

Preview - Star Reach (DOS, 1994)

I'm not sure if you've noticed, but there isn't a whole lot of originality out there in the potentially vast world of computer game design. Like music, TV, and pretty much every other form of entertainment, Those Who Create tend to find a basic formula that sells and run it firmly into the ground over a period of years. All you have to do is go down to a software store and count how many games have a number at the end of their title. It's kind of depressing, even though some games are so good they deserve to be copied a few times.

Some genres of games are bigger offenders in this area than others. Adventure and role-playing games, for example, seem to spin off sequel after sequel, and very rarely do they introduce anything truly original to the genre. The rationale for this is easy enough to figure out -- if the same thing keeps selling every time you put it out, don't make waves. Strategy games are one of the more diverse genres, but many of them still copy shamelessly from each other. That's why I'm glad to have gotten a sneak peak at Star Reach, a soon-to-be-released space strategy game from Interplay. This game is so different it's hard to even spot its influences.

The premise of Star Reach is the least original part of it, but it's not bad. At some point in the future mankind develops a faster-than-light drive, which opens up all kinds of possibilities for exploration and colonization of the galaxy, even the universe. Once we start exploring, it doesn't take us long to discover six other races that have developed similar capabilities and have similar motives. To avoid border wars and endless minor skirmishes, a board of diplomats is created for the purpose of assessing each race's wants and needs and deciding how to divide the galaxy. Peace is maintained for several years, until an emergency meeting of the diplomats escalates into a deadly firefight. With the intentions of each race highly questionable, the galaxy is thrown into a state of war. Your job in the game is, naturally, to take control of the galaxy and lead your race to victory.

Star Reach is a real-time strategy game, which you see once in a while but not with much consistency. It plays as a series of scenarios, with goals ranging from the acquisition of a key planet to the destruction of an alien base. You control the game from your star cruiser, which can be implemented in two ways. You can pilot your cruiser in a top-down view vaguely similar to the arcade sequences in Star Control, which lets you take part in battles. If you don't want to fight, you can put the ship in "phantom mode," which replaces the ship with a set of crosshairs you use to target objects you want to interact with. To examine a planet or ship, or to give them orders, you pilot your ship (or move your crosshairs) to the intended unit and dock with it.

Star Reach is essentially a military production/resource management game. The general idea is to produce enough resources to allow you to build up a superior military and wipe out the other

players, but it's not done in anything close to a typical way. Your planets are your sources of production, giving you money, ore for building, colonists, and ships. A planet's type sets what it will originally produce (volcanic planets are mineral rich but hard to live on, earth-type planets are good all-around producers), but you can improve on this by building planetary improvements, such as biospheres to increase food production for colonists or strip mines to increase the rate of mineral extraction. If you want a planet to serve as a base for ships, you must construct a storage bay.

Since a planet can only produce items if it has the necessary materials to do so, the allocation of resources is necessary. This is done by establishing trade routes, which can carry ore, food, and colonists (or any combination thereof) to another planet. Typically, trade routes shuttle resources from well-established planets in the rear of your empire to more recent acquisitions near the front.

One of the best features of Star Reach is the way groups of ships are handled. A planet's storage bay can hold up to eight ships, and any of these ships can be launched together as a convoy. The leader of the convoy is usually the weakest ship, which also has the most specific use. (For example, a planetary bomber will automatically be chosen to lead a group of fighters.) The convoy can then be given an order for the leader to carry out, and the support ships will automatically protect it if any opposition is encountered.

When Star Reach is released I expect it to gain universal praise for originality. Whether this originality itself is well-received is anybody's guess. Doing something different is never a sure thing, so only time will tell how the gaming public reacts to it. If strategy fans approach it with an open mind they are liable to enjoy Star Reach and its unique approach. Personally, I'd much rather spend a day with Star Reach than with Heresy of the Silver Serpent XXIII.

Demo

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