

DESIGN CRITIQUE

ARROWS OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE

Agincourt Endured, not Played

by David A. Smith

This is a double repeat: it's the second article in this issue by the same author, and it's the second article in two issues about *Agincourt*. If nothing else, it should prove interesting to see if critical exposure affects the rate of sale of this unusual game about a not very popular period. If you've forgotten, last issue C. Vasey pasted *Agincourt* on historical and design grounds. Mr. Smith is kinder but still voices one of the same basic criticisms: was this game necessary? See the SpiBus article in this issue. Computerizing *Agincourt* may imbue it with a different reason for playing it. — RAS

"But war's a game which, were their subjects wise, Kings would not play at."

— William Cowper (1731-1800)

In some ways SPI's game *Agincourt* reflects the battle itself; however much bravery and skill went into it, one feels that the energy could have been better spent elsewhere. For although Dunnigan and Werden have concocted a clever, realistic representation of the constraints which led to the French disaster, they have in so doing painted themselves into a corner: there is no other possible outcome than needless die-rolling, record-keeping, and eventually French slaughter.

This is not to say that I think *Agincourt* a bad game (and even if I did, I would have little cause for complaint: I voted for the game in the Feedback). Considerable imagination and careful thinking went into the game (although less went into writing and proof-reading the rules). The seminal ideas in *Agincourt* go along way to advance the state of the art (medieval); I expect them to find much more fertile ground in other simulations.

The Combat System

Understanding *Agincourt's* novel combat system is integral to understanding the game (and medieval tactics in general). The beauty of the system is the fluid way its components—combat, morale, movement, archery, unit composition—work together.

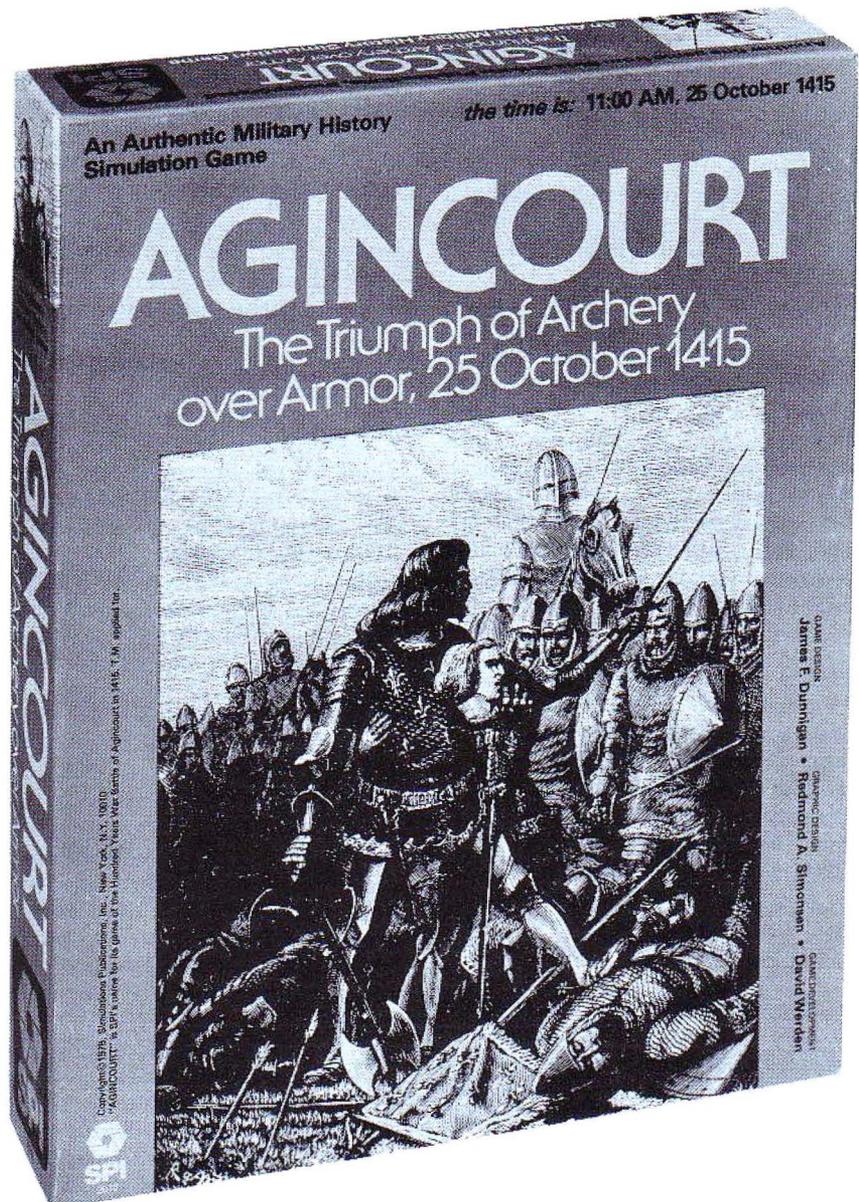
Medieval infantry (and even in many cases cavalry) were generally arrayed in large blocks of men several rows deep. The strength of a unit was therefore determined by the breadth and competence of its front line, its staying power by the depth of men ready to step forward when (not *if*) the front line fell. In *Agincourt*, each unit has a combat strength and a depth (measured in Lines),

each Line corresponding to one set of men. When a unit takes losses, therefore, its basic strength remains the same, but the number of lines is reduced.

