

REVIEWS

CIVIL WAR SURVEY

Capsule Critiques of Games in Print

by Steve List

One of the main reasons that people like short reviews is that it allows them to gain nodding acquaintance with a game that they may never get a chance to play. Thereby, one can speak with familiarity of titles that molder in their closets. Another reason is that reading about a game is the next best thing to playing it. None of us has enough time to play all the games we should (except, perhaps, Mr. List). —RAS

The recent proliferation of game titles on the American Civil War (at least a dozen between *Origins '79* and '80) makes it appear that this topic is the latest motherlode of game situations, but in fact the ACW is the oldest historical game period: Avalon Hill followed the non-historical *Tactics II* with the first incarnation of *Gettysburg* in 1958, and within the next few years added *Chancellorsville*, *Civil War*, and the 1961 hex version of *Gettysburg*. *Battleline* started as a Civil War oriented company, with *Seven Days Battles* and *Shenandoah* as its earliest works. SPI has by now discontinued more such games than most others have published: *Lee Moves North* (see *Lee at Gettysburg*), *Wilderness Campaign*, *American Civil War*, *Bull Run*, *Road to Richmond*. The now-defunct Simulations Design Corporation produced *Rifle-Musket*, and the equally departed Rand fielded *Lee vs Meade*, *Brandy Station*, and *Vicksburg*. Even GDW got into the act with a revision of *Manassas*, originally published by Historical Simulations Ltd. All told, in excess of 45 Civil War games have been published to date, though at least a fourth of them have come since June of 1979.

The older games adopted a wide variety of approaches and pioneered many now accepted game mechanics. The first *Gettysburg* was played on a simplified topographical map with a square grid. Units were rectangles of various sizes, and a paper template was provided to show the area in front of the unit into which it could fire, with bonuses for flank and rear attacks. In the basic version, units moved from square to square, but the "tournament game" rules provided for free movement measured by a movement gauge, very much like miniatures. *Chancellorsville* and the hex *Gettysburg* had many problems, not the least of which were graphical, but

they made a stab at ranged artillery rules with their secondary ZOC's, and had a fair line of sight treatment as well. Even the "child's game" of the lot, *Civil War* (with plastic pawns in place of suitably military-looking colored cardboard) was a reasonable and early attempt to simulate the entire war, not just a battle or campaign. SPI's *Bull Run* introduced the dubious pleasures of pre-plotted simultaneous movement, and other games made their contributions to, or detractions from, the state of the art.

The bulk of ACW games had always been operational in scale, with a smattering of strategic ones, up until *Terrible Swift Sword* in 1976. This game proved popular despite its size and time consumption, mainly because of its tactical flavor (the question of its accuracy is irrelevant — it was *perceived* as being an accurate tactical game). Almost all the new games published since then have been tactical in scope, and most have been refinements or derivatives of the *TSS* system. Prior to *TSS*, tactical games were limited to *Manassas* and two multi-scenario general games. SPI's *Rifle and Saber* attempted (and badly failed) to simulate tactical land combat in the 19th century from the Mexican to the Boer Wars using the same basic rules. *Rifle-Musket* at least confined itself to the ACW but was no better as a game or a simulation.

The spectrum of ACW game subjects is broad but unbalanced. Only *The Ironclads* and its Expansion Kit deal with naval combat. The rest are all land oriented and the most heavily covered subject is Gettysburg. Counting the various AH games of that title, this one battle has had 14 games devoted to all or part of it. The next best covered topic is Shiloh, with three titles. A similar bias is shown toward the eastern theater; neglecting Gettysburg games, the east has 19 titles to 10 for the west (of which three are devoted to Shiloh). Why this should be is probably due to subjective reasons. The east was the theater of Bobby Lee and Stonewall Jackson, of Southerners gallantly holding back the Northern Hordes. Certainly the contemporary press found whatever glamour they saw in war in the east. But while Lee and the bulk of the Confederacy's resources kept the Union armies almost stalemated in Virginia, the US Navy and the Federal armies in the west were dismembering the south and ensuring its ultimate defeat.

Below are brief reviews of most of the games now in print. Of those out of print, most deserved their fate. However, some are

worth obtaining if you ever run across a copy: *Shenandoah*, *Vicksburg*, *Manassas*, *American Civil War*.

REVIEWS

TERRIBLE SWIFT SWORD (SPI, 1976)

Designed and developed by Richard Berg. 3 maps 22" x 34", 2000 counters, 32 pp. rules, additional charts, boxed. Rating: B

Prior to the appearance of this game, ACW games were almost all operational, and strategic multi-map monsters were almost unknown; only Martial Enterprises had tried to make a monster game at the tactical level. *TSS*, despite many flaws (not the least being the inordinate amount of time required to play it) caught on and has fathered a large number of direct and non-so-direct descendents.

