



MAELSTROM

Blend ambition

PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: KDV Games GENRE: Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4.5GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2-6 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW

Most pies contain only one kind of fruit for a reason. While it's possible to bake a delicious multifruit pie, each additional ingredient increases the likelihood that the tastes won't blend properly. And, as the time-honored gaming adage goes: "If it's true of baked goods, it's true of real-time strategy." For every brilliant single-ingredient *Company of Heroes*, we get a *Maelstrom*: ambitious, but ultimately flawed because it tries to do too much.

GOOD ARTISTS COPY

Right from the jump, *Maelstrom* hits you with its kitchen-sink approach, with the Earth decimated by no less than an environmental crisis, a meteor impact, a nuclear holocaust, and—oh, the humanity!—corporate globalization. Despite this ass-whooping ex-machina, two surviving factions cling to life: the *Mad Max*-esque Remnants and the conspicuously pristine Ascension. No sooner do these two nemeses reach a stalemate than a mysterious alien race called the Hai-Genti invades, throw-



The direct-control mode allows you to take the reins of a single character, but its first-person control scheme is impractical.

ing the world into chaos. Why, it's almost as if *Maelstrom* ripped a page from...every sci-fi RTS ever made!

But the rip-off-itude doesn't stop with mere plot; gameplay, too, takes the smorgasbord approach. *Maelstrom* features three building-block resources, each gathered in one of the classic RTS ways. You either build resource-generating structures à la *Command & Conquer*, harvest resources from stockpiles à la *Age of Empires*, capture resource points à la *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*, or some combination of the three. It's an approach that fails thanks to its overcomplexity.

Each race employs a fairly unique play style, and all of them (especially the Ascension) enjoy hugely overpowered early-tier units. A rush of a dozen foot soldiers can take down an entire enemy base; as a result, *Maelstrom's* few original, nifty ideas—like the Ascension's transforming units or the ability to shape the land and control the weather—don't even come into play in most matches. And it doesn't help that the A.I. makes about as challenging an adversary as a pickled herring, rarely making use of the game's nifty features.



Despite the passage of more than 25 minutes of play time, the A.I. player has one base structure and no units. What a challenge!

WHY, IT'S ALMOST AS IF MAELSTROM RIPPED A PAGE FROM... EVERY SCI-FI RTS EVER MADE.

GREAT ARTISTS STEAL

Like *WarCraft III*, *Maelstrom* utilizes "hero" characters (three per faction), all of which have special abilities, lots of hit points, and voice actors hired straight from an ESL class. And as in *Faces of War*, you can manually control these heroes (or any unit) through *Maelstrom's* FPS-inspired "direct-control" system. While direct control has moments of usefulness in the single-player campaign, the interface is clumsy, and switching midgame from bird's-eye view to first-person is more jarring than a jelly factory. I never even used it in multiplayer or skirmish.

And that encapsulates the main problem with *Maelstrom's* design: Tons of options don't equal tons of useful options. You can rip off every successful RTS convention in the known universe (and developer KDV Games obviously tried), but the final product won't necessarily add up to the sum of those parts. That's not to say *Maelstrom* is a bad game...just one with a pie-full of flaws. •Eric Neigher

VERDICT

Unique environmental controls; each faction is distinct in tone and play style.

Brain-donor A.I.; cookie-cutter sci-fi storyline; horrific voice acting.

6/10

AVERAGE

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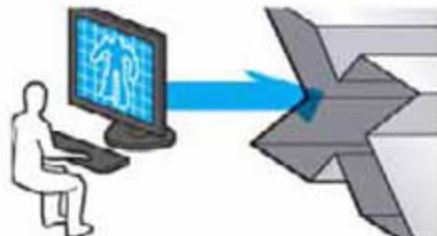
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