

War Crime In Real Time

*An Age-Old Hatred Lives On In Blizzard's
WARCRAFT: ORCS & HUMANS*

by Chris Lombardi

Where have all the humans gone?

Gone to Orc meat everyone.

Where have all the humans gone?

—6th Century folksong

WILL IT EVER END, THIS BLOOD FEUD BETWEEN ORCS AND HUMANS? EVER SINCE THE GREAT historical chronicler, J.R.R. Tolkien, stepped through a fantasy wormhole into the land of Middle Earth and recorded the horrendous wars that rocked that land, we've heard nothing but more reports of cruelty and bloodshed.

Is there nothing we can do? If only we could get the U.N. involved, perhaps they could negotiate a cease-fire. Better yet, if we could send Jimmy Carter on a diplomatic mission through space and time, he might return with the assurance that all would be well.

Alas, all of these measures would be stopped dead by the barrier between our world and the other. As meticulous a reporter as Mr. Tolkien was, he was negligent in detailing the means by which he accessed that alternate world. Are we left to despair?

Perhaps not. If, by a refocusing of the eye, we change our view of the matter, we might be able to find good in an ugly situation. One benefit, and the one closest to our hearts, is that the wars between Orcs and Humans have given us many a good computer game.

What we have in **Blizzard Entertainment's** WARCRAFT: ORCS & HUMANS, is exactly that—a pretty good game set in the Tolkienesque mythos. This slick, real-time strategy game recounts a war between a human kingdom and an orcish invasion force in an area called the Borderlands. The game tries its hardest to avoid partisanship in its retelling of the tale, and so the game gives each side in the conflict equal time. The single player game is played through 20 or so scenarios,

half of which can be fought from the human side, half from the orc. Even the manual shares this clean division, with the human account on one side of a split-format book, and the orc on the flip side.

If Blizzard borrowed generously from the accounts of Tolkien for its story and setting, they performed a perfect bit of creative larceny when it came down to the game mechanics and play. Replace the overhead graphics of orcs and humans with Atreides and Harkonnen, substitute WARCRAFT's resources (timber and gold) with Spice, and rename the various buildings that you must construct in a simplified SIM CITY style, and you have **Westwood Studio's** DUNE 2.

The similarities are more than skin



WARCRAFT: ORCS & HUMANS

Price: \$45-50 (CD-ROM), \$40-45 (3.5" floppy)

System

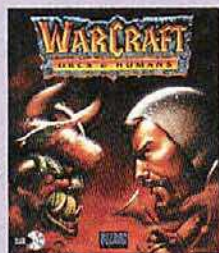
Requirements: IBM compatible 386-20Mhz, 4MB RAM, VGA graphics, 13 hard drive

space (average), CD-ROM, mouse; supports most major sound cards.

Protection: None

of Players: 1-2 (modem, network)

Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Irvine, CA
(800) 953-SNOW





CHARGE OF THE ORC BRIGADE As this orc scenario opens, a frontier town is under attack by vile human troops. The orcs must save the town and launch a counter-attack.



CORRIDOR OF DEATH The humans have set up a formidable defense at a strategic choke-point. With their piecemeal attack style, the orcs don't stand a chance.

peasants, more trees, more gold, more time—of which there's never enough.

The panicked pace rarely leaves room for a dull moment. *WARCRAFT* is a game of split-second decisions, a mad-dash juggling of resources and demands, that requires you to be both long-term planner and octopedal micro-manager with a quick but steady mouse hand. If you like to calmly contemplate your next move and carefully add up combat factors before launching your next attack, or if you can't manage the carpal calisthenics to right and left mouse click in rapid succession, you can forget about *WARCRAFT*.

If you can handle the pace, *WARCRAFT* will show you a good time. The scenarios are structured such that the game slowly does out new buildings that produce new unit types that have new abilities, so there's always a "carrot of coolness" constantly dangling before your nose. While you start with basic grunts and archers, and a handful of basic buildings, you'll soon find that the human can build stables (kennels for the orcs) that produce mounted knights (or wolf-riding raiders). A timber mill and a blacksmith will allow you to build catapults, in addition to improving the quality of your basic weapons. Then come churches/temples that produce clerics/necrolytes that can cast a variety of helpful spells, and towers that produce conjurers/warlocks who weave a death-dealing web of offensive magic.

There is a fundamental parity between the units and buildings of the orcs and the humans, but there are some differences that make for interesting play. While some of these differences are subtle (the human archers have a slightly greater missile range than the orc spear-

men, for instance), others are great. The two races have a completely different set of spells. While the human cleric can heal injured warriors and make units invisible, the orc necrolyte can raise the dead and bestow unholy armor on its compatriots; and while the human conjurer can call down a nasty rain of fire on his enemies, the orc warlock can call up a cloud of poison that drifts through the human's lands, injuring peasants and damaging their abodes. Both conjurers and warlocks can summon creatures from other planes, but the warlock's demon has slightly more strength than the conjurer's water elemental, but the water elemental has greater range with its attack.

