

I admit to being slightly surprised at the high response to my enquiries about solo gaming in the issue 14 Feedback and it is fortuitous that I had this article planned for this slot. John Poole has been wargaming for a number of years but has been a man of the shadows due to his primary interest in solo play. I am pleased to see him expounding on this important but poorly covered subject and let us hope that it stirs you solo players to put pen to paper with your ideas for interesting solo play.

SOLO BOARDGAMING

J B POOLE

I have the ineradicable feeling that the playing of boardgames solo is one of the enigmas of our hobby. In some ways one feels that it is akin to incest: there seems to be a lot of it going on but few people appear to know anyone who indulges in it and hardly anyone talks of it. Could it be the hobby that dares not speak its name?

I have seen figures quoted for the proportion of games played solo as high as 90%. Is this so? But even if it is an exaggeration it is surely a significant assertion. A minimal, cautious conclusion would seem to be that more games are played solo than in the way the sets of rules require, with two and occasionally more players. My object now is to try to examine some of the implications of this finding.

We may begin by trying to discover which people play solitaire games. One group of players clearly comprises those who play them in this way *faute de mieux*: they may have no willing opponents nearby, they may work unusual hours or have jobs that involve a great deal of travelling. But for such as these there is always the option of postal play. I do not consider this as a form of true solo gaming. Another group consists of those who use soloing as a sort of practice in the nets. This, too, must be viewed as a peripheral activity.

More interesting are the remainder: those who play solo for preference and through choice. As we have indicated already, we do not know how numerous they are but it is perhaps more promising to try to probe why they behave in this way. Some apparently do because they cannot bear the company of the opponents they are likely to meet. This was brought out in a letter to Moves (1). The writer could not cope with the 'buffism' of the gamers he knew. By buffism we are to understand a military knowingsness combined with a compulsion to announce the fact on every opportunity. We can only conclude that, by comparison, the writer was the very soul of reticence.

One has the impression that this fellow would play with others if only they would shut up. Are there any other, more positive reasons for preferring solo play?

Phil Kosnett has attempted a categorisation of the several types of wargamer he has detected (2). This is too elaborate to repeat here in detail and, indeed, some of his types — such as the reluctant opponents (spouses, children and other breeds without the law) — are scarcely relevant in the present context. The more significant subsets are: the military historians, the military buffs, the social wargamers, the 'supercompetitors', the 'avengers' and the 'wishful thinkers'. The first three are fairly easily identifiable. The second three require some of Kosnett's explication, especially since he finds solo players among them. The supercompetitors are those who can scarcely ever bear to lose: their solo play is "only to practise for blood matches". The other two groups are the oddest and their prime motivation seems to be patriotism. They play solo in order to be able to impose their own view of the past, in the one case, and the future, in the other, on the course of the games they play, even to the extent of cheating.

Do such types really exist? I suppose that one obvious drawback to being a confirmed soloist is that one is hardly in a position to find out. But perhaps I can go one step beyond Kosnett. The Solo Wargamers' Association recently polled its members on their likes and dislikes. The main intention was not, naturally, to find out whether they thought of themselves more as supercompetitors than social wargamers, or whatever. However,

some picture did emerge of members' attitudes to solo play. Their motivation, I would say, is primarily historical and their concern largely with accuracy. There may be little novel in this but I suspect that if Kosnett had quantified his findings gamers similarly minded would have bulked largest and the more strangely motivated ones would have been revealed as numerically of little account.

Bismarck is reputed to have said "Fools say that they learn from their own experience. I have always contrived to get my experience at the expense of others". Unfortunately this is a choice that may not be open to the solo gamer. He is condemned to his own company and must get his experience therefrom. The question I want to raise now is: is this sufficient? Is experience derived from solo play enough to develop one's own expertise and sustain an interest in the hobby.

Nicholas Palmer, in his interesting book, suggests that one needs contact with other players in order to gain in proficiency (3). I am sure there is much in this if what one wants is the ability to win games. For the confirmed soloist this may not be the most desirable objective. In Operation Olympic and Wolfpack, winning has been defined for us by the designers: but in other, two-player games that are converted for solo play there are not likely to be such externally determined criteria of success and failure — if we want them we have to set them for ourselves.

