

GM Review

The Final Verdict!

✚ BOARD THE DROPSHIP FOR EVAC
with 1/4 unit(s) for 1 Round(s)

✚ ALL CAPELLAN CONVOY UNITS MUST SURVIVE

▼ -1 INITIATIVE
Ⓢ KNOCKDOWN: PILOT INCAPACITATED!

When you shoot an enemy that's been knocked down, you can choose which part of their armour to hit.

Format PC Publisher Paradox Interactive Developer Harebrained Schemes ETA Out now Players 1-2

BATTLETECH

Go ahead, mech my day

Max 'Peanut' Mullen stands alone. The mech he's strapped into has lost both its arms, and its chest plate is sparking ominously. With no weapons, he can't shoot the final enemy, and on its next turn a volley of rockets will turn his bot to scrap. This is his last chance. He charges, flinging headfirst into the enemy in a crunch of metal. It recoils, staggers, and topples over. Peanut survives, but all around him are the smoking remains of the rest of our squad, three pilots dead in the wreckage. "Mission successful," the game declares. That's one way of looking at it.

In BattleTech, failure is unavoidable. You're outnumbered in virtually every fight, and if the enemy rockets don't blast you to bits then the heat from your weapons will fry your pilots inside their suits. To stand a chance of surviving its

turn-based battles, you have to think five moves ahead.

On your turn, you move one of your four mechs a limited distance on the battlefield, and then attack an enemy. The further you move in a turn, the more 'evasion' you gain, which makes you harder to hit. Your mechs carry a variety of weapons, from missile launchers to lasers, and each one works best at a specific range. The idea is to attack from a range that gives you the best chance of hitting – the percentage is shown on-screen – while ensuring you keep an eye on your heat gauge. If it gets too high, you'll take damage.

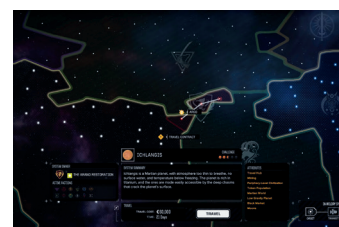
Enemy mechs can take a beating, so to kill them quickly you'll need to target individual armour parts, ripping them off to expose the fragile structure beneath. Arms, legs, and sections of torso all take damage separately, and you can focus fire either by positioning your mech towards the side you want to target or by taking 'precision shots', which use up the morale that builds throughout a fight.

Fights feel overwhelming at first because the game doesn't bother to explain its systems in any detail. Some attacks will damage a mech's stability, raising a separate gauge, and if it's high enough they'll fall over. But the game never tells you what types of attacks will make your opponents trip up. It never properly explains what the different indicators for lines of sight are (red, dotted white, solid white), nor does it walk you through the armour system that sits at its core. For the first six hours we're constantly failing and reloading. It's not fun and, bizarrely, the game has no difficulty settings, so you're stuck with its wicked ways.

Turning point

But when it finally clicks, you feel clever, and you learn how to stack the odds in your favour. That means accounting for your enemies' most likely moves, and cutting them off. It means switching off some of your weapons individually to generate less heat. It means testing several locations before you lock in your move, so that you squeeze every last percentage out of your chance to hit.

At that point, the difficulty feels exactly right, and it's remarkable how many

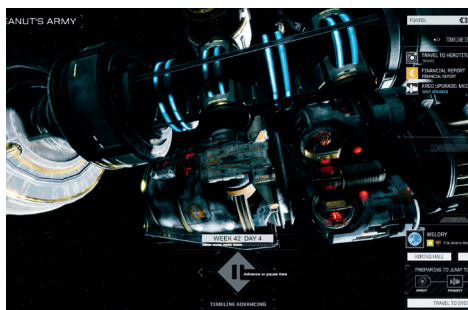


ONE GIANT LEAP FOR MECHKIND

Exploring the galaxy in BattleTech

In the campaign, you'll find some contracts on the planet you're currently orbiting, but others will take weeks to travel to. In that time, you won't earn any money, so it's often best to exhaust all the local contracts before you look for employment further afield. If you want, you can also just plot your own course and fly to whatever planet takes your fancy, hoping there'll be work for you when you get there. Check each world's difficulty ratings before setting out, though: going for the easy ones is a good way to build up some cash early in the story.

"IT'S REMARKABLE HOW MANY FIGHTS COME DOWN TO THE WIRE"



If you overheat you'll damage yourself, and you can break your mech if you push it too far.



You plan your moves from a zoomed-out perspective, and then move in to watch the action unfold.

fight comes down to the wire, with all of your mechs on their last legs as you finally land the killer blow. It's tense, and you're always worried that your enemy's next missile strike is going to be the one that cripples you.

