

MAGIC AND MAYHEM

In the annals of bad game name history, *Magic And Mayhem* is a prominent entry. They really should have called it *Speak And Spell*.



IT'S probably fair to say that the Gollop brothers have never made games for the masses. No slight, trifling efforts, theirs. The *X-COMs Enemy Unknown*, *Terror From The Deep* and *Apocalypse* were frighteningly complex turn-based/real-time strategy titles that demanded hours of play just to scratch the surface, and weeks to master.

One might reasonably have assumed *M&M* was simply going to be a fantasy variant of their winning *X-COM* formula, but although it's a real-time strategy game with an isometric viewpoint, and is thus reminiscent of earlier *X-COM* combat, it's about as far removed from these previous titles as you could get.

In charge of a wizard, Cornelius, who, for reasons of a typically fantastical nature which don't demand elucidation here, needs to travel from level to level killing mythical beasts and such-like, *M&M* initially appears painfully straightforward. Yet, this being a Gollop-penned game, there's inevitably an air of originality about the whole. For a start, rather than manufacturing troops or vehicles from a traditional base area, your wizard is able to summon creatures to help him wherever he chooses according to a set line-of-sight area.

Plus, rather than resource management, *M&M* demands that Mana be your chief commodity and your main worry. The amount of spells you can cast (and consequently the number of creatures you can summon) are therefore limited to how magical you're feeling as indicated by a circular yellow bar around Cornelius' face.

Which leads us nicely into Places of Power – stony mounds that, if stood upon by your wiz or

“An incredible amount of weapon combinations.”

any of his minions, will cause your level of Mana to recharge. There are generally four or five such points on every map, and, like *Red Alert's* ore fields or *Warcraft's* gold mines, it's of paramount importance that you take control of (and defend) as many of them as possible in order to ensure a regular supply of wizard juice. Hence the levels have a certain aspect of strategy about them, at least in terms of territory.



And that's it. Wander around some distinctly themed maps, slay the various baddies you come across, and read the many dialogue boxes that further the story-line. That's it, aside, however, from the tricky area of the spells themselves. Because it's obvious the team have taken the fantasy setting as seriously as one Professor Tolkien once did, and have devised an incredibly elaborate system of creation and casting that's based on the purchasing of talismans and the discovery of artefacts. Each of three talisman types (Chaos, Natural and Law) can be bought between levels, by spending experience points you've accrued for slaying beasts. Then, new spells can be concocted by combining artefacts you've collected during the game with the talismans. Dragging the two objects together gives you information concerning the potential consequences of the spell.

Although it sounds complex, it's actually extremely simple, but more than that, it offers an incredible amount of potential weapon



Bewitching

combinations. For instance, using the Tincal in the Chaos talisman gives you The Gorgon Stare allowing you to turn enemy creatures to stone, whereas positioning it in the Law talisman will offer you Iron Skin – a spell that can be cast on you or your allies to give them temporary protection from attack. Consider that there are 24 talismans and countless artefacts to find, and the amount of spell-types soon becomes mind-boggling. In fact, the fine-tuning of the game's myriad eventualities and possibilities must have been nightmarish, and full credit to Mythos for having pursued such a complex but satisfying system.

That said, other areas of the game would have benefited from being lavished with a similar amount of attention. Most notably the game's AI and, specifically, the creatures' path-finding capabilities. Sending your army in a given direction often results in unforgivably bad backtracking – your characters taking the most illogically circuitous routes available to them. Plus, even when given a specific location to travel to, your wizard tends to

become embroiled in often fatal melees if an enemy manages to land a hit – meaning you're constantly hammering the mouse button in order to reiterate your original directional command.

Surprisingly, and for no good reason, the maps have been made to wrap around at the edges, meaning if you walk or scroll in one

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direction for long enough, you'll return to your start point in a piece of Tolkienesque weirdness that is just too literal. It's an unnecessarily confusing system that's made worse by the appalling colour scheme used on the miniature overview. Forests are depicted as black, paths as brown, and although the fog of war covering the main playing area recedes, the mini-map remains unchanged.

Add to this the inability to turn dialogue boxes off (even when you've seen them before), the looping Irish folk music, and the fact that the action slows to a snail's pace whenever there are multiple enemies on the screen at once, and *M&M* begins to sound about as appealing as a night in with Michael Flatley.

Yet with extended play, the game becomes far more engaging; almost all of the maps' challenges can be approached in different ways, and the random nature of the enemy wizards' start points allows for fresh challenges if you happen to be unsuccessful the first time. This variety provides some welcome distraction from the game's faults.

The inherent difficulty of the single-player mode (even on apprentice level), coupled with the huge amount and variety of spells, means *Magic And Mayhem* is not going to be finished in a trice either. *Total Annihilation: Kingdoms* may be the RTS fantasy game we're really waiting for, but, for now, this'll do nicely.

MATTHEW PIERCE

- Publisher **Virgin** ■ Developer **Mythos** ■ Price **£40** ■ Minimum System **P100, 16Mb RAM, Windows 95** ■ Recommended **P166, 32Mb RAM**
- Graphics Accelerator **None** ■ Multi-Player **Network, IPX, modem**
- Web Address **http://www.vie.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

<p>PCGAMER Plenty of magic but not so much mayhem. An enjoyable curiosity.</p>	<p>78%</p>
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