REVIEW: OPENTTD

Download for free from openttd.org

Simulation games experienced a renaissance of sorts in the 1990s, owing to the rise of the Sim series with SimCity, gems like Theme Hospital, and of course the boom of tycoon games. The legendary Chris Sawyer may be best known for the Rollercoaster Tycoon games but before that, he made a name for himself with Transport Tycoon. Instead of laying out cities or buildings, Transport Tycoon saw the player developing and managing complex networks of trains, buses, trucks, and other vehicles between cities on an open map. Though it came in the wake of the original Railroad Tycoon, this one took the gameplay to a micro level where sophisticated managers could tinker to their heart's content. Transport Tycoon had such a lasting appeal that it remains active to this day, as a fan-developed open-source project called OpenTTD.
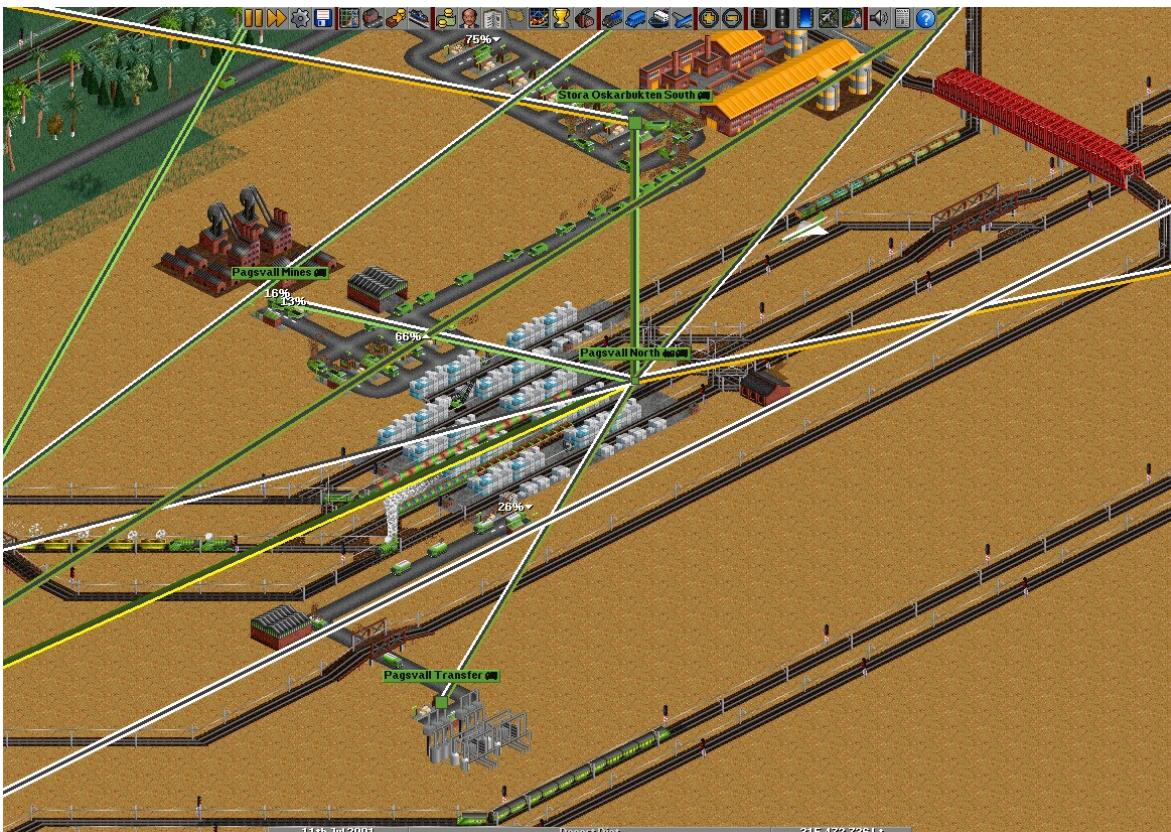
We've touched on what's special about the Transport Tycoon games, but it's important to know just how deep the rabbit hole goes before diving into this one. OpenTTD sets you up as the manager of a brand new transport company for a randomized region of inhabited countryside. The map is dotted with small cities and between them lie all sorts of camps and factories and refineries, all producing and consuming goods. Every building you see consumes and produces things, anything from grain and iron to passengers and mail. You, armed with some capital and some robust construction tools, must assemble a transit network that gets things where they need to go and turns you a profit besides. Not only can you make money from effective transportation systems, you can also help the burgeoning metropolises of the region grow with you.

