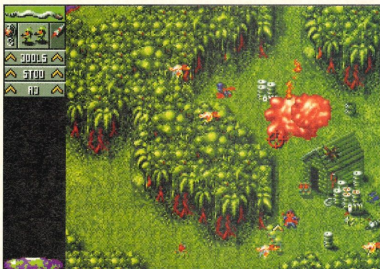




Alex Fraser pokes his head out of the bunker just long enough to review Virgin's superb strategic shoot-'em-up.



As your soldiers wander around, the screen scrolls super-smoothly in all directions to follow their progress. The scenery is completely interactive — you can hide in fox-holes and even blow up any threatening-looking trees. So hurrah for that.



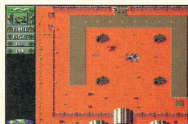
The helicopters are great fun. Because you're airborne that means you're well out of range of the ground-based troops' fire, so you can run amok without fear of reprisal. All you need to do now is put a bit of Wagner on your CD player, crank up the volume to max and you're away.

war has never been so much fun — and I'm afraid I've got to agree with them.

Cannon Fodder is not a game that's easily pigeon-holed. It's sort of a wargame... except it's not. And it's sort of a shoot-'em-up... except it's not. And it's sort of a puzzle game... except it's not. What is IS, however, is a superbly-

balanced blend of all three very different game styles, resulting in an experience that's completely unique and enormously enjoyable to boot.

In Cannon Fodder you're cast as the commander of a platoon of small (but perfectly formed) soldiers who you must attempt to guide safely through 24



A level map can be called up at any time. However, while it shows the positions of a major enemy bases, it doesn't show the location of individual troops so its use is limited.



After each mission you're rewarded with fifteen new recruits and also treated to the sobering sight of Boot Hill, where the bodies of those who have fallen in battle are buried.



If you wish you can split your squad into a maximum of three smaller-sized units, allowing you to set up some highly tactical manoeuvres. Any units not under your direct control will enter 'self defence' mode, digging in and sniping at any enemy soldiers who wander within range.

increasingly-dangerous missions, each of which consists of several self-contained 'phases' or sub-missions. Usually your mission objectives are brutally simple: destroy all the enemy's troops and installations — although there is the occasional hostage rescue thrown in just for a bit of light relief.



I am not what you'd call a violent person. In fact, some might go so

far as to say I'm a bit of a coward. Should the ugliness of a fight erupt in a pub, for example, then I'm the first to run and hide in the toilets — usually the Ladies' in fact, as there's less chance of the thugs rough-housing in the bar finding you there. Oh, they might have no qualms about sticking broken bottles in each other's faces, but entering the Ladies' toilet is another matter entirely.

So I'm not the most obvious candidate, perhaps, for reviewing Virgin's Cannon Fodder, a game where the player's sole aim is to kill literally hundreds of people in cold blood. But — hey! — a man's gotta review what a man's gotta review, so like the true professional I am I sat down at my PC, grasped the mouse, gritted my teeth, forgot my morals and got on with the job.

However, after a couple hours of shooting, maiming and blowing up the enemy's forces, I suddenly realised that I was (gulp!) actually enjoying myself — and quite a lot too. According to Sensible Software, the game's creators,



IT'S A BIT LIKE...

I'm in trouble here, because Cannon Fodder really isn't like any other game around at the moment. However, if pushed to make a comparison (as I am in order to fill this panel) I'd have to say it's got several similarities to Lemmings, especially in the latter stages where some intense brain-straining is required to get your troops through the missions unscathed. Graphically there are links too, although I don't recall quite as much blood and gore in Lemmings...



CANNON FODDER...



...LEMMINGS WITH GUNS?



If you want to get an idea of how hectic Cannon Fodder can get, then take a look at this - your squad of two men is being attacked by a chopper, a jeep and some enemy troops. Fair? Oh yes.

