y Michael Eilers

alapagos, like the fabled island chain from which its name is derived, is the stuff of mists and legend. This game was vaporware for so long that even the diehard believers began to doubt it would ever be completed and pressed on CD-ROM. For almost two years the game was nothing but a few small screen shots and a boastful web page full of annoying jargon. Now the vapor has condensed into reality, but the results are decidedly mixed.

Sorry, couldn't resist that one. Anyway, to the chase: Galapagos was designed from the core up to be utterly unlike any other game. Part Myst, part Tamagochi, part Tetris, and part Descent, this game seeks to combine puzzles and an artificial-life sim with gut-wrenching 3D realtime graphics. Featuring a floating, dramatic third-person viewpoint and a surreal texture-mapped 3D world, this is the first game I've ever played where you have no direct control whatsoever over your on-screen persona. Instead, you can only affect the environment around Mendel, the artificial-life experiment that you are entrusted with protecting and educating. By manipulating a lengthy series of real-time puzzles, you are supposed to guide him through five different worlds towards freedom.

upposedly, Mendel is designed to "learn" from the environment around "him" (as he is referred to in the manual) and gain cognitive ability, just as the puzzles gain in complexity. The only tool the player is given is the mouse cursor—all other aspects of the game, such as camera angle and rotation, Mendel's actions and Mendel's goals are controlled by the computer.

Using a 3D engine somewhere between Quake and Descent II in complexity and a camera view that whips around like a moth around a light bulb, Galapagos is a pastiche of tried-and-true puzzles and surreal, topsy-turvy worlds.

The result is beautiful, breathtaking, surreal, and supremely frustrating. I'm quite glad my mother wasn't even in the same city as myself during the course of reviewing this game, because I yelled so much profanity at my monitor that she would have immediately

disowned me, had she overheard. I screamed. I howled. I force-quit (command-option-ESC) the game in disgust dozens of times. And that was just the first two worlds.

To the Impatient: Beware
If your idea of gaming is a caffeine-fuelled 15-minute Quake fragfest followed by bouts of Myth mayhem, then Galapagos is definitely not for you. If you are a RPG fan or a Sim City tweaker obsessed with controlling every aspect of a game, Galapagos is utterly not your stuff. This is a game for people with the patience, calm, and detachment of a Buddhist monk.

The reason? Because you have an appallingly small amount of control over the game itself. You can't control the camera view, nor Mendel, nor anything that the game doesn't expressly allow you to control, and often that limited vector is simply changing the state of an object to on or off or forwards or backwards. Mendel just wanders blithely along into one deadly trap after another, while you scramble to click on platforms, switches and force fields, often having to chase a minuscule moving target with the mouse just as the camera viewpoint decides to shift 180 degrees in the wrong direction.

word of advice: Don't get too attached to little Mendel, because "he" will die horribly, senselessly, and pointlessly hundreds of times. Many of the puzzles cannot be passed through without killing off Mendel at least once, because only his death makes the "rules" of a given situation clear. Often you will progress through a puzzle only to have Mendel disintegrated at the very end because you failed to hit a hidden switch halfway through the puzzle. This wouldn't have bothered me much except for the pitiful whimpering sounds Mendel makes moments before his death.

I don't want to give the impression that I'm being so hard on this game because it is too difficult—far from it! I love a truly challenging game. A difficult game kicks your butt, but still rewards you when you do everything right in the right order. A frustrating game, on the other hand, is one in which you can do everything right and still get burned. Galapagos is just such a game.

I also don't want to give the impression that I didn't have any fun—I certainly did, and I felt a great deal of satisfaction after helping Mendel avoid a nasty trap and survive. But that burst of joy was tempered by dozens of agonizing disappointments beforehand.

old on to Your Lunch

The 3D world of Galapagos is certainly striking, though not as detailed as I expected. Using a true-3D graphics engine with very high resolution textures, the five worlds of this game are bright, colorful, and mind-bendingly surreal. Objects hang in empty space, gravity re-orients itself on the fly, and endless vistas fade into distant haze.

The camera angle shifts around as Mendel travels, always focused on the little bug(ger.) When he nears a wall or other object the camera pans around dramatically, with vertigo-inducing bobs and weaves. More than one of my friends walked away from this game feeling a wee bit seasick.

The graphics engine itself seems extremely fast, pumping out 30 fps+ at 640x480 high resolution on my Power Center Pro 240, and offers many options (including line-skipping and pixel-doubling) for getting decent performance with slower systems. The world of Galapagos is fairly simple overall, with heavy use of 3D primitives (cubes, pyramids, rectilinear solids) and flat planes. Though the engine seems to support sloped surfaces, they are rarely used. The worlds themselves are far less complex than an average level in Quake, but this seems to be done on purpose to accommodate the free-floating camera view, which requires lots of open space to manoeuvre.

isappointingly, the Mac version of Galapagos does not support hardware acceleration, while the PC version does (via 3Dfx and Direct3D.) Anark said they are currently considering a 3Dfx version for the Mac; no RAVE support was mentioned.

