• *Empires'* main map screen is a bit busy, and the fixed 1024x768 resolution is a problem.

EMPIRES IN ARMS

Head in your hands

REVIEW

No one questions whether Avalon Hill's *Empires in Arms* is a classic board war game—it's perhaps one of the great multiplayer war games of the past 30 years. As a simulation of the Napoleonic Wars, it encompasses intense negotiation and balance-of-power politics in a way that can only be done justice by seven human adversaries. And that, of course, is the problem with this port.

Given the current state of game A.I., it's foolish to believe a small-company effort like this one could provide anything resembling a decent computer opponent, when the game mechanics depend on tactical coordination and big-picture awareness on the part of each major nation. Predictably, *Empires in Arms'* digital brain fails to mount any kind of serious threat, either singly or en bloc. If you're an old veteran who's been looking forward to a suitable substitute for finding six living, breathing opponents, you're completely out of luck.

But what if you're just a latecomer hoping for an introduction to this outstanding pastime? Once again, the designers seem to have forgotten you, as the game makes no attempt to guide you through its complexities—no tutorial, no easily digestible introductory text in the manual, and no other tools to teach you, other than a small-print, PDF rules tome for your perusal. Furthermore, the only scenario included is the 1805-1815 grand campaign, making it impossible to use the board game's smaller scenarios (like the invasion of Russia) to get your feet wet. Let's not even mention the archaic interface and all of its problems.

GROGNARD OR BUST

It's clear that *Empires in Arms* is aimed squarely at *Empires in Arms* vets who already know the rules and just want to play each other via e-mail (since the game otherwise lacks the capability for Internet play). The manual even boasts that one of the game's strengths is its ability to adjudicate the rules and eliminate arguments. That's nice, because this

SMALL PORTS OF COMPLICATED BOARD GAMES WILL ALWAYS FOUNDER ON THOSE ORIGINAL DESIGNS' COMPLEX A.I. REQUIREMENTS.

happens to be the only advantage it has over the completely free VASSAL module of *Empires in Arms*, which lets those same grognards connect for simultaneous online play. If the rules arguments among adults playing this game become that intractable, perhaps everyone would just be better off playing another game altogether.

This is just the latest proof of the theorem that small-company ports of complicated board games—especially those designed for multiplayer—will always founder on those original designs' complex A.I. requirements, with the many required man-hours resulting in long development times that leave games stuck with an archaic presentation and interface design. The fact that this game is finally available *at all* is an achievement for the developer. At least you can use it to tinker around on an *Empires in Arms* board on your PC with the rules being enforced properly...but it's no substitute for the real game. • **Bruce Geryk**

VERDICT

☐ **Workmanlike adaptation of a classic game.**

☐ **Not much more than a play-by-e-mail tool.**

5 \10

AVERAGE

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• *Empires* depicts battles somewhat abstractly and resolves them with die rolls.

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