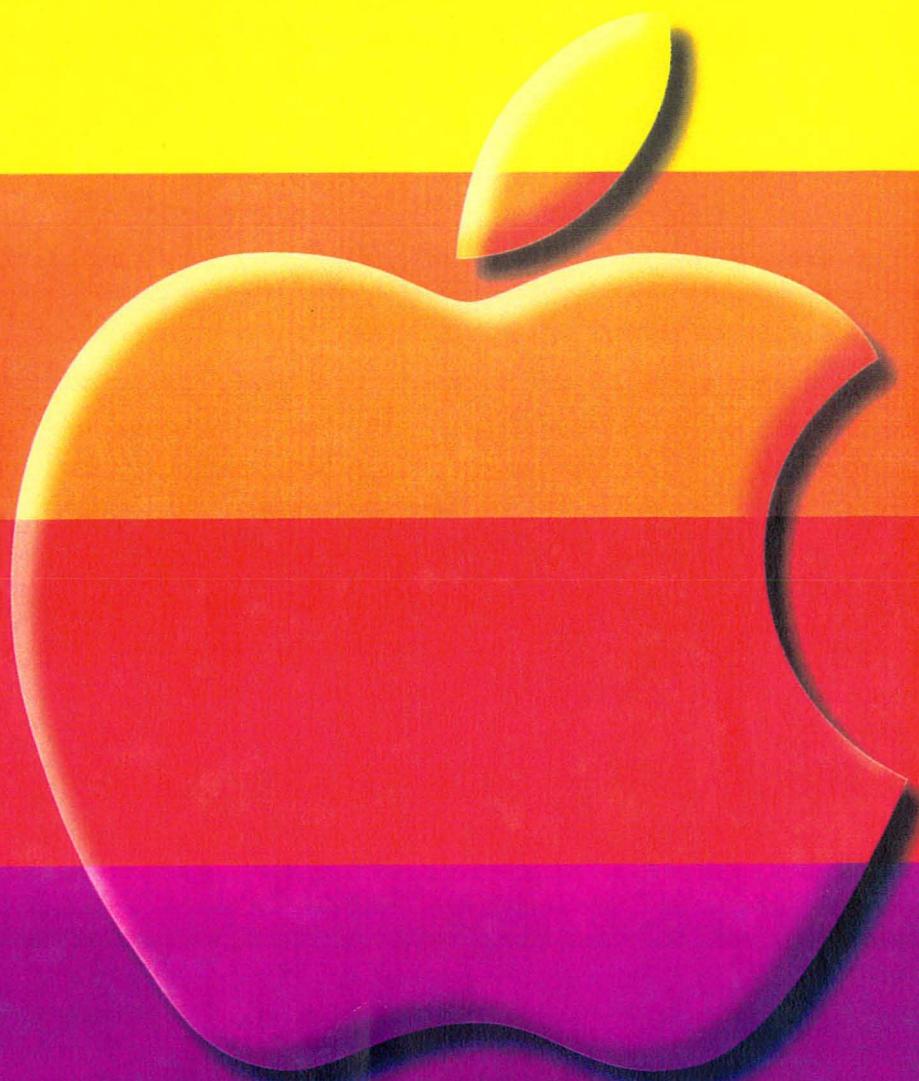


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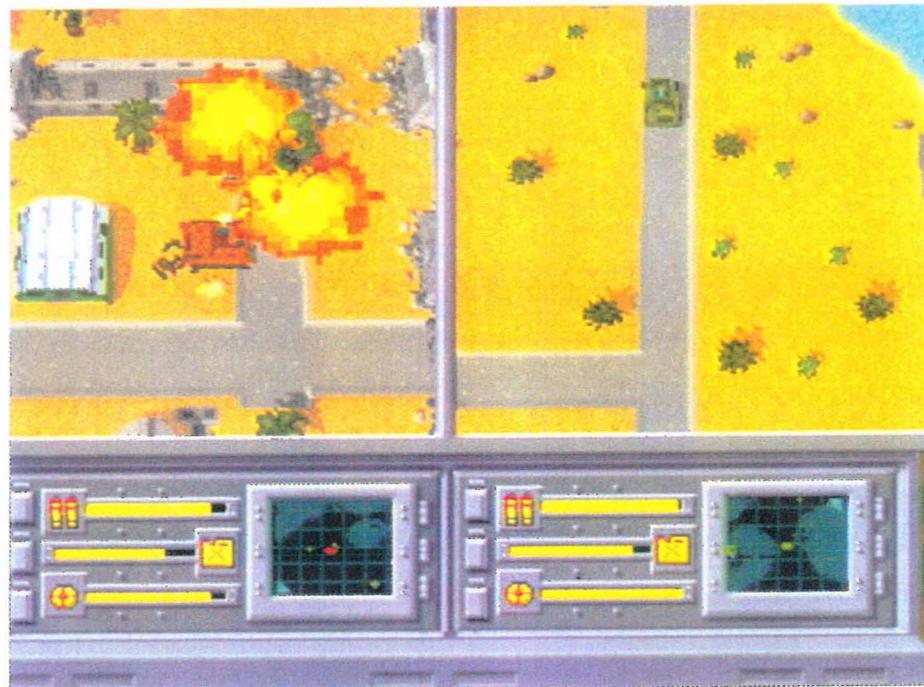
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Return Fire

