

GENRE: SPACE SIMULATION

# HOMEWORLD

Is it space opera or space hoedown? Strategy masterpiece or Stodgy ring-piece? Let's just say it's somewhere in the middle, shall we?

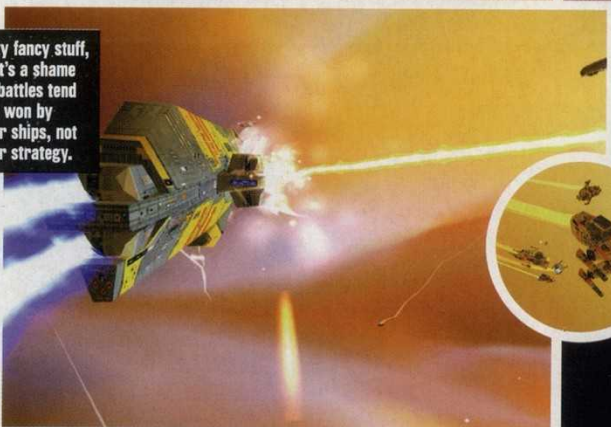


A lovely colour scheme, don't you think?



Bonus points are awarded for making boy-scout knots with your ships trails. Possibly.

Pretty fancy stuff, eh? It's a shame that battles tend to be won by better ships, not better strategy.



**UM, NO**

So you want to really push your new game, do you? Well, can I suggest you sign up Robbie Williams, Blur or Fatboy Slim? Oh, you want something a little more staid? For Christ's sake (and ours), steer clear of rubbish '70s prog rockers Yes, a band so awfully contrived that my brother likes them (he's also into Def Leppard). We'd have preferred a Yes/No option.

**IN** their constant search to adapt existing ideas, intelligent men have come up with the colour TV, instant coffee and the hand-held laser-death-ray. And when intelligent men announced that they were going to take the ever-popular RTS and Set It In Space, there was mucho excitement in the gaming world.

The problem, of course (and it's always troubled development teams working on projects like these) is that some of the elements that make the traditional RTS great just don't exist in space. *TA* improved terrain to incorporate height advantages, for example, but a space-based RTS has no terrain. Space is so empty it hurts. Where to hide? What are your secret strategies? How do you guard a resource area or vulnerable ships?

Publishers Havas claim that *Homeworld* is just as important a game to them as *Half-Life*. Well, sorry to disappoint you, my French friends, but with the best will in the world, those two games are on different planets. If *Homeworld* were a meteor, it would burn up in *Half-Life's* atmosphere.

The frustrating thing is that *Homeworld* is very well-made.

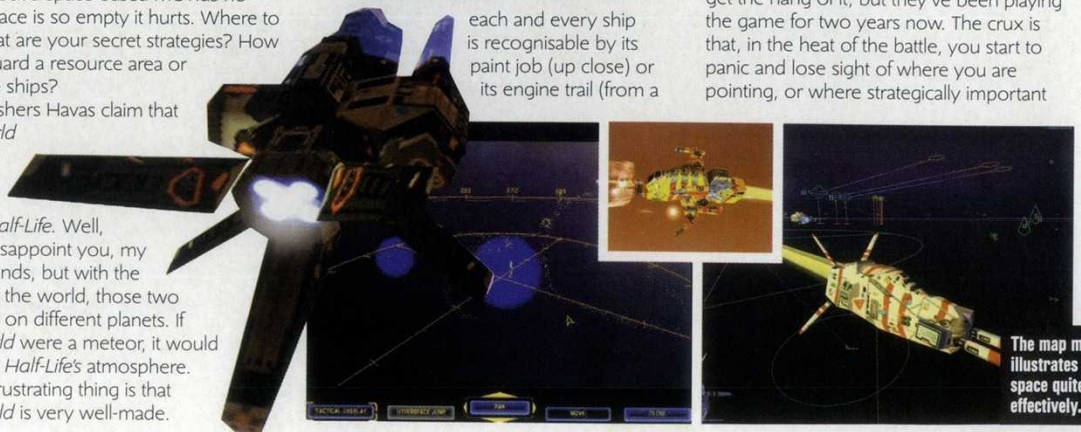
Graphically, it's quite gorgeous. Let's not underestimate the fab idea that lets you customise the colours of your race so that

