SCROLL

THE WILD • PURE • SIMPLE LIFE OF
ARTDINK

BLITTER

COVER

SCANLINE

CLOSING

6

6
66

10
65

Parade of souls

One more missing jewel from the 32-bit era is recovered with Atlus' English localization of Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers for Nintendo 3DS

Over the years, Atlus USA has been filling several gaps in the *Shin Megami Tensei* series; games that were passed over for English localization when they were originally released on the PlayStation, and now are given new life, pleasing old fans and attracting new ones. Of course, it's really their parent company we can thank, who has the good sense to remake these games for today's handhelds. The most recent spot to be filled is also one of the more interesting entries in the franchise, *Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers*, which Atlus has revisited for the Nintendo 3DS.

Soul Hackers takes place in the fictional Amami City, which also houses Paradigm X, a humongous and realistic virtual city where people log in and enjoy its various services. Behind its development is AlgonSoft, a tech conglomerate that gives away computers to the residents of the city, mainly for entering the Paradigm X pilot program. On the fringes of all this are the Spookies, a small group of hackers of which the player's character is a member, and who operate out of a trailer truck. Spooky, the group's eponymous leader, acquires a gun-shaped computer called a GUMP, loaded with a special program that summons demons into the real world—needless to say, soon Amami City is overrun. Demon summoning is usually done by trained people, but Spooky's careless use of the GUMP catches the attention of a mysterious organization, presumably the computer's creators, and before long, the Spookies are on the run from the bad guys, the cops, and just about everybody else who wants a piece of the action. On top of that, a wayward soul named Nemissa possesses the body of Hitomi, your childhood friend, and becomes an invaluable ally to the group, much to Hitomi's chagrin.

Soul Hackers will be familiar to anyone who's played the pre-*Persona 3* *SMT* games, as it's a relatively un-flashy RPG where acquiring the powers of demons within battle is almost as important as simply leveling up and staying alive. That also means that demon negotiation features into battles, where you can chat with any demon to try to get them on your side. Fusing demons into newer, potentially stronger ones will reward you well as you progress through the game and fight whatever's trying to kill you around Amami City. As in other *Devil Summoner* games, swords are also an important part of battle, and players can upgrade swords by infusing demons into them, making for a whole other layer of fusion mechanics to explore.
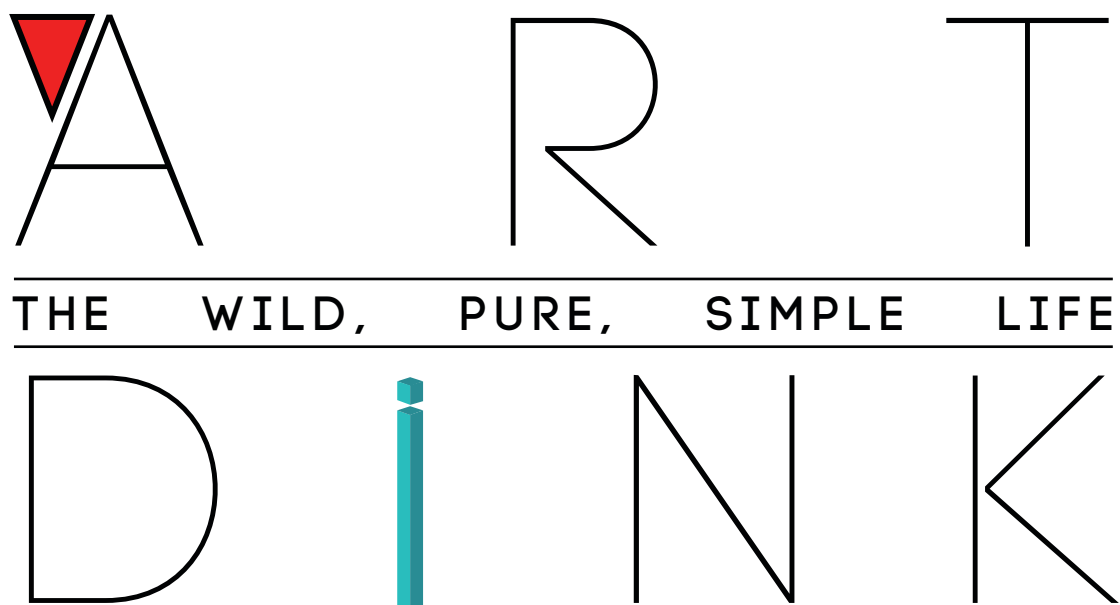
Soul Hackers also lets you hack the game itself, sort of. For those who find SMT games a little too difficult or otherwise hard to grasp, you can use the "COMP hack" feature to toggle the game's overall difficulty and the ease of its other features like automapping, analyzing enemy stats, or eschewing the effects of demon alignments. Of course, if you feel the opposite and love a good hardcore RPG challenge, you can set hacks to make your life harder.

The cyberpunk stylings of *Soul Hackers* are not entirely new to *Shin Megami Tensei*—the dismal Xbox installment *Shin Megami Tensei Nine* had a plot that also involved a utopian cyber-city, and other sequels and spin-offs have had technology-influenced elements within their universes. But it's in *Soul Hackers* where computers are very obviously intertwined with society, and they're what bring demons out of the woodwork, rather than worldwide cataclysms or special Tarot cards. With as many different interpretations of the *Shin Megami Tensei* world as there have been over the past decade or so, it's nice to finally have *Soul Hackers* get its due across the Pacific, so many years after longtime *SMT* fans gave up hope of seeing it in an official capacity.

ART
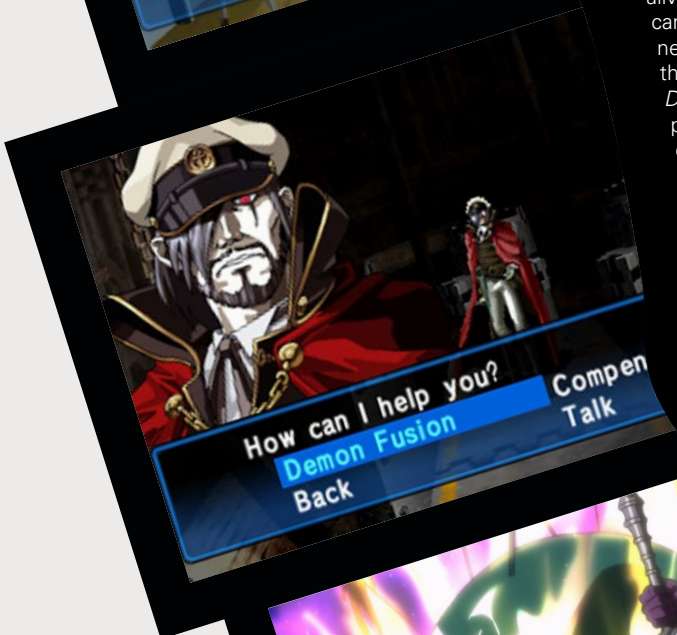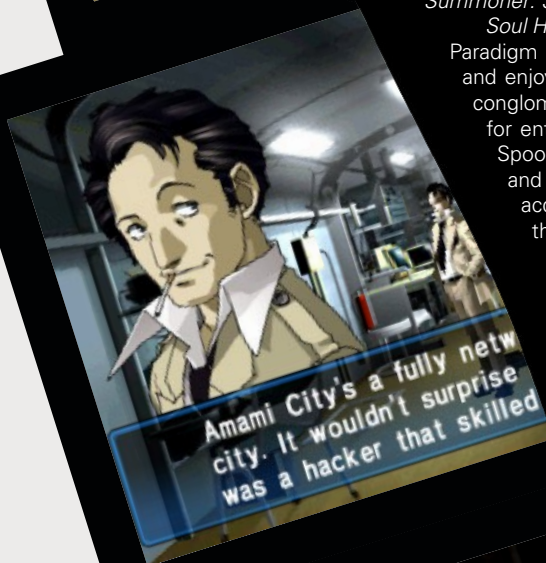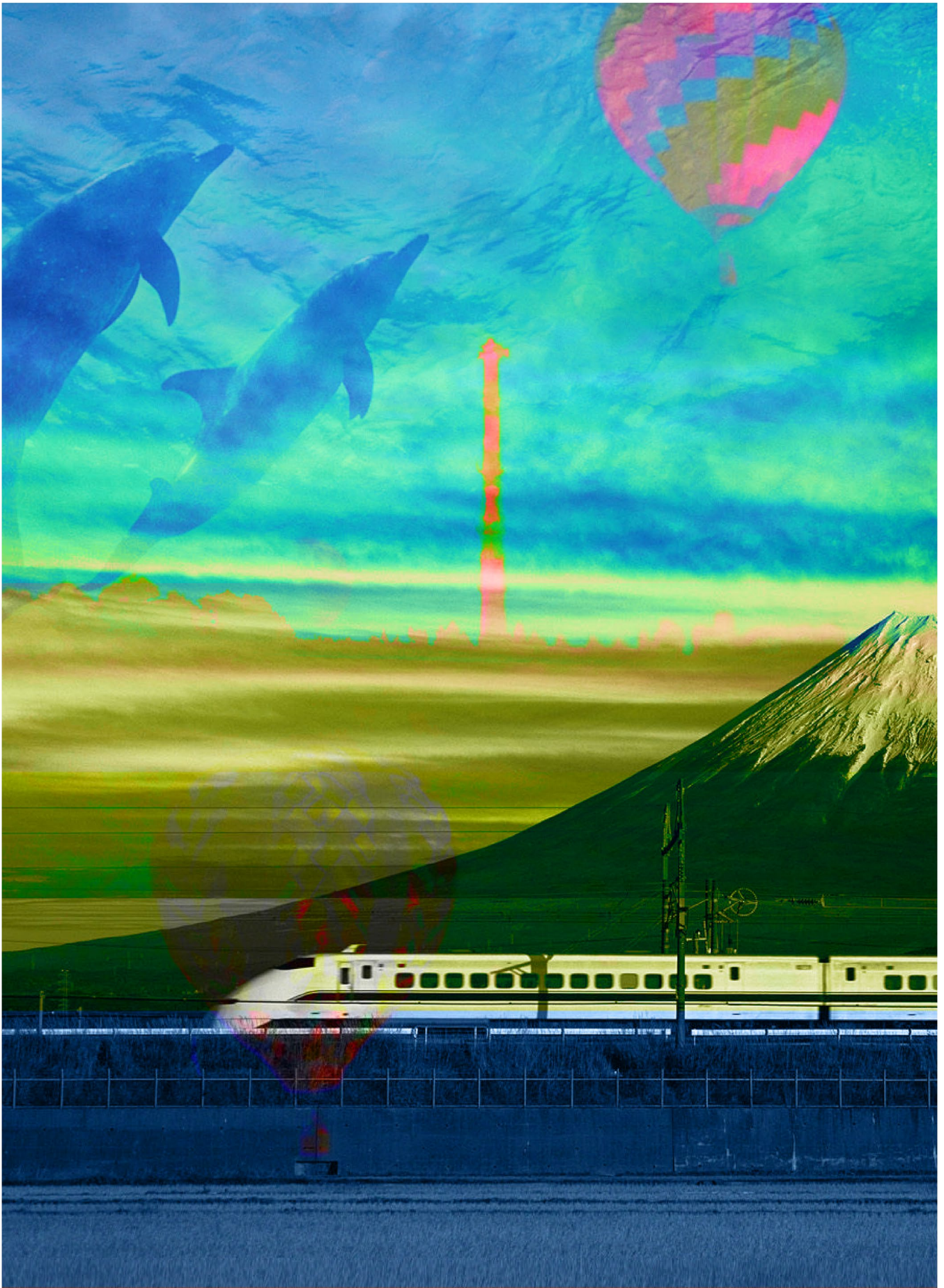
THE WILD, PURE, SIMPLE LIFE

DINK

Established in the heyday of the Japanese computer industry, Artdink was one of the country's most consistently creative developers and publishers of the past 27 years. Their speciality was simulation games, and at first glance, their lineup just looks like a bunch of railroad games and a few weird PlayStation titles—ironically, their craziest games were often the ones that made it outside Japan. However, the digital milieus of Artdink's games were incredibly progressive, and let us play with various parts of city development, experiment with artificial intelligence, and generally find new and interesting ways to explore the world around us through computer games, often to degrees far from those of their Western counterparts. This is the story of Artdink's best games, by way of the two biggest phases of its life.
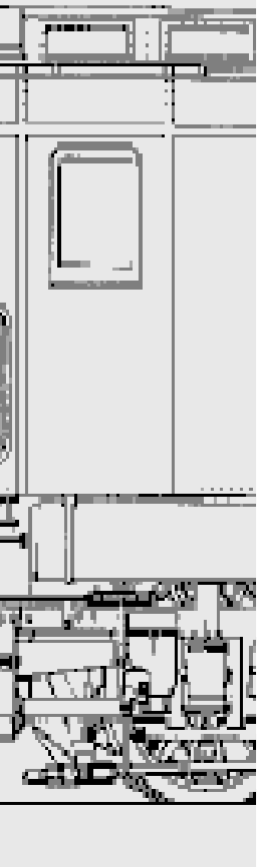
TAKE
THE
A—TRAIN

1985
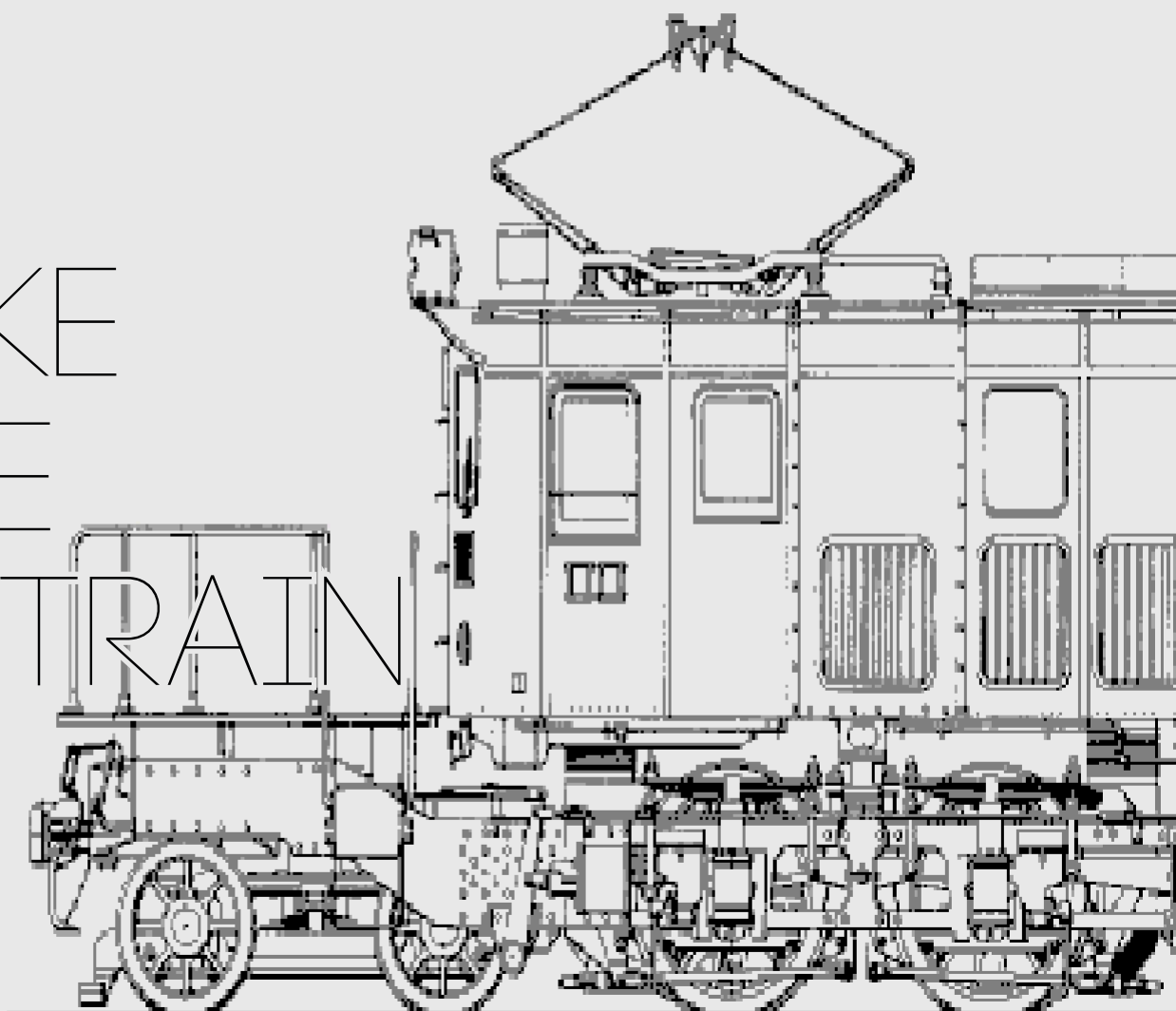
A rtdink's journey began here, the railroad game that would form the fulcrum of their existence. *Take the A-Train* was released at the very end of 1985—just before Artdink was incorporated, as a matter of fact—and brought the admirable complexity of train system management, if not the allure of model railroads, to thousands of personal computer owners whose interests between the two probably overlapped. You are presented with three different areas in a world loosely based on America at the end of the 19th century, and in each one you have a mandate from the president to build a functional railroad that stretches from coast to coast. And it won't be easy, as only a few meters of track have been laid beside a fairly developed town, and the hilly topography makes for a daunting logical challenge.

Unlike the richer business and city development simulations of their sequels, the first two *A-Train* games were more focused on railroads and nothing but: building and organizing rail lines that stretched up and down the countryside in order to provide people with sustainable transportation. And it was in these early games where taking the A-Train was quite literal: your cursor of building and destruction was a round "A" icon that could only move along laid tracks and continue to build more—or build the requisite stations, or simply get out of the way of other trains coming by on their schedules. Indeed, your train is used to get other trains moving, and in the game's maps, your initial tasks will be to connect tracks to where a fleet of other trains—freight and passenger lines—sit idly by. Laying track and other construction can only be done if the A-Train is stocked

with materials, which can only be picked up by the central station that provides them. In later games, the "materials" were an even more important bread-and-butter element to developing the city that needed to be properly funneled across the land, though its role in the original is naturally lessened; you get a nigh-infinite supply of stuff that's mainly used to extend the railroad.

Money is also not as important in this original *A-Train* than in the others—your main consideration is laying track, and how many tons of materials the train is carrying before you need to go back for more and lay more track. Financial disasters don't exist so much as good old-fashioned physical ones: Once you get the other trains moving, they have to be properly scheduled and routed on a 24-seven cycle, and any unfortunate collision means you can say goodbye to those trains. Likewise, if the A-Train crashes into

FINANCIAL DISASTERS DON'T EXIST SO MUCH AS GOOD—FASHIONED PHYSICAL ONES

another, it's Game Over. Couple that with the limited number of pre-made maps, and *A-Train* is more like a stage-based puzzle game than an outright sim.

You'll be forgiven for thinking this all sounds like the basics of Sid Meier's *Railroad Tycoon*, which came a few years after this first *A-Train*. Meier probably owes a lot to Artdink, but while there's many superficial similarities, the gameplay and design goals are quite different. Not to mention this was the mid-'80s to the early '90s, an extremely fruitful time for sim games that had room for many different ideas of varying executions, and not exactly plagiarism. Ironically, it's *A-Train III* that probably owes more to *Railroad Tycoon*, as it introduced deeper economic management—and you lose that one by going broke, not by crashing.

What's just as notable about *Take*

the A-Train as a game is the technical environment in which it was born. The original games were released just early enough to, unfortunately, be victims of their own time, mostly because it was before the widespread use of mice in the Japanese PC market. That left the game to be played exclusively with the numpad, using it to direct your track-laying, switch menu modes to the station scheduler, and so on. The later Famicom version didn't fare much better, employing a long list of button combinations just to get anything done (Sega's 1989 Mega Drive port was relatively streamlined, and even had super-smooth scrolling better than any other version). Other limits are coded into the game, yet no less irritating: You're always required to curve tracks before taking them in another direction, which can lead to a mess if you're not precise, though you can always delete

track by switching to "remove" mode and simply moving backwards). Similarly, you can't lay track at night, having to wait until 5:00 AM to keep going—though once dusk falls, the A-Train can rapidly return to the nearest station for more materials, if need be.

One could call this a humble beginning for the game that would soon become synonymous with Artdink, but *Take the A-Train* established a few not-so-humble precedents in sim games: the overhead view of the miniature landscapes predated *SimCity*'s release by nearly five years; the resource management had barely been seen in anything other than an RPG, and the day-to-night cycle was one of the less-discussed features of the game that would soon become one of its most defining. Now that the track was laid, it was time for Artdink to get the engine going.

HOW MANY ROBOT?

1987
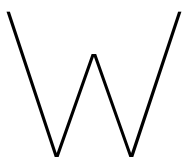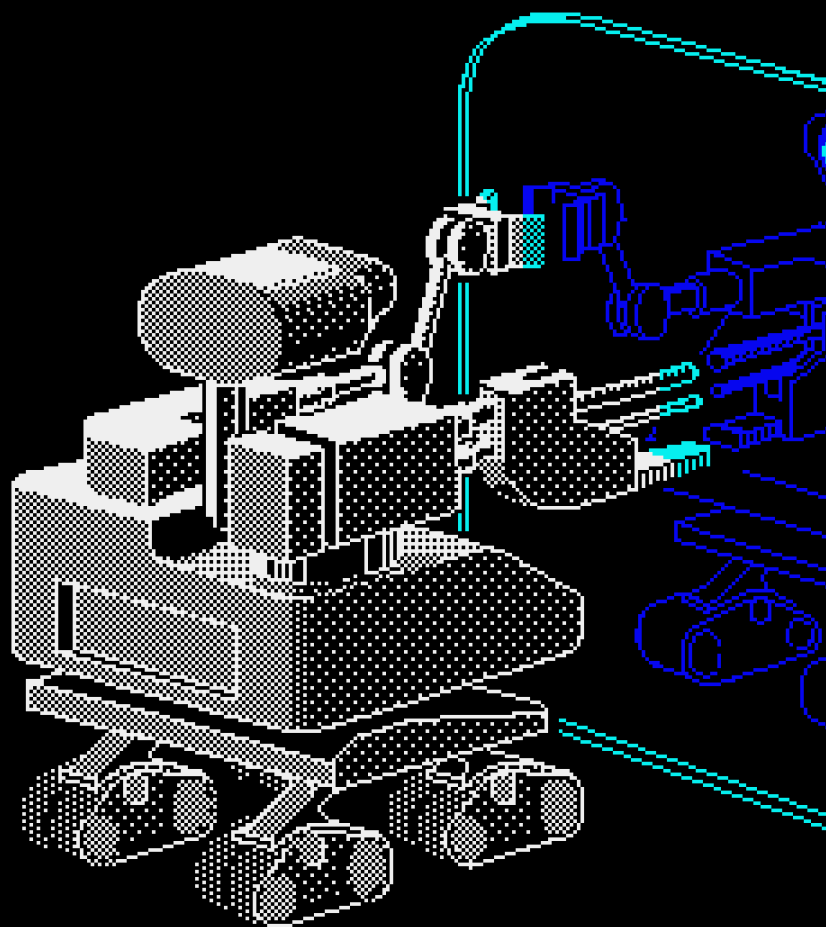
When Dukas' "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" bleeps its way along the opening credits of *How Many Robot?*, it's giving you a hint of what you're in for: slowly teaching an impressionable robot the ropes, then trusting it to do the right thing when you have to leave it to its own devices. Fortunately, mayhem doesn't unfurl in the way the song suggests, but dealing with an understandably stupid robot has its challenges.

How Many Robot? takes place in a land of mirrors, where giant mirror panes act as gates to another side of the world, but not necessarily an identical one. Odd setting aside, the game is basically about bomb disposal: the lone robot you guide scoots through the labyrinthine stages on its four treads, seeking out a red-colored explosive

package that it must then drop into a nearby receptacle to complete that stage's mission. Nine different challenges are available, each with names like "Corridor" and "Labyrinth," but they're all similarly daunting. You do have ample, real time to complete them, though—from a half hour up to two in some cases.

Describing the logic behind the gameplay of *How Many Robot?* could fill a book (like the manual, for instance), but it's rooted in two parts that were alluded to at the beginning of this entry: teaching and watching. When you start any of the game's stages, you have full control over the robot because it starts in a fully-lit room. You can steer it around, pick up and place the myriad blocks that lie around the floors, and clear a path to the next rooms. As you do this, the robot slowly accumulates "IQ" and "Culture" points, because as you're taking

control and showing it how things are done, it slowly but surely adds these actions (rather, its understanding of them and how they're used) to its memory banks.

