eview: The World at War: Operation Crusader

by Kare Kaye

yrenaica, November 18, 1941. Dawn. In a curious circumstance, both the Commonwealth and Axis armies of North Africa are prepared for an offensive. They each have their own immediate objectives, but the ultimate goal for both sides is to possess the prize that is Tobruk.

During the time that this portion of the North African campaign played out, the world was undergoing tumultuous events. On the 15 of November, in the midst of one of the most bitter winters Russia had seen, the German Army launched their second "general attack" on Moscow. In the Pacific, Japan entered the final weeks of preparation for the attack on the United States. Except by those who fought and died in North Africa, this was seen as a secondary theater of operations. Rommel himself was sent to command Afrika Korps with the explicit understanding that he was there to stabilize the border, and to prevent any further embarrassing losses of territory by the Italian allies.

History will attest that Rommel did not arrive in Tripoli to play out a submissive role. A master of deception and indirect approach, he essentially bluffed his way across Cyrenaica in the spring of 1941, and invested Tobruk. The British were inevitably compelled to attempt to relieve the garrison. However, both Operations Brevity and Battleaxe were miserable failures. The fortifications of Tobruk were formidable. Despite the distractions of the British relief attempts, by November Rommel was ready to launch his offensive against the port and then to drive into Egypt. Simultaneously, the Commonwealth had organized a third relief effort, and the forces this time were to be commanded by General Cunningham, personally selected by Winston Churchill.

Heavy Metal. Welcome then fellow armchair general to the cauldron of North Africa, to the maelstrom of men and steel that was Operation Crusader (OC): the largest tank battle of North Africa until that point in time. This is the first installment in The World at War (WaW) series, the new collaborative effort between Avalon Hill and ATOMIC Games. The player assumes the role of either the commander of the British 8th Army or the Deutsches Afrika Korps (DAK) — which essentially also directed the operations of the Italian XXth Mobile Corps and the XXIst Corps. On the surface, there is more than a casual resemblance between WaW and the now defunct V for Victory (V4V) series.

The scope remains grand-tactical, with units broken down into battalions and companies. Air power plays an integral and essential role in operations, and the maintenance of an adequate supply system is crucial. The scale is still four hours per turn and one kilometer per hex.

The similarities between V4V and WAW end just about there. The first dispatch brings ill news from the front. Some players with lower end machines will be left staring at the box or playing on a friend's machine. OC does not support BW, and the minimum recommended RAM is 4 MB. (Note that if your system is only equipped with the minimum RAM, be prepared to run with all extensions off, since the game requires 3 MB of dedicated RAM.) This is a game of considerable proportions — some lower powered CPUs may not provide satisfactory performance in terms of speed during the larger scenarios. I would personally recommend a minimum of a 68030/33 configuration, but a dedicated player may be able to tolerate less.

Preliminaries. The documentation for the game is exceptional by computer wargaming standards, and is on par with some of the better boardgames. The full color manual is done quite professionally. Although an index is lacking — and would be quite helpful to the novice player — the table of contents is well organized. The last 15 pages of the manual contain an excellent description of the scenarios and historical variants, as well as campaign notes and descriptions of the three armies which participated in the battle. Those unfamiliar with the battle or the period will gain immeasurably from reading this portion of the manual. Players will better appreciate the logistical nightmares of the British who were fielding 8 different tank types during the battle (several even had multiple versions), as well as come to understand that the weaknesses of the Italian Army were more than just morale related (some armor battalions were still equipped with tanks with wafer thin armor sheets that were armed only with machine guns). A two page section even offers some hints on play which is ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL reading for all players. Ignore this section and the computer AI will grind your units into the North African dessert.

OC contains five scenarios and the campaign game. The smallest scenario, 'Il Duce's Finest," serves as a tutorial. Other scenarios cover the aborted German assault on the Tobruk garrison, while two more cover the confused fighting around Sidi Rezegh airfield. The campaign is a substantial piece of work, expect to spend a weekend with it. The controls which allow the player to configure the game are essentially unchanged from V4V, although the option of "One Division per Attack" is no longer available.

he graphics are good, and the map is beautiful. Players can select either an "overview" map which depicts the general trend in developments, or a "close" map which is rich in detail and does a much better job facilitating the giving of unit orders. The unit "counters" representing the various battalions and companies can display either NATO standard military symbols or pictograms representing tanks, artillery, or infantry.