The graphics engine has some minor bugs, including a problem with brightness shifting up and down as you load or save games that left the screen patchy and washed-out.

The textures were rich and detailed, but used inconsistently. An object textured a certain way wouldn't necessarily behave the same way the next time you encountered a similarly-textured object.

Sound was used well overall, but the effects themselves are uninspired and often grating on the ears. I also experienced a bug which caused sounds to crackle when mixed, even when the PCI Timing Update was installed in my Power Computing machine.

The Puzzles
The obstacle courses you must get Mendel through in this game range from inspired challenges to pointless dreck, with occasional heavy repetition. There are dozens of versions of a "sliding platform" puzzle in which you must coax Mendel across a field of a half-dozen or more platforms, each moving back and forth, by lining up platforms as Mendel walks. Most of the puzzles are manipulated by clicking on the moving objects themselves, which usually causes them to temporarily reverse course. It is often unclear as to which objects can be manipulated and which cannot, so you have to click on just about everything.

Clicking on moving objects is further complicated by the camera movement, which often chooses a critical moment to spin around in a cinematic pan, causing the object you are reaching for to run away from you at lighting speed. Some of the puzzles would be trivial if it wasn't for this nasty camera trick. Granted, these camera shifts are quite dramatic and beautiful—if only the camera wasn't purposely looking the wrong direction so often! Many times when Mendel falls off a cliff the camera ends up looking stupidly at a wall or floor, or right through a "solid" object.

Perhaps I'm just spoiled by games like Myth: The Forgotten Realms, where you get total control over your camera movement. At the least I should be able to spin the camera around Mendel at will—after all, it is the puzzle I am interested in, not the bug! All too often the thing I need to click is just out of reach.

Adding insult to (repeated) injury for poor Mendel, many of the puzzles require you to go through them backwards after completing them forwards—the sort of gameplay-extending trick usually found in the lesser Myst clones.

came across some puzzles that were truly inspired, leaving me hanging in the dark clicking frantically while hoping Mendel knew what the hell was going on. This experience was tempered by the many puzzles that were just slightly-modified versions of ones I had previously completed. Some puzzles were just a test of my raw clicking speed, nothing more.

Most frustrating by far were the puzzles that used camera angles to make them unnecessarily difficult. One such puzzle featured a propeller-like device that had 3 (or more —I never got past it) platforms on different levels spinning around a central shaft. Clicking on the shaft reversed the direction of rotation, and clicking on the platform popped Mendel up in the air. By the time you got Mendel to the second platform, a cunning bit of timing, the camera was trapped against the ceiling, and so you had to try to get him onto the third platform while it was completely out of sight. To make a puzzle depend on timing is one thing—to make it depend on timing, luck, and pure guesswork is another.

At the very least Anark should have included a difficulty selector, allowing you to adjust the max speed of platforms, the camera, Mendel's walking speed, etc.—this seems a simple thing to do which would have improved my experience tremendously.

By far the most frustrating aspect of gameplay is Mendel's regeneration after dying. He appears at the place you last saved, virtually guaranteeing that you have to cover the same patch of territory over and over again. In the original version of the game (before the update to 1.1) these save spots were widely spaced apart, forcing you to cover huge amounts of space without a single mistake to get to the next area—I can't imagine how much more difficult and frustrating that made the game.

After reading the hype on the Anark web page and in the Galapagos manual about NERM (Non Stationary Entropic Reduction Mapping) technology, I'm afraid I'm more than a little sceptical. Hyperbolic descriptions make me wary, not to mention claims of "intelligent" behavior from a software simulation.

If Mendel does "learn" from his environment, then he does so in a way too subtle for my untrained eyes to observe. In the course of playing this game I saw Mendel get fried, shattered, frozen, burned, and crushed, and never once did he hesitate to walk straight into the path of danger once again. One particular puzzle featured a rotating wheel of energy beams, moving the same speed as Mendel—if he went counter-clockwise, with the beams, he would survive; if he went clockwise, he would die. I watched in increasing horror as he went clockwise over 20 times in a row, getting destroyed each time. All he seemed to be learning was a better way to kill himself. Even the lowly house ant, a creature with a brain smaller than the point of a pin, knows to run for cover when people's feet are around. Mendel, tireless, never stopping for a moment, finds the most dangerous thing around and heads straight for it. I am mystified by the fact that an "intelligent" organism like Mendel can't do a simple

ou are supposed to be able to "train" mendel by touching him (option-click by default.) Unfortunately this method is extremely ambiguous—it is not clear whether you are praising Mendel or punishing him. Imagine trying to train a dog with only a rolled-up newspaper and no treats, and without being able to talk to it at all! Mendel rarely, if ever, reacts to being touched; getting him to stop or turn around by clicking him proved almost impossible. Clicking on him when he was near a dangerous object didn't seem to make him reluctant to

approach it a second time—in fact, I might have been encouraging him to go near it, for all I could tell.