The game covers the Battle of Gettysburg at a pace of 20 minutes per turn during the day, with 8 one-hour night turns. Ground scale is 120 yards per hex, while units are regiments and batteries. Losses are taken in increments of 100 men or one gun, and are indicated by placing a numerical counter below the unit counter to show the number of steps remaining. The game has five scenarios — one for each of the three days, one for the fighting at Little Round Top, and one for the three days as a whole.

In addition to the combat units, leaders are provided at Army, Corps and Division level for both sides. The Confederates have Brigade leaders as well. Since units must be within a certain distance of their leaders to move, this allows the large Confederate divisions to spread out and detach brigades, while Union divisions stay bunched around their commander. Morale is reflected as well. Each brigade is rated for the number of strength points it can lose before it loses "Brigade Combat Effectiveness," which prevents it from initiating melee and makes it more susceptible to rout. The rule is given as an option. Beyond that, units must check morale on certain occasions (chiefly when suffering a loss) by rolling one die. A roll higher than its current strength causes a unit to rout (retreat 3 hexes at once, and thereafter suffer limited mobility and usefulness until rallied). This made weak units more susceptible to rout than strong ones, and was altered in official errata. Now units are rated by letter (A to E) which gives the die roll number needed to rout.

Casualties affect this only by adding one to the die roll once over 50% losses are taken.

Stacking is limited to 2 units or 8 strength points, and only the top unit in a hex can fire (and ordinarily, suffer casualties). Fire combat is conducted by cross-indexing the unit weapon type with range to target to get a multiplier applied to the unit's current strength. The resulting value, modified by other considerations, determines which column on the Fire CRT is used. Possible results are strength point losses or a Pin, which makes a unit unable to fire offensively or initiate melee. Melee combat is based on the strength differential of the units involved and can result in casualties via death or capture, and mandated retreats.

The sequence of play is: Phasing player determines which units can move; he bombards with artillery; non-phasing player can fire artillery at units which bombarded; phasing player moves; non-phasing player fires with units which haven't yet fired; phasing player does the same; non-phasing units threatened by melee can retreat; phasing units initiate melee; phasing player removes Pins and attempts to rally routed units. The chief defect of this sequence is that it permits units which have moved to fire just as effectively as those which have not, a major simplification considering the muzzle-loading weapons in use by almost all the forces involved.

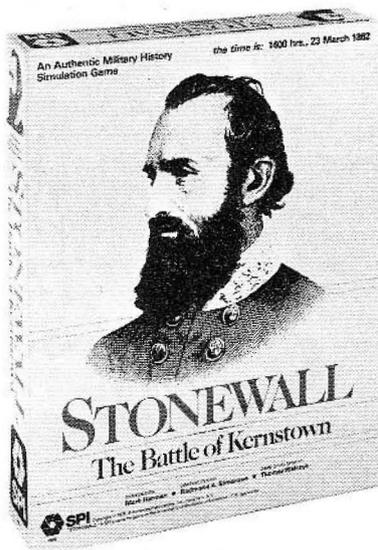
The game has many, many detailed rules. The Line of Sight rules (which involve slope and crest hexsides as well as elevations) could have been done better, but are interpretable. Much of the remaining detail is actually simplified compared to the complexities which could have been invoked, but is still dauntingly complex. Then again, some detail is pure chrome added to dazzle the player with historical ambience. All in all, I have no major criticisms of the game, but beware of the time it takes to play. A solid weekend of diligent activity might suffice to reach a conclusion in a single day scenario, but the whole battle cannot be played out in one sitting.

STONEWALL (SPI, 1978)

Designed by Mark Herman and developed by Tom Walczyk. 1 map 22" x 32", 100 counters, 16 pp. rules, boxed. Rating: B

The popularity of the TSS system cried out for it to be applied to a more manageable sized battle. This is it, the Battle of Kernstown of March 23, 1862 when Stonewall Jackson launched a surprise attack on Shield's division in the Shenandoah Valley. The Union brigades start the game a bit scattered, and must create a cohesive front to prevent the Confederates from slipping around them, but they cannot afford to be badly beaten in the process. The Confederate player must in turn avoid heavy casualties and either escape from the map or seize several key terrain objectives.

The TSS system is used with modifications. The BCE rule is made mandatory and the morale rating system from the errata is



standard. A nice touch in the rules is a section pointing out the various changes from TSS, which in most cases are deletions or minor modifications. The artillery bombardment and counter-battery fire phases have been dispensed with, for example. Indeed, TSS is the only game using them.