But when the robot enters darkness, you must rely on its artificial intelligence. Light also powers its battery, so you must make some sort of precaution that it doesn't get caught in a corner somewhere and end up "dying." You can take action in a couple of ways: the first and best way is to put together a "lamp" of sorts, which is a set of two distinct kinds of blocks that when placed together will beam light in four directions. You can then carry them, place them somewhere else, and spread light there. The second and trickier method involves careful positioning of reflectors; miniature mirrors that bounce light at right angles and create "half-beams" that won't recharge the robot as quickly, but will still allow you to
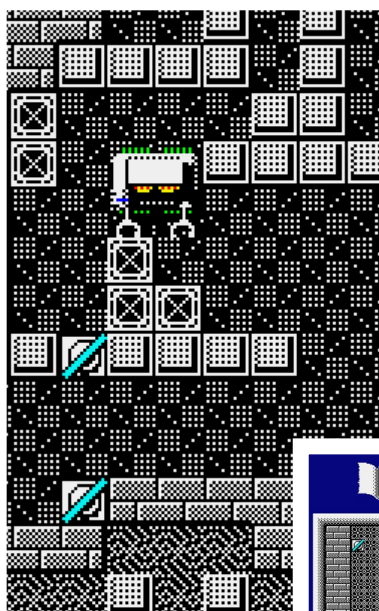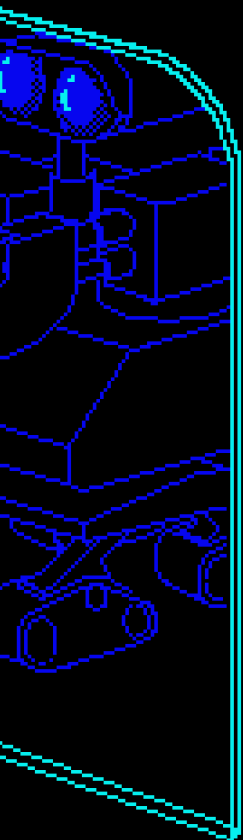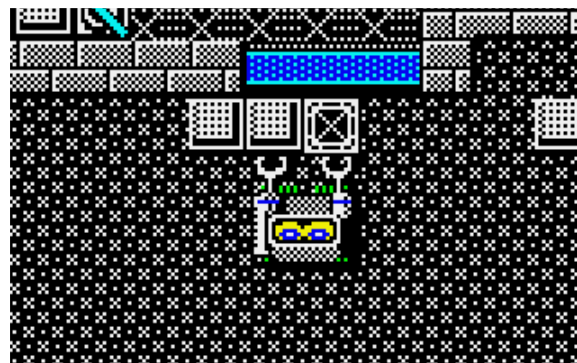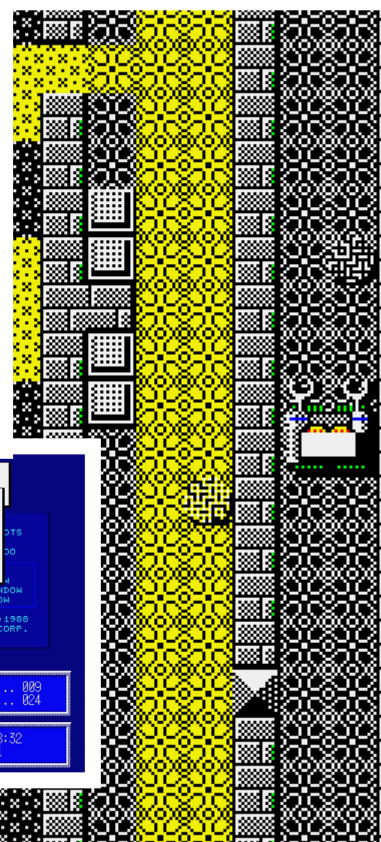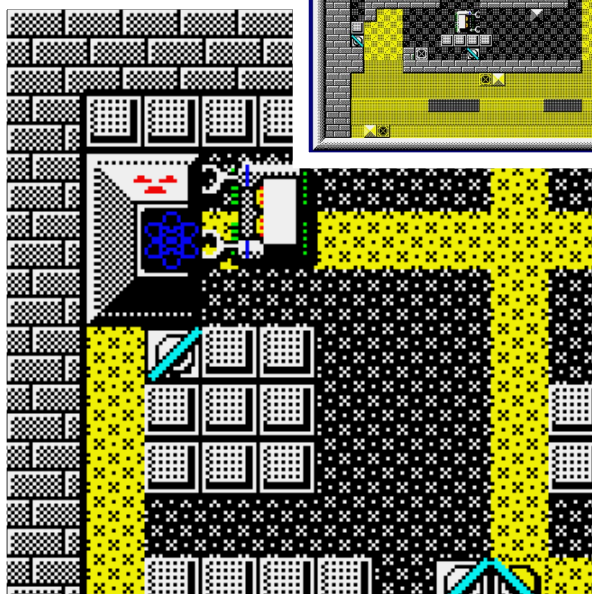
control it. Light beams will travel through blocks, but not walls or mirrors, and in several stages you'll see half-beams jutting through tiny gaps in walls that will give you some help later on. But because reflectors are also blocks, they can obstruct a path just as well as the others, which may keep the robot from passing through. After all, it moves on treads, and needs a decent circle of space to weave around corners and such. The puzzle, then, is to survey a room and figure out how to send light through it and into the next rooms—bypassing the big mirrors, which reflect the light—to ensure the robot has a relatively smooth path to the bomb.

When it enters darkness, and if its IQ is high enough, the robot will faithfully travel in a straight line and turn at most corners, and hopefully enters a patch of light so you can take over if need be. Mercifully,

you never lose complete control—you can still command it to pick up blocks when it bumps up against them, but it might not always do that, or you'll have a fraction of a second to push the "grab" key next to the one lamp block you need before the robot turns away. And indeed, it can get caught, spinning its wheels for a few seconds before temporarily giving up, tilting its head up and looking at you with puppy-dog eyes, expecting new instruction. Though even then your guidance is limited, as you can point it in a direction, but not necessarily move it there without light. And *then* there's the ghostly blocks that slither along surfaces and can harm the robot when it comes in contact with them. They're easy enough to trap in a space, but add one more merciless obstruction in your (and the robot's) progress. Should the robot become so helpless to the point that you

can't even successfully guide it out of a tight spot, you have the option of clearing its IQ or Culture banks and directing it from square one, though that's much more effective when it's standing in light and you have full control.

As you might guess, some moments in *How Many Robot?* are positively parental, because you never want to give up control of your little guy, but it has to be done sometimes. Then again, no one's ever sent in a baby to defuse a bomb and expect it to succeed. If *A-Train* showed where Artdink was heading, *How Many Robot?* showed what else they were capable of. However, this was still just a flirt with artificial intelligence—Artdink would evolve the concept into fully programming robots in the sequel (pg. 34) to sending walking killing machines onto the battlefield in the *Carnage Heart* series.

ARCTIC

1988

▼ Puzzle games were never a big part of Artdink's catalog, which is curious considering that some puzzle games become hallmarks of other "quirky" developers in history. But not Artdink; they typically stayed in their sim mindset. Nevertheless, *Arctic* was both one of their few puzzle games as well as one of their earliest releases. And to Artdink's credit, *Arctic* certainly is puzzling. True to their approach with sim games, it's a relatively speedy game that requires plenty of logical thinking—including management—to succeed.

That said, *Arctic* thrusts you into the game without so much as an opening menu screen. You're faced with a series of rails, disembodied in outer space and intertwining in geometric harmony. You also get a few different colored balls: blue, yellow, and silver. The goal of each stage is to first release the balls, and then send the blue and yellow ones back into the matching blue and yellow slots. And how do you do that? The rails are strategically dotted with little arrow symbols that move in two fixed directions, also in sets of blue and yellow. As you might guess, you can only switch the arrows by the whole color group and not individually, meaning that as you send a ball down one rail, one or more balls will inevitably have their paths changed. Quick reflexes may also be needed for closely-grouped arrows, so as to ensure your ball travels down the desired path. One last note is that balls will only veer right, so they have to be coming at the arrows from relative directions.

It's a lot to keep track of, and that's no understatement. It doesn't help that the first stage you're presented with is a multi-layered set of rails that isn't super-friendly to beginners, and immediately overwhelming to all but the greatest savants. However, in *Arctic* you can freely select any of the 30-some maps available, and some will ease you into the nuances of the physics and interplay better than the others. The question is how long you'll last as the mazes get more convoluted and the mess of marbles grows larger and more manic. Generally speaking, your best strategy will be to focus on one ball at a time, and watch how it moves along the rails as you switch the arrows and guide it to (or close to) the matching slot you have your eye on. This can be time-consuming but ultimately effective, and it's better than mashing on the arrow-change buttons in a vain attempt to get the results you want.

As mentioned, you must first release the balls to start a stage, and the release button not only gets the game going, it's
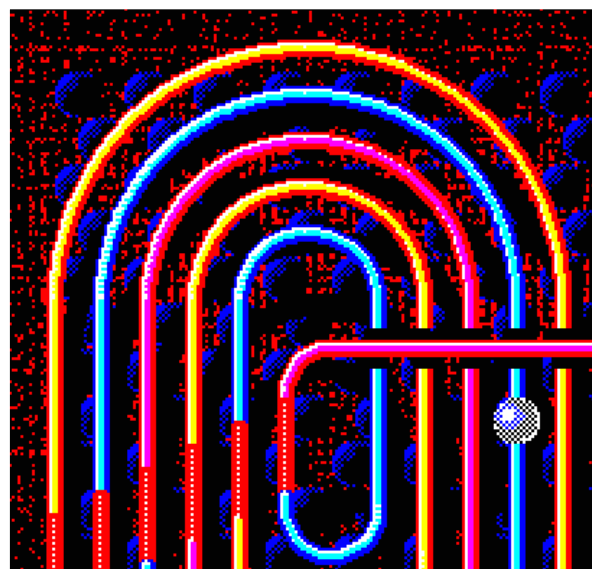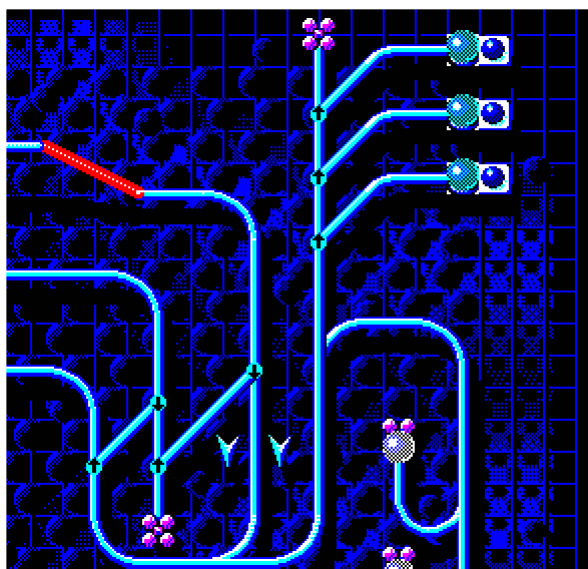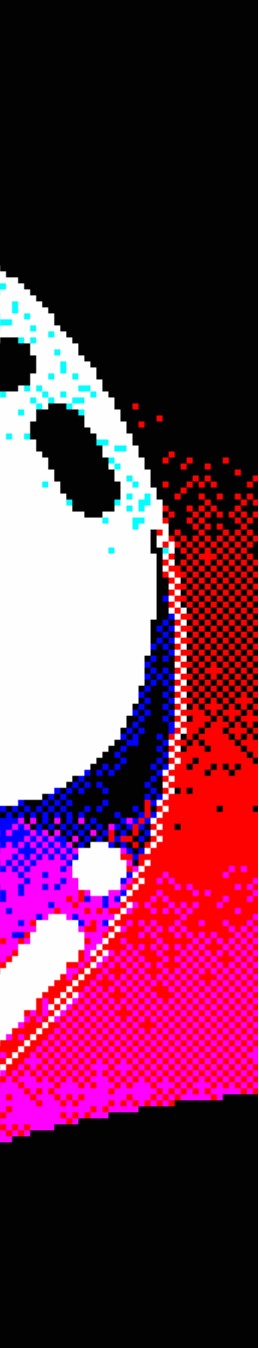
IT'S EASY TO SEE WHAT'S GOING ON, JUST NOT SO EASY TO KEEP IT UNDER CONTROL
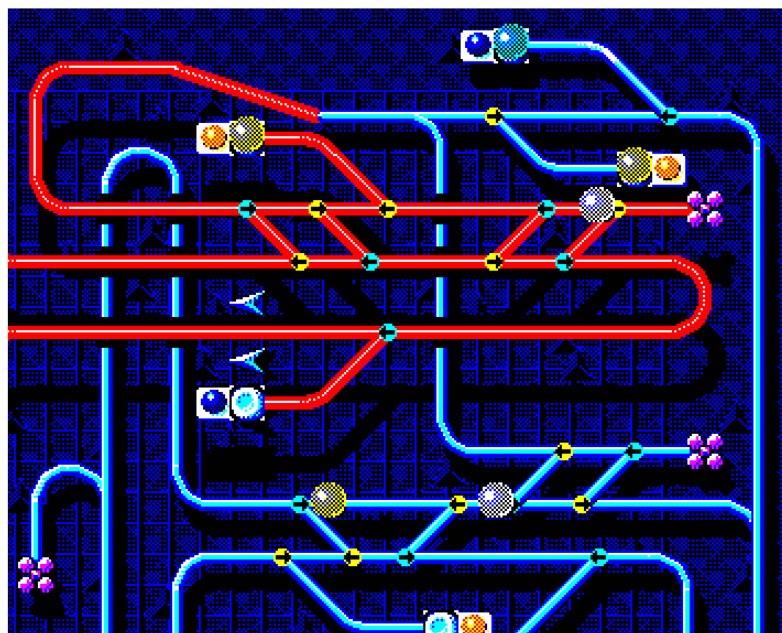
simultaneously your best tool and the bane of your existence. While it's needed to start the game, if you accidentally press it when you have balls properly slotted in, it's a devastating feeling to see your work undone (by your own hand, no less). Still, it can be a necessary evil if you get all but one or two of the slots filled, then accidentally send a silver ball into one.

As stages progress, you're introduced to more features of the maps that look subtle, but can greatly affect the game's physics. The first are the zippers; directional gates that will either push a ball in their indicated direction, or slow them down when they go against the grain. Later maps will also feature sloped rails, which function similarly to the zippers, but can affect momentum more quickly, and are often placed closer to one another than zippers. At least one stage features no arrows or zippers at all, requiring you to repeatedly slot and release balls as they travel across a deviously designed four-rail course as you try to "beat" the pattern before it beats you. And none of what's been described so far takes into account the physics of the balls themselves—obviously, one struck by a speedier one in the opposite direction will send it flying, and so yet another of your considerations is simply keeping track of where every ball is headed, and maybe, hopefully, sending them in the direction that will get them closer to an empty slot.

Arctic is ostensibly a puzzle game, but could easily pass as a strategy game. There's probably a reason the game is subtitled "Active Rail Playing"—it's like a minimalist version of the original *Take the A-Train*. And that's especially interesting considering that it comes from Artdink, a company that made its money on games that pretty much require thick, intricate manuals to understand how they play. Comparatively, it's easy to see what's going on in *Arctic*—just not so easy to keep it all under control.

That feeling of bringing order to chaos wasn't met by many other puzzle games; usually you slowly build to chaos, then try to undo what you led you there. You must work fast to lower a *Tetris* pile, but in *Arctic*, the balls will perpetually roll around until you intervene. Call it "slow twitch."

On the other hand, those characteristics were probably what kept *Arctic* from being a hit. Modern pinball tables are probably the most similar in how they demand your attention, which isn't too coincidental considering that *Arctic* can look like a pinball game from space. For Artdink, it was an interesting diversion on the path to simulation central.

FAR SIDE MOON

1989
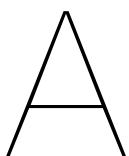
About a year after the first *A-Train*, Artdink released their second game, *Earth Defense Force*. No relation to the D3 Publisher alien bug-killing series, though—this *EDF* was about setting up defense bases from oncoming alien forces from across the solar system, all the way to Pluto. Again, no giant ants, but plenty of other threats to neutralize. A few short years later, Artdink produced the sequel, *Far Side Moon: The Earth Defense Force II*.

Far Side Moon, like Artdink's other early sequels, is essentially the same game as its predecessor, only it looks better, as it was on a new generation of PC. You have the same basic goal—grow your presence on the planets to win the war of attrition against the opposing powers—but there's a greater emphasis on building and resource management on top of the whole "staying alive" thing.
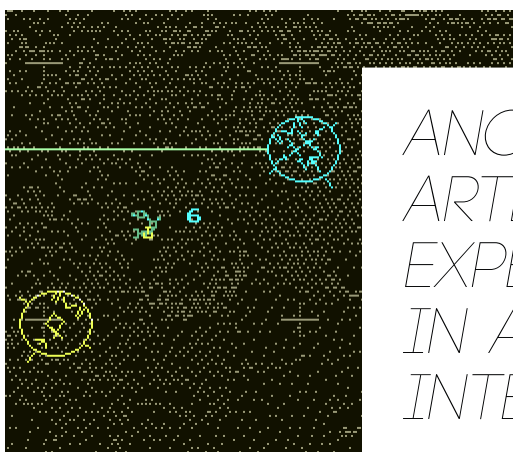
At the start of the game, you can choose which map you want to start on. Each one is a separate planet (and the moon, which is the first and easiest) where you're given a series of bases and your supporting set of resources. The enemy force has their own bases just a few klicks away, and they're not going to wait for you to strike first. Your mission is to build a fleet of artificially intelligent combat drones that seek out the enemies' crafts or patrol the bases.

Manufacturing the drones is a key part of *Far Side Moon*, and it's done by selecting from a database of CAD blueprints (not *actual* CAD) which are made up of different layouts of parts, including engines, shield units, and of course weapons. Once you like what you see, you can watch as the parts are placed on the panels that make up the chassis, and get it prepared for action.

Once a drone is constructed, it's time for liftoff. From the base, you can set the desired direction you want the drones to travel, then watch on an overhead map as they slowly head in that direction, where they may intercept and fire at enemies, crash into them, or go straight for an opposing base and start firing at their defenses. This has to do with their pre-programmed instructions, which are as simple as staggering the moments when they turn, to deciding which weapon to fire at an enemy within a certain range. Chances are nonetheless high that the drone will be destroyed before it does anything meaningful, but by building drones in the other bases and sending them out, you can maintain some level of crowd control.

The action heats up when you (or the enemy) get close to a base. At that

LABORATORY 02

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF AERONAUTICS
BOSTON MASSACHUSETTE
E. S. D. F. 011745S

LABORATORY 05

ARTDINK
SPACE TECHNOLOGY LABRATRY
CHICAGO ILLINOIS
E. S. D. F. 0326772

4
ROPULSION
ION
RIDA
2

LABORATORY 0

INTERNATIONA
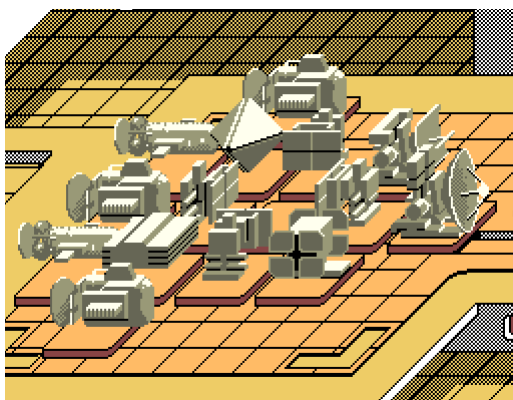
ANOTHER ARTDINK EXPERIMENT IN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
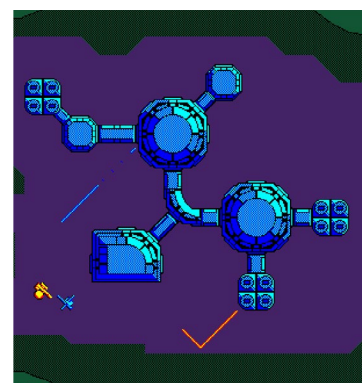
point, the game switches to a zoomed-in screen showing the attack drone and the defender drone doing the dance of combat. Depending on what side of the battle you're on, you can choose between "attack" and "defense" commands, and the drone will attack accordingly; either in an attempt to destroy the enemy's defenses, or to get rid of an intruder. These skirmishes will quite often look like two mosquitoes buzzing around aimlessly until they see one another and fire a tiny laser, but watching the action is important to keep a handle on the situation and chip away at the enemy's shields until they're no longer a threat. As a strategic tool on top of this, you can check out the results from an observatory that tracks the movement patterns of your drones, and make adjustments to new ones if necessary.

As in any simulation or strategy game, you can keep building stuff for as long as you'd like, but your resources are finite. Back on Earth, you have access to a number of laboratories across the United States that produce more parts, and their production lines can be instructed to focus on developing certain kinds of parts over others, in case you really need those new laser cannons delivered ASAP. As the labs send parts to the space stations, you can then refill any of your bases' resources and keep the drones coming.

Keep in mind that up until you launch a drone, all of this is manual. This isn't quite like a modern real-time strategy game where you click an icon and wait patiently for new units to show up—you must do all the management yourself, from keeping the labs in check to moving parts back and forth to even constructing drones piece-by-piece if you so desire. And in general, *Far*

Side Moon looks pretty overwhelming on a screen-to-screen basis, as you're confronted with windows and tabs and menus and diagrams that make you think you really are dealing with space combat and the requisite war economy. On one hand, some of that is a purposeful stylistic choice to add some flair to the interface; on the other, it's approaching space exploration porn.

Far Side Moon was another Artdink experiment in artificial intelligence, and the notion of being forced to rely on it to make progress towards the goal of the game. If patience was a virtue among PC game players, Artdink repeatedly drove it home. The mix of realistic space nerdery and sci-fi scenarios is worth recognizing in *Far Side Moon*, though it would take something with a harder edge, say in about half a decade, before Artdink made any real money off of it.

THE ATLAS

1991

Among all the different kinds of computer games lies the historical sim. It's something that usually falls in the "strategy" category, as diplomacy and fighting compliment the society-building that form the core of such games. That makes complete sense when you consider that the mere concept of battle is synonymous with video games, and that many people's understanding of history is punctuated by a series of wars and settlements—and after all, it feels nice to rule the world. As a consequence, the "history" part of a historical sim tends to be overshadowed. If such a sim could focus on early civilizations without all the bloodshed and more of the story of discovering the world beyond the coasts, it might still be fun, and that's exactly what Artdink tried to do with *The Atlas*.

The time is the 14th century, during a particularly prosperous time for the nation of Portugal, under the rule of King Afonso V. His Majesty wishes to take after neighboring countries and explore the world by sea. He recruits you to do the job; you must travel at least 1,000 leagues (around 9,200 kilometers) up and down Europe and Africa to discover new lands and hopefully establish channels for trade, thereby increasing the wealth of your homeland and the foreign lands you come across. The catch? You have only five years to hit the quota, and this game moves at a typical Artdink sim pace—even on the slowest speed setting, it can feel like a crunch as you see the days and months blip by. But hey, the king chose you because you know you can handle this.

Starting in the capital of Lisbon, you survey the incomplete world map and click on foreign cities and other settlements to "visit" them and set up trades or simply learn more about them. In addition, the world is dotted with various other mini-discoveries of flora and fauna. Your subordinates are wise men who also have a knack for adventure, and you will frequently be calling upon them to commandeer fleets of ships, seek new lands, and come back with the goods.

Naturally, ships are the only mode of transportation for enterprising explorers in The Atlas, and buying and selling them is important not just in extending knowledge, but keeping the fleet lean and organized, lest you run short on money (the king grants you a yearly stipend that fluctuates depending on your progress over the past 12 months). The basic game flow, then, involves lots of moving ships and assets from place to place to build a "network" of

WORLD ATLAS
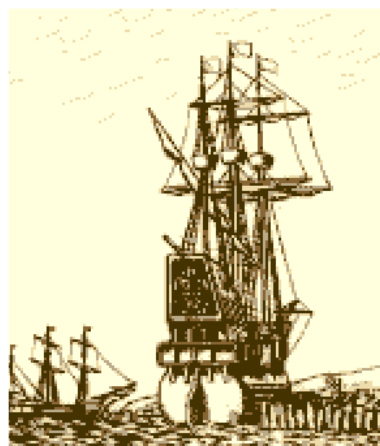
THE "HISTORY" PART OF HISTORICAL SIMS TENDS TO BE OVERSHAD—OWED

1500年6月13日　船乗りの病気が始まった。
早く陸地に迫りつかなくてはならない。
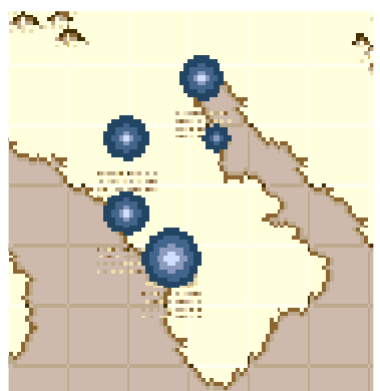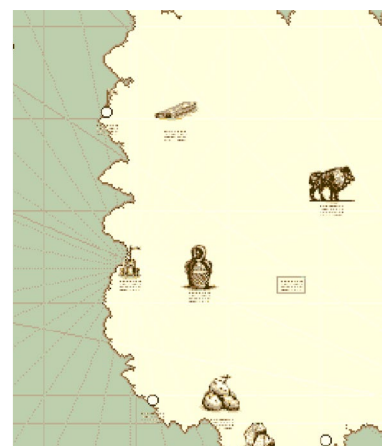
discoveries and settlements; a practice not unlike that in the *A-Train* games.

An interesting consideration is that you can't just take ships on multi-year voyages traversing the seas and expect them to come back with a load of riches. Ships must be directed to destination points on the map, and can only go so far before needing to come back. What this little practice becomes is a balance between the ratio of days exploring versus days returning; otherwise the game just makes error sounds and your ships go nowhere. You must also decide what will really reward your progress return home and report back with their travel journals, you can choose to accept them into record or decide not to believe them, which can actually change your entire knowledge of the world, shaping the map as you please.

The look of *The Atlas* is particularly

creative, especially for a 1991 computer game. The entire game is sepia toned, meant to represent the "World Atlas" you're assigned to complete. The oceans are represented in a faint blue, but otherwise the game is done in varying shades of brown. It's artistically appropriate, but can feel a bit drab after playing for a while. And with a large world map to deal with, looking around could have been handled better: the whole game is controlled only with the mouse, and scrolling around the map requires you to use the cursor to grab the game's window border and drag it in the direction you want to "pull" the view—working like a 1991 version of Google Maps.

The Atlas was one of Artdink's longer-lasting franchises, with a few sequels and ports that stretched over the rest of the decade. 1993's *The Atlas II* took place a

century after the first and improved on its predecessor by revamping the interface (with commands represented as books on a desk), adding more color, and streamlining the trade and exploration systems. However, it's too bad that almost no part of the series got its due outside Japan. This first game was localized, though only for Germany, and released in 1995 for DOS; much too late for it to seem relevant in the flourishing Western PC market alongside Windows 95 and the coming onslaught of 3D-accelerated games. The lack of battles, the one-click commands, and the funky map scrolling probably wouldn't stand with players expecting more features and depth comparable to *Civilization* or *Europa Universalis*. Not to mention that by then, Artdink had already released *The Atlas II*, and soon the series would move to the PlayStation.

EIKAN WA KIMI NI 2

1991

High school baseball in Japan may not match the fervor over high school football in America—it exceeds it, reaching a national level like that of American college sports. And it all has to do with the Koshien tournament, the yearly competition that pits 49 of the best high school teams in the country against one another for a chance at victory. Every prominent school has aspirations to at least play at Koshien, and winning teams and star players have great chances for professional recognition years before entering university. The obsession and romanticization of the sport has been visited a million times over in the country's media and pop culture, and to no surprise, when video games appeared, they offered a rich new vein.