In fact, the only skill Mendel has that seemed to increase over time was his ability to not fall off the edge of a platform. I'm not going to claim that NERM technology is an outright fake or fraud, but it certainly doesn't manifest itself the way the manual or web site would suggest. Even deep into the game, with a very "trained" Mendel, I still had to watch in frustration as he walked off yet another cliff into the deep beyond. Anyone who has played with the ReaperBots in Quake will find Mendel's dull-witted wanderings laughable.

Claims, Schmaims

While I'm kibitzing, I have some other complaints about the game. The manual claims that Mendel sees "like a bat," but with infrared light. Yet from the point of view of Mendel, almost every puzzle is a 2-D horizontal plane of shifting 2-D surfaces. Also, because this is a computer-generated world, there is no way to tell how much infrared "heat" any given object is giving off—I can't think of a worse choice of senses to give Mendel. Not once did I see Mendel deliberately try to avoid a moving object, so he has problems with motion sensing as well.

Also, using the names "Galapagos" and "Mendel" invoke the tenets of genetic theory—but anyone who's had a high school introduction to genetics will tell you that both Darwinian and Mendelian theories depend on population studies, not the life of a single organism. Taken in the context of the many other claims made by Anark about this game, this seems just one more sloppy piece of hype. There is a lot of pedantic babbling about "complexity theory" in the manual as well, also an invalid concept with respect to this game, as there is only one organism present, not the millions and billions needed for true evolution to take place.

The manual (and the web site) also claim that NERM brains are currently in use in industrial factories and robotics technology. Well, let's just say that if I was in a NERM-using automated factory, I'd stand far back from the safety line.

If at First You Don't Succeed...

I was tragically disappointed by Galapagos. Ever since computer hardware and software became fast enough to create realtime 3D worlds, I have been awaiting the arrival of a true-3D puzzle game, sort of a Tetris you can fly through. Instead, Galapagos left me feeling like an operator for 911 trying frantically to prevent Mendel's suicide over and over again.

The most frustrating thing about Galapagos is that it could really be a fantastic game, if just a few changes were made. If you could control the camera angle even slightly; if you could communicate more with Mendel, telling him "stop!" and "good boy!" and "bad boy!" instead of just "bump"; if the puzzles had been designed to take advantage of his skills instead of just leaving him wandering in the dark; if you could select a difficulty level, then this would be a much better game. Ideally, Mendel should be able to manipulate some objects himself, if he can reach them—that would be an example of true intellectual accomplishment on his part.

When combined with the hyperbole in the manual, Galapagos seems more like a technology demonstration for NERMs than a video game. Sadly, it fails even at that by depending so heavily on puzzles that test only the player's reaction time but not Mendel's intelligence. It is almost as if the AI people and the level designers were two totally separate divisions of Anark that didn't communicate while making the game.

Nevertheless, it is a striking game, and definitely a challenging one. I eagerly await future

games from Anark—they have proven that they can make a complex, difficult, and ground breaking game. Now all they have to do is figure out how to make it fun.

Pros
• surreal, sometimes gorgeous 3D texture-mapped world
• fast graphics engine with many customizations for slower systems
• 3D panning sound and original sound effects
• cinematic camera movement makes for very dramatic realtime views
• 36 "sectors" and 5 worlds means many hours of gameplay
• Mendel is pretty cute
• paradigm-breaking approach to gaming: a 3D game that isn't centered around murdering network opponents, and that includes "sophisticated" artificial intelligence

Cons
• frustrating lack of control over Mendel, the camera, and other game aspects
• NERM "intelligence" doesn't seem to live up to claims
• some levels are just different variations of the same puzzle over and over again
• a few puzzles require a trip backwards through them to be completed, artificially doubling their length
• Mendel is surprisingly helpless, unable to stop, turn in a tight circle, climb slopes or even look up or down
• irritating camera movement and placement makes some puzzles unnecessarily difficult by placing needed objects off-screen
• high frustration quotient even for relatively simple puzzles
• many puzzles depend on raw reaction time, not logic or deduction
• Some monitor-resizing and color-depth bugs (at least with OS 8.)

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