Game Reviews

Game: "Homeworld"
Developer: Relic Entertainment
Publisher: Sierra Studios
System: PC
Rating: A+

Every year for the past few years, someone has released a game that has taken an established genre of computer gaming and turned it from something stale and bland into something fresh and exciting.

These are the games other companies imitate.

In 1997, Blizzard's "Diablo" took the term RPG and gave it a strong dose of action, spawning dozens of imitators. Last year, Valve Software's "Half-Life" took the nearly lifeless first-person shooter market and made it viable again by adding something simple – story.

"Homeworld" is this year's innovator, and the lesser companies are already scrambling to copy the lessons taught by it.

I offer these words of warning, though: Take care, as this could become crack for any one of us. I already suspect "Homeworld" will be one of those games that always seems to take "just 10 more minutes." It's incredible and addictive. Damn time sinks.

Much, much more than just another "Starcraft" knockoff, Relic Entertainment's first project is a drastic reinterpretation of the real-time strategy game. In a field once ruled by two-dimensional games, "Homeworld" has made the drastic jump into 3-D.

For perhaps the first time ever, players can rotate around in the vast reaches of space, commanding large armadas of fights, corvettes and capital class starships in epic battles that would make George Lucas proud.

The best way to describe what it feels like to be playing "Homeworld" is to envision yourself as the commander of the Rebel Fleet in the end sequence of "Return of the Jedi," confronting a large armada of imperial ships bent on your destruction.

First and most importantly, the interface is incredibly intuitive and easy to use. This said, go through the tutorial. You still have to learn how the camera system works before you'll have the intricacies down pat. They have to teach you how to look before you walk, then fly.

The camera system is half of the joy of "Homeworld." You can watch battles from the far distant lofty perch above, or you can zoom in close and follow the path of one of your ships as it zips and zooms in its combat with your opponent.

All the time, every ship is clean and well-designed. The graphics are crisp and showy without being distracting, although there have been moments when I've felt like Nero watching Rome burn – the battle was just too beautiful for me to do anything.

Ships are divided into four classes: fighters, which are small ships designed for ship-to-ship combat (think X-Wing); corvettes, which are made for heavier combat but not as much (think Corellian Blockade runners – i.e. Leia's ship at the very beginning of "Star Wars"); and capital class, which are designed to have heavy firepower but low, low speed (think Star Destroyers.)

In addition to these four classes, you also have your Mothership. The Mothership is your central base of command. If it blows up, you lose. Guard it with your life.

Misplacing the Mothership will be tough, too, considering the thing is friggin' huge compared to your tiny little scout ships. This sense of scale was exactly what the game needed to make players feel as if they were there.

Moving ships is incredibly easy, as simple as point-and-click. You can also set your units into various combat formations, as well as tell them to assume a defensive or offensive stance.

It sounds like a lot to learn, but you pick it up quickly once you get going. Learning the keyboard shortcuts and hot keys is another thing that will help you keep your ships flying.

From the opening of the game, however, it's clear "Homeworld" is geared for a slightly older audience. Those of us who think of "Alien" and "Blade Runner" with fond memories will fit right at home.

The basic storyline is that the race of people you belong to finds the remains of a crashed spaceship on your planet. Within a few dozen years, you've figured out your people did not originate on this planet. With the discovery of a map, the construction of the Mothership begins as you and your people prepare to journey to your Homeworld.

While the single player mode is a bit short (only 15 missions), the multiplayer mode more than makes up for it, letting up to eight players duke it out in the vastness of space. If you've ever wanted to see a truly epic battle on your computer, right now, it doesn't get any better than this.

"Homeworld" isn't perfect; a few features that would have been nice to have did not make it into the final version. But the merits of the game so far supersede these petty little complaints so as to rub them out.

"Homeworld" doesn't just chip away at the old RTS mold, it shatters it with a massive sledgehammer and keeps on pounding until all that remains is dust.

A new watermark has been set.

If you've ever been vaguely interested in real-time strategy, space combat or even science-fiction computer games at all, do yourself a favor and buy "Homeworld."

– Cliff Hicks

Film Registry names films to be preserved

WASHINGTON (AP) – A Marlon Brando classic and a movie featuring the first big-screen kiss are among the 25 films that have been added to the National Film Registry.

"A Streetcar Named Desire," the 1951 vehicle that helped launch Brando's career, and "The Kiss," a 15-second flick made in 1896, are among the films the Library of Congress chose for the list.

By law, the Librarian of Congress names 25 films of cultural, historic or esthetic importance to go on the registry each year.

Steve Leggett, coordinator for the National Film Preservation Board, said the registry encourages the preservation of movies that might otherwise disappear.

Other films on the preservation list: "Civilization," 1916; "Do The Right Thing," 1989; "The Docks of New York," 1928; "Duck Amuck," 1953; "The Emperor Jones," 1933; "Gunga Din," 1939; "In The Land Of The Head-Hunters," also known as "In The Land Of The War Canoes," 1914; "Jazz On A Summer's Day," 1959; "King: A Filmed Record ... Montgomery To Memphis," 1970; "Kiss Me Deadly," 1955; "Lambchops," 1929; "Laura," 1944; "Master Hands," 1936; "My Man Godfrey," 1936; "Night Of The Living Dead," 1968; "The Plow That Broke The Plains," 1936; "Raiders Of The Lost Ark," 1981; "Roman Holiday," 1953; "The Shop Around The Corner," 1940; "The Ten Commandments," 1956; "Trance And Dance In Bali," 1938-9; "The Wild Bunch," 1969; and "Woman Of The Year," 1942.

'Millionaire' tops the prime-time slots again

NEW YORK (AP) – ABC is feeling like a million bucks, with "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" helping carry the network to a first-place prime-time win last week.

Airing nightly during November "sweeps," the hit quiz show claimed seven of the Top 16 slots for the week, according to Nielsen Media Research figures released Tuesday. Its Sunday edition won third place, behind NBC's top-ranked "ER" and ABC's "Monday Night Football."

Fox didn't fare so well with its quiz clone, "Greed," whose second weekly airing was Thursday. In the first half-hour – which faced that night's "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" – "Greed" ranked 80th place, with a 5.9 rating and 9 share. During its second half-hour, it vaulted to 40th place, scoring an 8.7 rating and 13 share.

A rating point represents 1,008,000 households, or 1 percent of the nation's estimated 100.8 million TV homes. The share is the percentage of in-use televisions tuned to a given show.