

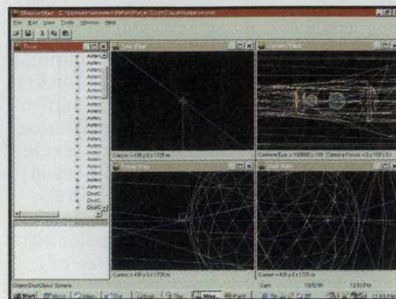
Homeworld

Game of the Month
PC GAMER
 December 1999

CATEGORY: Real-time strategy **DEVELOPER:** Relic **PUBLISHER:** Sierra, (800) 757-7707, www.sierrastudios.com **REQUIRED:** Pentium 200, 32MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM, 100MB hard-drive space, 4MB PCI video card, Windows-compatible sound card **WE RECOMMEND:** Pentium 350, 64MB RAM, 12MB video accelerator card, 600MB hard-drive space **MULTIPLAYER OPTIONS:** Modem, Serial, IPX, TCP/IP, Free Internet play: WON.net, Maximum players: 8

Relic explodes onto the scene with a genre-shattering real-time 3D strategy game that will space you out in more ways than one....

Within a year, we'll know for sure whether *Homeworld* had the same galvanizing effect on the development of strategy games as *Civilization* and *Dune II* did, but one thing is already certain: it moves the genre into compelling new territory. One of the recent hurdles in strategy gaming has been breaking the two-dimensional barrier; with our hands full looking down at units on a map, how could we possibly wrangle massed units that had positions on both the horizontal *and* vertical planes? How could we learn to think and command in three dimensions? With *Homeworld*, Relic provides the answer. *Homeworld's* achievements go far



The MissionMan software is incredibly complex, largely because it's a very, very powerful tool for making custom missions.

beyond moving the 2D combat game into 3D. It's a smart game, not just in gameplay, but in writing and narrative as well. The prime ingredients — graphics engine, control mechanics, scripting, mission structure, and narrative flow — are so fluid, so meticulously integrated that they form a gestalt, an experience that is far more than the sum of its parts. Never, at any point, are you popped out of the game for something so bland as a mission briefing or expository scene. A few stylized black-and-white line animations add flavor to the story arc, but the main drive of the complex and progressively intriguing narrative is handled in-game. Each new

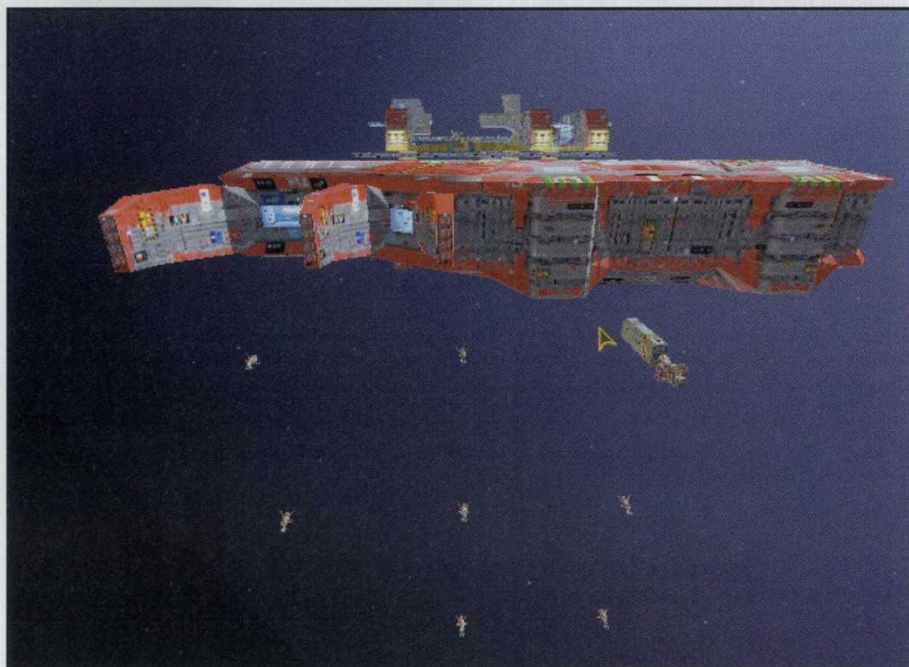


The Sensors Manager screen is essentially a large scale map of the entire area, useful for tracking threats and moving units.

