

Home Sweet Home

Matthew Jones

Buying a house can be one of the most exciting—and most stressful—experiences of your entire life. If you do your homework ahead of time, however, you can avoid some common real estate headaches. The web sites mentioned in this article can help you navigate the complicated process of buying a house.

After you have educated yourself about everything from realtors to home loans, you can check out this month's network resources and games. You can also read about the new products I have found. (See "Product Snapshots" on p. 50.)

WEB SITES

HomeAdvisor (<http://homeadvisor.msn.com>) can answer many of your questions about buying a house. At HomeAdvisor, you can start by deciding whether you are ready to buy a house and by determining your price range. You can also find detailed information about all of the steps involved in buying a house, including preparing an offer and closing a deal. You can then apply for a home loan online, and you can view listings for houses that are on the real-estate market in specific cities throughout the United States. You can even access statistics—such as demographics, school ratings, and crime statistics—for individual neighborhoods within a particular city.

After you have learned the basics of buying a house, Realtor.com (<http://www.realtor.com>) can help you find a realtor who meets your needs. You can search for a realtor by market area, company name, specialty, or keyword. You can then view current listings and contact information for each realtor. In addition, you can register to receive new listings via e-mail. You can also search all listings, and you can get information about financing, insurance, and moving services.

Build.com (<http://www.build.com>) might just convince you to build your dream house or to remodel your existing house, rather than braving the real-estate market. At Build.com, you can access hypertext links to thousands of web sites that cover every aspect of building and remodeling a house. For example, you can visit web sites for architects, contractors, and building materials manufacturers. You can also download building-related software, and you can learn about building-related trade shows in your area. You can even find home-

improvement hints, and you can participate in a home-improvement discussion forum.

NETWORK RESOURCES

If you have a question about networking, Whatis.com (<http://www.whatis.com>) probably has an answer. At first glance, Whatis.com appears to be a typical online reference guide, offering definitions for a variety of networking terms. However, Whatis.com features much more than definitions. For example, you can read about basic networking concepts, such as the relationship between clients and servers, and you can access tutorials that explain how to use e-mail and the Internet. You can even learn how to create a web site, from registering a domain name to designing a home page.

Whatsis.com also allows you to stay up-to-date with emerging technologies and with the latest developments in cyberculture. For example, you can discover that cookies, cupcakes, and crackers are more than afternoon snacks. In addition, you can read reviews of books about networking and the Internet, and you can search online job listings.



Cryo Interactive Entertainment's *Saga: Rage of the Vikings*

STANDALONE GAME OF THE MONTH

Midtown Madness from Microsoft Corp. is a car-racing simulation game. Following in the illustrious footsteps of Microsoft's

popular Monster Truck Madness game, Midtown Madness requires you to wind around curves and weave around obstacles as you try to cross the finish line before anyone else. However, unlike Monster Truck Madness, Midtown Madness takes place in the streets of downtown Chicago. As a result, you must dodge pedestrians, avoid traffic jams, and outrun police cars.

You can choose to drive one of a variety of cars, including the Ford F-350 Pickup, the Ford Mustang GT, the Cadillac Eldorado, and even the new Volkswagen Beetle. Each type of car offers unique advantages and disadvantages. For example, light cars are easier to maneuver when you are turning corners and bypassing obstacles. Heavy cars, however, can smash through obstacles, enabling you to save time by taking a direct route. And although a sports car might be more fun to drive, a sedan allows you to blend in with commuter traffic when the police are chasing you.

Product Snapshots

When I am looking for the latest computer games, I often find new and interesting products. Product Snapshots gives you a quick overview of the most useful products I have found during the last month. (Please note that these are first-look reviews; I have not conducted exhaustive testing.)

HP LASERJET 4050

HP LaserJet 4050 from Hewlett-Packard Co. is the latest addition to the HP LaserJet 4000 family of black-and-white laser printers for the workgroup. HP LaserJet 4050 is faster than its predecessors, printing up to 17 pages per minute. Even at this speed, HP LaserJet 4050 supports an extremely high resolution of 1,200 dots per inch. (To put this capability into perspective, just a few years ago 300 dots per inch was the standard.)

HP LaserJet 4050 includes a 133-MHz RISC microprocessor and up to 16 MB of RAM. HP LaserJet 4050 also includes up to three paper trays, an envelope feeder, and a folder and sealer that folds and seals forms into mail-ready pieces.

