

La Bataille D'Austerlitz

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Not so long ago monster games seemed the wave of the future. However today mini-games fill the shops and SPI, who were once producing a new monster every two months, have now abandoned them. While the SPI experience with monsters certainly indicates that teams of professional designers with limited time cannot continue to turn out satisfactory monsters to order, interesting games in this field are still coming from designers whose commitment to a certain subject is such that the design becomes a labour of love. Jack Radey's Eastern Front game *Korsun Pocket* is one such and another is Marshal Enterprise's *La Bataille d'Austerlitz*.

The Marshal approach to games manufacture is certainly different. Disdaining feedback, they produce nothing but large games on Napoleonic battles, using the same system each time (So far they have tackled Eylau, Talavera and Auerstadt).

Just how unusual the Marshal style is can be seen as soon as one opens the zip-lock bag. The first thing to catch the eye is the counters. In place of the usual one colour for each nationality plus a unit type symbol, all units, French, Russian and Austrian, are in colours corresponding to regimental uniforms and, in some cases, with regimental emblems on the counter. Since these emblems are also in colour, some counters have up to six different colours on them. The result certainly conveys something of the spectacle of a Napoleonic army drawn up in battle order. It is also extremely confusing. For example, it seems that, as well as Russian infantry, some French cavalry also wore green as both sets of counters are the same colour. However, confusion is only just beginning. There are three sheets of unit counters, all three of which contain some French and some Allied units, with nothing on the sheet to indicate which is which. Then, for some obscure reason, half the counters on each sheet are printed upside down.

The result of all this is that when I sat down to play the introductory scenario (which needs about twenty counters), I was still looking for the counters an hour later. Then it dawned on me that French counters use a different type from the Allied for their numbers. I'm sharing this discovery with *Phoenix* readers, since it's stated nowhere in the rules.

Next come the maps. There are four of them depicting the battlefield with its hills, forests, streams, lakes, villages and redoubts. Although less colourful than the counters they are still somewhat distinctive, with woods and villages represented not by symbols but by small drawings, in the manner more usually associated with fantasy games.

The rules, too, are rather unusual. It is evident that the designers have a very considerable affection for the era of Napoleonic France which manifests itself in many ways, some of them, one assumes, not intended seriously. The various members of the design team have awarded themselves titles such as *Maitre de la Palais* and *Duc de Pontecorvo* and the bibliography includes such surprising items as the music of Mozart and Beethoven. The victory conditions explain that, although the Allies win if Napoleon is killed, this act earns them the hatred of future generations. (A letter I wrote to Marshal Enterprises requesting clarification on certain points received a reply addressing me as 'citizen-reviewer').

All this is fairly amusing but I was less happy about the importation of French terms into the rules. The use of period terms such as *tirailleurs* for skirmishers is fair enough and adds to the atmosphere but the designers feel the need to go further and invent French equivalents for stock gaming terms, such as calling ZOCs *zones d'influence*.

Still the main function of a rule book is to explain a game clearly. The designers state at the beginning: 'The reader ... should look on these rules as not some sort of legal document subject to the perverse mental gymnastics of the mad barrister searching frantically for the smallest of loopholes.'

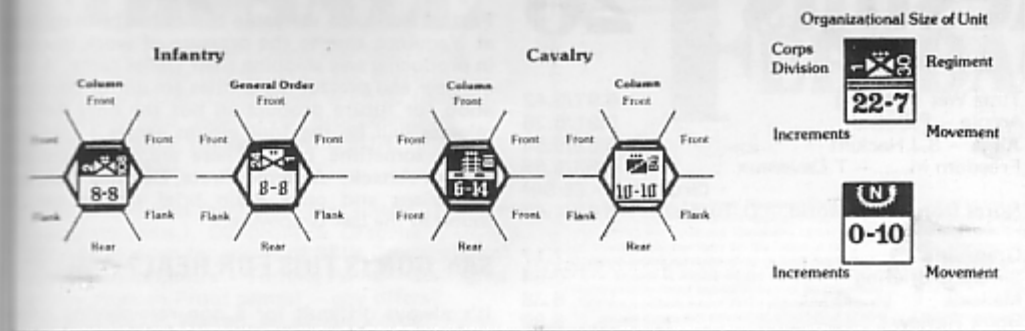
This approach is fair enough provided the rules really are written so the designer's intentions are clear. In this area I feel that, in view of the fact that the game system is a highly original one, the rules could have been explained rather more thoroughly, with examples of play given. In some areas it will take several readings to see exactly what the designer has in mind. Ultimately the information one needs is usually there but it can take a lot of finding. For example, the firing rules are, as written, incomprehensible until one turns to the fire table in a separate booklet. The rules inform you that the band of the Imperial Guard has a favourable effect on the morale of nearby units but do not tell you what the Guards Band counter looks like. (I presume its the one marked GB but it would be nice to be told).

