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I hate aliens.

I don't know why, I just do. Maybe it's the idea of being shot up into a space ship and probed by them. And despite the brightly coloured cutesy graphics, clearly inspired directly by the game's main competitors ([Final Fantasy Tactics](#) and the [Advance Wars](#)), I *hate* the aliens in Rebelstar Tactical Command.

It's not just the fact that I hate aliens in general, either.



Coming from the legendary Gollop brothers, Rebelstar Tactical Command is the spiritual continuation of the X-Com series (and nominally a direct continuation of the Rebelstar series, last seen on the ZX Spectrum in 1988, fact fans) games that featured both turn-based segments and resource management in terminally addictive UFO defence strategy titles.

[Rebelstar TC trailer](#)

Turn-based fun for GBA.

Thanks to the limitations of the GBA hardware, the resource management sections have been dropped completely, replaced with soldiers who gain experience points that you can spend on skill upgrades and the (limited) ability to choose your deployment and equipment at the start of each mission. While I do miss the lovely animated globe from the PC X-Com titles, the real meat of the game has always been in those turn-based sections, which work with quite a different, if perfectly valid, logic from the Japanese titles that crowd the GBA strategy market.



Each turn your team members are allotted 'action points' which can be spent as they wish - on movement, attacking and accessing their equipment. Most strategic is the 'overwatch' option, in which you can spend your action points to attack in the enemy's turn. Sounds easy enough? Well, wisely spending your points has far, far more importance than you'd place upon your Tesco clubcard - especially when you factor in some of the harshest line-of-sight rules I've ever seen in a game. Each turn becomes a slow crawl forwards, attempting to spot and destroy the enemy before they can even see you.

In Rebelstar Tactical Command, be prepared to fail, and fail, and fail again. You will *fear* this failure. Each time a bullet from an unseen alien strikes one of your tiny team of heroes it will be like a bullet in your own heart, as the creeping, desperate attempts to see where it came from begin a long slow sweep of the area with your team's eyes. And if you don't have enough action points? Then be prepared for the terrifying wait through the enemy's turn. And when the aliens strike, you will *hate* them.

[Mass Effect fans think this official image hints that Paragon/Renegade system is "absolutely returning"](#)
Shepard's hook.

This game, with its absolute, harsh, unyielding demands of military perfection against a hidden, constantly changing enemy in urban environments, should be used to kick our troops into shape. With the issue of a squeamish public, Rebelstar Tactical Command could work as the ultimate training tool to ensure they never leave a man behind.

- Yes, it's going to be amazing
- It looks good but I'm waiting to see more
- No, I've been tricked by trailers before
- No, Rockstar games aren't for me
- Hard to get excited about a game from one trailer

If you want to win, you have to be perfect. On entering a building, it is imperative that a character has all their action points available to quickly sweep a room, attack any enemies seen, and get back under cover within a turn. Leaving a character out in the open, no

action points left over, for the duration of the enemy's turn, is suicide.



"Hang on a minute", you're probably muttering, "This sounds unforgivably harsh."

Yes, I've talked a lot here about how scary it is, how hard it is, but is it actually any fun?

In a word, yes. A tremendous amount of fun. There is fun in the failure, because much like the best games of any genre, every mistake you make will be your own, and as a result is never as frustrating. That may sound like a surprising thing to say in a game that's actually so hard you'll die several times during the lengthy tutorial, but the facts of the matter are that I played each mission gaining the 'elite' rating (the highest one) before I allowed myself to move on, simply because it made me care.

And my men died, many, many times. And I *hated* those aliens for it.

It's the virtue of a job well done that will make you care about your troops, not the characterisation featured in the plot. In fact, it's your general conquered Earth plot - one remaining plucky group of rebels with an even pluckier main character who also holds a special secret (pro tip: he's the chosen one...) with a bit of mild probing and some cribbage from Logan's Run to spice it up a bit. Sadly, the mysterious disappearance of people older than thirty is what's stolen from Logan's Run, not a naked Jenny Agutter. To be honest, it's all a bit annoying, not least due to some writing that's poor enough to have grammar errors all over the place.



This general lack of polish in a game which requires absolute perfection from the player is one of the more unfortunate aspects of the game. While the anime artwork and generally cute game models are all fine and dandy, they look terribly washed out on my GBA SP screen, and while I admit I'm stuck in the dark ages with a front light, that the game looks much better on the recently released Micro is no excuse. For a game so aesthetically influenced by Nintendo's work in the Advance Wars series, it's a shame the developer couldn't take a leaf out of Intelligent Systems' book for the interface, with the front end being as drab as a Java title bundled with a Nokia phone, and the in-game menus being overly complex and occasionally inconsistent.

None of these things truly get in the way of the game, though. In fact, many gamers might be willing to forgive them in a budget title, because even with these admittedly piddling flaws this is one of the most atmospheric titles on the GBA and one of the tightest turn-based strategy games available on any system currently. It's not too short either, with somewhere in the region of 15 to 20 hours in the main mission, and a Skirmish mode in which you can while away the hours quite happily. The latter does seem like a bit of an afterthought in the face of Advance Wars' War Room mode, mind you.

With a tiny bit more polish Rebelstar Tactical Command could be not only one of the best games on the GBA but one of the best games released this year. Sadly however, its flaws keep it below the polished best of Nintendo, but for anyone with fond memories of X-Com, who can't get enough turn based strategy on the GBA, or if you just plain can't stand aliens, it's unmissable.

7 / 10

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