Last March, I was at a BrainShare session frantically taking notes about NDS eDirectory. At one point during the session, the presenter compared eDirectory’s ability to function as a cross platform to the Klingon Empire’s ability to travel to different parts of the Federation and fight against Klingon and Federation enemies. The presenter’s explanation reminded me that space science fiction has become intertwined with popular culture.

As I mentioned in last month’s column, many web sites are devoted to space science and education. (See “A Lunar Lie?” November Connection, June 2001, pp. 47–48.) As I searched these web sites, however, I discovered that many more sites are devoted to science fiction entertainment and space fantasy. This month, I decided to delve into the realm of space science fiction on the web and share some of my favorite sites.

WEB SITES

The presenter of the eDirectory session would love, and may possibly be a frequenter of, STARTREK.COM (www.startrek.com). Actually, anyone with a passing interest in Star Trek would find this web site entertaining. At STARTREK.COM, you can catch up on news relating to one of the many Star Trek shows, read biographies of the actors, and test your knowledge of Star Trek trivia. You can also learn where to find Star Trek attractions throughout North America.

Among my favorite features on STAR TREK.COM are the advice columns. If you have a question about what you should do in your personal life, work, finances, or just life in general, you can ask either Pelgar (a Ferengi) or K’Plett (a Klingon). Both Pelgar and K’Plett answer questions that humans send to them. Pelgar is quick and cynical in his responses; K’Plett, on the other hand, is formal and philosophical. Both actually give good advice once you cut through the rhetoric. You’ll have fun reading the questions humans write in, and you’ll appreciate the insight these aliens give to earthly problems.

One of the most interesting web sites I came across was the Klingon Language Institute (www.kli.org). For those of you who are not familiar with the Klingon language, Dr. Marc Okrand created an entire language for the alien race to use in the Star Trek movies. This site shows the serious scholarship work that has gone into the Klingon language since it was created: Both Shakespeare’s Hamlet and The Epic of Gilgamesh (a Sumerian tale that is the oldest recorded story) have been translated to Klingon.

If you want to read Hamlet, The Epic of Gilgamesh, or the Klingon newsletter, you can use many resources to learn the Klingon language. At the Klingon Language Institute, you can get information about dictionaries, tapes, books, and other Klingon training tools.

Of course, when anybody on this planet thinks about space and science fiction, Star Wars usually immediately comes to mind. (In fact, the Star Wars series earned the number one spot on our space-movie poll. See “Top Ten Space Movies” on p. 44.) The official Star Wars web site, starwars.com (www.starwars.com), contains nearly everything you could ever want to know about these epic films. For example, if you want to learn about the Sith, the Jedi, the Empire, or any of the characters in the four Star Wars movies, starwars.com features the histories of these groups and characters.

In addition, as you are probably aware, Star Wars Episode II is now officially in production. Starwars.com keeps you updated on how production is progressing.

If your interest in space science fiction goes beyond Star Wars and Star Trek, a good web site to visit is Starport (www.starport.com). At this web site, you can find the latest updates and reviews of science fiction television shows, books, and movies.

And yes, you can still read up on Star Trek and Star Wars at Starport. In fact, this web site has a number of intellectually oriented essays about the intricacies of Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace. Some of you may not have necessarily liked The Phantom Menace, but the theories proposed in these essays can make you look at this movie from several new perspectives. For example, could Jar Jar Binks be a hidden Jedi? (Before you jump to an answer, I suggest you read the essay.)

GAME OF THE MONTH

Space science fiction and Europa Universalis, July’s game of the month, have at least one thing in common—they both can cause people to become obsessed. At first, Europa Universalis drove me crazy (it has a steep learning curve). After I got the hang of the game, however, I would sometimes lose hours while I was “testing” this game.

Europa Universalis is a real-time strategy game based on European history, beginning with the time of Christopher Columbus’ voyage (1492) until the French Revolution (1792). In Europa Universalis, you control a European country from 1492 to 1792. During these three hundred years (called a Grand Campaign), you try to pick up as many victory points as possible through military, diplomatic, and economic means. At the end of the three hundred years, the country with the most points wins.

At first, the idea of real-time strategy turned me off. I was more familiar with turn-based strategy games such as...
Top Ten Space Movies

I recently assembled the staff at Novell Connection together to choose the top ten space movies of all time. I thought that choosing the top ten space movies might be somewhat controversial, but I had no idea just how controversial the decision-making process could get.

