rating

The power of life

CyberLife introduces the latest word in the digital pet craze
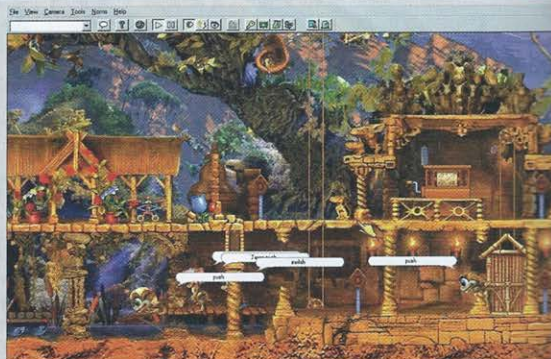
Creatures
Publisher: **Mindscape**
Developer: **CyberLife**

First off, it is doubtless that there are those who wouldn't even consider Creatures to be a game at all. There's no clearly defined goal and very little in the way of conflict. However, while this may be true, it also exists solely to provide entertainment, so what else would one call it? Whatever the category it eventually gets pigeonholed into, however, the fact remains that Creatures, which comes on a PC/Mac hybrid disc, is one of the most unique titles to come along in several years and well deserves all the attention it can get.

The idea is similar to the Tamagotchi and other digital pets. The "player" hatches, then raises a species of creature called Norns: cute, fuzzy, anthropomorphic beings who resemble Gizmo from the Gremlins movies. They chirp and burble in nonsense tones, and while some people may be put off by their calculated saccharine design, they are, nevertheless, almost painfully cute and appealing. The game disc comes with an initial batch of six Norn eggs, three male and three female, each of which has its own unique "genetic" blueprint, which governs everything from appearance to intelligence to temperament.

Players can interact with their Norns by using an onscreen cursor but can't ever control them directly. Instead, Norns must first be taught a series of simple words and phrases — initially through the use of a "teaching machine" that's helpfully provided near the hatchery — then led

Creatures' Norns may be overly cute to some, but once a player gets a good little family (herd? flock?) going, it's difficult to resist playing with them like real pets

through their surprisingly rather expansive world of Albia, being given demonstrations of how various things work and getting rewarded (or punished) for their behavior. Eventually, Norns will grow to maturity, mate (through the rather chaste

method of loudly kissing each other), and produce successive generations of genetically unique offspring. Their world even includes a rival species called Grendels, which like to slap Norns around and have a nasty habit of undoing carefully learned lessons in communication and behavior.

This is one of the most ambitious applications of Artificial Life paradigms ever brought to the mass market. While there is some controversy in A-Life circles about whether or not Creatures is "really" artificial life, and whether the designers have cheated in various ways, in the end, it doesn't matter. Some will doubtless find the appeal elusive, but Creatures still offers one of the most obsessive and entertaining experiences anyone can have in front of the computer.
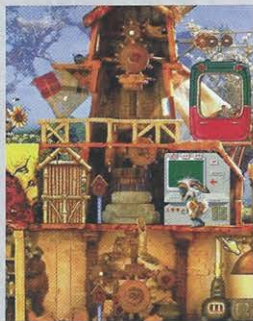
A computer is helpfully provided to aid in teaching Norns language (left). Breeding Norns and trading eggs over the Net have become a serious hobby in Europe since the game was released there last year (right)

Rating: ★★★★★