

★ £34.99 • Sierra • Out now

Well, Sierra's new space extravaganza has certainly taken its time getting here.

Paul Presley counts off the days

TECH SPECS

MINIMUM SYSTEM Processor P200 with MMX **Memory** 32Mb RAM, 1Mb PCI video card **WE SAY** It chugged in software mode on a PII 300 with 64Mb RAM, so we recommend a 3D card of any sort and those specs as a minimum

PCZONE CLASSIC

The moment I knew I was totally hooked on *Homeworld* came when I found myself still in the PC ZONE office at 9.30 on a Friday night, wondering if I could talk a rapidly fading Richie into having another multiplayer game. This is what *Homeworld* is really all about. It's what gaming is really all about. Moments. Those moments when, just for an instant, you're suddenly hopelessly lost in the totality of the gaming experience. You forget everything that's going on around you and become completely swept up in the moment. *Homeworld* is full of them.

THOSE MOMENTS IN FULL

For instance: a battle between several dozen fighters is going badly for me. I'm on the run, using evasive manoeuvres to try to stay alive, but I have totally underestimated my opponent's firepower. All is lost. But then,

I'm grinning from ear to ear like an insane child. I'm totally lost in the moment.

A large battle is, for a change, going pretty well. I've already got the upper hand and suddenly my freshly built reinforcements arrive on the scene. This is too much for the enemy ships and they actually turn and run. The sight of them bugging out is enough to make me feel totally euphoric and I actually give a cheer. I'm totally lost in the moment. Incidentally, out of curiosity I send a scout to follow them. It turns out they've fled towards a couple of support frigates just out of my sensor range to repair, refuel and rearm. I honestly think it's the first time I've seen a computer AI actually work to preserve its forces in a strategy game. Very impressive.

Another battle has gone badly and there's just one of my fast-attack fighters left. I have no reinforcements anywhere near him and the enemy is just too great in numbers to escape. I switch the tactics to 'evasive' and watch helplessly as he begins to duck and weave erratically, trying to fend off the inevitable for as long as possible. He's really

“Homeworld is one of those games that wasn't born with a genre in mind on the desk of a management executive”

emerging out of the distance, I spot a couple of my heavy assault craft, slowly entering the field of battle like the proverbial cavalry. A complete feeling of relief sweeps over my whole body at the mere sight of them. I'm totally lost in the moment.

I've just built my first two ion cannon frigates and have sent them into a pitched battle against several enemy fighters, supported by a large assault vessel. I tell them to attack while the fighter escort takes care of the smaller ships and can almost hear the weapon systems powering up. A searing bolt of blue light screams from one of the frigates and slices into the assault ship. I can practically feel the impact.

putting up a brave fight, giving it his all, but finally succumbs and bites the dust. I feel genuinely sad and just a little bit proud of his noble effort. I'm totally lost in the moment.

