Gaming for pocket money

ANDROMEDA9

FIONN BEHRENS

Andromeda9 is a free game of professional quality, programmed with OpenGL in Python. Steer your spaceship to unknown worlds, alone or against other players on the Net.

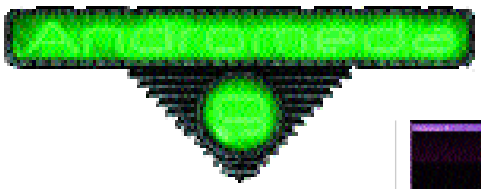


Figure 1: A good tutorial makes up for the lack of instructions

Installation consists of merely unpacking the compressed archive. Unfortunately, at present the game only runs on Intel-compatible processors. If nothing happens when you first start it, or if strange error messages pop up, it is often helpful to rename the libSDL-1.1.so and instead, with the command *ln -s /usr/lib/libSDL.so ./libSDL-1.1.so* (execute in the Andromeda9 directory) use the SDL library which is already in the system. More recent versions of the libSDL should function too.

The game requires a functioning installation of OpenGL, for example Mesa or GLX. This usually also includes an accelerated graphics card. Otherwise the demands of the game are fairly modest: 200MHz processor, 32MB RAM and 36MB space on the hard drive. If you want to play against other players on the Internet, a modem connection, ISDN or similar is required.

After starting the game, you will be greeted with a very nicely presented menu with neat transparency effects. After finding a suitable resolution (up to 1600x1200 is possible) in options and an appropriate keyboard configuration or joystick setting, the next thing to do is take a look at the demo mode to see what it's all about. Andromeda9 is in fact a mixture of Gravity Force, Quake and Xpilot, using the concept of the first, the playing modes of the second and the extras of the third. Plus there are the pepped-up graphics, which (though the game is basically played out in two dimensions) come up with really vivid and three-dimensional-looking ships, maps, extras and effects.

At the well made introductory level you can learn everything of importance about the control of the game, handling of extras, displayed data and a great deal more besides. Depending on the playing mode (there are the usual Deathmatch and CTF variants as well as races available) you can work your way, either co-operatively or every man for himself, through the still rather small number of maps with their very special little traps, teleports, extras etc. There are filling stations at some point on each level, which you can fly over in order to top up the ever-scarce fuel. There are also repair stations to fix any damage to the ship.

For orientation in the rugged maps you can blend in a display of a small overview map in one corner. A semi-transparent display box also gives continuous information about current fuel reserves,

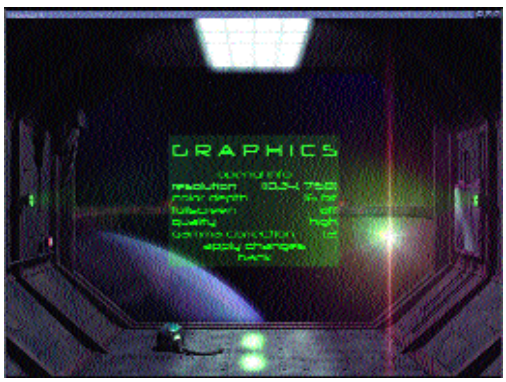
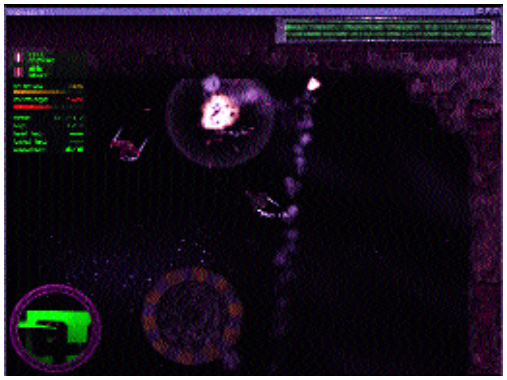


