

[left] In space no one can hear you hit pause constantly. [below] Targeting fleet-producing subsystems will enable your marines to safely capture your enemy's mothership. Then he'll feel dumb.



Here the menu takes up a third of the screen, obscuring your view of the luscious space graphics, and you can't move or shrink it. Hitting R minimizes the research menu, but B doesn't minimize the build menu. For all their bigness, the menus don't seem to use their space wisely; it makes you long for the minimalist simplicity of the sensors manager.

Many basics feel harder, although you get used to them. You now build the smaller ships in complete squadrons, presumably to make the battles bigger and more spectacular, but clicking on an individual ship gives you the relative health of the entire squadron at the bottom of the screen, which is less precise. Why not an AI setting to have ships auto-dock when they're near death? Why can't collectors auto-repair? Why no patrol? How about being able to assign docked craft to control groups? Alt-bandboxing a group of ships that includes hostiles doesn't show a list of all those selected, as it did in both the original and *Cataclysm*. The beloved formations such as sphere and claw have been abandoned for new, more efficient "strike groups," fleets that can include multiple ship types but move at the speed of their slowest unit. Familiarity with these is a major factor in combat, but the rock-paper-scissors consequences of using each type are barely touched on in the slender manual, itself a mockery of the original game's thick, detailed documentation.

Helping *Homeworld 2* skate by in the face of all this is what from every early indication seems to be a satisfying, uniquely textured multiplayer experience by LAN or (results may vary) by Internet.

Limited numbers of key modules called subsystems can be built to customize your larger ships with features like fire control towers, cloaking devices, and hyperspace modules. They can also be targeted by focused enemy fire, adding a whole new dimension of strategic possibilities. Already, techniques such as mobile refinery and platform rushes are being vilified online as proof of *Homeworld 2*'s faulty "balancing" issues. But tactically, it delivers an improved, much more elaborate combat model than the first game.

For all its clumsy new baggage and rushed feel, *Homeworld 2* takes itself seriously, designed from the ground up as a reward to the faithful rather than an olive branch to the casual newcomer. The lucky few up to its Sisyphean challenges will find themselves rewarded for their loyalty.

—Kelly Ward

DEVELOPER Relic Entertainment •
PUBLISHER Vivendi Universal • ESRB Teen

Savage: Battle for Newerth

Almost brilliant

★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

TRAPPED SOMEWHERE inside *Savage: Battle for Newerth* is a great game trying to break free. It's a mechanically brilliant design, a seamless fusion of action and real-time strategy that adds an element of organized tactics that you won't find in most other team shooters. Like the land of Newerth, however, which is locked in an eternal struggle between human and beast, the game is a Jekyll and Hyde mix of entertaining concepts and uneven execution. It's often hard to decide whether to love it in spite of itself or reluctantly hate it.

If you've played the "Natural Selection" mod for *Half-Life*, or the vastly underrated *Allegiance*, then you have some idea what to expect. Two teams of beasts or humans face off against each other on one of fourteen different maps. Most of the players jump into the game as warriors and fight it out with the enemy from a first- or third-person view (if you aren't using one of the longest ranged weapons, it's best to stick with third-person). One player on each

top sellers



It's a pity how poorly flight simulators sell. They can't get into stores, they languish on shelves, and companies have to pay people to take them off their hands. It's an awful situation. (Except for *Flight Simulator 2004*.)