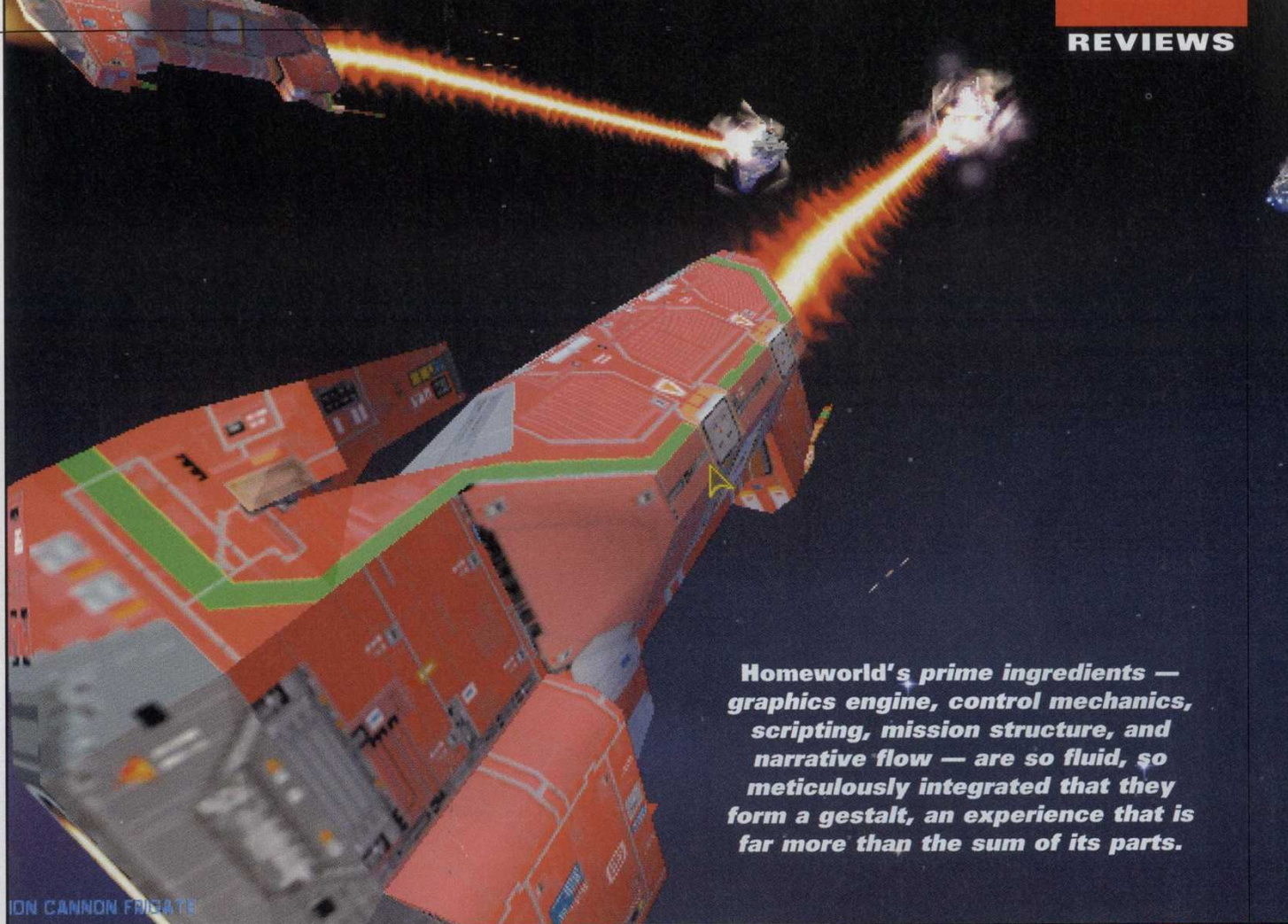
mission is like a chapter in a novel. While you know you'll have some combat and resource harvesting to do, you also know that you'll learn more of the mystery at the heart of the tale.

From the start, *Homeworld* sets a dramatic, somber tone that utterly captivates. Majestic in-game images set to a haunting choral adaptation of Samuel Barber's *Adagio* open the game, immediately involving you in cinematic storytelling so intertwined with gameplay that it's hard to tell where narrative ends and game begins. The story deals with a race called the Kharakid (whom we never really see) and their discovery of an ancient ship that points the way to the homeworld of their ancestors. This is merely the jumping-off point for the narrative, but since the plot twists start right from the tutorial, it's not really fair to spoil too much. It's sufficient to say that these folks have many surprises and setbacks in store as they make their way to the homeworld, meeting some strange ancilliary races along the way: some hostile, some friendly. You can play as one of two races — the Taiidan or the Kushan — with the differences primarily being in five unique ships and the visual style. This is a little confusing, since the Taiidan and the Kushan are both Kharakid, and their missions and narrative are the same.

