

STRATEGY GAME

Darwinia

Paul Hudson plays God – mwah ha ha ha haa!



BUYER INFO

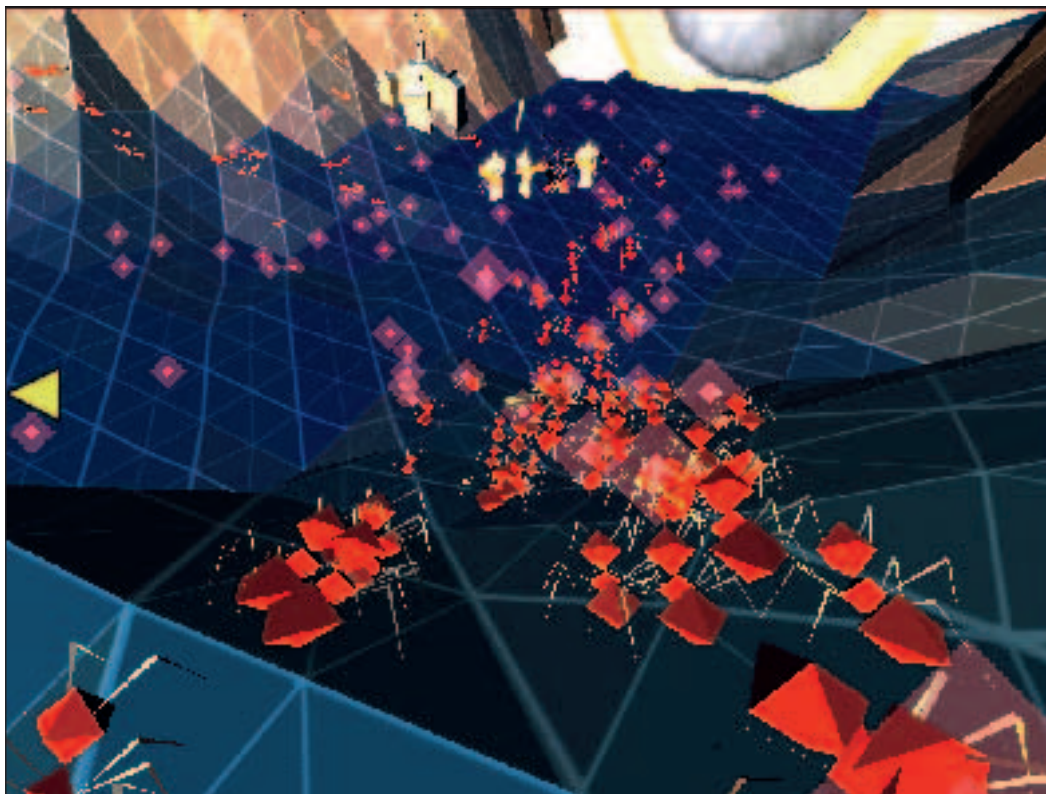
Cannon Fodder meets *Tron*, with some *Syndicate* thrown in. Also consider: buying *Amiga Forever* and replaying the originals.

- **DEVELOPER** Introversion
- **WEB** www.darwinia.co.uk
- **PRICE** £19.99



As Linux users, our watchword is choice. Choice and freedom. As Linux users, our two watchwords are freedom and choice. And reliability. Of course, no one expects the Spanish Inquisition, but equally no one expects a choice of good, free and reliable games on Linux beyond the odd first-person shooter. *Darwinia* uses the weapon of surprise to prove us wrong, partly by being so highly original that it will take all-new skills to master, and partly by the way it crams in swish graphics that nudge you down memory lane back to when computerised polygons were a novelty.

Introversion Software's last release was *Uplink*, the worldwide hacking simulator that surprised everyone by being original, fun and having surprisingly high-quality graphics. The company proclaims itself "the last of the bedroom programmers", which is probably true enough. This game is again published direct from Introversion, and the lack of middlemen keeps the price low. However, the creators certainly haven't



Where's the kettle when you need it? Ants reproduce by stealing spirits, and just keep on coming back for more.

skipped on the details: inside the case is a short manual containing game instructions plus background story, and some postcards inviting tourists to "visit tranquil Darwinia". The game itself takes up 30MB of disk space for a full install, which is surprisingly little until you realise that the graphics in

