Vista has changed minesweeper. Is it better?

DESIGN

The new graphics impress immediately. Minesweeper has skins for the first time, allowing you to choose between water or grass, flowers or mines. Openings ripple instead of instantly appearing. Mines explode and cascade across the screen, flowers leap and spin before turning a dead shade of grey. A laser beam inspects the field if you win. You can set your options so the skin changes randomly for each game, or resize the window to a resolution of your choice. Minesweeper even has enhanced sound effects which include **rumble** for the Xbox 360 controller.

Skins are an excellent idea, although it is disconcerting to find **flowers** in a game called Minesweeper. Blame the International Campaign to Ban Winmine, an Italian group that believes mines in computer games are offensive to landmine victims. They succeeded in getting the Italian version of XP released with flowers. Microsoft then formed a task force to study which countries would find Minesweeper offensive but decided it would be less expensive for users to toggle between the version of their choice. It is still an option to select the field with mines, but you might offend yourself. A nice touch is that dead flowers resemble mines from the Windows 95 version!

Rumble is a significant improvement over the limited effects of earlier versions. Sound has always been a feature of Minesweeper...people who find it disable it immediately. As with XP and 2000, this can be turned off in the menu after the excitement fades. (A meek explosion and a musical octave scale can be added to earlier versions by adding 'sound=3' to the winmine.ini file).

Openings take slightly longer to appear due to the ripple effect, but the other animations can be disabled. This is important, as players start hundreds of games per hour and the delays imposed by animations will devour your playing session. Another nice feature is that unflagged mines are displayed differently than flagged mines, allowing you to analyse your style.

The new menu is not user friendly. To change a level you must select the menu and try to decide whether you need to change options or settings. If you guess correctly you will be able to select the other two levels. The old menu was simple and efficient.

HIGHSCORES

Vista does not let you type your name when you set a new record. Instead it automatically saves the score and the date for each of your five best scores on each level. Beginner, Intermediate and Expert have separate highscore windows.

It is sad to see the entry box go, but the inclusion of dates and a more complete highscore list is excellent from the viewpoint of evidence for rankings.

A botched feature is the inclusion of **stats**. The game displays your win percentage, winning streak, losing streak and current streak for each level. **Microsoft has no clue** what type of stats Minesweeper players are interested in, so they pretend it is Freecell. Every game in Freecell can be solved without guessing and the goal is to solve them all. It is not the goal of Minesweeper to solve all games, it is the goal of Minesweeper to solve games as fast as is possible. Often you must guess, often you will make mistakes related to speed. Professional players start several hundred games per hour and finish a handful. Vista stats are displayed in truncated integers, making it highly unexciting to see your Expert win percentage at zero and your best winning streak at one. They should have browsed the internet and offered basic Minesweeper stats like 3BV.

Microsoft tries to help your stats by allowing you to replay games until you win them. They also guarantee an opening on the first click to eliminate at least half the games lost in the first few seconds. This click advantage makes it nearly impossible to use Vista on the current rankings. Firstly, an opening on the first click offers a time advantage by eliminating the time spent trying to find an opening. Secondly, it increases the odds of winning. A person who plays on other versions will have to play far longer complete the same number of boards. This advantage will be hard to quantify, making it nearly impossible to rank Vista scores alongside the current records.

REPLAY

Vista allows you to **replay each game until you win**. After each loss you are asked whether you would like to replay the same game or start a different one. If you decide to replay, another window appears reminding you that the mines are located in the same places. Replays count towards your statistics and scores.

Unfair prior knowledge of a board is illegal and is **banned from the world rankings**. Vista scores can not be accepted for world rankings unless the winning game and the game preceeding it are submitted on the same video. UPK offers a time advantage. The past discovery of finite board cycles in Minesweeper resulted in players abusing these cycles to set new world records on the easiest boards. Replay makes this abuse easier. Microsoft could fix this problem by not allowing replays into the highscores. The only step they take in this direction is not allowing you to win the same game multiple times, and on replays you can lose on the first click.

CHEATING

If you ignore replay UPK, the new Minesweeper is **secure**. The infamous XYZZY cheat programmed into the game no longer exists. The button with the smiling face is gone, simultaneously eliminating the two cheats that manipulate the face. The winmine.ini file remains trashed (eliminated in XP/2000) and the easily manipulated registry key (introduced in XP/2000) has been deleted. They are replaced by several new keys only editable in binary, none of which allow access to the highscore table.

As with all other versions the timer pauses if the game is minimised. You can screenshot the game, solve the situation and then restore the window. Vista adds a twist to the old story: a preview window appears if your mouse is over a minimised window, so you can look at your paused game! This is not really a cheat as ranked players can solve situations much faster than this cheat allows.

Of course, one could always program a solver.

WHAT IS YOUR IQ?

If you want to start a new game and you select 'New Game' from the menu a window appears and asks if you want to start a new game.

Think about that for a moment.

Every time you get killed…um, step on a flower a new window appears asking if you want to "Play Again", "Restart this Game", or "Exit". You get another window if you win allowing you to "Play Again" or "Exit". You even get a message if you click 'Restart this Game' which explains that you are restarting the same game! The only reason to believe in God is that the Replay message is a helpful tip, and tips can be disabled in the menu.

If you want to start a new game you should be allowed to start a new game without filling in paperwork! Why do you need messages asking if you want to exit? You can click the box with the 'x' if you want to quit! Players require hundreds of games an hour and these messages are spam.

FINAL COMMENTS

The new graphics will impress everyone. The animations and replay option will impress new players with poor solving skills. The stats will impress Freecell players. The mines will annoy activists. The flowers will annoy me. The pop-up windows will annoy everyone.

Damien Moore
08/03/07