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One of the biggest obstacles for computer wargame designers has been the difficulty of consistently producing titles which are both critical and commercial successes. The bane of most recent historic strategy games is their inability to match the accuracy of the simulation with an equal dose of fun. Although some established titles, such as Harpoon, have managed to attract a substantial following, wargames have remained primarily a niche market with a small but devoted following.

SSI clearly intends to change this. Allied General (AG), their first MacOS compatible release in some time, attempts to bridge the gulf which has traditionally separated experienced wargamers from the rest of the computer gaming community. Previewed in the December issue of IMG, AG showed strong signs that it had completed basic training successfully, and it was ready for action in the field. This is a report of the game's first deployment

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Allied General is an operational level strategy game simulating the fighting in the European theater during World War II (WWII). Players get to command the armies of the three principle Allies (Great Britain, the Soviet Union or the U.S.) through a series of campaigns which follow the course of WWII. The Axis side is usually directed by the computer but can be controlled by a human opponent during individual, non-linked battles. The perspective is that of the theater commander who leads all ground, air and naval forces arrayed in the region. The

laurels in AG belong to the player who can best master the art of combined arms warfare.

Victory is awarded for the capture of important cities at the earliest possible opportunity. Additionally, the players are continuously awarded a certain number of prestige points for fighting successful engagements during the course of the battle. These points represent the players' standing with their superiors, and allow them to request reinforcements or upgrade the current equipment used by the troops under their command.

Despite my glowing words about the preview, my first impression of the boxed game was not very favorable. The incomplete rule book, which looks more like a photocopy than a professional print job, appears to have been produced some time before the game was finished. It is supplanted by three lengthy "Read-Me" files on the CD that must be printed out for additional reference on strategy, product features, and game rules.

The second most noticeable omission is the lack of a tutorial which is particularly glaring considering that the product was not designed with the veteran wargamer in mind. Only about half the space on the CD-ROM is used for the program which leaves plenty of room for a narrated demo that steps the novice through the typical sequence of decision making events. As it is, even the simplest scenario can be a challenge for the wargaming novice.

The game does not ship with an installer, so the player must manually move the necessary extensions and folders. AG can be played entirely from the CD-ROM, but it is noticeably faster if about 35 MB of information are copied to the hard drive. Regardless, the CD-ROM must remain in the drive for the program to launch. This is not an ideal feature, but it is the least obtrusive copy protection scheme in vogue right now.

[Assault](#)

My opinion of the game improved dramatically once I started playing it, due in no small part to the highly intuitive interface and the variety of game options. In addition to three major campaigns (Russia, North Africa and Western Europe), players can also choose from one of 39 individual scenarios depicting a great historic or hypothetical battle from the war. Starting with minor engagements, like Sidi Barrani, players eventually get to command several armies in the epic battles that result in the final capitulation of the Third Reich.

As supreme commander of all forces in the combat area, players occasionally have the opportunity to direct naval units such as aircraft carriers and submarines. Nonetheless, AG is primarily a simulation of WWII Air-Land battles. Units are categorized as either core or auxiliary. The designation determines whether a unit is available only for the duration of a single scenario, or if it will participate in the entire campaign. Between the individual battles of a campaign, there is the opportunity to upgrade the formation with better vehicles or new weapons.

The game is designed to accommodate players of various experience levels. Two computer opponents are available, and these are labeled "Easy" and "Hard." This is a misnomer, and it may have been more appropriate to label the two options "Static" and "Fluid." Based on the scenario, the "Easy" option may turn out to be more difficult than the "Hard." There is also an option to modify the relative quality of the troops engaged in the battle which is a handy tool to balance games between players of different experience levels. Additional game preferences can be set to account for realistic supply and weather limitations, as well as implementing the "fog of war" option which hides undetected units.

The various fighting formations are represented by icons which the player maneuvers around the map. Aircraft, artillery, vehicles and naval units are individually rendered with great fidelity while infantry is depicted as three archetypal soldiers armed with rifles.

Commands are issued via the mouse and consist primarily of movement and attack orders. Units must be adjacent in order to engage one another, but artillery, air defense and certain naval units are capable of ranged fire. Most units can attack or move in any order, but artillery and air defense units can not attack after they move.

The prestige points accumulated for individual victories are the currency of the war. They can be used to purchase replacements, buy new units, and upgrade older units to new equipment. The system seemed a little contrived at first, but then I realized that most great generals did manage to use their popularity to get high command to place additional troops under their control. The game captures the essence of the historic relationship between the fame of great generals like Zhukov and the commensurate support they received from higher quarters in a way that is both simple and elegant.

