

Serf's Up!

Taking the Middle Road Through the Middle Ages

by Pete Scisco

In this trip back to the Middle Ages, real-time strategy fans will have to mellow their pace to achieve the game's objective—rebuilding a kingdom torn by feudal war. As a captain (the last one, mind you) in the Royal Palace Guard, you must reconstruct the kingdom campaign by campaign, ultimately defeating the King's own treacherous son.

Holy Shakespeare! With a classic plot like that and an entertaining display that turns the computer screen into a miniatures playland, this import from Germany's Topware Interactive is not without its charm. The strategies involved, particularly in battle, take some deeper thinking than what's required from many recent real-time action games that follow the mantra "the biggest fist wins."

After building an imposing army (infantry at the front of the legion, for example, archers in the rear, protected and positioned to fire on approaching enemy forces), players can experiment with formations and positioning.

Attacking an enemy's flank or rear brings huge benefits. In solo play, the game's AI is sophisticated enough to make parrying and drawing the enemy into the open a challenge. In multiplayer games, it adds a thoughtful component to attacks.

It Takes a Village

Unlike so many real-time strategy games, the support structure for military units plays a key role in the game and provides much of the entertainment. None of that short-cut "click on a archer and out he comes" stuff. Here, it takes a village to raise a Bowman.

First you'll need a Schoolhouse, which the game provides at the beginning of each mission, to produce the type of king's subject you'll need. Farms and vineyards produce food and drink. You'll also have to build an inn so your people will have a place to eat.

Back to our Bowman. You'll first need a barracks, which, like all buildings, must be connected to other buildings by a road. The laborers build everything, while serfs haul the supplies. Now you need a Woodcutter's Hut and a Woodcutter to fell trees. Next comes the

Sawmill and a Carpenter for making planks. You'll need a Weapons Workshop and another Carpenter to cut longbows from planks.

In addition to the regular farm, you need a Swine Farm and an

Animal Breeder for husbandry. You will need two Butcher/Tanner subjects—one to make sausage from the pig and a roll of pigskin; the other at the Tannery to turn pig skins into leather. Your Bowman will need that for his armor, which is made at the Armory Workshop.

Bedeviling Details

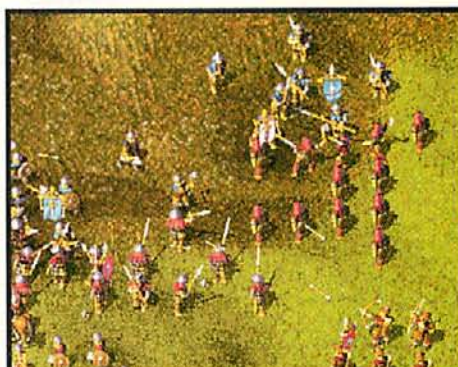
All of these details will satisfy the most anal-retentive empire builder. And watching the little people at work is a charming experience. Still, KNIGHTS AND MERCHANTS is just as notable for what it doesn't provide. Religion plays no role, there's no medical component, and there are no women characters. Another oddity is the constant reference to corn rather than wheat—since corn is indigenous to North America. Players looking for verisimilitude between the game and actual Medieval village life will be disappointed.

The characters and landscape details give KNIGHTS AND MERCHANTS a charm that's hard to resist. But with the real-time strategy elements bogging down in minutiae and the empire-building elements skipping some essential details, it will have to wait for its seat at the round table. **CW**

Pete Scisco's interest in the Middle Ages centers on the ramifications of movable type and the spread of information as agents of political change—which means he gets more chain letters than chain mail.



PART 1: THE TAVERN GREEN A parade of happy serfs whistle as they work, hauling lumber, stones, and farm goods.



PART 2: JOIN THE ATTACK A unit of Lancers initiates an attack against enemy forces.



PART 3: TIME TO DIE The Lancers break rank under a volley of arrows while the enemy outflanks a squad of infantry. Ouch.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD



APPEAL: Real-time strategy and empire-building fans who don't expect much.

PROS: Great animated graphics bring miniatures to life.

CONS: Slow pace; micromanaging bogs down strategic play; no wenchies.

DIFFICULTY: Intermediate.

REQUIREMENTS: Pentium 133, Windows 95, 24MB RAM, 70MB hard-disk space, 4x CD-ROM, 256-color video card with 1MB of VRAM (2MB recommended), 8-bit audio.

3D SUPPORT: None.

MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: LAN (2-6 players); modem (2 players).

Price: \$39.95

Publisher: Interactive Magic
Research Triangle Park, NC
(800) 789-1534

www.imagicgames.com