Though most Koshien-based baseball games cut to the chase and just let you compete in the tournament, Artdink played to their strengths and went for a full-on management approach in their *Eikan wa Kimi ni* series, you are the coach of a high school baseball team, tending to a roster of boys whom you hope to take to Koshien and beyond. Your customization options at the start of the game are voluminous: you can choose from over 4,000 schools in every nook and cranny of Japan, decide on the uniform designs, and can modify the stats of every player on the team—even what their faces look like.

You then have a year to hone the team as best as possible before the opening day of Koshien (in the first *Eikan*, you could only play for a year, but in *Eikan wa Kimi ni 2* and subsequent sequels you could keep at it for several decades). On an in-game day-to-day basis, this means putting groups of players through training exercises. The tasks can be

practical (pitching, batting, and running exercises), or character-building (cleaning the grounds, for instance). You can split up the kids between exercises however you like in case you want to build specific stats of specific kids, or just put all of them to work at once. Whatever you choose, your team's performance will reflect your cunning as a coach all the way to the end of Koshien. But after commanding them, all you can do is sit back and watch them train, as the game screens depict the boys running around in a super-bird's-eye view.

But it's not exactly all hard work until the Big Game, because there's still the local competition to consider. At several times during the year, rival school teams will come to you with friendly challenges. You can decline, but obviously it's best to test your team's mettle in real competition. It's here where the languid view of the
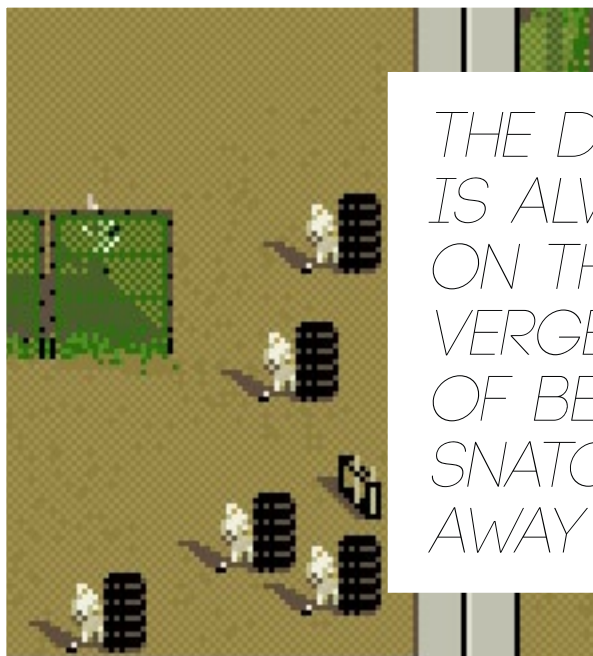
THE DREAM IS ALWAYS ON THE VERGE OF BEING SNATCHED AWAY
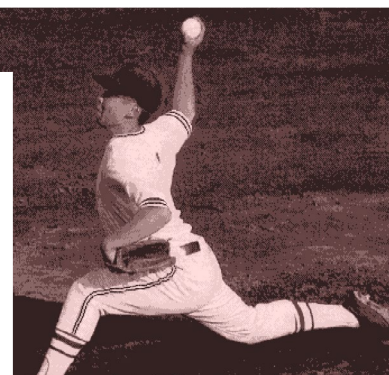
school dugout is replaced with a full view of the field, and you watch as your boys do their best.

Within that game view, your role is still as the coach; you can't go in and start controlling the players and try to win through video game expertise; this is a sim, after all. However, as the coach, you can make substitutions, call time-outs, and other strategic moves. And obviously, you can't get everyone on the field, so before games happen, it's up to you if you want to rely on the same core group of talented guys or give the benchwarmers an occasional chance. Players who participate in games further build their physical stats and averages, but a completely well-rounded team that can be substituted at will may not be the kind that wins at Koshien.

And when Koshien finally happens and you make it into the bracket (spoiler: you always do), what will happen then? That is, of course, up to the game, based on how well you've trained the team. Though things won't look too exciting as you watch the miniature games unfold, you still have to keep an eye on things and see it through to the end, even if the end comes too early.   Such is the excitement of entering a tournament with the national recognition of Koshien—the dream is always on the verge of being snatched away.

Well, in truth, that romanticization only subtly permeates throughout the game, and only partly because the game world is depicted with people the size of ants. The spirit of these youths is tested through the after-school training, the buildup to game day, and finally the tournament, but through the grids of stats and slow-moving games, you're constantly reminded that this is not the action-packed baseball

games you may be used to—this is for the real baseball nerds.

Regardless, Artdink wasn't really taking baseball simulation games anywhere new with *Eikan wa Kimi ni*, and definitely not within the Koshien trappings. But they did do a fine job, and as action-focused baseball games took over the console market, Artdink continued filling a niche. And yet after three PC installments, Artdink produced the fourth *Eikan* for PlayStation (with a later PC port), and the final two for PlayStation 2. The later games took after other baseball games like Konami's *Professional Baseball Spirits*, which had just as much realistic stat-tracking as it did sweeping moments of action in full 3D. And *Eikan* was pretty much Artdink's only prominent sports series, as a few one-off takes on golf simulations didn't do much. More of a lingering pop fly than a homer.

A-TRAIN

1990·1992
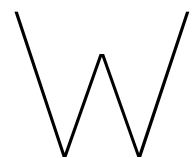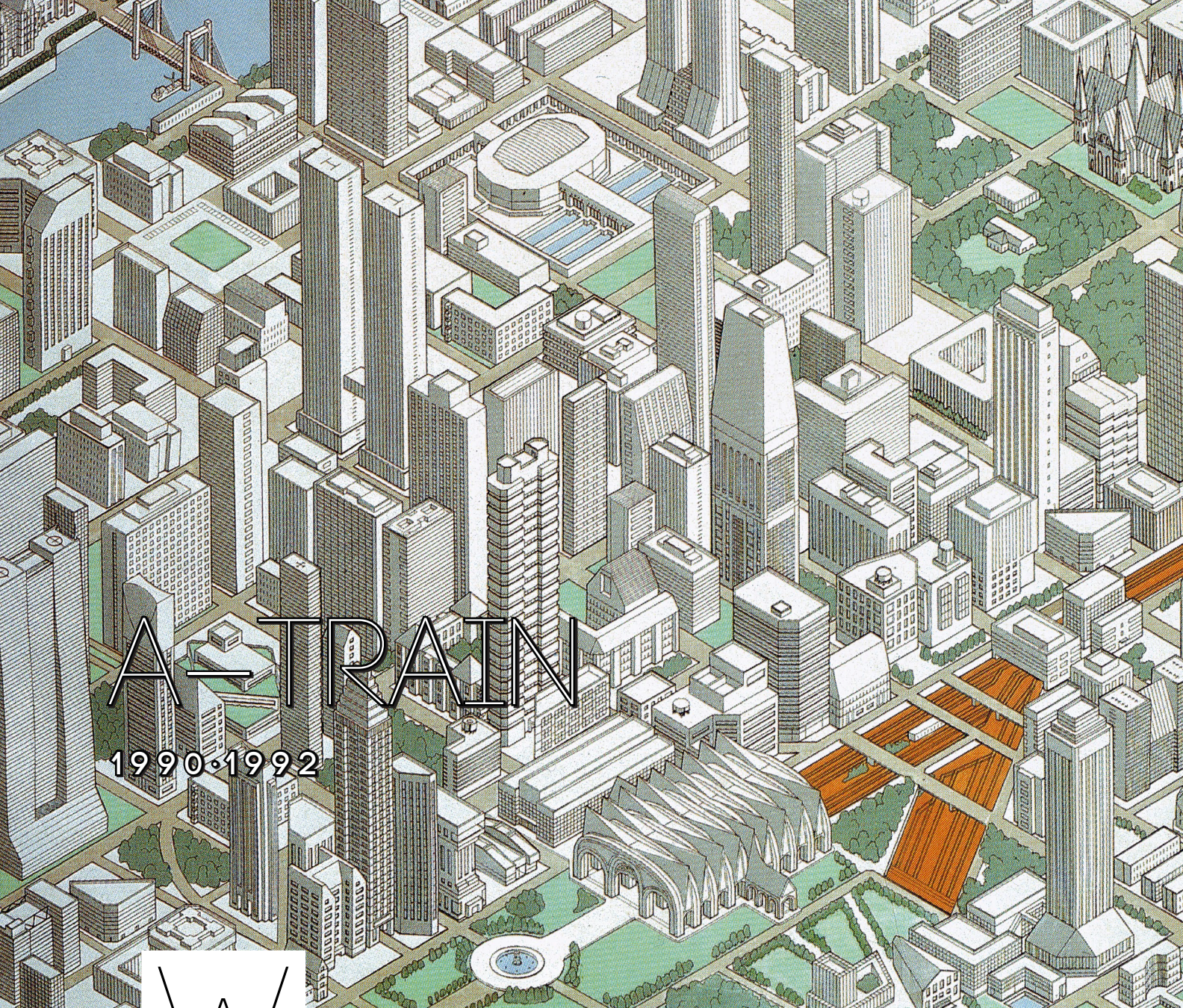
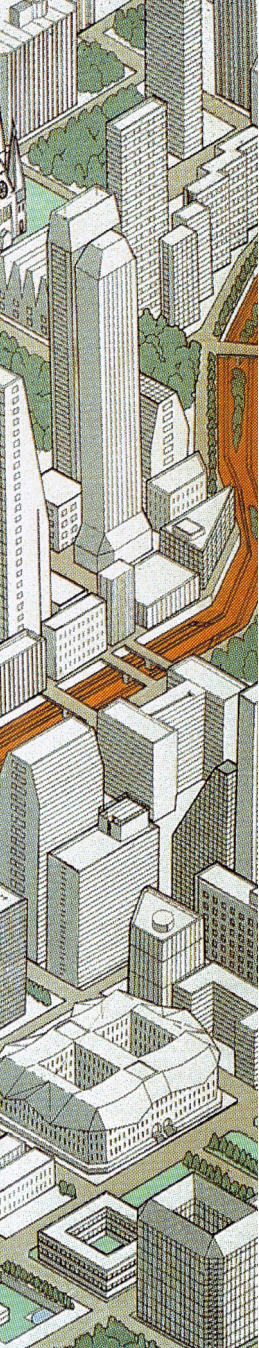With the third iteration of *Take the A-Train* ("*AIII*"), Artdink completely reinvented the look, feel and aims of the game, setting the franchise on a course that would define it for the rest of its life. This new *A-Train* was modernized from the ground up, from the setting, to the graphics, to the interface and the thinking behind its design. Gone was the American railroad pastiche; gone were the abstract numerical representations of locomotives shuttling up and down simple tracks. *A-Train*'s new role was a layered sim game with a present-day setting, and paired the usual railroad management with the ups and downs of urban commercialization. And now Artdink was at the top of their game.

Again, *AIII* was not simply about routing trains back and forth across the country anymore. The scenario maps provided to you in the game were less about laying track and more about seeing what you could do with a certain municipal situation—basically, getting as rich as possible. From the quiet and ripe rural areas to the crowded and challenging metropolis, the handful of maps in *AIII* gave you very different flavors of challenge. Still, trains were the draw, and you get plenty of them. With the game's rolling stock market, you can go shopping for one of 19 different trains, both for freight and passengers, and running the gamut from pokey old buckets to sleek bullet trains. Passenger trains may seem like a secondary consideration, but if you want a developed city, you have to send people out to experience it. All the trains run at different speeds and have different capacities, but you can own up to 25 of them, and they can be taken off or put back

on the tracks when needed. On that note, there's another difference from the older games that lessened the burden on players: trains no longer collide and explode, but gently touch and halt each other until you remove and reset them.

The trains brought with them one other part from the past games: the nondescript "materials," represented as bright white segmented blocks placed in whatever open space you've purchased near train stations. In the old games, materials were for laying track and building stations, but in *AIII*, you can just pay for as much track as you need. Meanwhile, you need materials *and* money to make everything else. Freight trains are effective, but operate in an if-then pattern: they'll pick up and drop off materials at whatever stations they come to, and can often take away materials they just left at a station last time. In order

FACTORY
COMMERCIAL
HOTEL
GOLF COURSE
AMUSEMENT
SKI RESORT
STADIUM
APARTMENTS
LEASE BLDG.
REAL ESTATE

THIS WAS THE REAL DEAL, AND ARTDINK KNEW IT

to build things, you need a nearby plot stocked with materials, but shuttling the blocks back and forth to desired spots can be a tiring process, even at the game's highest speed. But then, you can build factories to produce materials anywhere you want. Of course, you need materials to build the factories, yet to solve that chicken-and-egg problem, each map in the game starts you with a regular supply of materials shipped in from neighboring freight trains—and you can choose to simply rely on them and do things the "hard way."

As before, when you have an increasing number of trains running along an increasing number of branching tracks, you have to get strategic. Though it's nice to have freight trains shipping materials 24 hours a day, that may not apply to passenger trains, and so the train management of *AIII* drills down to letting you individually

schedule trains and isolate them to certain directions and sections of track. The old puzzle game sensibilities of the original games rear their heads here, as you must figure out the best way to keep your network of rails running smoothly—and should it just end up with you building a second set of tracks nearby, then so be it. Nevertheless, for a beginner, it's a common occurrence to have trains bump up against each other, even if you thought you got the hang of it.

The bigger and more important addition to *AIII* was the entire urban development facet, though it had nothing to do with trains. Increased transportation makes the land more attractive to newcomers, and the rural villages on the outskirts of town morph into bustling cities full of hotels, housing developments, shopping centers and skyscrapers. But it's

not quite automatic, and it's certainly not fast. In order to juice the local economy, you'll have to start playing land baron in addition to transportation tycoon. You get a taste of it early on when you're forced to buy land to hold materials, but that's just square-by-square on the map grid. Real motion happens when you start to buy apartment buildings, which gives more people places to live, and hotels, which encourages tourism. And naturally, placing these things as sensibly close as possible to your train stations will continue to reflect positively on the town and your checkbook at the end of each year. Later, you can buy various shops, parks, and leasable buildings for businesses, all the while maintaining the transportation system's efficiency for everyone who uses it. Should all this property and transportation management go sour—declining populations; uprooting

TAFYSTEEL

MESSAGE

SECURITIES MANAGER:

"THE MARKET IS GOOD"

TODAY'S STOCK MARKET

	BUY	SELL

CASH: 1,744,256 STOCKS HELD: 60

RIK TRAD	655	3	BIG IRON	738	4	RADONRLTY	662
HYGOESTR	666	3	TAFYSTEEL	735	4	BRAUNYCON	803

and re-laying train tracks—you'll soon feel the hurt in your wallet. In that case, you can always go to the bank and get a loan, which will be paid on top of your yearly taxes and other expenses.

For the new millionaire brimming with confidence after setting up trains and moving money around, *AIII* has another little playground for you: the stock market. Bring up the associated menu, and you'll be greeted by a number of fictional companies, and you can buy and sell their stocks with a few clicks in a sub-window. Naturally, you can monitor stock performance over time, and you'll be notified of big gains or losses in your portfolio. Some may call real-world stock markets nothing but a form of gambling, but in this computer game context, it is. You don't have to do it, but once you start the ball rolling, you add a whole new dynamic to your income, flipping

the switch on one more simulation layer to worry about on top of the trains running, the property value fluctuating, and ensuring you have enough left after taxes. It is, in other words, a computer simulation game: real life digitized. Similarly, in regards to the aforementioned land purchases, smart players will buy clumps of land in remote parts of the map, with the hope that the land value will rise with the population, then sell it back at its peak value.

AIII was the real deal, and Artdink knew it. As the look of the game was improved, so was its marketing. The elegant "AIII" logo signified a move away from the more lighthearted (and slightly amateurish) "Take the *A-Train*" games. As the game earned more clout among PC game players and the media, *AIII* eventually reached consoles. Artdink usually licensed out their games to other publishers instead

of doing their own thing, but *AIII* got two very distinct console ports: a faithful one for the PC Engine CD-ROM by Artdink themselves, and *AIII S.V.* for Super Famicom. The latter was dismal; a bad retooling of the game that added about three more steps to every menu command, among other shortcomings. Nevertheless, back on the computer market, Artdink supported *AIII* with a map construction kit, additional pre-made map packs, and eventually a big bundle of everything in one box.

Another symbol of *AIII*'s success was that it went global. Artdink was virtually unknown outside Japan, and an obscure English DOS port of the second *A-Train* (*Railroad Empire*) did little to help that. But in 1992, *AIII* was licensed to Maxis, and renamed simply *A-Train*. Maxis, of course, made *SimCity*, which was a celebrated classic in the West that would coincidentally

be released in Japan the same year as the first version of *AIII*. On top of that, *A-Train* was the first game Maxis published from an outside developer, not to mention a foreign one. "We have huge egos and think we're pretty good game designers," wrote Tim Bentley in the *A-Train* manual, "So if we publish someone else's game, it means we're really impressed." Maxis gave *A-Train* a respectful English localization: the game was mostly identical to its Japanese cousins, though advisor portraits were made more diverse and lingering broken English was cleaned up. If anybody could show the world how cool Artdink was, it was Maxis, but for some reason, *A-Train* did not reach a chart-topping level of success. What should have been one of 1992's best PC games became a niche title filling a gap between two *SimCity* games.

By that token, what the Maxis name did mean for *A-Train* was that it brought a host of comparisons to *SimCity*. Players expecting the usual zoning and budget balancing might find themselves confounded when constructing train lines and buying parks doesn't grow the city in the way they thought it would. It's all about how these games work: in *A-Train*, you don't build out from several different points; instead, you start with the singular focus of the train system, and the city grows based on your (hopefully) shrewd financial sense.

It's a simple shift in thinking, but it's an incredibly crucial one: You're not the mayor. You're here to start a financial empire by bringing more people into the area and generally keeping yourself out of the red. You never hear from residents demanding a police station, and the only times an advisor speaks up is when you're almost broke. It's dollars and cents, not

approval ratings and landfills. But you can't blame new players for the confusion: *A-Train*'s bright and colorful graphics *are* *SimCity*, and Artdink's use of an isometric view doubtlessly informed the look of *SimCity 2000* just a year or so later, which then informed other PC sims and RPGs for over a decade. In fact, pretty much the only visual element that was uniquely *A-Train*'s was its day/night cycle, which Maxis didn't adopt until *SimCity 4*.

A-Train sequels added more features and better graphics as they changed with the times, but the series would barely show up in America again, instead staying in Japan with the occasional European localizations. Regardless, it was Artdink's representative work, and if *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* were held up as examples of Japan adapting and mastering the computer RPG, *AIII* showed their mastery of the sim.

ARTDINK AND MAXIS: A

When Maxis licensed *A-Train* from Artdink in the early '90s, it could have been the start of a great game industry romance.

Think about it—two companies from opposite ends of the earth who both made it big producing the same kinds of games and would eventually influence one another. Maybe not consciously, but at least they were coming to the same kinds of conclusions. Unfortunately, it didn't quite play out like a fairy tale.

Artdink was a product of the Japanese PC boom, like so many other game companies that would later rise to prominence. They were a "software house" and a tiny staff of young hackers who saw more business potential in games than others. At the very end of 1985 they released their first commercial project, *Take the A-Train*, which would dictate their output for the foreseeable future. By now you've read enough of what *A-Train* became, and though it never quite became a worldwide success (for many different reasons), it steadily grew in prominence in Japan, and quickly became synonymous with Artdink.

Around the same time, in 1984, an American computer geek named Will Wright was putting the finishing touches on his first game, a Commodore 64 shooter called *Raid on Bungeling Bay*. The overhead maps that served as the stages in the game contained factories and other elements that would grow in power to try and better fight the player's helicopter. As the story goes, Wright found himself having more fun editing the maps than finishing the game, and soon enough that map editor would morph into the first version of *SimCity*, which was simultaneously borne from Wright's fascination with urban planning. Wright soon co-founded Maxis with fellow software developer Jeff Braun. Slowly but surely, they got *SimCity* published in 1989, upgrading the original Commodore version made by Wright into more up-to-date versions. In short, it was a smash hit.

Indeed, the original *Take the A-Train* predated *SimCity* by a few years, though Wright did have a solid vision of his game by 1985. Regardless, trying to hash out who did what first and when is a little futile when both games have their fair share of fundamental differences, and nonetheless came at a time when sim games of all kinds were becoming commonplace in the world's PC game markets.

Tatsuo Nagahama is Artdink's Will Wright. He was one of the founders of the company, and directed many of their early games, including overseeing the design of every major *A-Train* game. And, in fact, he remains at Artdink today as its president. Truthfully, it's hard to find much information about Nagahama, especially compared to Wright, who has since rode high on his success and leveraged it into all sorts of public appearances and post-Maxis ventures. Regardless, Nagahama was crafting previously unseen sim games around the same time as Wright, and both hit the big time just after the turn of the 1990s.

Maxis made a small empire out of making what they called "software toys;" not games, not simulations, but products still able to engage imaginations and educate players, however realistically, on how the world works. After *SimCity*, most of their games followed Will Wright's interest in the natural universe—evolution, ants, or Earth itself. But Artdink's sims were more about people and culture, be it anthropological, popular, or a mix of both. For example, take both companies' approaches to golf games: Maxis made *SimGolf* about designing courses and managing clubhouses; Artdink's *Big Honour* was about managing the career of a single golf pro. Maxis made games about rainforest ecology; Artdink made games about World War II tanks blowing each other up. And yet, While the Western world's PC gamers of the time lifted up Maxis and MicroProse as leaders of the simulation genre, over in Japan, Artdink already had several different sims with concepts that met, complemented, or exceeded the work of the Americans—and they just kept making more.

Artdink met Maxis when both companies were more popular than they ever were. In 1990, Artdink published Take the *A-Train III* (*AIII*), the game that essentially rebooted the franchise into what it would become. In short, it too was a smash hit. And it wasn't alone: *SimCity* had debuted in Japan that same year, and would earn many of the same accolades from the media as *AIII*. According to the *A-Train* manual, they tied for first in *Login* magazine's Simulation of the Year award, a prestigious honor from the
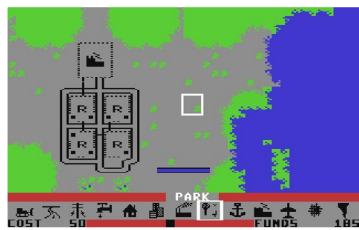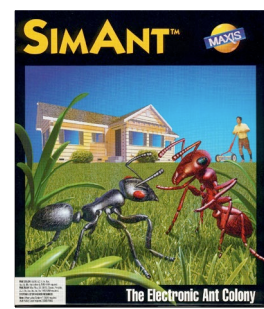
TALE OF TWO (SIM) CITIES

go-to magazine for Japanese computer nerds.

Perhaps because of that, Maxis caught wind of the game, and decided to license it from Artdink with the intent of an American release, making it the first "Maxis" game developed outside the company. At the time, it couldn't have been a better choice: a freshly localized port of Japan's homegrown "SimCity," backed with the increasing marketing muscle of Maxis. *AIII* became "*A-Train*" in America, and was released in 1992. (Ocean handled publishing in Europe, resulting in three prominent software company logos on the same box.)

But the release of *A-Train* was about as far as the Artdink-Maxis relationship got: a freshly localized port though it was, Artdink's game didn't even set the sales charts on fire the way it did in Japan. The spark was there, but Maxis failed to keep it going. On the other hand, it probably wasn't entirely their fault—*A-Train* had the potential to finds its niche in the West, as it wasn't an ugly or particularly confusing game, but it wasn't *SimCity*, and players just didn't bite.

It's fascinating that Artdink always danced around creating an out-and-out *SimCity* clone. Not that they should have, necessarily, but it's interesting how even after the brush with Maxis, the *A-Train* games remained on the *SimCity* sidelines, acting as a nice companion piece for players who were more into trains and transportation than juggling every last part of urban development and keeping populations high.

When the Sony PlayStation arrived in 1994 and '95, it was a new opportunity for both companies, but to different degrees. Before, Artdink and Maxis had licensed out their games for other developers to handle on non-PC platforms while they stayed focused on the computer markets, but with the PlayStation, Artdink eventually moved the bulk of their development to the console. Maxis—still independent back then—apparently saw it as a market to dip their toes in and nothing more. However, they did shake hands with Artdink once more and published the latest *A-Train* game for PlayStation, *AIV Evolution Global*, and again called it "*A-Train*." But it didn't do much better than it did in 1992, and the only other console game Maxis self-published was a port of *SimCity 2000*.

Maxis didn't stick around, but Artdink positively flourished on PlayStation, publishing several different games with ideas and presentations much more radical than what they were putting out on PC. Part of that was thanks to a young designer named Kazutoshi Iida, whose experimental titles *Aquanaut's Holiday* (pg. 38) and *Tail of the Sun* (pg. 42) proved that Artdink was willing to step outside the bounds of their usual PC simulation racket. Although some of their games that weren't Iida's still had a unique taste from
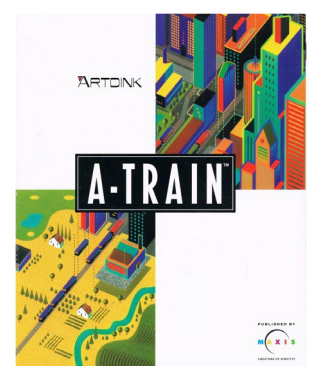
the company's PC catalog: the building-block madness of *ToPoLo* (pg. 44), the pirate ship escapades of *Susumu! Kaizoku*, and the traffic-controlling mayhem of *Navit* (pg. 56). And years after *A-Train*, Artdink would repay Maxis' favor, so to speak, by publishing the PlayStation version of *SimCity 2000* in Japan; finally, a Maxis game was handled by Artdink this time. But that was the final gesture of the relationship, and the two companies went their separate ways.

Now, Maxis is just another division within EA, and has become synonymous with *The Sims*, though they've kept the *SimCity* spirit alive by releasing a brand-new sequel in March 2013 (alive on paper, anyway, if you don't pay attention to the humongous wave of disgust people sent their way after the game's faulty launch). Artdink didn't quite follow the same path—unlike Maxis, they weren't bought by a humongous publisher, and have maintained their autonomy since the beginning. Pros and cons permeate both companies' stories: Maxis continued to live strong and lined the EA coffers with cash from the *Sims* franchise, but a longtime focus on that franchise and a lukewarm response to their last big "milestone" game *Spore* convinced fans that Maxis was just a name and nothing more. Meanwhile, Artdink made a hasty exit from the console market a few years into the life of the PlayStation 2, and practically relegated themselves to making nothing but *A-Train* games on PC.