The campaign mode, which is the centrepiece of the game, makes it similarly tense off the battlefield. Set in the far future, it sees you in charge of a travelling band of space mercenaries which gets pulled into a political tug-of-war. You complete priority missions to advance the story, and it'll take you a good 20 hours to see the end, but the narrative only really exists to nudge you forward. The meat of it is in managing your squad month-to-month. You have running costs, so you need to negotiate enough contracts to stay afloat financially while slowly picking up new pilots, mechs, and weapons upgrades.

Every month is a struggle. Peanut may have survived, but the fact that we've come back from our mission three pilots light quickly takes its toll. We recover the mechs, but the repairs are costly, and they're out of action for months while our technicians bash them back into shape. With no mechs, we can't take on any more contracts, and we slowly spiral

towards bankruptcy. It's painful. We reload a few hours back, vowing to keep more mechs in reserve.

Again, BattleTech fails to explain your management options in any detail. We end up spending a solid hour digging into some boring on-ship dialogue just to work out the basics of what's going on. That's not a good sign. But just like the combat, it starts to shine once you get to grips with it, and making ends meet feels like a big achievement. The mech customisation is the best bit, and you can refit each one to your liking by adding and removing individual parts.

Under the hood

We turn our Shadow Hawk into a melee specialist with a flamethrower and an arm mod to make it punch harder, and transform our Centurion into a long-range specialist with a missile launcher and a ranged laser. When you combine that customisation with levelling up your pilots' various skills, your squad starts to feel unique to you.

The contracts vary from assassinations to escorting convoys and more inventive story missions with multi-part objectives. They're mostly fun, but some have portions that should be



YOU MECH ME BETTER

The arms race never stops

At the end of each battle you're given a heap of new items. The most valuable are mech parts, as you really don't want to run out of working mechs (and therefore an income). Get three parts for a specific type of mech and your crew will automatically assemble them into the real thing, ready to send into battle.

The next best items are new weapons. You can find upgraded versions of ones you currently own that grant special benefits such as a higher critical hit chance, or simply better weapons within the same class type. If you acquire a weapon you want, you can attach it to one of your existing mechs provided it can take the weight. Upgrades take time, and we find that refitting our mechs is one of the key restrictions on how often we can go into battle. They can take 50 days or more if you're stripping them down and rebuilding them – a long time to be out of action. It quickens when you improve your ship, but it still feels like an age when you've got jobs to do and crew to pay.

Your engineers can only work on one mech at a time, which means that upgrades slot into a queue. Line up a couple of major refits and throw in some urgent repairs from a recent contract and you're looking at months without a full complement of mechs. It therefore always feels like a balancing act: should you upgrade your mech and put it out of action, or should you make do with what's currently working for you? It's a tricky decision, and we struggled to find a sweet spot.

cut entirely. In escort missions, you have to clear a site of enemies so that friendly transports can move safely through the area. There's nothing wrong with that, except that you have to then escort them halfway across the map. The game remains turn-based the whole time, despite the fact there are no enemies around at this point, and the friendly vehicles move painfully slowly.

Also painfully slow are the loading screens, which often freeze for 30 seconds before spluttering back into life. We had some performance issues during battle too, with the visuals consistently freezing before big explosions. It's not enough to ruin fights, but it is noticeable.

It's a shame these minor frustrations exist, because behind them lies a deep, satisfying strategy game with an even better squad management sim tacked on. It could be kinder to new players, and it's not exactly a looker, but it really captures the feel of building up a group of toughened mercenaries from nothing. In fact, Peanut is still in our squad as we reach the end – but instead of cowering in a mech with no arms, he's in a behemoth with giant missile launchers strapped to each shoulder, skillfully raining pain down on his foes. ■

GM LOVES...

- ✓ Combat is deceptively deep and always tense.
- ✓ Mech customisation is brilliantly in-depth and engaging.

GM HATES...

- ✗ It doesn't explain its systems, so the first five hours are a slog.
- ✗ Long load times and occasional freezes are frustrating.

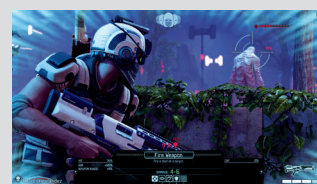
Better than...



MechWarrior Online

This solid first-person mech combat game shared its roots with BattleTech, but it was too short on game modes to keep players interested.

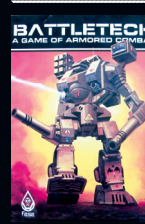
Worse than...



XCOM 2

BattleTech shares a lot of XCOM 2's DNA, but Firaxis' strategic alien hunter is more polished and explains its systems more clearly.

NEED TO KNOW



BattleTech is based on the long-running franchise of the same name, which originated as a tabletop game in 1984. The PC/Xbox MechWarriors games are also part of the series.

GM JUDGEMENT

79%



The testing combat is fun, and managing your squad of mercenaries is even better.
Samuel Horti