Hardware Reviews for Sale

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I WAS PLANNING on going to sleep early tonight, and checked my email and a few sites before I went to sleep. Bad move, I am now to0 angry to sleep, so it is time to rant, and get a few things off my chest, all while outing a few dirty internet secrets.

It all comes down to this, the hardware review world is going to hell in a hand basket, and the reasons are money, stupidity, and PR people that are too effective. Low morals on the part of many in the scene are also to blame, but they only contribute to the problem.

One of the nice things about working for The INQ is that you are not only dissuaded from ever signing an NDA, but you are strictly forbidden from doing it. While this may seem like a stupid thing on the surface, it is probably the best thing that can happen to a hardware person. It takes one of the biggest levers away from the unscrupulous PR and industry people. As an aside, I would say that the vast majority of PR people and hardware companies are above the board, good and solid people, but it does not take many to spoil the entire industry.

The no NDA rule pretty much rules out that. The INQ will bring you reviews the second that the products come out, people won't send us things if they know we will scoop everyone else. Fair enough, they are right. This also affords us the ability to tell you about things first if we can find out about them. Things are not handed to us on a silver platter, but there is also no ability for a company to say no. Additionally, the things we find tend not to be spun so hard they warp space around them. Net result, you win, and tend to get the truth, or at least not a slightly reworded press release from us.

Hardware sites are also known to the companies and PR firms to be either docile ass-kissers, or, well, not. The docile ones are the ones you want to use to get a story out, especially if the story is not all that good if measured against the unvarnished facts. The docile sites are the ones that get the sneak peaks, exclusives and perks that few others tend to get. Some are too stupid to do more than reword press releases and swipe slides from PDFs, others are flat out bought. It does not take a genius to figure out which sites fall into which categories.

You notice I said bought. If you have any doubts, let me tell you, the current hardware review site industry is flat out for sale. The higher up you go, the fewer exceptions to the rule there are. Some sites are directly for sale, I am sure you have seen it, it is a hard thing to miss. It works like this, when an NDA expires, there are 10 or so reviews of a new chip, board or widget. Most use the same benchmark set, or at least most of the sites have a fair number of benches in common, it is really hard to avoid a Doom3 bench. 90% of the sites will have a similar result, part A beats part B in commonly used apps, with A winning 80%, B winning 20%.

One site will have the opposite result, and come up with a bunch of new benches, most of which tend to be very curious. Some are games that you wonder why they are included, some are just odd. End result, product B wins by a lot, and goes against the grain, common sense, and good taste. If you are wondering, someone really did just make a lot of money.

The bribery takes several forms, the first is pretty basic, you send a check in with a review. These tend to be the easiest to spot, if you spend $20K or so, you are going to make it pretty good for your product. Sometimes it isn't as blatant, and the site gets to conduct and write the review the manufacturer designed.

The next one is more subtle, you pay us and you get veto rights to a story that we are doing. If you do in essence pay for the story, and then decline to have it published, you don't the money back, but the site owner probably gets a shiny new car. This may seem less harmful, but I think it is more insidious. Closely related is the false separation of the editorial side of the business from the advertising side. The ad side acts as the gatekeeper, but ostensibly has no direct control of the stories. If you want your product in the next roundup, you better have an ad campaign already paid for.

This separation, while it sounds less sleazy, tends to lead to flat out bribes in really short order. I know of several sites who take this route, and it is really laughable how they try to spin this as 'we don't take bribes'.

The industry basically comes down to three things, the stupid, the for sale, and the meek, and combinations thereof. The players on the other side of the hardware reviews all know who is who, and who to go to to get the message they want out, when they want, how they want. That is why our industry is so fundamentally broken, they are always better funded than we are, and usually better organized. The fact that many sites go out of they way to help the bad side of the PR world only makes the corruption easier.

Several sites are shining beacons of abjectly not selling out, and not regurgitating spun information in frankly demeaning ways. They tend to have the hardest time of it, ending up not getting comments from the companies, having to buy their own hardware to review, and worse yet, not getting ad dollars. The sites and people in the industry that stand up sadly don't tend to last.