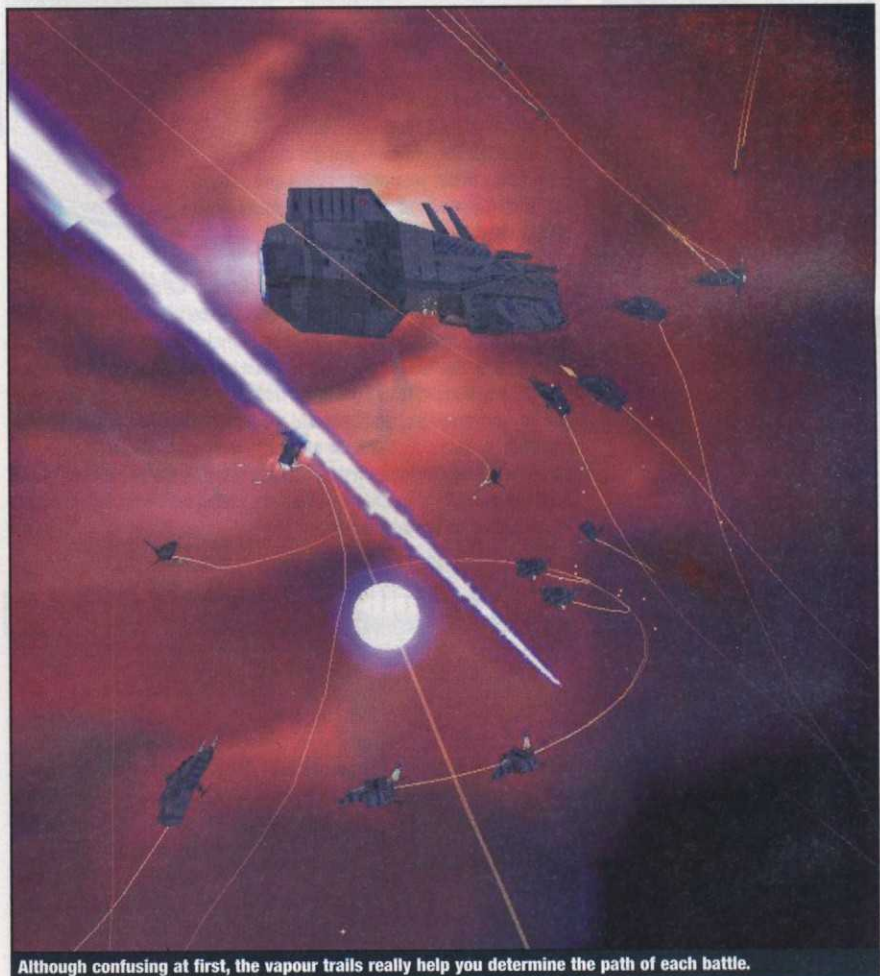
I BET THE WUSS CRIED

There are plenty of other moments like this and I'm sure you'll have your own stories to tell when you play the game. And play it you should, because if you haven't already figured it out (or glanced at the score), *Homeworld* is a superb game.

It's hard to pin down to one particular category. Part resource management, part space combat sim, part wargame, *Homeworld* is one