Format: 3DO
Publisher: Prolific Publishing
Developer: Silent Software
Price: £50
Release: Out now (US)



Select one of the game's 60 or so theatres of war (top). Then choose your mode of transport (middle). The winner of each bout is treated to a ticker-tape parade (bottom)



Explosions (above), accompanied by manic laughter, are one of *Return Fire*'s most spectacular aspects

After struggling with some unforeseen delays, Silent Software's *Return Fire* has finally made its appearance. And it looks like the wait has been worthwhile.

The game is set on a group of islands off the Australian coast. The aim of each mission is to locate and capture the flag fluttering above your enemy's HQ and return it to your own base. To accomplish this task, you're provided with a limited number of tanks, helicopters, APCs and jeeps.

After *John Madden Football*, *Return Fire* is arguably only the second serious longterm challenge available for two players on the 3DO. Although you can play against the computer, it's the dual-player mode that really makes the game stand out. With two participants, *Return Fire* becomes an exemplary blend of strategy and all-out combat. You have to battle your way through the assorted fixed gun and rocket emplacements defending the enemy base while at the same time keeping an eye on your opponent's progress. There are no 'correct'



It's easy to reduce even the most heavily fortified base to rubble in oneplayer mode

tactics here; because two humans are involved and each of the 60 well-designed playing maps is different, you have to constantly adapt to changing circumstances.

One of the most effective enemy tactics is to lay a proximity mine on a bridge. Your opponent then has the choice of either finding an alternative route (more combat and loss of time) or using the amphibious jeep to cross the river (risky, as the jeep can only withstand



Each of the four vehicles in *Return Fire* has its own unique characteristics (see panel right). There's a finite number of each, so deciding which one to use and when is a crucial strategic decision

one hit). It's this type of cat-and-mouse gameplay (the bridge is now obviously off-limits for you as well) that makes each game unique.

It's just a shame that the oneplayer mode fails to grip to the same extent. Because the computer doesn't directly attack your headquarters, even the hardest missions lack challenge and are fairly unrewarding. A more rigid structure, a greater number of mines and some enemy tanks patrolling crucial locations would have ensured greater longevity.

The graphics provide a perfect complement to the rich gameplay of the twoplayer mode. Although the bottom third of the screen is taken up with an oversized instrument panel, which means that the playing windows are relatively small, the game still manages to include plenty of detail. Trees toppling over one by one, rockets trailing smoke and little men fleeing from exploding buildings are typical. The camera zooms in and out to allow the player to see the action from the ideal angle – close up for battles, distant when you're travelling fast. The display does jerk occasionally, but this never really becomes irritating.

The sound is equally impressive. Rather than plump for the usual synthesised beeps and whistles, Silent has gone for an entirely classical score, overlaid with momentous explosions and presented in sumptuous Dolby Surround sound. The result is reminiscent of the pomp and ceremony of a Soviet-era May Day parade.

Return Fire is one of the few titles outside the beat 'em up genre to fully exploit the gameplay potential of playing against a human opponent. It's fast, competitive, strategic and, above all, fun. And that's a pretty compelling combination.



Getting around

There are four vehicles available in *Return Fire*. To have any hope of completing each mission, you have to use the one that's most appropriate to the circumstances.

Helicopters are vulnerable to enemy fire. They're best used to scout out the flag and for last-minute hit-and-run attacks on your opponent's jeep.

APCs are slow but heavily armoured. They are ideal 'first assault' vehicles as their rockets inflict severe damage. They're also the only vehicles capable of laying mines.

Tanks are more effective in open country than built-up areas. They're tough, relatively fast and can bring down enemy helicopters easily.

The jeep is the only vehicle that can collect the enemy's flag. Very fast, manoeuvrable, and instantly destroyed by enemy flak.



Clockwise from top left: lay mines around the enemy base when you're feeling the pressure; a twin rocket emplacement bites the dust; mining bridges effectively is a tough skill to master; clear all resistance with some heavy firepower before approaching the flag with the jeep; when the flag is discovered, a close-up lets your opponent know all about it