The journey is centered around a mothership, which functions as carrier and foundry. Using resources harvested from asteroids, dust clouds, gas clouds, and nebulae, the mothership builds support ships, strike craft, and capital ships. Research improves existing ships and allows new models to be built, with 30 different ships altogether. The introduction of new units is well-paced. For instance, multi-turret cruisers appear just as you need them against enemy swarms. Improvements can also be purchased from the enigmatic, star-faring Bentusie.



The launch of the Taiidan mothership as it begins its long journey to discover your homeworld.



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ION CANNON FRIGATE

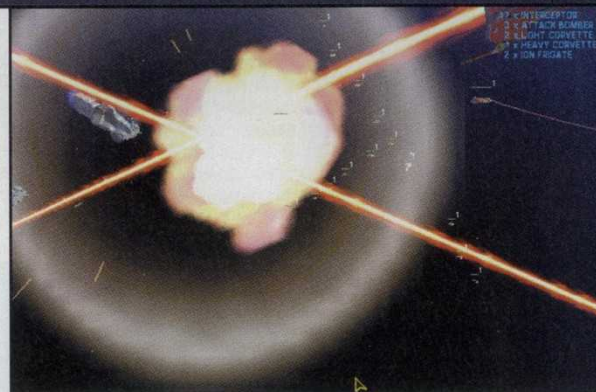
■ These Ion frigates are firing on enemy capital ships. You can place the camera just about anywhere you need to for the best view of the action. The explosions look great.

Units exist in three-dimensional space, which means they can move pretty much anywhere. Control takes a short period of adjustment, but through a combination of keys and mouse, you soon learn how to deal with that third dimension. By grouping units into fleets and formations, it becomes relatively easy to move them about, set attack aggressiveness and formations, and assign targets. This is aided by the ability to view everything from any angle. The main 3D screen — a gorgeous and detailed view of the action — can be zoomed, rotated, or moved anywhere. A larger scale map provides a good

overview of the entire combat area, and enables you to move units over greater distances very easily. It can be a handful at times, requiring you to pause to give orders, but rarely does it overwhelm.

This combination of large-scale fleet actions and cinematic perspectives creates the most impressive space combat ever created for a strategy game. It's like being in the middle of — and in control of — a *Star Wars* battle. Imagine a strategy game with visuals like *Independence War* and a couple hundred space ships seen from a scalable third-person perspective, and you'll have some faint idea of just how mind-blowing an experience *Homeworld* can be.

Mission structure is both a blessing and, until you figure it out, a bane. Early on you learn to beware of event triggers, such as sending a probe to explore that strange beacon at the other end of the map. You realize that it's best not to venture too far without a healthy quantity of banked resources. You also have to stop thinking as you would in a standard strategy game (one whose missions have separate goals). In essence, the single-player game is one huge mission broken into locations, chapters, and short-term goals. The ships you build early on can stay with you most of a game if you treat them with care. The unique flow of



17 CORUSSEFFOR
13 ATTACK BOMBER
2 LIGHT CORVETTE
1 HEAVY CORVETTE
2 ION FRIGATE

Homeworld is achieved by tying the missions to the narrative and the narrative to the journey of your mothership. The mothership must survive at all costs. It functions as both a carrier, repair craft, and unit builder. You "complete" one mission by entering hyperdrive. All your ships load onto the mothership, and the whole thing hyperdrives to a new location, where they offload to deal with new challenges.

These goals can change in the course of a mission. Even when a task is completed and the mothership hyperjumps out of the area, you may be rudely surprised to find yourself right back in the previous location with even greater headaches. I'm thinking specifically about Chapter 6, where you need to deal with the Protectors of the Gardens by fending off wave after wave of attackers while the hyperdrive charges. This takes eight



■ Almost all narrative is handled within the game engine, and progresses not only mission to mission but within missions as well.

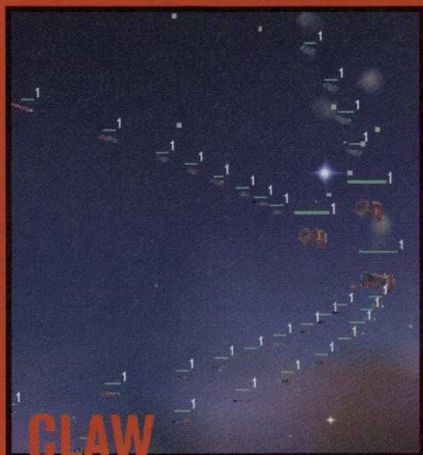
USING FORMATIONS

All these formations sure are pretty, but how exactly do you use them, and when? A controversial question among *Homeworlders*, particularly of the online sort, but here are a few approaches that have proven effective.