Having mastered the counters and the rules, on sitting down to play what do you find? The answer is a very interesting system which is worthy of examining in some detail. Each unit is rated for fire power, melee strength, morale and the number of steps (or increments as the designers call them) it possesses. These range from 5 for French skirmishers to 20 for a Russian infantry regiment. Losses are taken in steps which are recorded by a counter under the unit.



Target of Opportunity

RIFLEMAN DODDS



Napoleon said "the moral is to the physical as three is to one" and the designers of LBDA certainly share this opinion. Units take morale checks whenever they lose steps or are meleed against. While units can lose a lot of their steps with no ill effects, demoralisation means that they are, at least for a time, useless.

Infantry may deploy either in line or column. Units in line occupy two hexes (they are placed on the vertex between the two) and have a high fire power while infantry in column cannot use its fire power to such effect, is more vulnerable to fire, but it is more effective in melee.

It is worth looking for a moment at exactly why a column is effective in melee. Whether a unit is in line or column it will have the same melee value. However melee is preceded by a morale check for attacker and defender and a unit in column has a greater chance of passing its morale check and causing the enemy to fail. At first this seems odd but the results are in fact correct. Actual "cold steel", hand to hand combat involving large numbers over a long period, was rare but what often happened was that the mere approach of the enemy column (incidentally, not a column in the sense it is usually understood today; a battalion column might consist of 10 ranks of 100 men) would cause a wavering unit to break and flee. When this failed to happen the attacking columns might, like the Imperial Guard at Waterloo, break and run themselves. However, as John Keegan points out in "The Face of Battle", one advantage of the column in assault was that its tight ranks were self disciplining, in that only those at the flanks and rear had any chance to turn and run. In view of these factors it seems correct to make assault by column decisive in its effect on morale rather than simply by the number of casualties inflicted.

Artillery is handled fairly simply. This is one area in which commanders have an important role to play since they enable artillery on different hexes to combine fire. Artillery without commanders must roll a 5 or 6 to limber up and each unit has only a limited amount of ammunition available. No distinction is made between the guns and their crews so artillery may be eliminated by infantry fire.

The rules governing cavalry are very interesting. Cavalry charges are conducted in a separate phase. If they succeed against infantry in line or column the results can be disastrous for the defender. However, during the charge defending infantry may form square, which increases their morale and means a probability of heavy casualties for the attacking cavalry. However units in square present sitting targets to enemy infantry and artillery fire. To increase the defenders problems, units attempting to form square run the risk of failure and demoralisation, this risk growing greater the nearer the cavalry is. Consequently, if the defender waits until it is obvious which unit is being charged, attempts to form square may result in demoralisation and destruction by the cavalry. However, if units go into square when cavalry is still some distance away, the cavalry may simply select another target, leaving the infantry in square to be dealt with by firepower.

Leaders increase the morale of units (or decrease it if they get killed). It is suggested that, in multi-player games, each player should be represented by a commander on the map and that communication should only be permitted by written messages which must be conveyed by aides, also represented by counters, who run the risk of death or capture en route.

The system's various elements certainly offer an extremely detailed and interesting view of Napoleonic grand tactics. However, any simulation from a minigame to a Pentagon computerised wargame must inevitably simplify. Paradoxically, the more detailed a simulation is, the more obvious it becomes what is left out. Look for example at the way that gamers for many years accepted the early Avalon Hill games without asking basic questions (like what were stacking limits intended to simulate). However, when Panzerblitz appeared its far greater detail made it much more easy to relate to real life events and so there were soon complaints about what had not been simulated properly.

