y Karen Kaye

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien did not think much of his own work. He wrote it mostly to please himself, and to entertain his son who was fighting to protect the British realm in World War II. When he completed a chapter, he would send it at the earliest opportunity, and his son would read it out loud to entertain all those around him. Since he could not afford to pay a secretary, he typed several manuscripts himself, methodically banging out each letter on an ancient mechanical typewriter. The subsequent impact of his novels on generations of writers, directors and designers would have quite likely embarrassed this exceedingly shy man.

Tolkien's world, and the characters that populated it, have also influenced computer game design. In fact, there have been some mediocre attempts to recreate a computerized version of Middle Earth itself, and the conflicts with which we became acquainted in novels like The Lord of the Rings. These releases were ill-prepared to duplicate the complexity and richness of the master's world, and have subsequently fared poorly with consumers. Although Blizzard's recent release WarCraft is not an adaptation of Tolkien's world, in many ways it comes closer to replicating aspects of it than the designs which aimed for greater fidelity.

Prologue
WarCraft — Orcs and Humans, is the first Blizzard product for the Macintosh. Although its migration took over a year, the game has remained fresh and retained all the attractive

features which made it a success on the PC. The designers have made improvements in graphics and sound quality, which should appease Macintosh players for the long wait.

The contents of the game package make a strong initial impression. There are three installation options on the CD, requiring various amounts of hard drive space. An installer script handles the entire operation, and also copies any necessary extensions and control panels to the System folder. The "Read-Me" file explains some last minute changes and features. It is clear and very well illustrated, which is a necessity for the sections describing network games and play against a PC opponent.

The B&W manual is organized in two sections, one for the Orcs and the other for Humans. This arrangement does repeat much of the information unnecessarily, but the overall effect is "cool" and I enjoyed reading the two different perspectives of the same war. The artwork is typical AD&D steroid fantasy, but it does set the stage nicely for what is about to come.

Milieu

WarCraft is a strategy simulation covering the conflict between the Human race and the Orcs in the lands of Azeroth. The players have the option of playing either a campaign (12 integrated battles) or they can construct individual free-from scenarios. The engagements comprising the campaign are occasionally different for the Human and Orc points of view, so there is some merit to playing the game "from the other side."

Since there are only two protagonists and they are already locked in a bitter struggle, the game is free to dispense with the subject of political relations. Instead, the player gets to concentrate on fielding armies and leading them to battle, which is what most gamers would rather do anyway. In order to train and maintain these forces during the campaign, the player must develop an infrastructure to support the operation.

The two commodities which fuel the expansion of the hamlet are gold and lumber. And of course the oldest commodity itself, the sweat on the brow of the masses, who are represented in the game by the peasants and peons. They are the ones who chop the lumber and mine the gold, making all other things possible. They are cowardly and weak, but must be protected from enemy raiding parties, since the soldiers in WarCraft cannot be tasked with menial labor. Once a reasonable store of raw materials and money is amassed, the construction of a proper city can begin.

The player typically starts with a town hall and one or more farms. In due course, additional structures are added to the burgeoning village. Barracks allow the training of troops, while Lumber Mills facilitate the development of better missile weapons and lead to the construction of advanced structures. The Blacksmith and the Stable are necessary in order to train knights, while the Church and the Tower permit the player to field mystical troops like Clerics and Conjurers. In the latter stages of the war it will even become necessary to build walls around the strongholds in order to minimize the destruction from roving patrols.

The troop types are fairly standard, and even though there are minor differences between the two races, their armies are organized along essentially similar lines. The Footman is the basic armored infantry unit, supported by Archers who can deliver a ranged attack. Knights are heavily armored and are much speedier than other elements of the army. Catapults are cumbersome to maneuver, but they deliver a solid long ranged shot capable of tearing huge chunks from an army that it is not sufficiently dispersed. Clerics are able to heal the wounded, or in the case of the Orcs, raise the dead. Conjurers wield awesome powers, and are capable of calling forth Daemons and Elementals. A charming lot they make.

The scenarios that comprise the campaign get progressively more difficult; however, the

early engagements are designed to familiarize the player with game mechanics without omitting the fun. Initially, only two or three troop types can be commanded, and the building of certain structures is prohibited. This forces the player to learn how to win using only the basic elements of the game. Later, when additional features become available, it is much easier to employ them effectively since the player understands the fundamentals already.

