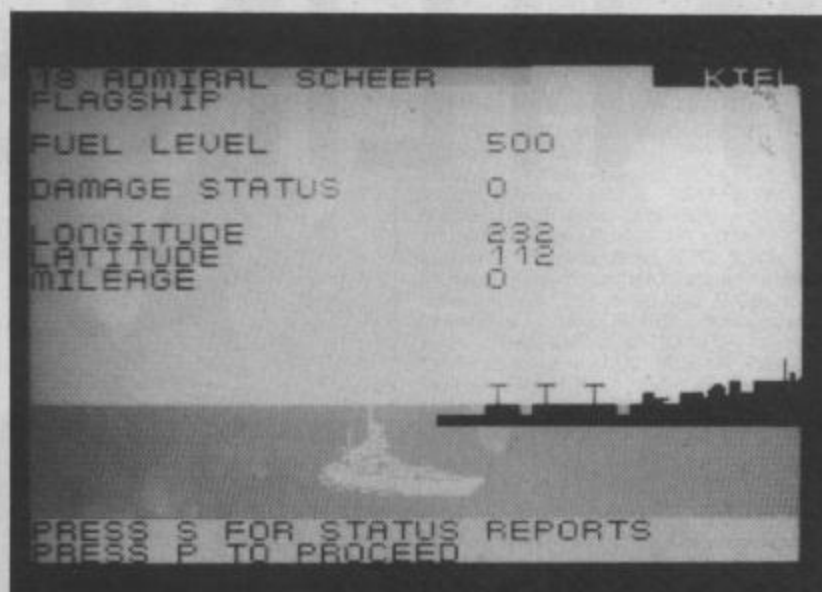


FRONTLINE



A Status screen during the sea-nic game, CONVOY.
Personally we prefer playing with our rubber ducks in the bath — more fun and safer.

once the same picture has appeared several times but referred to under different names, the effect soon wears off. The graphics for these little symbols are quite nicely done, like the title screen — but don't expect anything like the quality of graphics involved in an arcade or adventure game.

The object of the game is to get supplies to your own country, while simultaneously trying prevent supplies reaching your opponent's country. Surprisingly, there is no option to play against the computer. *Convoy* is a strictly two-player game, with Germany and Britain to choose from, and secrecy of plans and routes is so vital to interesting play that one person cannot play both sides successfully — you need a friend as an enemy! Furthermore, it is essential that each player looks away from the screen at various points in the game, which might prove difficult under some circumstances.

You try to achieve your aim by setting courses for your ships, pointing them in the direction of your country. This task is made very tricky by periodic weather changes, and allowances must be made accordingly (this is easier said than done). You can also try to set courses to block off enemy ports or shipping routes, though during play, absolutely no success was gained attempting this. An action sequence is mentioned in the 'instructions', but again, we couldn't find it!

What you do have to watch out for, is encounters with aircraft. Any damage to merchant vessels from planes sinks them, meaning you land less cargo when you reach port. One annoyance was dealing with petty details such as calculating exactly the speed of ships as they entered port so that they didn't crash straight into the har-

bour — that is probably going further than actual ships do in practice! It also means you waste a good deal of time for very little reason.

The game inevitably takes a long time to play to its conclusion and it becomes immensely boring long before then. There is a save game option for masochists, though. *Convoy* is a very strange mixture — some very good graphics (spoiled by vast overuse) combined with the potential of a reasonable war-game are ruined by poor game play. There is a redefined character set but as only three of the characters are redefined, there seems to be little logic to this self defeating feature. In fact, the game is riddled with so many petty annoyances that the game probably takes more time to play than the average gamer will be prepared to devote to it. All in all, this is the sort of game which will quite likely put you off war-games for life and gives strategy games a bad name.

Even at £2.50 *Convoy* is not value for money, despite its professional packaging. It's quite simply a disappointment from start to finish — leave well alone.

Martin Lester

PRESENTATION 30%

Unimaginative and simple

RULES 10%

What rules? Practically non-existent

PLAYABILITY 40%

Not difficult but annoying and unremarkable

GRAPHICS 50%

Not bad for this kind of game, but spoiled by repetition

AUTHENTICITY 50%

Hard to say as it isn't strictly a simulation

VALUE 12%

Minimal — only for masochists

OVERALL 25%

Even the low price doesn't justify its shortcomings

THE RATS

Publisher: Hodder & Stoughton

Author: GXT (Five Ways Software)

Price: £7.95

A plague of rats is swarming through London at an incredible pace. The government refuses to face the seriousness of the problem and won't give you the resources you need. Stopping the rats is proving tremendously difficult — you're racing against time and losing. The pace is electric but you wonder... are you likely to succeed in your task before you get sick to death of reloading the game...

There are several examples of computer games based on famous books on the market. The Electronic Pencil Company's *The Fourth Protocol* is perhaps one of the best examples of current success in this field, and now Hodder and Stoughton have released *The Rats* based on James Herbert's chilling novel. It is a fascinating mixture of semi-graphics adventuring and real time strategy. Unfortunately it is also a mixture of innovative successes and miserable shortcomings.

The title sequence is one of the most original and atmospheric ever designed for a computer game. A prologue is written out in bold white letters across a black screen to set the scene. A brilliant animation sequence follows, in which a pool of torchlight wanders around in the blackness before red eyes appear in the dark. Just as the light moves onto them, a superbly drawn rat pounces into view! Then you are presented with the main, blood-spattered loading screen. The pathetic little tune accompanying this is more amusing than annoying in the context.