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The raison d'être of AG is to simulate the bitter fighting in the great battles of WWII. SSI has successfully produced a straightforward command perspective that does not compromise the details of the conflict. The apparent simplicity of the game masks the numerous factors and modifiers which are taken into account during a particular engagement. The computer tracks up to 18 pieces of information about a unit, from spotting distance to vulnerability from naval attack. Yet, these details never get in the way of the enjoyment of the game.

True to its mission of creating a wargame that is accessible to anyone, AG spurns such wargaming features as plotted movement and stacking limits. Due to the scale of the map and the size of the units, only one formation may occupy a hex at a time. Movement is simplified through an automated plotting system. When a unit is selected, all the adjacent hexes to which it can move to are highlighted. The player simply selects the destination and

the computer moves the counter to the desired location. Experienced wargamers may take a while to adjust to this system, but novices will love the convenience of implementation.

The resolution of the battles is somewhat abstract, but it does emphasize the unique characteristics of all weapon systems. Since each formation is moved and directed to attack sequentially—after which it can not be selected again until next turn—the game gradually develops the feel of a chess game. Not only is it important to employ the right type of unit to attack a particular target, but the sequence in which it attacks also has a dramatic impact on the outcome of the battle. For example, an infantry unit is much more likely to destroy a bunker after the fortification has been attacked by artillery and engineers. However, if the infantry advances and occupies the enemy hex, it will be exposed since the artillery unit has already taken its turn and can not move up adjacent to the infantry (which is required in order to provide defensive fire support.)

The well designed interface and the PowerPC native software contributes to a fast, exciting game that is worlds apart from the cumbersome monoliths that players traditionally envision when thinking about a wargame. The quick game play means that most scenarios can be played in an hour or two, and even the monster battles of the Eastern Front can be completed in a single evening. Combined with cool sounds, good-looking graphics and the responsibilities of the campaign game—where players must safeguard their units between battles—AG adds up to an experience that is a total blast.

Not only is AG thorough, easy to use and fun, it also features a competent Artificial Intelligence (AI) suite. This silicon general can make a stand in a tough spot or roll mercilessly over the player with equal skill. The AI is hampered by difficult terrain, and it is not as unpredictable as human opponents but is far more tenacious and calculating. When the computer opponent no longer proves a challenge, armchair generals can compete in two-player games on the same machine or via “Play By E-mail (PBEM).” The PBEM feature does contain some restrictions, such as lack of combat animation, but most people are unlikely to miss this.

Casualties

In order to produce a game with wide appeal, the designers did have to make some compromises. The aspect of the game which is likely to annoy the grognards most is the supply system. Although AG does track the expenditure of fuel and ammunition, it allocates an excessive amount of such stores directly to the unit. The situation becomes especially obvious when a unit is surrounded and cut off from its line of supply. The formations can go on fighting for days without any degradation of mobility or firepower.

The Order of Battle of the combatants can also vary significantly from the historic baseline. In some cases—such as the Panzer III unit present at the Battle of Berlin—the situation is clearly an error. Fortunately, the designers have had the good sense not to deviate from historic facts to such an extent that engagements lose all semblance of credibility.

The scale of the scenarios is somewhat abstract and varies substantially from battle to battle. Each unit on the map appears to represent a division or equivalent sized fighting element, although this is never stated clearly. Formations are not identified by their military designation; instead, units carry a generic numbering system.

Most of the things I disliked about AG stem from my personal preference toward wargames with a high degree of fidelity to the historic events. Many players may not even notice the deficiencies in accuracy, and even if they do, I doubt that it will seriously detract from their enjoyment of the game.

Assessment

The folks at SSI have achieved their goals with AG admirably. Instead of designing a dumbed-down wargame, they threw away the mold and started from scratch. The resulting product is a new type of military strategy game based on historic events, featuring gorgeous graphics, complex game play, and an intuitive interface not yet seen in the genre. Even though I remain nonplused by the rule book, I can recommend the gaming experience of AG without reservations. This is a wargame of exceptional appeal that is easy enough to use for a novice, yet thoughtfully sophisticated for the veteran. AG is a new benchmark for MacOS wargaming and is destined to be a classic.

Pros

- Good selection of individual scenarios
- Interlinked battles form a campaign system with high replay value
- Easy to use; simple and efficient interface
- Great for players of various experience levels—numerous options for adjusting play balance
- Clever use of video and sound; gorgeous graphics throughout
- Accessible to players of various interests—omits the many of the trappings of board games
- A blast to play—complex details don't get in the way of the enjoyment of the game
- Easy to use PBEM support
- Ideal as an introductory game to wargaming

Cons

- Poor quality manual—players will need to print three “Read-Me” files from the CD-ROM in order to get the complete rules
- Lack of a tutorial; noticeably absent for a game aimed at the mass market
- Lack of installer; players must manually move extensions, control panels and folders
- Numerous compromises detract from historic fidelity—this will annoy the grognards but will be hardly noticed by the typical player

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