

y Jeremy Condit

hh... Descent. Since the release of the original Descent on the PC, it has become a name synonymous with breathtaking, heart-pounding action and extremely realistic 360° 3D environments. It's a computer gamer's best friend and a claustrophobic's worst nightmare. And now Descent II, the sequel to the ultra-popular Descent, has been released for the Mac.

The PTMC mining corporation, which enlisted your services in the first Descent as a "Material Defender," has found a contractual loophole that it has decided to use against you. In order to receive your fees for your initial services (ridding several mines of rampant robots), PTMC is requiring you to complete another set of tasks. You must now track down the source of the rebelling robots, which means more deadly robots, more powerful weapons, and even more mines that are just asking to be blown up.

[For Those Just Tuning In...](#)

Descent is a fully texture-mapped 3D engine designed by Parallax Software in a distinct effort to one-up id Software, the creators of Doom. Riding the wave of 3D game popularity that has made millionaires out of the folks at id Software, Descent brought the genre to a new level. This game features a fully 3D environment with unrestricted movement up, down, left, right, forward and backward. Furthermore, its level designers cut no corners with "2.5D" engines like Doom and Marathon, which require all walls to be at 90° angles to the floors. Unlike games which simply extrapolate a two-dimensional map to three-dimensional

polygons, Descent uses actual 3D models in its level design, allowing the mines which you will explore and destroy to sprawl out in all directions around you.

Descent also features an abundance of maneuvering controls. There are twelve (yes, twelve) keys that are dedicated to moving and rotating your ship in all directions. Your ship can pitch (like looking up or down in Marathon), yaw (like turning left or right in Marathon), and roll (a maneuver impossible in other 3D games, involving rotating around the current axis). You also have the ability to move along any axis at any given time, so you can accelerate either forward or backward, gain or lose altitude, and even slide to the left or right. Needless to say, it can be quite a daunting task for the beginner to master the use of these controls, especially in close combat. Those who are used to games like Doom and Marathon will need some time to adjust to the new possibilities in terms of combat and maneuvering. If dodging to the left and right is not possible in a given corridor, a touch of a button will make your ship leap to the ceiling. That is, you can leap to the wall that is currently considered the ceiling; a touch of a roll button will make it the floor. This 3D architecture is especially evident in the automap feature, which gives the player a high-resolution wireframe display showing the areas of the mine that you have explored. Using the standard maneuvering keys, the map display can be zoomed, rotated, and manipulated to just the right point so that you can see where you're going and where you've been.

The enemies, of course, are one of the most important features. All types of enemies (and there are a lot of them), are based on polygon models and are texture-mapped along with the walls of the surrounding mine. This means that each of the enemies can be viewed from an infinite amount of varying angles, whether from the top, the bottom, the sides, or the front, avoiding the somewhat disjointed effects created by sprite-based enemies in more traditional 3D games. In fact, the only sprites used in the game are in connection with weapons; for instance, sprites are used for energy weapon blasts and missile explosions. The Descent engine is without a doubt one of the most complex and detailed texture-mapping engines available for the Macintosh.

The object of the game is quite simple. Each level is an individual mine that you must destroy. The mines are, of course, infested with robots who have nothing better to do than rip your Pyro-GX ship to shreds. You can take all the time you want in fighting off the hordes of robots, though, but the main objective is to take out the reactor at the mine's core. Once you've achieved this goal, it's time to save your own skin. Amid flashing lights and explosions which continually rock the mine, you must make your way to the mine's exit within sixty seconds, accompanied by the voice of the mine's computer: "Self-destruct in 10 seconds... 9... 8... 7..."

If that doesn't get the adrenaline going, nothing else will.

[New and Improved](#)

Of course, Descent II features the obligatory enhancements in weapons, devices, and enemies. The main interface is the same, and a single glance at the game screen wouldn't be enough to differentiate between Descent and Descent II. However, the changes to gameplay are quite numerous. There are now a total of twenty weapons, including several varieties of energy blasts, spread fire, machine guns, missiles, homing missiles, bombs... The list goes on and on. Some of the most useful new weapons include guided missiles, which act like homing missiles except that you are given a chance to manually pilot them through the corridors. Flash missiles stun enemies for a certain period of time, and weapons like the Gauss Cannon and the Helix Cannon take the Vulcan Cannon and the Spreadfire Weapon to new levels. Yet another improvement is the missile cam, which gives you a small (or full-screen, if you prefer) view from the missile's perspective. This feature is handy in several ways, not the least of which is seeing around corners by piloting a guided missile.

