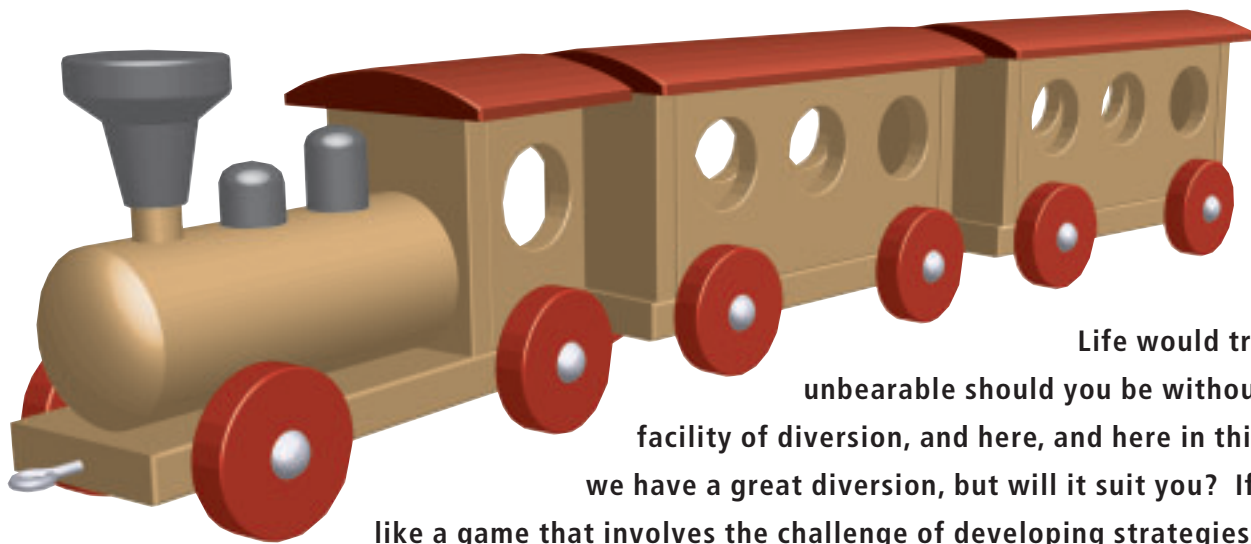


In the age of steam become a

RAILWAY BARON

COLIN MURPHY



Life would truly be unbearable should you be without the facility of diversion, and here, and here in this game we have a great diversion, but will it suit you? If you like a game that involves the challenge of developing strategies against a complex and changing environment then yes, I reckon it will.

Railroad Tycoon is a graphical strategy game, the aim of which is to build a railway empire. This you can do in a wide range of geographical and historical contexts, each of which provide their own unique challenges. These range from the almost ridiculous scenario of running a passenger train service in Antarctica to coping with the stresses and strains of running the all important supply services to Second World War-torn England.

You take on the responsibility of deciding routes, laying track between locations, building and maintaining infrastructure and running services.

You will find, depending on the type of scenario initially chosen, locations which provide resources and those that require them. The cattle farms require grain to boost milk production, the milk is required by populated areas, those areas with people provide passengers, mail and have other requirements still. So the first skill needed is to see where opportunities lie for bringing together resources and those with a need for them. Then to lay efficient and well maintained track between them, while keeping another eye open for further opportunities. That would make for a game good

enough, but Railroad Tycoon goes further, as your game progresses so does the scenarios develop over time – new technologies come into play, allowing you to combine new and different resources. But the gameplay doesn't even stop here as you also get to dabble in the world of high finance, where you can sell shares and issue bonds for your railway company and also buy and trade stocks of other companies playing against you.

The game itself is presented and packaged in a most professional way. The box, rich with artwork contains a 120 page instruction manual and user guide, a full colour fold out aide-memoire detailing the profitable route for resources to take through the maze of demands made by the world and the all important CD-ROM. When the game starts, at least for the first time, you are played a full motion railway themed video trailer to get you in the mood.

The Installation Process

This is clearly laid out in the user guide and involves nothing more than running a script and answering a few questions. You can customise the install to

COVER FEATURE

RAILROAD TYCOON II GOLD EDITION



The main game in play.

include the larger and more fancy introductory video clips and options on what sets of scenarios save on hard disk space, should that be a scarce commodity in itself. It did not set up a desktop icon by default, for KDE at least, but this was easily done by right-clicking on the desktop and creating a new link to the application.