And now, as game development industries in both Japan and the West face their own scrutiny, the chances are low that two companies like Artdink and Maxis would ever get together again, if not the slight bumping up against each other that started it. The natural response is to bring up indie games and the fact that the Internet has made us closer than ever, so international collaboration is bound to happen on a small scale. But that's still yet to be seen, and probably not without the kind of controlled business dealings that Artdink and Maxis no doubt went through. Still, if it could happen once, it can happen again. Here's to romance.
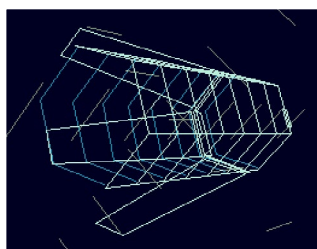
TOKIO

1992

At some point in the near future (or maybe just an alternate 1992), Japan establishes the 24th ward of Tokyo, though this one isn't anywhere near the metropolitan center. Actually, it's not even on Earth. Rather, the new municipality is a humongous space colony dubbed Tokio. Shaped like a hexagonal cylinder, Tokio is like the real Tokyo if it were rolled up like so much fish and rice. And people are ready to move on up to a de-luxe apartment beyond the sky, so as the ward boss, it's your job to accommodate them while keeping Tokio running smoothly.

It's a kooky setup, but in practice, *Tokio* is closer to *SimCity* than *A-Train* ever would be. It's all about building out the city while keeping residents happy, though both are handled in their own unique *Tokio* ways. The five sides of the colony's vessel are

made up of a grid of panels, each one able to be fitted with plots of land. When you start, you'll see housing developments and commercial properties just like in a real city, and can expand outward by building more roads, installing more buildings, and so on until you have a bustling, humongous city gracefully floating through space. Plenty of data is available to access from your advisers, as well, including population breakdowns Underneath it all, a control room contains huge generators and is staffed by intelligent robots (not coincidentally looking like they came out of *How Many Robot?*), with investments into additional power needed as the colony grows. And because Tokio is effectively a bio-dome, you can control the climate. Rainy days bringing people down? How about making the next day a little brighter, or why not just make an instant summer for a little while?

On the other hand, some shades of *A-Train* do poke through. You have a fluctuating stock of building materials, and transportation factors in, as well. At a basic level you can construct roads for automobiles, but you also have to keep an eye on the spaceports outside the colony, which send shuttles of people and materials back and forth between Tokio and Earth (plus a scenic route that makes a stop on the moon). You can redirect one or more of the 16 shuttles to focus on people or cargo depending on what you need more of, but otherwise the schedule will stay in place and run just fine without too much intervention.

Despite the wonders of city living in space, everything runs as confusingly and mundanely in Tokio as it does down on Earth. People have the same boring jobs, the same family problems, and the same

EARTH SHUTTLE			TOKIO → EARTH →		
A0	B1	A3	A5	B3	B2
2007	2002	2007	2007	2002	200
PSSGR	CARGO	PSSGR	PSSGR	CARGO	CARG
0:00	3:00	6:00	9:00	12:00	15:
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
6:00	9:00	12:00	15:00	18:00	21:
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
12:00	15:00	18:00	21:00	0:00	3:
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
18:00	21:00	0:00	3:00	6:00	9:

MOON SHUTTLE			TOKIO → MOON → T		
A2	A6	A1	A4	B0	B5
2007	2007	2007	2007	2004	200
PSSGR	PSSGR	PSSGR	PSSGR	CARGO	CARG
0:00	3:00	6:00	9:00	12:00	15:
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
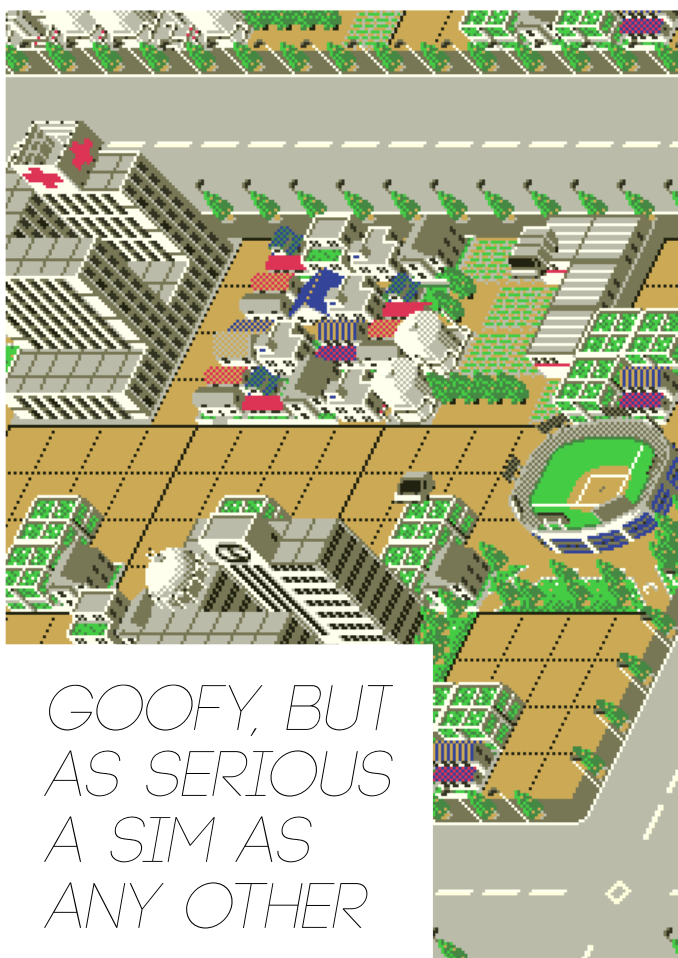
GOOFY, BUT AS SERIOUS A SIM AS ANY OTHER
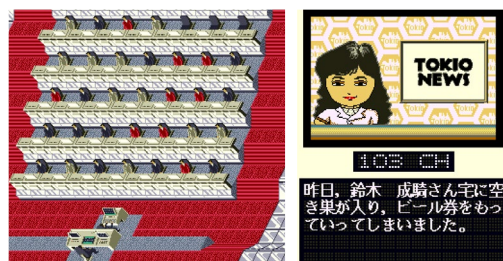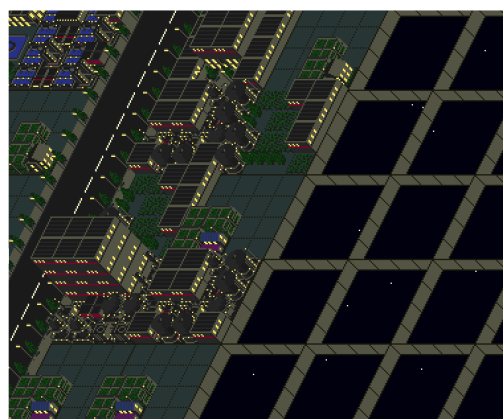
routines. And bureaucracy rules in the same way: to make any sweeping changes to Tokio, you must first run them by the metropolitan assembly, just as the other wards of Tokyo would. Ordinances are voted on, and though you can view the members of the assembly and try to make things happen with some friendly influence, it's up to them to decide what you can or can't do with the colony. (For those not up on Japanese politics, just think of the Dark Assembly from the *Disgaea* games.) And when it comes to hearing the voice of the people, you can do so literally by poring through the Tokio phone book, or clicking on any residence on the colony and receiving the opinion of an actual Tokioite, randomly generated by the game.

What helps *Tokio* stand out is its default gameplay view, a sort of double-face isometric presentation meant to

represent the cylinder that is Tokio, while still allowing you to easily move around the map. And it smartly changes as you move, too—scroll the screen up or down enough, and the view will recalibrate so that the next side is shown right-side up. It's slightly disorienting, but it's believable, and it works. And for a game that is basically "*SimCity* in space," *Tokio*'s appeal is bolstered by its comedic bent. Sure, *SimCity* has always had bits of silliness to it, but *Tokio* leans more toward the "madcap" side of things, beyond the absurd fact that you're managing the development of a space colony as if it were a 20th-century city. For example, by checking in on residents, you can get a variety of off-the-cuff comments, and sometimes you'll run across characters with strange adornments such as turbans or giant nose rings (and they're still meant to be Japanese!).

Artdink released only a few games in 1992, and *Tokio* might be one of the reasons why. It's one of their best-looking games for the time, with big, detailed sprites (that had to be drawn at different angles), and is packed with as many features as Tokio itself becomes packed with people—goofy though it may be, this was as serious a sim as any of their other games. And for people who think Artdink only made "wacky" stuff in the PlayStation era, *Tokio* showed that among the sims they produced in the '80s and '90s, they could still take a "normal" setting and tweak it just enough to get something that was totally silly and worth checking out. In 1995, another busy year for Artdink, they managed to make *Tokio 2*, wherein the humble colony becomes a sovereign, orbital city-state, with many of the same problems as before. So it goes in intergalactic diplomacy.

LUNATIC DAWN

1993
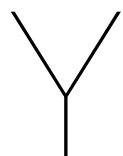
You may think that a company so devoted to sims like Artdink wouldn't bother with role-playing games. But they have, and *Lunatic Dawn*, their entry into the genre, gave way to a series second only to *A-Train* in the number of sequels and derivations produced. And of course, being an RPG doesn't really preclude any simulation elements, so what Artdink accomplished with *Lunatic Dawn* comes off as natural as all the other numbers-heavy games in their catalog.

Lunatic Dawn is as traditional as can be—for a computer RPG, anyway. You won't be rolling dice for every command, but you will be expected to do a lot of things on your own. In terms of building a party, character creation hits all of the expected fantasy RPG classes and stats to plug skill points into (interestingly, you can even name characters in Greek or Cyrillic script). But *Lunatic Dawn* takes less after the pre-made worlds of *Wizardry* and more after the transforming worlds of *Rogue*. This mostly has to do with the world map: it's randomly generated every time you begin a new game, with towns and dungeons and damn near everything else in different places every time. The area you start in may not look much different between playthroughs, but once you start roaming the map, it's a whole other can of worms (one that made the game's save files a then-massive six megabytes).

In accordance with this, you are not explicitly told what your path will be through the game: you know there's evil in the land and stuff needs to be found and bad guys need to be killed, but from there, you're on your own. No single quest begins your grand adventure (though you can take a "training" quest at a nearby dungeon); you must seek out trouble and take care of it, and your hand will rarely be held. Nevertheless, completing quests will raise your fame level and assist in growing your character(s). None of this is really all that revolutionary for an RPG, not even in 1993, but in a Japanese context, *Lunatic Dawn*'s strong emphasis on actually getting out there and exploring instead of having dungeons and story events fed to you was becoming a niche approach. And perhaps to no surprise, Artdink would be the ones to re-energize it.

While you have great freedom to roam the countryside in *Lunatic Dawn*, it does come at a price. In another (crucial) nod to *Rogue*, your party grows hungrier by the day, and needs a constant, reliable source of energy lest they drop dead in the middle of a field. Your food supplies are

かつてこの世界の歴史の中に
高度に発展した1大文明が存在した。
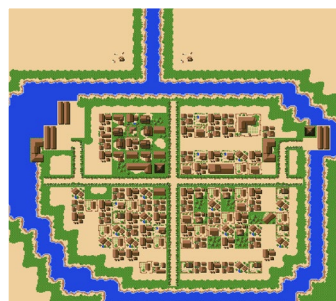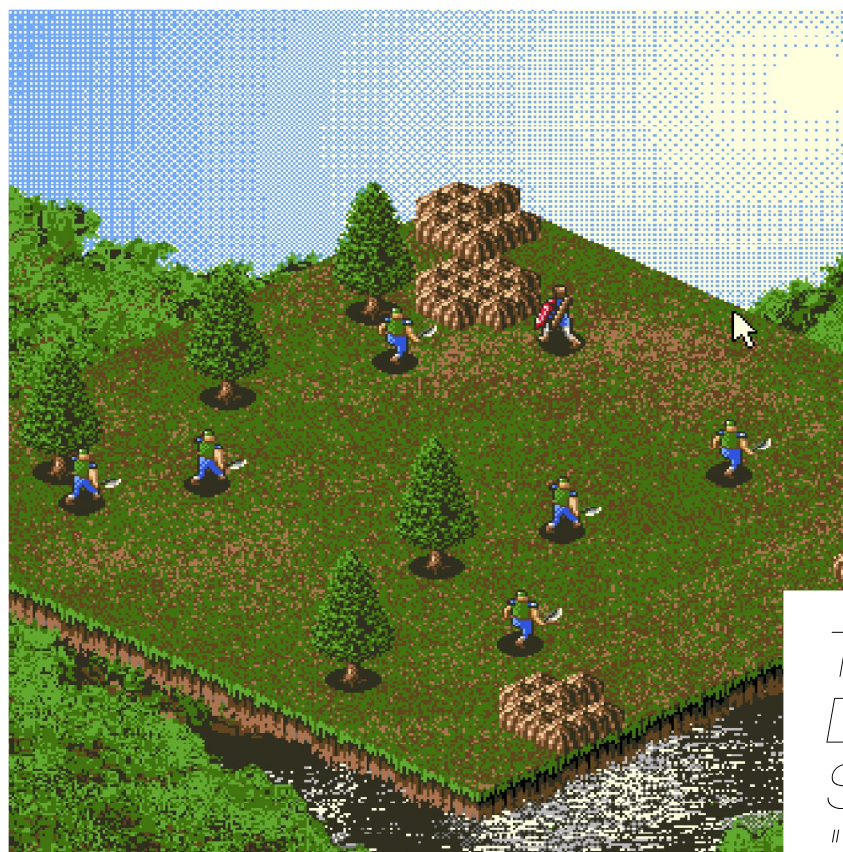
THERE'S A DISTINCT SENSE OF "ARTDINK BOLDNESS" THAT COMES THROUGH

rated by how many hours you can survive on them, and walking around spends time. What this means is that visiting towns can quite often turn into grocery shopping trips as you make sure you have enough to make it to the next town, or to the dungeon and back again. Likewise, you'll need to stock up on oil to provide light in dark dungeons; a throwback to the old days of needing torches to make any real progress.

Maybe the biggest draw to *Lunatic Dawn* in terms of freshening up the genre was the way battles are handled. They're random too, but they play out in real-time on isometric play fields, thus demanding more quick thinking than *Lunatic Dawn*'s turn-based contemporaries. At its simplest, you click on a party member, then choose commands to target enemies or allies depending on what needs to be done. Many times, you'll encounter enemies in groups,

and many of those enemies love to gang up on whoever's causing the most trouble in your party, usually melee attackers. At times like those, employing magic users is duly important in *Lunatic Dawn*, as they're the ones that can deal the most damage to the largest number of enemies at once. Battles can run unnecessarily long, too, because even weak monsters have uncomfortably large amounts of HP, and again, magic is the best way to defeat them as fast as possible.

As mentioned, *Lunatic Dawn* was one of Artdink's bigger franchises. After the first game came three more sequels, some scenario packs, and a couple of spin-offs, two of which being the PlayStation's *Lunatic Dawn Odyssey* and the PS2-exclusive *Lunatic Dawn Tempest* from 2001, the latter being the last original *Lunatic Dawn* game. Plans for another installment in 2009 were

canceled, and since then, the *Dawn* has gone dark.

Do the random elements and hunger management in this first game end up hindering it? It's hard to tell, especially when there's already several sequels that improve or otherwise smooth over those things; certainly *somebody* liked it. It's more a case of what *Lunatic Dawn* set out to do— and in 1993, when PC RPGs were more or less on their way out in Japan (or stuck in a rut of pornography), there's a distinct sense of "Artdink boldness" that comes through in playing it. It may not be worth playing through in 2013, and it may have taken another decade or two for the world to fall in love again with realistically-limited RPGs (see: the worship of From Software's Dark Souls series), but the shortcomings of *Lunatic Dawn* are ultimately forgivable, in the face of everything else that's admirable.
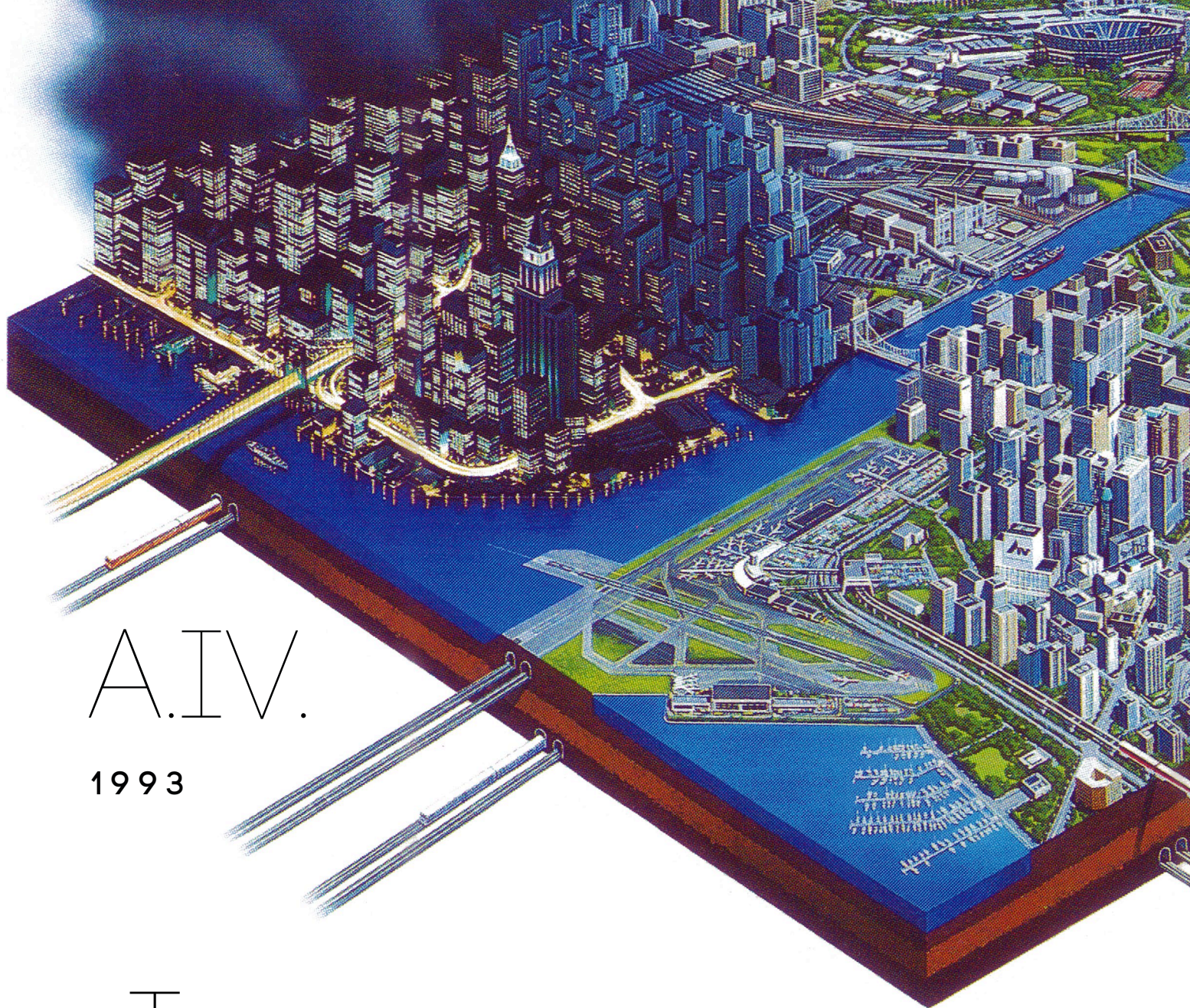
A.IV.

1993
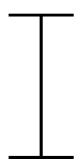
If the third *A-Train* was an important step forward for the series, then the fourth was an important digging in of the heels. Coming just three years after *AIII*, *AIV* didn't fix what was broke, and didn't need to remind fans it was still around. It was a sequel that revised, not rebooted. And it was exactly where it should've been.

So, what's the big deal? At first glance, *AIV* doesn't look much different from its predecessor: the user interface is starkly familiar, and though the world graphics are made much more beautiful with improved shading and lighting, the isometric scale is the same as before. Instead, what ends up making a difference in *AIV* is a whole new box of toys to play with. The first and most notable new element is the addition of buses. With buses, *AIV* opens a new transportation market to the player, and

one that demanded more considerate placement—you could always run a train track straight through town, but making an effective network of paved roads was something else entirely. Needs change with four-wheel vehicles, and because buses are solely people-movers, the trains' importance in transporting building materials was still utmost.

Regarding the trains, besides having a new and slightly expanded rolling stock market, the variety of track types that you can construct ballooned from... one. In *AIV*, you can build raised tracks, tunnels, and other configurations that will help you adapt to the game's new maps, which are much "hillier" than the previous game's, and can be tamed by building the correct track and road types around (or through) them. And through the changes in the map designs, you could also build and run

airports and marinas, though you had no control over the schedules of the planes and boats that come by. Another natural improvement to the game was the wheeling and dealing. The stock market features were expanded to include more companies to choose from, as well as the onset of financial "disasters," such as recessions.

AIV made it out of Japan, though it was better known in America and Europe as the PlayStation version by Maxis, who re-introduced the "*A-Train*" name (see sidebar). The original PC version was localized and ported to IBM systems in 1995, but this time it was Infogrames that licensed the game and called it *AIV Networks* in Europe. In America it was called *C.E.O.*, and included video interstitials featuring actor James Coburn. Though the core game was unchanged, Infogrames tried to market it not as a train-based city sim, but

FAST FOR WARD

A—TRAIN
PLAYSTATION·1996
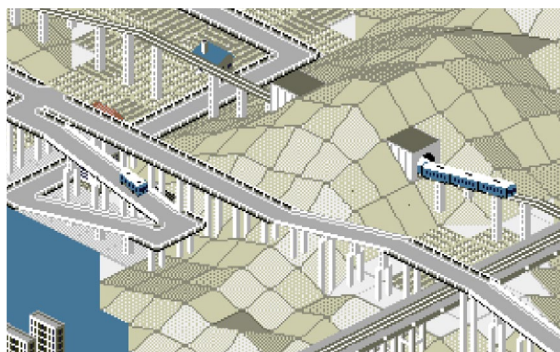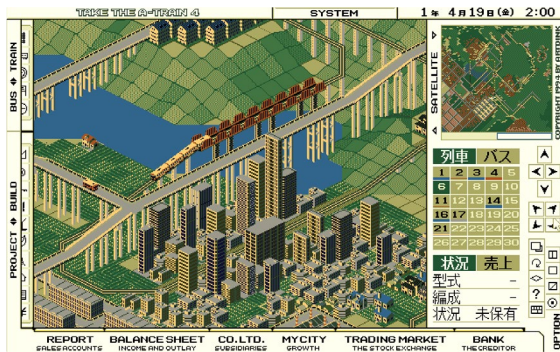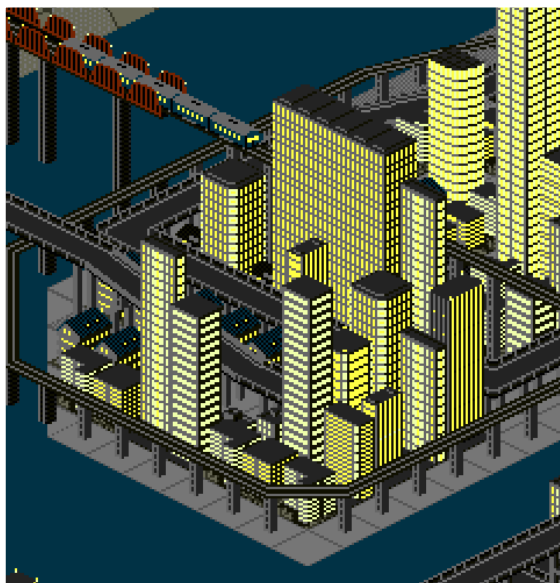
as a stock market-focused economy game, while the gameplay screen is supposed to be a sort of virtual reality representation of the real city you're lording over (plus, the eponymous "AIV Networks" is the name of a fictional in-game business news channel). A bit fast and loose with the source material, to be sure, and ultimately nothing about the game's release would unseat *SimCity 2000* from its throne.

And what *about SimCity 2000*? It made its splash in 1993, months before *AIV,* though wouldn't hit Japan until later. For as many comparisons one can bring up between *SC2K* and *AIII*, *AIV* seemed to take a few bits from Maxis' game—not so much in the gameplay, but mostly the interface, as you can now rotate and zoom out of the map view, as well as use "slice" views that let you view only certain elevation layers of the map. So while *AIV* maintained success in Japan, *SimCity* ruled elsewhere. Artdink may have seemed content with where the series was, but in truth, they would finally start moving forward.
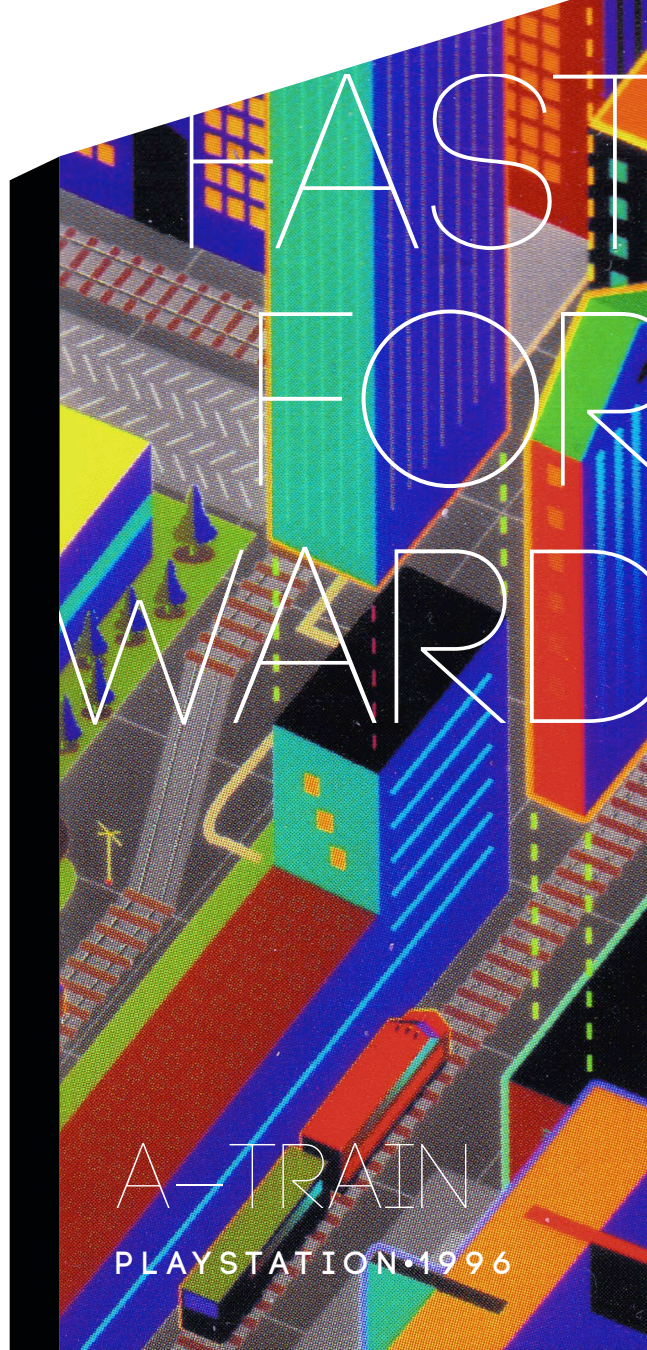
Maxis returned to the train yard when they published another *A-Train*: the American version of *AIV Evolution Global. Evolution* was a PlayStation launch game in Japan, and *Global* was an enhanced multi-language version that was also the third licensee release in America (though it wasn't released until February 1996). *Evolution*'s changes are obvious from the get-go: the graphics are completely overhauled, with a steeper isometric angle and larger sprites suited for low-res TV play. But the big draw was the ability to switch to a 3D polygonal view that lets you "ride" your trains in first-person—a gimmick that would nonetheless become a standard feature in the sequels. However, early PlayStation excitement in the West was about everything *but* urban development sims, so *A-Train* once again failed to grab big attention. And later, Maxis would release PlayStation and Saturn versions of *SimCity 2000* before bowing out of console publishing altogether.

