

neak Peek: **Onslaught**

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NOTE: Screen shots and information presented in this article are based on a pre-release version of Onslaught and are subject to change before final release. This article is not a review.

Two years ago some disgruntled board and computer wargamers asked themselves, “why aren’t there more good computer wargames?” With all the advancements in computer power and features there seemed no good reason why computer wargames released in 1992 looked and played like cardboard wargames made in 1962. Some would argue it’s because board wargame designs are good enough when combined with a computer to keep track of who moved where and who killed who. Although these disaffected guys still loved to play the classics they really wanted something new.

Enter Frontal Assaultware. Their solution was to create Frontal Assaultware, Inc. (FAI for short). FAI’s sole purpose is to design solid wargames which combine wargame and software design from the very start. For reasons Mac users can understand all designing and original programming is done on the Macintosh.

For two years they quietly worked in seclusion. But now they are out in the open and proudly advertise that they are serious about wargaming (hence their no-two-ways-about-it company and product names). This past August, after thousands of cups of coffee, the alpha of their first title, Onslaught, was shown at MacWorld Boston. Now IMG gets a crack at it...

The Basics. Onslaught is a divisional level, continental wargame involving two players (human or computer) and smaller, optional computer controlled “neutral” nations. It is a hex and turned based wargame playable by one or two players on a single Mac or over a network. Each turn represents one week of real time with no imposed time limitation. Weather is an important consideration as it affects each unit type differently depending on the terrain occupied. Units consist of easy to understand, yet detailed, characteristics which govern their quality and behavior. There are fifteen different ground and air unit types each with their own strengths and weaknesses.

You give units your orders to move or perform functions like follow another unit, para drop, or bombard a hex. Once all sides have given their orders all units move one at a time in random order so nobody gets a move first/last advantage/disadvantage. This type of turn

resolution is more fair and also makes for faster network games since two people can give orders simultaneously. Another great feature is the option to have your entire game stored as a replayable movie for review during the game or afterwards.

his Means WAR! Ok, ok, features are nice but you want to kick some butt, am I rihgt? First you choose the game's parameters including ones for the computer to generate a map from. You are given a country on one side of the continent, your opponent gets one on the other. Depending on the scenario variant you choose there may be several small computer controlled "neutral" nations in the middle. Of course, neutrality does not have to be respected.

You start out with a bundle of cash but no army. Unlike some wargames where each city builds a unit at a time or where your forces are already created and placed for you, Onslaught does none of these things. You get to build your own army, all at once, then freely place it within the borders of your own country. You decide your force's balance and where it will be deployed.

During the resolution phase units smoothly animate about their business. After all units have moved, ground combat is resolved with plenty of explosions sprites and sounds. The sight and sounds of combat are so full of variation that you will want to keep these features turned on, I know I did.

The Forces. Onslaught has fifteen land and air units to choose from. Each is rated for strength, experience, condition, supply, and level of entrenchment. One point of strength equals 100 soldiers, experience is in plain English (i.e. Veteran), condition and supply levels

are shown from 0-100%, and entrenchment is represented by a number from zero to five. In battle, units gain experience but lose strength and condition. You have to use your forces wisely and take extreme care not to get them in over their heads. You can, of course, build new units but good ones are costly and take time to adequately train (unless you're a sadist and send them into battle untrained).

A unique feature is a unit's attack and defense "threshold" settings. These thresholds determine how hard a unit will fight when in combat. Cranking a threshold up tells the unit to fight no matter what, while lowering it makes the unit more likely to run to mama. These behavior settings are extremely useful but a unit will only follow your orders in relation to its quality (i.e. don't expect a poorly trained, tired unit to fight to the last round for you).

No Fear of Water. So where are the naval units? The answer is there are none. Onslaught was designed to be a land/air wargame so naval units were left out. On the other hand, landing troops on your opponent's beach resorts can be a lot of fun. Onslaught's solution is to simply "charge" your bank account for transporting a unit by sea. This simple method allows the user to concentrate on land warfare but still have the option of showing up uninvited on an opponent's beach.

Balance is Key. Like any good army you need to have a variety of units in balanced numbers. There is the old question of how many armor and heavy bombers you can afford but there is also other major military dilemmas. To do well you need to be good at resource management, troop rotation, balance of arms, and using weather to your own advantage. Those who have won other wargames by simply throwing all of their forces in one direction will have to learn some new tricks. There is no single solution to winning at Onslaught.

We Don't Need no Stinking Tables. What's a wargame without pages of tables and charts? Onslaught. This game has no visible tables or charts for the user to brood over. The old guard wargamer may not like this but they would like the 8,000 cells of data used for unit behavior even less. Nor would they like the complex equations used to determine how weather, terrain, unit type, experience, condition, etc. affect combat. In other words, you need common sense, experience, skill, and intuition to play Onslaught not tables and a calculator.

Although its complexity means it could never be played as a board wargame, Onslaught is not difficult to play. Unit data, weather, terrain, and other elements are presented in a common sense manner. This is exactly what a computer wargame should be; full of detail and nuances without making the user have to deal with it. If you want more details the instructions, should you ever read them, describe how the game mechanics work in plain English.

Interface or Else. We have all played games and said, "nice idea but it's too difficult to play." FAI is hell bent on a slick user interface and it shows. Onslaught's slim, floating palettes rid users of the usual plethora of dialogues most games need to function. Each palette is as small as it can be, while still getting needed information across to the user. Only one palette is needed pretty much all the time while the others are optional or are needed only once in a while.

The slim "Info Palette" displays the current hex and unit information. When you click on a hex or unit all the information you need pops up in the Info Palette. Need to split or join some units? Hit a command key, and the Info Palette expands. After you make your changes, it then goes away. It's as simple as that!

The easiest way to give a unit orders is to command click on it, select the order you want from a pop-up menu, then release. There are several orders to choose from including following other units, moving to a selected hex, and intercepting anything that moves (enemy, of course). To get units to move just click and drag and arrows will show you the path you have chosen. To see what units are in a stack just option click and a selectable pop-up menu appears showing the icon and name of each unit in the stack. In general you have a choice of at least two, sometimes three, ways to get something done.

Will It Work on My Mac? You need a 68020 Mac or better, System 7, at least three to four MB of free RAM, and probably around four MB of free disk space. Onslaught supports B&W, 16 greys/colors, and 256 colors on any sized screen. Power Macintosh owners will be happy to know that Onslaught will be native while older Mac users will be relieved that it works just fine even on an LC (though slower, of course). All PowerBook users need to know is that Onslaught's designers and programmers have PowerBooks too. Enough said.

Declaring War in December. Even though Onslaught is not done yet (look for it in December) it promises to be a "killer" wargame. The combination of slick interface, detailed wargame, networking, cool graphics and sounds, ease of use, and other cool features will no doubt open the eyes of any war or strategy gamer. Its lack of certain standard board wargaming conventions might turn off a few hardcore wargamers but I'm willing to be most won't. Onslaught, after all, is a true wargame.