eview: V for Victory 4: Gold-Juno-Sword

by Karen Kaye

Type: Strategy (Grand Tactical) Wargame
Publisher: Three-Sixty Pacific, Inc. (408/879-9144)
Retail Price: $69.95
Mail Order: $43.00
Requires:MAC Plus or newer, System 6.0.5 or later, 1 HD disk drive (800K available on request) and a hard drive, 2 MB for B&W (1 MB for limited play), 3 MB for 256 Color (3 MB for System 7 either B&W or Color)
Protection: None

The Normandy invasion is not a new topic for the V for Victory (V4V) series. The first installment covered the American landings at Utah Beach. The operation that is the subject of this release was a joint effort by British and Canadian forces. The three sets of invasion beaches were well-separated, but the primary objective of the Commonwealth troops was the city of Caen. It was a major transportation hub, as well as a substantial urban center, the liberation of which would be a significant boost to the morale of the French resistance. Allied planning for the invasion had been meticulous: it not only included a survey of the proposed landing beaches and the terrain directly inland, but also lead to the development of specialized equipment and vehicles for the landings. Allied intelligence indicated that the entire sector was defended by a handful of coastal artillery batteries and the 716th Infantry — a unit made up mostly of older soldiers and lacking in heavy equipment of all types. Montgomery intended to smash this unit in the first few hours of the invasion, and take Caen on D-Day. Rommel was well aware of the weakness of his position, as well as the impact that Allied air power would have on his attempts to move units forward. He began to reinforce his position, but his plans were incomplete on the 6th of June. In V for Victory: Gold-Juno-Sword (GJS) players have the opportunity of leading either fine army and attempting to fill the shoes of two of World War II's most famous generals.

Back to the Beach. Each release in the V4V series is a stand alone game covering a major land-battle of WWII. Previous editions have included (in order of release): Utah Beach, Velikiye Luki, and Market Garden. The game system has won numerous awards, but the releases have been somewhat inconsistent. The Artificial Intelligence (AI) of the first two releases was weak, there were compatibility problems between the first and subsequent game sets, and the initial release version of Market Garden was plagued by so many bugs as to be unplayable for all practical purposes. GJS sets out not only to offer the replay of an exciting WWII battle, but to lay to rest the deficiencies of the previous game sets and fulfill the promise of a successfully integrated wargame series.

The scope remains grand-tactical, with units broken down into battalions and companies. The player

assumes the role of a Corps or Army commander. Both air and naval support (when appropriate) are available on request. Those who are new to the V4V system may wish to see also the April 1993 issue of IMG, which included a review of Velikiye Luki that contained additional information on the game system and turn-sequence specifics.

Those familiar with V4V will find the usual supporting material within the box: a 32-page Operations Manual (designed to familiarize novice players with the computer interface) and a 131-page Reference Manual (which provides information about the unit types and their historic performance, as well as a more detailed discussion of the game rules). Unfortunately, neither is as polished as in the previous three game sets, and first-time players may find it tough going. The Reference Manual contains a number of typos and mistakes. For example, it states that there are three ways in which supplies may be captured, yet it actually describes only two such methods. The manual appears to have been produced some time before beta testing was complete, as there are more than a dozen significant items of errata listed in a Read Me file on the disk. Players absolutely cannot ignore this essential information.

Despite these shortcomings, those new to V4V, regardless of their wargaming experience, would do well to muddle through the operations manual. This is a complex game, and the software includes minimal help features. Once an initial level of familiarity with the game system has been established, the Reference Manual becomes an essential reference. The package also includes a map of the area covered by the game, as well as a series of charts on movement costs and terrain effects on combat. The charts are useful for beginners, but the map itself is of poor quality; in fact, it looks like the reproduction of a low resolution screenshot.

Externally, the game set conforms to previous editions. GJS contains six scenarios and the campaign game. The controls that allow the player to configure the game are unchanged. The interface is superbly Macintosh, and everything can be executed with a mouse. Experienced players may be able to progress faster in larger scenarios by combining mouse clicks and keyboard shortcuts (found in the Installation and Information Guide). The graphics continue to be of the same high quality that has been a hallmark of the series all along. B&W monitors are supported, but they hardly do justice to the icons or the terrain. 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 variances, and players may even choose to allow the computer to select one or more random variants. GJS includes a hypothetical scenario, a first for the series. Entitled "To the Sea," it postulates what could have happened if Rommel would have been given authority to move his Panzers closer to the beaches, as he had wanted.