BROAD

"Parade formation" is mostly good for organizing your vessels before breaking them into smaller formations, but isn't much good for combat.



CLAW

This formation works best for a large fleet based around a core of capital ships. It is certainly the best way to approach a major battle and focus fire on a cap ship. Cap ships can lag behind at the core of the claw while interceptors and corvettes form the talons. Used in conjunction with smaller wedge groupings, it is very effective in full-out battles, since it allows a long duration of sustained fire.



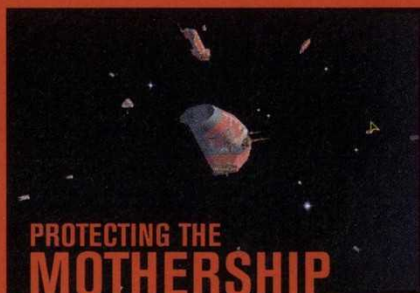
DELTA

One of *Homeworld's* features is the ability to bind units to more than one group. Binding an entire fleet to group 1, for instance, enables you to approach a battlezone in a tight claw formation. Binding individual, smaller groups of maneuverable interceptors, corvettes, and cruisers within this large formation enables you to splinter off faster attack groups for strafing runs. I've found that splitting some ships into wedge-shaped assault groups creates the most flexible solution to lightning-fast attack and retreats. Wedge is a good fighter formation, and on a straight-on pass at a target creates a strong concentration of fire.



PROTECTING THE COLLECTOR

A harvester force group should also be assigned to a single key. At least two resource collectors should be included, along with one resource controller. Don't split the collectors up. Let them work in close proximity to better protect them, like a shipping convoy. You can move through the resource fields quickly and efficiently this way. With two collectors and a controller, you'll want at least 20 interceptors, 10 multi-gun corvettes, and an assault frigate or two. Remember that your collectors are always the first target. Use a line of probes to keep an eye on other approaches to the mothership and collector so there are no ugly surprises.



PROTECTING THE MOTHERSHIP

A custom configuration is best for guarding the mothership from all angles of attack, particularly in multiplayer. You'll need to manually position individual ships and groups of ships in space around the mothership, and then bind them all to the same key for easy reference. Top, bottom, left, right, front, and rear all need to be accounted for: you're building a box. It's best to do this in defensive lines, like ripples in water. On the inside line, closest to the mothership, station heavy cruisers at all six points, fairly close to the ship. Leave a repair corvette or two on the inside line as well. In the second line of defense, try to create a "box" of assault frigates two-to-six units long. These have the best firing arcs and can stay put.



SPHERE

I had only used this as a purely defensive formation before talking to designer Alex Garden, who informed me of the "Sphere of Death." By setting Sphere formation and picking a single large target, your fleet will form a sphere around that target and fire *in* at it from every direction. It works!



X

The X is a tight little formation that provides good support and fair flexibility in a full-scale furball. It's better than Claw for attacking multiple smaller targets, but not quite as good for hitting major targets due to the wider spread of fire.