In addition, HP LaserJet 4050 includes HP WebJet Admin, a web-based management application that allows you to perform management tasks through a standard web browser. For example, you can use HP WebJet Admin to view the printer's current status and to change the printer's settings.

HP LaserJet 4050 is available in several configurations, one of which is network ready out of the box. Other configurations offer an optional 10/100Base-TX internal print server and an optional infrared port. With the infrared port, users can take advantage of wireless printing from a laptop computer, a handheld computer, or a digital camera.

You can purchase HP LaserJet 4050 through retail channels beginning at the suggested retail price of U.S. \$1,099. For more information about HP LaserJet 4050 or to find the HP reseller in your area, visit HP's web site (<http://www.hp.com>). You can also call 1-800-752-0900.

Midtown Madness supports Windows NT, 98, and 95. You can purchase Midtown Madness through retail channels at the suggested retail price of U.S. \$44.95. For more information about Midtown Madness, visit Microsoft's web site (<http://www.microsoft.com/games/midtown>). You can also call 1-800-426-9400 or 1-425-882-8080.

NETWORK GAME OF THE MONTH

Saga: Rage of the Vikings from Cryo Interactive Entertainment is a real-time strategy game that is similar to Microsoft's Age of Empires and Blizzard Entertainment's Warcraft II. As the game begins, you assume control of a Viking clan, overseeing the process of sustaining and advancing Viking civilization. For example, you direct clan members to gather food,

chop wood, and mine metals. You then can direct clan members to use these materials to construct various buildings and vehicles, such as houses, workshops, and ships.

After Viking civilization begins to progress, you can research various skills and technologies, such as the ability to wield different weapons. You can then create warriors and lead these warriors in a quest to conquer neighboring lands until Viking civilization achieves world domination. To meet this goal of world domination, you must defeat or forge alliances with more than 60 civilizations, such as Dwarfs, Giants, Centaurs, and Trolls. All of the civilizations use unique buildings, tools, and weapons. The civilizations even play their own battle music.

CREATIVE NOMAD

Creative NOMAD from Creative Labs Inc. is a portable digital audio player and voice recorder. Creative NOMAD, which supports the MPEG-1 Layer 3 standard used for audio compression, is smaller than a deck of cards and weighs less than 2.5 ounces. Depending on the version, Creative NOMAD includes either 32 or 64 MB of RAM, which you can use to store MP3 files. You can then listen to these files through the headphones that come with Creative NOMAD.

Creative NOMAD includes a CD filled with MP3 files that you can listen to. (You can download additional MP3 files free from <http://www.nomadworld.com> and from other web sites that offer MP3 files, such as <http://www.mp3.com>.) Creative NOMAD also includes software that you can use to convert music from CDs that you already own into MP3 files, which you can then listen to on Creative NOMAD. In addition, Creative NOMAD includes a docking station. You can plug this docking station into your computer. You can then insert Creative NOMAD into the docking station and download MP3 files directly from your computer to Creative NOMAD.

When you are not listening to MP3 files, you can use Creative NOMAD as a digital voice recorder. The 64-MB version can store up to four hours of telephone-quality voice messages, which you can upload to your computer using the docking station. (According to Creative Labs, the 64-MB version can store up to two hours of music. However, most MP3 files are encoded at a bitrate of 128 to 160 KB, which averages out to only 1 MB per minute of music. Creative NOMAD may be able to store two hours of music if you convert MP3 files at a bitrate of 56 KB, but this bitrate provides poor audio quality.)

You can purchase Creative NOMAD through retail channels at the suggested retail price of U.S. \$169.99 for the 32-MB version and U.S. \$249.99 for the 64-MB version. For more information about Creative NOMAD, visit Creative Labs' web site (<http://www.creativelabs.com>). You can also call 1-800-998-1000 or 1-405-742-6622. ●

You can play Saga: Rage of the Vikings in standalone or in multiplayer mode. When you choose multiplayer mode, you can play against up to seven other people over a network connection or over an Internet connection.

Saga: Rage of the Vikings supports Windows NT, 98, and 95. You can purchase Saga: Rage of the Vikings through retail channels at the suggested retail price of U.S. \$39.95. For more information, visit Cryo Interactive's web site (<http://www.cryo-interactive.com>). You can also call Cryo Interactive in France at +(0)1-44-65-25-65.

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