But casualties, although they do not reduce a unit's hitting power, do result in dead and wounded men. The dead underfoot reduce combat effectiveness and undermine morale among the living. And the fugitives, fleeing to the rear with tales of battle, blood, and overwhelming numbers, also undermine

morale in the troops who wait behind the lines.

A quick look at the combat and morale charts (9.4, 10.4 and 10.5), points up one of the fundamental features of the combat system. *As a unit takes losses, it becomes increasingly likely to take more losses.* And, of equal importance, *melee combat is almost incidental: an army is destroyed by fire losses and morale desertions.* Thus the two armies are perched, nervously, on a morale preci-



pice. Whichever army starts losing is likely to be routed. And the English longbow can push the French over the edge.

The longbow is easily the dominating weapon in the game, with about half again as much killing power as the shortbow, and much greater effective range than the crossbow. Moreover, the English archers have roughly twice as many arrows as their French counterparts (and they have the ability to retrieve arrows if needed). And the English longbowmen have one additional, vital, asset: their stakes.

The importance of the stakes cannot be overstated. *Once the English have emplaned their stakes, they cannot be attacked by French Men-At-Arms.* And although the French cavalry might theoretically be able to reach the longbowmen, the archers will have several shots at the cavalry as they charge, and the ten Morale Points for attacking through the stakes virtually assures that one of the two lines will break: the chances that a French cavalry unit will actually inflict damage upon archers behind stakes is vanishingly small.

Movement is governed by the momentum of the medieval mind: "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" seems to be the motto. And the French (but *not* the English) are governed by a nasty rule known as Case 5.3, which says, basically, that the French must move in solid lines, without turning, until they run into a woods hex or an enemy unit. This robot behavior means that any French line that hopes to get near the English Men-At-Arms must also send several blocks of men up against the English longbowmen — behind their stakes.

Leaders, especially King Henry, also play an important role. In addition to helping charge up combat units, leaders may engage one another in Personal Combat. If captured, they have ransom value. And if Henry V is captured or killed (Case 10.3 uses the words "captured" and "killed" interchangeably without ever clarifying the ambiguity), English morale is likely to crack. Thus, if the French can kill the King, the course of the battle can be swung in their favor.

The best chance to do this lies in the *Fait Du Mort*: the fanatical suicide squad (have you ever encountered a suicide squad that wasn't fanatical?) As soon as a French combat unit becomes adjacent to Henry, the *Fait Du Mort* unit materializes and challenges the King to Personal Combat. Although the *Fait Du Mort* is not likely to kill the King, it is one of the few French weapons which has a chance of doing damage to the English.

The Scenarios

Historical. The introduction to the Historical Scenario suggests that it is "suitable for solitaire play." That is an understatement; the Historical Scenario is *unsuitable* for anything else. On the first turn, the front French cavalry — and only the front French cavalry — must charge full speed at the English lines (i.e., to virtually certain destruction). On the second game-turn, the

French front line must move forward; on the third game-turn, the French archers must advance, and on the fourth game-turn the second line advances.

As each line advances over the muddy ground, the English will have plenty of opportunities to riddle the French ranks. Some units will run up against the English stakes, where they are sitting ducks. Others will be directed against the English Men-At-Arms; these will be subjected to a withering English crossfire from the archers.

French combat effectiveness for the few units fortunate enough to reach the English Men-At-Arms will swiftly fall to zero as a result of the dead underfoot, fugitives fleeing to the rear, and new forces crowding in behind the unwieldy formations. The *Fait Du Mort* will in all probability not kill Henry V; they have six attacks against the King and must inflict five wounds to achieve capture. And unless they do, the English will totally rout the French.

The Victory Conditions for the Historical Scenario have been skewed so that the French have a chance of winning a game victory (a casualty ratio less than seven to one can result in a French "victory"). If you can stomach playing through a scenario where the clockwork Frenchmen get massacred at less than the historical rate, be my guest.

