



**By John Hood**

### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2003 I joined the online writing staff at Inside Mac Games (IMG). Inside Mac Games was founded in 1993 as a floppy disk-based magazine. Since its inception, IMG has been at the forefront of the Mac gaming scene, providing news, previews, and reviews to hundreds of thousands of readers throughout the world.

Today IMG is published on the web and to subscribers via the MacGames DVD. With an installed base of over 100,000 readers and 350,000 unique visitors per month, IMG is among the most popular gaming sites on the Internet. Sponsors include Aspyr Media, Inc. and Feral.

Since I left IMG, much has changed in the Mac gaming world: The iPhone and iPod touch were launched and Apple has broadsided competitors with its vertically integrated App Store. If anything, the desktop environment is no longer as important! We're witnessing a paradigm shift towards mobile as the dominant platform of the future.

Over the following pages you can read my previously published video game reviews, and previews, which were written during my tenure at IMG.

### Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy



In January 1978 at the age of five my world was changed forever by an inaugural encounter with the cinematic realm. The film in question was Star Wars and, like fellow members of Generation X, I've followed the series in its multitude of media incarnations: from books to toys. However, video games remain the fondest forum since the early Atari coin-ops.

Jedi Academy is the second sequel to Jedi Knight and rapidly follows in the wake of Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast. And, as such, is the third installment. The speed of the game's port, to the Macintosh platform, is indicative of the timely talent of Aspyr Studio and the insatiable appetite of Mac gamers for original and licensed product. The most pertinent question on many gamers' minds is: will it suffer from trilogy exhaustion?

#### Graphics

The graphics are augmented by Raven Software's code enhancements. The sumptuous visuals belie the Quake III game engine's four-year age! Rain super heats as it falls onto a striking lightsaber and the character animation is suitably smooth and fluid even on modest hardware (this review was conducted on an 800 MHz iMac G4 with 512 MB RAM). Close combat has not witnessed such balletic battles since Darth Maul cartwheeled onto celluloid in Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace (1999).

#### Sound

The sound design is unquestionably of a pedigree deserving of the title's roots. My review sessions were monitored using JBL Creature speakers, which rendered an involving and detailed three-dimensional sound stage replete with the familiar sounds of a galaxy far, far away. I lamented being unable to savor the delights of a 5.1 mix, however. Where would a Star Wars adventure be without the familiar underscores of John Williams' familiar (if overused) leitmotifs? No longer used in their original cinematic context, here his orchestrations inform your journey to become a Jedi...

## Gameplay

In this outing Kyle Katarn (who made his first appearance in the legendary Dark Forces) is no longer the principle protagonist and acts as mentor alongside Luke Skywalker. Instead the game designers adroitly avoid any tenuous contrivances and invite you to create a new character from scratch albeit one who goes by the fixed name of Jaden Korr. The inevitable Sims (no it's not Skywalker Family Ties) comparison cannot be ignored, but doesn't detract from the short-lived novelty of deciding gender, species and lightsaber type (later stages allow for the wielding of two light sabers and Darth Maul's infamous double-bladed light saber).

During the early stages of Jedi Academy, as you investigate the whereabouts of Luke's missing journal, the missions allow you to hone and enhance your Jedi powers before the saga starts gaining momentum. In between levels you get to choose between Light and/or Dark Force powers and either Choke or Confuse your opponents with Mind Trick. The decisions you make delineate character, which is a neat twist and one that leads to a choice culminating in two possible endings.

The decision to provide the lightsaber from the outset was an inspired one – you now get what's on the box – instant gratification. The galaxy-spanning missions take in the sights and sounds of Yavin 4, Tatooine and the derelict Rebel Base on Hoth.

Friends and old enemies return to assist or impede your path. Incidentally, I took great delight in confronting Bucket Head (fans will know who I am referring to)! And utilizing mounts i.e. Tauntauns adds an arcade aspect to the title.

The multiplayer section is undoubtedly the most compelling facet of Jedi Academy! Alongside the obligatory Capture the Flag and Free For All is Siege. The brand new Siege mode takes its cue from Wolfenstein's class-based objective mode and involves co-operative play. This allows for tremendous strategic scope and success will be determined by the abilities of the team. From Duel and Power Duel to the Siege mode – even the most jaded multiplayer veteran should find something to satiate their needs.

## Conclusion

Jedi Academy lacks a compelling narrative; dramatic pace is thwarted by a non-linear mission interface. And the title gravitates more towards Beverly Hills 90210 or Dawson's Creek sans angst - will the kids ever graduate?

