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STS145
Game Review

INTRODUCTION

This review will discuss Archon for the Commodore 64 and Atari. Created by a company called Free Fall Associates, Archon was designed by John Freeman and Paul Reiche III, and programmed by Anne Westfall. It was published and distributed by Electronic Arts in 1984.

STORY-LINE AND GAMEPLAY

At first glance, Archon looks strikingly similar to chess. The game opens with two opposing forces, each arrayed in 2 rows on a 9x9 board of alternating white and black squares. The army on the left is known as the Light, and the other, the Dark; both are drawn from elements of fantasy. One's goal, presumably, is to defeat the rival force. This is the extent of Archon's minimal storyline.

Archon's gameplay, however, is another matter completely. Consider the game of chess, on which Archon is loosely based. Chess is a game based solely on strategy. An attacking piece, no matter how weak, will always defeat the defender. The game BattleChess (Interplay, 1988) extended the gameplay to include comical animations of the battles between pieces. However, the outcomes of battles were not changed, merely prolonged. Archon takes this design one step further, and introduces the element of chaos. Like chess, Archon is about careful positioning of pieces and control of the board. Unlike chess, however, battles are not deterministic; an attacking piece does not automatically win. Instead, the two pieces are given the opportunity to fight in real-time to determine the victor.

Within this model, even the weakest piece has a chance, albeit small, to defeat the more powerful ones. The situation is further complicated by the square on which the battle takes place. A soldier of Light is more powerful – more damaging attacks, more health – when fighting on a white square; the same is true of a Dark piece on a black square. Moreover, the color of certain squares varies throughout the course of a game, mirroring and effecting the ebb and flow of the balance of power.

Pieces range in movement range and type, as well as health and attacking strength. In addition, each side has a special piece (the Light's Wizard and the Dark's Sorceress) that is extremely powerful and can cast spells. Each piece can move a limited number of squares, using one of three movement types. Pieces that walk cannot move over other pieces, whereas flying pieces can. The spellcasters can teleport, but its effects are the same as flying.

Players take turns moving their pieces. When two pieces occupy the same square, the screen changes to show them in a battlefield strewn with randomly changing obstacles. To the victor goes control of the square. A player wins under two conditions:
- he controls all 5 "power" squares

- he destroys his opponent's forces

TECHNOLOGY

Archon was not technically stunning. That is not to say that it was poorly implemented; rather, it was merely average for its time.

GRAPHICS

Obviously, the developer of Archon was limited by the graphics hardware available when it was written. Specialized processors, 3D, high-resolution displays, and other graphical niceties we are accustomed to today were at least a decade away back then. For 8-bit, low-resolution graphics, however, they do a surprisingly good job of enhancing the atmosphere of the game. The animations are smooth and believable; the Troll's ponderous footsteps look and feel markedly different from the Unicorn's swift hooves.

SOUND/MUSIC

This is one area in which the game could use serious improvement. Music is non-existent. There is a minimal set of sound effects (~5) present in the game, which are all system beeps of varying frequencies. Whether limited by financial constraints or motivated by personal pride, the designers of Archon were responsible for the (lack of) sound effects.

CONTROL INTERFACE

Players can control their pieces using either a keyboard or a joystick. Both the strategic and tactical action take place on a 2D field, so movement is in one of eight possible directions. The controls were a little unresponsive for this reviewer's tastes, which again, could be a function of the older hardware. Moreover, attacking is a little clumsy. Firing requires prefacing the fire button with a direction button (or twist of the joystick). While this doesn't sound too difficult, imagine moving in one direction and trying to shoot in another.

AI

There is a rudimentary AI built into the game. On the strategic level, the AI is predictable at best and downright annoying at worst. There seems to be little randomness to the AI's strategic decisions. It will usually open the game with the same set of moves and spells. Suppose the AI is Dark. For the rest of the game, the AI assumes a defensive posture by moving all its pieces to black squares. It almost never attacks a human piece when the human is on a white square. (I made the AI do it once, when I had one Knight left, the weakest piece in the game). The AI is so obsessed with this strategy that if all of the human's pieces are on white squares, it will move one of its pieces back and forth, from one black square to another, ad infinitum, without any regard to strategic consequences. Thus, the AI always forces the human to attack on the AI's terms, when it is stronger.