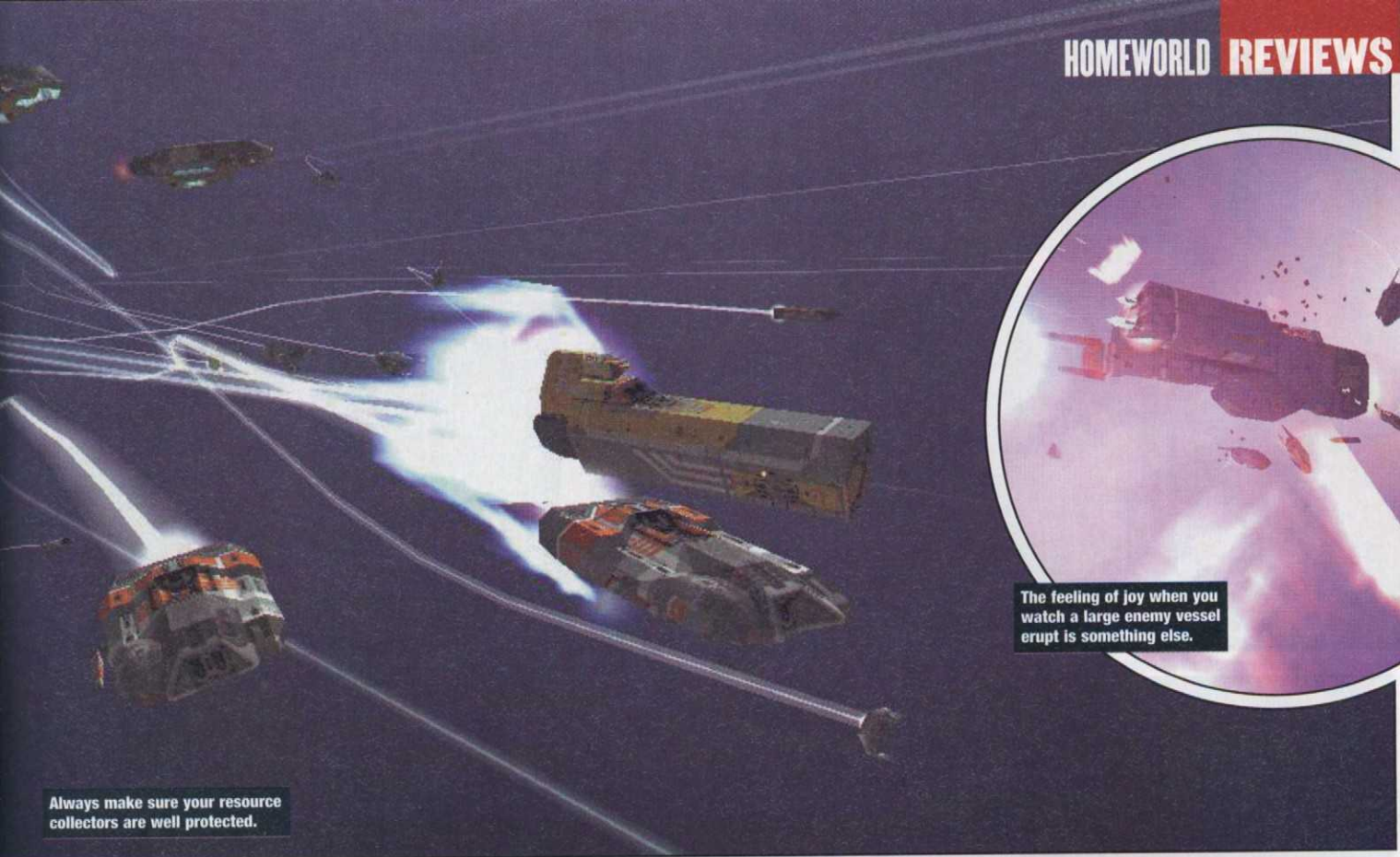


Two big capital ships duke it out.



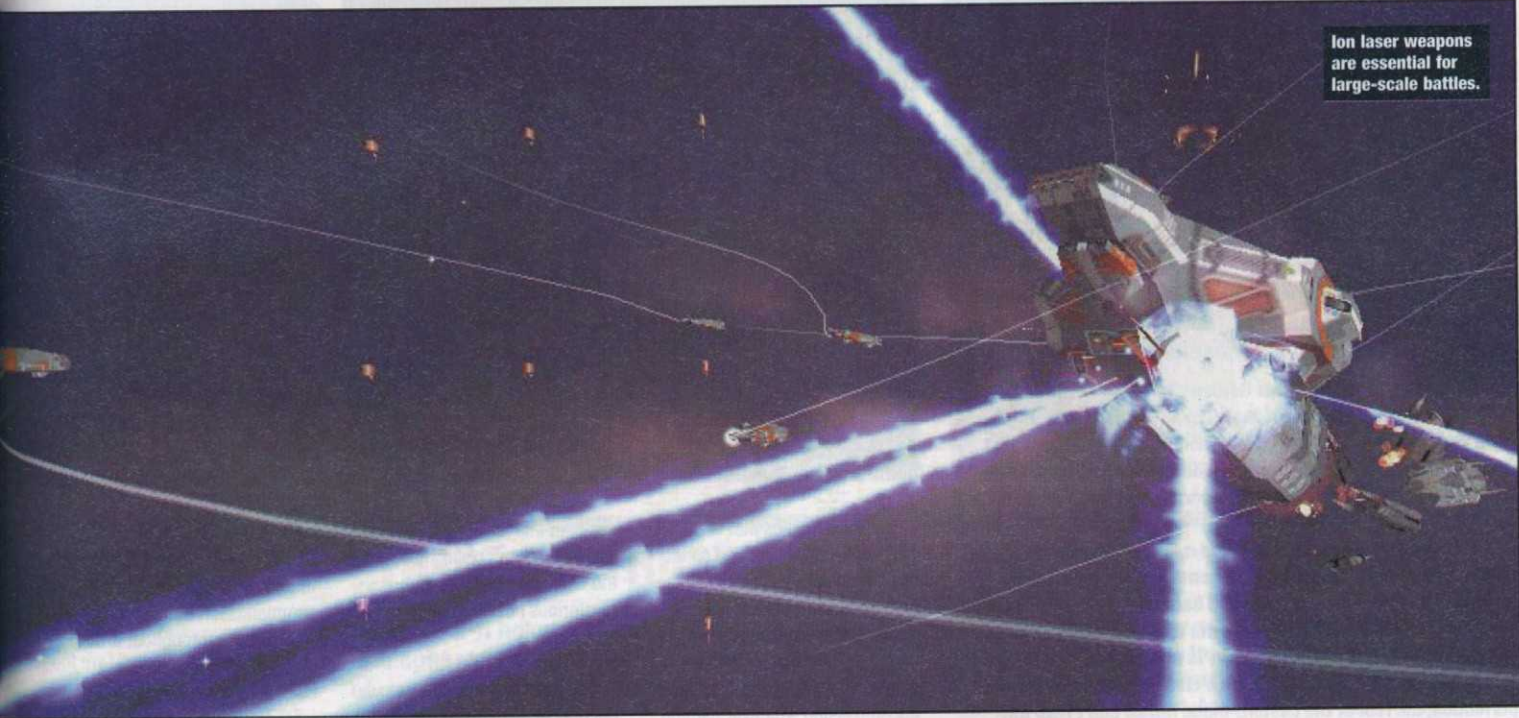
Although confusing at first, the vapour trails really help you determine the path of each battle.

