Today, WarCraft 1 & 2 get their first-ever digital launch—and it's on GOG



Enlarge / The kind of image that makes us immediately ask, "What you wan'me kill?"
Blizzard / GOG

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When we last spoke with Blizzard Entertainment about one of its biggest classics, the original *Diablo*, the chat came with a surprise announcement: the original PC game was now for sale online for the first time, and not on Battle.net. The game's launch on GOG prompted many technical and logistical questions, and after answering those, Blizzard confirmed an intriguing "one more thing" about the first two *WarCraft* RTS games *also* coming to GOG. At the time, these had no release date.

Turns out, the wait was surprisingly brief.

GOG and Blizzard have officially opened a veritable Dark Portal to the first-ever digital-download version of its first two PC RTS games, *WarCraft: Orcs & Humans* and *WarCraft II: Battle.net Edition* (which includes that sequel's awesome expansion pack). Right now, you can buy both as a combo pack for $15, or buy them separately for $6 and $10, respectively. And we've played them!

GOG got axe for you

- Taking it back to the days when Battle.net support required a full SKU update.
- Familiar RTS sights. Yes, you can walk on this ice, and the trolls in question won't slide around. (But they will constantly remind you that you are, indeed, the boss.)
- Pre-mission briefing.
- Post-mission taunting. (Lose *one* unit in battle, and they call you a slave… some nerve, Blizzard.)
- *WC2*'s launcher, like the GOG launcher for *Diablo 1*, offers two versions of the EXE. The "updated" one includes this inset options menu for visual preferences.
- GOG's interface makes it easy to insert your newly acquired CD key, should you wish to look that info up before booting into the game.
- Trouble is, of course, that a mix of ancient netcode and port-opening requirements make this a less than ideal game to play online.
- But, hey, Battle.net still works for this game.

Just like this month's *Diablo* re-launch, GOG has rebuilt *WarCraft II*'s executable to run with modern operating systems and monitor resolutions in mind. Meaning: nothing has been remastered. Instead, players can expect "integer scaling" as an option for any monitor resolution they have so that the

original artwork and sprites fall into a proper 4:3 ratio whether they appear in a window or full-screen mode. Other GOG-specific bonuses include optional anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering. (As with *Diablo*, I would advise *WarCraft II* players to ignore these pixel-blurring options, but if that's your jam, then by all means use them.)

The problem with this is the same as in *Diablo*: in many of the "integer scaling" modes, *WC2* lets your mouse cursor float away if pushed against the right or bottom edges. This happens when you move the map around with your mouse, which is way more common in an RTS than in a *Diablo* game. I prefer moving an RTS map via the mouse instead of arrow keys, so this issue bums me out. The solution has been to pick the generic "fullscreen" option, which fixes the mouse-boundary issue but adds much blurrier pixels (and messes up my Windows desktop once the game quits out). I've asked GOG for help with this issue and will update this section with any pointers they send.

Additionally, GOG's version of *WC2* includes a "vanilla" binary without many of the modern display adaptations. The reason is that this version includes Battle.net support, which requires leaving the executable in its ancient 2.02 state. Just like the 1999 launch of this game's "Battle.net edition," it requires a valid CD key, which GOG packs into your purchase. (GOG's version of *Diablo* doesn't require this.) And, yep, Blizzard's *WC2* servers are still alive and kickin'.

But once again, GOG has loosed a "Battle.net" game of old that requires a stomach-turning combination: you have to open specific ports on both your PC and your router, and you have to subject your machine to some pretty ancient netcode. As Ars' Peter Bright said last time around: "Running this game and opening up your network to it is going to make it extraordinarily easy to hack your computer. We have built numerous safeguards over the last 15 years to try to reduce the risks of exploitable network code, and this game removes all of them." (Click here to read the full screed.)

In good news, you can either directly connect to other computers on your LAN or fake a LAN connection by using a VPN program like Hamachi and loading an old-school online IPX session to play eight-player *WarCraft II* versus matches.

Bombs are great!

- The original *WarCraft* means we're going back to DOS, baby. (Or, technically, DOSBox, a DOS emulator.)
- Welcome, human.
- Gearing up to launch the orc campaign.
- Blizzard's art for the first game still looks pretty great, all things considered. But it's a pain in the butt to actually play.

Meanwhile, the original *WarCraft* has been repackaged to boot into a DOSBox emulation session, essentially running DOS within your OS of choice. And, you know, it works in that funky-but-functional DOSBox way. (Thanks to this DOSBox support, *WC1* works in both Windows and MacOS; *WC2* with its customized binaries sticks to a Windows-only release on GOG.)

But I have a hard time recommending *WarCraft: Orcs & Humans* as anything other than a historic relic. This game saw Blizzard boldly dipping its toes into the nascent real-time strategy universe, which meant dealing with early '90s expectations that anything outside of slow, rigid, turn-based tactics was "too fast." The result is a painfully ponderous experience in desperate need of quality-of-life fixes across the board.

WC2 wasn't just a "*WarCraft* but slightly better" kind of sequel. It was the true fulfillment of the original game's potential—first on a mechanical level, then supercharged with incredible pixel art, sound design, and army balance. It's a no-brainer recommendation for every proud mouse-and-keyboard gamer in the world, from the wistful and nostalgic to the RTS-clueless, because its early take on the genre combines slower

speeds with good ideas and an endearing, fresh-faced universe. There’s a reason *WarCraft* was embraced as its own world of characters and lore, as opposed to laughed off as a Tolkien rip-off, and *WC2* is the primary source of that reputation.

If you want to open your wallet to GOG and Blizzard today and dive into a DRM-free *WarCraft* game, skip the bundle and grab the $10 *WC2* package. Its massive single-player campaign, boosted by the critically acclaimed *Beyond the Dark Portal* expansion pack, will keep you (or an excited kiddo) busy for fifty quintillion hours, give or take. And since it’s DRM-free and the CD key is only required for the vanilla Battle.net mode (which, again, we don’t necessarily recommend), you might find a way to get your paid copy of the game onto a second computer and boot some satisfying IPX-based versus combat. (Every parent who reads Ars Technica should do this with their kids. It’s the responsible thing to do.)

These are the remaining two games GOG and Blizzard teased earlier this month during *Diablo’s* GOG launch. We think it’s now up to the Blizzard Classic team to put out a “new” old game from here on out, and *WarCraft III: Reforged* is on deck.

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