

WARHAMMER: DARK OMEN

Dark Omen is a Real Time Tactics game, developed by Mindscape and published by Electronic Arts, in 1998. It is one of the early defining games of its genre, attracting players of different backgrounds to form its player base. It is the sequel of Shadow of the Horned Rat, which had very similar gameplay, but suffered from a hard to use interface, and campaign that was deemed by most of its players to be too hard.

The game involves series of tactical battles taking place in a fantasy setting, where the player is given control of a mercenary army led by an opportunist general. His force, originally consisting of cavalry, infantry, crossbowmen and a cannon, is later joined by many unique units, ranging from mercenary ogres to flame hurling wizards to a massive treeman. Casualties can be replaced between scenarios, and it is possible to reinforce units by buying extra armor, with the money earned throughout the game. However, there is no way to replace a wiped out regiment.

This gameplay appeals to turn-based strategy players as it offers a lot of depth and planning during the preparation stage. Much of the battle is decided by how the player places his units, and which regiments he assigns which magic items to. Taking advantage of terrain features is a major decisive factor in battles, and since artillery pieces can not be moved once the deployment phase ends, their initial placement is extra important.

The game also appeals to real time strategy fans, since the fast paced combat requires players to decide quickly and adapt to overcome different threats posed by the opponent. Flanking the enemy with cavalry, retreating when the situation is dire, dispelling an enemy spell right before it causes severe casualties, or landing a devastating mortar hit in the midst of an archer regiment are all some of many maneuvers that can lead to a tremendous advantage with perfect timing.

Mindscape has a tendency to add arcade-style features into games, and Dark Omen is no exception. The original warhammer rules are changed in various places to give the game a more action-based feeling. The war machines, and to a lesser extent, all ranged units, are less luck based, and are more based on the player's ability to time the shots, leading to a skill based game rather than one that is decided by luck. The magic system is another example to this, as magic points accumulate in the mana pool, and wizards can use them to protect their own units with a dispel shield, or blast the enemy with various different offensive spells.

Players who are already familiar with other games of the genre such as close combat and myth would find the game to be a new experience, as it shares most of the gameplay mechanics of the other games, while introducing new elements, giving the game a unique feel. Some core features of the genre, like regiments gaining experience, and the player's forces being affected by morale, are parts of the gameplay, making the player more protective of his units, and discouraging suicide missions.

Not being able to save during a battle also adds to the risk factor, but the scenarios are generally designed in such a way that the player can not win without taking risks. So rather than avoiding risk altogether, players have to decide which risks to take, to try and minimize the damage caused by possible wrong decisions. This is especially important during the campaign, as losing a crucial support unit to a careless mistake may make it extremely hard to get through a future mission where the terrain features are in favor of it.

The singleplayer campaign, has a strong focus on defense and survival. The game favors players making clever use of terrain features such as placing cannons on elevated ground or moving infantry units through cover to avoid being spotted. Some interface elements further help achieve this, as units that can not be seen by any enemy unit are shown with a special icon, and when hovering the mouse over terrain, the cursor changes when the terrain is not within line of sight of the currently selected unit. Many small details like these combine to give the player a feeling of the battleground - what he knows and what he does not know.

Between each battle is a series of dialogs between the commander of the forces and some of his troops, his advisor, and other characters that his army get involved with. There are certain points in the game where the player can decide what to do, like, helping citizens defend their town from an undead attack while reinforcements are urgently needed at a border fortress, or not waste any time with the village and make way to the border fortress.

In this case, if the player chooses to help the citizens, his army arrives too late at the border fortress, and instead of defending, he ends up having to attack the fortress to retake it, putting him at a disadvantageous position. However, his army will have more experience, and perhaps a new magic item at its disposal, as a trade-off. Decisions such as this shape the flow campaign, and eventually, at the end of the game, most of the characters the player has helped show up to help him in his final battle.

The multiplayer mode is competitive, allowing players to buy regiments and magic items with a set amount of gold. Experienced regiments of some types are also available for higher gold costs. The multiplayer has a nice extra feature, allowing the player to control orcs or undead as well as human armies. Being able to command armies that were only enemies in the campaign gives a different initial feeling, as the player struggles to understand the different strategies he needs to use, remembering battles he has lost to them in the campaign, but looking at them from another perspective. However, all of the abilities, strengths and weaknesses are well detailed in the descriptions of each unit, giving players something to base their initial decisions on.

The three races play surprisingly different. Humans strive to use combined arms; magical items, wizards, gunpowder and mercenary units. Orcs rely on sheer numbers, and unreliable but massively destructive spells. Many of their units have options that add an element of surprise and unpredictability to them, like hidden goblin fanatics lunging forward from a goblin regiment. Undead do not suffer from morale problems, and cause fear, making them an army focused on making the enemy run rather than fight. Many of their units have powerful abilities, for instance the dreaded incorporeal wraiths, invulnerable to normal weapons.

The armies in multiplayer games also gain experience, and they retain items they have captured from killed enemy units. The players are given the option of saving their surviving army after the battle, making it possible for players to run a mini campaign as a series of multiplayer missions. This adds a sense of persistence to the game, if both sides agree to it. The players are given the choice to play the game whichever way they want.

I believe what made the real time tactics genre initially successful was the focus on defense, since many strategy players generally enjoy defending and minimizing casualties. What most strategy games offer is the opposite - armies are an expendable commodity, and games are won through economic growth. Thus the real time tactics genre emerged with a completely different focus: limited resources, units subject to morale, and able to accumulate experience. This made the player's army into strategic resources rather than expendable commodities.

As a successful game of a newly emerging genre, Dark Omen is definitely a game to take into consideration, when looking for old features that got lost in time, to incorporate into a new real-time tactics game.