In fact, as we whittled down the list to ten, some definite factions arose. Some staff members lobbied hard to have certain movies thrown out, while other staff members lobbied diligently to have those movies stay on the list. Witnessing this scene was comparable to watching the Romulons and the Klingons hammer out a peace settlement.

After some compromising (and a little bickering), we finally came to a consensus. In our humble opinions, the ten best space movies of all time are as follows:

1. Star Wars Series
2. Space Odyssey: 2001
3. The Day the Earth Stood Still
4. Apollo 13
5. Star Trek I-IX
6. Aliens
7. E.T.
8. Men in Black
9. Close Encounters of the Third Kind
10. Independence Day

Honorable Mentions: The Right Stuff, Capricorn One, Space Quest, and Space Balls

We know that the list may be controversial for you, too. We'd like to know if you agree or disagree with our list. Send your comments to editors@ncmag.com.

Civilization. Turn-based strategy games are like board games in that a player makes all of his or her moves at one time. However, real-time strategy means that the clock is always ticking. One second of your time may equal one day's time on the game. For example, your armies and navies don't move a certain distance on a turn as they do in turn-based strategy games; instead, they move a certain distance according to how much time has elapsed.

Managing a budding empire according to time rather than to turns is tricky. You can easily forget an army, navy, or battle front in a distant part of the world. As I began to play Europa Universalis, however, the clock felt natural: I could speed up the time if nothing was happening. Or, if I were fighting a two-front war with internal revolutions, I could slow down the clock. A newer clock feature I like is the ability to pause the game and make critical decisions while time stands still—a feature that would be nice in real life.

On a refreshing note, your goal is not to conquer the entire world in this game but to win as many victory points as possible. If you are just a natural warmonger and just can't help attacking and annexing other countries, however, you'll find that the rest of the known world will soon ally against you and beat you back into your place (a fact that I figured out through sad and painful experience).

In other nation-building games, after you find a winning formula, you can stick to it and triumph in all of your subsequent games. With Europa Universalis, however, nothing could be further from the truth.

I've completed two Grand Campaigns—one as England and one as Austria—and they were very different games.

When I played as England, I stayed out of European affairs, built a massive navy, and focused on colonizing the New World and Asia. As Austria, I controlled a small, land-locked country in the heart of Europe and concentrated on the twists and turns of European diplomacy. I had no navy and no colonists, but I did enjoy buying my way into the graces of my allies and making deals with my enemies.

You can also choose from options other than the Grand Campaign. For example, you can lead a nation during the Thirty Years War, or you can take control of the Inca Empire and fight off the Spanish conquistadors. Europa Universalis has hundreds of options which kept me coming back to the game. After I played the game from one angle, I would wonder what it would be like to play as another country or under a different set of circumstances.

Along with the variability in the game, I really enjoyed the historical aspects of running a country during this time period. The monarchs, statesmen, and military leaders are actual people from the time period. As a result, you can play to their strengths or weaknesses.

As I mentioned earlier, Europa Universalis is complex, and the learning curve is steep. It's difficult to run a country. You are in charge of the budgeting, infrastructure, armies, navies, diplomacy, internal relations, and so on.

Things can be quite precarious at times. The fate of your entire nation could rest on securing one alliance. One problem with Europa Universalis is the frequent crashing that occurs late in the game. Although the crashes did sometimes cause me grief, in a way I was grateful. I wonder if I could have ever turned the game off if it did not crash occasionally.

You'll likely find yourself playing this game for hours. As you drive to and from work, you'll find yourself making plans to defeat those powerful Turks or planning how to colonize India.

Europa Universalis is one of the best strategy games on the market. Just beware that you may not get as much done as you used to before you bought the game and that your significant other may never understand why.

Europa Universalis supports Windows 95/98 and Windows NT/2000 with Service Pack 4. In addition, Europa Universalis requires a Pentium 200 MHz (Pentium II and 300 MHz are recommended), 2 MB of video RAM (supporting 800 x 600), 64 MB of RAM, and 180 MB of free hard-drive space.

You can play Europa Universalis as a standalone game or with up to 8 other players in multiplayer mode via a network connection or the Internet. Europa Universalis is available through retail channels for U.S. $49.95. For more information about Europa Universalis, visit www.europa-universalis.com.

Send your review of a great web site, network resource, game, or product to editors@ncmag.com.