In each mission you control a handful of men, typically no more than five, each armed with a machine gun and a couple of grenades and rockets. It's not a lot, but despite this disgraceful lack of firepower your brave boys will courageously carry out your every order to the letter, even going so far as to walk into minefields or off the edges of cliffs should you ask them to.

Should you fail your mission - which is a nice way of saying that you all your men have been killed - then more troops will be drafted into service from your reserves and you can have another crack at it until you either succeed and move onto the next mission or you run out of reserves, ending the game.

All sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? Ha! Don't be fooled. Agreed, the game starts off easy, with the player required to do little more than run around and shoot things. Indeed, the first two or three missions are a breeze, and you'd have to be the games-playing equivalent of Eddy 'The Eagle' Edwards not to get through them with most of your men unharmed. It's only then, however, when you're starting to get all cocky and over-confident, that you realise you've



been lead through a cunningly thought-out basic tutorial and that the real fight is just beginning.

Complications, like missile-firing choppers and impregnable gun turrets are gradually introduced, and the initial anarchic shoot-'em-up action slowly gives way to



If you come across any abandoned vehicles feel free to hop in and go for a ride. It's best not to put all your chaps in one basket, however, because should the enemy blow the vehicle up the passengers will go with it.

even more enjoyable strategic planning. Come the tenth mission, by which time your men will probably have the life expectancy of a cream cake at a Weight Watchers meeting, you'll be desperately grateful for the 15 new recruits that enlist and swell your reserves after each successfully completed mission.

The final stages of the game are nightmarishly tough, yet not frustratingly so. This is undoubtedly due to the inspired control system where everything, from running and shooting to launching grenades and driving tanks, is accessed via one or two mouse clicks - there's no fumbling about with tiny icons or pull-down menus or anything as cumbersome as that.

To move your troops, for example, you simply point at where you want your lads to go and then click with the left mouse button. Likewise, pointing at targets and clicking with the right button will make your troops fire their guns, while holding down both mouse buttons will launch a grenade or a rocket.

On the later levels you'll discover abandoned tanks, jeeps and helicopters just begging to be commandeered, yet the control remains as elegantly simple as ever. All it takes is a couple of mouse clicks to climb aboard and then you can zip about. Easy, as they say, peasy.

So, when your boys bite the big one you really have no-one to blame but yourself. Which means that you'll want to have another go. Only this time, of course, you'll do better. Then you'll have another go. And another. And another. And suddenly it's 42 a.m. and you realise you've been playing Cannon Fodder non-stop for ten hours. Be warned - this is addictive stuff.

There's so much in Cannon Fodder that's good. No, strike that, because 'good' isn't strong enough - try 'brilliant'. Like the gorgeous animation of the tiny sprites. And the tongue-in-cheek, sometimes black - sick even -

touches of humour throughout. Even the sound, which in most games is little more than a hastily bolted-on afterthought to give you something to listen to, is an integral part of the game and an essential aid to survival - should you hear the distant thock-thock-thock of rotors, for example, you'll know a chopper attack is on the way.

I could fill five times the space I've got here with good things to say about Cannon Fodder but sadly all I have are two pages - we do have to make room to review the other not-so-brilliant games, you know. So let me end with the best thing I can say about Cannon Fodder: buy it.



CANNON FODDER

VIRGIN/SENSIBLE SOFTWARE

(081) 960 2255

£35.99 OUT NOW

RECOMMENDED SPEC

25MHz 386, VGA, 640K, 2mb RAM and 4Mb of hard disk space.

ALSO SUPPORTS

Soundblaster, Adlib and Roland soundcards.

THE GOOD...

- Inspired and fantastically addictive mix of blasting and puzzle solving.
- Hugely playable thanks to the elegant and well-implemented control system.
- Packed with humour and some hilarious - though some might say sick - animations.

...AND THE BAD

- Does get very demanding in the later missions, both mentally and physically.

OVERALL

92%