The world is an unmoving canvas, and your paint is railroads and bus depots. You can use trains, road vehicles, boats, and aircraft to construct your network, with passenger and freight options for each. That's how granular the game is, in fact, that you have to purchase specific cars or trucks or containers for different products. Then you'll need to lay out their stops, designate how full they should be before departing, and even what times they should arrive if you want to fool with actual timetables. If you get everything right-ish you'll see your little vehicles putter around the map as you've directed them, and your coffers will begin to fill with profits.
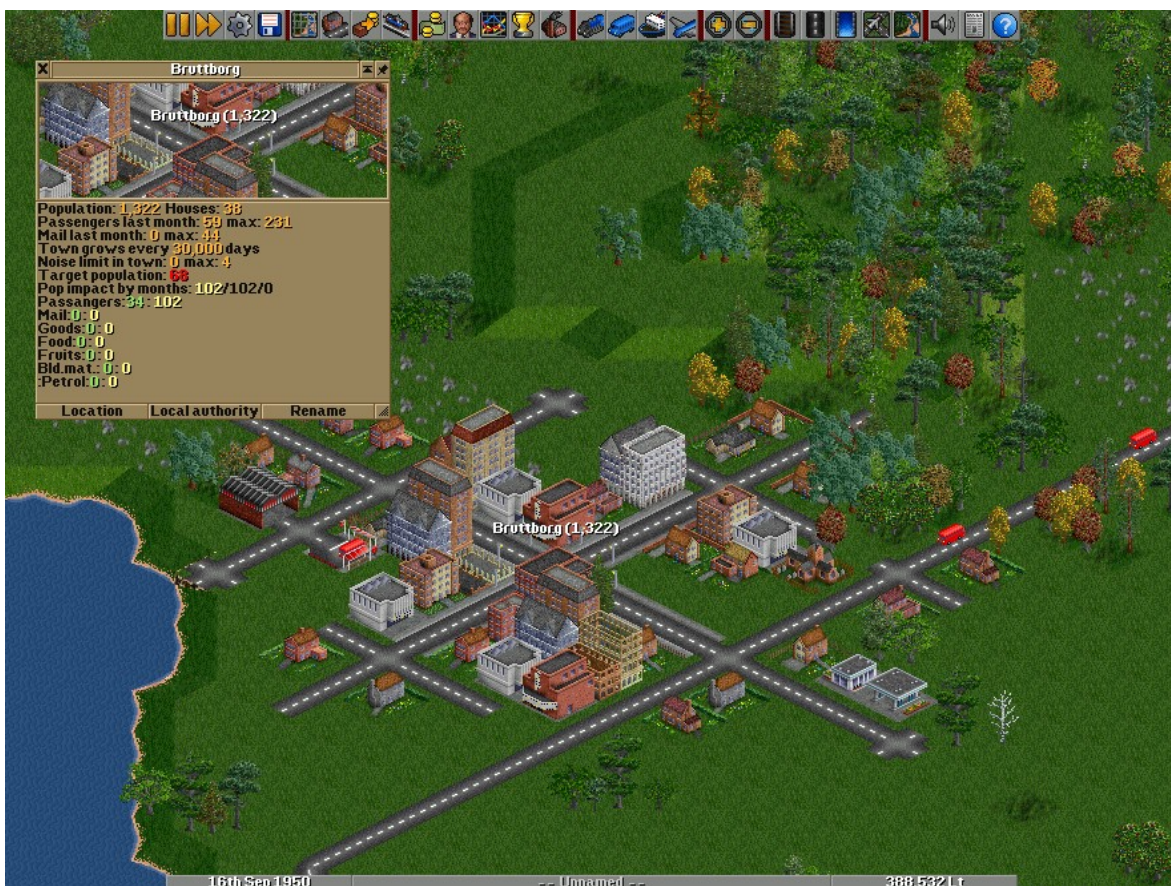
It's not an easy game to get into by any means, of course. Between the age of the original title and the nature of the fan game there's essentially no tutorial or in-game assistance, just tons of documentation to pore over. Just getting a single train to run between two stations took me some time to figure out, and my result wasn't anywhere near optimized. I touched on it above but the simulation is bewilderingly granular, allowing you to set routes and schedules and groupings and freight types for your network. Then there are advertisements you can run and industries you can invest in and other financial pursuits to explore. Working out all this from the in-game tooltips is possible but will take some serious time investment, and ultimately you're probably going to be working out of a wiki if you really want to sink your teeth in here.

There's also the building element of the game, which is where OpenTTD's true strength in customization and creativity lies. None of the towns or businesses are connected by default so you'll also be responsible for laying roads and rails. Roads are simple enough but the rail system here allows for incredible complexity thanks to the signaling system. This is no casual simulation; trains can't pass through each other on single tracks and will wait until the line is clear before pulling out of the station. You're best served then by building your own double tracks, interchanges, multi-line stations, and even whole trainyards to get optimal results. Signal networks can be so vast and complex that they mirror real-world solutions both in layout and efficiency.

Where classics like Railroad Tycoon obfuscated the scope of your network for simplicity's sake, Transport Tycoon lays it all out nearly as bare as it is in real life. The guts of your company are there to dig around in and operate on, and its reach along roads and rails is as great as you can make it. If you have the patience, you can build railroads that mimic actual lines and stations with trains arriving at different platforms on strict schedules. It won't be easy but all the information you need is there, along with fan-made graphics and sounds to ensure the package remains free and open indefinitely. We've been without a truly great train sim in recent years and while I hope that changes soon, it's nice to know there are classic games as deep and detailed as OpenTTD to hold us over.