But there is more to proficiency than winning. There is also the ability simply to play better and here I would agree with Palmer. Without contact with other players it is nearly impossible to arrive at any realistic assessment of one's own competence. Without competition one is unlikely to meet those situations on the mapboard that so often serve to confuse and dismay one. The play of each 'side' is likely to tend to a sameness that will often lead to an indecisive result. It is a difficult, perhaps impossible feat so to bifurcate one's mind that one can, in effect, take on two separate and opposed personalities and, even if one has succeeded to a degree, these two personalities will each be coloured by the one personality that controls them both. And as for him, as the French say, even the most beautiful girl can only give what she has — each of us is what he is and only with some difficulty can he act out of character.

It follows, therefore, that the commonest prescription for solo play, that one should try to be two people, will not, in my view, really work. Take, for example, Jay Richardson, writing in Moves (4). He supports the opinion that solitaire play can improve one's ability, "but you must always take the role of spectator and be absolutely impartial in your play You can, of course, cheer and sympathise with one side as much as you want but you must always play your best regardless of which side is moving. To help you in this at first, imagine you have just gone to a friend's house to play and you find that he and a third party are in the middle of a game. The third friend (sic) then leaves and you take over his forces. Repeat this chain of thought at the beginning of each side's turn until you are able to play quite impartially".

Perhaps this does work for some. I know only that it does not for me and I remain sceptical of the dual personality school of warfare.

But this is only one type of solo game and it may help to try to place it in context.

We may distinguish three types of game. If we follow hallowed military practice and name the two sides Redland and Blueland these are:

Type	Redland	Blueland
A	free play	free play
B	free play	programmed play
C	programmed play	programmed play

(Richardson's approach thus corresponds to a type A game).

I would guess that type A games are the commonest for the obvious reason that they demand from the player no more than that he should follow the given rules of the particular game he is playing. It seems probable — although there is no apparent way to prove it — that the ratings for solitaire playability published regularly in Strategy and Tactics refer to this manner of play. Familiarity with some of the games that are highly rated for this quality suggest that this may be so; examples are the quadrigame series. One can play such games in a fairly satisfactory fashion, single-handedly, by following the rules provided.

In the type B group we include Wolfpack and Olympic. In these 'Blueland' is, in the one, the Allied merchant fleet and its naval and air escorts and the Japanese Army in the other: 'Redland' is the German submarine force in Wolfpack and the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in Olympic. The programming consists in giving Blueland a clearly defined set of objectives and responses. Redland, on the other hand, can do what it wants, including the option to throw the game away.

Several games, while not being designed for solitaire playing, have in their rules solitaire scenarios. On examination these often turn out to be of the B type. One instance is Frigate, where the example is the Battle of the Nile. The French fleet is anchored in Aboukir Bay: the British approach in line ahead and proceed to cause a lot of mischief. It is not much of a game since the encounter is so lopsided, as it was in reality, and there is little amusement, even in a game, in kicking a man who is so far down, as it were, to begin with. About all that one can say for it is that it is a useful means to learn the mechanics of play.

Somewhat similar to this is the solitaire scenario in Patrol. This simulates the advance of an infantry squad across no-man's land in France in the First World War. The squad is subjected to random machine gun and artillery fire. The lone player has to get his men across five of the six map sections. As the notes with the game say, "The player can't 'win' this game. But if one can exit 40 to 60% of the men off the map, he's done well". Roger Sandell's gas attack scenario has elements in common with this while adding variety too (5). Soldiers has a more elaborate scenario set on the eastern front in the 1914-18 War.

Of rather more interest is a solitaire version of Richthofen's War, devised by Mark Saha, that appeared in The General (6). It is imaginatively based on the proposal to introduce the Kettering aerial torpedo towards the end of the Great War. This was, in actuality, designed for the U.S. Army Signal Corps by the Dayton Wright Co. in 1917-18. It had a speed of 55 mph, a range of 40 miles and carried 180 lb. of explosive. A game consists of the solitary player taking the part of a German aviator and endeavouring to cope with a dozen launchings in an arbitrary day. The Torpedoes come over at varying heights and speeds and must sustain critical hits in order that they may be considered destroyed (but if your aircraft is too close when they go off, as they may do, the effects on oneself may be critical too). The rules effectively handle the behaviour of the torpedo. From there on it is up to the player to do his best. It is sometimes the case that suggested solitaire games involve a suspension of some rules: this is not so in Saha's game.

A related game — not surprisingly — is the V-I destruction scenario in Battleline's Air Force.

