

## review: **Pirates! Gold**

by Richard Rouse III

Type: Arcade/Strategy

Publisher: MicroProse

Retail Price: \$69.95

Street Price: \$54.00

Requires: 256 Color Macintosh with 3.2 MB free RAM and 15 MB free HD space

Protection: Manual Lookup Every Time You Play!

f any computer game developer can be called a real celebrity, it's Sid Meier. By name recognition alone, Meier is the designer most computer gaming fans have heard of. His name has been featured prominently above the title of his games while others must struggle to get their name mentioned anywhere on the box. Meier is also widely seen as one of computer gaming's few intellectuals. He's always the person most quoted in articles about the Computer Game Developers Conference. More importantly, however, is that Sid Meier is one of the few game developers who has a distinct style which is clearly evident in all of his games. Along with others such as Jordan Mechner(Karateka, Prince of Persia) and Richard Garriot (Ultima I-VI), Meier has defined genres and set new standards for style and consistency in computer entertainment while developing games with a very distinct stamp, finished products which are indisputably his creations.

Originally released in 1987, Pirates! is probably the game most fans think of as the first real Sid Meier game. Previous works (Silent Service, F-15 Strike Eagle) had won accolades to be sure, but Pirates! was the first of his to capture the real feel and spirit of a particular period in history. It attempts, and succeeds to some degree, to simulate not just figures and battles but an entire way of life: that of a privateer who at any moment could be abandoned by his crew, over-run by competitors, or forsaken by the winds. Though by no means the masterpiece that either Railroad Tycoon or Civilization is, Pirates! offers flashes of brilliance which, in 1987, foreshadowed greater things to come.

**The Color of Gold.** One extremely good aspect of Meier's work is that his games have never relied solely on graphics to gain their popularity. Unlike so many other games which will no longer be played once their graphics engines become outdated, Pirates! or Civilization will continue to entertain for decades to come because they have captured what Meier called

“the elusive quality of fun.” This is one reason why Microprose’s recent release of *Pirates! Gold*, basically an attempt to replicate the original *Pirates!* game with whiz-bang painted graphics, is so unsuccessful. If anything, the graphics in Meier’s games were consistently non-refined. They were quality work, a bit quirky, perhaps, a tad humorous, though by no means the product of anyone who has ever touched a real paint brush. And they contributed to the consistency of his products, to the unique feel of his games. And from what I saw at CES of his upcoming *Colonization*, a product being developed very much in the days of whiz-bang graphics, the pictures have the same distinct non-refined style as they always have.

**Gameplay.** *Pirates! Gold*, like *Pirates!* before it, places you as a buccaneer off the Spanish main in the 17th century. It is your goal to amass for yourself as much of a fortune as possible within your lifetime, perhaps getting married, rescuing your sister, and doing a good deed or two along the way. The game incorporates all the traditional aspects of piracy: sword-fighting, sailing, fast-paced battles at sea, treasure locating with the aid of ancient maps, politicians who can be bought, and merchants who, more often than not, proudly tell you that they don’t trade with pirates. *Pirates! Gold* duplicates the gameplay of the original in many ways, but in the translation to 256-color graphics seems to have lost that elusive quality of fun.

Sword-fighting is in many ways the central play element of the game, and it is also one of its biggest detractors, both in the original *Pirates!* but even more so in *Gold*. Sword-fighting is conducted as a combination of both statistics and arcade elements. Most all ship to ship battles end with one craft ramming the other and the two crews slugging it out till the bitter end. The player takes part in this fight through his character sword-fighting with the opposing captain, and it is the victor of this duel which determines which side will win the entire battle. If one side has a large morale or manpower advantage, that ship’s captain will have a much better chance of emerging victorious. However, finger-dexterity and luck still play a large part in determining who wins. The manual has a long, badly written section on sword-fighting styles, but most players enjoy figuring these things out for themselves and will find that hammering the attack button is the best way to win a battle. In *Gold*, the interface for sword-fighting is a debacle, with the mouse controlling whether you move forward or backward, and the keypad controlling the height at which you parry or thrust. Or if you’re truly adventurous and keyboard-lazy, you can use the mouse to click on the nine buttons (with the same function as the keypad) set up on the screen. I remember Sid Meier saying that he had made the sword-fighting an arcade element because he disliked games where you won a battle simply because you had so many sword-fighting “points.” However, as any sort of a realistic arcade game, the sword fighting in both the original and *Gold* is quite poorly designed, to the point where it is almost arbitrary who wins. Indeed, it seems that Meier has realized this by the fact that his two subsequent, superior games have had no arcade elements in them at all.