HOM



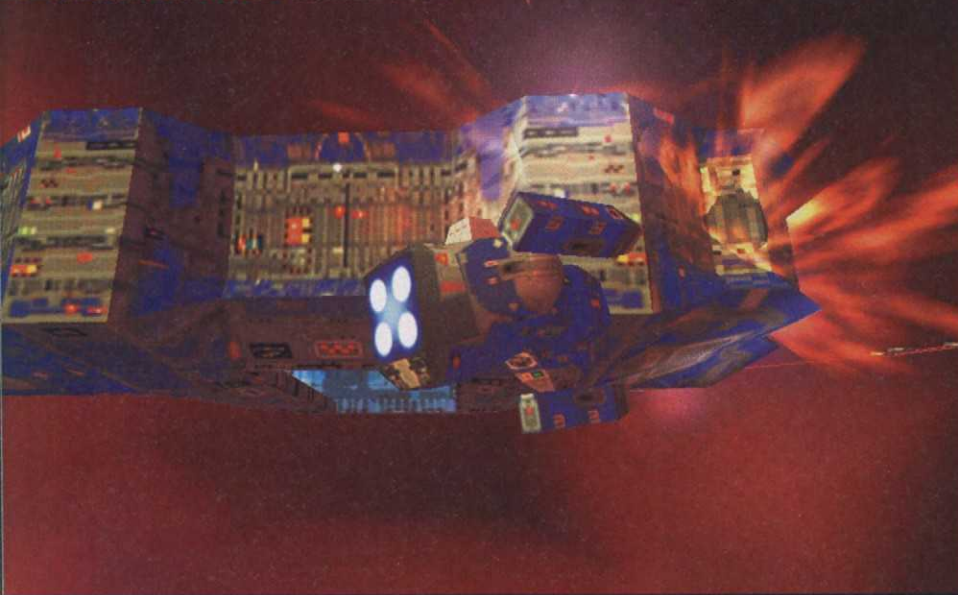
The feeling of joy when you watch a large enemy vessel erupt is something else.

Always make sure your resource collectors are well protected.



Ion laser weapons are essential for large-scale battles.

EWORLD



If your mothership goes, that's it. Game over. So make sure it's defended well.



The Build Manager is where you spend your resource units. Choose wisely as half of each battle is won or lost right here.



The Research Manager is perhaps the weakest part of the game. There's nothing really innovative on offer here and no real technology 'branching' à la Civilization.



Formations are all-important in combat. Here we see 'The Claw' being used to good effect.



Now these boys knew how to ROCK!!!

ADAGIO FOR LIGHTSHOWS

The musical side of *Homeworld* for once deserves as much attention as the graphics, but not necessarily for the right reasons

The story of lead designer Alex Garden's 'flash of inspiration' on hearing Samuel Barber's *Adagio For Strings* one morning has been well documented and it's a testament to his integrity that the stirring classical piece has remained in the game, not to be replaced by some thumping techno drum-hop trance beats for the 'now' generation.

Ironically, this dogged persistence might be the reason the music doesn't quite gel in the final game. It's not Mr Barber's fault. *Adagio* remains as stirring and hauntingly beautiful as ever, even more so when combined with the epic nature of the game's cinematic opening scenes. What jars is actually the rest of the music. Because we open with such a classical piece of audio perfection, the rest of the custom-made music can't help but fall behind. What's worse is that the style changes. Instead of remaining with the classical flavour, we are instead assaulted with a sort of sub-Jean Michel Jarre repertoire, circa his 'industrial Arabic' period. In short, it gets old, quick.

But an even more bizarre musical tale revolves around – wait for it – Seventies lightshow pioneers Yes. It seems the boys from Relic and the ageing beardos came together and *Homeworld's* themes and style so inspired lead vocalist Jon Anderson that he wrote a song based on it. To quote the man himself: "The game is very similar to thoughts that are common to human beings. We're all trying to find our way home."