- 1 WarCraft III: Frozen Throne**
Vivendi Universal Publishing ★★★★★
- 2 Flight Simulator 2004: Century Of Flight**
Microsoft ★★★★★
- 3 The Sims: Superstar**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 4 Madden NFL 2004**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 5 The Sims Deluxe**
Electronic Arts Not Rated
- 6 Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided**
LucasArts ★★½
- 7 WarCraft III: Reign Of Chaos**
Vivendi Universal Publishing ★★★★★
- 8 Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection**
Microsoft Not Rated
- 9 Age Of Mythology**
Microsoft ★★★★★
- 10 The Sims Unleashed**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★
- 11 Diablo II**
Vivendi Universal Publishing ★★★★★
- 12 Battlefield 1942**
Electronic Arts ★★★★★½
- 13 Roller Coaster Tycoon 2**
Atari ★★★★★
- 14 Rise Of Nations**
Microsoft ★★★★★
- 15 Neverwinter Nights: Shadows Of Undrentide**
Atari ★★★★★½
- 16 Finding Nemo: Nemo's Underwater World of Fun**
THQ Inc Not Rated
- 17 Finding Nemo**
THQ Inc Not Rated
- 18 SimCity 4**
Electronic Arts ★★½
- 19 Command & Conquer Generals**
Electronic Arts ★★★
- 20 Zoo Tycoon**
Microsoft ★★★★★½

The August list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market. For more information, please contact NPDtechworld.



Server Name	Map	Players	Bases	Time	Type	Flag
51 East 7th (Fixed)	overgrown	12/12	N x B	00:01	RTS	1/4
52 East 10th (Fixed)	morning	11/12	N x B	00:08	RTS	1/4
Map:romcom.net	map	12/12	N x B	00:02	RTS	1/4
Today's Message: There seems to be routing problems with routing tables on the internet that is not allowing some people to access our master server. The result is that some people can't get a game. We're sorry we'll have to fix it soon. This is a top priority for us!						

[left] Good Commanders keep you occupied with interesting tasks such as protecting vital units. [above] Sometimes your options for finding a good game are rather limited.

team takes the role of Commander; instead of fighting on the ground, these players get a bird's-eye view of the battlefield and are responsible for organizing tactics, building a base, and researching new technologies for the troops.

While it's not an entirely novel concept, *Savage* strikes the best balance yet between the action and strategy elements. It's simple enough to pick up without the need for tutorials (a good thing, since it doesn't have any) while providing just the right tools to keep Commanders and troops working together. Commanders can issue various orders to other players, such as "protect this unit" or "mine this resource" or "attack this target." More importantly, they have the means to reward compliance with gold or equipment, which provides players with a natural incentive to work as a team and follow orders. Commanders can also promote players to officers, giving them a special banner that appears on both the character model and the mini map and an aura that heals nearby units. Experienced Commanders will use this clever mechanic to hand pick the best tacticians and give the rest of the troops a reason to follow them around, greatly reducing micromanagement in battles. It all works amazingly well in practice—problem players are rare.

Unfortunately, good players are also rare. The first and most troublesome problem that you encounter in the game is the minuscule size of the player community. There are rarely more than a handful of well-populated servers to choose from, and in semi-off hours (weeknights, for instance) there might be as few as two or three. Of course you can only play on one server at a time anyway, so even a couple of busy servers should be more than you

Half-baked

Secret Weapons of WWII asks, "How much would you pay?" for a glorified mod

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

BY TOM CHICK

SECRET WEAPONS IS another *Road to Rome*-style map pack that doesn't do a whole lot to the original *Battlefield 1942*. Most of the secret weapons are just skin jobs. They tend to be bigger guns and faster planes, which are carefully balanced against other bigger guns and faster planes. The result is that they don't feel much different from regular guns and regular planes. The rocket pack is a rare and underpowered sputtering deo-dad good for little more than getting you onto the roof of a building, where you can't snipe because the rocket pack always comes with a German submachine gun. The guided missile is a twitchy exercise in having one chance, if you're lucky, at hitting something so long as it's really big and slow.

The irony is that the closest you'll find to a dramatic change is in the mundane stuff: a sniper rifle that doesn't lose its zoom after you fire; a C-47 that serves as a mobile spawn point; a zippy motorcycle that can get you where you're going faster than any jeep; and a few amphibious vehicles that throw a new twist into maps with water. You've probably seen these sorts of things done just as well or better in mods that didn't cost \$30.