The Rats is, to all intents and purposes, two games in one. The Strategy game involves stopping the spread of the rats from the city of London and eradicating them as soon as possible. The opening screen is a simplified map of London with an option window at the bottom. The main options are 'Report', 'Forces', and 'Research'. A flashing cursor on the map indicates

rat activity, and you can call information on areas of activity, deploy forces, or ignore the cursor and work on research instead.

If you ask for a report, you will be prompted to define which area you wish to access information about. Moving your own cursor over the chosen area on the map and pressing enter, opens a smaller window on the screen which provides basic information such as 'Old lady attacked by monster rat'. You may then eliminate the window and move on.

You can also ask for reports from various groups you may have deployed in the field. Three icons on the screen indicate the R&D centre, GHQ and Harris' flat (Harris is one of the major characters from the adventure section) and reports can also be sought from these places. It is fairly important to follow the reports so that you become aware of the nature of the attacks, but to concentrate too much time on them will leave you no time to allocate forces.

The deployment of the fire service, police and professional rat-killers is vital to your success — if you fail to contain the rats and they leave London you lose the game. The three types of forces have varying ability and choices of weaponry. Initially, weapons are fairly conventional, with dogs, gas and high pressure water hoses. You must equip a unit and then move it to the area where you require action (fortunately you don't have to figure out how many of what to give to whom; the limitations of each force are worked out for you). Later you may ask for that unit's progress report.

Your forces are very limited and trying to stop the rats with them is in fact impossible. What you need to do is delay the rodents for as long as you can and eventually, the army will be brought in by the hopelessly reluctant government, thus giving you a second lease of life. This does not happen for some time however, and there's plenty to keep you busy beforehand.

It's also vital to devote resources to research, but you have finite resources and must decide how to use them to best advantage. The areas for research are origin, nature, offence and defence. Spending points on offence and defence will help develop more potent weaponry to



If this rotund fluffy thing reminds you of your hamster then you've got problems. One of the not so friendly RATS.

use against the rats — but making discoveries about their origin is fundamentally important to the adventure game.

The adventure game, like the strategy, is real time. You are shifted to the adventure section at random intervals throughout play. Each entry into the adventure section, which is really a series of mini-adventures involving various minor characters' encounters with the rats, is precluded by an alarm sound from the computer. Don't worry if you lose minor characters — as you often will to start with. Allow a major character (such as Harris) to bite the dust, however, then you've had it!

The format of the adventure is excellent. A large window on the right of the screen contains all the text output in slow-scrolling format, which helps emphasise the real time aspect of the game. At the bottom of the screen is a small window with three major command options which give access to further sub-options presented in the left hand window.

A heartbeat sound (at least it's supposed to be heartbeat) accompanies the text. As the situation becomes more tense, the heartbeat speeds up, adding greatly to the atmosphere. Because the game uses options instead of text input, conversations with the computer can't be ambiguous, which results in very fast and efficient play. Occasionally a new option will appear in the window, implying

an impending application — sometimes using it will not help, but generally the appearance of new options works like an inbuilt hint sheet!

If you lose an encounter with the rats, the page seems to tear open and a rat pounces out at you. The use of a simple scream sound is quite effective here too. This is definitely one of the highlights of the game. The narrative quality of the text is superlative and gory, in true Herbert style. Definitely not for the squeamish, this.

The two games integrate perfectly, with good strategy needed to keep going and good adventuring necessary to finally subdue the oversized vermin. With automatic returns to the strategy game after completion of the 'mini-adventures', this smooth play must be credited for the faultless piece of design it is.

The 'miserable shortcomings' of the game already mentioned don't really exist in the game, but rather around it. The loading sequence is very unfriendly: the tape has to be stopped during the animation sequence. Although the instructions mention a way to skip the animation, it didn't want to work, and very little leeway is left between loading sections. When the animation ends you do not receive a prompt to restart the tape, but have to wait for the tune to finish and press play. Problems arise which could easily have been avoided.

While the game is loading it is easy to believe that an error has occurred — the tape error warning used in the sequence is totally useless and it's difficult to tell whether the program is being received. This problem is aggravated by the disablement of the speaker, and for some totally inexplicable reason, some of the blocks are not actually received at all, to judge by the border during loading. It is natural to assume that the system has crashed — but if you leave well alone, the game loads perfectly in the end. This weird pretence of failing to load is very annoying — particularly since it isn't referred to in the instructions. Very unfriendly.

Once loaded, it's wise to save the game as soon as possible as there is no restart facility because the program possesses massive data files and the game itself continues on the second side of the tape. If you haven't saved a game, you will have to load the entire thing from scratch! There is no menu of options to help clear up matters, and the instruction booklet is misleading and practically unintelligible.

These are major faults, considering the size of the game. On any other game they would be totally crippling, but because of the input format, even badly explained sections can be picked up fairly easily.

The game's percentage based scoring system is silly. We scored 35% for playing what

was apparently a good game, full of successes. Yet on a new game where the computer was left to win without any player input, the final score was 21%! Also, when in the adventure section and the pace gets fast, minor system crashes seem to occur in the form of text character decay and randomly appearing, multi-coloured blocks, though these do not seem to affect play.

If Hodder & Stoughton had ironed out these faults, the game would have been declared perfect. However, its shoddily finished format may detract from the success the game deserves.

PRESENTATION 66%

Some prompts in the game would have raised this rating. And the instructions were ambiguous...

RULES 90%

... Having said that, once you pick them up, they're very clever!

PLAYABILITY 90%

Very fast and smooth — especially with a joystick

GRAPHICS 90%

Almost as good as they could possibly be in this kind of game

AUTHENTICITY 90%

Fair play and very close to the book. Impressive

VALUE 80%

You do get a lot of game for your money

OVERALL 70%

The game is let down by the loading problems and lack of a restart facility

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