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At first glance Barrack is relatively simple: you must clear at least 80% of the square with your Barrier Gun before advancing to the next level. The faster you clear a level and the more of the square you clear, the greater your score.

In your way are the infernal bouncing balls which destroy any incomplete barrier they bounce into (and take one of your lives in the process).

To aid you, occasional Yummie Cakes leave behind Ammo Cartridges (for super-fast barrier shots); Cluster Magnets (which hold the balls out of the way of your barrier shots); Lightning Bolts (which make your standard barrier shot a little faster) and Life Keys (which add to your store of lives).

Every now and then a 'multiplier' appears as well. These are a mixed blessing: capture one of them when they are showing a 2, 3 or 4 and you double, triple or even quadruple your score for that level; capture one when they are showing 1/2 and you'll get only half the deserved reward for your efforts.

From these apparently simple principles, however, emerges the best game I've played on a

computer for years.

While at the lower levels, filling as much of the square as possible is the surest path to high scores, as more and more balls appear, isolating these balls (which provides bonuses of its own) is a more effective method. But if you fly through the lower levels too quickly, it's likely you won't have built up your store of Ammo Cartridges and Cluster Magnets. This is fatal at the higher levels when there are so many balls on the playing field it is virtually impossible to get a complete barrier up without recourse to these special extras.

Moreover, as you make it into the higher levels, the balls become more than a mere nuisance. The plain Pawn Balls (as they are called) are accompanied by Sentry balls (which change direction if you fire off a barrier too close to them), Ooze balls (which splinter into Pawn balls) and Nuke balls (which bounce wildly but can destroy other balls nearby if they are confined to a small enough space) amongst others.

No two games are enough alike for 'standard' strategies to be of much use. In my own several days playing (and not doing much else) I've had games where I went into level 2 with a score already in five figures and a bucketload of lives and extras and other games where, even after reaching level 7 I had barely an extra to my name and no score to speak of.

Fresh and original, Barrack is a fast, furious and almost perfect combination of adrenalin-induced rush and strategic thinking. The Forté household expects to be playing Barrack long after we're done with the latest multi-megabyte multi-media CD-ROM-based extravaganza.

One small caveat loses it half-a-point in the IMG rating, however. At the end of a game which doesn't achieve a high score, you are bounced to a screen with a grinning shark and an evil laugh which makes it quite clear you've not made it to the pinnacle you sought. This is fine but, just before you are taken back to the control screen, a contemptuous voice announces that 'you all disgust me!'. This voice can't be turned off and, after only a few games, the constant belittling becomes rather irritating.

Nonetheless, this is a small complaint and hasn't stopped any of us from spending altogether too much time playing this extraordinary game.

### Pros

- Original and challenging game which will keep you playing for many more hours than you should.
- Almost perfect combination of strategy and arcade qualities.
- Challenging enough for adults without being so difficult that kids can't enjoy playing
- Adrenalin-inducing game without violence makes this a suitable game for kids who shouldn't be playing Marathon but want to.

### Cons

- The 'you all disgust me' tag at the end of all games which don't achieve a high score becomes intensely annoying after a time.

arl Bunker's latest release isn't as flashy as Greg Lovette's premiere game for Ambrosia, but it is no less original.

Superficially, Deco resembles Tetris: multi-coloured objects drop into the playing area from above and your job is to make them disappear so they don't fill the playing area up and end the game. The more you make disappear, the longer the game lasts and the higher your score.

That's where the resemblance ends, however. The objects that drop are not multiple shapes but segmented, multi-coloured columns of varying length. You make them disappear not by creating full rows but by arranging for like coloured segments to cross. And if you let unlike colours cross, the full length of both columns turns an unhealthy grey and blocks off that

section of the board.

The columns appear at the top of the screen in their 'holder' waiting for you to place them on the board. As soon as they appear the clock starts ticking and the faster you drop them the higher your score for that piece. Since they all appear with the same orientation (vertical) the only way to make two like colours cross is to rotate the board ninety degrees. In one of the games crueller and cleverer touches, you can only rotate the board ninety degrees in one direction. Finally, if you don't drop the piece quickly enough (and the time you have is reduced with each new level), it turns grey.

Not quite as furious as Barrack, Deco is also more of a purely cerebral challenge. Speed and accuracy are needed for high scores but the real challenge is to place your columns carefully and spot possibilities and patterns as far ahead of time as possible. If you've ever found yourself deliberately testing your Tetris ability by creating difficult piles of blocks and then getting yourself out of trouble with fast hands and a keen eye you're a prime candidate for Deco.

It's also more customisable than Barrack, offering several levels of difficulty based on the number of different colours used by the columns (from an easy two colour game to a fiendishly difficult four-colour game). As well there is a 'small pieces' option which makes longer and much more involved games possible.

While playing Barrack is something of a cross between the surge of Maelstrom and the strategy of ???, Deco has the intensity involved in being forced to solve a Rubik's Cube in less than a minute with the manic speed of a good version of Tetris.

Deco is easier to learn than Barrack but is perhaps more difficult to master. There are fewer strategies to consider but the game's singular purpose is all the more compelling for its straightforward simplicity.

If you like your games abstract, challenging and beautifully simple in concept and execution, you should take Deco out for a spin today.

With shareware of the quality of Barrack and Deco appearing for Mac OS users, I'm not sure I'll ever be bothered to go down to my local software store again.

#### Pros

- Thinking person's Tetris
- customisable levels of difficulty make it suitable for a wide range of ages, skill levels and make it possible to play for anywhere from five minutes to forty minutes (if you're good).
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#### Cons

- High scores are invisible until you register
- No support for 4-bit greyscale screens in a game otherwise perfect for PowerBook users.

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Questions or comments? Want us to review a particular shareware or free game? Contact me at: [bforte@adelaide.on.net](mailto:bforte@adelaide.on.net)