Dueling Duals: ATI Puts SLI into the CrossFire

Let's face it. In today's modern world we like things fast. Fast cars, fast food, and especially fast computers. So when it comes to graphics on today's PCs, we not only want them to look good, we also want them to perform as fast and as smooth as possible. Luckily ATI and NVIDIA have been engaged in an all out war for the past 5 years, fighting to deliver us faster and more innovative products before their competitor can. Needless to say, I'm in support of this war.

ATI was king of the high end graphics card race for a long time, until NVIDIA recently took a big step ahead of them with their GeForce 7 series. Not to mention that NVIDIA was almost a year ahead in the dual video card market with their SLI technology, leaving ATI even further behind in the race for the PC gaming market. However, ATI is striking back by releasing their much delayed R520 GPU (now dubbed the X1000 series) and offering their own dual video card solution, named CrossFire.

The CrossFire technology is very similar to SLI in that it allows your computer to use two graphics cards instead of one. In theory, this could accelerate your graphics processing power by two. In reality the performance gain, although good, is usually nowhere near twice the amount that a single card produces. Still, the main concern for high end gamers and enthusiasts is having every last drop of performance that is available, and with CrossFire, that's exactly what you get.

The CrossFire has several distinct advantages over SLI. The main advantage is that unlike SLI, you don't have to pair up two of the exact same cards. Instead you only need two cards that are within the same series. For example, owners of a Radeon X800 CrossFire Edition card can use any other card in the X800 series. If the slave card (the non-crossfire card) is of a lesser ability than the master card (the CrossFire card) it will automatically downgrade to the same ability of the slave. This should help encourage those who have already invested in a high end ATI card to upgrade to a CrossFire system, since they would only need to buy the appropriate CrossFire card to upgrade. However, buyers should be sure that their motherboard is equipped with ATI's Radeon Xpress 200 CrossFire chipset, since it is a requirement for CrossFire.

The CrossFire technology also has a wider compatibility range than SLI. Wherein SLI only works with certain compatible games, CrossFire works on them all. In addition, the CrossFire supports four rendering modes, while SLI only supports two. The one notable mode introduced on the ATI cards is the CrossFire Super AA (Anti-Aliasing) mode. This special mode combines super AA and multi-sample AA and offers up to 14x AA in comparison to NVIDIA's best of 8x AA. This makes games look more crisp and clear, instead of blocky and pixilated.

One of the biggest problems that ATI has to face is that a lot of enthusiast chose to go with SLI, instead of waiting for ATI to come up with a dual card solution. ATI lost a lot of potential market share by allowing NVIDIA's SLI to remain unchallenged for so long. However, there are many loyal ATI fans that have remained vigilant, and will undoubtedly embrace ATI's CrossFire.

So even though ATI bided it's time, it looks as if it was well worth the wait. ATI not only offers a more powerful selection of video cards, but also a superior dual card solution. Still, SLI is well established and offers higher resolutions than the CrossFire. Although CrossFire may be superior in many ways, SLI is still a very strong competitor. So if you've been considering going dual card, now is a great time to do it. It's much better than fast food.

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