y Glenn   Goldberg

 triggered my particle cannons and smiled grimly as the WarHammer's torso panels exploded in a flash of orange flame. Unfortunately, my enemy's return laser fire ripped my Mad Dog's left arm from its body causing my damage screen to light up like a Christmas tree.

I was getting pounded. Suddenly my reticle flashed red. My Streak short range missiles had obtained a target lock. I pressed the trigger and a volley of missiles slammed into my enemy 'mechs legs, severing one of them completely. I fired my pulse lasers and watched as the other leg split in half and the WarHammer toppled to the ground and exploded.

I checked my damage screen: half my torso armor was gone and all the circuits on the right side of my 'mech were shorted. With the left arm gone, my fire power was vastly diminished. I hoped that the WarHammer was going to be the last of the...

<<Enemy 'mech detected>>>

A 100 ton Dire Wolf trundled out of a nearby canyon and opened up with its auto-cannon, holing my armor in three places. I settled back into my chair, this was

going to be a long night.

Welcome to the year 3057. A civil war is sweeping through the inhabited galaxy and pitched battles are being fought on every planet. These battle are fought by men in machines that pack as much firepower as a modern tank brigade. These 'mechs stand 30 feet tall and can demolish buildings in seconds, and you have just volunteered to drive one.

This is the premise of Activision's newest game, MechWarrior 2. MechWarrior 2 is based on FASA's table top game Battletech. MechWarrior faithfully reproduces the Battletech world and thrusts you into it as the rookie pilot making his/her way up through the ranks from lowly MechWarrior to the ultimate position of Khan of the clan.

Install
The install program for MechWarrior 2 is a standard "pick the size of your hard drive" install. You have three choices: the minimum install (45MB), the recommended install (a whopping 78MB), and the full install (113MB).

As per usual, the more you install on your hard drive, the more quickly parts of the game will run. The installer program will also install Sound Manager 3.1 into your extensions folder if it cannot detect it.

Pre-Flight
Double click on your MechWarrior icon and you are treated to an eye-popping movie intro. This movie sets the stage for the upcoming battles and it is one of the most impressive introduction sequences I have ever seen. The movie sets the mood for the rest of the game, which it turns out, is equally as beautiful to look at.

At the main menu you can choose which clan to fight for or pick a Trial of Grievance. The Trial of Grievance is sort of a practice area (In Krensky's Law of the Clans, any grievance is settled between warriors during a trial by combat.) You can set up various battles between yourself and other warriors. This is the perfect arena to allow you to hone your battle skills before signing up with a real clan. You can duke it out mano-a-mano, or set yourself (and your enemy) up with two other "wingmen" (called Starmates). The Trial of Grievance main menu serves three functions. It gives you the option of which planet you will battle on (different terrains call for different strategies); allows you to pick which 'mechs everyone (you, enemies, starmates) will pilot; and allows you access to the 'mech lab (I will discuss the 'mech lab later).

f you choose to start on your campaign, click on the clan you choose to swear allegiance to. After you pick your clan, you are treated to another beautifully rendered movie that explains the background of your new family. As is always the case, you can skip these movies with the click of your mouse.

You are then deposited in the clan hall where you are given four options to choose: Briefing Room, Registration, Cadet Training, or Holo-projector. Each of these choices serves an important function throughout the game.

The Holo-projector is made for the die-hard role playing fans. The projector gives you the history of your clan, biographies of important people, and an interesting technology overview. If you have an interest in the BattleTech universe, this is some fascinating reading. If you bought the game for the action, the information is not necessary for your enjoyment.

Registration allows you to register your alternate identity and replay any old missions you have already beaten. This is also the area that allows you to check your score and keep track of multiple MechWarriors.

Cadet training is an important introduction to your 'mech and what it can do. You choose various missions (everything from navigation to weapons control), and an instructor will lead you through the mission, offering tips and giving advice. The cadet training ends with you fighting a veteran pilot to earn the rank of MechWarrior.

The Briefing Room is where your mission is given to you. You can get your mission, set up your starmates, pick the 'mech your will use on the mission, or access the 'mech lab. If you choose to take the mission, you are given the option to read a short background piece about the mission. This short story adds an interesting dimension to the game but is not necessary for the action fan.

