

y Gary Le

When Descent made its debut earlier in the year for the PC, it became an instant success with gamers. Rave reviews for the game cropped up everywhere, praising the talented people at Parallax Software for breaking new ground in computer gaming. Descent became so popular and successful that contests to crown a Descent Champion ensued. Players all over honed their skills and battled it out over network play to prove their worth and exercise their strategic genius. Well, PC gamers had their turn already—it is now time for Mac gamers to join the party. Descent for the Mac has arrived, and we're not just going to join the party, we're gonna crash the sucker!

Operation "Unplug"

In the distant future, technology has taken over the chore of underground mining on the nearby planets, replacing the tired old hands of humans. But no one said technology was fool-proof. Mechanical robots used to mine precious ore from the planets have gone berserk, becoming hostile killing machines ready to pump anything that moves full of hot plasma. Bureaucrats, never one to clean up after their own mess, send you in to eradicate the problem. Jumping into the armed hovercraft they provided, you prepare yourself for descent into the mines with one simple objective: destroy the main reactor core and anything that gets in your way. Basically, if it runs on double A's, then it's toast. While Descent can be played solo, multi-player games are possible through network or modem play.

Breaking Ground

Descent features a full 3-D gaming environment in which the player has complete freedom to move in all directions, resulting in 360 degrees of utter realism. This impressive feat of game programming allows for an infinite number of possibilities for combat encounters. Besides giving way to devious evasive maneuvers, it provides players with "trick moves" with the hovercraft, such as loops or sliding and rotating simultaneously so as to move along a circular path, all the while facing the enemy who is at the center and letting loose with your trigger. Other games, like Doom, were restricted to movement within a fixed plane. Not so with Descent, because if it's possible to move in a particular direction in real life, then it can be done within the game. Of course, timely execution is also important, as the game takes place in the confines of a mine labyrinth. Rooms and pathways come in all sizes and shapes, thus forcing you and your reflexes to react accordingly to the environment. Otherwise, the player could suddenly find himself with his cheek helplessly against the wall, with enemy robots laughing their circuits off before they bid you farewell. To help the player avoid such accidents, a slew of weapon systems are scattered throughout the mines, ready for immediate use. While your hovercraft comes equipped with standard lasers, more potent weapons, such as the quad laser rifle, vulcan cannon, spreadfire cannon, plasma cannon, fusion cannon, and a host of different missile systems add a little something extra to your assaults.

The amazing thing about Descent is that actions and movements within the game are in real-time, leading to fast and furious battles. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a network or modem game, in which you pit yourself against other human players and duke it out in various scenarios. This multiplayer option is where the real action takes place, because no computer can replace human instinct and experience. Don't be misled though, as the computer-controlled enemies throughout the 30 game levels that come with Descent can be fiendishly clever in their objective to make you a fatal casualty. Completing all 30 levels will definitely cause your trigger-finger to sport new calluses, not to mention getting your money's worth out of your joystick. But more importantly, these levels provide an excellent means for flight experimentation and a chance to hone your reflexes for human opponents.

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The fact that Descent requires a Power Mac hints at the game's remarkable graphics and animation routines. Everything from the walls to the enemies are texturized and brought to life with smooth animation. Because not everyone has a Power Mac 8500 or 9500 adorning their desk, the game features a fully customizable system to fine tune all the graphic details to best suit the player's machine. There's also a "pixel doubling" option that enables a full screen experience at the expense of a slight reduction in rendering quality. Descent was reviewed on a 6100/80 with 24 MB RAM, which allowed for the highest level of detail at full screen, albeit with pixel doubling. The point of all this is: even on a 6100 (with sufficient memory), the action in Descent was so extraordinary that it boggles this reviewer's mind how so much detail can be packed into one game. A good example of detail is when you are in a long unlit corridor and can't see what is directly ahead. If you fire your lasers or release a flare, sections of the corridor light up as the laser travels down its length. This sounds perfectly logical, but implementing this in a game is anything but easy. Also, Descent has an auto-mapping feature that keeps track of all the locations you've explored. With a simple hit of a key, a three dimensional wire map of the whole level appears. But what's really crazy is the player can rotate and zoom the map in any manner with the movement keys and the map rotates and zooms accordingly in a silky smooth fashion. Not only is this mapping feature useful when you're lost, it also provides clues about certain openings that your mapping sensors picked up, but you couldn't see because of inadequate lighting, etc.

Descent comes on a CD-ROM, which is required to be in the machine's drive to play the game (a subtle method for copy protection). This is not merely a technical formality, because Descent utilizes the 16-bit quality soundtracks on the CD-ROM as background music. These soundtracks meld perfectly with the game's awesome sound effects as you twist and turn, barrel roll, and blast your way through. And if a pair of external speakers or headphones are added, then be prepared to put the paramedics on standby, as the ensuing experience will definitely get your heart pounding. Besides lending 13 adrenaline pumping tunes to your exploits, the CD-ROM can also function as a regular audio CD, making it a snazzy addition to your music collection. But wait, there's more! If you tire of the included soundtracks, you can eject the CD-ROM and insert an audio CD of your own once you're in the game.

The Challenge

All the above qualities give ample opportunities to build suspense within the game. There will be many times where you'll fly along a corridor on your merry way when enemy fire erupts from an opening directly above or below, hidden by the dark, or opening a door to a room laden with mechanical assassins. As you put on the brakes and retreat (for those of us more cautious), suspense builds as you quickly formulate a strategy, while knowing full well your enemies are alert and patiently awaiting. Now imagine what happens when eight human players hunt each other down in a networked scenario. Whew! This is definitely not a game for the faint of heart. But this is precisely the reason why so many Descent players live for the challenge of competing with one another. To further accommodate these player urges, MacPlay has set up a competition to seek out the pilot with moves and a trigger worthy enough to be crowned champion. To accompany this honor, a cash purse of

\$2500 along with a complete Macintosh Power Computing 120 system is included. Information on how to participate in such a competition, and everything else related to Descent can be accessed on the World Wide Web at MacPlay's web page given below.

Are You Ready?

Descent is currently available only for the Power Macintosh, which leaves out many potential buyers, but the game excels in a flawless manner for the intended audience of Power Mac users. Action and arcade lovers will immediately become engrossed with the game's action, while countless others will be converted. The mechanical rebellion is prepared and patiently awaits for your "Descent." Question is, are you ready?

Pros

- Complete and unrestricted player movement
- Ability to perform awesome flight maneuvers
- Fully textured 3-D environment
- Animation is both smooth and of superb quality
- Background music and sound effects build adrenaline and suspense in the game
- Option for multiplayer games via network or modem play

Cons

- Power Mac only

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