Figure 2: Cool menus thanks to OpenGL: Andromeda9 Prefs



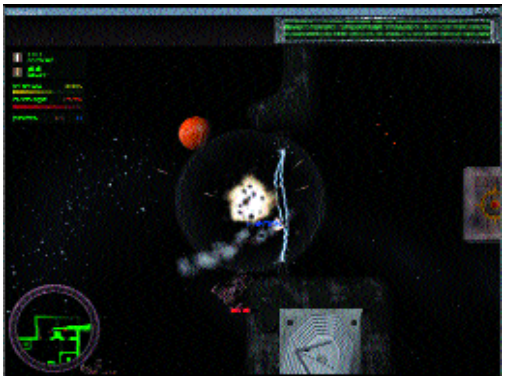


Figure 3:
Practice makes perfect

armaments and damage to the ship.

Since the game is squarely aimed at multiplayer use, without an Internet connection very little will happen at first. But if you're online, then even with a slow 33k connection, there are next to no limits on the fun you can have. Gruesome slaughters in CTF mode and hair-raising racing round the, sometimes extreme, tracks are pre-programmed. Tip: there is a mode for home practice using a split screen, so that a single computer is all you need to have fun with Andromeda9.

At first you would scarcely notice the fact that the game was actually programmed in Python, or only by some characteristic file names. But it does go to show that good games can be written even in a relatively "high-level" language - nowadays there is no longer the need to master machine code to program a good game. Plus, it's an impressive demonstration of the power of this language, which is looked down on by "real c0derZ".

The sounds are good; the game can, commendably, also cope with the enlightened sound daemon - so no problem with the Gnome desktop. Anyone who wants to can copy their own favourite songs in mp3 format into a sub-directory of the game - these will be played during the run time of Andromeda9.

The programmers are currently working all out on a new version, which was not ready before we went to press. The new features are to include a global classification system that stores the scores of the individual pilots in an Internet Highscore List. The space ships will be able to brake using reverse thrust and a weapon to destroy powerups is said to be imminent. Additional settings for gravitation and yet more new weapons are planned. There is also going to be an input screen for Net games with chat option, plus drones (robots), against which you can practise whenever there are no human opponents available or if you don't yet feel ready for the big, wide world. Last but not least, many parts of the game are also going to be completely revised in terms of graphics – so we can look forward to a game that will definitely be worth its 15MB download. ■

The author

Fionn Behrens is a student of technical computer science. He can be contacted on the Net as Fionn at IRCnet.

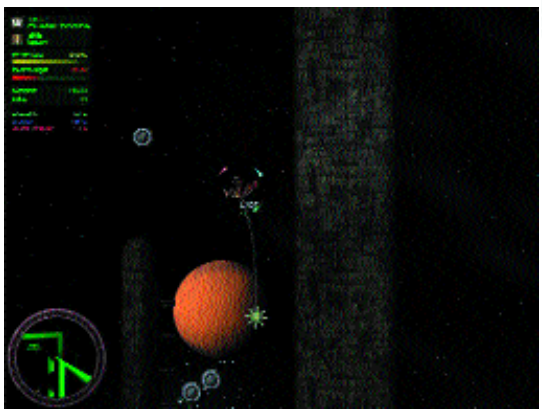


Figure 4: Preview of the next version of Andromeda9: Revised graphics, multiplayer ranking and cool new weapons

Conclusion: Nothing new, but still very good! The graphics look simply top class. Technically, the game is impeccable, simple to understand without being undemanding -- and all free! The hard-core XPilot-gamer will shudder and turn away, but for the occasional Net gamer this game is certainly worth downloading and can bring you many hours of fun with your friends.

Rating:

Long-term gaming fun:	*75%*
Graphics:	*85%*
Sound:	*80%*
Control:	*85%*
Multiplayer:	*90%*
Originality:	*25%*
Complexity:	*40%*
Overall rating:	*85%*

The new version of the game was not ready by the time we went to press, but should be available for download in the near future from the Andromeda9 website -- *www.andromeda9.com*. ■