The song is to be included on their new album *The Ladder* – out now, pop-pickers. Personally, we've not rated Yes since the seminal (and cruelly misunderstood) *Arriving UFO* came out in 1972. You know, sometimes you miss the level-headed sensibilities of Rick Wakeman. And I never thought I'd see myself typing *those words*.



Co-ordinate your attacks in the hope of a successful gambit.

of those games that wasn't born with a genre in mind on the desk of a management executive with degrees in Market Trend Spotting and Bandwagon Jumping. This started with a single vision and grew from there, encompassing whatever gaming genres it happened to pass on the way.

The storyline is straightforward enough and actually provides the gameplay with its shape. An ancient race has discovered a map buried in a ruin beneath a desert that points the way to their species' original home planet. An expedition is mounted, a new class of giant spacecraft is constructed and undergoes a series of hyperspace trial runs. However, while the ship is away from the planet, a hostile force invades and destroys everything. You have no choice left but to

seek out this fabled 'homeworld' and rebuild your civilisation, all the while pursued by the mysterious hostile force.

BY YOUR COMMAND

The real beauty is that Relic have not only managed to portray all this in stunning visual quality but have also made a user interface that allows you the freedom to play out any military tactic you can think of, issue just about any

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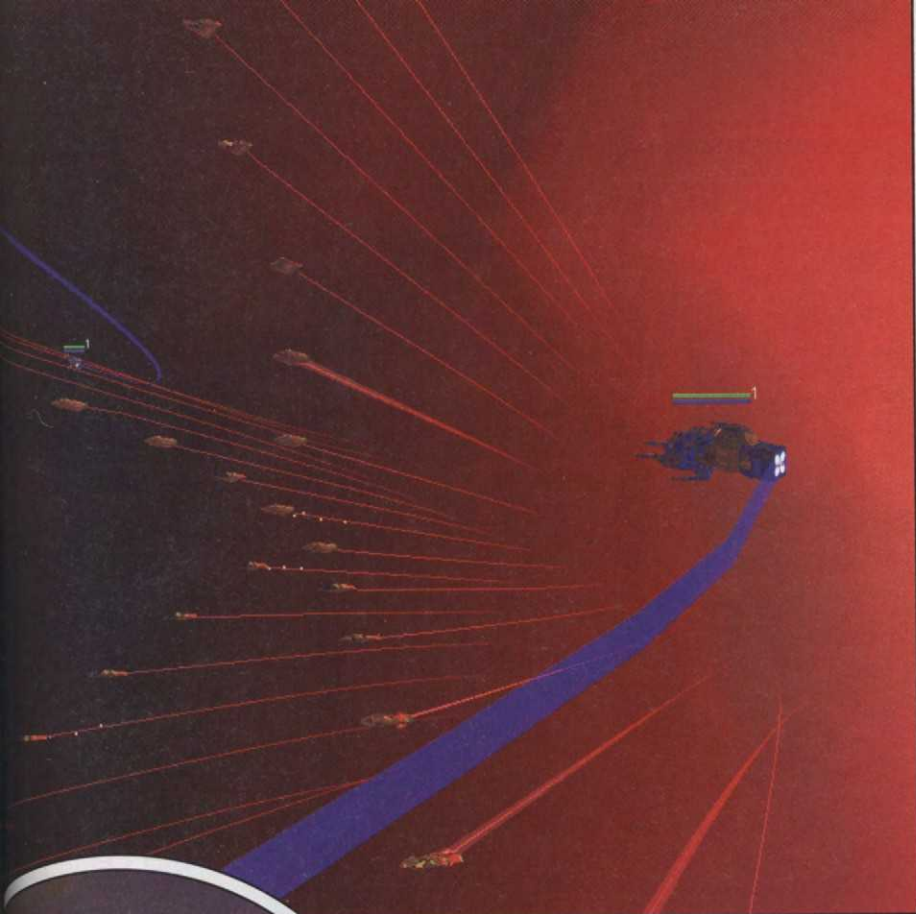
type of command you want, yet remain practically invisible on the screen and be instinctive enough to grasp it within about ten minutes of play. It's a stunning

achievement. No menus to sort through, just a game to play (well there is one menu, but all the commands have simple hotkeys).

Your task throughout is as straightforward as the story. Use your mothership to manufacture units, mine asteroid fields and dust clouds for vital resource materials, build up a steadily advancing fleet while researching new technologies and fulfilling the objectives of

each particular mission. And fight the enemy. A lot.

