

Game Review

Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness

**Success of a Real-Time Strategy
Multi-Player Game Online**

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Despite the fact that Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness was first released by Blizzard Entertainment in the tail end of 1995, it was named 1995 Game of the Year and Multiplayer Game of the Year.¹ In the following year when it was released for the Macintosh platform it won Best Game Award by MacUser. Warcraft II is a real-time strategy game (RTS), where economic resource management and strategy are emphasized. A rich fantasy story line is offered for single player use, while many internet-gaming networks exist to offer a multitude of new games for multiplayer users. The producers of Warcraft II include Michael Morhaime, Patrick Wyatt, Samwise Didier, and senior producer Allen Adham. Designers include Ron Millar and Chris Metzen, supported by programmers Michael Morhaime, Patrick Wyatt, Bob Fitch, Jesse McReynolds, and Frank Pearce.

In Warcraft, the game setting begins in the year 583 A.D., when the first Portal between the world of Humans and the world of Orcs is opened. Warcraft is set in a medieval scenario, filled with units such as peasants, footmen, archers, knights, and mages. The Horde on the other hand consists of units such as two-headed monsters known as ogres, trolls, and creatures assembled from the corpses of slain knights, known as death knights. The evil Orcs enter the Kingdom of Azeroth, the mightiest of Human Kingdoms, through the Dark Portal and manage to expel the Humans from their own homeland and send them across the ocean into the land of Lordaeron. For the human Nations still remaining, the real-time battle between Humans and Orcs continues with Warcraft II. To completely destroy the humans, the Orcs have assembled a massive army, composed of air, land, and sea units. The story of Warcraft II begins.

To continue with the Warcraft story, a player needs to play either the Orc or Human campaign in single player mode. Each campaign offers a different story and a different ending. A successful human campaign is the removal of Orcs from the Land of Azeroth, and the destruction of the Dark Portal. On the other hand, a successful Orc campaign is the complete obliteration of the Human race. Each campaign consists of twelve different scenarios. The first five scenarios on both the Human and Orc side are identical, only difference being the story line and race chosen. In each scenario a player is given an objective to meet to move onto the next scenario. With each new scenario, new units, buildings, and upgrades are available. The story line is in tune with the scenarios.

¹ <http://www.blizzard.com>

Besides playing campaigns, single-player mode also offers the option of playing up to 7 computer opponents on a variety of different maps. Unlike the campaigns, this mode has no objectives but to completely annihilate the opponent and has no structure. A player can choose to play on any PUD (warcraft II map), whereas the campaigns always have the same scenario.

It was not the single-player features or the great story line that have won Warcraft II acclaim, but rather the multi-player options as a real-time strategy game. Warcraft II offers a variety of ways to play the game online. A player can directly connect into another computer using a Null Modem cable attached to the serial ports. This option supports only two human players. Two players can also connect with each other via their own modem and phone line. In order to support up to 8 players, a person can play over an IPX network. This has been the most popular method of playing this game online. And for Macintosh players, they can also play using the previously stated platforms, as well as through a TCP/IP or Apple Talk connection, which is unavailable for PC users.

There are many internet-gaming networks a player can use to play Warcraft II online. Some include Kali, , Heat.net, Battle.net, and Gamezon.com. In multiplayer action, the objective is to completely destroy the enemy. Every single unit must be destroyed, unless the opponent surrenders. Warcraft II supports up to 8 players in one game each player with the option of allying with another player. It was initially Kali that spawned Warcraft II's success as an online game.

For every Human character available, there is the equal counterpart as an Orc. Warcraft II attempts to establish balance between the two races. All the characteristics (building and training costs, strength, speed, etc.) of the corresponding units and buildings are identical, except the graphics, sound, and spells. The spells in general attempt to be direct opposites of the counterpart unit. For example, Ogre-Mage cast bloodlust, which gives a unit the ability to cause twice the damage, whereas Paladin Knights cast heal, which recovers the life points lost due to damage. The Death knights cast haste, which speeds the movement of units; Mages cast slow, which slows down the movements of units. Overall, the design is very well balanced in theory. This way there is no all-powerful unit or strategy.

At the heart of Warcraft II is resource management and strategy. A player is responsible for gathering resources, and then turning those resources into military strength to combat the opponent with.

Gold, lumber, and oil are the three resources in Warcraft II. Each unit, building or weapon upgrade requires a specific amount of one, two, or all three of the resources to create. Thus, the more resources you have available, the more buildings and units you can build. Peons and Peasants are responsible for all production. They are the most important units in the game and the key to winning. Quite often Peon management is just as important as controlling attacking units properly. In land battles of equally powered units, control plays a big key, but generally the player with the most units and similar or greater upgrades, wins the battles.

