eview: Syndicate

by Christopher Breen

h sure, we've got problems: depletion of the ozone layer, destruction of the rain forests, urban blight, gang violence, the anti-Christ sitting in the Senate Minority Leader's chair, tomato horn-worm infestations…. Modern life is a rough and tumble exercise. But I'm here to tell you, our current maladies got nothin' on the trials that unborn generations are bound to endure if the prognosticators who write entertainment software are to be believed.

For example, the folks who punch the clock at Bullfrog Productions Ltd. seem to think that the future is anything but gay and cheery. Lacking the pluck and chin-upetude that was siphoned from the population of the British Isles during the Thatcher reign, these four designers have determined that our future, as portrayed in their fine work, Syndicate, will not be managed by a benign world order, but rather controlled by a group of flagitious crime gangs that look upon the native population as just so many expendable taxpayers. Granted, given the current state of affairs in the Jolly Old, this probability can hardly be deemed fantastic.

Bullfrog's Harsh Vision. The world has become a gray and grim place. Shotgun-wielding police impotently patrol the remarkably clean streets, animated billboards hawk fizzy beverages as well as a particular British entertainment-software concern, and rival gangs of syndicate henchmen spray each other with weapons of death while the black-clad citizenry marches blithely on, thanks to the CHIP — the digital equivalent of Prozac — that has been pronged into their willing necks.

You are the Big Cheese of a small European crime syndicate who has designs on becoming the Godhead of Gouda by muscling into each of the world's 50 territories. Tackling each territory in turn, you drift aloft in a futuristic dirigible, propelling a quartet of armed and dangerous cyborgs around a small cityscape. To gain control of a territory, you employ such indelicate methods as kidnapping, coercion, and, of course, mayhem. As you successfully annex each new territory, you are allowed to impose draconian tax rates on the population. These filthy shekels can then be diverted into cyborg enhancement and arms research

which, in turn, provides you with tougher cyborgs and nastier weapons at an accelerated rate.

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Each of the 50 rounds begins with a mission brief that sets forth the goals of the particular assignment — whom to kidnap or kill — and the dangers that you are likely to encounter. Additionally, the Mission Brief window contains a crude map that provides scant data about the location of the target and rival syndicate members. To learn more, simply click the Info button to gain additional strategic information, or the Enhance button to view a more-detailed map. A certain amount of your precious cash reserve is deducted for each click of these buttons.

Once you've accepted the mission, it's off to the Team Selection window where you choose, out of the four, the number of team members you wish to engage. This window is also where you buy and sell weapons (additional weapons can be obtained during battle by stripping them from the dead), channel money into research, and purchase cyborg modifications. These modifications enable the cyborgs to take more abuse, run faster, carry more weight, make snappier decisions, and hit their intended targets with more accuracy. Modifications come in three increasingly potent versions and only become available after you've thrown a fairly hefty amount of cash into research.

After all this preparation, you're ready to send your troops into battle. Missions take place in small towns that boast gray buildings, brown cobblestone streets, and metallic ramps and roofs. You view a portion of the town from above and at a 45 degree angle — imagine a close up of a sinister SimCity 2000 burg. You can identify your cyborgs by their trench coats, red heads, and the numbers — 1 through 4 — floating above their heads. In the lower left corner is the Scanner window that provides you with a greater, but less detailed overview of the area. This scanner indicates the general location of friendly and rival cyborgs, police, guards, buildings, streets, vehicles, targets, and citizens. To move your cyborgs around town, click either in the scanner or in the main view window. The selected cyborgs move to the location of the click either singly or, if you've ganged them together in Group Mode, en masse.

Focusing In On The Kill. There is a strategic element to Syndicate — planning the least dangerous route for the cyborgs to take to the target, deciding how to get the greatest return from research investments, setting tax rates that bring in the most loot without antagonizing the locals so badly that they revolt — but in the long run, strategy plays only a minor part in the proceedings. The real fun of the game, for those

who appreciate this sort of thing, is the gratuitous violence inherent in every mission.

Look, you're running a crime syndicate here, not a daycare center. When rival syndicate members appear, they aren't likely to invite your boys over for tea: It's kill or be killed, and Syndicate presents these deadly exchanges in a most gratifying way. Expect pools of blood, crumpled bodies, and tremendous explosions.

To achieve these effects, simply select a weapon from a cyborg's cache, point the mouse at the intended target while holding down the command key, wait for the Targeting Icon to turn red, and blast away with a mouse click or two. In situations where your group may be overmatched, hold down the control key while firing to send the cyborgs into Panic Mode — a state in which intelligence, perception, and adrenaline levels of the cyborgs are temporarily increased, causing them to blast everything in sight.

To demonstrate that the future is not completely lawless, each town contains members of the police. These unfortunate public servants are only allowed to take on syndicate members if weapons have been drawn and shots fired. Poorly armed and protected, the cops are little more than a nuisance who swiftly become so much syndicate fodder.

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Crime Pays… Or Does It? Syndicate is a port of a DOS product that looks like it was actually made for the Mac. The graphics are attractive and lack the "chunk-style" look common to many DOS games. Additionally, since the original used the mouse extensively, the controls for Mac users are logical and fairly intuitive. Manual aficionados, on the other hand, are bound to feel slighted. The main manual is intended for non-Mac players, and the included slip of paper that instructs Mac users to ignore all this nonsense about left-clicks and right-clicks is terse, at best.

Although Syndicate maintains the attractive interface of its ancestry, it also suffers from the same maladies found in the original. DOS players reported that the game ran remarkably slow on all but the most powerful PCs. Regrettably, this issue has not been addressed in the Macintosh version. Mac gamers loading Syndicate into their LCs and Classic IIs will find that the cyborgs seem to reluctantly crawl through the streets on the way to their date with death. Targeting and firing upon groups of rival cyborgs is fraught with delays on these machines. Fortunately, there is an on-line demo of Syndicate available in the Inside Games forum of eWorld. If you are concerned that your Mac may not be up to snuff, download the demo and give it a try.

But the main problem with Syndicate can not be solved with even the mightiest processor. You recall that you view the action from above and at an angle? Nice view, granted, but what happens when your cyborgs duck behind a building only to encounter a rival with an Uzi? Because of the way the interface is set up, you can't see behind buildings and there is no way to rotate the view. Unless you immediately shift your troops into Panic Mode, your gang is quickly transformed into ground chuck. Bullfrog would be well advised to take a peek at Maxis' SimCity 2000 and A-Train to see how this problem can be addressed.

Despite these shortcomings, Syndicate is an entertaining and reasonably challenging enterprise. The game looks great, the sounds are convincing, the game play is varied, and the action is enthralling. Yes, part of the challenge does come from trying to keep your troops in plain view, but if you have the stomach for this kind of violence and enjoy your arcade action mixed with a touch of strategy, you could do worse than to join this Syndicate.

Pros
• Great looking graphics
• Good sound effects
• Cool explosions
• Decent strategic component
• Gratuitous violence

Cons
• Is slow on less-than-robust Macs
• Non-rotatable view
• Gratuitous violence