

# review: **Sword of Sodan**

by Richard Rouse III

Type: Arcade

Publisher: Bethesda Softworks, Inc.

Retail Price: \$49.95

Street Price: \$34.00

Requires: Macintosh LC or better, 16 or 256 colors, System 7.0 or better, 4MB RAM, 5MB free hard drive space.

Protection: None

word of Sodan is the latest game from Bethesda Softworks, the company which last brought Wayne Gretzky Hockey to the Macintosh. Sword was originally available for the PC, the Amiga, and even the Apple IIs. The game's "ancient" origins are painfully obvious in the Macintosh version.

Sword of Sodan offers some sort of story line to explain the events in the game, yet the extremely small manual is poorly written and uninteresting enough that no one in their right mind would read all the way through it. But the plot is really irrelevant, since Sword of Sodan is first and foremost a side-scrolling, jump-and-fight, hack-and-slash arcade game, resembling in design many of the games available for the Super Nintendo or Genesis video game systems. Sword of Sodan makes no pretensions about being anything other than "fun arcade action," but the problem with the game is that it isn't even good mindless entertainment.

**Low Res Heaven.** The most appalling part of game is the graphics, which are scaled up from the 320x200 VGA screens which were found in the PC version of the game. Macintosh users, with their 640x480 monitors, have come to expect, though perhaps not quite accept, this from graphics adventures such as those produced by LucasArts or Sierra. Both of those companies have tried their best to develop quality enlarging algorithms which allow for smoothing of edges and make the graphics as nice as possible. Bethesda, on the other hand, has gone with the absolute worst scaling algorithm ever seen in a Macintosh game, which results in some of the most pixelated and chunky graphics you'll ever see on a Mac. The problem goes beyond that, however, since the graphics were not very good on the PC in the first place.

raphics are not the be-all and end-all of computer games, and a game can usually make up for poor graphics with good gameplay -- the excellent Infocom adventures had no graphics whatsoever. However, *Sword of Sodan* has perhaps the worst gameplay to be found in any Macintosh game currently available. Much of the combat consists of swinging a sword until the enemy advances into it. Enemies range from spear wielding guardsmen to vomit hurling zombies, yet all can be killed using the same tactics. Occasionally you encounter a larger, end-of-level villain which is uninteresting and simply requires more blows to kill. There are supposedly three types of attacks one can make: a stab, a thrust, and an overhead blow. But all cause the same amount of damage, hit with the same frequency, and the former two even look identical on the screen. In addition, you find potions which are supposed to grant you special abilities. However, all of these, with the exception of "Extra Life," do absolutely nothing. For instance, you can get "Invulnerability" and then die immediately. Or you can drink a "Magic Zapper" potion which the manual says kills the nearest enemy, but it doesn't kill a thing.

Accompanying the combat are what can only be called "items that roll along the ground." These pointless nuisances appear out of nowhere for no reason and require you to jump over them. On one level they're barrels, on the next they're these strange smiling faces. Similar brainless obstacles appear throughout the game. Once in the castle, you will encounter pits which literally appear out of nowhere on the floor with no way of avoiding them, unless you have completed the level already and have memorized where to jump. Gameplay has countless bugs which cause things to hit your character when they shouldn't and cause more damage than they should. For instance, when you die on the "In the Land of the Dead" level and your character is reincarnated, flying vomit appears immediately in front of you and hits you regardless of what you do to avoid it. Or, on the "Between the City Gates" level, you are often reincarnated on top of a spike, which causes you to be killed instantly.

**Compatibility Questions.** As for Macintosh compatibility, when run on a IIci, the program informed me that it did not have enough processor power to play the poor music which accompanies gameplay. Sometimes the program would recommend that in order to make the game fast enough I should run the game in 16 colors instead of 256 to improve the game speed; sometimes it said nothing. Crashing was not a problem, but when I attempted to run the game, it would often immediately quit, claiming the infamous error type one. In order to play *Sword*, I had to reboot.

**Overall.** *Sword of Sodan*, along with Inline Software's *Deliverance*, may be one of the first commercial Macintosh arcade games to employ scrolling graphics (the black and white shareware classic *Kung Fu Chivalry* did it years ago), but that by no means makes it worth purchasing. Actually, it's not really worth the five megabytes of hard drive space it takes up, or even the electricity required to keep your Macintosh on while you play it. More than anything else, *Sword* is depressing.

It's sad to know that someone would devote time to make a game so bad, and that such a product would actually make it to market. What's also unfortunate is that Bethesda and other companies will look at the poor Macintosh sales of popular PC games such as *Sword of Sodan* and declare the Macintosh market unable to support game developers enough to warrant porting their software over. All developers should learn, as some companies such as Brøderbund and Microprose have, that, in order for games to sell on the Macintosh, they must be good PC games in the first place and they must be carefully ported to the Mac. Unfortunately, *Sword of Sodan* is neither.

#### Pros

- Side-scrolling graphics

#### Cons

- IBM VGA graphics blown up with a horrible algorithm
- Bugs galore
- Game is uninteresting
- Death is often arbitrary
- Too many others to list