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Battle for Wesnoth

The Battle for Wesnoth is on in the days that never were

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Free software games have long ago evolved from the command line. In this article I'll describe one thoroughly addictive, turn based, graphical online game named "The Battle for Wesnoth" (<http://www.wesnoth.org/>).

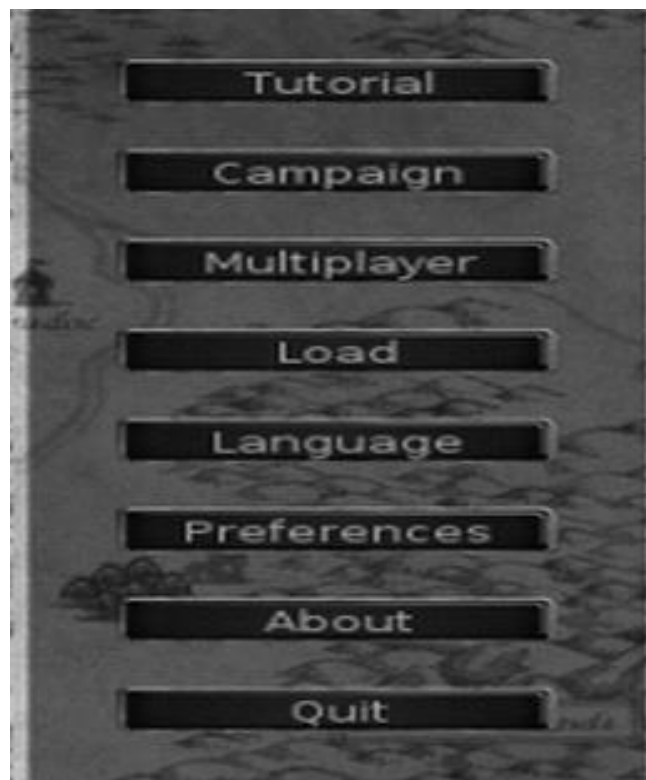
To be honest, though, I am limited by my middle aged perspective and lack of knowledge of what is in the frame. So, I have asked my ten-year-old son to dive into the depths of gamesmanship and help his poor old father in his senile dotage. I will be doing the writing but Nelson will do the playing. His fingers are faster and his aim is crueller. I will observe, explain and ask from him his wisdom. Let us begin, unleash the dogs of war, warm up the pop corn. It is my turn. Nelson I will not be beaten.

Starting point

The Battle for Wesnoth is a free software online game that can be learnt efficiently offline. The game is graphical and role based. There are two versions (at the time of writing) that you may download. The first is stable, version 1.02 and the second is somewhat less stable, but has a few more features that are being put through a test phase. For practice the stable version is the best to start with. Depending on your operating system, there are different ways of installing the game. For Windows, download the installer and just run. In a few seconds everything is working.

On starting Wesnoth you are given a number of options as shown in figure 1:

Figure 1: Screen grab of start options



The tutorial, the top most button, is an excellent starting point. Once in the tutorial, you will find yourself guided through a basic scenario (as shown in figure 2), by the computer controlled character named Delfador. Delfador sets you a series of minor tasks that quickly build up the skills

Figure 2: Delfador the teacher speaks



you need to flawlessly interact with the game arena. My son required no supervision to use the tutorial and, despite an inherent lack of patience common to his generation, he managed to master the basics of the game in less than ten minutes. Whenever he made a mistake that made a scenario impossible to fulfil he was sent back a couple of turns in the tutorial. This method proved to be a highly effective means of communicating tactics.

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The game is role based and everyone has to take his, her or its turn. Figure 3 is a screen grab of the area of play as seen at the beginning of the beginner's tutorial.

The map is divided into a hexagonal grid (as shown in figure 3). The beautifully rendered graphics smooth out the appearance of the grid, but honestly the matrix does exist! Depending on how much money you have you may recruit from a range of fighting figures, each figure with its own specialisations, strengths and weaknesses. Some figures can move distances fast, others can heal or use brute force to bludgeon their way through a retreating army. Finding the right balance of recruits and using the right tactics to emphasise the core strengths of your army require practice and