HR2
1994
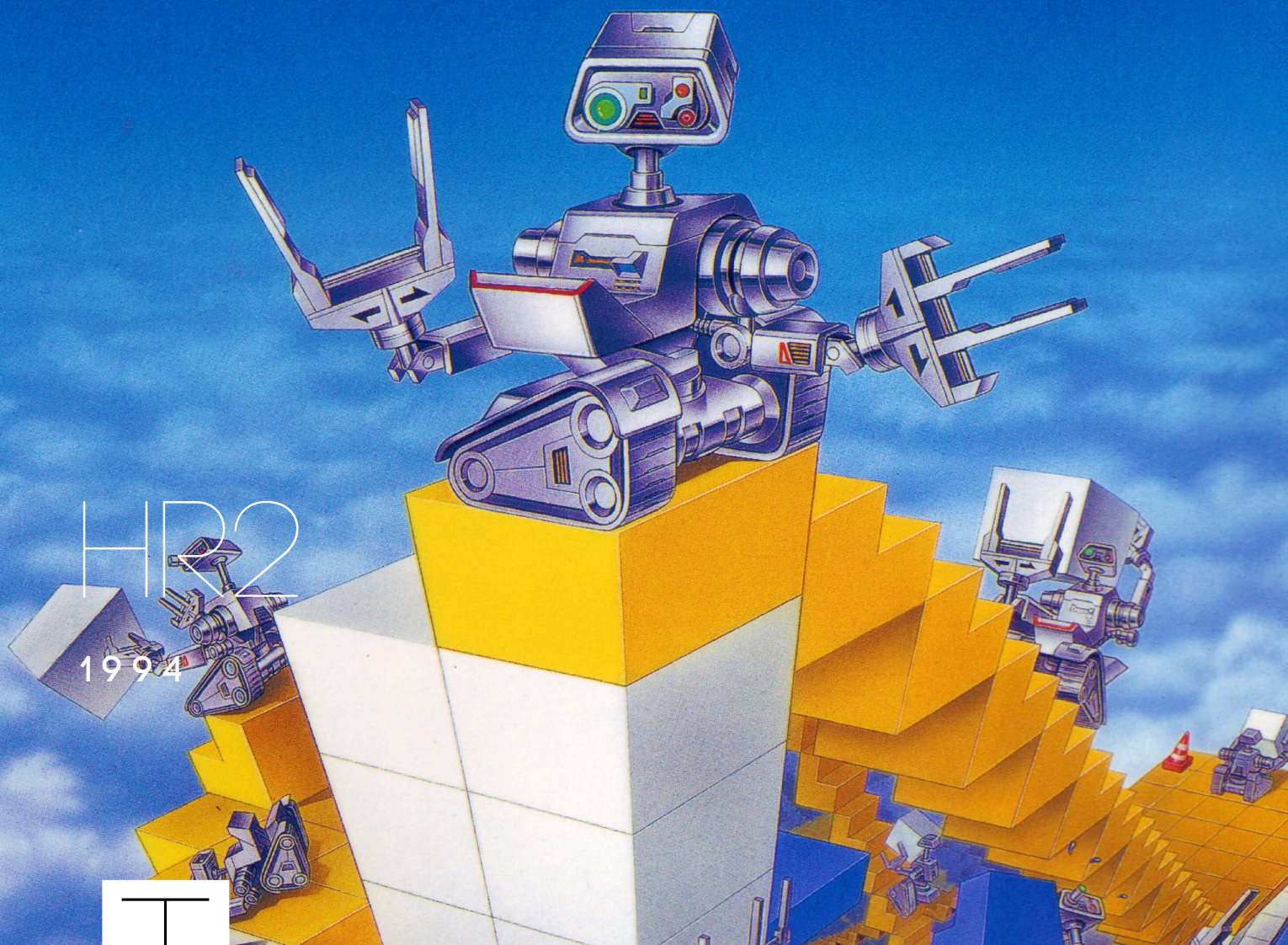
The robots are back, and they've changed careers. Apparently, bomb disposal was just too dangerous a line of work in *How Many Robot?*, so in the sequel *HR2*, Artdink's cute little 'bots are now in the construction business. Arguably, their artificial intelligence programming is less intelligent this time around, but on the flip side, you can do a lot more to improve it.

HR2 involves using the robots to construct the interior of a tower according to your instructions. Or in other words, if you go by its tagline, "Let's Make a Taller Building Than Anyone Does!" And it might not need much more explanation than that. When the game begins, you already have a few robots dutifully going about their assigned tasks: building pillars, walls, staircases and floors. You can add more robots until you have a whole fleet of 16,

plugging away at growing the tower until it's reaching the stratosphere. But if you assign a robot to make pillars, for instance, it isn't intuitive enough to start building one where it's needed. In that case, you have a variety of different markers that you can place on the floor, which dictate the type of structure and the direction it faces. In the case of the pillar, the robot will simply keep stacking blocks to make one until it can no longer reach. The method differs for floors and stairs, where you can just click and drag to set their positions, but load-bearing fixtures need a bit more thought behind their placement. Additional position markers will tell robots where to stop, turn around or remove pieces, and more advisory types such as flags and cones can be used to guide the robots in the way you want, in the event they keep taking the long way around to go up the stairs.

And though this isn't *A-Train*, progress in *HR2* hinges on maintaining a constant supply of building materials. Fortunately, you don't have to wait to get them; it's as simple as clicking the menu selection to call up a desired quantity, then telling the game where to put the pile. The material blocks are color-coded, as they're used for the associated fixtures, so robots that need them will frequently pluck from the piles and build until there's no blocks left. But again, you can keep 'em coming for pretty much as long as you like, and the only consideration is finding the space to put them.

Assuming you keep an eye on what goes on during the game and how you want your tower to take shape, much of your time in *HR2* is spent being hands-off. (Which is why cranking the game speed as high as it can go still won't feel like it's fast enough.)
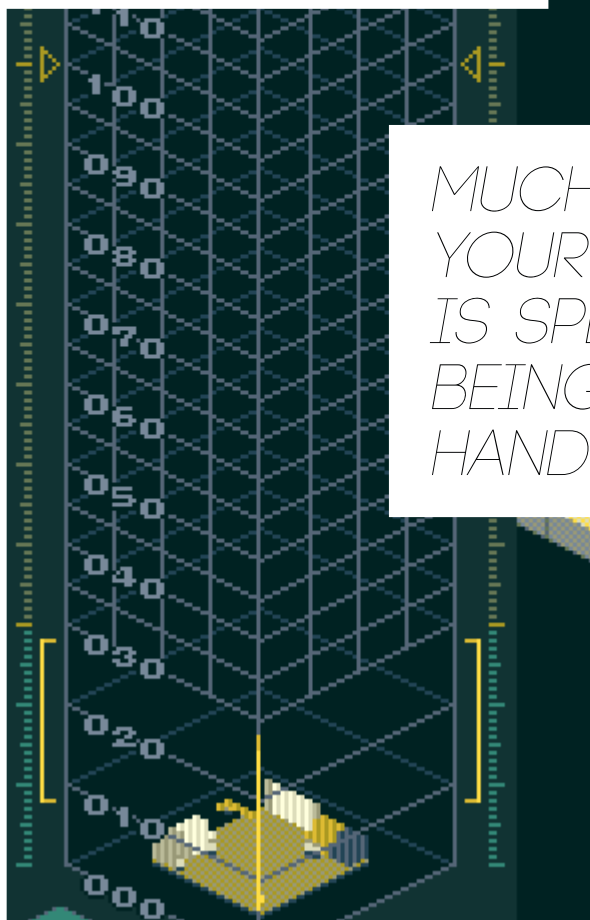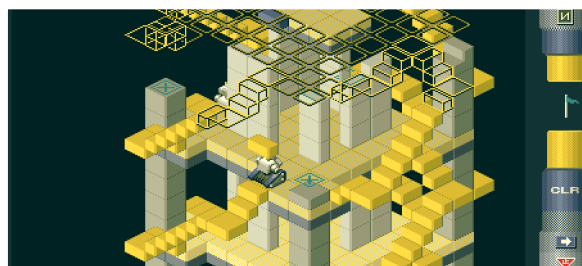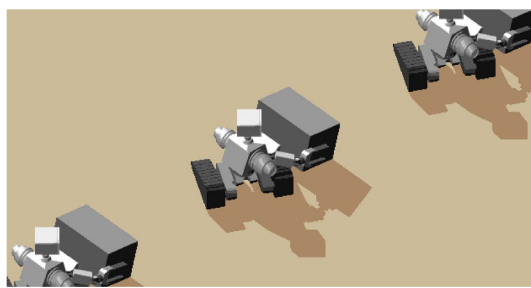
MUCH OF YOUR TIME IS SPENT BEING HANDS—OFF
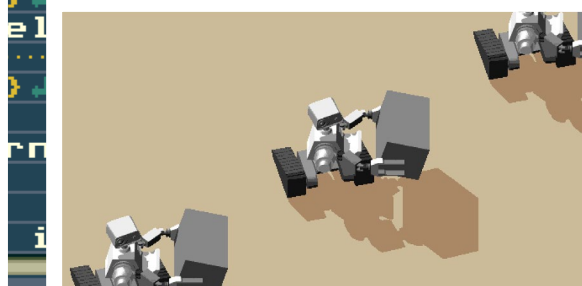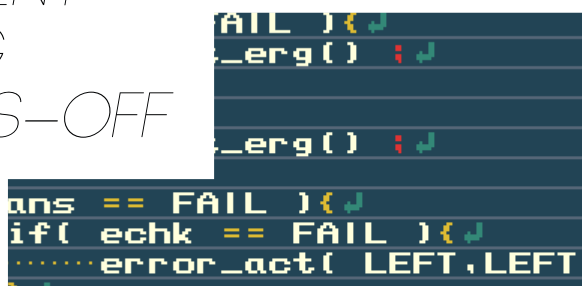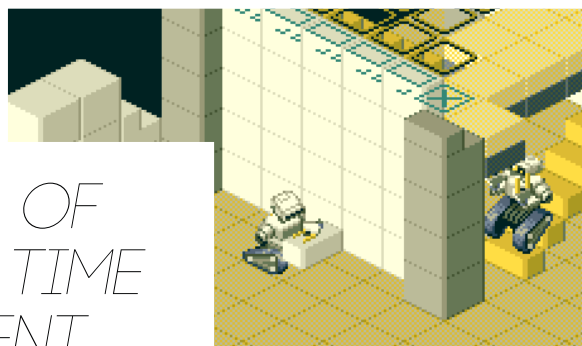
Adding more robots doesn't necessarily mean things will go faster, especially in the earliest parts of the game when you have fewer floors. You can start a robot on any job, but you can also switch their roles at will, and as long as they have the materials they'll get going at it.

But true success in *HR2* lies in making sure every floor is structurally sound. That is, within the game's logic—stairways will float freely, but floors will obviously risk collapsing if they're not supported by walls or pillars. Technically, you can get by with a little oversight here or there, but earthquakes can happen at any moment, rearranging or potentially wiping out floors, so it's important to keep everything properly propped up, or face the consequences.

HR2 includes one big feature that almost seems like a dream from the original *How Many Robot?* that's finally realized, and it's not one for the faint of heart. Built into the game is "Mini-C," an honest-to-goodness programming language meant solely for modifying the robots' actions. Learning it is completely optional, and it's not super extensive, but for hardcore tinkerers, you can open up the editor and start tweaking, adding or otherwise messing with the robots' instructions. Too often, a robot will finish what it's working on and then sit motionless in a corner, so one could theoretically add some extra instructions to the "Floor Maker" program to keep that robot busy with something else.

Superficially, *HR2* is no more stunning than *How Many Robot?* was in 1987, but its use of pleasing, neutral colors is well done. The game also includes an album's worth of music: internationally-inspired ditties, themes that communicate hard work, and even a selection of tunes from other Artdink games.

With tools like Mini-C at one's disposal, *HR2* made itself Artdink's most ambitious artificial intelligence sim. It's simple on the surface, but can be as involving as programming a game from scratch. Simplistic robot kits can be found all over the world—surely you or someone you know was into Lego Mindstorms in their heyday—but to find them incorporated into a computer game is pretty rare. *HR2* was also one of Artdink's last original sim games for PC before diving headfirst into the console space, so in some ways, it's a fitting send-off for the company's legacy on the platform (make no mistake: they still made plenty of *Lunatic Dawns* and *A-Trains*)—one that started so long ago with a few interesting games, like one about a little robot learning to think on its own.
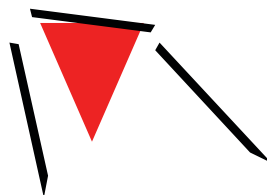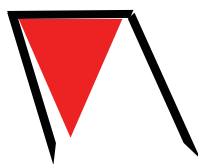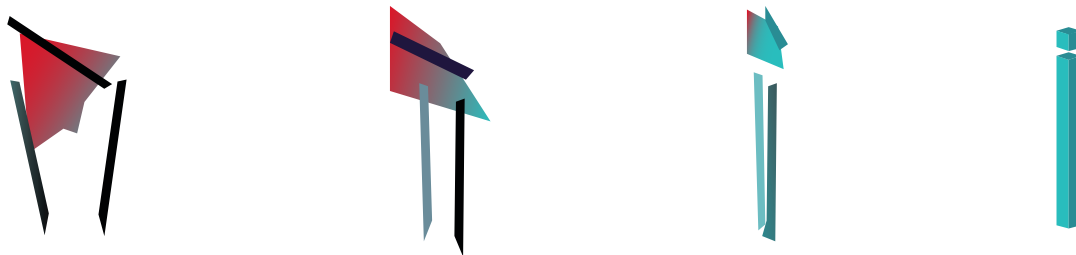
TRANSITIONS

In 1995, after years in the computer game space, Artdink refocused their efforts and began publishing most of their games on Sony's PlayStation, like many other companies of the time. *A-Train* and *Lunatic Dawn* maintained a presence and popularity on PC, but it was hardly where the company's new ideas would be headed. Instead, what the PlayStation brought out of Artdink was a wider variety of artistic, playful, and comical games that still had the worldly flavor of what came before them, yet could appeal to the wider audiences of console gaming. That led to more of their work being brought overseas, and many of us came to know Artdink not by way of *A-Train*, but by exploring the sea, programming virtual robots, and meeting a long line of anthropomorphic dominoes.

AQUA— NAUT'S HOLIDAY

1995

Kazutoshi Iida didn't always have a goal. Some of his first work for Artdink games included drawing pixel art or digitizing photos for console ports of *Eikan wa Kimi ni* and *The Atlas*. In life, he's an artist first. Iida stayed with Artdink for a few more years, and when he was in his mid-'20s, he was suddenly the director of the company's first completely original PlayStation game. *Aquanaut's Holiday* doesn't have a goal, either—it is at its core an experience in observing the deep ocean, freely "gliding" around reefs and hills, discovering wonderful sights, and wondering if there's anything else out there.

In *Aquanaut's Holiday*, you pilot an undersea capsule with the simple mission of exploring an expansive section of the ocean. It's not even a "mission" so much as an activity—you're free to float around every nook and cranny you come across, bump up against any schools of fish or other sea life, and generally just take it all in. Your goal, so much as there is one, can involve simply uncovering every part of the map, looking for the next new fish, or searching out and admiring a number of "wonders" placed at various spots around the map, such as sunken pyramids and shipwrecks. At one of the furthest corners of the map, you can even find a humongous, voracious fish to make you uneasy. While finding such things may be few far and between in one sitting, that does magnify the impact when you finally do.

Most of *Aquanaut's Holiday*'s interactivity is in the ability to move around the sea, but you can also emit tones by pressing the L and R buttons. Depending on the tone, a nearby fish will react, and potentially come closer to your capsule. It's a cute diversion as you're traveling, but quite pointless.

Aquanaut's Holiday may not fit the traditional view of what a "game" is, but it does have a clear(er) gamelike feature in it, yet it's one easily ignored: the Reef View. At a designated spot in the game, you can build a reef that can potentially attract all the sea life in the game. Artificial reefs have been in use in the real world for quite some time, and in *Aquanaut's*, it's used to bring the fish to you. The buttons on the controller will place colored blocks onto the grid screen, and you can also set their height, ideally creating a varied shape of a reef that can promote life around it. The colors attract different kinds of sea life between them, so the rule of thumb is to maintain a rainbow pattern along the whole reef to keep creatures coming in nice and easily. However, your number of blocks is

limited, so you can't just build a big reef from the beginning—as you progress in the game, uncovering more of the ocean map, your inventory of blocks grows slightly along with it, so your exploration does have a real incentive beyond just finding weird stuff.

Aquanaut's Holiday showed that Artdink was willing to spread their wings slightly when it came to the PlayStation, and surprisingly, it was localized and published by Sony in America and Europe, making it the first non-*A-Train* Artdink title to be translated in English. But it also fell in an *A-Train*-style trap, because the growing PlayStation audience wasn't going to receive something as vague as *Aquanaut's* with open arms. Marketing played a part, of course, but it was nonexistent. Sony did not play up the "weirdness" of *Aquanaut's* the same way they would with something like

PaRappa the Rapper, and as a result, most of the exposure it got was via middling magazine reviews. Is this to say *Aquanaut's Holiday* is an amazing, misunderstood game? Not exactly, because it does have its rough edges, and being so boldly goal-less tends to exacerbate all the little annoyances of it. Being a first-wave PlayStation game, *Aquanaut's Holiday* looks borderline abstract, especially 15-plus years on: the draw distance is short, the fish simplistic, and the polygons that make up the world are quite distinguishable. On the other hand, heck, that kind of visual treatment is en vogue these days. And with Iida's naturally artistic bent, it's easy to assume a lot of what you see and hear in *Aquanaut's* was done on purpose, not necessarily out of limitations.

A year after the original release, Artdink made a second edition of

Aquanaut's Holiday for Japan, subtitled *Memories of Summer 1996*. This was a small revision that added options such as button customization and the ability to set the capsule on a Roomba-like autopilot just by letting go of the controller after accelerating (sure makes collecting reef blocks easier). *Aquanaut's Holiday 2* was released in 1999, long after Iida had left Artdink, but the sequel kept the spirit of the original, just with a few improvements in the interface (analog control, for one thing). With that, the series would eventually move more towards cataloging sea life as well as exploration, ultimately adding dramatic elements as well. As for the first game, *Aquanaut's Holiday* would not exactly end up telegraphing where Artdink was headed for the rest of the '90s, but it nonetheless made a hell of a statement of intent. And Iida still had a little more to say.

CARNAGE HEART

1995

Carnage Heart seems like it was inevitable; the natural high point of Artdink's occasional explorations of artificial intelligence. From the cute robots and dumb space drones of their '80s games came the happy medium between the two in the '90s: walking war machine robots fighting in space.

Indeed, Carnage Heart is all about interplanetary war, localized to colonies of bases on planets and moons (already there's shades of Far Side Moon). The weapons of choice in these times are the aforementioned walking robots, known as Overkill Engines (OKEs). The OKEs on both sides are unmanned, and so the true masterminds of battle are the programmers trying to make the smartest robots possible. Carnage Heart is a turn-based game, and on each turn, the player can do a lot: they

can buy new parts and configurations from manufacturers around the world, set up new OKEs, and then ultimately make moves on the battlefield. The simplest description is also an apt comparison: Just imagine Military Madness or Advance Wars with an extra layer or two of unit management, and that's Carnage Heart.

But, again, that is a pretty simple way of putting it. Every OKE you acquire can be fitted with different weapons and body parts from a catalog that can expand through your development orders, and the real selling point of Carnage Heart is the ability to program the internal software for each and every OKE you send into battle. Instead of an imposing scripting language, programming in Carnage Heart is done through fairly easy-to-understand icons, which are then mapped out on a large grid. Similar to the drones in Far Side Moon,

the OKEs' programming is basically a ream of if-then statements: if there's an enemy 100 meters away, then fire this missile; if a missile is close enough, then jump-dodge to the left; if nothing else is happening, then continue advancing towards the nearest enemy. This is represented visually by arrow markers, and in practice, a red square will scan the grid, traveling according to the arrows, each pass proceeding differently based on what's happening. And the system isn't quite as limited as that short description makes it sound, because you can also throw in random number generators to "roll the dice" on most instructions.

To be sure, this is all pretty optional, as software can be automatically filled out with the touch of a button, and OKE builds ("cards") are available to you from the get-go. But even the player who goes the "easy" route needs to think about what

Negotiation   Turn 1 Funds 500000

Kawashima Corp
Brenan
Mcmorell
AAC
Union Claude
Ca   Lo

Nice to meet you, Commander.
You can purchase blue prints
to create more powerful OKEs
from these companies.

Congratulations on completing your
tactics! Drakken will at last be at
peace. We look forward to seeing you at
the party on Earth!

Move Forward

R & D   Turn   1 Funds 477228

Livewire
Durability 720
Weight   2900 kg

Price   17200
Total   17200

Thank you very much.

THERE'S A PRIDE IN SEEING OKEs ACT OUT THEIR PROGRAMS IN A THEATER OF WAR

and when to send out on the battlefield—arguably even moreso than a dedicated tinkerer. Ultimately, that does bypass a lot of what makes *Carnage Heart* so intriguing, because otherwise it really is just *Military Madness*, only with longer fight animations.

Several other considerations are needed to ensure success in *Carnage Heart*: you must form "lines" and battle units of OKEs to have something to put out on the front lines, and also make sure you manufacture enough weapons and ammo for the loadout. These and the other various facets of the game make up the content of *Carnage Heart*'s second disc, which was simply a tutorial video that calmly explained everything in detail, while indirectly proving that this was not some hyperactive robot combat game.

The end goal of any *Carnage Heart* play session is to advance on the enemy

bases, staying alive long enough to capture each one on the map. When a group of your OKEs engage hostiles, the screen switches to the battle view, where you can watch the entire battle play out, switching camera views as desired and hoping at least one of your 'bots survives the skirmish. Again, as all this happens, the OKEs will repeatedly scan the grid (shown in a corner of the screen) and act at the moment an instruction is scanned. While it can be tense, there's a certain level in pride in seeing your OKEs act out their programs in a theater of war, instead of as a screen full of icons.

Carnage Heart may have been inevitable in terms of Artdink's history, but it did end up more prolific than its ancestors. Like *AIV Evolution* and *Aquanaut's Holiday*, Artdink made a second edition, *Carnage Heart EZ* ("Easy Zapping"), which was released in Japan following the American

and European versions of the original. After that was a proper sequel, *Zeus: Carnage Heart Second*, with a host of new stuff, including a new software grid that could have a number of sub-grids, and the ability to set the scanning pattern in several different directions each pass. *Zeus II* followed in 1999 with more improvements and an emphasis on the game's mythology, but after that, Artdink failed to produce a new *Carnage Heart*, while their other franchises migrated to the PlayStation 2. It would take 11 years until Artdink finally refreshed the series in *Carnage Heart EXA*, a new installment for PSP. The mixture of strategy and story on a portable system makes a certain amount of sense, but so far, *Carnage Heart* doesn't show any new signs of continuing. As the last bastion of Artdink's robot intelligence games, though, it would be nice.

TAIL OF THE SUN

1996

With *Aquanaut's Holiday* finished, Kazutoshi Iida's next directorial project for Artdink took things out of the water and onto land, and where a different set of misshapen bottom-feeders ruled all they could see. *Tail of the Sun* is the story of a tiny group of cave people with big dreams, big courage, and big appetites. Unluckily for them, there's always something to challenge any one of those things.

Tail of the Sun's high concept is an exploration of prehistoric tribes and the earliest myths of humanity, where the sun was seen as such a powerful and respected force that people always desired a way to come in contact with it. The stocky Neanderthals you control have aspirations to reach the sun, because it's there, and it's awesome. Their idea is certainly easier

said than done: to build a tower made of the tusks of mammoths, one so high as to reach the perceived distance to the sun. But there's no use waiting for a bunch of mammoths to die, so someone has to go out there, explore the wild tundra to the far north, and bring back some tusks for the tribe, all the while increasing the population and maybe picking up some knowledge about the rest of the land on the way.