Type C games give the player the least amount of freedom but, compensatingly, I feel, are likely to lead to the most interesting situation. So far as I am aware there is no example of such a game available commercially (and one may wonder whether it would sell if there were). Thus the effort required in order to play this sort of game falls upon the player entirely. I believe it is here that soloing comes into its own.

One definition of 'game' in the OED is "A diversion in the nature of a contest, played according to rules, and displaying in the result the superiority in skill, strength, or good fortune of the winner or winners". Perhaps by these terms a type C game is not really a game at all. Those that are prepared to invest the time and effort in setting such a game up will most likely not be overly worried about the outcome: the end will probably be of little concern when compared with the means. It is significant, I feel, that Featherstone in his book on soloing stresses the amount of planning and preparation that are generally needed and suggests that solo play is admirably suited to campaign games (7).

This approach to soloing has been usefully explored in two articles by Russ Smith in Moves (8) and it is thus convenient to draw upon this account. However, it must be said that, stimulating though his ideas are, they are not presented in the most palatable form. Smith's first article deals cursorily with systems theory and the second, and more interesting one, with the application of the theory to a single-handed game of Borodino, a game that has always scored highly for solo playability. The theory has a certain relevance but it cannot properly be said to provide a necessary or even adequate background for what follows it.

In his first article Smith makes the obvious enough point that a wargame presents the participants with a constant flow of information. For effective play each player must be able to assimilate it, process it and make consequential decisions. If one plays solo the problems of information control are, as a minimum, doubled. Broadly speaking, the bigger the game the more complex the processes — which must help to account for the high ratings for solitaire playability that quadrigames usually get (as Marshal Saxe said, "Multitudes serve only to perplex and embarrass").

How to cope with this complexity is the subject of Smith's second article. He begins by stating that to make a solo game enjoyable the state of total comprehension that comes from being the sole player must be restricted: the fog of war must be introduced. This is done by the prior preparation of strategic and tactical operations guides (which yield the unfortunate acronyms SOG and TOG). Several of the first should be developed for each side. Each will set out one broad course of action, specifying objectives, OBs, forces committed, reserves and a timetable. One SOG is then chosen randomly for each side. It should also be determined for each side at what point the original SOG will be deemed to have failed and a new one — again randomly picked from a new set — required.

One TOG will serve for both sides. It will show the range of tactical situations encountered in battle and the conceivable resolutions of them. Thus when attacking an enemy line one could:

1. make a frontal assault
2. attack one end of the line
3. attack both ends of the line
4. outflank the line, or
5. await reinforcements.

The method selected is decided upon by a die throw but the outcome of this is biased according to the personality of the particular commander involved. Thus for the sake of variety, to put it no higher, each side's forces should be divided into armies, corps, divisions or whatever is appropriate, as they are historically or in some other convenient manner. Each of these formations is then assumed to have a commanding officer. His personality may be known from history or it may be determined by die roll. Smith suggests the following scheme:

aggressive	0, 1, 2
average	3, 4
cautious	5, 6, 7.

For specialist forces subtract 1, and for militia or battle-weary units add 1 to the throw.

Therefore, to return to the attack on an enemy line, the action likely to be taken by each of the three types of commander is resolved by yet another die roll, according to the following table:

Die Roll	1	2	3	4	5	6
aggressive leader	1	1	1	2	3	4
average leader	1	2	2	3	3	4
cautious leader	1	1	2	5	5	5

(the numbers, of course, refer back to the first table).

This is the essence of Smith's method. His second article gives more details and comment than can suitably be included here.

It will be plain from this account that some games lend themselves more readily than others to this manner of play. Essentially there should be discernible an actual or implicit structure within the forces deployed. If leader counters are supplied, so much the better since their survival may be important. With these crude criteria in mind I offer a personal selection of games that I consider to have appeal for solo play (an asterisk indicates that leaders feature in the game as published):

Waterloo*, Chancellorsville*, France 1940, Fury in the West*, Torgau, Marne, Lee Moves North*, American Civil War*, La Grande Armee*, Breitenfeld*, Grenadier*, Cobra and Friedland 1807*.

From the examples I have used it will be evident that ideas for solo play are widely scattered throughout the literature of the hobby (and there are, of course, others that it is not possible to quote here). Whether or not one learns of a particular idea is usually due more to luck than anything else. The hobby is largely characterised in its literature by amateurism and ephemerality: the exceptional journals may be numbered on two hands. Yet jewels turn up in the most unlikely places. Can anything be done to preserve them? Would this be a suitable cause for Phoenix to concern itself with?

