

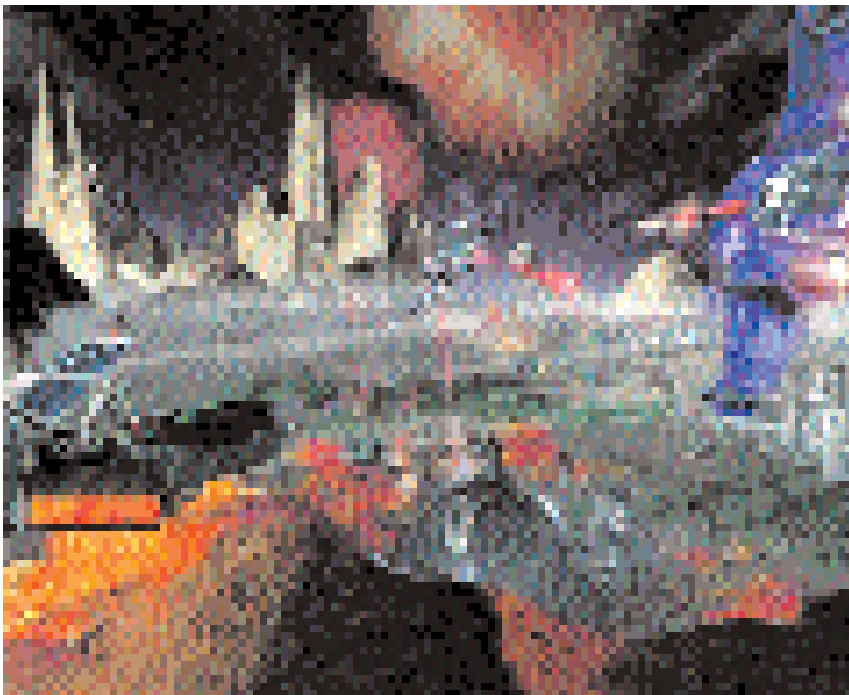
New civilisations

SID MEIER'S ALPHA CENTAURI



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Another classic from Loki arrives fresh on the Linux desktop. This time it's Sid Meier's latest work, Alpha-Centauri, that is joining the already wide range of high quality strategy simulations for Linux. Firaxis, a software house with strategy experience, provided the necessary background.



A user-friendly setup program makes installation child's play. The installation size can be selected in five stages between 26 and 601 MB. If completely installed on the hard disk there's no need to insert the CD later on. Like most games from Loki Alpha-Centauri has ESD support – you don't miss any warnings or system sounds during the game as a sound card is allocated.

The sounds heard during the game are pleasant and unobtrusive. Useful additions in the Linux version, such as the ability to iconify using [Ctrl+Z] and edit string gadgets using the shortcuts from *vi* or *emacs* round off the technical side of implementation nicely.

Those of you who have already played the classic Civilization 2 will remember that there were two possible ways to win a game: by totally wiping out all your opponents or by becoming the first civilisation to send a manned space mission to Alpha-Centauri. The latter was undoubtedly the most honourable, but also the most difficult way.

This is where Alpha-Centauri starts. There is a malfunction on board the expedition's spaceship and the population travelling on the ship is awoken from a deep sleep. In the chaos that ensues the future inhabitants of space are divided into seven groups, each with their own ideology.

They decide to divide the ship before it crashes without power into the destination planet in order to increase their chance of survival and be able to build up civilisations in various places based on their respective ideology. The "Spartans", for example,