Figure 3: Part of the tutorial map



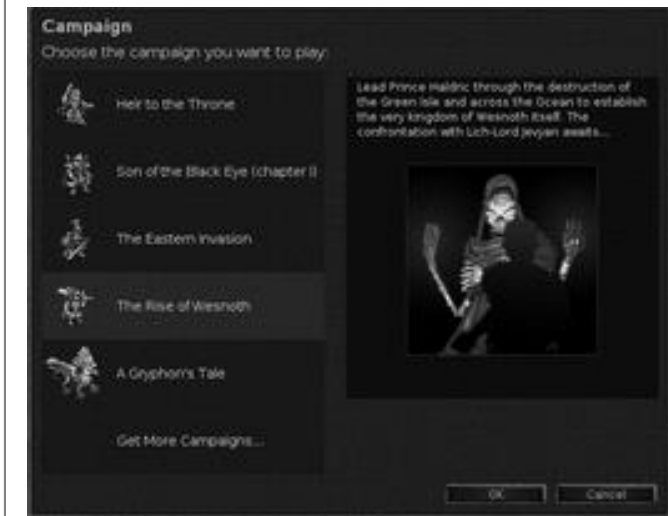
a sense of tactics. Thus, this is an easy game to learn, but note that you will never quite finish with the learning curve. Promising for the game, is the fact that the learning curve is a feature common to many famous cult games.

After quickly learning the basics through
the tutorial you are ready to make it out
into the unprotected, unforgiving and
violent world

At the beginning of the game you are given a pot of gold and the first few turns are all about moving your recruits into their right placements. You may order your recruits about by clicking on them. Special actions like chatting or labelling a piece of ground are achieved by right clicking. The interface is simple and quick to learn to use. During fighting, the figures gain experience and are slowly promoted—increasing level and skill factors, morphing their iconic representations during their evolution.

After quickly learning the basics through the tutorial you are ready to make it out into the unprotected, unforgiving and violent world that we all belong to. You have plenty of choices for confrontation divided into two categories; campaign and multiplayer. Multiplayer is the most fun, but building up experience is easier in the protective havens of the campaign option. Figure 4 is a screen grab of the campaign options. Basically a campaign is a set of scenarios

Figure 4: Select your campaign



based around a story. A scenario can be considered a goal that needs to be achieved—for example reaching a certain location or killing a certain figure. Once you have chosen the campaign you wish, a story is presented in a combination of words and pictures. The story fills in the background details of the campaign and is intended to motivate you to fight to your last ounce of artificial blood against the evil that unfolds. A campaign is played against the computer. A feature of great worth is the ability to download campaigns via the “Get more campaigns option”. You may, with this feature, go online and choose updated or new stories. Downloading extends the value of Wesnoth and allows the online community to participate and personalise. I look forward to an online voting system, perhaps as part of the game. Voting would enhance the market place for new campaigns.

After playing a few campaigns and generally routing the enemy (yeah that’s what they all say!) I decided to face off against a few humans. Therefore with shaking hands and a nervous laugh I selected multiplayer, as shown in figure 5. The most applicable option for me was the joining of an official server. Once connected you may choose a game to play, observe or start a new game. Observing allows you to see the action without participating. You may chat as well, but you have no influence on the figures on the map. Hanging around the lounge, a meeting point for players, I noticed two generic user populations. The first group of players had agreed elsewhere to play with their associates

Figure 5: Choosing an option in multiplayer mode



and known competitors. Group two players choose a random game and interacted with other strangers. Therefore, Wesnoth is not just a game, but also an excuse to make social contact with like minded battlers. The chatting feature adds an extra level. In the heat of battle, you can choose to chat with your allies or taunt your enemies. My son particularly liked the label feature where you can place text against locations on the map. He spent twenty minutes in one game writing the word “mine” over objects only to have the label deleted by others. A waste of time you may think or pure psychological warfare, only the winner will know.

AI v Human is a good start point for practice. But don’t expect too much intelligence from the computer. You may even host your own game, fun for a cultural version of a LAN party. Yes, force your friends to play in costumes with pointy hats!

Observing from a distance

Okay, I admit it on my home network my son beat me. I’m still more intelligent than he is. Only he didn’t realise that, and the game was on his side, and anyway who cares. At

first Nelson played the game because of the promise of a little extra pocket money. But as soon as he had got the hang of things he went online. As I write he is sitting next to me with my laptop fighting, labelling and chatting. Dynamic and active and learning some basic English words on the way. Okay so the words include kill, retreat, and run. But the chatting in general is clean and all the interacting partners are honestly doing their best to capture the spirit of the occasion. The multiplayer feature adds great value to the game and he continuously switches the chat option “Send to allies” thus fostering a real feeling of competition through medieval insults and modern day slang. To find out what he thought about the battle of Wesnoth I asked Nelson a number of pertinent questions:

AB: What was your first impression of the game?