Launch
If you thought that flying an F-18 was difficult, wait until you see the keyboarding skills you are going to need for MechWarrior. Not counting the number keys (they are used for throttle controls), there are no less than 12 keys that you must use in just about every mission.   These keys are extremely important and they become

second nature after a while, but this causes a somewhat steep learning curve. You will need keys for twisting the 'mechs torso (kind of like you twisting at the waist), navigation keys, jump jet keys (if your 'mech is equipped with jets), override thermal shutdown key, and a host of weapon keys. Practicing with the game on the Cadet Training course will quickly allow the player to get used to the key configurations.

MechWarrior is a very keyboard intensive game. This is also where my first complaint comes in. Activision chose to support CH brand joysticks only. If you have any other brand of joystick, you must manually configure it. I use my trusted Mouse Stick II and even after configuring it, the play doesn't feel exactly right. However, we've heard Activision is working on an update to MechWarrior II that will include support for the Thrustmaster and other popular joysticks.

Enough about the controls, how does the game play? In a word: AWESOME. On my Power Mac 7100/66, the game runs at full detail levels with only occasional jumps. It is smooth and beautiful. From the fully rendered enemy 'mechs to the bitmapped explosions to the bobbing of the screen as your 'mech walks, Activision did not skimp on any segment of the program. The sound is top notch too. The voices are crisp and clear, the music is moody, and the sound effects are spectacular.

The backgrounds are my only complaint about the graphics. The terrain and backgrounds are all very plain. The game world looks like the world of F/A 18 2.0 except it doesn't have quite as much graphic detail. This tends to detract from the overall look of the game.

Lock and Load

As is the main focus of any war game, your 'mech is your life. The game comes with 15 pre-made 'mechs that you can pilot. If you cannot find a 'mech that suits your tastes, a quick jaunt to the 'mech lab can alter that situation. The 'mech lab allows you to take a preexisting chassis and turn it into your own private killing machine. In the lab you can add armor, add heat sinks (vents on your mech that bleed off excess heat), and add weapons systems and ammo. With 28 different weapons, you won't be able to choose easily. The lab also allows you to change your 'mech's engine (more speed means a bigger and heavier engine). This is where the true test of a MechWarrior comes in. You must balance your need for weaponry with the size of the 'mech you can use. Let's face it: you cannot put a 12-ton autocannon onto a 30-ton Kit Fox. Even with the heavy 'mechs, you can only carry ten weapons and you must keep your heat build-up in mind.

You choice of weapons includes: particle cannons, machine guns, gauss rifles (a giant electromagnetic cannon that throws large metallic slugs), lasers, and three types of missile systems (short range, long range, and radar guided Streak missiles). There are pros and cons to each weapon system and finding the right balance takes a bit of planning.

We've been hit!

Another area of the game that Activision did not skimp on is the damage system. It is one of the most complex I have ever seen. As your 'mech takes damage, systems start to break down. A leg shot will cut your speed, a head shot can knock out your scanners. A hit to an area where ammunition is stored can cause an ammo explosion that will devastate the interior of your machine. If your 'mech's arm is shot off you will lose any weaponry mounted there.

Is it hot in here?

As I mentioned in the 'mech lab section, excess heat build-up can cause problems to your 'mech. As you fire your weapons, heat builds until your 'mech's computer triggers a thermal shut down. You can override the shutdown, but if you continue to abuse your 'mech, the excess heat causes your fusion generator to overload. Can you say nuclear explosion boys and girls? I knew you could.

Being a competent MechWarrior means walking the razor's edge. You must fire your weapons enough to destroy your enemy but not enough to destroy yourself. I have watched my 'mechs melt down enough to know.

Summary

If you have had enough of the hot Iraqi sands or you have shot down enough TIE fighters to stock a used starship lot for eternity, try hopping behind the control of a 50-ton Nova and go up against a 100-ton Dire Wolf. MechWarrior 2 is a must own for any combat simulator fan's library. The action is fast and furious, and the game is beautiful enough to keep you entertained for days. It has some hefty memory requirements and is Power Mac only, but if you have the machine, you must have this game.

Pros
○ Stunning graphics
○ Spectacular sound effects
○ Great game play
○ Supplementary material adds to atmosphere

Cons
○ Hefty memory requirements
○ Keyboard Intensive
○ Support for CH joysticks only

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