But while the ultimate goal is to complete the tower and touch the *Tail of the Sun*, the player's chief concern within the game is staying alive. You can freely roam the expansive world map, and you can easily whack some of the smaller animals you come across, but the mammoths are like the "final bosses" of the game; they shouldn't be engaged until you're reasonably prepared. And so, killing and eating prey you can handle early on is more important, because

eventually you will raise the levels of your physical stats, not to mention your "cultural level," where milestones occasionally come with a new, stronger weapon to use. Should a Neanderthal die, you simply select the next one available and continue from the starting point. But the extra importance in running around eating and killing is the fact that doing so gives time for the tribe to increase its population, thus giving you more lives, in video game terms.

Generally, the wild animals will leave you alone unless you start jabbing at them, but there's a few ways to self-sabotage, too: staying underwater for too long will lead to drowning, so don't go swimming too often. More precariously, when dusk falls, your character will immediately konk out and fall asleep. And not necessarily on a dime, because you keep momentum. In other words, sometimes you can only helplessly

THERE'S FUN THAT HITS YOU UPSIDE THE HEAD, AND THEN THERE'S FUN THAT INTRIGUES YOU

WILD, PURE, SIMPLE LIFE

watch as your sleeping caveman slides right down a mountain in the opposite direction you wanted to go. Animals can rudely wake you, but it's possible that you'll pass out again soon after just to get a few more winks. The physics in *Tail of the Sun* have other quirks in that vein: attacking animals is somewhat imprecise, since you need to be lined up with the target just right, but it gets better as you acquire better, bigger weapons. And there's also the ability to bound off any slope as if it were a springboard, which is handy for getting around, at least.

As you continue growing your tribe, building up the strength of your character(s), and begin collecting mammoth tusks, the tower on the little mound at the center of your world will begin to grow. And when you collect that final tusk, the whole tribe comes out for a celebratory dance, and finally you climb the tower to the sun. And

at the end, a rather profound message about your journey—one of many, depending on how well you did in the end. Could it have all been the dream of a simple mind?

Tail of the Sun is less vague than *Aquanaut's Holiday*, but a player who doesn't read the manual or a FAQ can still end up scratching their head. This is not a game with a bunch of persistent meters or numbers on the screen; even the map you have isn't that serviceable. (Just about the only user-friendly feature is an option to warp back to the tower after eating animal meat.) This may well have been the point of the game design, as even in 1997, a version of *Tail of the Sun* with a bunch of tutorial prompts and a clear idea of how close you are to winning would dilute the entire product. There's fun that hits you upside the head, and then there's fun that carefully intrigues you, and if you stay with it, then it

has done its job.

Iida pulled double duty as director and as one of the graphic designers on *Tail of the Sun*, presumably contributing some of the odd interstitial screens that you see when the game loads or when milestones are reached. After *Tail's* release, Iida and a couple of other coworkers left Artdink, and would eventually resurface with Nintendo's *Doshin the Giant*, another game where a simple people worship the sun as well as the eponymous friendly monster it summons. Now at Grasshopper Manufacture, Iida has moved more towards music than graphics—his last role as director was *Evangelion 3nd Impact*, and he sang his heart out in *No More Heroes 2*'s ending theme. And as it would turn out, to a generation of discerning hardcore game fans in the West, he'd end up defining Artdink better than any train game ever would.

TOPOLO

et's Enjoy the Digital Toy!" reads the tagline of *ToPoLo*. It's a statement that doesn't exactly tell you what you're in for—any video game could be called a digital toy, and ironically, Maxis used to call their games "software toys." But *ToPoLo*'s self-described toy is more literal than you'd think. It is, for all intents and purposes, the Artdink concept of video game Lego: you have an infinite supply of bricks to attach to one another and color however you'd like, building fanciful little creatures that can either be at home with the animals in the game's themed stages, or completely look out of place; it's all up to you.

The themed stages are what you see when you start the game—you have a choice of six different ones, each based on kid-friendly places like the sea, the savannah, the moon, or just the featureless "plain" stage. Associated pre-made creatures are already running amok on these backdrops, usually aimlessly, and always dancing the entire time—a wonky tune plays persistently no matter what you're doing in the game. They can be observed by moving the camera around, and you can back out and visit another one whenever.

But building is what *ToPoLo* is all about, and the construction interface is meant to be as simple as possible without resorting to teaching kids 3D modeling: you use a crosshair to target connection points on bricks you want to put another brick onto, what direction to set them, and so on, using the directional pad to twirl the brick around while the crosshair stays focused. Different animations are also available—a single brick can squirm and pulsate to the rhythm, as long as it has enough room to do so (they don't actually have to be touching). By bringing wavy, springy bricks into the equation, *ToPoLo* does what no building block can do in the real world, and it helps bring life to your creations, as you can potentially make them bob and up and down, take big strides, or practically any other silly movements to match the other ones on the dance floor. Nevertheless, it does take a bit of time to understand just *how* to fit bricks together and how they orient themselves once you select the connection points, but once acclimated to the logic, you can start on your creative path.

And your creativity may be all you'll have, because basically, *ToPoLo* has no point. You can say what you want about *Aquanaut's Holiday*, but *ToPoLo*'s central activity of building creatures out of bricks for the sole purpose of making them dance
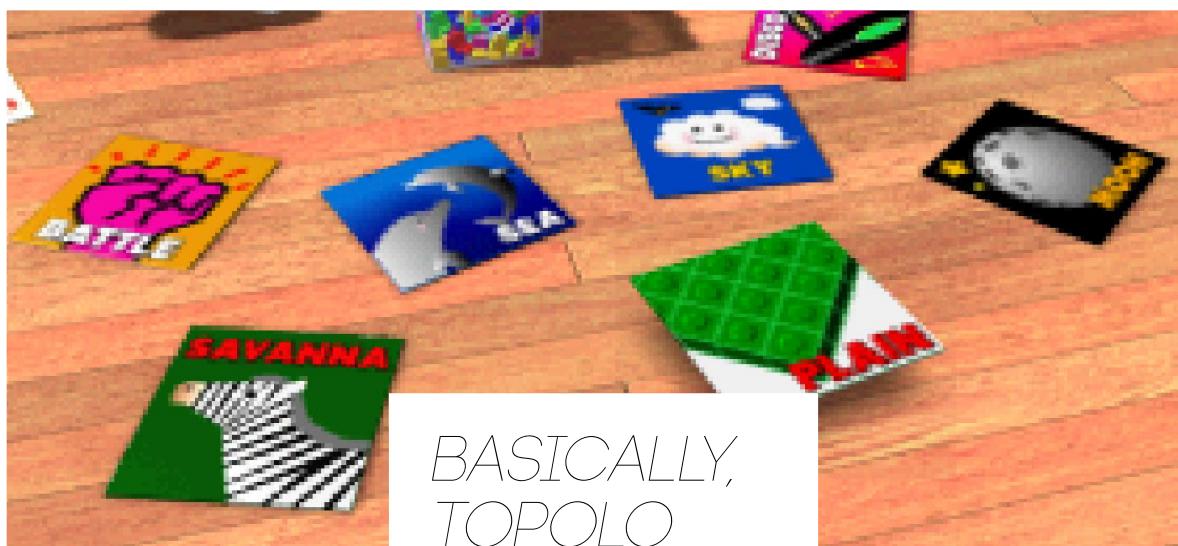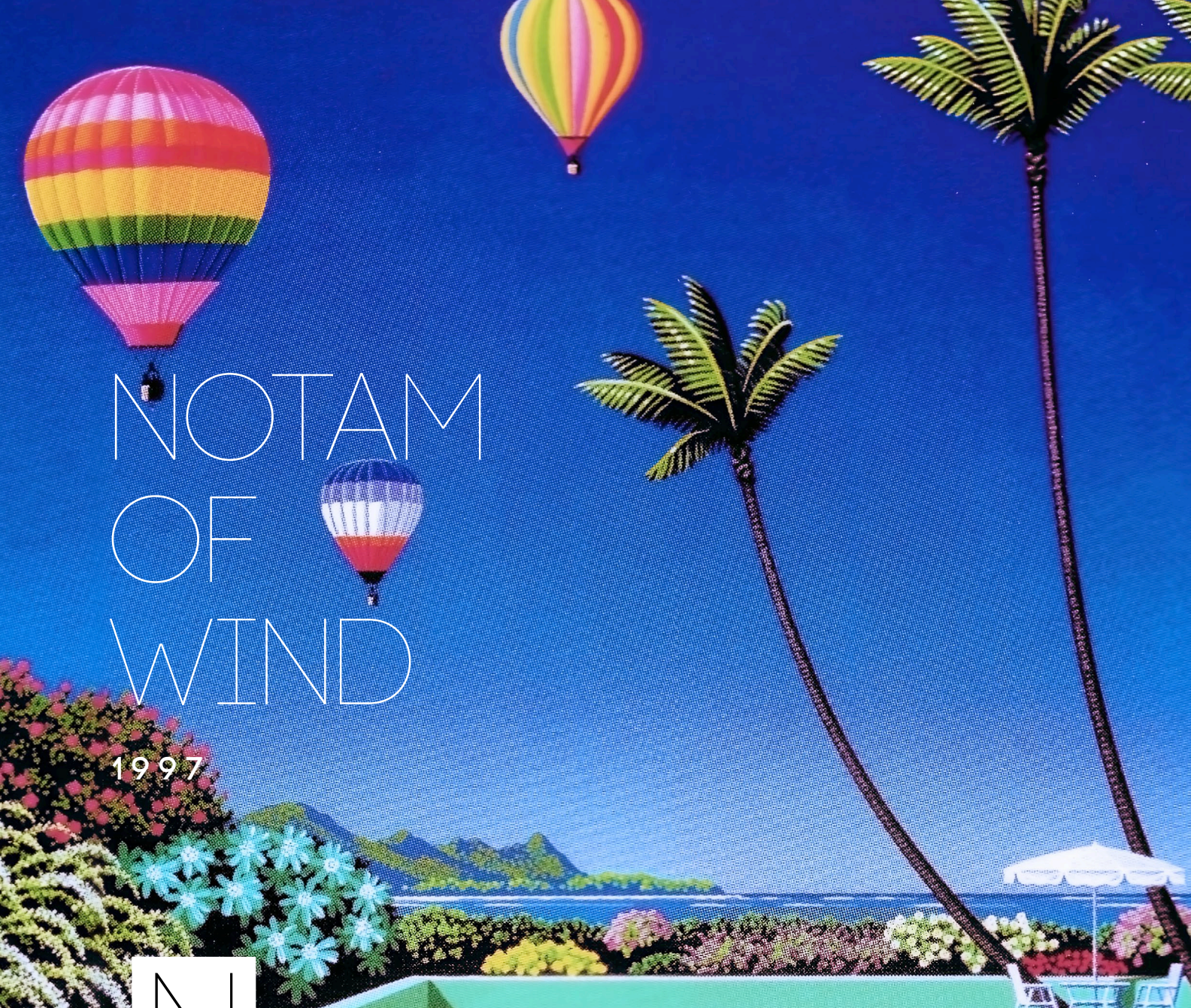
BASICALLY, TOPOLO HAS NO POINT
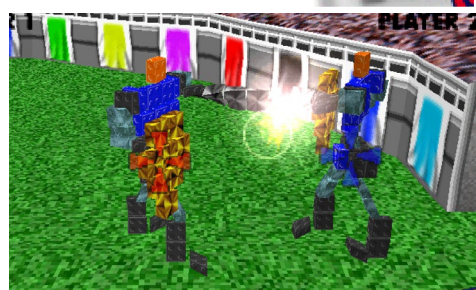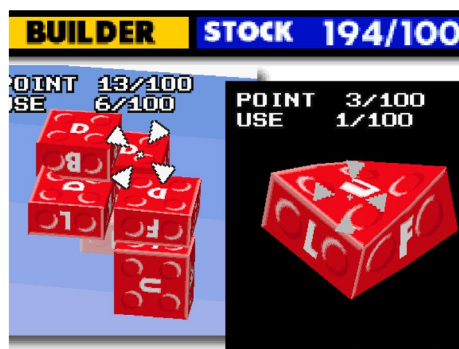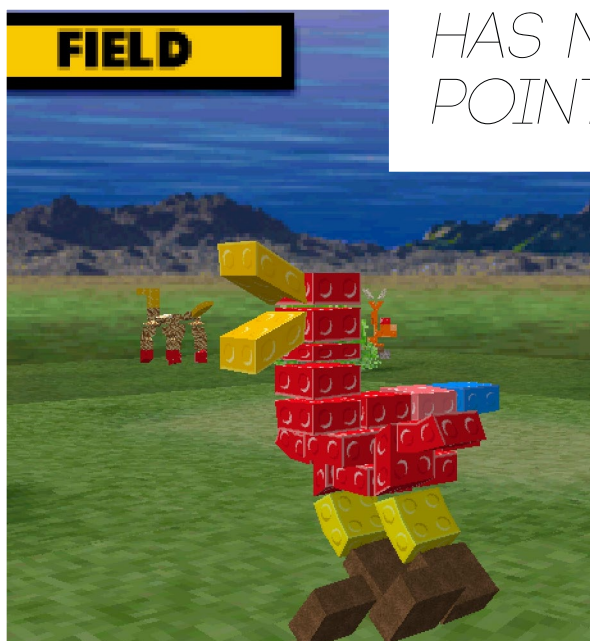
in a 3D stage goes above and beyond the call of absurdity. Taking into consideration its inherent freedom and relatively wackiness, its closest companion would be the borderline irreverent *Noby Noby Boy*—though even that had a greater goal.

None of this is to say *ToPoLo* is *completely* shallow. For serious builders, there's the two-player battle mode, which pits your brick figures against computer or human opponents in an arena, and then you simply pummel one another as if it's the prototype of a fighting game. It's like picking up your Lego creation and smashing them against your friend's Lego until there's nothing but a pile of bricks and broken dreams.

It's the look of *ToPoLo* that really brings you in. It's unabashedly "kiddie," with bright colors, big bold type, and a bevy of happy, bouncing brick animals. From top

to bottom, it's a game that would be right at home in an Ikea children's department. And part of why it's so interesting is that it's somewhat antithetical to Artdink's usual M.O., which was and is producing complex simulation games made by and for adults (or at least for older kids). If *ToPoLo* simulates anything, it's building-block dance parties, but at least it does them really well.

ToPoLo was developed by FlipFlop, a contract developer that ended up producing several of Artdink's PlayStation games. Their early work was a few PC games before Artdink signed them, however, they fell off the face of the earth in 2000 after working on the rebooted *Atlas* series. Still, *ToPoLo* certainly made for an interesting console debut. And for Artdink, it made an interesting reach out into the world of the truly toylike.

NOTAM OF WIND

1997

NOTAM: "Notice to Airmen;" an advisory sent out to craft in local airspace to let pilots know of any obstructive or otherwise dangerous areas on their flight path. For example, indicating the time and location of a hot air balloon show. That only partially explains why Artdink titled this game the way they did, as a notice of caution doesn't really evoke the serene beauty that *Notam of Wind* gives off at first glance. But what's in a name?

It's easy to assume that *Notam* is a sim—not just because of Artdink's name on the box, but because aeronautical sim games are a dime a dozen, and one about hot air balloons seems like the natural thing to do. In truth, *Notam of Wind* is more like a hot air balloon version of *Pilotwings*: Caution is of utmost importance, but the unrealistic missions you're put through

lend more of an arcade-like quality to the whole thing (and if nothing else, there is an initials-entry screen).

Central to *Notam of Wind* are two play modes: in "Round" mode, you must complete certain goals specified by the stages, such as traveling a certain distance ou from the start and coming back along a specified path. In "Try Task," you can select from three different sub-activities: "Fly In" asks you to find a designated target on the map and peg it with three of your little marking balls. In "Try Delta," all you must do is toss the balls at any three places on the map to create a triangulation, but you're rewarded based on how far you flew and how large the triangulation was. And then in "Wolf Hunt," your balloon is on the prowl for neighboring animal-shaped balloons—hit them with balls and your "wolf" nabs its prey, and hopefully succeeds

at the entire mission. In every activity, you can choose the type of map in which you want to fly—a city, a valley or a breezy desert land—as well as any combination of weather types, from morning to night, rainy or snowy. The environments have plenty of scenery to look at, including special sights like Nazca lines, carnivals, or the occasional aurora borealis. Lastly, you can choose from a handful of cute patterns for your balloon as an extra touch of personalization.

But this is all much easier said than done. The hot air balloon by nature is a "dumb" aircraft: you can release the hot air valve to ascend to great heights, or let things cool off to come back down a bit. And indeed, this is all you really can do when playing *Notam of Wind*, but you must stay mindful of the wind to proceed to the areas required by the task. To handle this, a meter on the side of the screen shows five

THE WIND
IS YOUR
BUDDY,
YOUR
ENEMY
AND YOUR
SOUL MATE
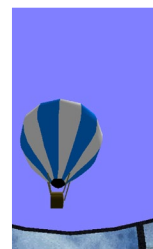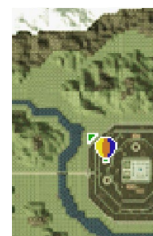
different wind directions, each at different altitudes. To move in a different direction, you either ascend or descend to the desired current, and let it take you away as you keep a hand on the valve.

The problem, of course, is that the wind changes at a moment's notice—for example, it could veer slightly to the right, or completely in the opposite direction. To correct this, you can ascend or descend to the next best current to send you where you need to go, but soon that one will change, too, Depending on the game mode you're playing, you can select your launching point almost anywhere on the map (a self-imposed radius keeps you from starting too close to a target), but no matter how strategically you play it, there's always the chance you'll end up a mile from where you thought you'd be. So it may be no surprise that playing *Notam of Wind* can be a pretty

hectic experience. Come to think of it, the title's reference to NOTAMs may be apt, as the inevitable haphazard soaring would probably cause some problems in the real world.

While it's important to keep a handle on your surroundings and react accordingly when the wind changes, sometimes the game just plain antagonizes you. It's all due to the draw distance, which is pitifully close, even when the weather is set to clear and sunny. You simply can't see far enough ahead to reasonably judge what your next move should be, and if you veer too far off the windblown path, you may end up bumping up against a mountain or castle too many times (which definitely isn't good, as your balloon does have a health bar). Graphics don't always mean everything, especially for a PlayStation 1 game, but had *Notam of Wind* been made on the PS2

or better, it would doubtlessly have been a much easier game to manage.

Frustrating though it may be at times, *Notam of Wind* possesses a surprisingly decent degree of realism. Hot air ballooning is a unique challenge in flight, and to have that adapted to a tiny eight-button controller makes for a weirdly appealing video game. With the variety of things you can fly in *Pilotwings*, it's a wonder no one else at least attempted a hot air balloon experience in anything since. Chalk it up to another case of Artdink doing what no one else would, and (mostly) pulling it off. No matter when you're playing the game, you slowly come to terms with a fact that applies to real hot air ballooning: the wind is simultaneously your buddy, your enemy and your soul mate, and even if it's in a game, you are never not struggling to find a way to deal with it.

A5

1996·1997

Following two big jumps for the *A-Train* series—most of *AIII* and the 3D views of *AIV Evolution*—it could, in a manner of speaking, finally relax. The next step for *A-Train* was evolutionary, not revolutionary. Artdink took the traditional 2D map and the foretelling 3D view, added and tweaked features (of course), and refined it all into *A5*, one of the more elegant entries of the series.

One of the biggest changes within *A5* is ostensibly a step back: the main map view is a straight-on 2D grid rather than the isometric angles used since *AIII*. Buildings no longer "pop off" the terrain, and are just regular painted squares on the grid. It does make your cities feel less bustling while you work on them, but there was some practicality in the change: when setting train tracks and roads, they now

realistically curve when you drag them around the map, reducing the number of extra clicks or button presses one would need to weave them around city blocks or landforms. (*AIV Evolution*'s odd "clock hands" way of directing tracks was no more helpful than the classic method.) Because of this, it's visually easier to go with a flat 2D map, rather than draw every possible kind of track bend whether something big or small is obstructing it from the player's view. And it also assists in orienting train and bus station placement, which took a bit of getting used to in the previous games.

As *AIV* added a new form of transportation, so does *A5*: helicopters and trucks. Small helicopters will buzz around the city on daily schedules, and you can set their flight paths, though because the surrounding airspace is fairly empty, there isn't usually a whole lot to worry about.

Trucks, meanwhile, can carry material cargo just like freight trains, and will share the roads with buses where applicable. Beyond the vehicles, *A5* also adds a series of new subsidiary types, such as more varied kinds of apartments and shops in addition to the usual selections. New scenario maps are in as well, again challenging you to grow your bottom line within quaint or burgeoning cities. Some of the maps are loosely based on real cities, such as Paris, though the sparse and hilly terrain in that one isn't exactly faithful to the region. One map even comes equipped with a space shuttle launchpad.

But *A5*'s real touchstone was the 3D mode. Granted, it's not much different from *AIV Evolution*'s—you still can't directly modify the city within it—but the graphical improvements made it one heck of a nice decoration for anyone wanting to explore

THE SYMPHONY OF THE CITY
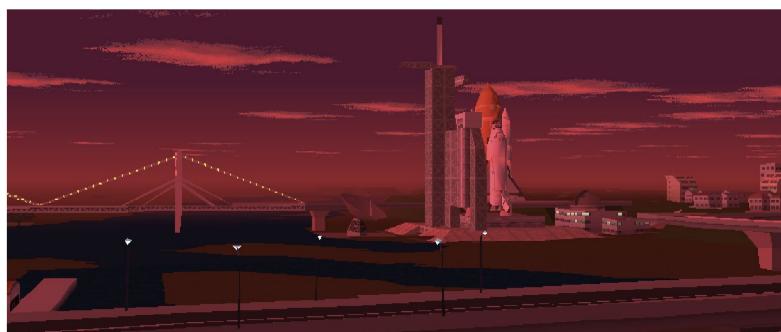
their metropolis from literally any angle. Again, it was old hat to PlayStation players, but this was an especially big deal for the original PC version, the first *A-Train* exclusively for Windows 95. The advent of add-on graphics cards towards the late '90s offered promising upgrade paths for PC gaming, and so *A5* was an early adopter of PowerVR graphics, with Artdink pushing the requirement onto anyone that wanted to play the game. A 3D *A-Train* city rendered in real-time on PC was a nice showcase, and it was a luxury previously only enjoyed by consoles like the PlayStation (a hypothetical software-rendered *A5* would most certainly not be able to do its cities justice, which was a problem Maxis ran into with *SimCopter*). Before, in *AIV* Evolution, the 3D city was barebones, which was understandable seeing as it was a PS1 launch game. *A5*'s 3D world features

the sunsets and sunrises missing from the now-flat 2D view, and buildings correspond to the changes by having lights turned on until bedtime, and so on. And of course, all the trains and vehicles eternally run on their given schedules, working hard every day.

The 3D looks nice, but even the 2D part of the game is smartly composed. *AIII* and *AIV* had a nice slick menu window bordering their gameplay, but the bright, simple and tacky buttons tend to make the whole thing a little... clinical. *A5*, on the other hand, uses soft, blue-based colors all over the menus and interface, which worked well in conjunction with the green hills in the maps, and generally made for a user interface that was easy on the eyes. When it's a sim game you can spend several hours with in one sitting, that's important.

Artdink's tagline for *A5* was "The Symphony of the City," which couldn't have

been more apt. For starters, the game's soundtrack is a selection of original classical pieces performed by the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra, which are largely jovial in tone, and play during the 3D view, breathing some life to the activity of the city. The music also brings you into the *A5* world; the game's intro movie is a beautiful five-minute sequence that's wonderfully composed, both aurally and visually. It's the ideal sound for a city sim, as jazz or some breezy synthesized tunes really only evoke a certain part of a city, while an orchestral score lends a cinematic quality that makes even dinky old PlayStation graphics seem more epic than they really are.

Everything came together in *A5*, and so tightly that it remains the peak of the *A-Train* franchise. Sequels would push forward into full 3D gameplay, but *A5* took the ain't-broke-don't-fix-it mentality, finely honing the elements that made the previous two games great, and turning a modest sim game into an event. It was also the first *A-Train* game to get a TV commercial in Japan, and if something like that doesn't tell you what Artdink thought of the game and its potential, what else would?

FAST FOR WARD

TAKE THE A— TRAIN Z
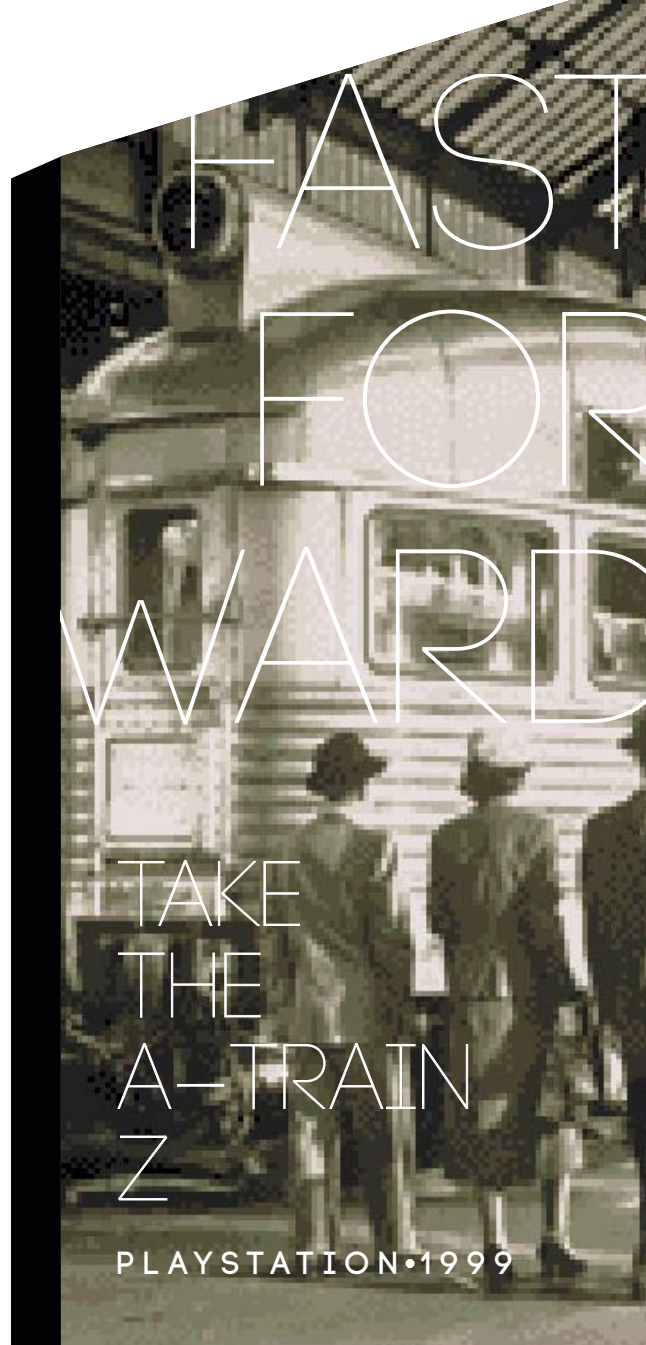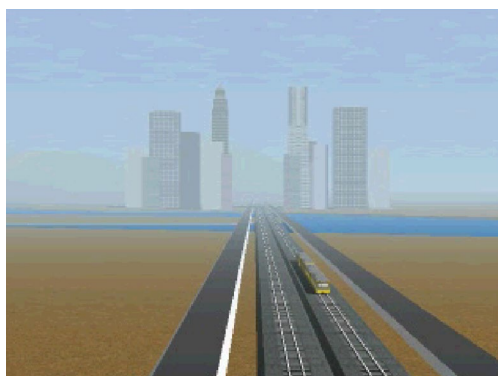
PLAYSTATION•1999

The PlayStation *A5* engine was re-used for *A-Train Z*, a spin-off that presented players with constructing a single, cohesive transcontinental railroad. That should sound familiar, as this game was a deliberate revisiting of the concepts of the first two *A-Train* games. With that in mind, the game's setting is distinctly American, and even features a narrative involving the new recruited city planner (you), and a varied (and chatty) cast of characters who will either help you or just get in your way. And for the first time since the old games, "materials" are not just required to construct buildings, but the train tracks, making the usual management challenges of *A-Train* ever-so-slightly more daunting.