It couldn't be all that bad, can it? Well yes, it is, and I have witnessed most of it personally, and the rest I have heard from to many trusted sources to disbelieve. It really sucks when someone tries to hand you more cash than you have had in your bank account for the last 6 months, and you have to turn it down. How do I know, I have done it. I have also had more than enough companies with good, honest PR people tell me who is for sale, and the names all center around a small group of sites and people. If I had anyone who was willing to go on the record, I would dearly love to publish names, but the combination of being blacklisted and the inevitable lawsuits are more than enough to cower most people.

If you look, several candidates float to the top of this sewer. Some are the stupid, some are the for sale, some offer nothing more than press releases. Some do rock the boat, and tell the truth even when it is clearly not in their best interest. I feel their pain, having been shut out more than my fair share of times.

So what brought this on? The dual core release today. The two reviews I read, both on major hardware sites, were so flawed it was laughable. The first was an update so riddled with factual errors that it was laughable. Not complex errors that are forgivable, but well known facts, previously released, that make my head hurt. The person who wrote this story must simply be a moron, and the person who moves his lips for him when he reads must have the technical sense of your average brick. It physically hurt to read.

The next one was a review in full, or at least in half. It was stated that it was given as a special preview to the site, which set off warning bells number 1-3 in my head. It purportedly put up the dual core gaming chip against the single core gaming chip predecessor, and also against the gaming chip from the competition. It looked to be a great job, with lots of benchmarks, and an attempt to start up a new way of benchmarking in an environment with multiple tasks running. Cool, finally something worth reading.

To step sideways a bit, the current dual core chips are all going to suck on games regardless of whether they come from Intel or AMD. Both are heat limited and will debut several clock bins below their single core counterparts. The Intel side also takes a step backward in bus speed because of the added loads on the bus. All these are engineering realities, and in no way diminish the really great jobs both companies are doing to bring dual cores to the masses.

It does mean however that until software catches up, most likely not this year, that gaming is going to suck on them. They will cost more, take more power, and be a status symbol for the rich and stupid, but their frame rates will blow dead goats. On multitasking and multithreaded apps, they will shine like the sun, but how many of these are there? How many times do you encode a movie while typing a document, zipping your C drive, doing some heavy CFD work all while listening to a few MP3s? Yeah, me neither, but at least 3DSMax and photoshop will rock on the new chips.

Getting back to reality, imagine my surprise when I saw that this new preview studiously avoided games. They are testing two of the most popular gaming chips out there, and the heir to the throne, and they did not put in one single game benchmark. Not one, think about that.

In the rebuttal to this, there will be the usual cries of 'we were not testing gaming performance' or some such bullsh*t ass covering, but here is the truth, if you are going to multitask and do and do anything that tasks both of the CPUs, one of those is going to be a game.

If you read up on the benchmarks posited by the current crop of reviews, how many are things you do regularly? How many fit the a scenario that you have EVER found yourself in? How many of you would do 7 things concurrently if you had seven things to do rather than do one or two at a time, and probably end up at the finish line first? The human mind does not multitask well, so 19 active windows is 17 or 18 more than you really can use at once.

The simple fact is that these chips suck on games, so the preview was done either implicitly, explicitly, or with bushels of cash, but it was done is a very deliberate fashion. And you probably believed it. Think I am full of crap? Look at how many reviews the top sites did before today of either CPUs or GPUs, and count the numbers that had zero games. Count the number that did not even speculate about gaming performance. See a pattern? Toss in a few factual oddities, stretchings of the truth at the most innocent, and you have a wonderfully deniable bending of the truth with a purpose.

The whole affair today typifies everything I think is wrong with the industry. I didn't name names, post links, or lay blame directly on purpose. To be honest, this time I have no proof. People have tried to bribe me, people have tried to get me to write things they want written, and people have tried to cower me. I have told them all that they possess more than enough orifices to place their ideals. Today fits this pattern.

Today's crop of stories goes to graphically show who is either tame, openly influenced, or flat out bought. Read all the previews one after another, the patterns you see really are there, and the reasons they are there are as bad as you fear. Toss in that a couple of sites who you would have thought should get CPUs didn't, and you have the makings of a conspiracy. It isn't one though.

Well, that is enough venting for now. If I can't get to sleep after all this time, I can always stick my head out the window and scream until I get arrested. Hardware reviewers are going bad fast, and there are precious few left. I applaud the good ones, and decry the rest, hopefully in a way that makes things a little bit better. µ

[Source](#) [2].

[Hardware](#)

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[2] http://www.theinquirer.net/?article=22332