y Sean Kelly

Do you have what it takes to be the next Francis Drake, John Smith or Christopher Columbus? You can find out in November when MacPlay plans the first release of its Mac version of the popular PC strategy game, Conquest of the New World. But why wait? If you have an Internet connection you can embark on your journey right now by downloading one of three Demo versions from the MacPlay Internet site at: http://www.macplay.com/ (If we haven't already included a demo on this month's disc, that is.)

As its title implies, Conquest of the New World is a strategic conquest game in the vein of Civilization and Colonization. Play begins when you land your ship on the shores of an uncharted world, which is, as in Civilization, shrouded in blackness until you begin to reveal various geographic features through exploration. The game is turn-based. Your mission is to build up a successful colony and ultimately beat enemy nations in the race for control of the New World. To this end, you must send out explorers to chart and claim territory, use your settlers to establish a settlement and your soldiers to attack enemies and protect the settlement against the native inhabitants and competing colonies. The demo consists of three basic modules: a Tutorial, an Island Scenario and a Combat Game.

he demo limits you to 40 turns, or 40 game years. With all the micro-management necessary it sometimes felt longer. The game interface is fairly Mac-friendly. A zoom function lets you pull way back to reveal the explored continent in its entirety or zoom in to look at individual buildings where tiny settlers go about their daily routine of planting crops or chopping wood with sound effects to match. Double clicking on the town hall brings up menus that allow you to build new structures, engage in trade etc. A menu bar at the top of the screen lets you access individual units, check the game score, save at any point or quit. A very useful "next" button allows you move from unit to unit to issue commands without having to search them out individually. Some menus can be left open on the screen, like the auto-map. I must admit it took a while to become familiar with the abundance of options necessary to run a successful and expanding colony. With larger and multiple colonies I can imagine getting a big headache.

Attack!

After the movement phase, any attacks made are resolved on the combat screen. MacPlay has crippled the only competing nation in the demo, so it didn't make for aggressive competition. However, attacking native villages made them hostile to the point where they repeatedly raided my colony making off with valuable goods. I soon learned to engage in friendly trade with the Indians until I was powerful enough to crush them.

In contrast to some of the tedious aspects of colony building and exploration, I found the Combat module to be simple, challenging and a great deal of fun. In fact, it's good enough to be a mini-game in itself. Battle takes place on a 3x4 grid. Your forces are represented in the foreground as highly detailed miniatures that you move like chess pieces. You have three fighting pieces: artillery, cavalry and foot-soldiers. Your enemy can have any combination of the same, except for the natives, who can't use cannons. In combat practice mode, you can only fight the natives. Victory is achieved by capturing the enemy's colors, totally destroying his forces or inducing him to beat a hasty retreat. The interface is refreshingly direct. Click on the unit or units you want, then click again on a highlighted square to move them into position. Fighting is turn-based with the attacking forces getting the first move.

The "crack" of musket shot and the snorting and neighing of horses bring the battlefield to life. The playing pieces are skillfully animated from the dramatic charge of cavalry to the recoil of smoking guns. There's even a playful dog on the sidelines. The computer plays a good game, but I did beat it with regularity after I discovered its weaknesses. I'm looking forward to testing my mettle against more than just the native or French (present on the Island scenario only) forces.

Networking/Netplay
The demo lets you play over a network against one other opponent using Open Transport 1.1, or over the Internet if you have a PPP account and you know your opponent's IP address. MacPlay says the full version will allow six people to play simultaneously over a network. Since I am not on a network and have no friends, I couldn't take advantage of these options, but don't let that stop you.

What's Coming
If you're wondering what MacPlay has in store for us in the release version of Conquest of the New World, here is what's promised:

• Random worlds: different maps every time you play
• Up to six players at a time, playing as Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, Holland, and the high Native civilization (these natives represent what the Incas, Mayas, Aztecs, and other non-European civilizations might have become in a different world)
• Four levels of each building, with graphics and animations to match
• Combat graphics for all six nationalities
• More sophisticated and more aggressive computer players
• Additional options for trade and diplomacy
• A wide variety of victory conditions: number of turns, number of points, or a combination of the two
• Seven different solitaire scenarios
• Many more 16-bit stereo sound effects and background sounds
• User-configurable standalone combat game
• Ultra-high-detail zoom level

Conclusion

Basically if you like the demo, you'll know if you like the real game or not. Try it out. There is a lot to do in Conquest of the New World, and if you can't stomach the details of micromanaging a colony, then this is probably not the game for you. As for me, playing this demo has whet my appetite for further conquest. If you enjoy the challenge of games like Civilization and Colonization, then Conquest of the New World looks to be a worthy addition to your gaming library.

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