This, above all else, is where *Homeworld* proves itself in the world of strategy combat games.



Communication with your mothership and fleet controllers keeps you abreast of events and provides you with your mission objectives.



Attacking the enemy mothership is futile unless you have a lot of guns.

With most titles that fall into this vaguely defined category, there's usually a 'golden route'. Take *Birth Of The Federation*, for instance. As soon as you'd figured out the best way to develop each new colony and built a big enough fleet, the whole game became a process of repeating the same formula over and over until you won. You tend to find that most strategy games, once you've figured out the optimum path to take, become little more than exercises in repetition.

But *Homeworld* has somehow managed to free itself – and the genre – from this scenario. The balance of unit types available, combined with the way they interact, the alarmingly impressive tactical mind of the computer AI and the openness of the whole game means there is never a golden route that



“THERE ARE THOSE WHO BELIEVE...”

Cheesy sci-fi hokum, Mormon teachings turned into light entertainment and a constant source of pay cheques for Dirk Benedict. It inspired *Homeworld*, too...

You look at *Homeworld* and can't help playing 'spot the sci-fi influences'. The zippy little fighters attacking big capital ships say *Star Wars*, naturally. The mix of gun turrets and ion beam 'cutting' weapons (plus the overly CGI visual style and large-scale battle scenes) practically scream *Babylon 5*. But the biggest parallel is the mid-eighties, Glen A Larson extravaganza that was *Battlestar Galactica*.

Relic's Alex Garden makes no bones of the fact that he's a huge fan of the show and would dearly have loved to make the officially licensed *Galactica* game. Take *Homeworld's* storyline: the last survivors of an entire race setting off across the galaxy in whatever ships remain, pursued by a malevolent alien race hell-bent on their destruction, searching for their fabled home planet. Throw in Richard Hatch and you've got yourself a TV show *Sparky*. But sadly, the licence was not to be, so a thinly-disguised tribute to what we're left with.

I'VE GOT MY ION YOU

If there's one thing we like, it's a *big* gun...



DEFENDER
It may be slow, but this thing is the Tony Adams of *Homeworld*. It stands there in the heart of your defence and, should anything come near it, just dives in feet first and obliterates the enemy.



CLOAKED FIGHTER
No strategy game would be complete without a 'sneaky bastard' unit and *Homeworld's* is the Cloaked Fighter. Does exactly what it says on the tin.

There's also a Cloak Generator unit available further down the line that can hide multiple ships in its energy field.



MULTI-GUN CORVETTE
Like the many arms of Vishnu, no less than six fully articulated gun turrets adorn this baby. It can take on an entire squadron of fighters by itself, making it an ideal first-strike craft.



ION CANNON FRIGATE
When mere projectile weapons aren't enough, you want an ion cannon on the scene. Useless against fast-moving fighters, the devastating ion beam is used to slice through an enemy capital ship's armour. Think of the Death Star's weapon and you'll know what I mean.



HEAVY CRUISER
As *Homeworld's* manual puts it: "When a Heavy Cruiser shows up, things get really quiet, really fast." This thing has FOUR ion cannons and six regular gun turrets, each one the size of an entire corvette.

However, there are those who believe the only true way to enjoy *Homeworld* is to turn off all the game's music options, get hold of the CD soundtrack to the TV series and have it playing in the background when you start. And do you know, you can just about convince yourself (yes, I've tried it). All together now: "Fleeing from the Cylon tyranny, the last Battlestar, Galactica, leads a ragtag, fugitive fleet, on a lonely quest – for a shining planet known as... Earth." (Ooh, what a giveaway.)

Perhaps they should call the A-Team?





“It feels like being in command of any giant space battle you’ve ever seen in a film or television sci-fi show”

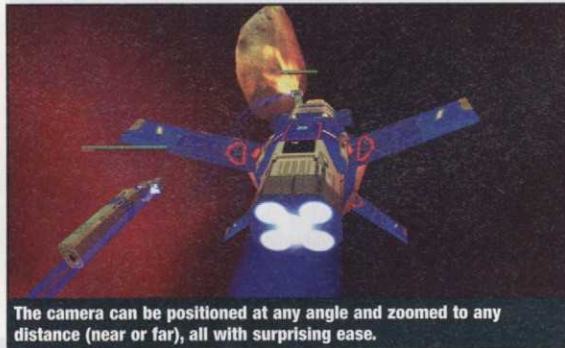
Support ships provide much needed repair and refuelling facilities for strike craft on long-range sorties.

