● The challenging A.I. makes the lack of multiplayer a minor problem.

ARMAGEDDON EMPIRES

Quite the gaming revelation

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE
Games for Windows

When a genre falls on hard times, count on its fans to pick it back up again. In the same spirit as *Falcon 4.0*'s adoption by the flight-sim community (it came out in 1998, and it's *still* popular), we've watched turn-based-strategy projects like the free *The Battle for Wesnoth* and the very indie *Dominions* series admirably fill the gaps in a genre that's seen more prolific days. Cryptic Comet's *Armageddon Empires*—arguably 2007's best strategy game—is yet another of these small-company masterpieces.

Armageddon Empires explores the political and anthropological possibilities of four separate factions fighting over a devastated Earth. Who would win? The game answers this question with a clever hybrid system that combines collectible card game–like deck building with a board game–style map and movement mechanics. Resources collected from the map allow you to turn cards from your hand into game pieces. You build bases and outposts (which create reinforcements), and fight battles that revel in the mass rolling of dice. Watch 'em spin!

The genius of the design lies in the game's habit of presenting you with clear choices that have no easy answers. Solutions come both from initial deck builds and subsequent hand management. For example, the game places a premium on reconnaissance due to the extensive fog-of-war mechanics; you can try to take advantage of this by including lots of recon units in your deck or hope to land a knockout blow with heavier (and slower) units while conceding that your opponent will be a step ahead of you in battlefield intelligence. Technology and air power are other elements in which you can invest, which means skimping elsewhere. The card selections have definite winners and losers, too—which invites serious study.

HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU, KID

Part of the game's charm stems from Cryptic Comet's investment in artwork. The components look beauti-

> THE POST-APOCALYPTIC ATMOSPHERE IS A PRODUCT OF A LEVEL OF ART DESIGN YOU EXPECT FROM LARGER-BUDGET GAMES.

ful, with attractive card art and a sparse but elegant map. While the gameplay stands on its own, the aesthetics enhance the theme and demonstrate just how important presentation is—even in hardcore strategy games. The postapocalyptic atmosphere is a product of a level of art design that you expect (but often don't get) from much larger-budget games.

Armageddon Empires runs on low-end machines (PC and Mac!), the try-before-you-buy demo gives you a good idea of whether or not you'll like the full game, and you can even download the manual for free. Developer Vic Davis has been great about considering player input for patches, so if you make a good suggestion about improving the game, chances are he'll at least listen. He's also committed to a free "miniupgrade" in the next year, which will incorporate some additional faction cards and independent units. Davis and his game just go to show that sometimes, the oldest (and friendliest) gaming business models work the best. ● **Bruce Geryk**

VERDICT

☑ **Brilliant combination of CCG and board game.**

☒ **No multiplayer.**

9\10

EXCELLENT

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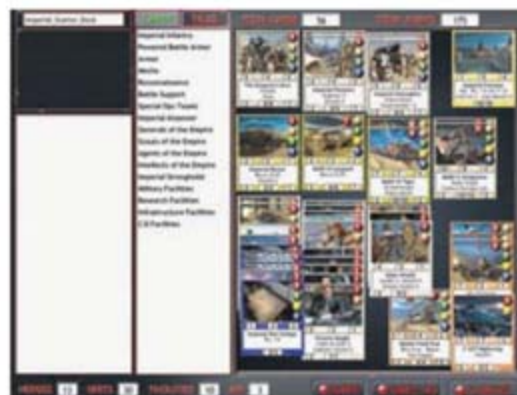
● Games are as quick as an hour—or much longer, depending on your setup choices.

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