Three remarks to conclude with:

First on Don Featherstone's book (7), which is still the only one devoted entirely to soloing: his interest is, as one would expect, in figure gaming. There are ideas here that can be adapted for board-games but I have found them to be indicative rather than prescriptive. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that Featherstone does bring together some methods devised by other gamers that would otherwise be well nigh irretrievable. Boardgamers should be so lucky.

Next on Phoenix: it would be graceless to omit mention of the solo scenarios that have already appeared in these pages — Roy Gibson on Coral Sea (9), A.J. Gilham on Foxbat & Phantom (10), Tony Jones on Richthofen's War (11) and most recently, J.D. Beardsworth on Outreach (12).

Finally, may I invite any actual or potential soloists, if they have not already done so, to join the Solo Wargamers' Association? Details of membership may be obtained from:

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2. P.Kosnett, Moves No. 19, 1975, P.13.
3. N.Palmer, 'The Comprehensive Guide to Board Wargaming', Arthur Barker, London, 1977, P.121.
4. J.Richardson, Moves No. 1, 1972, P.20.
5. R.Sandell, Perfidious Albion No. 7, 1976.
6. M.Saha, The General Vol. 11, No.6, 1975, P.6.
7. D.Featherstone, 'Solo-Wargaming', Kaye & Ward, London, 1973, P.7.
8. R. Smith, Moves No.10, 1973, P.8. No. 12, 1974, p.13.
9. R.Gibson, Phoenix No. 4, 1976, P.6.
10. A.J.Gilham, Phoenix No. 6, 1977 P.14.
11. T.Jones, Phoenix No. 11, 1978, P.5.
12. J.D. Beardsworth, Phoenix No. 13, 1978, P.4.

This is but an appetiser for the main course coming up next time with discussion of War of the Ring but hope that this whets your appetite!

SAURON

ED
MERRYWEATHER



Sauron is SPI's simulation of the battle between the last alliance (elves, men and dwarves) at the end of the second age. Those of you that have not read 'Lord of the Rings' (both of you) won't have a clue what I mean. As the subject of this article is the game, I suggest you beg/steal/borrow a copy to get the history O.K? Good. Meanwhile, back at the battle ...

The combat system is two-stage. First, you compare your attack rating (A is best, down to E, which is worst) to your enemy's armour protection rating (4 if best to 1, worst). The two are cross referenced to find a range of values for two dice (e.g. 4-7, 3-6, 2-7). If you roll within these values, then you are entitled to roll on the casualty results table, cross referencing with the units morale value (W-Z) to get your casualties. Units are backprinted to give two-step reduction. Units retreated are automatically disrupted, and have to be undisciplined by a leader. Leaders can also have a go at each other via an individual combat results table. Elendil and Gil-galad are equipped with magic weapons which increased their chance of killing someone (i.e. Sauron, a ringwraith or Gorgol). The ringwraith incidentally is not identified so I don't know whether it is 'permissible' to have him killed by a man. Also, what happened to the other eight?

Missile combat (as in bows and arrows) is designated on units capable of it by a small letter 'e'.

This is all very well, but on a straight military fight the Mordor forces would get slaughtered with their rather lousy combat/morale ratings. So what do we add to balance it ... spot on man, Sorcery — this is what gives the game its sheer superbness in my eyes (or on my boardgaming table). Sauron is blessed with the ability to do a bit of amateur conjuration, like turning day to night which makes orcs fanatical, enabling them to skip the first part of the combat procedure and go straight to the casualty table. He can create sinister visions which gives all but the stoutest (not fat — brave!) nasty feelings and they become disrupted or bringing on the Beast of Mordor (a nasty piece of work something like the Inland Revenue on four legs). This is not an historical animal, but something that is 'a lot of fun (a designers invention in toto)' (Designer's notes), sentiments I'd tend to agree with. Last but not least is Wrath of the Ringwraith which spurs units in close proximity to same to fight a bit better.

The Sorcery is done by allotting Sauron magic points. Each spell costs so many of these points which are knocked off his total. Incidentally, the Sorcery rules are far better than those in 'Sorcerer'.

So what have we got? A good pitched battle, balanced and lots of fun. It gives a victorious Sauron general a chance to do better things like the conquest of all Middle Earth. It's magic!