But since *Battlefield 1942* is phenomenally addictive, you've already played the hell out of it and now you're hungry for more, no matter how half-baked. So you hand over your cash and in return you get a handful of more-of-the-same gameplay (the new objective mode sounds promising, but is so poorly balanced that you have to wonder why it's in there). Adding insult to \$30 injury, the expansion's restrictive copy protection means that servers won't run *Road to Rome* and *Secret Weapons* maps in rotation, effectively splintering the community.

DEVELOPER D.I.C.E. • PUBLISHER Electronic Arts • ESRB Teen



"Nothing personal, Wolfgang, but your car handles like a boat."

need, right? In practice, it just doesn't work that way. The quality of the game experience depends largely on the players, especially the Commander. A single inexperienced Commander can spoil the game for the other 31 players, and while the players can vote to impeach their Commander, sometimes there isn't anyone better to take his place. With so few viable servers and only two Commanders per game, it takes a good deal of persistence to get any command experience at all.

The game often suffers from more mundane maladies. Network performance is sometimes poor, even on low-ping servers. Characters warp and jerk about the map, making combat (for troops) a crapshoot and unit selection (for Commanders) an exercise in frustration. Ranged weapons sometimes get "stuck," firing off all their ammo (which costs gold) before your client synchs with the server. Packet loss errors occasionally boot you out of the game, robbing you of any gold, levels, and upgrades that you might have acquired.

Then there are the times when the stars are right and the planets align and you land in the perfect game, with minimal network problems and talented Commanders and balanced teams. Bases flourish, coordinated groups of players fight well-orchestrated battles, players keep voting to extend the time limit, and you realize that you've been playing the same scenario for two hours and you still don't want it to end.

That's when you catch a glimpse of the brilliant game *Savage* can be—Jekyll at his most charming. It's a pity that his other half feels so much more familiar.

— Benjamin E. SOSNES
DEVELOPER S2 Games • PUBLISHER
Games Publishing • ESRB Teen

Command and Conquer Generals: Zero Hour

The arms race goes arcade

★★★★★

IN MANY WAYS, *Command & Conquer Generals* was the first "arcade-style" real-time strategy game, if such a thing is possible. Eschewing the meandering plots, convoluted build orders, and protracted campaigns of other popular titles, it cuts right to the chase and delivers loads of visual gratification wed to a tight interface. For some folks, this approach doesn't sit too well; alternately decried as "shallow" by some and "unbalanced" by others, a lot of the subtleties of the game went unnoticed.

Zero Hour takes its arcade sensibilities even further, and the result is one of the most adrenaline-filled (and occasionally heart-stopping) experiences out there.

This time, the inspiration comes from the fighting game genre: during skirmish and internet play, you now choose one of nine generals—three from each faction—as your avatar, and each comes with a very specific set of units and upgrades. The expansion takes advantage of this approach by adding the all-new "Challenge" mode, which pits you and your chosen general against the other eight in arenas designed specifically to exploit that general's abilities. Throughout the battle, the rival general taunts you, occasionally telegraphing his or her plans. It's a hilariously absorbing approach that emphasizes the game's winking personality and over-the-top sensibilities.

There are also three new five-mission campaigns that are all-too short and not exactly satisfying. Still, like the original *Generals*, *Zero Hour* isn't really about the single-player component. At its very core it's a multiplayer experience in much the way *Street Fighter 2* is; both are games of fast-paced and very immediate aggression that depend not only on how well you know the game mechanics overall, but also how well you know the nuances of the character (in this case, general) you've chosen. There's no complaining about early rushes; every match you fight is a rush, and it's over just as soon. The first time you pit yourself against a US Air Force general, you find yourself utterly overwhelmed, but after several matches, the genius of this game's balance shines through; if you have your defenses ready and can weather the first five minutes of carpet bombing, you can sap your opponent of resources and shut them down with



A pinpoint strike from the US Air Force general trashes poor General Kwai's populist dreams; [below] Where would an expansion be without the mandatory Snow Level™.