The minimum install size is some 200MB with graphics displayed at 1024x768 and 16 or 8-bit colour depth. Sound is nice to have, as you are offered audio feedback, but you don't have to rely on this. The game play isn't very processor intensive and only calls for a minimum spec of a Pentium 133.

Choosing the consist of each train



Info:

Publisher- Loki Games
<http://www.lokigames.com>
 Cost - £15.00 from SuSE or
 Linux Emporium.

Playing the Game

Even though the game comes with a comprehensive, but still readable manual, it also features a very handy tutorial scenario to allow the eager player to start to enjoy the game without any unnecessary delay.

The tutorial will show you how to manipulate the basic features of the game, such as laying track and building stations. From here you get to see how to set up train services and organise the cargo that they will carry from one town to another in exactly the same way you would in a real game.

The screen initially shows an isometric view of the landscape with trees and some building representations shown. Using the mouse you click and drag between any two objects to lay a track. After the track is laid you then need to add stations and sundries, such as water towers and post offices. Next you need to buy a train to run on your line and choose the make up of the carriages and wagons that will be transported. You need to choose the correct cargo to move between towns such as iron ore from the mine to the steel foundry along with coal from the pit. This allows you in turn to transport from the foundry to the tool factory steel.

Each cargo moved increases revenue for your company but also increases the wear and tear on the train and track.

The game can be played with others over a TCP/IP network, be it local or through the Internet, or pit your wits against computer-controlled players which you can configure to match your skill level. The winner being decided on the final profit achieved over a set period of play.

At any point you can purchase new track, trains or cargo and modify the wagon make up of each train.

When running short of money you have the option to enter the world of business dealing where you can raise capital or should you be flushed you can attempt a takeover or merger with rivals.

One curiosity though is that if the CD-ROM has been left in the drive then a Rhythm and Blues track is played ad nauseum – never has a CD been snatched from a drive bay with such vigor!

The plus and minus keys control the speed of the game and the graphical view shows tiny train models moving back and forth. This is just one of the keyboard shortcuts which you will find out about by taking the time to read through the paper documentation as well, knowing some of these keypresses really improves the game flow.

The only criticism of the game was when you choose the cargo combinations you have to say at what station these will be left. The map for this section may contain lots of towns, but being so close due to the map scale it is often difficult to highlight the correct one with the mouse.

When laying track you need to be careful of the route over the landscape that is taken, as if over steep terrain then most fuel and time are used as well as a greater chance of the train breaking down, giving rise to further costs or a replacement train.

The more that a train is used the greater the chances are of a breakdown. Breakdowns cause the goodwill of the company to be hurt and so in turn the share value. Adding more roundhouses at stations means that the trains are more likely to be maintained for longer.

After playing all the available scenarios you have a built in map editor so you finally can make a railway on the moon if you choose.

Along with the manual there is also the strategy guide on disk in html format. This is not simple and electronic version but rather a game walk through showing how and why certain gameplay occurred. It also sets out how the computer plays and what strategies to use to win.

While playing events will occur. This is where some action has occurred that you maybe able to utilise such as a remote town offering a bonus to any company willing to connect a railway line to it or a line being bombed during a war.

Once you are familiar with all the game techniques you can then play in the advanced scenarios. Here you receive no income for moving unwanted goods, only a cost as your fuel is used up. This level does allow you to be ruthless with your opponents. You can not only buy railways but the surrounding industries such as the dairy farms or ports. Once owned, you can then deal on margin profits where the rival railway companies have to pay you a percentage for the goods. You can also use your personal wealth to buy rival stock so giving you more voting power when you attempt to do a takeover or merger. Failed mergers need to wait a year before reattempting. This stops you quickly increasing the bid to buy at a minimum cost.



Should you be less than financially astute, then you also have the option of playing the game in 'sandbox' mode, where the financial distractions are removed from the overall game, more than enough for some of us. The game is very configurable, allowing you to make changes to things like the colour depth of the display, so the game will work on less than up-to-date hardware, or to change the skill level of your computer opponents so that you can enjoy a challenging game and not just a whitewash on one side or the other.

The cutesy graphics similar to SimCity games do not distract and with the speed control it is sometimes like watching a Hornby railway in you X session.

Overall, the game has caused many a lost hour and it continues to eat up free time. Each time you think you have mastered the game you realise that there is another layer of dealing and so the game becomes more and more devious.

Building stations

■ Profit or loss?