A—TRAIN ROLLS ON
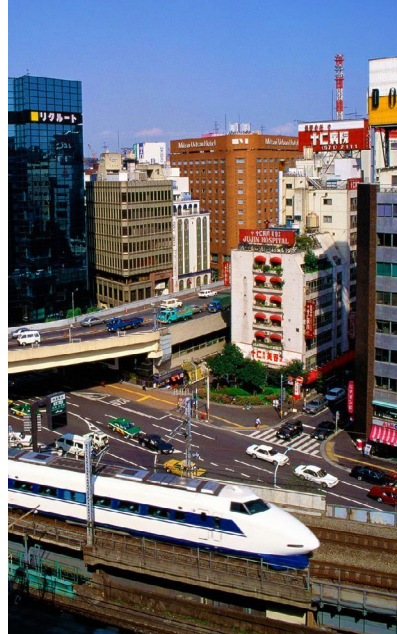
I t's obvious that *A-Train* was Artdink's bread and butter, and in fact still is—the series has remained consistent since 1985, whereas most of Artdink's other franchises have fallen by the wayside. But for such an important torch-bearer for the company, *A-Train* has had its share of ups and downs. *A5*, as has been said, represented the series at its peak: good graphics, great audio, and improved interfaces. Over the following decade, *A-Train* games made natural—and some unnatural—evolutions as Artdink did the best they could to adapt to trends in the game industry, not to mention within *A-Train*'s own genre.

After *A5* came *A6*, released in 2000. *A6* was made exclusively for the PlayStation 2, partly as a display of the system's graphics capabilities. All of the gameplay was now in an explorable 3D world, rather than the important stuff happening on a separate 2D map. While this no doubt seemed like a great and natural step forward, *A6* felt watered down, and didn't look quite as slick (relatively) as *A5*—plus it was lacking that classical-music grandeur. Worst of all, moving around a cursor with a gamepad didn't work as well as one might expect, despite this being the first *A-Train* to use analog controls. Interestingly, *A6* was the next *A-Train* to be localized in English, though it was only released in Europe.

After that underwhelming turn, Artdink stayed on PS2 and followed *A6* with *Take the A-Train 2001*, a pseudo-sequel that put an emphasis on your empire's growth throughout the early 21st century, and addressed (or tried to address) some of the issues from *A6*. Apparently it was enough for the fans, as this was the one that got a groundswell of support. Part of this was helped by Artdink releasing additional content discs, and fostering some semblance of an online community via their website. Eventually Artdink released a PC version, *A-Train: The 21st Century,* and it

partly served as a concession to PC fans who didn't have a new *A-Train* in the past few years.

It would be four years before Artdink again took *A-Train* forward, though at a glance, you'd think it was a step back. *A7* marked the series' return to PC, and it moved away from the 3D world, instead employing detailed pre-rendered sprites like many sim games of the time, especially *SimCity 4*. Artdink proudly declared it as a throwback to the days of *AIV*, a point which may have brought back some players who were unimpressed by the PS2 showings.

Surprisingly, Artdink took *A-Train* back to consoles in 2006 with *A-Train HX*, a new edition exclusively for the Xbox 360. With this, the series went back to fully 3D gameplay, and pulled out all the stops to make the environments look as nice as they could while also expanding the size of the maps. Like *A6*, it was partly a showcase for the Xbox 360, and came at a time when other small Japanese developers were giving Microsoft another chance, but would eventually not commit.

The series took another odd turn in 2006, but one much odder than an Xbox release. In a collaboration with Idea Factory, Artdink put their name on *The Intercontinental Railroad Together With Lisa*, the first *A-Train* for PSP. The kicker? It was actually a *moe*-ified remake of *Take the A-Train Z* (see opposite page), with the same characters and basic gameplay goal, only the cast was redrawn as cuter anime characters—an attempt to pander at the otaku who, presumably, wouldn't touch a sim game unless it had a cute cartoon girl involved. Needless to say, the series did not reappear on Sony's handheld.

Finally, in 2008, Artdink put a number on the series again. *A-Train 8* was nice to see, but it was essentially a PC version of *HX* at first glance, with the expected slathering of improvements to graphics

and gameplay. Artdink pushed the fact that it could display in HD resolutions and beyond, but the problem with both it and *HX* was that the cities themselves didn't look all that impressive; the buildings were simplistic, as were the weather effects. It did get the job done, and it was nice to again have a 3D *A-Train* you could use with a mouse, but the impact just wasn't there.

2009 brought the release of *Take the A-Train DS*, an original installment made from the ground-up for the Nintendo DS, complete with a 3D view mode like the good old days of *A5*. Artdink made a big deal of this one, and after EA released a couple of disappointing DS *SimCity* games, it was nice to see *A-Train* adapt more naturally to the handheld.

Towards the end of 2010 the latest installment, *A-Train 9*. *A9* pumped up the draw distance and map sizes, included over 220 trains, and even added an "illustration" filter that gave your maps a cel-shaded quality to them. A short time later, in 2011, Artdink launched *A-Train for Gree*, a mobile game that infused the franchise with social gaming elements, including more personalized trains among the usual selection that took the shapes of cute animals or mushrooms. Not quite the same deep sim game we've come to love.

Which brings us to today: *A-Train 9* was upgraded to a version 2.0 "Professional" edition at the end of 2012, and included the requisite map construction kit. And that's where the series sits so far.

Though *A-Train* may stand alone in Japan, PC sim games have sustained popularity in Europe, particularly Germany. As such, *A-Train 8* and *9* were localized into several European languages, including English. The latter was redubbed *The Train Giant*, and is available at retail and for download, should you be curious as to how far *A-Train* has come since it was under the Maxis umbrella.

NO ONE CAN STOP MR. DOMINO

1998

N o, they most certainly cannot. Mr. Domino is a powerhouse; a perpetually running and grinning block of ivory that nevertheless always has trouble in his way. In *No One Can Stop Mr. Domino*, it's your job to make sure he has a clear path at all times.

Mr. Domino (or Ms. Domino, should you choose her) have their fun hoofing it through six down-to-earth yet slightly-off stages, including but not limited to a casino, a convenience store, a family's home, and an amusement park. The stages loop like a race course, and some other domino friends hang out on the sidelines watching the mayhem unfold. When the fun begins, Mr. Domino begins jogging along the course—you can speed up or slow him down using the D-pad, and turn left or right to dodge any obstacles that might trip

him up, whether it's a stray billiard ball or chess piece.

By pressing a button, Mr. Domino can lay a trail of dominoes behind him. (Seems gross, but then, he is *the* Mr. Domino.) On the next lap through the stage, he can hit the domino at the end and potentially knock down a long line, earning some points in the progress. That's the basic way to use them, but to complete a stage, a domino must fall on the various "trick tiles" placed throughout the course. Doing so activates a special animation from one of the background elements—for example, in the convenience store stage, a box with a picture of Munch's *The Scream* will literally scream with bug-eyed insanity and leave some giant kanji on the ground. Stages have different numbers of trick tiles, but all of them need to be activated in order to complete the stage and move on. And since

you need to hit them with dominoes, you'll naturally be sending Mr. Domino through the course twice as many times as there are tiles, at least if you're still a beginner.

As mentioned, obstacles are dotted around the stages, and trick tiles will almost always create new obstacles in the path, as well. So in actuality, someone *can* stop Mr. Domino: himself. All that running around gets tiring quickly, and Mr. Domino has to keep up his stamina, or else he'll lose his color, collapse, and the game will be over. Every stage has a few health tiles that will fully re-energize Mr. Domino when he steps on them, but they're not abundant, and players will have to carefully monitor Mr. Domino's pallor and make a concerted effort to head for the health tiles when they come into view. And this is all on top of trying to hit all the trick tiles without bumping into something else, including a

ONE OF ARTDINK'S MORE OUTWARDLY RIDICULOUS GAMES

zoom tile that might send you headfirst into a door. With that and the game's limited continues, *No One Can Stop Mr. Domino* can get pretty maddening, but it has that arcade spirit, and once you realize that and deal with it, it becomes a satisfying challenge.

Just reading about how to play *No One Can Stop Mr. Domino* probably isn't all that helpful towards figuring it out, and indeed even a first-time playthrough will seem confusing. But it's not exactly unheard of, because in a way, the game utilizes principles of pinball tables—the act of going through a course and back again, hitting every possible goal and other features of the stage before you can move on, and maybe even getting the high score if you're good enough. Given the devious layouts of some of the stages, where you must do some fancy quick turns so as to narrowly avoid a moving wall or take the smoothest

and fastest path, it also demands the same kind of mastery as pinball, and that's something that can throw off a longtime, steadfast video game player.

Games like *Tokio* and *ToPoLo* had some wackiness to them, but *Mr. Domino* is one of Artdink's more outwardly ridiculous games. Aside from the group of anthropomorphic domino friends, the stages are also a bit goofy—the convenience store *Scream* was mentioned, but the rest of the store is lined with real Japanese candy bar brands and other foods all stacked up to create the stage path. The family house has the whole family walking around it as Mr. Domino zooms through the children's bedrooms, down into the kitchen, and back again. And nobody seems bothered that there are, indeed, anthropomorphic domino friends running around. Is Mr. Domino a hero in this society? Perhaps some sort of

god? If so, how come no one clears the obstacles for him so he can happily run his little butt off for all eternity? These are questions without answers, but they reflect the reactions to the game when it first came out. It's all quite similar to the kooky stages of the *Katamari Damacy* games, though *Mr. Domino* doesn't entirely lose the plot with its own sense of humor.

Mr. Domino was the last Artdink game in America for quite some time, and was published there by Acclaim, of all companies. It was also the last game to form that "wacky" impression of Artdink by players who only knew them via this, *Aquanaut's* and *Tail of the Sun*. (For the record, Kazutoshi Iida had nothing to do with this one). Perhaps it's not a bad way to bow out, because it's with games like *Mr. Domino* that made Artdink get stuck in our minds and earned our respect.
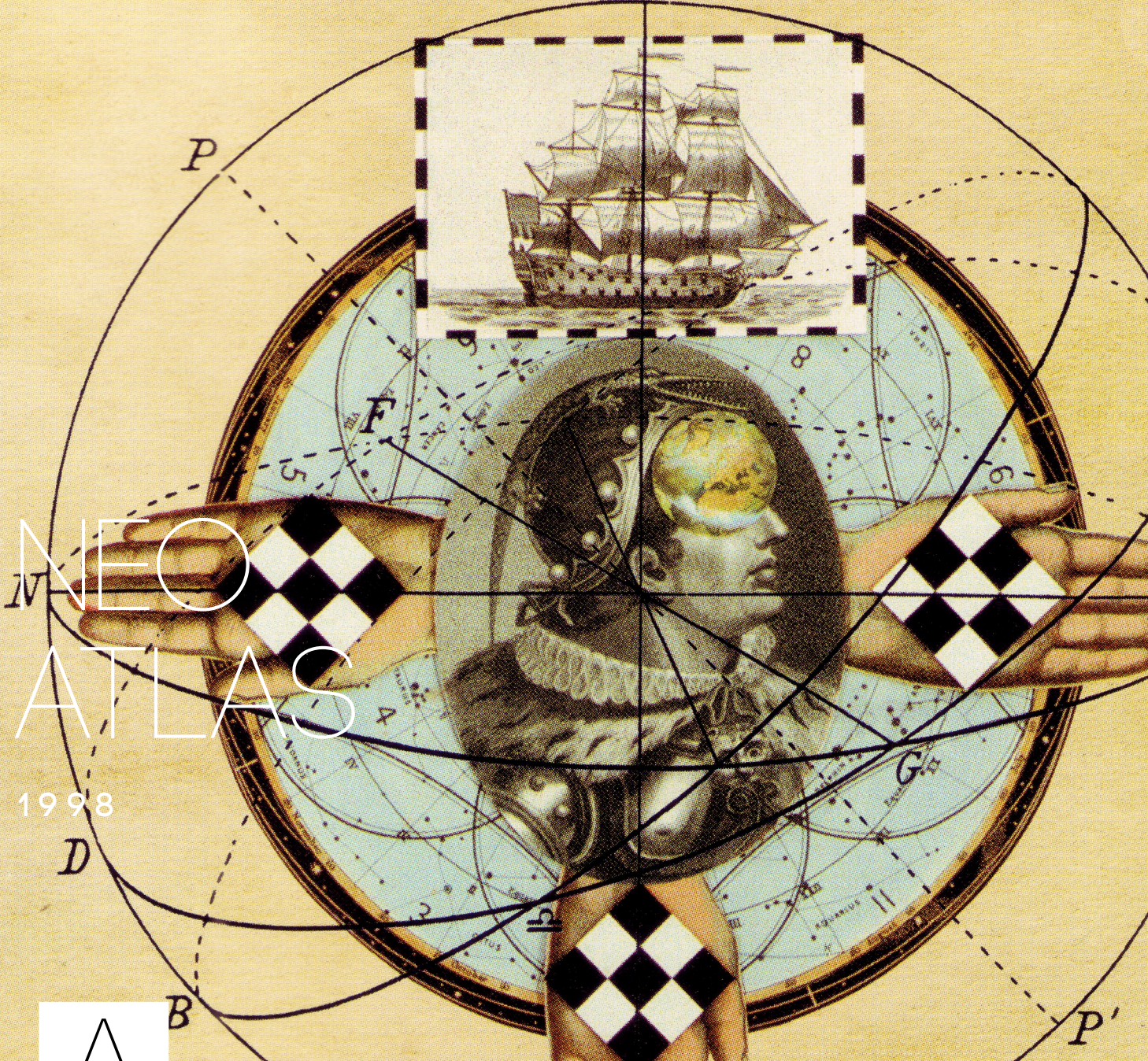
NEO
ATLAS
1998

After two versions of *The Atlas* back in the days of old PCs and 16-bit systems, Artdink and FlipFlop rebooted the franchise for the PlayStation. *Neo Atlas* may not be all that "neo," as it still adheres to the core concept of the series, which is to explore the world, complete an atlas, and establish foreign trade in the name of the king of Portugal. The only difference being that now you're guided along by an unsettling caricature who tells you how to play the game and assists in any dialogue events. But much of the same process of hiring scouts, buying ships, then sending them out to the sea remains, and the king rewards you yearly, with payouts based on how much of the world you've managed to discover and learn about in the past 12 months.

Regardless of the similar gameplay,

Neo Atlas is artistically striking, just as the originals were, but in somewhat different ways. It evolves the "parchment" look and feel of the original *Atlas* games and their world maps by leveraging 3D polygonal graphics. The main view of the game is set at a slight isometric angle, and is generally more isolated than before; you can't zoom out quite as far and still do most of the main commands. Otherwise, the polygonal map has a distinct paper-like texture applied to it, and still-covered parts of the world are cloaked in moving clouds. Now the World Atlas is much more "alive," and in turn, heightens the appeal of the joys of *Neo Atlas*.

Ironically, *Neo Atlas* would last just a bit longer than the original Atlas series. *Neo Atlas 2* came in 1999, largely the same as the original except with a greater emphasis on story through a series of in-game

"episodes," then succeeded by *Neo Atlas III* for the PlayStation 2 in 2000. Both sequels were faithful to the first game's unique art style, with *Neo Atlas III* looking even more like a etched and painted-on world map.

Neo Atlas is, admittedly, not a super-important Artdink highlight as much as it is a notable stepping stone for one of their better series, one that abruptly ended after the release of *Neo Atlas III* and the subsequent disappearance of FlipFlop. With three installments, it's fair to assume that the concept of having fun while "rewriting" history made for a more appropriate console sim game than the original PC games, which tried to straddle the line between education and entertainment. It didn't stay that way for very long, but Artdink deserves some credit in yet again nudging a genre in a direction nobody else considered.

AS ARTISTIC-ALLY STRIKING AS THE ORIGINALS WERE

NAVIT

1998

Sure, *A-Train* is not *SimCity*. It doesn't need to be bothered with power, water, industrial zones, or crime waves—when you're making money, who has time for that? On the other hand, those parts of *SimCity* contribute to the game's fun, and after all, *A-Train* built a whole series on transportation considerations. What if there was a game that took one of those facets of *SimCity*—oh, let's say that transportation one, for instance—and focused it into a whole game? Yes, that's *Navit*, an Artdink-published PlayStation traffic management sim.

To be sure, *Navit* is different from both of those games, because it's not a persistent simulation that continues forever; rather, it's a stage-based game with the same basic goal, and the way you do things is more in line with a straight-up puzzle game than a layered sim. As a runner of traffic control cameras, you oversee snippets of cities at once, and the multiple highways and intersections that stitch them together. In every stage, you have to deal with impending gridlock, often from cars coming off of the freeways, and have a set amount of time to manage the roads to the point where a meter on the left side of the screen (essentially a "satisfaction" gauge) reaches and maintains 100%, while keeping the other, bad-news meter from topping out, too. If you can maintain a well-oiled traffic system in the time allotted to you (stages usually hover around 30 minutes), you win, and are awarded a series of grades based your performance, including the overall stress level of the whole thing.

Accomplishing this is done not by tearing up roads and replacing them, but by simply putting money into new ways to manage traffic jams. The surprisingly helpful (for a PS1 game) in-game tutorials show you how to do pretty much everything: you can get different classes of traffic lights that monitor and handle intersections better; you can use bigger signs to better direct drivers; you can paint turn arrows on lanes to filter traffic in a certain direction; you can set up railroad crossing gates, and you can also get the police involved and set up spots to be monitored by cops. You can even get relatively down and dirty and modify the traffic lights' patterns yourself, tweaking the balance in time between light changes in an attempt to keep the flow of traffic smooth and consistent. Buying every trinket for every corner of the map isn't exactly the smart way to go, though, because every intersection or stretch of highway has different needs.

And nothing ever goes perfectly. As

you flip between intersections and try to keep a handle on everything that's going on, you'll still run into the risk of an accident happening. If there's a car that took a turn at the wrong time and collides with another, you're immediately taken to the scene and choose whether or not to have the victims airlifted or driven to the hospital. And boy, does it cost you. Interestingly, you also have the freedom to check out the details of any driver of any car—if you notice them speeding around a corner, you can actually peek at their license and ticket them, complete with them grumbling and asking what they did wrong.

You must also deal with the opposite of traffic: parking. Empty lots can be commandeered for parking, and allow cars to come in and use them for however long. The added problem there is the whole nature of entry and exit, as even that involves a little bit of traffic management.

Road maintenance is also a priority. When the weather changes and snow begins falling, the accumulated ice and snow can cause problems for drivers. Similarly, miscellaneous debris can pile up and affect the overall health of the road. No one likes potholes, after all. This can be fixed by simply ordering a cleanup of any stretch of road, but of course, you need money, and it's assumed you've been spending it wisely this entire time. Otherwise you can go broke and be forced to sit there, helplessly watching gridlock get worse and accidents become more of a problem until, poof, everyone's upset and you lose the game.

Fortunately, *Navit* doesn't take itself too seriously. Again, this is neither *A-Train* nor *SimCity*, and the characters within the game are all squat characters who generally look cheerful. Things like that just help the game even more. *Navit* is a fun and well thought-out sim game, with pretty much all the things you would expect a traffic controller to worry about, buy, and manage. It even indirectly encourages to be smart with money, as some real-world municipalities certainly aren't.

Strictly speaking, *Navit* was not actually an Artdink creation—it was from another contractor; the developer Masterpiece, who made it big with *The Conveni*, a lighthearted convenience store management sim that ballooned into a wide-reaching franchise in Japan. That Artdink put their name on *Navit* was simply proof that the two companies were on the same wavelength, and that a sim game focused on the minutiae of organizing intersections may have easily come from Artdink internally. Just thank goodness there's no trains or planes to deal with.

AQUA—NAUT'S HOLIDAY: HIDDEN MEMORIES

2008
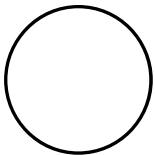
One may say that the third *Aquanaut's Holiday* is a departure from what made the previous installments so interesting. The serene, goal-less exploration of the original was tantamount to a piece of media art, as Kazutoshi Iida may have even wanted. *Aquanaut's Holiday: Hidden Memories*, on the other hand, is a very obvious move towards something that's more in line with traditional expectations of video games: you have a defined structure of missions and story events, a thick helping of plot, extra-pretty PS3 graphics, and plenty of things to discover and even unlock. Not to mention it was a coproduction with Sony Computer Entertainment, which *usually* has a history of seeing promise in games that go against the grain (remember that they published the first *Aquanaut's* in America and Europe). Is nothing sacred?

Well, yes and no. The fundamentals of *Aquanaut's Holiday* were not ripped out in *Hidden Memories*; they just had a couple of layers of purpose laid on top of them. And in doing that, Artdink actually pulled it off, making what is indeed the best *Aquanaut's Holiday* game.

The player is an unnamed journalist, seeking information on the missing oceanographer Bill Glover, acclaimed in his field. Your leads have taken you to the Kisira Atoll, a lovely bit of ocean beauty somewhere in the middle of Polynesia. The atoll has a fascinating ecology that has attracted researchers to it, and the development of a one-man submersible craft called the Dolphin allows them to explore it. With the aid of a young woman (Jessica) and another researcher (Robert), both from the institute Glover worked, you're given access to a Dolphin craft and tasked with exploring the atoll for any traces Glover left behind. And it's not just a case of looking for footprints—the atoll is rife with mysterious nooks and crannies, and Glover left behind a paper trail of riddles that you'll need to piece together in order to find him.

The Dolphin is equipped with an AI navigator, too, which calls you "Captain" and assists you in getting around the atoll and looking up any information on the clues you find. Diary entries from Glover will lead you to certain symbols and forms around the atoll, which may be covering up a treasure or simply the next hint. Nevertheless, you're free to explore what you've discovered of the atoll just as you would in other *Aquanaut's Holiday* games, collecting information on the sea life and generally taking in the underwater landscapes. The story is not entirely thrilling,
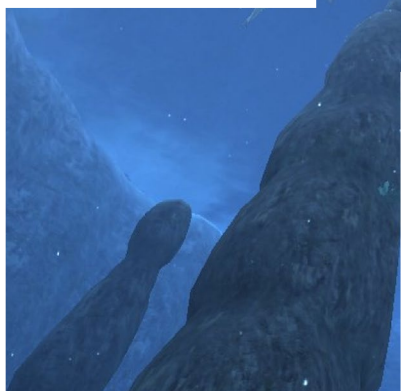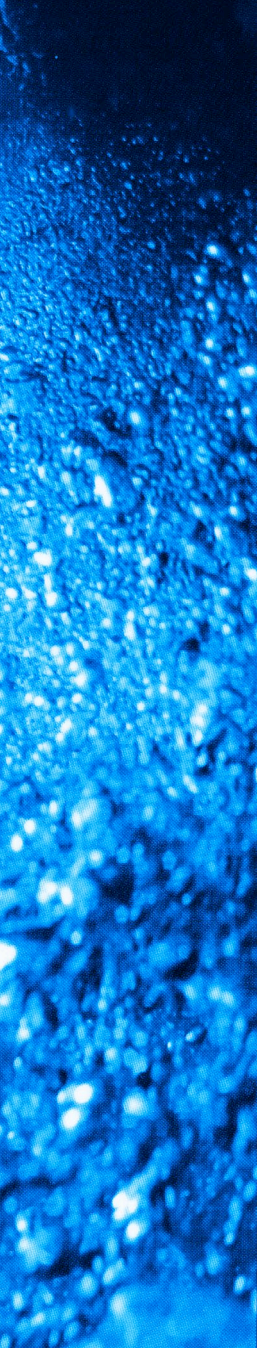
ARTDINK'S CONSOLE SWAN SONG

as it's told mostly through text boxes, but its duty is to guide you through the atoll by seeking out Glover's clues, happening upon new types of sea creatures, and other milestones that open up successive parts of the map.

Your best tools in *Hidden Memories* are sonobuoys, which allow you to fast-travel to the spots where they're launched—incredibly convenient when you start getting far enough in the game (they're available to you at a point in the story after the beginning, anyway). You have to earn the ability to carry more, and then will have to buy them from Robert, but it's never not worth it. A variation of them was in the previous games and were used in the same way, so at least some carryovers didn't need a lot of changing.

Another part of the old *Aquanaut's Holiday* that was given new life in *Hidden*

Memories is the sonar tone emitting. By using the shoulder buttons to emit tones, you could attract certain fish attuned to them. Previously a novelty, the sonar system now lets you grab the full attention of fish and engage in small repetition games. Succeeding at these earns you a bit of "Meme," represented by an orb meter on the screen. It's basically experience points, as filling up the Meme orb will level up the Dolphin's skill tree and grant you improved abilities. Other features round out the *Hidden Memories* package, such as the Aqua Heaven Library, where you can review the sea creatures you've spotted and collected info on, the ability to take photos and save them as transferrable JPEGs, and a wonderful soundtrack composed by Hideki Sakimoto (*echochrome*).