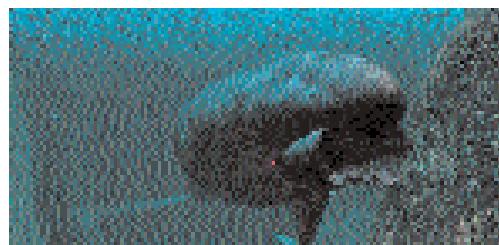
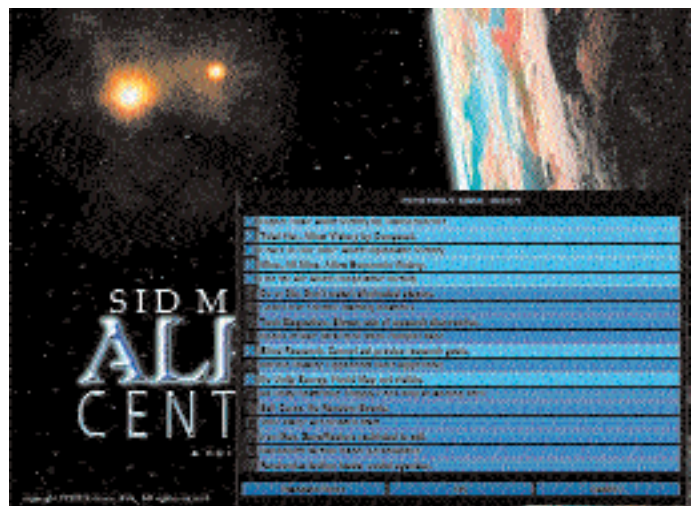
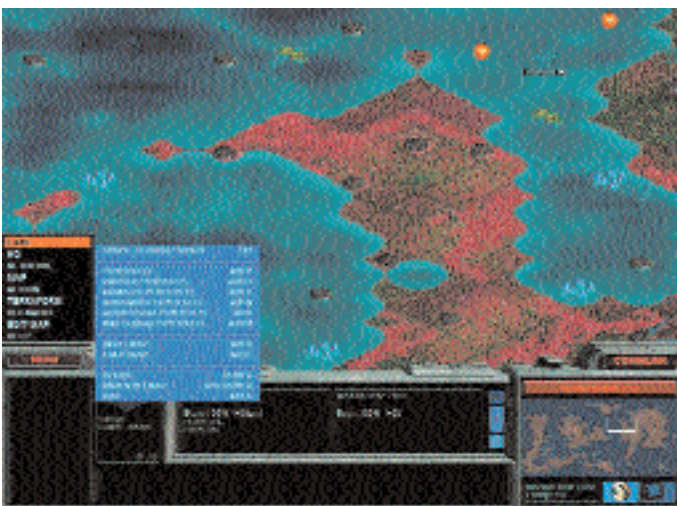
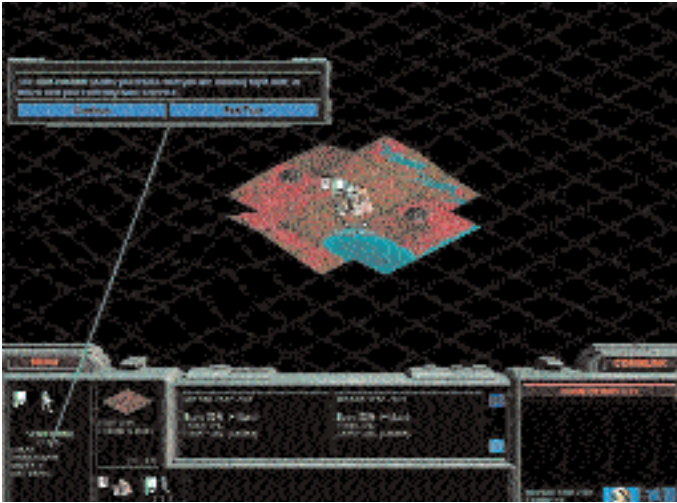


Figure 1: A number of video sequences, some of which are rather long but nice to watch



favour war as a solution to conflicts whilst the "Morgan conglomerate" endeavours to maximise personal wealth.

So this is where we are. The ship has landed or crashed. The people have built the first town using the materials available. And now there is a difference of opinion. Many will soon realise with a yawn that Alpha Centauri is not much more than the third rehash of Civilization. In addition, the terrain can seem strange and boring and many of the terms and routines with which Civilization players are familiar no longer function. In Civilization we had sports complexes, libraries, mathematics and the alphabet: things with which everyone is familiar and which we could classify and use in the context of the game without any problems. But now the future has arrived: there are network nodes, gene factories, retrovirus research projects and ethical mathematics. Many of the familiar, easily understandable elements from the old days now have strange names, as have the spies, for example. Furthermore, Alpha-Centauri cannot be easily extended with modules, as Civ could at the time.