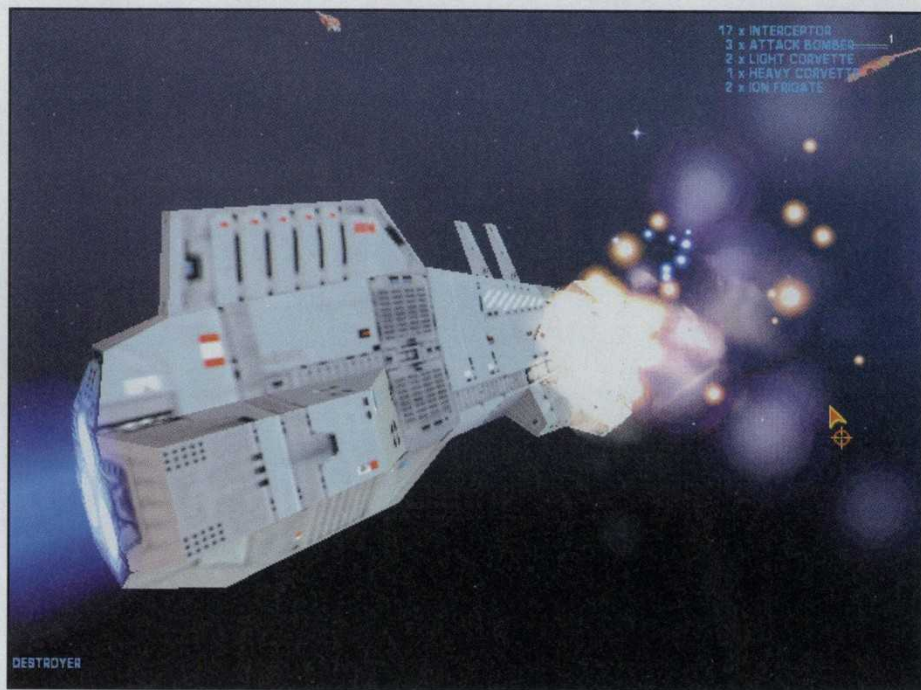


WALL

Wall is best used when positioning mothership defenders, where it helps evenly space your inner and outer "walls" of frigates.



■ Ion frigates have a powerful beam, but narrow firing arc and poor maneuverability, so they're best hanging back from serious swarms.



■ This is a view of the enemy under fire. You can shift attacks and concentrate fire with amazing versatility using just a few simple keystrokes. Once you learn the basics of game control, playing is a snap.

satisfying, story. Hosting via WON.net comes complete with a matching lobby, and the early popularity of the title will ensure plenty of opponents to choose

from. Games can handle up to eight players and be configured for harvesting or no-harvesting options. Bounty Hunter mode rewards kills with resources, and a "chess" variant provides a fixed group of units with no resources. The basic multiplayer structure, however, is a

defend base/harvest/kill-everyone style of play. The difference comes in pursuing new technology, which is not parsed out chapter by chapter as in the solo missions but is more like a tech tree. The mothership can also move and hyperjump around the map. The MissionMan mission editing software is mind-bendingly complex, but also very powerful.

Homeworld's greatest obstacle to best-seller status will be proving to people that it doesn't have a steep learning curve, despite how complex the controls and presentational seem at first glance. A very thorough tutorial, excellent documentation, and a clear key card make it

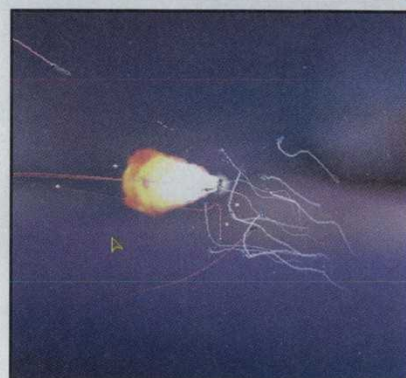
minutes, and is essentially an Alamo situation. After you've spent uncounted ships and resources buying that precious eight minutes and quickly engage hyperdrive, the hyperdrive fails; three satellites create a force field that prevents the drive from working. These must be destroyed but — guess what! — the Alamo is still under siege and by this time you're down to a skeleton force and no resources. I was socked so hard by this mission that I had to go back *three* missions and collect *every single* resource on the map to build a larger fleet in preparation. I wasn't very keen on this particular juncture of the game, since it was wholly unexpected, but it was an object lesson in having to think in streamlined, realistic terms. The end of a mission isn't a Get Out of Jail Free card.

Which brings us to the central "issue" with *Homeworld*. (If you're a more negative type, substitute "problem" for "issue.") The single-player game is fairly short for experienced players. I played as the Taiden and finished in about 12 hours. Times will vary

from ten hours (experienced gamers) to 25 (relative novices), and there are no difficulty levels to help stretch this out.

Happily, the multiplayer aspect of the game is a very different, and quite

The combination of large-scale fleet actions and cinematic perspectives creates the most impressive space combat ever created for a strategy game. It's like being in the middle of — and in control of — a Star Wars battle.



■ A zoomed out view of...spermatozoa? No, those are the trails left by ships, which helps tell heading. Each side has a different color.

easy to begin playing. Once you know the controls, it's no more difficult to manage than *StarCraft* or *Command & Conquer*, and the rewards are many. This is an utterly unique and completely satisfying game experience that is destined to become a classic. There is no question that *Homeworld* will be seen as a turning point: the historic site at which real-time strategy entered the next dimension.

—T. Liam McDonald



■ Interceptors are the fast, plentiful first line of defense, doing all the nasty work and swarming the enemy.

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS: Slick, innovative design; unlimited cinematic views; strong multiplayer support.

93%

LOWS: Solo play time can be very short.

BOTTOM LINE: Engrossing real-time strategy matched to a vital and visually intense story make this a gaming experience like none other.