The strategic depth of Warcraft II is very good, but it is also lacking in certain respects. Because Orcs and Humans are basically mirror images of each other, the strategy for one race is the same for the other race in theory. Thus it appears that Warcraft II loses strategic depth by having equal races. But in reality, this is not the case. The Orcs, specifically Ogre-Magi have one magic spell that disrupts the balance between the two races on land games: bloodlust. It is such a powerful spell that multiplayer games are primarily players using Orcs. It allows a unit with bloodlust to cause more damage on an opponent than is normally done. Its counterpart, heal by Paladin Knights, is not very effective and difficult to perfect. In a game where the ability to acquire resources quickly and attack quickly and effectively is most important, bloodlust is a decisive factor.

In terms of strategy, it varies according to map, what the resource setting is it, how many players are in a game, whether there are any Human players, the location of allies, etc. There are many possibilities to choose from. Each strategy provides advantages and disadvantages. For example, on an 8 player PUD such as Fixed GOW, one strategy is known as a "grunt rush". A player focuses on creating as many of these units as possible, and then storming an opponent with numbers. The opposite strategy is known as "straight to lust". This is where a player walls herself in with towers, does not build any grunts, but rather attempts to have Ogre-Magi with blood lust as fast as possible. From these two basic strategies are derived many others. While grunt rushing a town, a player can build towers on the outside of an opponent's town in case she is walled in. The many different options available make this game highly appealing.

WarCraft II's tactical strength is enhanced by a "fog of war" concept. A player can only see the area her own units have sight on, and the game map still remembers the terrain and buildings of an area that

a player has left, but does not see moving units and does not notice any changes until the site is revisited. The Battle.net edition has an option where allies can see each other's "fog of war", thus greatly enhancing team playing.

What propelled Warcraft II beyond a just a simple RTS multiplayer game was the internet communities that formed around the game. After playing games, players converse in game chatrooms, or other channels. Communities provide a system for competition as well a motivation to excel. One good case is the Macintosh warcraft community that formed in 1996. During that year, different teams (Clans) formed in response to the competition. Players would join an irc (internet relay chatroom) channel named #macwarcraft where players would post IP addresses, and host games. One clan that formed was Burningblade. The clan initially was only concerned with being the top Clan on the Macwarcraft Ladder, but eventually it also became a community of friendship, both within the clan and with other players.² This also happened with many other clans. These communities based on excelling in the game and friendship fostered, and the result was the success for Warcraft in the Macintosh platform. Similar situations happened in PC gaming.

Not only is multi-player game option great, but also the control interface, 2D graphics, and the map editor feature. The control interface is simple and informative. The screen consists of 7 different sections. The command map shows a player the area occupied by her troops and buildings. The resources line shows the available resources, there is a minimap, with the option of fog of war before play begins, an area for unit description, a line for typing messages to allies and enemies, and a unit command screen. The screen is clear and informative. Since Warcraft II is a game about speed, "hot keys" exist to build units and for actions. This way a player does not have to rely on using her mouse to select options. One problem with the interface is that a player cannot select more than 9 units at one time to perform an action.

All the units and buildings have a 'cartoonish' quality to them. But, they convey game information quickly and with minimal player effort, and provide a great look/feel/mood for the game. The SVGA graphics are crisp and clean, and the movements are well animated. Each kind of army unit has a different voice, and each acknowledges commands with randomly picked phrases. The background music

² <http://www.burningblade.org/timeline.html>

though is repetitive and uninteresting. Luckily you can play the game while you play music CD at the same time.

One of the key features about Warcraft II is the replay value. Because Warcraft II comes with a map editor, a variety of custom puds (warcraft maps) can be created, and distributed among other players to play on. For example, one of the most popular puds is Garden of War. Some of the locations of the mines offered an unfair disadvantage, so people began to edit the map, and then began distributing the pud online as Fixed Garden of War. Modifying maps became so popular that when Blizzard released the Battle.net edition of Warcraft II, it contained its own versions of the fixed puds found online.

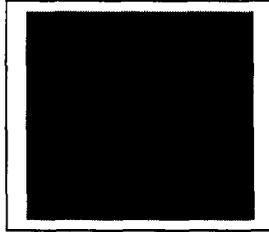
The success of Warcraft II lies in the fact that it is a true representative of real-time strategy games. The gameplay poses for the player an infinite stream of possibilities that are well paced and of consequence. Single-player mode offers scenarios and campaigns that tell a good story and pose problems to solve, whereas multi-player mode offers intense action with many important decision points, strategic options, tactical options, and ways for players to excel, through communities formed around the game. These communities increase the depth of play, by giving room for experts to excel and distinguish their play, leading to intense competition and analysis. The two races have balance, and at the same time have enough unique characteristics and distinctive play mechanics. There is no overall powerful unit or strategy. Every unit thus has a strength and weakness. Along with game playing, Warcraft II offers an easy to use control interface with informative graphics, and a variety of different game options, including the ability to edit and create new maps.