Although one can make an ideological choice between the Light and Dark side of the Force, the consequences are bereft of any deep emotional resonance. This is no Greek tragedy. On an entirely subjective note, the temptations of the Dark side can be overwhelming and brandishing a red double-bladed light saber is supremely seductive!

The play experience lost some of the anticipated luster due to stuttering frame rates in the first patch (1.0.1a) for the single-player edition. Programmer Brad Oliver rapidly addressed this issue and it is strongly recommended that you apply the most recent patch (1.0.1b). This should solve matters for Mac OS X 10.3.x Panther users. However, I didn't have a copy of Mac OS X 10.2.x Jaguar to perform a comparison test.

The Jedi Academy bonus multiplayer maps extend the game's life cycle. The addition of a level from Ord Mantell (referenced in *The Empire Strikes Back* and further explored in the comic strip serial by Archie Goodwin and Al Williamson) should bring a smile to the face of any fan – it's where Han Solo encounters one of Jabba The Hutt's notorious bounty hunters.

Whilst this is the perfect primer while we wait for the Macintosh port of *Star Wars Knights Of The Old Republic*, it remains to be seen whether or not there is any life left in the Jedi series. However, for sheer kinetic fun adorned in the furnishings of the Star Wars franchise, you'd be hard pressed to ignore the emotive thrill of brandishing two lightsabers at once and the ensuing Stormtrooper decapitations!

**Gameplay:** 7

**Graphics:** 8

**Sound:** 9

**Value:** 7

**Overall score:** 7.75 (out of 10)

### XIII



With the imminent release of the Macintosh port, it's IMG's "raison d'être" to tackle the daunting task of another hands on preview courtesy of those fine folks at Feral Interactive. And a rare chance for this comic book fan (and former fine art student), with a predilection for the darkness of an American McGee's Alice, to experience an interactive 3D graphic novel (graphic novel was a term coined by Will Eisner; comic book with high quality storyline and artwork)!

If 'Retro Chic' found favour in the quirky No One Lives Forever (a veritable pastiche on UK television's The Avengers) and its first sequel, XIII takes the First Person Shooter (FPS) into the labyrinth of 1920s to 1950s inspired Dark Deco!

#### **Bourne Again**

Acclaimed French/Canadian developer UbiSoft serves up a self-referential cocktail in which film director Doug Liman's The Bourne Identity stars X-Files superstar David Duchovny (as the titular character). And Adam West (General Carrington), television's 1960's Batman, returns to a setting that acknowledges the source medium that made him an international cult star - comics.

XIII is a complex story of betrayal and intrigue based on the original French comics by Belgian's William Vance and Jean Van Hamme (who took part in the production of the game). The XIII comic series is replete with Byzantine plots that would delight even the most demanding fan of ABC's award-winning Alias television show.

#### **JFK**

The President of the United States has been assassinated, and everyone (most notably large guys with guns) possesses a compelling argument that you did it - even you're not sure! As the story unfolds, you'll learn more about your mysterious past, discovering that you are number XIII (shades of Patrick McGoochan's seminal TV series The Prisoner) of The Twenty, a mysterious shadow organization, the group that perpetually want to see you dead - there's no chance to discuss 'issues' over cappuccino in a virtual Starbucks. Your eventual goal will be to clear your name of all charges (if only you could remember your name...), and get to the bottom of the conspiracy.

So it's clear that the story is a little more involved than, say, the riveting backstory behind Doom! To do the job, you'll have the usual array of weapons and gadgets. There are 13 standard weapons, including crossbows, assault rifles, and rocket launchers, each with an alternative-fire mode. You'll need to choose your weapons and tactics carefully, though, because you can only hang onto four weapons at a time.

### **Sans solo**

XIII is not entirely flying solo as he is accompanied, at key stages, by Major Jones, a sassy female operative voiced by multimedia diva Eve. During these stages XIII will have to battle enemies while receiving covering fire from Jones and vice versa. So be prepared for some bombastic fire fights with other characters as you progress through the game.

As a counterpoint to the adventures with Major Jones. Adam West's General Carrington is bereft of any armoury, so it's your duty to act as human shield during the rescue mission!

### **On top of the world**

From the Baywatch opening (not The O.C?) to rooftops and snowy mountains, the Mac gaming tourists amongst you will be well served as you unearth that most post-modern of questions – Who am I?

### **Enter the Manga Dimension**

Sometimes referred to as Manga Dimension or non-photorealistic rendering (NPR), cel-shading arguably entered the video game lexicon in the seminal Jet Set Radio Future (JSRF) (From Sega development team Smilebit) and, perhaps most famously, changed the look of Link in Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker. XIII (Thirteen) witnesses cel-shading's maturation in the over populated FPS genre!

