THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

A nuclear holocaust may hardly seem a suitable subject for a computer game, and many people may find the fantasy world of this game objectionable. But, ethical questions aside, Apocalypse — The Game of Nuclear Devastation is a traditional Diplomacy-style package that demands tactical skill and quick reactions.

Most computer games are solitary, anti-social diversions. Advertisements may depict families sitting grouped around the home computer, but games are generally designed for the single player.

However, Apocalypse brings back the traditional rivalry and intrigue associated with Diplomacy and other such board games, and thus is eminently suited to family gatherings. Indeed, the BBC version allows up to 15 players to take part. It is a genuine multi-player game, not simply one in which players take turns to participate in an essentially single-person game.

Apocalypse was originally a board game, based on Diplomacy, which has now been extended to take advantage of the graphics and number-crunching capabilities of the microcomputer. The main game covers four 'theatres of war' — Europe, the Caribbean, the UK and London — while extension kits may be purchased to include action in South Africa, the Levant, the Arctic, the USA, South-East Asia, the Pacific Campaign of World War Two, outer space, and historical campaigns based on the Fall of the Roman Empire and Napoleon's battles. These options are available on three tapes that are merged with the main game.

The screen is divided into a series of squares, displayed as a 40 by 20 (BBC) or 20 by 20 (Spectrum) matrix. Blue squares are used to represent sea, while various other colours depict different geographical features — rural or urban areas, cities, mountains or deserts. There are also symbols to represent the opposing forces. These graphics are dependent on machine capabilities. The Spectrum's simpler graphics have the benefit of clarity: the squares are either filled in or left empty, so it is easy to pick out territory that is occupied by an attacking force. The BBC display, while allowing greater graphic detail, appears somewhat cluttered by comparison and players' symbols tend to become lost in the background.

Players take turns to deploy their forces in a manner appropriate to the chosen scenario. Armies and navies are moved around the playing area, and attacks set up and repelled, with the computer acting as a referee. Moves are made by selecting options from various menus, and here the display could be improved to make things easier. The 'nuke' option may be selected in the main game, with predictably devastating results, but this may be used only in its correct historical context — the program won't allow you to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against unfriendly Roman legions, for example.

This is a lengthy game but, if enough like-minded players can be found, it is well worth investigating. Whether or not it is any better for being played on a microcomputer is another matter. Many people may find the board game equally compelling.

Apocalypse: for BBC Micro (2-15 players), £9.95
for ZX Spectrum (2-4 players), £9.95
Publishers: Red Shift, 12 Manor Road, London N16
Authors: Helmut Watson (BBC); Bob Tyler (Spectrum)
Original Game Design: Mike Hayes
Expansion Kits: £4.95 each
Joysticks: Not required
Format: Cassette

War Zones

Apocalypse is a game for all the family because up to 15 people can play at once on the BBC version, or up to four on the Spectrum version shown here. At least two players are always needed.

The players take up armed struggle that can eventually end in nuclear conflict. Thankfully, the display restricts itself to maps such as these, rather than showing pictures of devastation

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