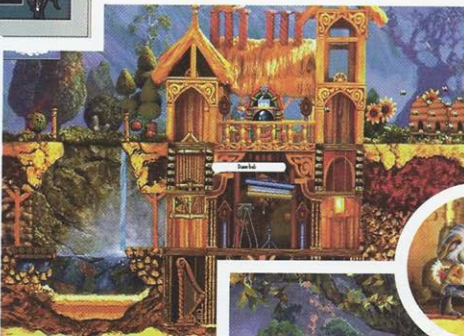
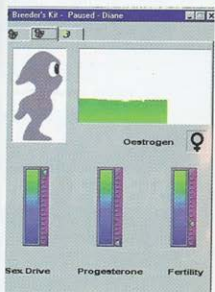


The first artificial life game is about to hit the market — are you ready to start breeding your own family of virtual pets?

Creatures



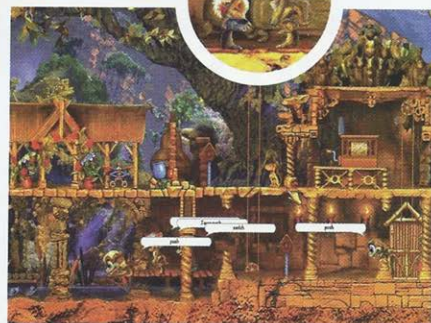
To keep track of each of your Norns, there are a variety of control panels. Some panels are responsible for keeping track of health, others enable you to administer medicine, others help you keep track of heritage



The world of the Norns isn't very large, but it is extremely detailed

Format: **PC CD-ROM**
 Publisher: **Mindscape**
 Developer: **Millennium Interactive**
 Release Date: **June 1997**
 Origin: **U.K.**

As profiled in NG 23, Millennium Interactive's *Creatures* is startlingly different. It could be argued that it is less a game than a small scale genetic experiment disguised as entertainment. *Creatures* is the first commercial release of artificial life technology to hit the market, beating out Anark's *Galapogos*, which has suffered some delays. The game revolves around a species of undeniably cute creatures called Norns, which bear a more than passing resemblance to Joe Dante's Gremlins. The player's task is to first hatch the Norns then attempt to teach



Teaching your Norns nouns and verbs is key to controlling their behavior; communication proves to be of prime importance in *Creatures*

and guide them through their two-dimensional world, known as Albia. The underlying mechanics of the system model the complex interactions of each Norn's individual body chemistry and neural networks — each Norn learns his or her own behavior and ways of interacting with the world and each other, and each Norn is unique.

Every copy of the game comes with a disc containing six genetically unique eggs, three male and three female. The player's first goal will naturally be to

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The greenhouse is where Norns can get food. Carrots and lemons are the mainstay of a Norn diet and help nourish the critters to get through the rigors of life

Players can influence the Norns' behavior by rewarding them (through tickling) or punishing them (by a sharp slap on the rear end)

teach the curious newborn to talk so that it can tell what's on its mind.

This is made easier by the inclusion of a "learning machine" which displays a rudimentary vocabulary and en-

courages the Norn to learn through repetition.

Once basic communication is established, a rather patient process of instruction can begin, although each Norn is perfectly capable of learning on its own. Players can influence their behavior by rewarding (through tickling) or punishing (by a sharp slap on the rear end) the Norns as they see fit. Exactly how well a given Norn takes to instruction depends on the individual Norn — during one session, an especially curious young female became so fascinated by a set of elevators that she spent an hour going up one and down the other, totally ignoring everything else, including the need to eat and sleep — but with enough perseverance players can gain some

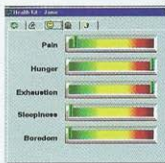
level of control through simple reinforcement. The more ambitious players can take even more drastic measures, introducing stimulants and herbs that can affect everything from energy level to sex drive.

As successive generations of Norns develop — they do, after all, breed, and the offspring are a genetic combination of their parents plus some random mutations — older Norns can teach younger Norns, and groups of Norns can interact in complex and unpredictable ways. Albia even includes a rival species of sorts, the Grendels, which can attack the hapless Norns, steal their food, or give them diseases (although according to beta testers on the Web, it is apparently possible to crossbreed Grendels and Norns, creating a hybrid called Grenorns, whose characteristics are, at press time, open to speculation). In all, the Norn life cycle lasts 10 to 15 hours, at which point, they grow old and die.

Especially interesting generations of Norns can be exported from the game and posted to Usenet and World Wide Web sites for other *Creatures* devotees to download and add to their own worlds. Millennium itself has even set up a Web site with a "weekly six-pack" of Norn eggs for hatching and breeding.

Creatures isn't your average game. The satisfaction is in guiding a virtual being through its life and teaching it to behave how you wish — you can breed a generation of do-gooders or sociopaths. It may not be for everyone, but as a harbinger of artificial life products to come, it deserves a place in the sun.

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These panels show the genetic fingerprint of your Norn and its current status



The learning machine (above) is a useful tool for teaching young Norns basic verbs. Cleanliness is next to Godliness for the Norns. Showers are provided for their use (left)