NB: First, I thought it just was a game with just a few figures in it—rather limited. But later, I saw the figures rise to another level and I could then use much stronger attacks. I liked the feeling of progress a lot.

AB: And the graphics?

NB: A little on the old fashioned side.

AB: Did you win?

NB: Not yet. Apart from against you.

AB: (Ahem)... okay, moving on... Do you have any ideas on how the game can be improved?

NB: Adding shops for buying things that make you stronger, weapons, healing magic, daisy cutters.

AB: Would you consider adding your own campaigns to the game if you could?

NB: Yes. As long as it doesn't take too much time to learn.

AB: Is there anything else you would like to add?

NB: No, I am busy playing. Go away!

Remember to feed the cat, you may lose yourself in the multiplayer mode

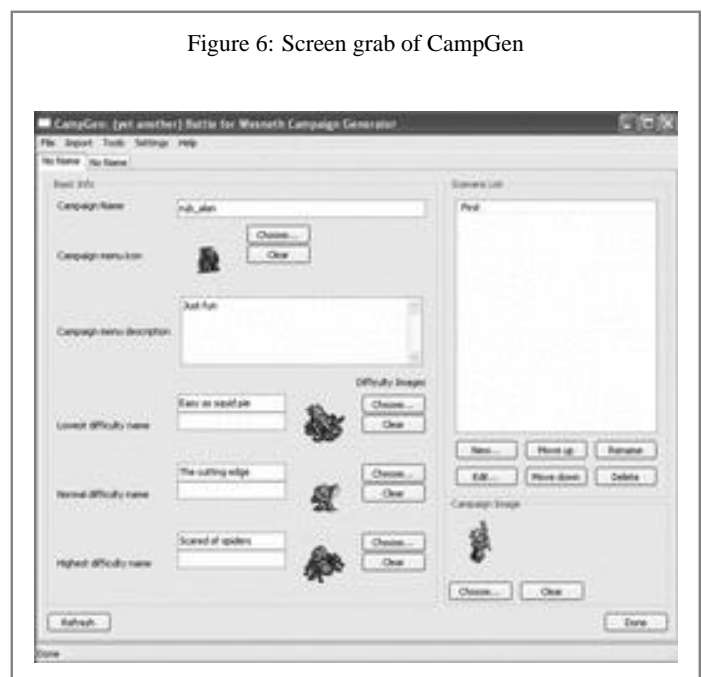
So as you can see from the conversation, Nelson likes playing the game, but does see some room for improvement with the graphics and feature enhancements. Myself, I think that the multiplayer feature makes the game. It is well worth giving it a test run through the tutorial on a rainy Sunday morning. Just remember to feed the cat, you may lose yourself in the multiplayer mode.

Mapping Wesnoth

The Battle for Wesnoth, the game itself is a mature and well polished product. Creation of personalised campaigns is still a little on the raw side. But, I have no doubt that this minor weakness will be changed for the better in the coming months. To build a campaign yourself requires the creation of resources such as maps, figures and music, and the configuration of these resources into a scenario. A campaign is generated out of a series of these self-created scenarios. Maps are easily rendered via the inbuilt editor. The editor allows you to place land types on the map and save the it in text or binary format. Text format costs a little bit more disc space, but with practice the text is readable by your standard ten-year-old. Map generation is the obvious and simple part. Building a campaign is somewhat harder. A tool that simplifies this process is “CampGen”. Campgen is a Python script based on WxWidgets, a free software, cross-platform, native UI framework (see figure 6).

The game is interactive, community orientated and has a rich set of features

Figure 6: Screen grab of CampGen



Conclusions

Wesnoth is well worth trying out. The game is interactive, community orientated and has a rich set of features. A lay-man given enough time can make, via the help of tools, new scenarios and campaigns. The battle for Wesnoth is thus a living entity slowly expanding through the energy of its on-line community. I expect it to become more successful and look forward to playing version 2 with a mature set of tools for campaign generation.

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Getting started information (<http://www.wesnoth.org/wiki/GettingStarted>)

WxWidgets (<http://www.wxwidgets.org/>)

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Nelson Berg is an intelligent and aggressive game player and part-time ten-year-old son of Alan.