OC offers numerous perspectives and variants on the battle. The AI is able to play either the Axis or Commonwealth side in any engagement. During initial scenario selection, the player is allowed to specify such variables as weather conditions, accuracy of intelligence on enemy forces, level of air support, etc. Each scenario offers several variant possibilities, and players may even choose to allow the computer to select one or more random variants. One of the more interesting variants postulates the promotion of Gen. Gott to the command of 8th Army prior to the battle, while another benefits the Axis by simulating the potential impact of an Axis occupation of Malta.

The most significant and long awaited change on the scenario selection menu is the option for "Play by E-Mail" (PBEM). Since no AI is currently able to match the cunning and frailties of the human mind, this new feature is likely to be the major selling point of OC. Two turns are exchanged during one transmission (except during the first turn when one player starts the game), and with compression, turns can be exchanged in less than one minute of transmission time (9600 baud). The compression included with the game is not as compact as something that can be achieved with StuffIt™, so those operating with 2400 baud modems may wish to further compress the saved game turn prior to transmission.

This is not your father's computer wargame. Experienced V4V players will be able to enjoy the product immediately. However, ATOMIC has revamped V4V from the ground up. While obviously the two games are related, those who will attempt to judge OC by the standards of the old game are in for a heck of a surprise.

The interface is superbly Mac, and everything can be readily accomplished with a mouse. Keith Zabalaoui's toolbar allows players to easily access the frequently used features. Upon selection, each is accompanied by a sound effect, perhaps none more ominous than the first few notes of Beethoven's 5th Symphony which announce the Victory Condition status. Two new features and two significant modifications are readily apparent in toolbar:

Leaders: OC will account for the abilities of certain individuals to impact the outcome of a battle dramatically. For the Axis, this individual is Rommel, while for the Allies it is Gen. Gott. These two leaders can be attached to a unit, and they will modify the final odds of the battle in which they participate.

Counter Frames: Players will be able to select a colored border for all unit counters. This border can be used to identify various units conditions: level of fatigue or disruption, unit type, supply status, or distance from parent HQ.

Aircraft Assignment: Squadrons of fighters bombers and medium bombers are now individually assigned targets. Their likelihood of reaching the target is independent of each other. Fighter bombers can fly a maximum of two mission per day, while medium bombers can attack only once. Aircraft suffer attrition as a result of missions flown.

HQ Chain of Command: The game's sophistication in handling the intricacies of the chain of command is superb. Army, Corps, division, and regimental HQs are represented. This allows different elements of a single division to operate at varying supply levels — an offensive battlegroup in attack supply supported by a defensive line in general supply.

Regimental HQs greatly increase the flexibility of the mobile German and British divisions, while highlighting the limitations of the cumbersome and ponderous South African and Italian infantry divisions. Serious wargamers should also be delighted by the option to assign HQs selectively to AI control. Under V4V this was an all or none affair. Now it will be much easier to concentrate on a certain portion of the battle, without having to check every unit every turn in order to avoid having the AI do irreparable damage to the front line.

On the debit side, the game still does not allow a player to "grab" a unit and trace a path which the battalion would follow during the movement phase. ATOMIC does not plan to add this feature.

The combat system now reflects the very unique ability of armored vehicles to influence the outcome of battles. They can still participate in "set-piece" attacks, but they can also conduct "overrun" attacks during the movement phase. The "overrun" attacks represent those actions where armor was able to roll over very small units, those cut off from supply, or those that had become heavily fatigued and disorganized as a result of continuous battle. As a result of these actions, the defenders are completely eliminated (combined effect of casualties and prisoners), while the armor unit is able to continue moving. "Overruns" even negate all Zones of Control (ZOC) projecting into the target hex. Armor penetrations can now be readily duplicated by the game.

It is important to note that "overruns" do not need to have the armor unit start the turn adjacent to the enemy. It is therefore possible to use deception, by having the armor units one or two kilometers away from the intended point of attack. The enemy is forced to guess. Not all hexes can be reinforced, so the adversary tends to thin out the line so all points are more or less equally protected. The attacker selects the target units, and launches an infantry attack backed by artillery with the intention of disrupting and fatiguing the enemy. Simultaneously , the armor units are given movement orders through the target hex and an additional few hexes to the enemy's rear, completing an envelopment. If the armor units get a 10 to 1 or greater odds on the disrupted enemy units in the target hex when they get there (calculated in the background), they will execute the "overrun" and keep moving. This

can be devastating if an armor battalion penetrates into the enemy rear and overruns several HQs and artillery battalions in the same turn!

