

To put it in a word, the difference between *Earthsiege* and *Earthsiege 2* is resolution. Not just in the graphics, though: *Earthsiege 2* is a much subtler game in many ways. For fans of real-time tactical land combat in giant tin cans, the subtleties in the design of *Earthsiege 2* make it a definite must have, simply because it makes all the fundamental components of the original look like rehearsals for the real thing (and the first game was quite good in its own time).

Where do you find these subtleties? The most obvious place is in the increased opportunities for HERC and weapons configuration. The resource management side of the game is much more customizable than in the original, with a wider variety of weapons and HERCs to choose from. This not only means that you get to play with a larger set of toys, but also suggests that you'll have to take much more care putting the right combination of team units and weapons hardware together to succeed in the missions (and overall campaign). The addition of air units to your side means you can try to bring your flying skills to bear on the game as well. Tank compulsives may find the Razor an unwanted intrusion, especially since you're required to fly it at some point to progress through a campaign, but most will learn the ropes quickly enough and realize that the Razor's a heck of a lot simpler than the average air combat sim (and can be slowed to almost a hover, an important tactic to learn along with the slash-and-run techniques more obviously necessary for success using a fast air unit). Combined air and ground combat means learning how to plan your resource expansion carefully as you progress through a campaign, so that you neither lose out on the advantages of having air units nor end up relying too heavily on them (they're a lot more fragile than most of the ground HERCs).

Game play in-mission requires substantially more precision as well. The missions now often involve objectives that go well beyond Blast All Cybrids, with many more tap-in-and-download-info-from-enemy-base, protect captured technology as it escapes Cybrid clutches and fight carefully so you maximize salvage types of situations to work with. Since each of these kinds of missions involves *preventing* destruction as well as perpetuating it, the likelihood of your inadvertently wiping the mission target in your zeal for a firefight goes up astronomically as well. As a matter of fact, both newcomers to the HERC/Cybrid *Earthsiege* universe and veterans of the first game may find the preponderance of mission failures early on in campaigns a bit of a frustration, until they figure out that those failures have been of the shoot-yourself-in-the-foot variety. Choosing the right weapons and the right balance of team-mates can be crucial to mission success; mission parameters for success are fine-tuned enough that failure will often be inevitable, unless the player's taken the particular strengths and weaknesses of weapons systems, HERC unit combinations and team size into account (yes, it's possible to field too *many* team-mates, as well as too few – and not just for reasons of resource loss, see below).

The now fully-3D terrain mentioned on the box adds subtlety to play which rivals that found in Looking Glass Technology's excellent *Terra Nova*. Most traditional tank tactics making use of hill cover (by going hull down, for instance) can now be brought into play, turning *Earthsiege 2* into a game that's as much beyond *Earthsiege* in this area as *Descent/Descent II* are beyond *Doom* and equivalent flat-worlder 3D action games. One of the most exciting things about ground-based mechanized battle using futuristic walker-style units is that your play involves learning how to manage defensive tactics as effectively as offensive tactics. Like any excellent console fighting game, the best players of this kind of game have learned the subtleties, timing and rhythm of anticipating when it's time to strike out and when it's time to duck and run. Since

both actions in *Earthsiege 2* take place in relatively slow motion (the game's efforts to convey the sensation that you're traveling in stupendously heavy metal are quite successful), it's going to take some practice to understand just how far out from enemy units you're going to have to start planning both offensive and defensive maneuvers. That practice, though, pays off in a very fulfilling sense that over time you've really come to grips with the clear strengths and weaknesses of different weapons, team and armor combinations.

There's additional subtlety – though it's something I hope the designers continue to do further work on – in the way your team-mates work alongside you during a mission. While you sometimes have to guard against friendly fire (as you would in real life), more often than not you're going to have to be careful not to either fire upon or run into your team members in the middle of battle. As with most of the games in this genre, your team-mates are often much more aggressive, left to their own devices, than they should be for their own health. They're also regular Davy Crocketts, ready to head off on solitary ventures without the slightest regard for civilization (your company or your HQ's need for defense, for instance). If you watch your team-mates (if you can survive long enough while doing so!) during a mission, you'll see that they *do* often co-ordinate with each other pretty effectively against enemy targets, often ganging up on a unit when there's not too much distraction in the immediate vicinity. Just not with you.

The negative to the above situation derives from what I consider one fundamental flaw in team communications design: the inability to pause the game, look down at the situation map in your HERC's cockpit, select an enemy unit, select which of your team-members you want to go after it, which you want to guard, etc., then un-pause and resume play. The goal with *Earthsiege 2* is obviously to keep the player entirely in real-time during play, but the battle engagements are often way too fast and furious to make good use of the excellent team communications system in place. You'll find you have the most opportunity to communicate with your team members just prior to or after a firefight; once in the battle, things are usually happening too quickly to stop long enough to both consider what to communicate to a team member and then transmit that message to him/her. I hope that in the future either a pause-and-look-around option or some kind of microphone-based voice communications peripheral system will be implemented for this game/engine, as that would *really* improve the utility of the team communications element of the game. Your success in getting a team-mate to take on a particular target should *not* depend on the efficiency and timing of your mouse pointing skills, and that, unfortunately, can happen all too often in *Earthsiege 2* (it was a problem with the original, too).

Of course, one thing you learn as a result of this kind of excessive real-time pressure is that – as leader of the team – you don't always prove the first one to charge into battle with the heaviest armament; you don't use your brain to hammer a nail, and as the brains of your outfit you shouldn't be trying to play hammer, too. *If* you can find a good vantage point away from the heart of the battle, and *if* you've configured your team size and equipment properly so that your team members aren't immediate turkey-meat once a battle starts, you'll find the communications system much more effective as an element in gameplay than you would otherwise.

One of the nice things about *Earthsiege 2* is that, though you get intelligence reports prior to each mission recommending team size and composition, these are not automatic guarantees of success; as you learn the game, you figure out that often those recommendations are acceptable

generic choices, given your current resource and experience situation. If you can optimize play, you'll often find that you can go in with a smaller team than is recommended, and, as long as you're not stuck in one of those "ten more Cybrid-generating pods landing every two minutes" scenarios (talk about pressure! C'mon, guys!), you'll have better control over what your teammates are doing (and less slow-down if you're using anything less than a P90 as well). Choosing large teams each time through not only wastes resource, but also guarantees that if the Cybrids don't take out at least one of your team members, you probably will (especially if you're carrying missiles). It's kind of fun jumping up and down and cursing when you see a team member step in the way of one of your missiles *right* after you'd just locked-up a Cybrid and launched at him, though, even if it won't net you victory in the long run. Argh.

All in all, *Earthsiege 2* continues the legacy of the original game, in the sense that it's an easy game to get into, with plenty to work with even at a relatively superficial level of play. Where *Earthsiege 2* goes well beyond the original is in the details (which are extensive and subtle), which is a guarantee that for anyone willing to spend lots of time with a single game instead of cruising six a month, there'll be plenty of reward in the quality of play discovered. Not a bad deal at all.