

y Brian Forté

Hearts Deluxe isn't a game this reviewer had played before encountering the computerized version but it is perhaps best described as combining parts of Bridge, Poker and 21 into a game which is relatively easy to learn but difficult (and fun) to master.

Although there are four players in a given game Hearts Deluxe doesn't permit human opponents. Making up for this are a number nice computer-specific touches, including opponents who speak and, most spectacularly, voice control for those with an AV Mac or PowerPC-based Mac OS computer with 16-bit sound I/O.

Voice control is effective and, with the latest version of Apple's Voice Recognition software (1.4) works well even with my Australian accent. Moreover, voice control doesn't feel as gimmicky as you might think, advancing the game or playing a card with a voice command very quickly feels much more natural than moving that rodent-shaped thing around the desk.

Out of the box (so to speak) your opponents are restricted to the lowest of three levels of competence: the two more challenging levels are only available to registered users. I gathered some friends around a card table to try the game against human opponents and, even given none of us had played before, the value of registering was quickly evident. The 'Dumb as a Stump' opponents are fine for learning the game but it only takes a week or two of practice to be able to beat this level of play with little or no difficulty.

Another nice feature is the ability of the game to accept plug-in opponents. As it is distributed by freeVerse it includes one set of opponents: Zak, Rob and Jen. Available as separate files, however, are numerous other opponent sets, all of whom give the game a different look and, in some cases, a different style of play.

IMG has gathered several of these sets together for inclusion with the game so once you are sick of the eighties style of Zak, Rob and Jen, you can try out the twenties-Parisian feel of Sylvia, Otto and Hugo or play against the World War III troika of Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt (who make up the Yalta set). It is worth noting these plug-ins are shareware in their own right and registering your copy of Hearts Deluxe doesn't register any Hearts Deluxe plug-ins you might use.

Whether you are a fan of computerized card games or not (and we've all probably seen enough of Solitaire and its many iterations), Hearts Deluxe is worth more than a casual look. It takes a little time to get a grip on game play but, once that small hurdle is overcome, it is a rich and full game which you will probably never completely outgrow.

Pros

- Easy to learn and fun to master
- Voice control on AV-capable Mac OS computers
- Plug-in architecture allows for alternative sets of opponents

Cons

- No options for human opponents
- Although easy to learn, the on-line help is terse and probably off-putting to the casual player

uperficially, Mac Brickout is just another iteration of a very familiar game (in this case Breakout). Rather like Hearts Deluxe, however, Mac Brickout is much more than first appearances.

Like the Breakout of old, Mac Brickout comes complete with multi-colored blocks, some of which require multiple hits to remove and some of which cannot be moved at all; multiple levels, each with a different pattern of blocks to remove and the deadly pool beneath your paddle, although Mac Breakout's pool is nothing more harmful than water. That doesn't stop you losing your ball if it passes below your paddle, of course.

Almost as soon as you start playing, however, Mac Brickout's unique variations manifest themselves: along with your paddle, the array of bricks and the bouncing ball come the falling bubbles.

he round bubbles turn out to be nothing but a nuisance (although they are worth fifty points if you burst them) since they have an annoying tendency to send your ball off in strange and useless directions. The cylindrical bubbles, which the author calls capsules, are something quite different, however.

Each capsule comes complete with a letter or symbol and each symbol represents a different effect: the capsules with the up-and-down arrows allow you to move your paddle up and down as well as left and right; the capsules marked with a 'W' make your paddle wider and the cylinders marked with a '3' make the ball sprout into triplets. These are hard to keep in play but, for a while, increase your hitting power considerably.

In a neat twist, not all capsules are benign. A capsule with an 'N,' for example, makes your paddle narrower. Worst of all is the dreaded 'red X' which makes your paddle transparent to the falling ball (and only ever seems to turn up when it is almost impossible to both avoid it and stop your ball from falling into deep-blue oblivion).

Another nice touch is the absence of documentation regarding these capsules. To quote the help file, 'catch them with your paddle and see what prize you get.'

Registered users gain access to more and different capsules including a Laser capsule, Free Ball capsule and Warp capsule (which provides a chance for an instant 100,000 points!). Registered users also gain access to a full Level Editor which makes it possible to create custom levels, both for your own use and to share amongst fellow players.

Mac Brickout is as good a variation on Breakout as I've played. Very different from last month's Shatterball, it is proof that it is not the originality of a game idea that counts but the execution and the details. In these latter two areas, Mac Brickout is a stand-out winner.

Pros

- (registered users only) a Level Editor which provides tools for creating custom and portable levels
- An effective and well-designed two-player mode (it doesn't, however, provide for simultaneous play)
- Clever variations on the standard 'breakout' provide right amounts of variation, power and frustration

Cons

- Uses custom color palette which wreaks a subtle havoc on 256-color displays
- Plays a little fast and loose with the mouse pointer when the game is being played. This makes it possible to accidentally click outside the game and thus become temporarily stranded with the game in the background but the pointer still invisible (the problem goes away as soon as the running game finishes).

Questions or comments? Want us to review a particular shareware or free game? Contact me at: zmacbrian@eworld.com