Night actions have a dramatic new look and feel. All units are depicted as generic "side" counters and all the map colors have darker hues. It all adds to the atmosphere of nighttime and uncertainty. What players can be certain of though is the severe penalties their troops will suffer for moving and attacking at night. A night attack, based on the outcome of the battle, can easily increase both fatigue and disorganization to 15 (the maximum values in both case, they indicate very high states of fatigue and near complete loss of chain of command and mutual support). The New Zealanders, who had been trained for night actions, do not suffer nearly as much, and in addition they get a night combat modifier. A wise player will learn to use these troops prudently and not gamble them away in probing attacks.

Both the "Fog of War" and "Limited Intelligence" features are a carryover from the V4V series. The former limits the amount of information available about your own troops as they become fatigued and get further away from their HQs, while the latter reveals information only gradually about enemy units, and frequently distorts the numbers. At the beginning of the game, most of the enemy's units will be hidden. They can also disappear off the map even after contacted, if they move several hexes away from friendly units. This feature is much more reliable than it has been under V4V, and it has an added twist under OC: "Dummy" counters.

Both sides used deception during the North Africa campaign, however Rommel earned his nickname "The Desert Fox" due to his mastery of this art. He had numerous shops in Tripoli build wooden tanks and artillery pieces. At times portions of his front lines were secured by nothing more than these wooden units, interspersed with a few companies of regular soldiers who went about making a lot of noise and smoke. He was known to use trucks with airplane propellers mounted on them to whip up a lot of dust and disguise the actual approach of his main attack force. Players can now recreate this uncertainty though the use of the "dummy" counters mentioned above. At a distance of two kilometers, they show up as infantry, armor, and artillery units. They are easily destroyed in battle, therefore their obvious use is to make the enemy think twice about attacking a position. They can also serve well to keep a line of supply open to an otherwise extended unit.

The Quartermaster. It has been said that an Army travels on its stomach. It would tend to reason that a wargame is ultimately only as good as its handling of supply allocation and distribution. OC's supply system is very sophisticated, so much so that if it were implemented in a board game it would render it unplayable. Even those who are familiar with V4V are strongly encouraged to read the section of the manual covering the new supply system.

In addition to the "off board" supply sources, OC also features on board supply dumps. These are the real life blood of the army, and their loss to the enemy is a crippling blow. This is compounded by the ability of the enemy to actually capture a portion of the supply tonnage located at the depot. The capture of Tobruk will not only reward the Axis player with the victory points associated with the hex, but will also provide a boost of supply that will be necessary to keep the Panzer troops in attack supply.

Each unit receives an amount of supply that is associated with the supply level of its parent HQ on the 6 AM turn. It will then carry this supply with it throughout its moves. Even if surrounded, units will retain some fighting power and will succumb only gradually. Continuous fighting will reduce a unit's available supply, so it is possible that a unit will gradually be reduced to lower supply level as the day goes on. This is particularly true of

artillery units, that can consume large amounts of supplies if the player insists on firing until the tubes melt. In addition, the game constantly evaluates the length of supply lines from parent HQs, and what effect enemy ZOC have on it. It is even possible to have one's line of supply severed by a unit that has not yet been spotted.

The Debriefing. OC depicts an intriguing confrontation. Rarely does it occur that both sides in a war are ready to lunge at one another at the same instant in time. But this is precisely what occurred here. While it could be argued that the Commonwealth and the Axis clearly have the respective roles of attacker and defender, the conduct of the battle was a sea-sawed affair. Shortly after the opening round, Rommel attacked the British armored columns in the flank and caused heavy casualties. On the 24th of November, Cunningham, the British commander, was so concerned over mounting losses and Rommel's offensive posturing that he wanted to call the whole operation off. This decision cost him his job, and he was replaced by Gen. Auchinleck.

All these features are just so much fluff if the program does not produce an organized whole that will challenge and entertain the player. Considering the complexity, the AI is quite good at recreating this battle, and will present a competent opponent to any wargamer. Doug Walker is   responsible for the strategic AI, while Larry Merkel has worked on the tactical AI since V4V (basically, the former is responsible for the AI's opening moves of the game, while the latter handles the combat and maneuver sequences in the latter portion). They both deserve numerous laurels. The improvement over V4V is quite dramatic. Not only is the AI much more likely to encircle units, it will viciously attempt to cut supply lines. It also recognizes key strategic terrain on the map, and will attempt to secure it. The overall effect is that the game is less linear than its predecessors, and one in which the AI will genuinely surprise the player with its moves.

Modem play in the true sense is not supported, and would probably not be a wise choice in a game where players may take 10 to 15 minutes to complete their turns. The idle time, waiting for the opponent to finish their moves, would not only frazzle the nerves, but would also do unacceptable damage to the telephone bill. PBEM was the sound alternative to allowing two separated human players to play one another. After some trial and error, the final system implemented in OC is really very simple and works remarkably well.