Cel-shading is much more than a superficial stylistic treatment in XIII; it underscores the game's comic book roots and (excuse the terrible pun) is a marvel to behold! For example when an enemy appears, he'll get a close-up panel (a comic book convention sometimes referred to as a box or frame) of where he is, so you can home in on his exact location. A direct kill will witness his timely demise in delicious close-up and includes the obligatory "AARRGH!" (literally known as a sound effect by comic book artists)!

### **Gore**

While not on a par with the visceral thrills of a Resident Evil, XIII splatters stylised blood in a manor akin to Grand Theft Auto (GTA). This title is not recommended for the faint hearted or younger players - an audience it adroitly eschews.

### **Battling the dark side**

The single player (SP) mode serves a solid storyline encompassing 13 missions (which cover 34 levels) that should take around 25 hours to complete (depending on the player's prowess). However, the multiplayer (MP) option secures greater repeat play value since it combines all the modes present in the PS2, GameCube, and PC and XBOX iterations. And the crowning achievement is that all too elusive Holy Grail - Mac vs. PC conflict!

It must be noted that Bot AI in SP mode isn't showcased in a glowing manner here, but MP Bot engagements can get intense!

### **God is in the detail**

Although my preview hardware was within the minimum system requirements (Mac OS X 10.3.3, 800 MHz iMac G4, 512 MB RAM and GeForce 2MX), sound was choppy and poorly synced. The sound effects are all in a real time. Therefore evincing the need for more powerful hardware such as nVIDIA's GeForce FX 5200 Ultra and ATi Radeon 9800 Pro cards.

Adorned in the stylistic trappings of the graphic novel tradition and powered by Epic games' UnrealEngine2 (a.k.a. Unreal Warfare Engine); Ubi Soft invested 2 years of R&D! XIII promises to deliver a unique, if not signature, FPS experience for those gamers whose hardware can smoothly run Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell and the Unreal Tournament franchise.

Feral Interactive sent IMG a preview based on a very robust beta build (1.0 RC5), which is the current version being tested by Ubi Soft. Last minute tweaks and installation changes (my preview copy was sent on 3 CDs) notwithstanding, it gave this reviewer an excellent insight into what to expect.

The retail edition of XIII will bow on a single DVD. Feral Interactive's Edwin Smith kindly shed light on the decision to adopt the DVD medium:

- To preclude the need for a multi CD ROM release
- Only one installer needed
- Nice and clean look and feel with 1 disk, which is more "Mac like"
- Add enhanced video files with higher file sizes, desktops and even other demos to a game DVD
- Anti-Piracy

## Worms 3D



One of my most enduring memories as an undergraduate (and losing valuable book time), was playing the original award-winning Worms (1995) on the Sony PlayStation! Team 17's turn-based opus relied on the player's ability to correctly judge the trajectory and the power necessary to inflict devastating damage (on a par with shock and awe) against the clock (usually around 30 seconds, but this could be adjusted higher or lower). All the while trying to achieve mastery over the wind. You see, the wind can be unforgiving and weapons that are vulnerable to air current can be rendered impotent.

After 9 previous iterations including Worms Pinball and Blast, the basic premise remains intact (and relatively unspoiled) as the franchise inevitably segues to luxurious 3D in 2004! And the impish dialogue and black humour (motifs of the franchise) still remains cuttlingly humorous. Friends' star Matthew Perry would be pretty proud of that achievement!

### Porting progress

Feral Interactive is never merely content to publish key titles 'per se' on the Mac platform! Whenever working with UK porting house Zonic, it is always the partnerships intention to provide Mac gamers with compelling "added value" as a reward for our patience. This release is no exception to that golden rule.

In the case of Worms 3D (alongside the development of XIII), a rare opportunity to improve the graphics arose. It was noticed that whilst playing Worms 3D that at high (or low) resolution the interface was blurred! The original Adobe Photoshop files, used during development, were leveraged to replace all the interface graphics and weapons that Feral had been given assets for. And to avoid alienating the Mac gaming community, the PC keyboard was appropriately replaced by a Mac version!

**Carnage candy**

Worms 3D inspires obvious graphical comparison with Pangea's Bugdom series! And possesses looks that would make even Earthworm Jim blush with envy! Everything has an organic Play-Doh look and feel, which would delight the artists at PIXAR. The textures are simpler than Unreal Tournament or Halo, but then that's wholly appropriate given the context, and the game runs smoothly under Mac OS X 10.3.4. Support for Full Screen Anti-Aliasing (FSAA) is available for those equipped with a compatible graphics card. Is it time for an animated television series from Warner Bros. and attendant merchandise such as action figures, I wonder?

