

Unreal life SIM CITY 3000 UNLIMITED

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Perhaps the most well-known simulation game of all time is now available on Linux. But with expectations for the new edition of this classic game so high, is the third generation bound to disappoint?

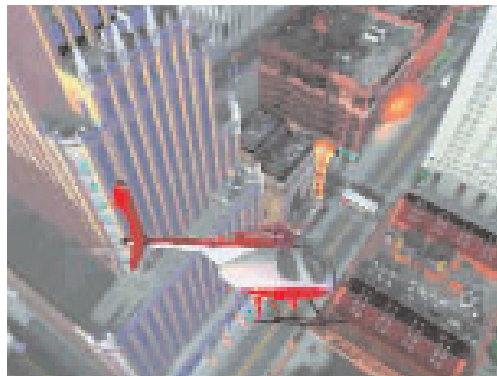
The pre-release version at our disposal needed 440 MB of hard disk space to install it. After startup, a window opens that can be up to 1152 x 1024 in size. Alternatively, you can also switch to the full screen display, which speeds up the graphics slightly. All in all, SimCity 3000 would appear to be astonishingly resource-hungry for a simulation game. It needs a 300 MHz Pentium class processor and at least 32 MB RAM (but I would definitely recommend 64). You are then given the possibility of simulating cities of enormous size with a level of detail never seen before.

Your attention is grabbed as soon as you see the film sequence in the main menu. Cute little animat-

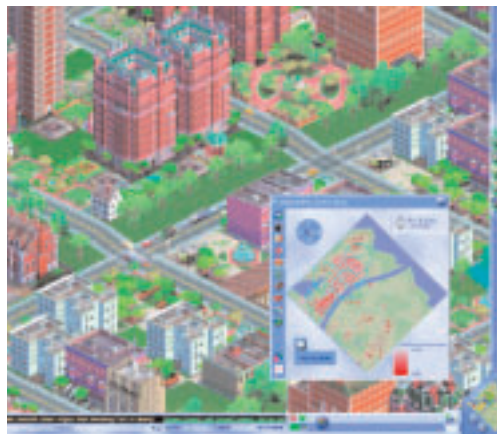
ed buttons switch to the main program functions. Accompanied by jolly background MP3 music (from a selection of over 10 tracks), you can begin creating your first big city. Tried and tested procedures and operating concepts have been retained. Superfluous frills have been mostly avoided and many entertaining details added.

So, from the "shifting fly droppings" of days gone by, you get real street activity with animated people, bicycles, cars, etc. Building details are neatly animated and the attention to detail is pleasing. When looking at a police station building data, for example, you stumble across the line "Monthly doughnut consumption".

Fig. 1: Intro. video (left), Main menu (right).



[left]
Fig. 2: Many details with best possible enlargement



[right]
Fig. 3: Famous structures, such as the Eiffel Tower, can be built.



Even though it is still unmistakably "Sim City" and little has changed in the basic design, the game has become much more flexible, with many improved features. The music changes as the size of your city grows, echoing changing scenarios. Car horns and irate motorists shouting can be heard if there is a traffic jam. Famous buildings from the real world, such as the pyramids or the Statue of Liberty can be included in the city. The selection of buildings is bigger and new modes of transport, such as underground railways and bypass roads, have been added.

When making decisions, the player has the support of a team of electronic consultants. They have their say automatically or on request, depending on the situation in the game. You should read what they have to say at all costs – they have many useful hints to give. You also have detailed diagrams at your disposal and overviews of events in the game. These make it possible to assess any situation accurately. Operation is, as usual, mostly intuitive – but unfortunately you can get stuck in a few spots. Also, the problems encountered in the Windows version of the game have been imported into this platform. "True to the original" – it gets stuck when building bridges or slip roads onto motorways. Libraries have a negative number of books and the export of the water supply constantly fails for reasons that are hard to understand. These are small details well-known from the Windows version, correction of which is a job for the programmers of the original. It would be too much for the Loki programmers to rectify.

As was the case in the older versions, with time the game will come up with one or two surprises. UFOs can suddenly descend on the well-ordered streets of the city and, if you're unlucky, they reduce some part or other of your city to rubble. Or maybe a tornado or earthquake will play "landscape designer" in the inner city, meaning you soon have your hands full with things to do.

