano Olympics.



Some stages take place at night, an unusual and promising feature. Expect more in the final version, including neat lighting effects



## Snobow Kids

While others have tried to create semi-simulations of the snow sports, Atlus has disappeared off at a tangent with its game, *Snobow Kids*. The game is very Japanese in its styling and content, and it's uncertain yet whether or not it will be picked up for a western release. However, *Edge* was surprised to learn that Shigeru Miyamoto rated it as one of his favourite thirdparty Nintendo 64 titles at Space World (although some would say his choice was rather limited).

*Snobow Kids* is a light-hearted production, featuring squat characters and some very off-piste action.

As these screenshots show, certain tracks feature no snow whatsoever, while the various

modes include 'Trick Game' and 'Speed Cross'.

The inclusion of grass-only tracks implies that the developers have tried to expand beyond the limits of the genre. Atlus has also included support for four players and RumblePak, and will be making *Snobow Kids* one of the first within its genre available with a pre-Christmas release (in Japan). Expect more on this unusual title soon.

The control system is currently far too simple, with only jumping and braking buttons at the player's disposal



## Snow Speeder

Coming from Genki, developer of the underwhelming *Multi Racing Championship*, *Snow Speeder* is the least-promising N64 snowboarding title. A Japanese release is pencilled in for March, with other markets to follow, but considering the legal gravitas of the 'Star Wars' brand, a name change is expected before it is released in the west.

Genki has re-used the *MRC* graphics engine, which will undoubtedly put *Snow Speeder* at a visual disadvantage

when pitched against its rivals. In addition to this handicap, the control system is currently far too simple, with only jumping and braking buttons, and Genki has not yet decided if the game will focus on racing, tricks, or both. However, a twoplayer mode has been included – though it must better the poor quality of *MRC's*, or *Snow Speeder* will fall way short of the mark. As things stand, *Edge* doesn't envy Imagineer having to promote this game against the competition. ▶

# Ski Champ

Originally announced at JAMMA, *Ski Champ* is the latest game from Sega's AM1 arcade division. It is also the first game from AM1 to use the Model 3 chipset, and features some truly spectacular scenery. At one point a train races down the mountain side in a demonstration of pure processing power – one that the current crop of domestic videogame formats cannot hope to compete with.

Other neat touches include wind whipping through the jackets of the characters, and an avalanche that tumbles towards the course during play.

Additionally, players will be able to choose different paths through the courses, in much the same style as Namco's *Rapid River*.

*Ski Champ* is purely a skiing game, featuring a full-size cabinet that accurately provokes a sensation of involvement in the action. But given AM1's past expertise in creating sports games, it's hardly surprising that *Ski Champ* passes muster. Although Namco has slid down these slopes before with considerable flair,

*Ski Champ* is enough of a step forward to gather a significant following. **E**



## More than just boards and skis...



In a similar fashion to its stablemate, *Decathlete*, *Winter Heat* will inevitably appear on the Saturn. Gameplay is less complex than Konami's...



... *Nagano Winter Olympics '98*, which has been developed by separate teams for PlayStation and Nintendo 64. Both are very competent versions

Previously featured in E53, Konami's *Nagano Winter Olympics '98* and Sega's *Winter Heat* focus on the upcoming Olympics in Japan. Konami's game has been developed (by separate teams) for the PlayStation and N64, while *Winter Heat* employs the Saturn-friendly ST-V arcade board. Both titles are equally promising, although *Winter Heat* lacks snowboarding events, which is curious given the current popularity of the pastime both in Japan and the rest of the world. **E**