Hidden Memories was released about a month apart from *Afrika*, another Sony

release that was trumped up as one of the early PS3 highlights, but nonetheless made a good companion to Artdink's game: both are about exploring parts of the world most of us don't get to see, and have those aforementioned story and mission structures that bring everything together.

For Artdink, this was technically their console swan song. After ignoring the PS2 for a few years to concentrate on PC releases, their reunion with Sony and the franchise that practically defined Artdink on PS1 led to a polished, big-budget production that retained much of the magic of the original, while making it more understandable to a wider audience. *Hidden Memories* is a beautiful game, just as *Aquanaut's Holiday* was; just as *Aquanaut's Holiday* 2 was; just as much of Artdink's catalog was. If this was how it had to wind down, it couldn't have wound down any better.

BEST
OF THE
REST
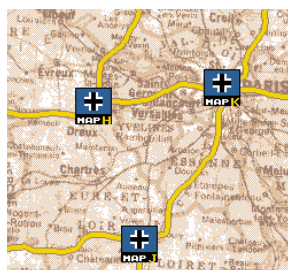
PANZER DIVISION
1990

Despite what the previous pages may suggest, Artdink was no stranger to military strategy games, as exemplified by *Panzer Division* and its sequel. Emphasizing tank combat, *Panzer Division* is otherwise a straightforward military strategy game set in the time after D-Day, and the struggle against the Third Reich.

BIG HONOUR
1992

Big Honour is one of Artdink's non-baseball sports games, yet is fashioned in much the same way as *Eikan wa Kimi* ni: you create an aspiring golfer, then take them from age 19 to age 50, choosing not just what tournaments to play, but what to do in life—marry, divorce, retire, and so on. Also employed a 3D view when hitting the links.

ROME WASN'T BUILT IN A DAY
1995

A-Train will always be compared to *SimCity,* but Artdink also made *Rome Wasn't Built in a Day*, a more explicit city-building game with all the *SimCity* trimmings, only it's in ancient Rome, not a modern metropolis. Unsurprisingly, Artdink was ahead of their time, as the concept came more than a decade before Firaxis's *CivCity: Rome*.

SEKIGAHARA
1991

Sort of the Japanese counterpart to *Panzer Division*, *Sekigahara* is a war sim all about the famous battle of 1600 of the same name. Choosing either side of the battle (Hideyori or Ieyasu), your mission is to win and unify Japan. The game plays in a two-part system; in the first, you have a month to prepare before the battle, then take your trained forces onto the battlefield, directing them accordingly.
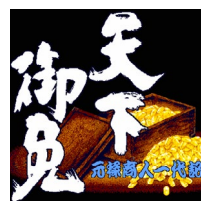
TENKA GOMEN
1994

Probably the most ingenious business sim of Artdink's that wasn't *A-Train*, *Tenka Gomen* puts you in the shoes of a merchant in the Genroku era (1688-1704) of Japan. You're selling luxurious items to the people, and are constantly tempted by the dark side of the yakuza. It's up to you how clean you want your burgeoning business to be.

HANAMARU KOUMUTEN
1998

Sorta-kinda like a human version of *HR2*, *Hanamaru Koumuten* has you playing foreman and managing every step of a construction project, from buying the equipment to hiring the workers and keeping all of it in line and under budget.

VAMPIRE
1999

The only strategy RPG Artdink made that wasn't *Lunatic Dawn*, *Vampire* takes on a traditional Gothic style and an original vampire legend. As young vampire Christopher, your destiny is to defeat the evil count Duran. To help on your quest, you explore the town during daytime and make friends with the residents, then during battles at night, they can be recruited into your vampire posse.
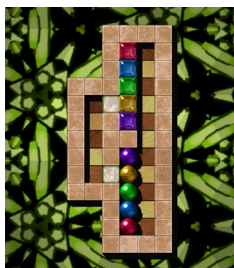
U–SA
2000

11 years after *Arctic*, Artdink made another puzzle game. *U-SA* is like a sliding puzzle with a match-three rule: you rotate the entire level, which knocks around the marbles inside, and you must line them all up so that the colors match. 100 levels of brain-wracking goodness. Released in America as *Turnabout* by Natsume.
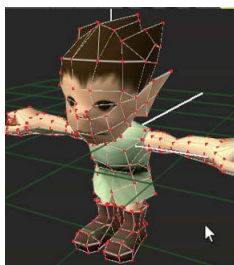
BASIC STUDIO
2001

After programming-focused games like *HR2* and *Carnage Heart*, Artdink eventually made an entire consumer-level development suite. For around $100, *BASIC Studio* gave you almost everything to make a game on your PlayStation 2, with sound, image and modeling tools—not to mention an '80s-style instructional manga.


THE SEED
2001

Artdink took some of the gameplay elements of *Carnage Heart* and adapted them into The Seed, a sci-fi strategy game that lets you set commands on a battlefield, then watch skirmishes play out up-close, with a variety of low-altitude fighter ships fighting on alien planets. You can also customize the ships, and (at the time) play online against other people.


SUSUMU! KAIZOKU
1999

For those who think the *Atlas* games are just too mundane, there's *Susumu! Kaizoku*, a PlayStation game all about the pirate life. You take the role of the son of an infamous pirate, though you used to be a captain in the navy. Your father's disappearance draws you back into piracy, and you commandeer a pirate ship, hire henchmen, engage in battle, and collect treasure.
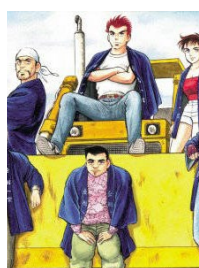
BUCHIGIRE KONGOU!!
2000

Another highlight of Artdink's absurdity: you are Hayato Kongou, young and talented machinery operator, who is often battling for honor with cranes, dozers, and any other big construction vehicles in this arena-style fighting game. Amazingly, it was localized for Europe as *BCV: Battle Construction Vehicles*.
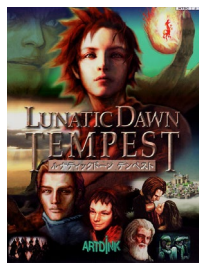

LUNATIC DAWN TEMPEST
2001

One of the last *Lunatic Dawns* was a PS2 exclusive, and went against the series' grain by being a first-person RPG. The hero is a teenage girl determined to break out of her hard-working life and become an adventurer like her father. POV aside, the quest-based structure of *LD* remains among several different kingdoms.

CARNAGE HEART EXA
2010

EXA is one of the more recent games to actually have Artdink's name on it, and it's a revisiting of one of their key series. Pretty much all of the core tenets of *Carnage Heart* make a return: the massive customization options, the programming, and the series' later move into a story-driven experience. Curiously, you can also choose to directly control the OKEs, which effectively injects a bit of *Armored Core* into *Carnage Heart*. Scandalous!

ARTDINK NOW
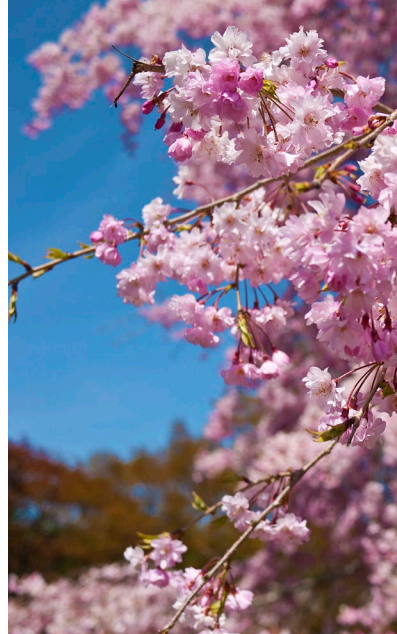
The Artdink of the 21st century definitely didn't start out like the Artdink that came before it. The company's presence on the PlayStation 2 was meek, typified by more *A-Train* sequels, a few mediocre one-offs, and their *TVWare* imprint, which released a series of PC-like non-game applications for the console, from searchable road atlases, dictionaries, to a *Neon Genesis Evangelion* typing game. Basically, while *TVWare* was way too mundane for full coverage in this magazine, Artdink released more of them for PS2 than actual games. Then, after the release of *Aquanaut's Holiday: Hidden Memories*, in 2008, Artdink had all but disappeared from mainstream game publishing. "Creatively bankrupt" would be the venomous way of putting it, but Artdink was still doing stuff. That is to say, *are* still doing stuff. *A-Train* is their number-one product, though as of March 2013, it's also their only product.

Much of Artdink's presence in today's Japanese game industry is not even really Artdink. In December 2001, they opened a subsidiary called Studio Artdink, a company devoted entirely to contract game development. This means that games made by Studio Artdink don't get their logo on the package, and maybe not even anywhere in the game. But it's a common practice in Japan, and it seems to be keeping Artdink—or at least the name—afloat. Virtually all of Studio Artdink's output has been for Bandai, and it's stuff no one would ever expect "normal" Artdink to work on: *Gundam* and *Macross* games, other anime titles, and the *AKB 1/48* pop-idol dating sims. They also co-developed Nintendo's *Fossil Fighters* series with Red and M2, but obviously that was in an even more diminished role.

Could Artdink be on their way out? It's certainly more plausible than ever, but *A-Train* has kept a consistent schedule, and the latest version just came out at the end of 2012, so it's not too easy to tell at this moment. And again, Studio Artdink will seem to work on anything Bandai gives them; anime-license money must be doing well by them, all things considered. But if you read any of the past 60-some-odd pages, you already know that Artdink had two great periods of its life, and that those are what's worth remembering and appreciating—amazing ideas, crazy games, and a whole lot of track laid in its wake.

ARTDINK
SOFTWARE HOUSE ESTABLISHED IN 1986
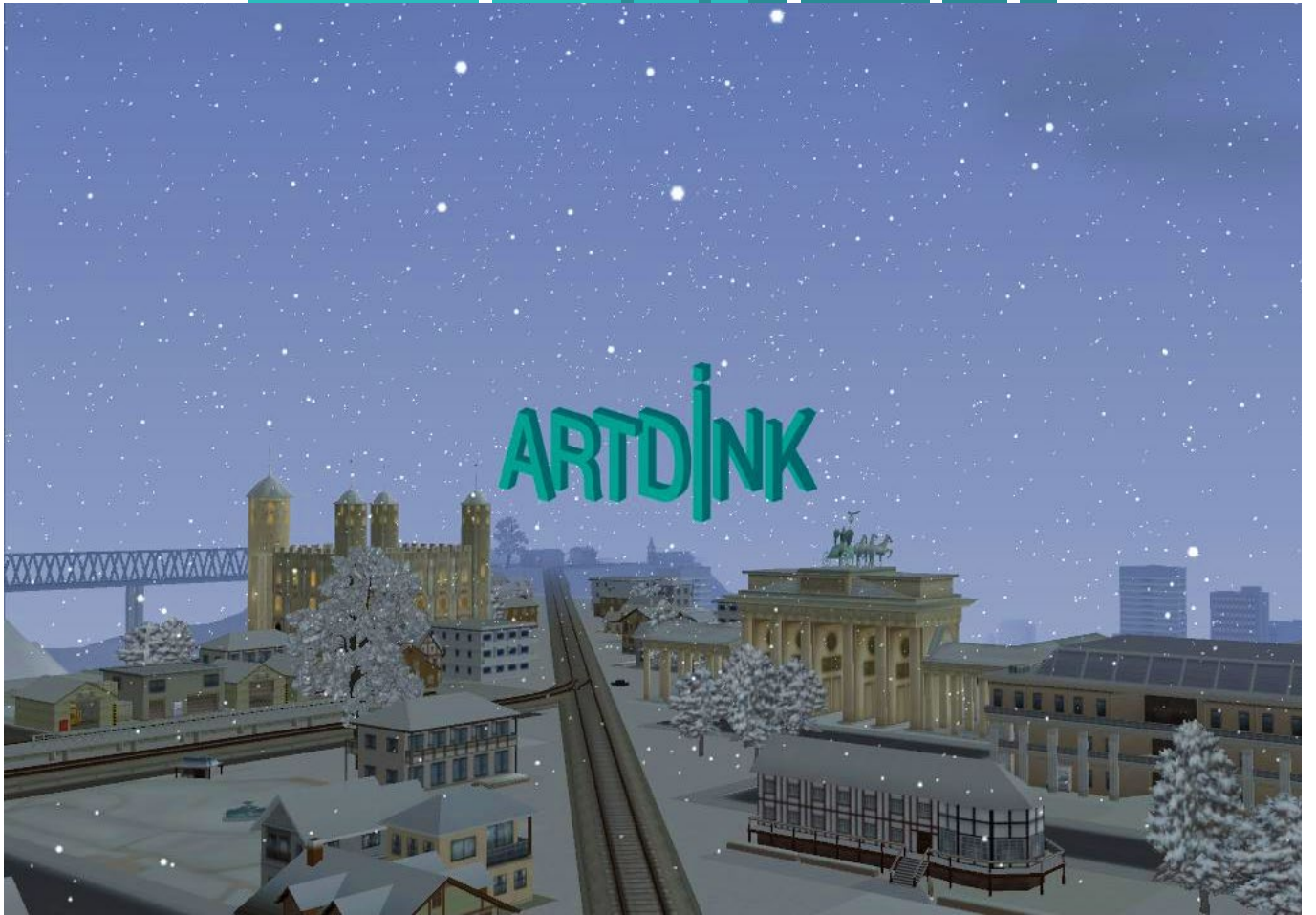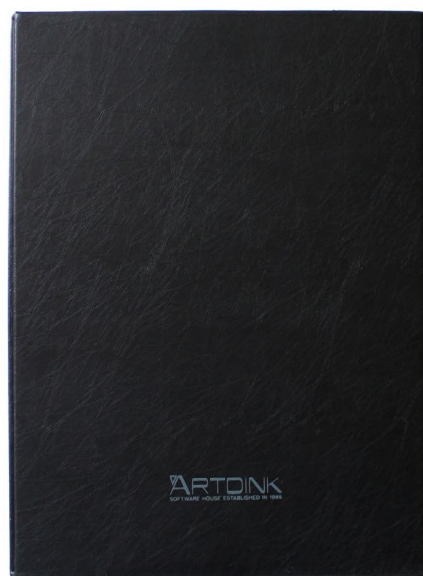
The ISLAND of Misfit Hardware

ARTIFACT #GM2PN

Nintendo Mobile System GB

Cell Division

The early relationship between Nintendo and the Internet has already been explored here, when the Famicom Network Adapter was covered back in *SCROLL* 04. That idea was mostly useful to adults wanting to do banking, as it was too limited for gaming. But Nintendo never really dismissed networked games, and at the turn of the 21st century, they made another step towards the ideal.

That step led to a network service for the Game Boy Color called the Mobile System GB, launched in January 2001. While that was the name for the overarching service, the centerpiece of the system was the Mobile Adapter GB, a dongle that tethered your Game Boy Color to a cell phone and allowed access to the mobile Internet. (Three different Adapter colors were available, corresponding to the different bands phones were supporting at the time). An included cartridge called "Mobile Trainer" allowed access to the basic network features offered, while also giving tutorials on how to use everything.

Those features were all things we now take for granted: texting, game news, regularly-updated game data, multiplayer gaming, and other downloadable content. Of course, it was all on a much smaller, more primitive scale. Not to mention it was totally kid-safe—with the Mobile System, getting your Game Boy "on the Internet" meant using the Nintendo-made software to access Nintendo-made mobile web pages, which told you about more Nintendo-made software.

The Mobile System's big crutch was that you couldn't use it with any old cell phone. Nintendo had a partnership with KDDI and their DION (now AU) mobile web platform, so only KDDI customers could bask in the Mobile System glory. And it still cost extra money: the Adapter set was 5800 yen, plus a 400-yen system registration fee, and then the standard 10 yen-a-minute connection fees; no doubt an expensive proposition for any cell phone-owning family.

Obviously, the real draw of the Mobile System was integration with games. The potential was huge, but the System floundered right out of the gate, with an extremely minimal amount of games supporting it, both from Nintendo and any licensees that hopped onboard (mostly Konami, as the developers of the Mobile System were Mobile21, a joint venture between Nintendo and Konami). *Pokémon Crystal* supported the Mobile System, but was released a month before the Mobile Adapter, so unlocking its potential would have to wait. But once the Adapter hit, the *Pokémon* factor immediately earned it some purpose: once connected to

The Mobile Adapter GB tethered a Game Boy Color or Game Boy Advance to supported cell phones and let users send messages, check out Nintendo-produced mobile web content, and potentially engage in multiplayer competitions. Pokémon Crystal *was its killer app, but other software failed to make a real dent, and Nintendo shut it all down after nearly two years of operation.*

the network, you could enter a "Battle Tower" that allowed you to trade or fight other Pokémon trainers, and special gifts would also be available to download as well—now foregone conclusions in new *Pokémon* games. The Adapter also supported peer-to-peer connections, meaning you could call your friend's phone and interact without needing to connect to the DION servers. Of course, this essentially turned the Mobile Adapter into a clunkier link cable, but the option was there.

While originally for the GBC, the Mobile System's 2001 release fell just a couple of months before the launch of the Game Boy Advance, and Nintendo was quick to mention that the GBA would also support the Mobile System. However, even fewer GBA games supported it than the GBC: Nintendo's strategy game *Napoleon* offered online skirmishes, and Konami's *Silent Hill Play Novel* let you download "gaiden" chapters over the network. Again, there was no real killer app until Nintendo included support for the System in *Mario Kart Super Circuit*, letting players race online three years before *Mario Kart DS*.

After a price drop of the adapter to 3800 yen in the summer of 2001 (around the time of *Mario Kart*'s release), the Mobile System still struggled to get anywhere. Eventually, Nintendo announced that the entire endeavor would be shut down in December 2002. It sure makes their recent Internet initiatives seem like a breath of fresh air.

WACKY WORLDS

SEGA • GENESIS • 1994

Wacky Worlds Creativity Studio is probably best described as moving Colorforms for your Genesis: you have a few backdrops with virtual booklets full of stickers representing characters and incidental objects, and you can place them anywhere, modify them in almost any way, add music and sound, and end up with your very own wacky world.

The six different backdrops pertain to different themes: underwater, the moon, a fairy tale castle, a haunted house, a tropical island, and a child's playroom. They have their own sets of stickers as well, and you're immediately free to go nuts and create any kind of scene you want with the tools at hand (or just choose the bomb tool, blow everything up and start with a blank canvas). What's nice is that you're not locked to one theme; you can select from any stickers from any other world, put them in, and create incestuous mayhem. It's built for silliness (rather, wackiness), and if you were a creative kid who loved silliness, this gave you a pile of resources to work with.

In order to jazz up the Sega-ness a bit, Sonic and Tails feature in the game: Sonic is your navigator on the main menu, and Tails has a role as a character sticker. ToeJam and Earl also have cameos as stickers and representative sound effects, and strangely, they're the only other Sega characters that show up. Did Greendog have a special clause in his contract or something?

Wacky Worlds is not just about stickers, because you can also modify music tracks by stacking different "blocks" of loops that play in sequence, and are also themed after the six worlds. And this isn't exactly a "drawing" game, because there's no ability for free-form painting, but you can grab any sticker, pull up the sprite and recolor it. *Wacky Worlds* also came with the Genesis Mega Mouse, a definite aid in controlling the game, because using the D-pad and one button can become quite a pain. It's not *Mario Paint*, but for Sega, it did in a pinch.

By no means is *Wacky Worlds* revolutionary or deserving of canonization, but it was the first game under the "Sega Club" line. After the release of *Barney's Hide & Seek Game* in 1993, Sega of America formed the Sega Club brand as an umbrella for additional games that were the most child-friendly (and perhaps a response to recent criticisms that Sega was helping peddle violent games to impressionable kids). *Richard Scarry's Busytown*, *Bonkers*, *Math Blaster*, *Ecco Jr.*, *Tempo Jr.* (oddly enough) and a few other games all got the Sega Club name attached to them throughout 1994 and sparingly in 1995. The company even used the brand to sell the smaller Japanese version of the Genesis six-button controller.

Though it didn't last long, Sega Club was another venture of SOA's that added to the humongous pile of stuff they were already working on at the time: three game platforms with a fourth (32X) and fifth (Saturn) on the way; a virtual reality headset that wouldn't happen; a renewed threat from Nintendo to deal with, and then they have to figure out how to sell a bunch of games to kindergartners? Oh, and when the Pico will be out by the end of 1994 and have essentially the same software? Regardless, *Wacky Worlds* and its level of freedom mixed with its ease of use had some all-ages appeal to it (who doesn't want to see ToeJam and Earl literally dance on someone's grave?)—and for being the first Sega Club game, it's one of the best.
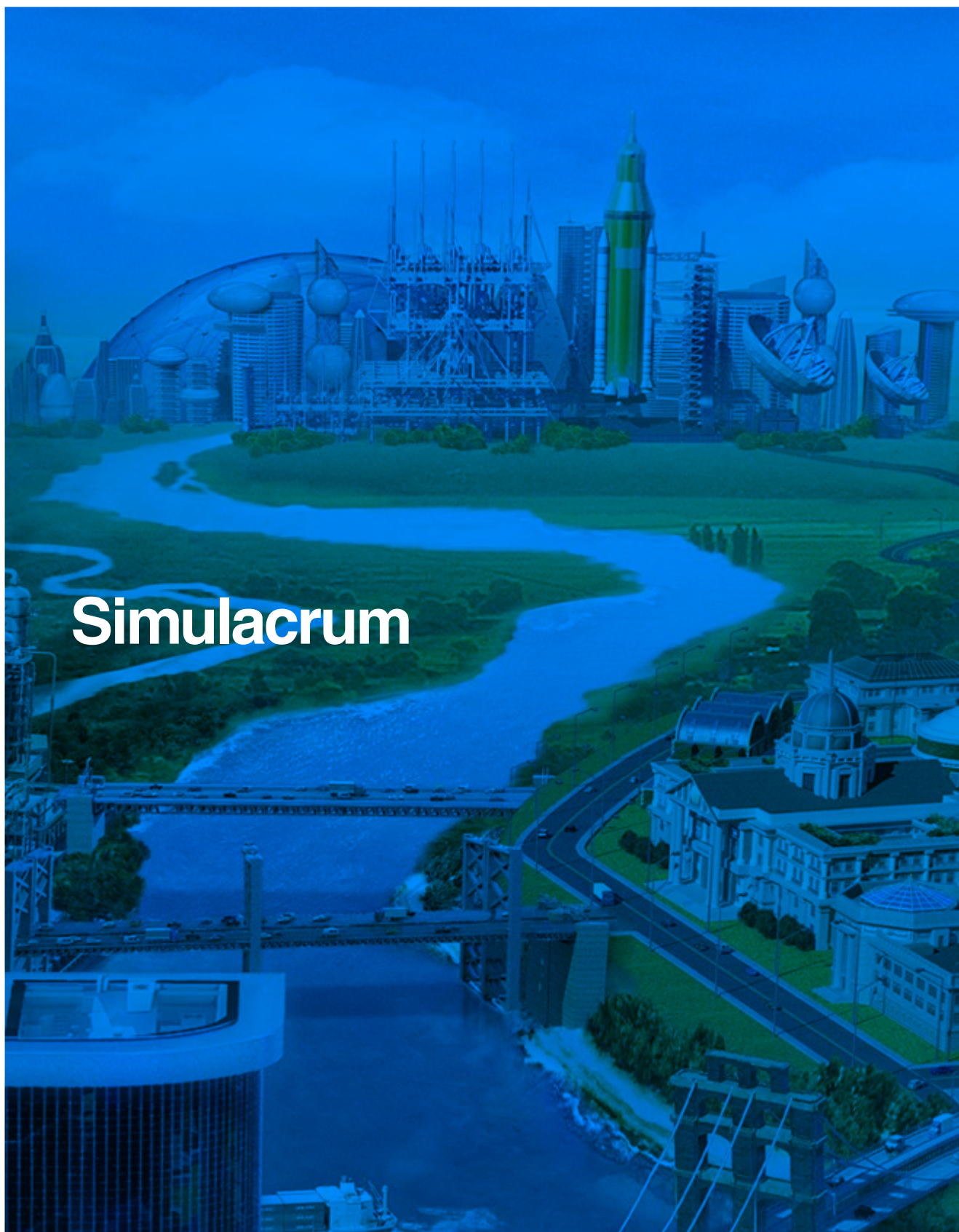
Simulacrum

I've

always been bad at sim games. I was always intrigued by SimCity on the Super NES, and eventually fell in love with SimCity 2000 on Windows, but I still never really "got" it. As a kid, my strategy was to throw money at problems, buy some extra parks, and see if that changed anything. I grew frustrated when the RCI meters barely moved. And I never had the desire to seriously play any scenario maps; talk about unnecessary stress. It wasn't until *SimCity DS* that I finally starting figuring out—too bad it was a lackluster excuse for a SimCity game.

So as you might surmise from that, it was a little daunting for me to go through some of the Artdink games in this issue, especially when most of them were in a language I still don't completely understand. At the very least, I took my time to learn the basics of playing the Maxis version of *A-Train*, a game that had confounded me back when I rented the PlayStation version in 1996. Now that I'm older, wiser, and maybe a little more patient, I had fun. I got it, finally. Just in time to write this issue.

The thing is, I never really hated sims. *SimCity* was always on my mind, and I always thought the concept of managing a city/golf course/safari park/dictatorship was cool. From the outside looking in, what I find most fascinating about sim games is the way they bring out player stories. It's easy to find first-person narratives about someone's jaunts through *SimCity* or *Tropico*, and they often have a more personal feel than similar treatments for different games. How many *Dark Souls* "diaries" does one really need to read, and how unique are they, really?

It's a weird time for sims, though, that's for sure. People are putting Maxis and EA through the wringer for a bungled launch of the new SimCity, and it seems you can't go a month without seeing some new weirdo simulator from Germany pop up on Steam or elsewhere, their logos using the same faux-*Microsoft Flight Simulator* font as they have since the early 2000s. But I'd be lying if I said going through the Artdink catalog didn't make me want to take another step forward and check out what I've been missing in the genre. The proof of this is in the copy of *Train Simulator 2013* I bought on Steam, which I wouldn't have even entertained the thought of had I not been playing three *A-Train* sequels that same week. Artdink is still pretty darn influential after all.

rdb

next

BIPEDAL DOG™