Here come the Linux games!

JAGGED ALLIANCE 2

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The Canadian company Tribsoft has gone to the trouble of converting the game to Linux, which has in turn been brought to us by Titan, among others. The game itself is almost more complex than the story of its development – but let's start at the beginning.

Whenever there is a TV report about distant countries, in which dictators are oppressing people by the thousand this all somehow seems very far away. Anyway, there's nothing you can do about it.

Jagged Alliance 2 deals with just such a country. An evil tyrant named Deidranna is keeping the small, poverty-stricken country of Arulco enslaved with great harshness and in dire conditions, and she is also squeezing the last drops from her tormented subjects, in order to spend the money thus obtained on the army and her terrorist state.

The former ruler, long believed dead, is in hiding abroad and commissions you, as an experienced mercenary, to liberate the land from its ruler with hired troops. To do this, you receive precisely 40,000 dollars start-up capital. This whole process is packed into a very well-made and very long introductory film.

The game comes in a typical DVD plastic case, whose hard plastic holder does not exactly mollycoddle the CD, which is clamped in so hard as to be bomb-proof. It is only on closer inspection that you discover the second CD, which is necessary for installation, in a paper cover hidden behind the manual. After starting the installation program, you are met with a simple shell script which has four installation variants, requiring between 305 and 850MB of space on the hard disk. And yet, considering the free-of-charge, easy-to-use installation tool, a somewhat more click-friendly installation wouldn't have hurt.

The instructions come in the form of a 50-page, illustrated booklet, which gives a comprehensive introduction to all aspects of the game. Especially useful at the beginning is the short reference on the first three pages of the instructions, because there are quite a lot of functions and keys to memorise. The objective of the game – liberation of the country piece by piece, gaining new confederates, money and sources of raw materials – can only be achieved, even at the easiest level of the game, with brains and hard work.

After the intro sequence, the extremely homespun graphics with a skimpy, unalterable resolution of 640x480, seems more than a little unpleasant. But as we all know, strategy games often are not primarily defined by their graphics. So, if you aren't put of by this glitch, you will soon find out that JA2 is a game whose playing levels set new standards for Linux software.

On the other hand it would be unfair to Jagged Alliance to force it into the strategy games pigeonhole. Even if you would like to think that in the end all computer games come down either to someone racing around somewhere and chasing something or some kind of resources being

This game looks set to become a classic on Linux computers. With JA2, Sirtech has come up with a hitherto unknown but successful mixture of action game and strategy simulation, which has won the hearts of many gamers, and not without good reason; its predecessor, Jagged Alliance, was named 1995 strategy game of the year.

Figure 1: The comprehensive intro film describes the situation at the start of the game.

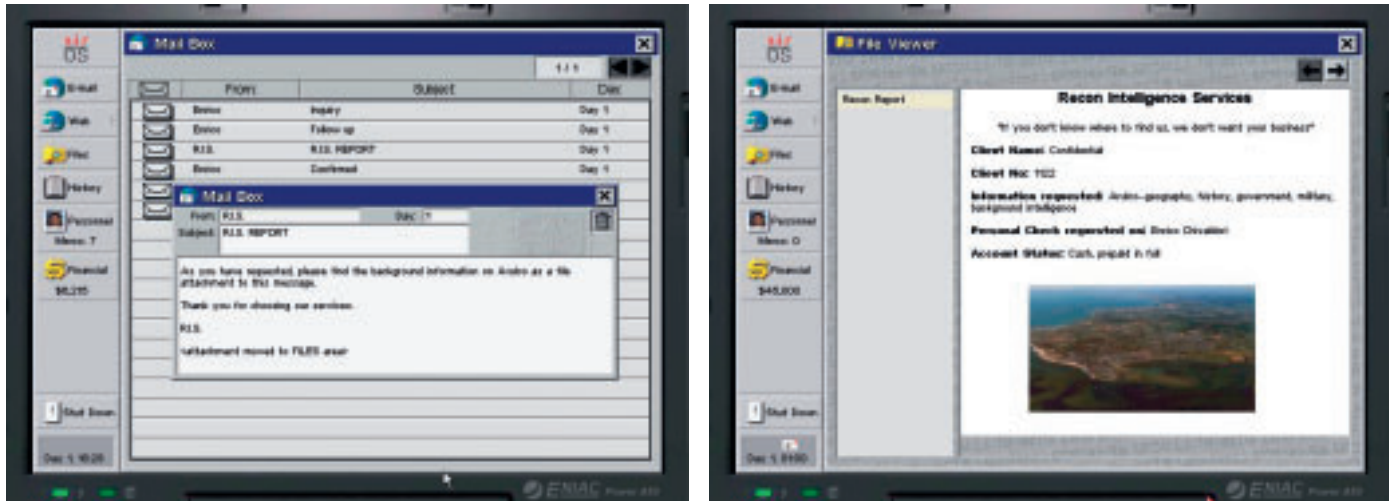**Figure 2: The "SirOS" Laptop: Whether email, Web or finances - this helps.**

URLs

Sirtech
http://www.sirtech.com/
Tribsoft
http://www.tribsoft.com/store.
html
Titan http://www.titan-
computer.com

Evaluation:

Long-term playing fun:	90%
Graphics:	35%
Sound:	80%
Control:	85%
Multiplayer:	0%
Originality	90%
Complexity:	95%
Overall rating:	80%

managed somewhere far above – Jagged Alliance offers both and more, although with the emphasis on strategy. In fact, this successful combination of large-scale strategy and direct contact with the detailed handling of role-playing elements has defined its own, new genre.