Between the real time play and the interesting mixture (but basic balance of) the opposing units, it seems we've got a great game here—a game designed for an ebbing and flowing contest of tactical and strategic wits. There's room in this game for tricky feints, misdirection, and devious combined-arms tactics. Unfortunately, *WARCRAFT*'s artificial intelligence (AI) doesn't quite live up to the design. Computer AIs in general, and *WARCRAFT*'s in particular, don't do "ebb and flow" very well, and certainly very few, if any, can be said to have much "wits." It's tough enough to give AI direction,

much less the capability for "misdirection." So, with a nod of acknowledgment to the fact that programming a good AI is extremely difficult, especially in a game as free-flowing as *WARCRAFT*, it must be said that *WARCRAFT*'s AI is predictable at best, and very gullible at worst.

On the predictable end, the AI's overall strategic approach seems to be the same for each scenario. The computer has a group of units that it uses to attack at the beginning of a scenario, giving the player some early headaches. From that point on, it sends a steady stream of small groups, usually just enough to weaken the human player's defensive line, but rarely enough to cause serious trouble. Meanwhile, it keeps a small defensive cluster at its town. The human player's strategy, then, is to weather the initial attack, set up a defense for the steady stream of small threats, and then amass enough troops to take out the computer's relatively small home defense. For



PEE ON THE PEONS Human knights race to save a group of gold-bearing peasants that are under attack. Peasants are a favorite target for both sides.



PURPLE PAIN An orc warlock has snuck up to a human town and cast several poison cloud spells. The clouds have a nasty habit of killing peasants and ruining paint jobs.

the human with any sort of natural intelligence (NI), most of the scenarios are a walk in the park, especially if the NI can master a few tricks to take advantage of the AI's tactical weaknesses.

To deal with the AI's inability to match the NI wit-for-wit in an even fight, the designers have used a device about which I have mixed feelings: they've designed "puzzles" into the scenarios. Each scenario seems to have a "trick" that you must figure out, and there's usually only one basic approach to the solution. For example, in one of the human scenarios you must rescue a

group of peasants being held in a compound. Since you aren't given any other peasants or money at the beginning of the scenario, you *must* rescue the peasants before you can generate money and build more troops. Once you find the compound and the "correct" path to the compound, then you must figure out how many troops it will take to spring the prisoners and get them back safely, while defending your home town against the huge orc army that is programmed to attack im-

mediately after you've breached the prison walls. This whole affair is a trial and error process requiring you restart the scenario a half dozen times before you figure it out.

On the one hand, I like this device because it in part makes up for the AI's weakness, and the designers use it to tell a story, and tell it well. Each scenario is a chapter in the story of the war (introduced with voice-over speech and a cool animation where a 3D landscape morphs out of a 2D map), and the scenarios are designed to reflect the story. In one orc scenario, for example, an orc town is under siege. You

start with a group of units some distance from the town, and you must race over, relieve the siege, and then use the buildings that you save as a platform upon which to build your war machine. On the other hand, once you've figured out the trick to a scenario, the challenge is gone. So, WARCRAFT is not a game that you would play over and over again.

These criticisms crumble into so much moot dust once you get another human on the other end of a network or modem. WARCRAFT has a remarkably clean and easy interface for both two-player network and modem play, and a number of customizing options allowing you to choose the map and starting unit mix of both players. In less than a minute after installing the game on the CGW network, my orc hordes were thrusting their scythe of death through wave after wave of humans controlled by a fellow editor. Here is where WARCRAFT really comes alive! Fast-paced, fun, and flexible enough to support a wide variety of tactics, WARCRAFT ranks up there with such classic two-player slug-fests as COMMAND HQ and GLOBAL CONQUEST.

When the final body count is tallied, and the streets have been scrubbed clean of orc and human blood, the recommendation is this: if you enjoy frantic, real time games, and if you don't mind a linear structure in your strategic challenges, WARCRAFT is a good buy. While the AI is no Einstein and the "puzzle-based" structure of the scenarios won't make for much replay, you'll still get a good 30+ hours of moderately demanding play. In the meantime, start a campaign to convince a natural intelligence (a gaming buddy) either to buy a modem or stay after work and play WARCRAFT head to head. For while the history of the Orc and Humans is one of tremendous bloodshed and cruelty, nothing in this world or any other can match the ferocity and unrelenting bitterness (all in fun, of course) of two humans locked in mortal gaming combat. 🐾

Fritz...



he's a prima donna

THE EDITORS SPEAK

WARCRAFT: ORCS AND HUMANS

RATING ★★☆☆

PROS Exciting real-time game play and a terrific suite of two-player options.

CONS The AI is dull and the "puzzle based" scenarios do not encourage single-player replay.