

Graduate Blog

Rantings of a semi-conscious graduate student -- take with a grain of salt.

The RTS Struggle

Posted by chathaway on Nov. 1, 2016, 1:20 a.m.

During all my free time, which as a graduate student, which I totally have a ton of (no, sarcasm, of course), I've been searching for a good RTS game to play. If you know if one, please leave it in the comments! This blog post documents my attempts at playing various games; I will record what impressions of the game were, how it compared to the "gold standard", and whether or not I returned the game before Steam's grace period was up.

Note that I try these games for a maximum of 2 hours, then make a snap judgement. I don't have a ton of discretionary income for games, so if I don't love them, I return them and continue with my search.

The Gold Standard

My favorite RTS game of all time is Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance. This is a game that came out in 2007, based in the far-future where war is waged by giant robots which teleport to a planet and construct armies to destroy other giant robots.

There are a ton of reasons this game is gold; but the most important are:

- Direct IP connect (see <http://logrit.com/blog/good-games-need-ian>)
- Strategic Zoom - at any point in a game, you can simply scroll your mouse wheel out so far that you are looking at the entire map; all the units are clear icons, you can see lines representing weapon range, radar/sonar range, etc. To look at a new place, simply move your mouse over it and zoom in; it zooms into where your mouse is pointing
- Continuous resources - This is a bit of a weird word for it, but basically you don't need to stockpile 10k wood before you can start building something; start building it, and resources will be subtracted from your stockpile (which is usually empty) at whatever rate is needed; this allows for much more crafty use of economics
- Just enough variety in factions without being overwhelming; I concede it could benefit from some diversity here, but every faction has very similar mechanics with slightly different strengths and weaknesses
- Diversity of winning plays -- there are at least a dozen ways to win, and it changes every game. Alongside this, there are a ton of different "layers" to the game; what you can see, radar, shields, sonar, tactical missiles, strategic missiles, ground, air, naval units, etc.

Although the games had the potential to be long, they were usually quite rewarding. The AI could be fairly challenging, especially when you added in the "Sorian AI" mod, which made the AI much smarter.

Supreme Commander 2

This game does not actually exist. There is a game that goes by this title, but it is only related to FA in the title. The gameplay is entirely different; from the economy, to the shields, to the way technology is "researched" (note that in the first game, you never researched anything).

But it has strategic zoom, so there's that.

Cossacks 3

I played Cossacks 3 for 1.2 hours I believe. It is a solid, good for reminiscing, Age of Empires II clone. Down to researching new epochs. They added a lot; it's bigger than AOE2, but basically the same.

My biggest issue was the lack of strategic zoom and the fact that it was all about stockpiling. That, and the way the units "stacked" in such a way as to have 50 spearmen poking one guy so he dies instantly, left me very underwhelmed. I could picture playing this with friends, if they already had it, but I wouldn't push people to buy it.

Galactic Civilizations 3

Turns out, despite other websites saying it was, this is NOT a RTS. It is a turn-based space crawler, which has plenty of interesting mechanics and a great of diversity for units. But since it's not an RTS, it wasn't what I was looking for.

I played this game for 15 minutes.

Ashes of the Singularity

This game got closer than any other! Even closer than Supreme Commander 2! But alas, it was not meant to be.

The most difficult thing to me was something not easily redeemed; the graphics. The colors look cartoonish, and make it difficult for me to focus on the fun aspects of the game.

On top of there; there is no strategic zoom. Although they got the economy right (as I recall, it's been a while), it does not focus enough on the micro scale, and everything should be done using the "army" unit. A giant ship (dreadnaught? battleship? I forget what it's called) organizes your armies, and helps you control the thousands of ships on the battlefield.

Biggest problem? There are 2 factions. Each faction has maybe 16 ships; not much to work with. On top of that, for whatever reason, gameplay just isn't fun.

Update

Ashes of the Singularity: Escalation added strategic zoom! This brings it much closer. I spent a few minutes playing the campaign, which is essential IMO, since it helps you understand what you're doing in this place (a little different than other RTS's). Still, graphics are somewhat annoying, but much improved with the help of the strategic zoom (I can identify units and resources more easily). So... good?