If all else fails, you can even issue a ‘kamikaze’ order to individual units. Do or die, son. Do or die.

The training sections are well presented and easy to follow.



Can anyone make head or tail of this?



The camera can be positioned at any angle and zoomed to any distance (near or far), all with surprising ease.



Mining asteroids and dust fields is essential for survival. Resource collectors are therefore among the most precious of your units.

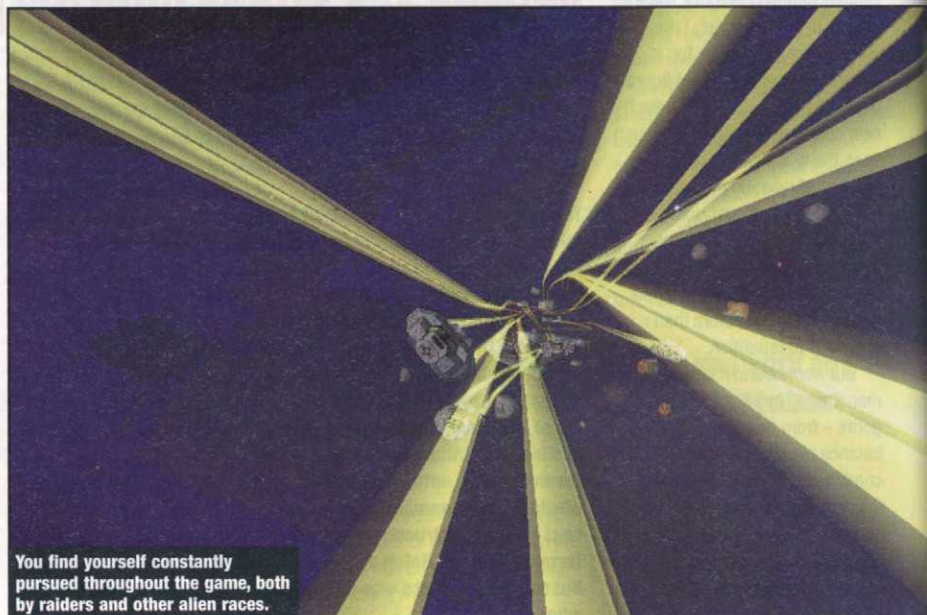
SON, I'M GONNA MAKE YOU A STAR... AND A GAS CLOUD

Homeworld comes with its own mission editor, but then doesn't everything?

Admittedly, with a game set in the vast emptiness of space, you don't immediately think there'll be very much use for a mission editor. But there's a deceptive amount of variety available to you in the MissionMan program that comes with the full game. This is mainly down to the game's open-ended strategy aspect.

Unlike the level editors of *Unreal*, *Half-Life* and the rest, where you're essentially creating mazes with set obstacles to overcome, here you're concerned with the distribution of starting units, the amount, size and locations of resources and how different players will make use of them. It's actually bordering on hardcore wargame territory, but since it looks so nice we'll let that pass.

The only downside to MissionMan is that it looks so hideously complex to use and comes with such a spartan manual that you tend to approach it with extreme caution.



You find yourself constantly pursued throughout the game, both by raiders and other alien races.



The intro sequence and mid-game FMVs actually use the pre-production artwork. Oddly enough, it works really well.



Individual ships actually gain experience as they win more battles. The trick is keeping them alive long enough in the early stages to do so.



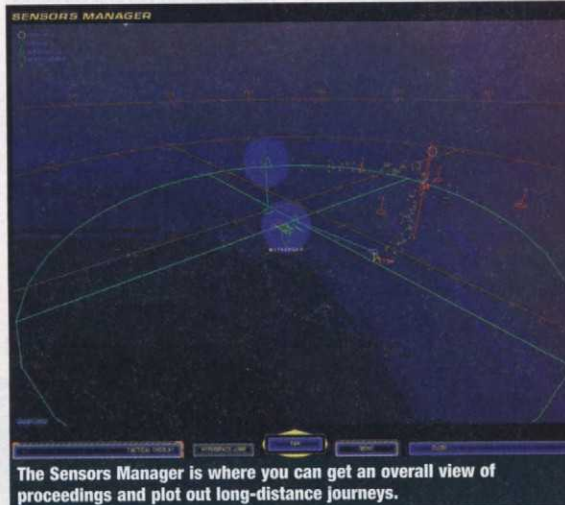
The game occasionally breaks into automated sequences to further the storyline.