Both players get to see all the turns play out, and the ability to send two turns at a time is a stroke of genius. Player "B" receives the first turn from the opponent. He plots his moves for turn one, and executes the turn. Then he plots his move for turn two and sends the whole thing to player "A." The first thing player "A" sees is a replay of turn one. Then she plots her moves for turn two. She executes turn two and plots her moves for turn three. And the cycle repeats. The game prohibits cheating by tracking both players moves and their orders to execute the turn.

Whining. The foremost complaint against OC is the lack of compatibility with the V4V series. There are a dozen good reasons why this is so, yet none of them reduce my desire to play Velikiye-Luki under the WAW game engine. I suppose it is time to break the ties, and set WaW off on its own.

Even with everything that I liked about the game, there are some things that I wish were different. The map does not refresh accurately after a unit that has not yet been spotted passes over the name of a town or village. This has the tendency of giving away movement by hidden units. Since only the lettering is affected in this way, I consider this a minor nuisance.

The Executive Officer (XO) has graduated from administrative school, but is still not as

helpful in reducing player workload as I would like. There is still no way to order a regiment or division to take an objective, which means that players will have to give every single battalion an order, or trust the XO with an entire regiment or division. But keep the faith, this feature will be implemented in a future version of WaW.

Those friendly units with whom contact has been lost due to range or disruption, should temporarily revert under AI control. It makes little sense to be able to direct the affairs of these battalions when their condition is a mystery, and likely the precise location of their component units is unknown. When contact with the unit was re-established, the player could once again take control of the unit.

The protection is a mixed bag. It requires one-time manual look-up when the game is initially booted. I found the look-up protection generally unobtrusive. Many consumers object to any protection, but ATOMIC felt that they needed to do something about the perceived loss of revenue. Since the manual is nearly indispensable for most players anyway, I would think that individuals would want their own copy of the game. I am neutral on protection schemes, but respect ATOMIC's right to make the decision to incorporate one. I predict that this issue will be a thorn in the side of OC, without really impacting sales one way or the other.

The Footlocker. There appears to be a very bright future ahead for the WaW series. Already in the works is the next edition: Stalingrad. Due to the scope of that operation, the scale of the game will change to regimental level from the current battalion level. Anzio is also being discussed as a potential future release. At this time there is no discussion of redoing the V4V battles under the current system. Market-Garden was very popular, so I would not completely rule out that WaW may revisit the largest airborne operation of the war.

Doug Walker is considering releasing alternate versions of the scenarios, in order to challenge the more experienced wargamers. These scenarios, and potentially the campaign, would feature a more aggressive AI, that would be intolerant of player mistakes. If, or when these variants see the light of day, they would be distributed over the major on-line services.

The Verdict. OC produces a real sense of satisfaction when played. I've already referred to the fact that this is a complex game with many nuances. Players can expect to have to re-read the manual. Novices will find a steep learning curve and an AI that likes to be taken seriously. It is perhaps best to compare OC to a game of chess where some of the opening moves have already been played. The two sides are relatively evenly matched, and each has certain advantages and weaknesses. It is up to each player to determine which of a myriad of combinations of choices will result in victory for their side.

For many years, it was hoped that computer wargames would offer all the challenges of traditional boardgames, while alleviating the drudgery of setting up and keeping track of "stuff" on countless sheets of paper. The truth is that while computer wargames offered some of these conveniences, they were unable to reproduce the complexities of the great boardgames, and tended generally to be weak opponents. To most of us, they represented a compromise. This game has changed all that.

OC is a breakthrough game, that will thrill the wargaming enthusiast, and is well deserving of IMG's perfect rating.   Although the work of many individuals, it has not become a victim of diffused responsibility. From the thorough research of Eric Young, to the programming skills of Jeff Wessevich, Keith Zabalaoui, Doug Walker, and Larry Merkel, to extreme testers who identified and exterminated countless bugs, this is a magnificent effort. In every respect they ought to be proud. But the real winners are the gamers, who will get to enjoy the premiere wargame of 1994. OC is the "must buy" wargame of the year!

Pros

- Great color graphics - beautiful map
- Excellent interface
- Several scenarios, each with variants
- The first real computer wargame that is too sophisticated to be played as a board game
- Strong AI
- PBEM opens new horizons in the search for opponents
- Excellent, full color documentation

Cons

- Limited use of animation
- V4V battlesets incompatible with WAW
- The XO still has a limited capability to reduce workload in large scenarios
- A minor glitch in the way the location names get refreshed after an "invisible" unit passes over them