**"Graphically, Homeworld is quite gorgeous."**

each and every ship is recognisable by its paint job (up close) or its engine trail (from a

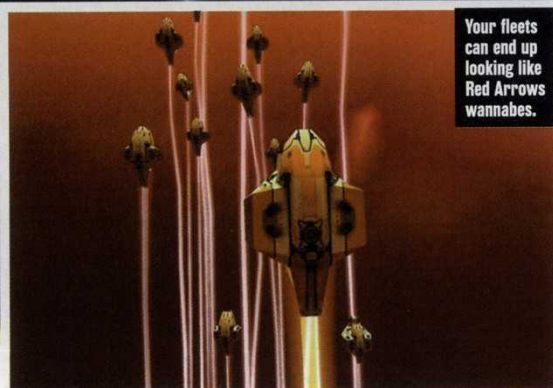
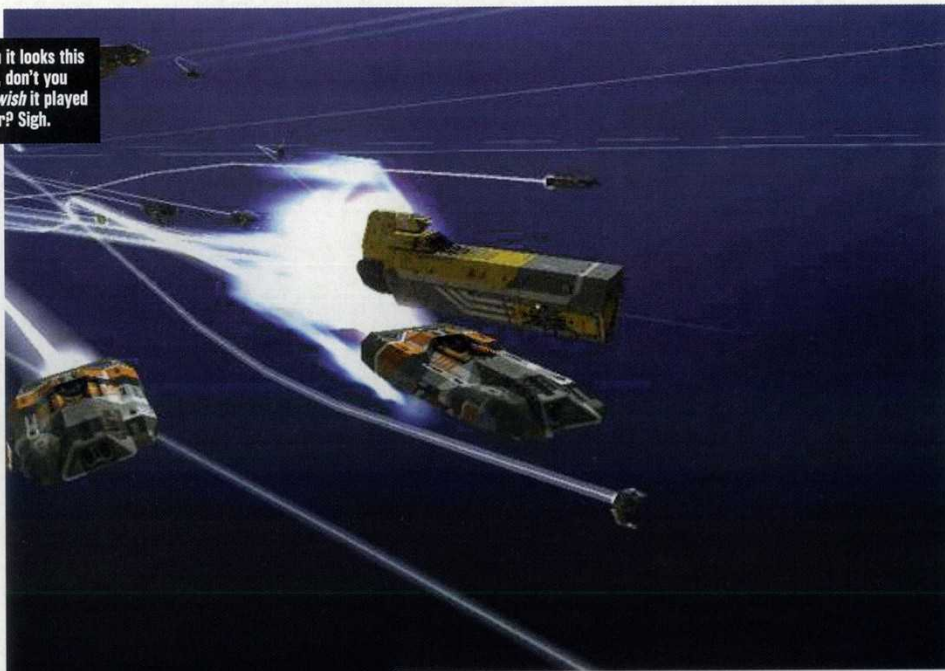
distance). Spacecraft that are little more than dots in the blackness of the void zoom in to become beautifully realised.

*Homeworld's* control system can best be described as 'about as good as it can be'. The right mouse button is used to pan around a point of focus (usually a group or a single ship, although it can just be a spot in space), and both buttons turn on the zoom feature (although a mouse wheel works better). The centre button is used to change the focus, while the left button works in the traditional way of selecting units or giving orders. No doubt developers Relic are happy to talk about how easy it is once you get the hang of it, but they've been playing the game for two years now. The crux is that, in the heat of the battle, you start to panic and lose sight of where you are pointing, or where strategically important



The map mode illustrates 3D space quite effectively.

When it looks this good, don't you just wish it played better? Sigh.

