

Savage

Two games in one — but is either any good?

It's not that rare for a PC-game developer to attempt to blend two or more genres together to create a new type of gameplay, although these cross-breeds have typically met with limited success, both critically and commercially.

The latest — and perhaps most ambitious — hybrid is an online-only multi-player game dubbed *Savage: The Battle for Newerth*. It combines the micromanagement of real-time strategy games with on-the-battlefield action, in a style vaguely reminiscent of "straction" experiments like *Uprising*.

Thanks to its strong cooperative component and carrot-dangling tech-tree upgrades, *Savage* succeeds where others have failed. While hardly perfect, its innovative mix of two popular game genres is hard to put down.

After choosing your server, you join one side of this fantasy war — Humans vs. Beasts, each with unique units, buildings, and weapons — and then select whether to play the game as a real-time strategy game or a first-person shooter. Clicking the "Spawn" button launches the on-the-ground Warrior mode (played from either a first-person or third-person perspective), while choosing "Commander"

launches the RTS interface, where you assign orders to AI grunts to mine resources and construct buildings while chatting with human-controlled FPS Warriors to direct combat.

Basically, the RTS mode is for those who want to think and the FPS mode is for those who want to act. But each side must rely on its teammates' coordination and cohesiveness.

Each side has only one Commander, but it's possible (though almost never seen) for that player to switch roles with an FPS player in mid-game. And teams can vote for a new Commander if they don't like the way things are going.

The ranged, magic, and melee weapons are similar to those in other games, but there's a neat twist — Warriors can switch bodies to become another kind of creature if the Commander has researched it. For example, on the Beast Horde side, players can exit the body of a cat-like Stalker and enter that of a huge but slow Behemoth biped. If so desired, two gamers can face off as Commanders with no other human players, or even better, two players can fight as on-the-ground Warriors while AI Commanders build up their respective bases.

KNOW YOUR BATTLEFIELD



Trees, water, and mountains serve as obstacles for both sides. Learning a map and picking the right spawn points will give one side an advantage over the other. (Having a savvy Commander helps, too.)



Oh, you savage beast, you. A Behemoth wields a tree trunk while taking down an enemy's buildings.

Savage supports up to 64 players in one map (two Commanders plus 31 Warriors per side), although in our experience, the action can slow down considerably with too many players in one game.

Other technical issues include some servers that can't be accessed, others that load a different map than what's indicated, some clipping issues, and the odd freeze or crash before a game loads (but rarely during gameplay). Occasional lag "hiccups" can seriously affect first-person aiming and third-person melee combat.

I have other minor beefs with *Savage* — mainly the lack of voice support: in a game that requires constant communication, it seems a glaring omission. And while some map layouts are better than others ("Crossroads" and "Alpine Valley" are two good ones), the varying climate conditions are really just for show, since they don't affect gameplay at all. The game's RTS and FPS elements aren't anything exciting on their own, but the combined whole makes *Savage* a fun, fresh game that will likely get better over time as its technical kinks are worked out, better maps are created, and organized clans begin to pop up. — Marc Saltzman

VITAL STATS

CATEGORY Strategy/Action
ESRB RATING T
DEVELOPER S2 Games
PUBLISHER Games Publishing
REQUIRED PIII-500, 128MB RAM, 33MB HD, 32MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND PIII-1GHz or higher, 256MB RAM, 128MB 3D card
MAXIMUM PLAYERS 64

On the ground, Warriors can choose to build, help mine resources, or in this case, repair a building.

FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS: Hybrid genre works; demands team cohesion; clever team concepts; no monthly fee.

LOWS: Technical snags need ironing out; no voice-chat support; no tutorial.

BOTTOM LINE: Proves that melding two game types into one can be done right.

PC GAMER 80%
 EXCELLENT