Sailing around the Caribbean is also given a pseudo-arcade feel, as players must navigate their ships around islands and reefs in real time. The winds are your true master at sea, and you must sail your ship so as to get the most speed while heading generally in the direction you want to go. The manual includes a fairly accurate description of basic sailing tactics such as tacking. Broadsides battles with other ships and the tactics used in them make up, for me, one of the more interesting aspects of the game. Unfortunately, sinking a ship with your cannons does little but boost your ship’s morale since you’ve just sunk all the booty to the bottom of the sea. But morale is important, since it is not only the quantity of your forces but also how much they like you and will be willing to die for you that allows for victory in sword-fights. An on-line map has been added to the game to ease your quests, though it is still not exactly convenient to use. Also, a turbo key has been provided which will greatly speed up your otherwise tediously slow voyages.

**Interface.** The Macintosh interface in Gold is a disaster. A total swipe from the DOS version, Gold first lets you know that something is wrong because it installs hundreds “.gcr” and “.pcx” files as you would find on an Intel machine. In addition, the game shuts off all background processes, and though the menu bar is still visible, the game will not allow you to switch out until you’ve quit. Furthermore, the “About” box has been replaced with a blank space, and though you can see all of the desk accessories, trying to run any one of them will just cause the game to beep at you. A further detriment to the game is that you can only save in one of eight “slots.” When all the slots are full, you’re out of luck. While the old Pirates for the Macintosh provided you with logical on-screen menus for different actions (look at treasure map, save game, look at ship’s log, etc.) Gold provides instead a horrible “graphical” interface with totally non-intuitive places to click. For instance, to perform actions from your ship, you’re presented with a picture of your cabin. Some of the actions are obvious: click on the book to read the log, or click on the map to look at the map. Other such graphical links, however, can only be described as stupid: click on your boots to return to the game, your dresser to save, or your bed to quit. Particularly strange is that when you have disembarked and are miles away from your ship in the middle of the woods, to save the game you still get a picture of your cabin. Admittedly, the original Pirates! for the Macintosh had a decidedly non-standard interface. However, it worked quite well in its own strange, inventive way.

One aspect hasn’t changed between the two games: they both feature identically annoying and infuriating look-it-up-in-the-manual-every-time-you-play copy protection.

**Hmm, Bugs.** Gameplay is also riddled with infuriating little bugs which don’t actually prevent you from winning the game, but do a lot to destroy any fun you might have. For instance, whenever you run your ship into land, the computer asks if you want to disembark or not, as it should. If you answer no or when you later get back on your ship, the computer turns the boat around 360 degrees and starts you off sailing right away. If you happen to have left the game in turbo mode and anchored your ship in a tiny cove, it is likely that your ship will keep quickly running into the sides of this cove over and over again, asking you each time if you wish to disembark. There’s barely enough time between being asked whether you want to disembark to press “t” to turn off the turbo mode and try to maneuver your boat out.

**Graphics.** The graphics for the game are really quite nice, as fully painted graphics usually are. The original Pirates! Gold was made for Super VGA machines, and hence the graphics port over to the Mac quite well. Particularly detailed is the tiny ship which sails around the sea, changing for whichever type of ship you happen to be sailing at the time and whichever of nine directions it happens to be heading. As mentioned above, however, the graphics seem quite out of place in a Sid Meier game. Perhaps they are even too good, considering the price that we pay is the unacceptably large 15 MB of disk space the game now takes up. Unlike nearly all other Sid Meier games, animation is missing from most of the graphics. The original Macintosh version featured black and white line art for graphics, which were animated in interesting and humorous ways and were actually quite capably drawn, enhancing the overall flavor of the game. The graphics in Gold just seem out of place, almost just pasted in on top of a game which called for an entirely different genre of artwork.

**It Ain’t Golden.** All this is not to say that there is no entertainment value to be found in Pirates! Gold. Were it not for the wretched, non-Macintosh interface the game would actually not be too bad. But what has been lost is the distinct Sid Meier feel, as well as the elusive quality of fun that he is renowned for capturing in his products. The original Pirates! may not have been a masterpiece, but it was still a great game which showed that Sid Meier could be a lot more than a flight simulator designer. It should be viewed as the first step in establishing Meier as one of the true computer game authors. Remaking this game, as the people at Microprose have done, is a bit like trying to remake Citizen Kane: you’re doomed to fail before you even begin since you have no hope of living up to the quality of the

original. Which is a shame, since all of these nice painted graphics could be put to good use somewhere, but not in Sid Meier's Pirates!

#### Pros

- OK graphics

#### Cons

- Bad interface
- Bugs
- Manual based copy protection