Enough about the negative points. Others will be excited by the new possibilities Alpha-Centauri offers the ambitious simulation freak. Many of the games are like cheap beer: you drink some, have

some fun, but soon forget what you drank and what exactly you did.

However, Alpha-Centauri is like the work of a master wine-grower: designed in detail, each ingredient closely inspected, each process carefully considered. The design has been distilled with careful attention to detail, the result is pure enjoyment. Firaxis invested heavily in a detailed background story for the game. This creates a credible situation which grips the player.

Co-author Brian Reynolds has done his homework: Sid Meier's Alpha-Centauri has the degree of scientific plausibility we expect from a game from Firaxis, a software house that also developed titles such as Gettysburg and Railroad Tycoon Pate. On the back page of the manual, for example, there is a short essay on the dynamism of the coming into being of planets and solar systems, which provides an explanation of why the "Planet" in Alpha Centauri is like it is. This kind of detail is the difference between a good and a really good design.

Also worth noting is the amazingly high level of atmosphere and personality for a strategy game. The main reason for this is the high quality of the game texts. These texts in conversation and negotiations are what bring the leaders of the various groups and all the other characters to life. The

[above]
Figure 2: The first game.
Thank goodness the help
is excellent

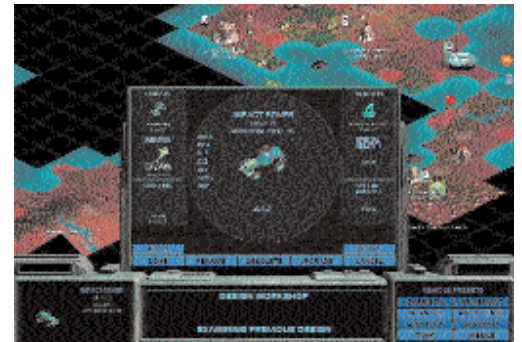
[below]
Figure 3: This is how it
looks if you are to configure
a whole world



[above]
Figure 4: A confusing variety of research goals and discoveries



[right]
Figure 5: Designing new units is fun.
[left]
Heads of state à la Alpha Centauri



game's diplomatic model is certainly one of the best there is in a computer game. The players seem to be dealing with real people when they try to keep relations between up to six other civilisations in check.

The option to configure units individually down to the last detail is a lot of fun and allows for an almost infinite amount of variations. Of course, each "tribe" has its own advantages and disadvantages, which take effect in the course of the game and which players can use to their benefit where necessary. The artificial intelligence is cleverer than it is in other games of this kind and cannot be so easily outwitted with diplomatic tricks.

The help system integrated into the game is context-sensitive and activates itself automatically. It makes life particularly easy for beginners as they try to find their way through the jungle of options. Again, there are several ways to win the game, including a diplomatic and economic victory. While in Civilization the mission to Alpha Centauri was the most desirable victory, this time achieving "Transcendence" is the highest goal.

In addition to the diplomacy aspect, players must ensure that their own citizens are always in a good mood and productive. Players spend a lot of time exploring the terrain, discovering new technologies, building new bases and conquering enemies. The bases play a key role as they serve several purposes, such as the construction of new units and research.

It is also possible to invent and build new things to increase the productivity and well-being of the inhabitants. When new discoveries are made, play-

ers can use them to "upgrade" all the old units. The technology aspect of the game is so extensive that it is a little hard to grasp.

You may catch yourself making a gut decision as it is so easy to lose an overview of all the technologies. The secret projects the game offers are something else – in this respect the game is a lot less restricted than its predecessors. A host of "special" projects, some of which include very important events for the outcome of the game, are yet to be implemented.

The game's multi-player capabilities are up-to-date and even include the option to play moves by e-mail. A wide range of functions can be switched on or off and provide extensive scenario settings. Several players can even play on one computer (alternately).

On balance, although Alpha Centauri isn't completely different from its move-based strategy predecessors what it does, it does well. It feels as if the game designers have done practically everything right. So it is more of an evolution than a revolution. There is likely to be a difference of opinion on the originality of this evolution. But for simulation fans, there's no getting away from it: buy this and you'll be spending long nights playing "just one more move". ■

Evaluation:

Long-term enjoyment:	95%
Graphics:	55%
Sound:	75%
Control:	90%
Multiplayer:	85%
Overall score:	85%