• Battle on the Barrow-wight Downs.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS:
THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II—
THE RISE OF THE WITCH-KING

Not of this Middle-earth

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **BreakAway Games/EALA** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space,** *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II* MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

⚀ **For any other** real-time strategy game, *Rise of the Witch-king* would be a pretty sweet expansion pack. You get a new faction, more units for the original factions, and improvements to old features. But a lot of the new content feels like pushing a square peg into a round hole, and the best features are simply corrective.

In the original game, the dynamic campaign and the custom hero creation felt like glommed-on afterthoughts. Their potential is finally realized in this expansion. The War of the Ring campaign is still a mess in terms of interface, but now it's built around a strategic economy that makes the interface worth the hassle. The changes to the create-a-hero system let you make rebalanced custom heroes whose costs are proportional to their powers; this adds a lot of flexibility and metagame strategy. It's also worth noting that the expansion lets groups of units move together rather than have each unit running ahead at its own speed. How was something this fundamental not already patched into the original game?

Beyond these fixes, *Rise of the Witch-king* heads off in its own direction. The new faction, Angmar, sounds great on paper—sorcerers with ice/death-themed powers, Thrall Masters who enslave other races, a couple of flavors of troll, and packs of wolves. But the problem with Angmar is that it relies too much on micromanagement. The lack of micromanagement—at least in terms of popping off carefully timed unit powers—was part of the fun of the original *Battle for Middle-earth II*. You could slam armies into each other and enjoy the spectacle rather than fuss with clicking little buttons at just the right moments. Button-clicking was limited to heroes or Ring powers that effected dramatic reversals of fortune.

THE NINE RIDE AGAIN V2.0

Some of the new units for each faction are also curious design choices. Each race gets elite units, halfway between heroes and armies. This is an odd place to occupy, and it muddies up the clear distinction between the heroic and the mundane.

Like cadres of spellcasting sorcerers, it's not very Tolkien. The concept works well enough with Mordor's nazgul, who are now an elite cavalry squadron, but they're offset by everyone else's elite army. Oh, look, it's some nazgul. Aren't those guys just Sauron's counterpart to the Knights of Dol Amroth or the Goblin Fire Drake Brood? Remember when they used to be cool?

The inspiration for *Rise of the Witch-king* is an appendix from the books—so it's not surprising that none of the new content recalls anything from Peter Jackson's films. Again, one of the things that made *Battle for Middle-earth II* great was the way the game recalled the movies. As with the expansion for *Star Wars: Empire at War*, it's a tricky situation. How do you create new content for an expansion when a game relies on familiarity with a set of movies? In both instances, the developers simply invented all new stuff from outside the films. As a result, they lost the connection—and, therefore, a lot of the appeal of their games.

On the whole, BreakAway Games and EALA have some great ideas in *Return of the Witch-king*. It's too bad that many of these ideas—which seem to have tumbled out of some other game's design document—don't fit with *Battle for Middle-earth II*. ● **Tom Chick**

• **Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of Angmar.**

VERDICT
⊞ Things that are fixed.
⊟ Things that are added.

6\10

AVERAGE

⊞ Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

⟫ NONE OF THE NEW CONTENT RECALLS PETER JACKSON'S FILMS.

Games
for Windows ®

ISSUE 03 \ FEBRUARY 2007 \ THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

WORLD EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

THE CROSSING

HOW VALVE AND ARKANE ARE KILLING A.I.
(AND REPLACING IT WITH YOU!)

FREE-O-RAMA

101 FREE GAMES

GIANT MEGA-LIST OF GREAT GAMES
THAT WON'T COST YOU ONE DANG PENNY!

SPECIAL REPORT

MAKE MONEY PLAYING GAMES!
CHECK OUT OUR GUIDE TO
REAL-LIFE GAMING CAREERS

PLUS: WHY DO VIDEO GAME STORIES SUCK?
WE ASK GAMING'S TOP SCRIBES

ZIFF DAVIS MEDIA

PREVIEWED
TITAN QUEST EXPANSION
MORE KILLING AND LOOTING!

PREVIEWED
SUPREME COMMANDER
SON OF TOTAL ANNIHILATION

TECH
VISTA HANDS-ON REPORT
WHICH VERSION IS FOR YOU?

FEBRUARY 2007 ISSUE 03
$4.99 U.S. $6.99 Canada

Display Until February 6

0   14024 06950   9

0 2>

GFW.1UP.COM