Descent II also introduces plenty of the new devices for your use. An afterburner gives you a quick burst of speed just when you need it. A headlight device (extremely useful) can illuminate the darker corridors of the mine. Also, you can pick up a small device that lets you power up your shields with excess ship energy, and you can find a mapping device that gives you a full map of the entire level you are playing.

The new and improved lighting effects are worthy of mention as well. Light seems to be treated not in terms of light levels for individual walls but in terms of distance from designated light sources. Lights on the walls of tunnels illuminate certain areas, but a stray shot can easily destroy the light and darken the tunnel (usually your signal to fire up the headlight). The standard Descent lighting effects remain, though; if you fire an energy weapon down a long tunnel, you'll see a glimmer of light travel down the corridor walls as your projectile proceeds down the corridor. Likewise, flares can be fired into a nearby wall to help shine some light on the area for a certain period of time.

Wall switches are another important improvement. Certain sections of the wall contain circuitry panels that, when shot, produce effects such as the deactivation of force fields (which reflect energy weapons and ships) or the opening of walls or doors. This allows for more sophisticated level design; like Doom and Marathon, levels can be made more challenging by forcing the player to find a specific switch in order to open a door. Unfortunately, all switches are, well, "one-way". Once you've shot 'em, there's no repairing 'em.

Advanced artificial intelligence is, in my opinion, the most important improvement to Descent.

Some say the enemies have always been smart enough to learn your moves (and I'm still not quite sure I'm convinced of this), but I can say that enemies show a startling amount of intelligence and make quite worthy foes. I've seen enemies dodge my missiles, and I've occasionally seen enemies strafe across a corridor and then retreat. Some of the weakest enemies can be extremely hard to kill given their small size, incredible speed, and amazing ability to move out of the way of your shots. The "Thief-Bot" is one of the more advanced intelligences featured. This robot (who you will come to loathe with a passion) is extremely adept at sneaking up from behind you, snatching a weapon or device out of your arsenal, and then retreating down the corridors of the mine. He has very strong armor, and trying to shoot him down is about as frustrating as trying to swat a fly. On a more positive note, though, seeing him explode always brings a smile to my face...

The wonderful "Guide-Bot" is another feature that dramatically improves gameplay. Your Guide-Bot is a small blue robot that must be released from its cell on each level. Once released, it will follow you everywhere and help you navigate through the corridors of the mine. Its basic programming will lead you to each of the required keys, in order, and then to the reactor, and finally to the mine's exit. The Guide-Bot will explore the maze until it finds the appropriate path, and then it will come back to find you before turning around to find its destination again. You can also command the Guide-Bot to find powerups, energy, shields, enemies, or simply to stay away. This is, indeed, one of the most unique and important features of Descent II. The Guide-Bot eliminates much of the confusion that sets in when you can't find where you're supposed to go next, and it greatly improves gameplay without giving too much away. Another interesting feature is the ability to watch the Guide-Bot cam, which displays a small window in the bottom of the screen where you can see through the Guide-Bot's eyes. This is handy for planning the route you're going to take or for spying on enemies. For instance, you can instruct the Guide-Bot to find an enemy robot and then watch the Guide-Bot cam so that you know what to expect when you turn that next corner...

Lastly, multiplayer games have been enhanced. New options for use of certain weapons as well as player handicaps add to multiplayer fun. Also, markers dropped throughout the labyrinth (used for navigation in single-player mode) can actually be used as cameras to spy on enemy movements. Modem-to-modem, LAN, and Mac-to-PC multiplayer games are all supported.