Unfortunately, the same applies to computers. If you have loaded a big city with lots of activity, then even the latest computers can crash. I think there is still room for improvement here for Maxis and Lokis. I mean, whoever heard of a Sim City bringing a Pen-

tium 450 to its knees? Perhaps increased use of accelerated graphics would be helpful. It is some consolation that the Windows version of the game suffers from the same problem.

The logic and intrinsic intelligence in the game are OK, but in the final analysis a bit so-so. So, the inhabitants of a city do not want to live right next door to a high security prison, that's logical enough. And they complain if neighbouring cities have advantages that are not to be found in their own. The fact that they still complain about their taxes being too high, even when dropped to 2%, OK, even that could be realistic. What I missed here was a multiplayer option.

On the plus side, you do have the option of designing your own buildings and integrating them into the game. Also, the possibility of transferring old games from SimCity 2000 and expanding them with the new options offered by SimCity 3000 will certainly be enormously motivating for some fans. Humorous details and the funny news tickertape at the edge of the screen means you always have to smile. If a city is going too well, you can always let loose one of the catastrophes available and then measure its regeneration capabilities.

In spite of all the new features and research that have gone into the new version (the developers even investigated how water towers actually work) it is still the same old Sim City. If you cannot stand SimCity, SimCity 2000 or similar games, this won't convert you. But for all the Sim-addicts out there, it's clearly a must.

For casual players the impulse to buy may not be quite as strong. It is very much a question of which way your inclinations lie. ■

Rating

Long-term

enjoyment factor:  70%

Graphics:  55%

Sound:  85%

Control:  70%

Multiplayer: N/A

Overall rating:  65%

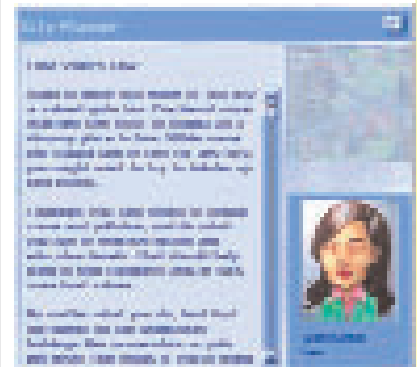
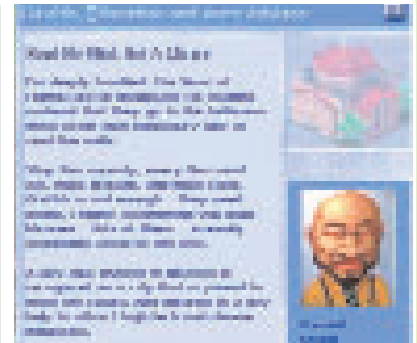


Fig. 5: Various consultants are on hand to help

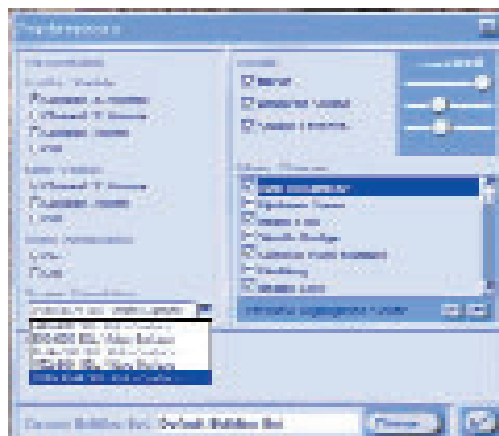
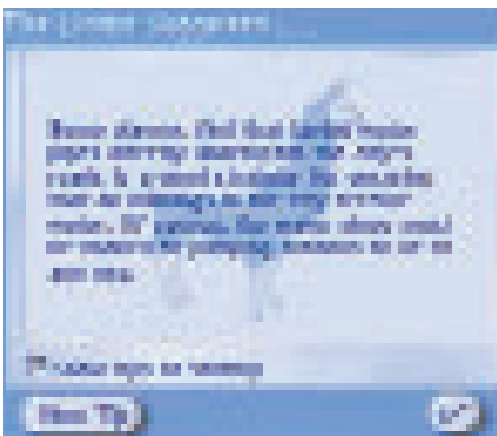


Fig. 4: Tooltips help the beginner (left). Preferences (right).