

The Marne: A Deserved Retrospective

By Robert "Smitty" Smith



It's hard not to get nostalgic over these maps....

For any of you who've missed the centennial celebrations and outpouring this year about First World War, it's because it's the 100th year anniversary, now of the American intervention and the Russian collapse. It seemed like a good time to pull down an old SPI classic off the shelf and review it. I would have pulled down Avalon Hill's Guns of August, except that I like myself. The one we chose was The Marne from SPI in 1972. The choices made by the German General Staff at the Marne were arguably the turning point for Germany's best and least expensive effort to win in the First World War. The Marne actually covers two different scenarios; the Allied September Counterstroke and the German late August Pursuit of the broken Allied Armies. It's a 1972 game in the classic mode of SPI. What I will tell you is this – the game plays far better than one might think. Moreover, I'm not certain why the dreadful BoardGameGeek rating. Perhaps it's due to there being a sure win strategy? I never go looking for those myself...Why did I wait this long to play this game. How about the answer stupidity, believing in what others told me without finding out for myself about the game's value.



Turn 1 - The French and British attack on the left and center with some good success as the BEF is a monster.

COMPONENTS

The components are early SPI for those positives and negatives that are associated with that. The units are three different colors with a light grey for the German, light brown for the French and dark brown for the British. The German color stayed within what would become the historic color SPI seem to always use for the Germans but the color choices for the French seem odd – until one think of the France 1940 French color for units. The map for them was sharp with big font and crisp printing. We were then impressed by the heavy cardstock and I still am impressed as all my SPI maps have continued to hold up well over 40 plus years. Generally we might consider them perhaps three colors then – and that's subject to interpretation! This map had one error, showing a French set-up area for the September scenario color coded as German. It's what would later become the industry standard at 22" x 34" with a scale of 7.2KM per hex. Along the board edge the Reinforcement chart is laid out for all four of the different what ifs parts of the game. I found the components to be both good and brought back a sense of warm fuzzies.

RULES

I would consider the SPI Accordion rule folder to be perhaps five pages long. Now that is also subject to debate. I found no issues but do pick up the game errata off BoardGameGeek. My copy had the errata with it. I don't see the errata for this game having any show stoppers in it, as they are mainly clarification. Maybe as clean as a set of rules of any game from this era. It's a clean game as is for purposes of play. [Link to Errata](#)



Turn 3 or 4- the BEF has crushed the German flank and is turning inward on it.

GAME PLAY

IF you can get past The Marne's old fashioned or quaint graphics, you'll find quite the gaming bargain. There is the Allied Counterattack and the German Pursuit as noted earlier. What ramps up the value here is first the Pursuit scenario allows for the Allies to choose historical or a free setup. Even better is the inclusion of four different German Order of Battles. They feel plausible when one looks at what options were open and force structure.

What makes this so much fun is the simple flow of the game. It's the uncomplicated days of maneuver and open combat in World War One. The game system allows for stacking, but because of the unit density choosing this option is fraught with other dangers. What was cool was a system called Leapfrog withdrawals. A Leapfrog withdrawal was where you could move directly from a Zone of Control (ZOC) to another ZOC IF you were adjacent to a friendly unit which is in the hex you wished to "Leapfrog" into. Now you can leave ZOCs without but only by moving to a hex that is free and clear of enemy ZOCs. Like I said, pretty simple and clear.

Now what makes the game a different sort of challenge is how the player turn is constructed. First, it's set up for the first player to move-fight-move and fight. Ok – little odd but we've seen that variation before. But German units that attacked in the first combat phase are not allowed to participate in combat in the 2nd phase. Units can become disrupted but those disrupted in the 2nd combat phase remain disrupted. It becomes a fine balancing game of trying to anticipate where the first combat phase might cause you to focus your effort dependent upon success or lack of success in the first phase. Disrupting units have the benefit of making a unit miss its next Move-Fight phase. The Combat Results Table is

focused more on making units retreat. However at higher odds it gets ugly, and the BEF is quite powerful, allowing them to muscle high odds with little difficulty. Calvary is weak and needs stacked with other units. Victory is simple –Add strength points eliminated and victory points of captured Germans and compare this as a ratio to that of your opponents.

CONCLUSIONS

Surprisingly fun game. With the inclusion of the two different scenarios The Marne has at least several good plays in it. Look for it on eBay as it's worth a pick up. Current price seems about twenty to thirty dollars for a used copy in good condition. Disregard that 6+ score from BoardGameGeek. Few games are as fun, playable and easy to learn on WW I as the Marne.



Between these losses and city VP's, it is a 2:1 Marginal for the Allies - historical result.