Free Deployment. Life is made a little easier for the French in this scenario. The ground is dry (allowing the French to cover the distance between themselves and the English lines in half as much time, thus reducing the attrition rate). The French are not forced to catapult themselves senselessly forward on a railway timetable as in the Historical Scenario. Instead they are saddled with a new form of idiocy: any French unit which begins a Movement Phase within the range of any English Bowman *must* charge the English lines! And deadly Case 5.3 is in effect; a whole line must charge if one unit is within range.

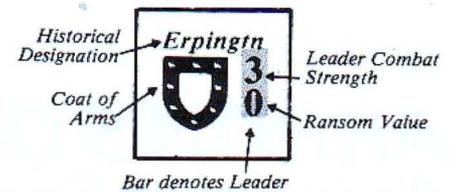
There is only one escape clause: French archers may satisfy their masculine urges by returning fire, rather than charging. This suggests a possible French strategy: hold positions, returning fire as necessary, and try to lure the English out from behind their stakes.

The French should deploy, in defiance of all conventional medieval wisdom, with their shortbowmen in the front line. Directly behind each shortbow unit, crossbowmen should be deployed. Then, starting exactly six hexes behind the shortbowmen, the French should place lines of four units (alternately large and small formations), with as little side-to-side crowding as possible. The first line should be cavalry positioned so that they can dash forward around the shortbowmen when the time comes. This done, the French should wait.

The English must originally deploy as they did historically, but are not subject to Case 5.3 (lucky for them). Assuming the French sit tight, the English must advance to at least longbow range (six hexes), and give up the protection of their stakes when they

Sample Units

LEADER



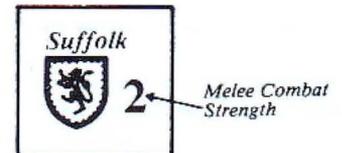
MEN-AT-ARMS



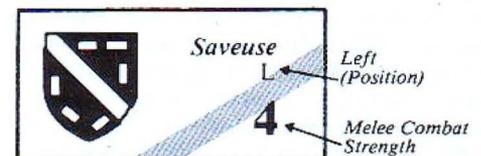
ENGLISH LONGBOW (Front, archer)



ENGLISH LONGBOW (Back, yeoman)



FRENCH CAVALRY (Front, normal)



FRENCH CAVALRY (Back, charge)



FRENCH CROSSBOW



FRENCH SHORTBOW



move. (Or the English can also wait, in which case the game lasts until night falls and nothing really changes. Presumably the French therefore win by starving the English into submission.)

Once the English decide to move — as they eventually will — they have a choice between a piecemeal advance or a full-blown march forward. If the English advance only a few units, the French may choose to trade ar-

row volleys with them. (The English are likely to advance to a range of three or four hexes — the distance of maximum superiority over the shortbow.) Although the French are likely to get the worst of the fire results, the English will use up a lot of arrows in inflicting casualties — and the shortbow is nothing to sneeze at (not against archers).

In the event that the English do grind down the French crossbowmen, they will be short of arrows and fearful of advancing to retrieve them (that is why the French crossbowmen are placed one hex behind the shortbowmen; to prevent the English from plucking arrows from the corpses). This strategy will not inspire confidence among the French shortbowmen, but it will give the French an opportunity to take on a reduced English force after having inflicted some casualties.

If the English player is impatient or daring, he may choose to advance his entire force in a body. The French have only one chance: the full-speed-ahead charge while the stakes are not planted. If the French have placed their units properly, they should be able to sift the cavalry and Men-At-Arms lines through the ranks of the shortbowmen and hit the major portion of the English line before the Englishmen are ready. (The rules imply that the English may plant stakes even if there are Frenchmen breathing down their necks, but this seems historically inaccurate, and I suggest that stakes may be implanted by the English only if the implanting unit is not adjacent to a French combat unit.)

Although the main combat units will not be able to reach the English lines in a single charge, enough of the English will be engaged so that the potentially greater French staying power (seven lines to four in most cases) will have some effect. At the very least the French will have an opportunity to get at the entire English line: according to Case 16.22, stakes may be implanted only after three Impulses *over two turns*. And, once engaged in melee, the English bowmen become (much less deadly) yeomen.

At this point, with the full English force busy, the French shortbowmen and crossbowmen can advance, the former to fire over the heads of their fellows, the latter to look for opportunities to move adjacent to a weakened English combat unit. There is a real chance that the French will carry the day and win, not just a game victory, but a historical victory as well.

That, at any rate, is what might happen if things go right. If things go wrong, the Historical Scenario could be replayed. This French strategy requires iron nerve, exact timing, and just plain good luck. It risks disastrous defeat, but is the only chance for a fighting victory.

