Opening Moves

CONSUMING THE INDIGESTIBLE
The Large Game Syndrome

In *MOVES* 33 I ran a number of Feedback questions concerning the big games on the market — how often you've played them to a decision, how long it took you, whether you wanted to buy more big games and how much you'd be willing to pay for them. Between then and now, SPI also held one of its face-to-face subscriber seminars (an occasion where we invite a random selection of subscribers to visit our offices and chat about the hobby) and at that seminar many of the same questions were asked.

Perhaps the most interesting single piece of information to come out of all of this investigation is the fact that the big games are not *played* very much. Apparently, you buy them, read the rules, massage the components, maybe even set up a scenario — but you don't really *play* them. The average number of games played to conclusion (i.e., not necessarily playing *every* turn) was 1.23, No single game showed an individual average-times-played higher than 1.9.

75% of you said that you bought the big games because they provided a detailed and realistic treatment of a subject that interested you — an overwhelming concentration of responses that paralleled those of the seminar participants. It's somewhat odd that you big game buyers are looking for detail and realism and yet don't really get involved in playing these detailed and realistic systems. I'm sure, of course, that there exist individual exceptions to this phenomenon (I've spoken directly to some of you that have virtually exhausted yourselves playing, for example, endless sessions of *War in Europe*). But it is bemusing to designers that they develop extensive and intensive systems that are hardly used and never explored in any great detail by most of the people that buy them. Surely *one* playing of a game as highly ramified as *War in Europe* doesn't even begin to sort out the possibilities inherent in the situation and the system. So why is all that detail there? If it is never experienced, what does it matter that the system works smoothly or at all? What is the point of having alternate scenarios in a game that no one will play more than once anyway?

It is doubly interesting to note that the ideal playing time for a game was indicated to be approximately *four* hours. None of the large games can be brought even *near* to conclusion in so limited a time — yet 80% of you said that you'd continue to buy big games! The members of the seminar panel clearly stated that time-available was a severe limiting factor on their participation in the hobby. Many had games that they had

bought and not even gotten around to *opening* yet! They speculated that it would be nice to have a game design as detailed as those of the big games but built into a game that could be played in a single evening. Even so, most of the panel indicated that they had an affection for the big games albeit one that sprung from daydreaming about them rather than actual play.

The acceptability ratings of the big games on the list are uniformly high — only two games out of fourteen had a rating lower than 7.0 and the average was 7.2. Acceptability didn't seem to have much impact on how often the game was played — in fact the lowest rated game was played the most *(Global War)*. This was also true of the playability rating vis-a-vis times played, i.e., the more playable games were not necessarily the ones that were played the most often. If anything, it seems to be that the bigger the game is physically, the less often it is played (which makes some kind of sense—after all, who has a spare gymnasium in their house to accomodate *War in Europe* for a month or so?).

It has been suggested that people buy big games to get information from them — but how much information does one really get from a system that is barely used? Oh, you can set up the order of battle on the map and call that information — but you can get the same thing at much less cost and effort in any good military atlas. True, there is a special quality to the digitalization of strengths on the units in a wargame — but you don't really get a feel for what these numbers mean unless you actually play the game. Back in the bad old days when every game system was identical you could look at a number and make certain (correct) assumptions about it. Nowadays that just ain't so — raw values are so highly modified by systems that one must experience their effects in order to understand the *meaning* of the number. Wargame numbers are now contextual rather than absolute.

So let's assume you play the thing once — what do you know? The surface of the rules structure and a general impression of the terrain effect on combat. You can't be sure of the relative quality of the armies. You can't be sure of the balance or imbalance of the situation. You can't be sure of the validity of the victory conditions or whether or not the historical result can be obtained in the game. In fact you can't be sure of *any* of the historicity or historical information in the game.

You really can't even be sure that you played the rules right! I've spoken to more than one otherwise bright gamer and pointed out a false assumption on their part that vitiated everything that they had been doing in a given game. Setting up a large game and perhaps playing a few turns or even one complete scenario is really only equivalent to reading the chapter headings and a few introductory paragraphs in a history of the battle.

The fact remains, however, that you do like big games, will buy them, and continue to give them high marks. They will, therefore, continue to have a large place in the

production output of (at least) this company — since SPI does gear itself to produce what you want — not what we want you to want! All I'm attempting to point out is that we should be more realistic in our assertions about these megaliths: i.e., what we are or are not doing with them, what they mean as games and as historical works, and how they affect the nature of our hobby. Since most of you don't *really* play these things the following can be said about the design of future big games:

1. They can be infinitely complex.
2. They can be infinitely (sic) large.
3. They need not truly function as *games* at all!

Is this not so?   —Redmond