Similarly, the very detail of LBDA makes what has been omitted more obvious. In particular there is one very surprising omission. The rules include facing to determine in which direction units may attack but facing has no effect on defence. This seems odd to say the least. Admittedly Napoleonic armies had no machine guns to enfilade whole lines but, since defence against fire is based on whether a unit is in line or column, one would assume these formations presented different targets from the flank than from the front. And surely a player which can make a melee attack against a unit's rear should gain something thereby?

In the end we come to the recurring question about big games. Can you actually play it? With some reservations, the answer is yes. There are several small scale scenarios which, even though they use only a small number of counters, still require a lot of decision making (Whether you consider it worth your while to pay for a big game if you are only going to play the small scenarios is another matter). Certainly everyone should start off with one of these since, when you start playing, you will have to refer to the rules frequently and it will not always be easy to find what you want. Unfortunately, even in the small scenarios, deployment is presented in a rather cumbersome fashion, since the scenario will simply tell you to set up, for example, Doctorov's division, after which you must turn to the Order of Battle to see what Doctorov's division consists of. (This would matter less if the counters were less obscure).

To conclude, the rules and graphics of La Bataille d'Austerlitz show a great deal of talent and originality and the game will certainly be of interest to all fans of Napoleonic or giant games. However, the confusing presentation of the game's information mars the final effect. If Marshal could improve this (and perhaps produce a game on a small Napoleonic battle to fit on one board) they might produce a generally recognised classic.



I suppose it had to happen. I did not, I must be frank, expect that my gentle remarks in this column would be paid any real attention in the higher echelons of power but one does, rather like Eeyore on his birthday, hope for the best. It is a bitter pill to swallow when one's worst beliefs are confirmed and confirmed with such emphasis.

Prior to emptying the ash bucket about my person which is already suitably clad in sack cloth, which is all that I can afford under this munificent government, I had better explain what I'm so depressed about. As I arrived at the SPUKORGY I was greeted by the smiling face of a SIMPUBS person who pointed me down to the counter whereat I was required to register my arrival in order that I might qualify for a key to the room where I meant to spend as little time as possible sleeping. Now this counter is, you understand, groaning under the heavy burden of hundreds and hundreds of games. Some new, some last month's lot and some of the grand old favourites like "Airforce" and "Atlantic Wall". Atop this inviting, nay, seductive heap of merchandise was the cause of my dismay.

In bright red letters I saw the word Dallas. It was printed upon a box lid which carried pictures of the various actors who, I am assured by one of my more square eyed fellow war gamers, play various parts in a television series of that name. Following the legend Dallas I was able to read "The Television Role-Playing Game" and upon the side of the box was the unmistakable SPI logo. I joke not! I have always had some misgivings about the general level of sanity at SPI as some of my comments in this, now regular, letter will have shown.... but Dallas?

The future is now clear. While various other games design companies struggle to keep up with that astonishing piece of deception Ares (produced to make us think that SPI was going into SF&F games) Dunnigan (hereinafter known as 'Crazy Jim') Simonsen (L'il Artie) and Hessel (The Bradawl) are heading hot foot for the mass market with such games (to follow the instant success of Dallas) as "Starsky and Hutch go Cruisin'" (The dynamic duo take time off from their work and find that the gay world is not just into uniforms), "The Streets of San Francisco" in which Karl Malden gains victory points for learning to see round his nose, and "The Big Apple" in which Crazy Jim finds that there is more to the world of computing than TRS-80.

In the meantime World Wide Wargamers have already committed vast resources to negotiating with Granada TV for the game rights to "Coronation Street"; Fusilier Games have sought the rights to make a game from "Mrs Dale's Diary" (Aberdeen is awfully far north) and Philmar have got the rights to do "The Archers" (plus four points for crossing ploughed arable; plus six if muck has been spread). Where will it all end? Who can say with any authority? I even wrote to SPI, from the depths of my despair, and suggested they might do "Sgt. Bilko" and "Mash" but they said that they might turn out to have too much to do with military games and they weren't doing those any longer.

Following the example of other conservationists who have fought to preserve our Ale and our Bread I am about to start a Campaign to Preserve Wargame Publishers. Subscriptions will be welcomed whenever I've managed to get an address where Crazy Jim can't get me. Now there's an idea for a game.... call it "The Godfather".....