The game primarily runs on four levels:

• The first of these is the laptop. This links the player with a virtual Internet, in which you can do such things as obtain information, buy arms, hire mercenaries and send emails. For the medium term, an indispensable aid.

• Then there is a sort of complete overview, in which you can determine the composition of the groups of mercenaries, map out routes and switch to all other overviews. But the map in this overview has an over-ground and also three underground levels, all of which you have to keep an eye on.

• Thirdly, a sort of action mode, in which when there is contact with the enemy you have to send your fighters one after the other to face the opponent in best role-playing tradition. Each mercenary also has, as in a role-playing game, quite specific characteristics and strengths, the type and quality of which jointly determine the outcome of each round of fighting. This is a mode where good tactics are especially necessary otherwise you will soon lose a few valuable comrades.

• At the fourth level there are the steadily interspersed inter-sequences, which move the

action forward each time minor stages and game objectives are achieved and thus support and steer the player in their task.

Many additional elements enlarge the variation options almost to infinity – so you can construct your own implements from individual components and combine these in turn with up to four others. Ingredients such as chewing gum, steel piping, super glue and the like are used here. So no problem adorning your own favourite cannon with a bit of DIY with laser pointers, tripod, aiming telescope and range extenders – McGyver says hi.

Of course, at the beginning, due to the low amount of start-up capital, there is no change of hiring an army of top class fighters. What you have to do, given the resources, is to buy and to plan tactics carefully and circumspectly. The first contacts will occur shortly with the scattered rebels, supporting them in the first instance with advice and deeds, and soon with people, too. Later the citizens of Arulco will also be joining up and training as militiamen and allowing their mines to be exploited for the good cause, so that then at last the much-needed money comes into the treasury.

Each individual mercenary and militiaman has an individual set of equipment, with which, depending on his special abilities he can repair other people's armour, open locks, heal the casualties or build things - and much more besides. This is somewhere that the patient player can open up endless prospects for optimisation. Even the good

Figure 3: There's a nice loading image for all key scenarios.
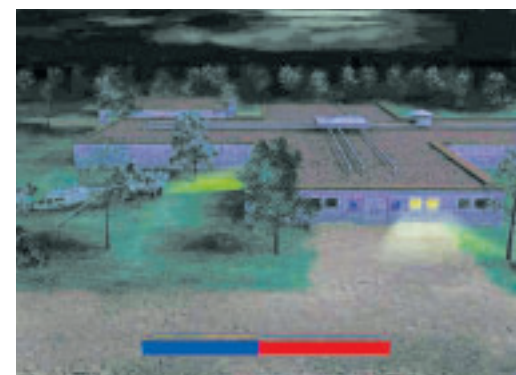
Figure 4: Strategic and personal decisions take place in the global overview and on the virtual laptop.

Figure 5: The action mode - right in the thick of it, whether a rebel pub or Deidranna's human experimentation clinic.

organisation of a simple contact with the enemy with some well thought-out series of moves and well-distributed people can easily take half an hour. Thankfully the game has a function up its sleeve, for impatient colleagues who prefer to concentrate on global events, to dice automatically for entire enemy encounters.

The sound is well done and finely adjusted to the events – noises always come from where they are created, the background music is unobtrusive but not boring, although now and then it does stutter a bit. But to compensate, JA2 also supports ESD of its own accord. This means that any system sounds or your own favourite music can be listened to alongside the game on any old sound card.

In this game, we sorely missed the option of multi-player scenarios. It is precisely in the domain of strategy games with non–linear time sequences that others have shown that such a thing is easily possible and can also be highly entertaining. The fact that this option is missing is something that must be chalked up as a big minus point.

A game of this kind of complexity does of course also require a high-class interface for operation. This is where SirTech, with its successful division of the meagre space, has done wonders. Details such as a directory of inventory by map sectors and sensibly arranged tables with colour highlighting of entries which are strategically important or relevant to decision-making turn the game into a pleasure. What is urgently needed, though, is a keyboard pattern, because you currently have to remember more keys than with a flight simulator for fluid play.

Lastly, the successful integration of the various game levels give Jagged Alliance 2 that certain something. You can change completely naturally from the tactical overview to the action mode, never getting the feeling of overlooking something or losing perspective. Whenever things get tight, you can stop the game time and decide at leisure whatever needs deciding. And the fact that the fight actions are term-based also means that you don't have to worry that your opponent might drill you a new hole in your hat while you're pondering the next step.

Conclusion

This game could keep you occupied for a month. Although from a technical point of view the game sometimes seems outdated and the paltry resolution cannot be described as anything but anachronistic Tribsoft, by converting it to Linux, – if you overlook the Spartan installation and a few memory leaks, the correction of which is already in progress – has come up with a solid and tidy product. No obvious bugs or crashes occurred during our test.

From the point of view of game playing, this special class of mercenary simulation, which has already been awarded prizes many times and all over the world, is a real cracker, which defines its own particular style – a definite buy for strategy fans.

A list of reference sources for this game and Linux-specific discussion forums can be found on the Tribsoft website. And by the way, the porting of the Unfinished Business game expansion onto Linux has already been announced for the near future. We can hardly wait. ∎