

SAVAGE 2: A TORTURED SOUL

Real-Time Action-Strategy RPFPS

PUBLISHER: S2 Games DEVELOPER: S2 Games GENRE: Most of them AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.s2games.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 1GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 6-24 players VERSION REVIEWED: E-tail



REVIEW

The theory of the player commander, in the minds of developers both amateur and professional, must look something like this: One player assumes the role of master tactician, able to survey the war zone from a satellite's-eye view, direct the combat, and anticipate enemy exertions of force with the prescience of a chess master and the eyes of an eagle. This god-king of the voice-communication button demands obedience and respect from his troops—and in return, he showers them with useful supplements to their arsenals.

In reality—where players aren't the altruistic paragons of togetherness that many starry-eyed devs seemingly expect them to be—commanders are just as individualistic as their subordinates, and troopers rarely have incentive to ten-hut until they're in need of an airdropped goody bag. Enter *Savage 2: A Tortured Soul*, a "genre-bender" with enough abbreviations on its fact sheet to warrant the cliché...and a commander mode that excels despite the proclivities of your average multiplayer gamer.

A (CONTRIVED) TALE OF TWO TEAMS

Welcome to the embarrassingly derivative fantasy land of Newerth, where the Legion (which is not an Alliance) of Man constantly clashes with the Horde (which is not *that* Horde) of Beasts on utterly forgettable geography dotted with fortuitously proportional gold mines to fight over. The player classes can be similarly reduced to archetypal standbys: Rangers, melee guys, healers, summoners—they're all here. A contrived storyline attempts to mold *Savage 2's* factions and setting into something more meaningful than standard RTS base vs. base warfare; but, like most multiplayer games, this one succeeds

not because of what you fight for, but *how* you fight for it.

Think *Fable* meets *Guild Wars* on the plains of *WarCraft III*: Every class (save for building-busting siege units) has third-person melee and first-person projectile attacks at its disposal as well as a host of spells and special abilities. Melee duels erupt in frantic bursts of full-contact rock-paper-scissors, where blocking and interrupt attacks create openings for slashes and skill bar-based spellwork. Even support classes—usually relegated to second-rate-citizen status by the hardcore—are dynamic enough to guarantee a healthy number of healers and builders on any given team.

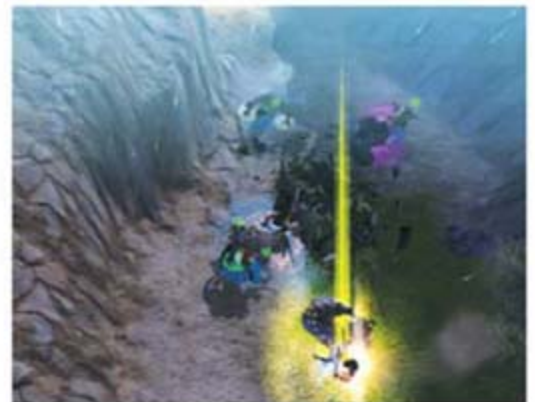
GOD GAME

And then we have the commander, an elected (and unimpeachable) leader duty-bound to erect skill-unlocking structures and sling helpful buffs and debuffs into the fracas below. What was true in *Battlefield 2* is true here: When the commander starts *commanding*, players tend to get busy doing whatever the hell else they'd rather do...and for the ignored emperor in the sky, it doesn't take long for fits of Old Testament vindictiveness to set in. Blow off an order or challenge a decision and you run the risk of being forsaken by the higher-up, denied the heavenly buffs that can win battles.

Ground-pounders left in the lurch get their own shot at schadenfreude when the team's prospects for victory turn south: When income slows due to depleted or seized mines, the commander must rely on the generosity of players willing to dip into their own kill-earned coffers to keep the war effort afloat. Donating gold so that Big Brother can continue producing public works might seem like a no-brainer on paper, but charity for the good of the team doesn't come naturally to most players. Many of them would rather live free *and* die.

These observations aren't intended to deter you from *Savage 2* or its commander mode. In fact, developer S2 Games comes closer to balancing the player commander formula than anyone else by managing to instill a sense of reciprocal dependency between players and commander and a fear of mutually assured destruction for the team that refuses to act like one. An understanding of this dynamic seemed to dawn on a great deal of players during the game's early weeks; *Savage 2's* designers did an admirable job of inspiring teamwork rather than forcing or ignoring it.

Leave it to a team of 11 developers to succeed so resoundingly where behemoths have failed. *Savage 2* isn't perfect—squads are semirandomized smatterings of players



• Finishing the enemy base.

unable to communicate or coordinate fluidly as of this writing, and the game can be overwhelming to new players—but its ambition is matched only by the amount of fun you'll have playing. • **Rory Manion**

VERDICT

- Great combat system; excellent commander mode.
- Good teamwork could be further encouraged.

B-
GOOD

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