Even though there are some scenarios which have unique objectives, in most cases the player wins by destroying the enemy armies and laying waste to the opponent's stronghold. There is no attempt to plunder the enemy's resources or to capture structures intact and make use of them for one's own designs. This is indeed a cruel and savage world, one which the Master of Mordor would feel right at home in.

Motif

If this all sounds tempting so far, I should caution that I have yet to divulge the best parts. This game is exceedingly simple to get started, and the player ought to be up and running in about 10 minutes. The are a few preferences to establish which affect the speed of the game, and then it is on to the first scenario.

The interface is a breeze, both for moving around the playing field and for commanding units. The player can define "hot-spots," which allow rapid navigation to any of ten locations on the map. For conventional orders, the player selects a unit or structure and issues a command by choosing from the available pictograms that depict various units actions. These are along the lines of Move, Attack or Train. Then the player selects the destination, target or choice of structure. The AI handles the navigation, the individual fighting, and the placement of the new unit.

WarCraft makes excellent use of sound, digitized voice and supporting music to create an overall mood. The game can in fact get quite noisy. The chopping of wood and the construction of buildings are both accompanied by appropriate sounds. The army units, and even some of the buildings, acknowledge their selection with a sound or spoken response. The battles are characterized by the din of arrows flying through the air, the clash of steel on armor and the inevitable screams from the dying. The cacophony is heightened by the fiery explosions from catapults and the impact of the spells cast by the magic users on both sides.

The dissonance would become unbearable were it not for the use of stereo panning and the limitation of producing only those sounds appropriate to the action taking place on the visible portion of the map. Bart Farkas pointed out that with stereo panning selected, the game adds such nuances as producing the required sound in the left or right speaker, depending on which part of the display area the action is taking place. It was also a handy decision to block those sounds not associated with the action on the display area. This way the player is not forced to listen to the incessant chopping sound made by half a dozen peasants clear-cutting a forest.

The Achilles heel of WarCraft is the graphics. Although reasonably clear most of the time, the overall quality is only average by Macintosh standards. The buildings themselves are distinct and the fighting above ground reasonably easy to follow, but the underground scenarios can make the player feel visually challenged. There are particular areas of the dungeons where the bloody remains of several corpses are scattered on a cobble stone floor. When the player's units engage in combat with the adversary over these areas, the whole mass becomes a melange of colored pixels that makes it difficult to identify particular units. Fortunately only two engagements in the campaign take place below ground.

locution

On the other hand, this limitation is offset by a number of well executed features which more than make up for the shortcoming. The success of the game in the PC world is clearly not accidental, and the added capabilities of the Macintosh product make it even more appealing.

Foremost is the strong emphasis on head-to-head play. WarCraft supports a number of play options including two-player games through modem, network or direct link. The designers have built in a "spawning" attribute which allows two players to compete in a network or modem game with only a single copy of the software. All necessary extensions and control panels ship on the CD. Best of all, the designers had the foresight to build in cross platform compatibility so you can humiliate your PC opponent.

The AI is designed to handle routine tasks which would otherwise burden the player. For example, once a peasant is assigned to chop wood in a forest or dig for gold in a mine, he will continue to do so until the supply in the area is exhausted. I only wished that the programmers would have allowed the player to automate additional tasks, such as commanding barracks to train a certain troop type until directed to stop.

Real-time play is perhaps the most endearing feature of the game. The demands on an authoritarian warlord's time are incessant, and the player will be reminded of this repeatedly in WarCraft. The need to simultaneously manage the training of new troops, the building of additional structures, and the burden of defending against constant enemy raiding parties will test the span of control of the very best. As a result, the game is consistently changing, filled with apprehension and excitement.

WarCraft excels in the variety of scenarios which make up the campaign. I enjoyed those the most that presented me with a unique situation. One of these provides the player with a substantial army that must come to the rescue of a friendly city that is already under attack. Another requires that the player track down the Orc Warchief's daughter in an underground dwelling and administer the ultimate punishment for disobedience of her father. Both of the scenarios showed the creativity of the designers and prevented the campaign game from becoming completely monotonous.

Diatribe

WarCraft ran flawlessly during the entire test period, however, extended play revealed minor deficiencies. None of these appeared to be programming glitches, instead they represented questionable design decisions and missed opportunities which would have made the game even more enjoyable and user friendly.