[AV Heaven](#)

Descent II is a true audio-visual treat. The music included on the CD (in standard audio CD format, no less), is an excellent alternative/techno soundtrack that suits the game well. Although I had my doubts about the music at first, it has since proved to be a fitting companion to Descent II's excellent gameplay and graphics. If you don't like the music, though, you can turn off the CD option and listen to Descent II's default music (the same music heard in the demo). Even better, you can eject the Descent II CD while playing (though it's required to be in the drive while starting the game for copy protection purposes) and then insert your own favorite audio CD to use as background music. I often switch CD's so that I can listen to the excellent MechWarrior 2 soundtrack while playing Descent II.

Descent II also features new video sequences. The old escape scene which plays after you exit each mine has been replaced by a full-motion video sequence reminiscent of the destruction of the Death Star in Return of the Jedi. Also, an entertaining and graphically stunning introduction movie plays when the game opens, replacing the old text screens that provided the plot for the original Descent. With Virtual Memory disabled on my PowerMac 7500/100, these movies play flawlessly at full 640x400 resolution. All cutscenes are seamlessly integrated with the game and are a joy to watch, especially when it means that you've finally finished another level...

Performance

Despite all the numerous enhancements mentioned above, Descent II still performs very well on my PowerMac 7500/100 (stock model, no cache). Animation is smooth and fast at all times with all detail levels maxed out and pixel doubling on, though the animation is rather choppy without pixel doubling (i.e., in high resolution). Descent II requirements are hefty enough, though, that the game requires a PowerPC processor; an '040 just won't cut it. However, if you found the original Descent enjoyable on your current PowerMac, it's probably safe to assume that you'll enjoy Descent II just as much using the same system. Of course, a low-end PowerMac will still be able to adjust settings like detail levels and screen size to get the most out of Descent II.

Descent II's performance is also enhanced in the absence of Virtual Memory. My PowerMac has 16 MB of memory, so I usually use Virtual Memory to expand my computer's RAM to 32 MB. Unfortunately, this effectively cripples the cutscene movies, so I often trim down my extensions and turn off Virtual Memory to play Descent II. Users of 8 MB machines should be forewarned that cutscene videos (and indeed, the game itself) may not live up to their expectations because they will be forced to use Virtual Memory in order to meet the game's minimum memory requirements. Despite problems with the movies on my 16 MB PowerMac 7500 while using Virtual Memory, though, the game itself performs equally well with or without Virtual Memory.

If you still have problems with performance, MacPlay's wonderfully thorough manual provides plenty of help for those with performance problems or those just trying to learn the game. MacPlay provides their 70+ page (!) manual both as the standard booklet included with the game disk and as Acrobat .PDF format on the Descent II CD.

A Sight to Behold

Descent II is a truly immersive gaming experience. Without a doubt, Descent II provides one of the most realistic gaming environments I have seen on a Macintosh. The 360° 3D graphics engine tests your senses and your reflexes to the limit, and new items, characters, and devices challenge the mind as well. The graphics engine, with its superb animation and lighting effects, combined with the sinister AI and wonderful Guide-Bot and missile cam features bring the 3D genre to a new level for any player. Make no mistake, though, this game is difficult. Even once you have mastered the controls, you'll find yourself hard-pressed to survive the dozens of levels in front of you. (I started off on "Hotshot" difficulty, and by level 4, I wished I hadn't.)

While not for the faint of heart, Descent II delivers the goods, in a seamless package providing a realistic environment, fiendishly clever enemies, and some of the most intense action ever to find its way to the Macintosh. Descent II is another triumph for MacPlay and Parallax alike.

Pros

- 360° 3D environment
- Detailed ship controls
- Smooth animation on most PowerMacs
- Clever AI
- New weapons and ship upgrades
- Guide-Bot improves gameplay
- Realistic lighting effects/destroyable light sources
- Secondary cameras and views
- QuickTime intro and transition movies
- Excellent CD soundtrack and options to use other audio CDs
- Enhanced multiplayer options

- Thorough Macintosh manual, both hard copy and on disk

Cons

- Hefty system requirements
- Difficult to learn, difficult to master
- Induces severe claustrophobia:-)

Publisher Info

MacPlay
18922 Fitch Avenue
Irvine, CA 92714
(714)553-3530

<http://www.macplay.com/>