For the novice player, this is usually a disaster. In tactical combat, not only does the AI have the advantages associated with battling on its own square, but it can also bring its computational abilities to bear, in the form of superior defensive reflexes and deadly

offensive accuracy. At long distances, the novice player has a small chance of surviving. However, the AI-controlled piece is relentless; it closes in on the human piece mercilessly. At short ranges, the human player is doomed; it cannot hope to compete against the responsiveness of the AI.

All hope, however, is not lost. An experienced player can survive by manipulating the flaws in the tactical AI. As stated before, the human should keep as far away from his opponent as possible. In addition, he should take advantage of the AI's flawed pathfinding. For some reason, the AI-controlled piece tends to get blocked by obstacles frequently. The smart human player will take advantage of these opportunities to move further away, or take free shots at the opponent.

DESIGN

Whereas Archon's implementation is mediocre, its design is outstanding. In fact, as a testament to its design, Archon is an extremely addicting and enjoyable game, in spite of its technical deficiencies.

PLAY BALANCE

Both the Light and the Dark armies employ a menagerie of creatures drawn from elements of fantasy; the former is championed by the powerful Djinni and noble Phoenix, whereas the latter is served by an evil Dragon and mysterious ShapeShifter. Creatures on both sides are unique, with a wide variety of abilities and combat styles. While superficially different, however, both sides are actually quite well-balanced in gameplay, In fact, exploring the following comparison chart will demonstrate this. Each piece on one side has a counterpart on the other, with only relatively minor differences.

For readers who have played WarCraft (Blizzard, 1994), this approach will feel familiar. Orcs and Humans are merely two makeovers of the same underlying entity. StarCraft (Blizzard, 1998), in contrast, incorporates three drastically different forces that result in an unexpectedly well-balanced game overall.

It is worth mentioning that there are some players who feel that the Dark is more powerful; it is left to the reader to formulate his own opinion.

STRATEGIC DEPTH

The potential for a deeply strategic game is present in the game design, as evidenced in these examples:
- each spell can only be cast once, so their use must be judicious
- the colors of certain squares vary throughout the game, requiring position adjustments
- creatures are limited by movement rates and types

In practice, however, the actual strategic depth of the game varies, depending on the relative abilities of the two players. If one player is much better than the other, he can use his most powerful piece and simply plow through his opponent's army. In such a game, strategy takes a back seat to rampant annihilation.

Archon, though, truly shines when both players are fairly evenly matched. When outcomes of battles are not a foregone conclusion, each move is suddenly endowed with crucial strategic importance. When to use a spell, where to position one's pieces, when to attack and when to retreat – these are all decisions that must be carefully deliberated by both players.

REPLAY VALUE

As with strategic depth, the replay value of Archon is a function of the players' relative skill levels. When one player is much better than the other, he quickly tires of the lack of challenge. One reviewer of Archon observed that he eventually had "no new people to challenge… [because he] would whoop them pretty badly".

Against an evenly-matched human, however, the replay value of the game is tremendous, as no two games will be the same. Against the AI, the replay value is also fairly high. Beating the AI is quite difficult for the novice, but not so ridiculously hard that he gives up trying. Eventually, he will be able to defeat the AI consistently, at which point he can try variations on the game, such as winning by losing the least number of pieces, or exploring all possible battle combinations.

SUMMARY

There is a reason why computer game buffs consistently rave about Archon as "great" and "one of the classics". It was an extremely innovative game for its time, managing to skillfully blend strategy and action into a seamless whole. Originally designed for the Commodore 64 and Atari, it inspired versions for the Apple II, Nintendo, the PC, and Unix. It was succeeded by Archon II, Archon III, and Archon Ultra. While not particularly innovative technically, it is still soundly implemented, and is just plain fun to play. Although it has since been superceded by games with better technology, Archon can be considered to be the forefather of these modern games; Archon's masterful mix of high-level strategy and tactical action is echoed in games such as the Star Control series, Master of Orion, and the like. It is this pioneering and enduring design paradigm that guarantees Archon a significant place in the history of computer games.