All in all, this is a much more playable game than TSS, but given the small forces in use, it is a bit frustrating because it requires the players to substitute maneuver for mass in a system that makes maneuver difficult.

BLOODY APRIL (SPI, 1979)

Designed and developed by Richard Berg. 2 maps 22" x 34", 1200 counters, 32 pp. rules, 10 pages notes, plus charts. Rating: C+

Having found the public susceptible to more TSS style games, SPI applied the system to the Battle of Shiloh. The results were less satisfactory. This was chiefly due to the additions made to recreate the battle conditions — in addition to morale and BCE, the players must now do bookkeeping to account for stragglers and the accumulation of fatigue by units engaged in marching and fighting.

On top of all this, a system had to be laid on to keep the Union forces sitting around in camp while Confederates approached, a system to allow Union troops to discover the approaching bad guys, and a system to let those who had made such discoveries spread the word to the rest of the army. In addition, evolutionary changes to the original TSS system were made, such as stacking limits varying with terrain, and a new treatment of artillery battery composition (helpfully, data to allow the new method to be retrofitted to TSS is provided).

The result of all this is to create a morass of rule hunting and record keeping that is as fatiguing as the marching and fighting being portrayed, a strong disincentive to play. Three scenarios are provided (plus hypothetical ones based on altered historical conditions): The battle as a whole, the first day by itself, and "The Confederate Attack," billed as "the only 'short' scenario" which can be played in 8-10 (HA!) hours, *excluding* setup time, which is another story (and

evening). Still, buried beneath that workload is an interesting game.

WILSON'S CREEK (SPI, 1980)

Designed by Richard Wright and developed by Thomas Hudson. 1 map 22" x 34", 200 counters, 24 pp. rules and charts, boxed. Rating: B

The TSS system rules that emerged from *Bloody April* are being applied to a new series of games of manageable size called "Great Battles of the American Civil War." The first of these issued (though labeled Volume 3) is *Wilson's Creek*, a battle fought in Missouri on August 10, 1861, which went a long way toward keeping that state in the Union.

Like Shiloh, the situation involves a weaker force (the Union, this time) making a surprise attack on an encamped enemy. Like *Bloody April*, it provides a system to allow the attacker to approach and to simulate the surprise in the defending camps. Like *BA*, it is hard for the attacker to win. Unlike *BA*, it can be played in a reasonable amount of time. The new, streamlined version of the TSS system is quite playable in modest doses.

PEA RIDGE (SPI, 1980)

Designed by Eric Smith and developed by Thomas Hudson & Smith. 1 map 22" x 34", 200 counters, 28 pp. rules and charts, flat box. Rating: A

Volume 1 of the Great Battles is subtitled "The Gettysburg of the West, March 7-8 1862." This battle determined that the Union would control the non-Confederate states west of the Mississippi.

Once again the TSS/BA rules are employed, modified a bit for the situation portrayed. This is an excellent game subject, as both sides get to maneuver and attack. It opens with weak Union forces holding isolated but key locations, with strong Rebel forces bearing down on them. The separation of these locales creates two separate battles in which the Union player must hold out until his reinforcements arrive. The Confederate player must win both (or win one and achieve at least an exhausted standoff in the other) on the first day to be sure of winning, or else the Union player has a good chance to recover on the second day and carry both ends of the field. A good game on an interesting situation.

DRIVE ON WASHINGTON (SPI, 1980)

Designed by Thomas Hudson and developed by Eric Smith and Hudson. 1 map 22" x 34", 200 counters, 28 pp. rules and charts, flat box. Rating: B-

Volume 2 of the Great Battles is the Battle of Monocacy Junction, July 9, 1864, when Jubal Early emerged from the Shenandoah Valley to threaten Washington and divert Union forces from Grant's steady advance and campaign of attrition to take Richmond. Early's corps was held for a time at the crossings of the Monocacy River by scratch units from the Army of the Potomac and garrison troops.

The main flaws of this game are the low BCE levels and morale of the Confederates compared to the Union forces. In addition, the Confederate divisions cannot move until Early enters the board (determined by a die roll) and travels around to each division commander to snap him out of his trance. On top of that, a mechanism called "Confederate Limited Initiative" is used. Each division has a CLI rating, the number of casualties it can suffer before losing initiative (typically 1/3 to 1/2 of its total BCE values). Once this limit is reached, a division is severely limited in most activities unless Early is stacked with the division commander.

The result of all this fiddling with the rules is to allow a pick-up force of 3 Union brigades to have a good chance of fighting to a standstill 12 brigades of the Confederacy's best troops. While this makes for a gamable situation, (i.e., the Union player can actually win), the historical objective was for the Union to delay Early's advance as long as possible, not to try to defeat him in open battle.