



# LOAD OF THE RINGS BATTLE OF THE MIDDLE EARTH

Minimum Requirements: 1.3 GHz Processor,  
64 MB Graphics Card, 256 MB RAM and 4 GB disk space

RISEING STARS RATING 8.4

By Niloy

**T**HE Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-earth is stylistically consistent with the movies and is presented with style and polish. While that portion of the game is excellent, the rest of it is simply decent. While it's fast and can certainly be fun, there's just something missing in the gameplay to categorize it as amazing. Even so, I had an enjoyable time playing *Battle for Middle-earth* and I think LOTR fans will as well, even if the story isn't totally consistent.

Let me explain... Earlier on in the game, I rescued Boromir from his death on the shores of the Anduin, and he's been bravely fighting alongside the forces of Gondor ever since; and Gandalf never fell to the whip of the Balrog in Moria, because Aragorn stuck the buggler with his sword first. Saruman is running around with a group of orcs somewhere near Minas Tirith casting powerful battlefield spells. Sam had the assistance of a number of the guards of Gondor when he handed Shelob her arse on a plate, and oh - that Balrog I mentioned? I just summoned it to kick about some foes in the fields of Rohan.

If you're not getting the hint yet, what I'm saying is this: if you're a Lord of the Rings purist, look away now. If you have ever been known to make a statement like "the removal of the scouring of the Shire ripped the narrative and moral heart from Tolkien's vision!", then do not seek out this game. Seek professional help instead. If, on the other hand, you just loved the epic fantasy of the trilogy and think that the idea of leading the armies of Middle-earth into mortal combat sounds like your cup of tea - step right up.

Basing a real-time strategy game on a movie is a concept which looks loaded with difficulty, but EA focused on what will make a good game rather than on fitting in exactly with the plot of the trilogy. That's a good move. Freed from the restrictions which seem to be imposed on most other movie tie-ins, *Battle for Middle-earth* does throw up some peculiarities such as suspiciously resurrecting heroes and fictionally unlikely Balrog summoning, but in return it offers a genuinely compelling game which benefits hugely from its epic setting and the player's familiarity with the universe and characters, rather than being held back by it.



Four unique sides are playable in the game - the kingdoms of Rohan (which has incredibly powerful cavalry, as you'd expect) and Gondor (great defensive capabilities), and the evil forces of Mordor and Isengard, which are largely focused on swarming the enemy with wave after wave of orcs, and also have access to powerful siege units such as those bloody

great elephant things. Aerial support is provided by giant eagles and by Nazguls, and each side has a bunch of hero characters at their disposal, most of whom are indeed disposable, and whose influence can often swing the progress of a battle.

The campaign game is played out on a large 3D map of Middle-earth, which is divided up into a set of provinces. You move your armies (up to three of them) around this map, dropping into each province individually to fight through a battle - leading to the capture of the province, and effectively giving you control over the course of the campaign, although occasionally you'll be called upon to fight through a specific part of the plot. These plot-specific parts (including the Fellowship going through the Mines of Moria, or fighting the Uruk-Hai at the Anduin, or the climactic siege of Minas Tirith) will sometimes give you control simply of a small group of heroes and task you with keeping them alive - an odd departure from their normal expendability, and arguably one of the weakest elements of the game. When will RTS creators learn that taking a couple of units through a mission simply isn't as much fun as con-

raising the cap on the number of units you can have at your command. In one of the nicest touches in the game, the armies you create are also persistent, so the force you end one battle with is by and large the same as the force you start with next time around, and normal units as well as heroes level up and gain experience. You can even rename your regular units, giving your army that rather more personal touch.

This aspect leads to some of the finest moments in the game - such as the level where you defend Helm's Deep from invaders, up to the point where you are rescued by the appearance of Eomer's army of horsemen - the very army which you've just spent several missions assembling on the plains of Rohan. It also gives rise to a particularly gruesome aspect of the evil forces in the game - when playing as the forces of Mordor or Isengard, you can order your own units to kill each other in order to boost their experience, which is a cunning way to exploit the tendency of the unit production cap to leave you with far more resources than you can possibly spend.

Once the game gets going, it's incredibly spectacular. Although this is no *Rome: Total War*, the clever decision to make each unit into a group of five men (or ten orcs for the swarm-happy Dark forces) means that you still end up with epic scale battles, and watching a set of siege elephants bearing down on the gates of Minas Tirith is a scene to stir the heart of any RTS player. Graphically, *Battle for Middle-earth* is one of the best looking strategy games out there; it can strain a little when there are too many units on screen, but in general it's an impressive feast for the eyes, with every major location from the movies recreated in loving detail.

While EA's use of the Lord of the Rings franchise to date has largely been fairly impressive, the direct movie tie-ins have all been quite shallow. *Battle for Middle-earth*, however, would be an impressive game even if it weren't based on Lord of the Rings. It's a clever and well-constructed strategy title with plenty of innovation of its own, and a genuinely great use of the franchise. Easily the best of the Lord of the Rings games to date, it also comes well recommended as one of the best PC strategy games of 2004.



trolling an army?

The overview map itself is very simple, but it serves its role well and as a plus point, it's beautifully modelled and animated. Each province that you capture boosts your power, giving you special abilities such as the ability to summon Elvish allies in battle, boosting your production rate or simply

## SITES UNSEEN

By Niloy

Gmail invites anyone? I'm giving out Gmails again. No limitations this time, everyone who asks for an account will get one!

Floating Logos

[http://www.siberart.com/signs%20pages/logos\\_home.html](http://www.siberart.com/signs%20pages/logos_home.html)

First, let's make this clear: The logos aren't really floating. Through the miracle of digital enhancement, the photos have been altered to remove the posts and poles that keep the signs in the air, giving them the eerie appearance of gravity-defying weightlessness. Without any visible means of support, even McDonald's signs take on a ghostly quality. Though most of the logos designate fast-food outlets and gas stations, this sign seems some how appropriate floating above the Earth.

Microsoft's Anti-Spyware

<http://tinyurl.com/5p7co>

Microsoft has stepped into the anti-spyware arena with a fast and useful tool. It's still in beta, but it already ranks as one of the best anti-spyware around.

Bullies for hire

<http://www.eastsidemall.com/bulliesforhire/bullies.html>

A service that lets you to hire bullies to bully your children.

Peace Art Project Cambodia

<http://www.peaceartprojectcambodia.org/>

Even the first few years of the new millennium have been a big bust world peace-wise, some folks still insist

on keeping hope alive. In the finest tradition of beating swords into forks and spoons, 23 University students from Columbia have been trained to sculpt in a unique medium -- decommissioned weapons. No shortage of material here; after more than 30 years of civil war, ending in 1998, the Cambodian government destroyed 125,000 weapons across the country. The students have secured thousands of these, including guns, tripods, mine casings, and destroyed ammunition. A look at the sculpture gallery shows the results: machines meant for killing transformed into such peaceful and useful objects as a bicycle, stool, and even a doggie.

Be a GOD for a while

<http://www.jraxis.com/atheism/simulator/>

A "God Simulator" that dares to poke fun at the Almighty.

Sam's Mailbox Picture Collection

<http://sblom.com/mailbox/>

Is anything more indicative of the human spirit and mankind's eternal quest for beauty than a lovingly crafted mailbox in the shape of a cow? Whatever your answer, you can still enjoy Sam's storehouse of the most bizarre mailboxes on the planet. Apparently, some people like to receive their TV Guides and credit card bills in something a little more complex than the traditional lunchbox-shaped container. Sam has done us the service of posting the wildest and wackiest of these, adorning streets from Texas to New Zealand.

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