King Harry's Folly. At first reading, King Harry's Folly might seem like a minor variation on the Free Deployment Scenario, but there are five little words which change the entire complexion of the battle: "English yeomen have no stakes." But the designer giveth and the designer taketh away: the French cannot take full advantage of this

aberration: instead, French units may only move if they have been fired upon, and then the unit attached must charge the English line, totally piecemeal (Case 5.3 is *not* in effect). Once the French have suffered 30 Casualty Points, the entire army may move as it pleases. The only hope for the French, therefore, is to sit and take it until a sufficient force of Frenchmen are mobilized that a charge *en masse* may be considered.

The French should deploy so as to sacrifice the 30 Strength Points as painlessly (!) as they can, by putting four large double counter units (without leaders) and one Third Battle infantry unit in the front line. The remainder of the French force should sit behind a screen of archers, avoiding Fugitives as they stream off the field, and wait until enough of their countrymen have been butchered that they can advance. Then, "once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more/To close the wall up with our English dead!" (*Henry V*, Act III, Scene i, 1-2).

Open Field Of Battle. The only problem with the Open Field of Battle Scenario is that the game-map is too small. Here the French are not forced to charge the English stakes if they wish to force battle: instead a flanking action is called for.

The French should place their main strength on the two flanks; only a small residual force of archers and Third Battle infantry should be left in the center. These forces should not move. The wings should be composed of a mixed force of Men-At-Arms and cavalry in homogenous lines. Each flank should swing wide of the English lines and then, as allowed by Case 20.43(E), pivot and close upon the English from behind.

Given enough space to turn the English line on both sides, the French are almost certain of victory; those damn English stakes cannot point in all directions at once. If movement is limited to the game-map provided (which I frankly think is unfair; an open field of battle does not have out-of-bounds markers), the French will be forced to engage the ends of the English line before sweeping around. This, while painful, should not be fatal to French chances.

Personal Combat

From the French point of view, Personal Combat exists for only one reason: to kill Henry V. The Personal Combat rules are sketchy in two very important areas: how long a combat between leaders lasts, and how many wounds it takes to kill a leader. My own interpretation is that (1) personal combat is fought in sets of six "rounds" per Game-Turn (i.e., one round every thirty seconds); (2) it takes five wounds to kill a man or capture him; (3) wounds are cumulative from Game-Turn to Game-Turn.

The Personal Combat table provides one of the rare opportunities for a "pure" game-theory analysis. Assuming that the combatants wish to maximize the difference between the probability of inflicting a wound and the probability of receiving one, the Superior leader should use Retiring Attacking one-third of the time and Retiring Parrying

the remaining two-thirds, while the Inferior leader should use Standing Parrying two-thirds of the time and Retiring Attacking the remaining one-third.

The Superior Player may, if he is *much* superior to the Inferior, choose to accept an unusually high risk and use Advance Attacking or Stand Attacking, but *the Inferior leader should never use Advance Attacking, Advance Parrying, Standing Attacking or Retiring Parrying.*

Conclusions

The results of the Personal Combat analysis given above demonstrate one of the frustrations of the game. The best strategies for Personal Combat are namby-pamby prancing about; neither Player can attack without exposing himself to bad odds. Likewise, to have any chance of winning the game (in any of the Scenarios where the French can affect their destiny), proper French strategy is to deploy in such a way as to minimize the inherent stupidity under which the French must operate.

The best strategy for the French in *any* of the Scenarios is not to fight at Agincourt, but instead to seek battle elsewhere, preferably on a nice, wide, dry plain, where the French have enough room to bring their greater numbers to bear. If the French are "forced" (by the game designer) to fight, their best strategy consists of sacrificing some units to exhaust the English arrow supply (which is a little like trying to storm machine-gun nests with waves of infantry). In short, the French player spends all his time trying to avoid being forced (by the rules) to blunder into losing the battle.

These features, which make *Agincourt* very weak as a *player's* game, are its historical strengths. Obviously Dunnigan and Werden chose to depict a game-system which reproduced the conditions necessary for an English victory. In that they have succeeded, admirably. Without resort to artificial unit strengths or awkward organization rules they have recreated the stacked deck the English dealt the French, not only at Agincourt, but at Crecy and Poitiers.

Agincourt should be viewed, not as a game, but as a learning exercise: for the designer, the developer, and any prospective players (but not, alas, for the hapless French). The archery tables, morale concepts, and personal combat ideas are all ready to be transported into a more fitting subject. (The Personal Combat Table could do with a bit of reworking to make the aggressive strategies more reasonable.)

Al Nofi's article (written before the simulation was finished), provides a fitting epitaph: "ultimately, the French failed because they could not win." Ultimately, the game aspects of *Agincourt* failed because the simulation aspects triumphed: a French disaster *was* inevitable, given the conditions. The historian will congratulate Dunnigan and Werden for bringing the battle to life; the gamer will hope that they apply the same reasoning to other battles with less predestined results. ■■