In the early stages of a scenario, the movement the army is reasonably easy due to the small number of available units. Eventually, the number of soldiers mounts and the armies approach 20 or 30 units organized into a combined arms force of knights, missile weapons and magic users. At this stage, the multitude becomes very difficult to maneuver. The player can only give simultaneous orders to four units at a time, and even these units will often fail to maintain formations they have been assigned. Armies easily loose cohesion as foot soldiers inadvertently move outside the protective umbrella of the missile weapons. The player is forced to spend substantial amounts of time on the reorganization of the force.

Combat is a frenzied affair, where micro-management reaches new heights. While the missile units will fire on any enemy who comes in range, the other soldiers seem incapable of independent action. The only time a warrior will select a target on it own is if it is under attack from that particular unit. This means that if one of the player's three knights is engaged with an enemy, the other two will stand by while the first is hacked to pieces. The magic users are equally inadequate, and require constant prodding to cast a healing spell on those about to fall in the front rank. Worse still, friendly units will attack one another other without warning if the player gives the wrong target for an attack order. The resulting chaos may indeed replicate the actual feel of a medieval battle, nevertheless, as a gaming experience, it can become quite frustrating.

While battles themselves are difficult, the winning strategy is easy to deduce. The game is essentially played in three phases: defend, expand and attack. In most scenarios the player is faced with overwhelming odds in the beginning, and must protect the peasants long enough to build a barracks. Then the game enters the expansion phase, where new gold mines are sought and the army is built to considerable size. Finally, relying on superior organization skills, which the AI seems unable to match, the player overwhelms the enemy is a single cataclysmic battle.

After playing a little more than a dozen scenarios, the game became somewhat stale. The fact that there are only two races did not help matters, nor did the small selection of troops. The latter scenarios are indeed large, and can take the better part of a day to complete. Since there is no surrender in WarCraft, every last enemy must be killed and all the buildings razed in order to achieve victory. When it becomes clearly evident that the other player has lost, this pointless continuation was tiring.

Soliloquy

Blizzard is about to release WarCraft II for DOS-compatibles. Many of the shortcomings listed above have been fixed in this version. The game will include Dwarves and Elves in addition to the two races chronicled in the original. It also adds a slew of new units, including naval vessels and airships. Development of the player's empire will receive greater emphasis with

the addition of several new structures and two new resources. Armies will also be much easier to manage, since they can be assigned to maintain certain formations. It is unclear when or if WarCraft II will come to the Mac, however it is safe to assume that if the original sells well, the wait can not be long.

Summation

WarCraft does not outperform the competition in all areas, but it is exceptional in the way in which the various features are successfully organized to produce a highly satisfying entertainment product. It took some time to overcome my aversion to the rather average graphics, but after a while I noticed that I was enjoying myself too much to care. I learned to compensate for the limitations of the interface, and by the end of the campaign I was quite handy at directing a large army. Though at times it still felt like controlling a stampede with a cattle prod.

Blizzard enters the Mac market with a strong first effort. A proven commodity in the PC gaming circles, the game offers excellent overall playing value. It is a product that manages to incorporate all the right ingredients. WarCraft has an easy learning curve and an abundance of scenarios wrapped in a well designed multi-media package characterized by imaginative use of sound and animation. It is an entertaining game against the computer, but the real fun starts when the connection with another player is made. A balanced game which will appeal to a broad cross section of the Macintosh community, WarCraft is likely to be one of the most popular entertainment titles this holiday season.

Pros
• Installation is a breeze
• Two campaign games and 20 free-form scenarios offer ample replay value
• Easy to get started; simple and efficient interface
• Support two-player games through modem, network and direct connection, including head to head against a PC opponent.
• Clever use of sound, music and digitized voice; stereo panning adds an excellent touch
• Scenarios use building block approach to gradually familiarize player with game features
• Real-time play forces players to prioritize and make tough decisions
• Head-to-head play makes the game come alive

Cons
• Graphics mediocre by Mac standards; some underground locations are too "busy"
• Large formations of units difficult to maneuver; a maximum of four units can be grouped to receive simultaneous orders
• Emphasizes destruction of the enemy above of all else; no attempt to capture towns or resources
• Units require constant direction in combat
• WarCraft does not reward bold strategies; success is guaranteed by sticking to a systematic approach

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