It is important to note that that what made Warcraft II so great is not exactly the standard for RTS games entering into the year 2001. One key feature of Warcraft II is symmetry. The Orcs and Humans are very similar races. In Starcraft, released by 1998 by Blizzard, there are three different races with very distinct characteristics. Balance still exists between the races, but they have become more diversified. In 2001, Warcraft III will be released. Different races continue to exist, except now the focus is more on smaller groups. Thus, Warcraft III is a blend between RTS games and RPG's (role-playing games), including 3D graphics and five different races. In the development and evolution of RTS games, Warcraft stands as a true representative of the early form of the genre. A demo version of Warcraft II can be found at <http://www.zdnet.com/gamespot/filters/products/downloads/0,11095,199259,00.html>.

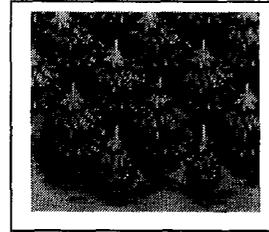
THREE PRIMARY RESOURCES



GOLD MINE



OIL

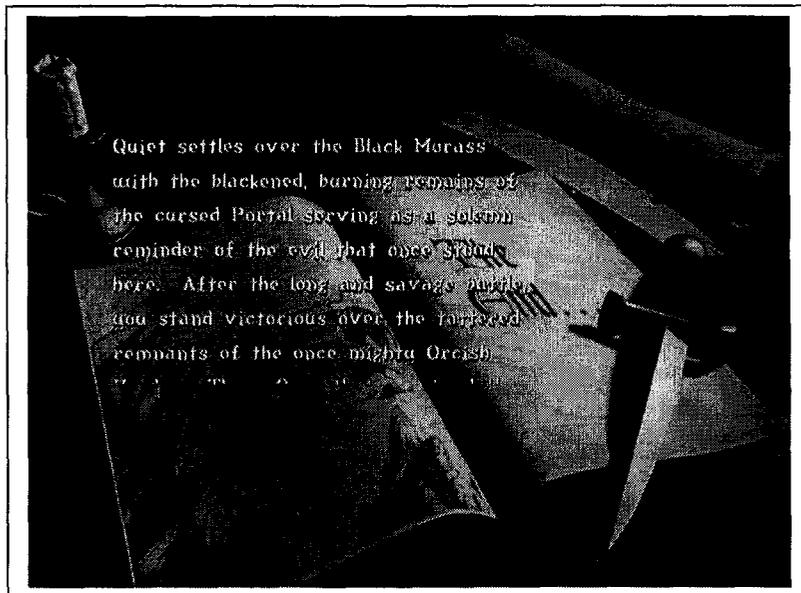


LUMBER

AVAILABLE BATTLE UNITS

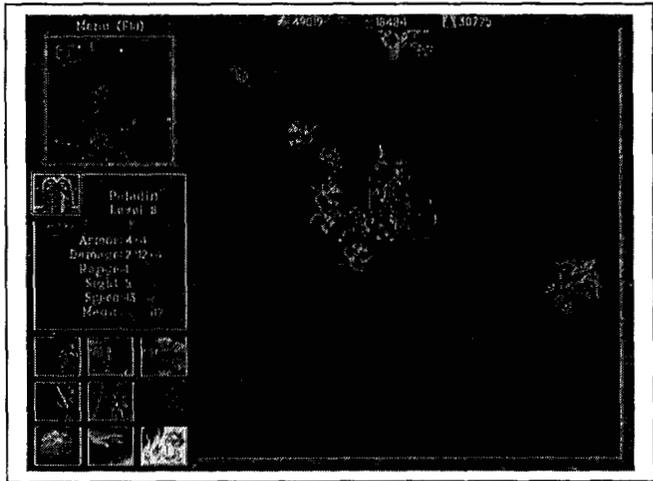


SINGLE PLAYER CAMPAIGN STORY



Quiet settles over the Black Morass with the blackened, burning remains of the cursed Portal serving as a solemn reminder of the evil that once stood here. After the long and savage battle, you stand victorious over the tormented remnants of the once mighty Orcish

HUMANS



ORCS



ORCS VS. HUMANS