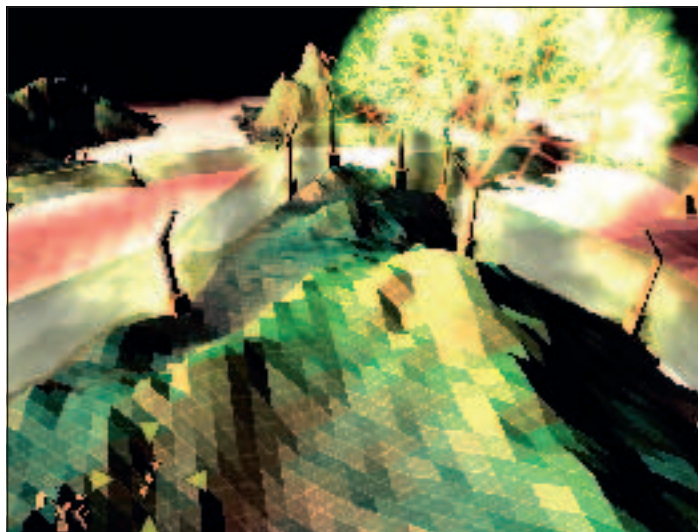
Darwinia aren't about high-polygon meshes and 512x512 textures – we're going back to the old school here. But first, just what is Darwinia, and why might you want to visit?

Having failed to create a market for his new console – the Protologic 68000 – Dr Sepulveda watched his enterprise collapse around him. Only then, when the doctor was a destitute recluse, did he discover that his consoles contained an unintended design quirk that allowed them to be linked together to form a learning, thinking grid. Inside, Sepulveda used digital DNA, known as spirits, to give life to a virtual population living inside his grid. Thus he created the world's first virtual theme park: Darwinia. The beings inside – christened Darwinians – have individual personalities, as well as the ability to learn from the rest of the collective as they live and die. The result is a living, growing world. Or at least that's how the story goes.

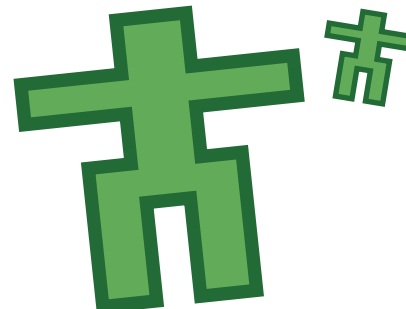
You enter just as things start to go wrong. Darwinia has been invaded by a virus that hunts down and kills the

Darwinians, and only you can save them from doom. The beings themselves take the form of small green stick men who lead peaceful lives until the virus chases after them and inevitably kills them. To save the world you need to create armed attack squads that deal out laser bolts (and, later, grenades, rockets and air strikes) to fight back against the virus. Happily, your squads can kill the pink, triangular virus faster than bleach, and you can guide at least some of the Darwinians to safety.

However, like any good virus, this one evolves. The initial beasts morph into a 3D centipede mutation, which moves faster and can break up into parts to attack from multiple angles. Later on you'll also get to meet the egg-firing triffid that launches virus eggs into your Darwinians to hatch into more beasties; the spider, which



The polygonic world of *Darwinia* has seas, trees, grass and forcefields.



THE DARWINIA TASK MANAGER

Building units (referred to in-game as running a program) is done through the Task Manager, which appears when you hold down Alt. It will show you three screens: on the left you can see the technologies available to you; in the middle you can draw gestures to create new units (pictured here); and on the right you can see your objectives. Waving your command to make it so is a satisfyingly God-like way of making the little people obey, but we found the gesture recognition somewhat problematic in the thick of fighting...



tears squads apart in a matter of seconds; and many more nasties. Fortunately you evolve just as quickly: eager to regain control of his world, Dr Sepulveda researches new units and weaponry that bolster your forces and level the playing field. These upgrades help, but aren't exactly a stretch of the imagination: squad v2 has four members rather than three; squad v3 has five members rather than four, and so on.

Polygonic spree

Installation on Linux is as simple as buying the Windows CD and downloading the Linux install script from the game's site. For us (using Mandriva and SUSE) the install worked first time with no problems, which is all

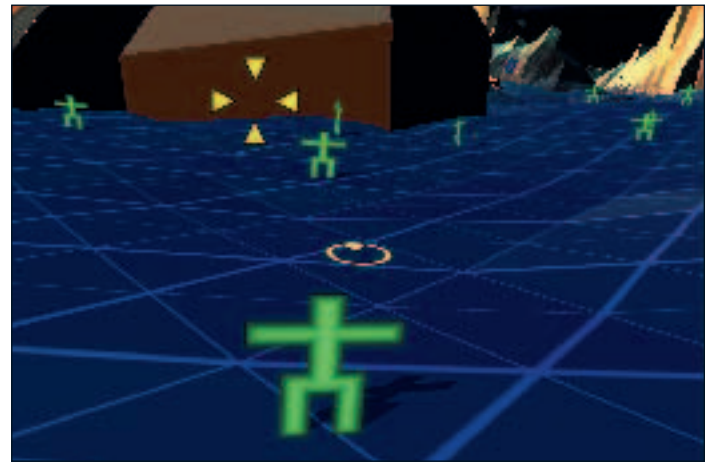


Be careful: unprotected portal use can spread the killer virus...