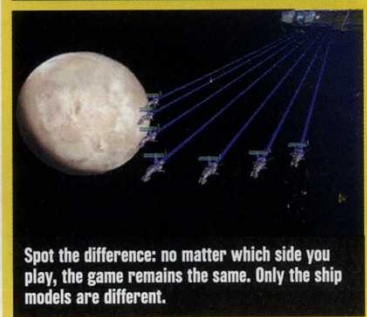
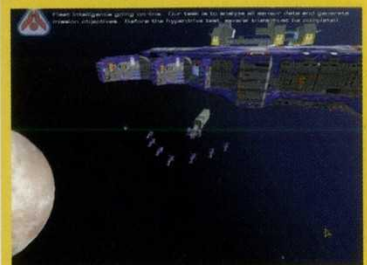


Your fleets can end up looking like Red Arrows wannabes.

**TWO SIDES TO A STORY**

*Homeworld's* tear-jerking plot begins with the discovery of the planet where your race must first have evolved. After dispatching a new hyperdrive ship to investigate, the rest of the race is destroyed (I'm paraphrasing here, but the destruction bit is quite good). Thus, in a *Battlestar Galactica* style, the one lucky ship must return to its home planet and re-establish a civilisation. *Homeworld* is that progression.

When you start the single-player game, you have a choice of two races. Unfortunately, the story is the same for both, and this seems like a wasted opportunity. While you meet various protagonists throughout your journey, there's a recurrent enemy (think Cylons). How much better it would have been if *Homeworld* had given you two distinct campaigns, with the story seen from both sides. Instead, the second race just has different-shaped ships with the same names. Bah.



Spot the difference: no matter which side you play, the game remains the same. Only the ship models are different.

flight groups are. You can group ships using the traditional C&C 'Ctrl-number' technique, but nine hotkeys just aren't enough.

Nevertheless, the battles can be awe-inspiring. On my PII 300, I had more than 50 of my own ships – including fighters and battleships – attacking some 30 advancing enemy craft. Fighters sweep and turn in selectable formations, cruisers loom and light trails intertwine like crazy spaghetti (multi-coloured crazy spaghetti at that). It's frantic and it's thrilling, but you know you're just an observer. The strategy is really in the battleforce you create and arrange, not the attack itself. If you try to see everything, then you can no longer pick out your forces or those of your opponents. In the end it's just a case of selecting all your forces and telling them to attack all enemy craft in the area, occasionally targeting specific ships if these are proving a particular threat.

The AI for the smaller craft seems effective, albeit simplistic, but the larger ships simply and steadfastly blast away at their

# Distant

targets, just too slow to avoid any sudden counter-attacks. The resources on offer are generous, and the level doesn't end until you hyperspace away. This gives you

**"Handcuffed by serious design problems."**

the opportunity to soak up the remaining resources, repairing and reorganising your troops before the next sortie. The missions are tightly scripted, so a few attempts at the

trickier ones give you an indication of which strategies are going to work. Sadly, the outcome usually boils down to how many ships you send into the fray and how many you leave to defend your mothership.

*Homeworld* is disappointing. Sierra's own hype, as well as some glorious demos, had given us high hopes for this game, and while it is hugely enjoyable – thanks to the glorious graphics, non-Yes music (a kind of atmospheric, thoughtful Kula Shaker) and interesting story – it's handcuffed by some serious design problems. A fine example of space-based RTS, then; just not the finest example of RTS.

STEVE OWEN

**PCGAMER PROFILE**

**Homeworld is:**  
 ■ Real-time strategy in space

- Very atmospheric
- Difficult to control at times

**Homeworld is not:**  
 ■ As involving as C&C

- Better with Yes music
- As good as Sierra think

■ Publisher **Havas/Sierra** ■ Developer **Relic** ■ Price **£35** ■ Minimum System **P200, 32Mb RAM, 70Mb HD, Win 95/98** ■ Recommended **Pentium II, 3D card, 342Mb** ■ Graphics Accelerator **Direct3D**  
 ■ Multi-Player **LAN, Internet** ■ Web Address **www.relic.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

**ALSO WORTH A LOOK...**

**Privateer 2: The Darkening** PCG 37, 85%  
 Want a space story and a bit of action? This is EA's finest try to date. And it's on budget.

**C&C: Tiberian Sun** PCG 73, 92%  
 The new strategy champion. Sublimely designed, and set on terra firma.

**PCGAMER**

**Wonderfully constructed and realised strategy story, beset by irksome design problems.**

**78%**