Long-range probes can offer vital intelligence on the enemy or act as perimeter boundaries.



The two-player races don't have many differences other than one or two alternative units.



The Sensors Manager is where you can get an overall view of proceedings and plot out long-distance journeys.

← ensures victory. You find yourself formulating military strategies as you take a break to go for a slash. It feels like being in command of any giant space battle you've ever seen in a film or sci-fi television show. *Homeworld* is about letting you work out how to be victorious in battle, not about how to 'solve' a computer game. And when a plan works, oh man, it feels good.

NIT-PICKING CORNER

Are there faults? A couple, although they're not so much faults as areas that could have worked better. The most notable is the inability to issue orders while the game is paused. There are times when things are so hectic that you need to pause it, take stock of the situation and be able to issue the odd command or two. It's a personal thing but it would have been a nice option.

ALSO CONSIDER

IMPERIUM GALACTICA (GT Interactive, £9.99) A sort of catch-all strategy title comprising C&C ground combat, *Masters Of Orion* resource management and *Birth Of The Federation* space colonisation. All it lacked was a decent space combat section, which the imminent sequel will address. A cheap alternative to *Homeworld*.

PCZ #64, 77%

STAR TREK: STARFLEET COMMAND (Virgin Interactive, £34.99) Similar sort of space combat meets strategy, but nowhere near as deep, engaging or fun as *Homeworld*. About the only thing it has going for it is the licence.

PCZ #81, 83%

COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIAN SUN (Electronic Arts, £34.99) The big-name strategy title of the summer, which is a shame because *Homeworld* is better. A lot better. And a lot more original to boot.

PCZ #81, 90%

The main disappointment is the research section. Although it does an adequate job, there's nothing really innovative about it and it's little more than a way to ration out the introduction of each new unit type. This is a shame, because every other part of the game shows so much originality of thought and innovative design that this just seems kind of tacked on – only there because it's expected.

MIDNIGHT ON THE FIRING LINE

But this is all petty stuff. *Homeworld* does such a good job of sucking you in, making you feel at home and letting you enjoy the actual game that any criticisms are so minor as to not matter. What it does, it does superbly. The storyline is so well integrated into the game that you'll keep coming back, and for once the multiplayer 'deathmatch' mode is more than just a gratuitous option. Once again, the freedom allowed to the player means every battle feels fresh and the enemy's AI constantly surprises you with new twists.

Homeworld's biggest asset is, as I said at the start, its ability to lose you completely in its universe and make you relish each memorable gaming moment. Isn't that what you really want from your games these days? [X]

PCZ VERDICT

- UPPERS Thoroughly absorbing gameplay • Visually stunning • Incredibly fluid and easy to control
- DOWNERS Standard research section • Doesn't have the official *Battlestar Galactica* licence • Hard to find criticisms for a balanced review

94 The most rewarding game you'll play this year. Simple as that

LOST ON THE WAY

Homeworld was originally due out in March. What the hell kept it?

Sometimes, as a journalist, your instincts kick in when you see an early project. A hunch tells you when something is going to be big. That was how I felt when I was first shown the game in September 1998. The odd thing is that what I remember of the game back then doesn't look a hell of a lot different to what I'm playing now.

Last December, I was sitting in Relic's Vancouver offices, enjoying an

after-hours game of multiplayer *Half-Life*, and musing on how the game I'd spent the day being shown around still looked fabulous and still played superbly, but didn't actually appear to be any different. I'm sure they must have been working on *something* in all that time. Probably the AI. Developers are always 'working on the AI'. I dropped the matter and went back to being killed by Relic's lead artist.

Now we're in October (or at least we will be by the time you read this) and still nothing, on the face of things, seems to be any different. Even more intriguingly, the game has been held back several times – not just from its initial release date of March 1999, but also about three times in the past two months. So what is going on?

The official answer, which is probably truthful enough, is that it's

been undergoing constant bug-testing and game balancing. The same thing happened to Blizzard's *StarCraft*, after all. Certainly a game with such an open-ended, non-linear and highly strategic nature would require extensive testing before it goes 'gold' (as we say in the games business). Plus – take it from personal experience – Relic's Alex Garden is a real perfectionist.