you can ask for. The in-game interface is remarkably simple: most of the time there's no GUI cluttering things up, which means you get to enjoy the marvellously retro eye candy. The Darwinians and basic viruses are 2D, the hills and mountains are simple polygons, and even more advanced enemies have polygon counts under 100. The real beauty is in the effects that drive the world, and when you toss your first grenade you'll be most impressed by the flash of light and sound and the tinny screams of dying computer viruses. Subtle effects abound, such as the clever pixellation effect applied to units so they look like bitmaps, and the hardware 3D audio that adds Doppler effects.

Although the game does use the concept of resource collection and management for some objects, unit creation doesn't actually use any of these resources: squads and other units are essentially free, which means suicide attacks are the order of the day. Killing one of your own units? Ctrl+C, naturally.

Along with squads, you also command engineers capable of rescuing spirits from dead Darwinians and enemies, which are then taken back to an incubator for reincarnation. The engineers also reprogram buildings infected by the virus so that they work for you, but the downside to all this functionality is that engineers are essentially defenceless – without a squad backing them up they'll be torn apart by the first virus they bump into. Perhaps the most important skill of the engineers is that they fly rather than walk, which allows them to float quite happily over water that would drown everyone else. This becomes particularly important in planning your



Life as a Darwinian is terribly dull, so it's no wonder they don't fight back.

attacks. You can only build units where you have control of a building, so with a little cunning you can fly your engineers around the back of your enemy, take a lone building, then attack from the rear and the front simultaneously.

Green guerrillas

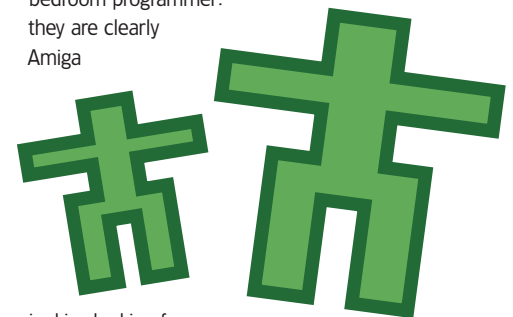
Each map has numerous islands separated by vast expanses of water. To cross that water you need to fight past the viruses, capture the radar dishes, and teleport your forces into still more fighting. Although there is only a small degree of self-defending skill built into the squads, they are far better off than your Darwinians. Until you upgrade them to have some amount of small-arms capability, the Darwinians merely run and scream as the virus annihilates them. Resistance, for them, is somewhat futile.

As you can't take control of individual Darwinians, Dr Sepulveda has provided you with an upgrade: promote a Darwinian to an officer and move him around freely. More importantly, officers issue orders to Darwinians that cause them to migrate in a lemming-like manner in whichever direction you tell them. One of the earlier missions has you save 150 Darwinians from their impending doom, for which you need to set up a long route of officers across the map to guide the little people to safety.

At first the game will confuse you with its orthogonal thinking and pure originality, but after the initial shock of this not just being another *Cannon Fodder*, you'll quickly learn how to take advantage of your limited forces and craft a winning strategy. The graphics and sound effects are raw, quirky and lots of fun, and you'll be surprised at just how different each of the landscapes and missions are. This

being a small-time project, there are a few bugs, but they get patched quickly enough and couldn't possibly detract from the delight of actually having something new to test your wits.

Having played the game all the way through, we can't help but admit that Introversion writers continue to embody the world of the bedroom programmer: they are clearly Amiga



junkies looking for a place to pour out their love, and there are in-jokes and cultural icons scattered throughout. Perhaps our favourite of all was the bootloader, which randomly chooses a retro animation such as an Amiga-style 'this game was cracked by' to a Spectrum tape loader.

Touches like this throw you back to your childhood gaming days, and do so in such a marvellously clever way that you probably won't even realise you left them. [LXF](#)

LINUX FORMAT VERDICT

FEATURES	8/10
PERFORMANCE	10/10
EASE OF USE	9/10
VALUE FOR MONEY	10/10

Fun, friendly, original, and wholly Linux-compatible. This is the most innovative release we've seen in years.

RATING **9/10**