In the Trenches. The look and feel of the game remain unchanged, and experienced players will be able to enjoy the gameplay immediately. The scale is still four hours per turn and one kilometer per hex. Some minor nuances will be noticed by those who own only the first two releases. Primary among these is the depiction of the supply status of a unit through the use of two colored bars beneath its name. This feature alleviates the need to have the supply lines drawn on the map when a particular unit is accessed, and it also gives a more accurate indication of the supply status of a surrounded formation. The calendar now shows all available reinforcements due to arrive per day. Both of the above are welcome additions.

Yet, at first glance it would appear to be all quiet on the Western Front. Where are the bells and whistles that will set GJS apart form the previous game sets? After all, the game still does not include the perennially promised modem capability. If one looks carefully, however, it will gradually become apparent that the major improvements in V4V 4.0 are tucked away on the inside. Not only do these fixes improve the current game set, but they enhance the playability of the previous three. Engineers will no longer vanish from the map when given defensive orders, fratricide has been eliminated, and units will no longer reattach themselves to other HQs when they can still trace a line of supply to their own headquarters. The order of battle has been updated for the previous three releases, and a database patch is included with the game. The AI has also been improved, and it is nearly equally as competent on offense as it is on defense. The use of artillery has been made more historically accurate, and it will no longer be possible for players to keep firing around the clock. HQs are now also more difficult to destroy — especially with artillery fire — in an attempt to account for their dispersion over a wide area. The combined effect of all these improvements have been to invalidate many player techniques and tricks that were not based on historic precedent.

The Debriefing. The battle depicted by GJS is an armor aficionado's dream. Between the two sides, elements of ten armored divisions participated in the battle. In the end, it was not the equipment or the training of the soldiers that decided the outcome, but the ability of the quartermasters to feed, clothe, and equip the troops. The German Panzer divisions in the area were strong, and properly supplied they could have swept the invasion back into the sea. Even in the absence of reasonable supplies, they were able to significantly delay Montgomery's timetable. Re-enacted here, it is a tense situation that presents many opportunities to both sides.

While modem play is still in the works, the need for a human player is no longer as vital as with the previous game sets. The AI is significantly more competent, and will generally succeed in providing the player a good challenge. The new AI's greatest strength is also its primary weakness: it attempts to maintain a solid front line. While this prevents easy encirclements (as in Utah Beach), it also tends to prevent the AI from conducting bold offensives. The truth is that no matter how refined the code for the AI becomes, it will never satisfy all wargamers. It must nonetheless be emphasized that GJS is a major improvement for single player games.

As for other elements, the "Staff Assistant" (SA), which allows players to delegate certain responsibilities to the AI, remains unrefined. While it is more efficient at utilizing artillery, especially the plentiful naval support available to the Commonwealth, players still have few choices in configuring it. There are still no means to assign a division to the AI and subsequently give that division an objective. There has also been some discussion of allowing the formation of "battlegroups," which would consist of several battalions with a common purpose. This would reduce player workload and be historically sound, but so far remains unimplemented.

Limited Intelligence (an option selectable at the beginning of a scenario) is no longer just a nicety. Information about adversary units is revealed only gradually, and it is even possible to miss detecting several enemy battalions. Under these conditions, strategic movement close to the front is especially

perilous.

The Footlocker. In light of the updates to the three previous game sets, it becomes obvious that this is a very large series of games. This review has focused primarily on GJS, but some of the updated scenarios, especially from Market Garden, were considered. Those considering playing Utah Beach scenarios under the new game engine must be sure that they have version 2.0 of that game. Earlier versions of the database are simply inaccessible for the GJS. Version 2.0 is available to all registered users directly from Three-Sixty for a shipping and handling charge of $5.00.

Three-Sixty was involved in an extensive beta-testing process for GJS. It appears that their programming efforts, as well as the countless hours of support from the testers, have all been worth it.

The Verdict. In some ways it could be said that V4V returned to its roots with this latest release. In some other aspects, the game has been through a series of refinements, which in many ways represent the completion of a cycle. GJS is probably the end of the award-winning series. It is, nevertheless, the fulfillment of the potential many only imagined three years ago with the first release.

Despite minor documentation errors and a few unresolved issues, V4V is the premiere strategy wargame on the Mac market today. It is unmatched in terms of scope, historical accuracy, and level of detail. As Three-Sixty claims, Gold-Juno-Sword is truly "Wargaming Without Compromise."

Pros
• Splendid 256-color graphics
• Excellent Mac interface
• Sufficient variants to ensure continued playability
• A truly sophisticated wargame
• Dramatic improvements in AI
• Completely updates the data of previous game sets

Cons
• Limited use of sound and animation
• Modem and network support not yet available
• Numerous typos and errors in documentation
• Limited capability to reduce workload in large scenarios