Existing Worms fans will be delighted to learn that bazookas, grenades, dynamite, air strikes and sheep made it safely from 2D, with the addition of brand new weapons to take advantage of the more expansive 3D landscape.

**Customised combat**

The single player (SP) mode still rotates predominantly around randomly generated battlefields against computer-controlled teams (the level of difficulty can be adjusted).

Alongside the obligatory Tutorial and Campaign modes, Team 17 have introduced the new Challenge mode, an offering where players can participate in various objectives such as firing-off a shotgun at as many targets as possible before time runs out to unlock bonuses such as medals and secrets.

Players can pass levels with Gold Silver or Bronze. As an incentive, getting Gold and finding secret areas (in SP) unlocks more hidden weapons and levels for the multiplayer mode.

The Challenge mode is somewhat repetitive, but completionists will no doubt find it a noteworthy addition all the same. Also the code system that was used to generate levels in the original is included in Worms 3D. And the codes for the PC version work on the Mac. It's worth searching the web for sites dedicated to collecting these cross platform codes!

Ultimately multiplayer (MP) mode is the signature element of the Worms franchise and here 2-4 teams can compete against each other in highly addictive sorties. The landscape of war can be edited; players can select to play in Lunar, War, England, Horror, Pirate or Arctic (in day, evening or night)! Or alternatively choose a randomly-generated landscape, or one that you've unlocked in the Campaign mode. In the mood for a chat, taunt or want to privately discuss tactics (with fellow team members and allies)? That's here too!

Worms 3D is compatible with GameRanger. Therefore, I urge you to 'fire-up' GameRanger as the MP mode is far more engaging than the SP experience because of human interaction - watching an enemy worm sink into the icy depths, underscored by a suitable quip, is a very satisfying accomplishment. Worms 3D MP is a luxurious treat and may close the deal for gamers unmoved by the series anaemic SP mode.

**Blasted bug**

Subsequent to the GM release. MP games work on a LAN, but there is a bug in the network detection check which will cause all network games to be disabled if the Internet cannot be reached.

Zonic are working on a fix for this and it will be included in the first patch. In the mean time, if you can get your LAN connected to the Internet, you should be able to play locally.

**Got Worms?**

The transition to what could be construed as a more liberating 3D context, has introduced new challenges and complications that can confuse! You can toggle the camera between 3rd person (default), 1st person and blimp views. However, at times I found orientation difficult - the 3D terrain is more problematic to gauge than in 2D. And it requires greater effort (not necessarily a negative) to accurately judge how far to shoot a missile in order to target it anywhere near an enemy. This can lead to frustration, which often detracts from the pleasure of playing.

**And now for the conclusion**

Worms 3D is a solid port and clearly the product of stringent QA (Quality Assurance). Kudos to Feral and Zonic. With spruced-up graphics, a multitude of tactics available, coupled with the ever-changing, randomly-generated landscapes, Worms 3D is a pleasant antidote to the glut of FPS releases.

However, I was left with a yearning for the 2D side scrolling pleasures of old and the absence of an engaging soundtrack was remiss! The score of Worms 3D isn't as impressive as the sound effects. Whilst I'm not looking for a John Williams orchestration, the music didn't serve the action and was turned down in favour of the amusing dialogue and spot effects.

As I completed this review Team 17 officially announced 'Worms Forts Under Siege!' The Worms saga continues...

**Gameplay:** 8

**Graphics:** 9

**Sound:** 7

**Value:** 8

**Overall score:** 8 (out of 10)

**Addendum**

You should consider purchasing the definitive mobile edition of [Worms](#) (iTunes link) for iPhone/iPod touch.

**About the author:**

John Hood has a BA (Hons) in Media Production from the Media School of Bournemouth University and was featured in the Alumni Association magazine, The Talbot, a Media Careers special. Subscribe to John's [Flickr](#) and [YouTube](#) channel.

John has worked for the BBC, Thomson Reuters and Dow Jones.

When not attending preview screenings of upcoming television series or providing consumer product feedback for companies including 3, Google and Sony. John writes about film, television, interactive entertainment, and more in the geek galaxy!

**Blog & Podcast:**

John's blog has been featured on Thomson Reuters, Nielsen, Chicago Sun-Times, TV Guide and USA Today websites (among others).

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