

## DESIGN CRITIQUE

# COULD THE ONE TRUE RING BE BRASS?

## *The Impact of Perfect Intelligence on War of the Ring*

by Neil Randall

Here an interesting central point is raised: how does one simulate a work of fiction accurately and completely and yet still allow for surprise and alternative outcomes? Is it possible to “keep the faith” with what is possible in the book and yet still have a playable and interesting game? Another question occurs to me: to some extent, characters *become* what they are through what happens to them in the plot of a novel — how then can this *dynamic* be simulated with the static characters found in wargames? The Puppet Master (the Player) cannot be the sole source of personality dynamics in such a case — so, interactive, mutable characters seem to be required. —RAS

It is fashionable these days to criticize the popular. Anything that becomes popular also becomes the property of the public that made it so, and that public is, for the thing itself, both its *raison d’être* and its most dreaded foe. For the public first gives popularity and then takes it away with a fickleness that would make Cleopatra wince with envy. Yet, there is nothing wrong with criticizing something that is popular: there is no work of any kind that is above criticism. It is wrong, however, when something popular is criticized merely because it *is* popular; and this, it seems, is more often than not the case.

It is, therefore, with extreme caution that I criticize the very popular *War of the Ring* (please note that I am using the term ‘criticism’ in the sense of ‘finding fault with’; i.e., the negative side of appreciation.) It is very easy to lose credibility when dealing with a currently popular work, for the reasons shown above. The critics of the critic become far more numerous than the critics of the work itself. This critique attempts to show a few major weaknesses in the game, while at the same time pointing out its major strengths. Still, as in all works, the strengths are both expected and taken for granted, while the weaknesses define to what extent the work is to be valued.

*War of the Ring* sets out to accomplish a major task: to bring to life, in game terms, probably the most widely-read novel of the current generation. As one of the designers, Rich Berg, writes in the Designer’s Notes, “*Lord of the Rings* is distinguished by the fact that it is not only widely read but almost committed to memory by many Tolkien devotees. Obviously many trained eyes would be scrutinizing the game for flaws and so the research was of paramount importance.” Clearly, as shown by the above statement and those that he gives in the *Fire and Movement* interview, Berg realized the pro-

blem with what he was attempting to do. The nit-pickers, he knew, would be out in full force, claiming that Frodo should be given such-and-such an ability and that Gandalf should have a slightly lesser sorcery level than Saruman, etc. Therefore, as the advertising copy on the game itself states, “Every major event of the novel — and many minor ones — are re-created in a fast moving, exciting game...” The wealth of detail and the amount of research that so obviously went into the creation of the game is truly staggering. The graphics are beautiful, the play is fast, and the outcome is always in doubt. It is easy to learn and quick to play, and the whole thing just seems to ooze with Tolkienisms.

But the game has a flaw of such scope that it undercuts the very basis of it. That flaw is, simply, the Search System. At first, it seems a minor flaw, forgivable in that it fairly accurately recreates the problems of finding characters while at the same time dispensing with the unplayability which would result from a true hidden-movement system. But after a few playings it becomes evident that the whole system nullifies all the brilliance of the rest of the game’s systems and components. The very core of the novel has been bypassed, and what we are left with is a game with beautiful and necessary chrome, a solid steel body, but absolutely no engine.

The problem is this: The Search System (apparently adopted so that the original hidden movement system — as discussed in early Progress Reports — could be abandoned) fails to work both tactically (as will be discussed later) and, most importantly, strategically. If the purpose of a simulation game is to allow the players to adopt alternate strategies (to the original) within the limits of the decision-making abilities and options of the original combatants, then *War of the Ring* fails in its purpose. We are given the ability to move the characters wherever we will, with an endless choice of strategic options, but we are only partially, and not fundamentally, given the high-level problems that faced the two protagonists.

And it is the lack of hidden movement of Fellowship characters, along with the problems of the Search System, that creates these basic unrealities. Basically, there are nine Fellowship counters on the map to begin the game. These are placed face-down in Rivendell, from where they proceed to head towards Mordor. Only by spotting these characters can the Sauron player find out which character is where. Even if he spots a

hobbit, the Fellowship player merely states that a hobbit has been spotted; he does not reveal the hobbit’s name. Thus, the Sauron player is kept constantly in the dark as to where the Ring-bearer really is. So far, it is a good and extremely playable system. But here the problems begin.

The Sauron player has two methods of searching (in order to spot the Fellowship characters). During the Search Phase, he draws a Search Card (from the pile) and checks to see if there are any Fellowship characters in any of the three named provinces. If there are not, nothing happens. If there are, he may, by expending the required number of Shadow Points, move his searching force (either Orcs or Nazgul) to the province and conduct a search. (For the purposes of this article, the mechanics of spotting are unimportant; they are realistic within the context of the game’s Search Procedure, and are thus not an issue here.) This first method is basically sound; the second method, however, is not. During the Fellowship Player Movement Phase, whenever a Fellowship character enters a hex that contains pieces friendly to Sauron, the Sauron player may search that hex. If successful, the character is spotted as above. If not, the character keeps on moving.

This system leads to some extremely unrealistic situations. As stated in the Players’ Notes, “one of the best tactics is to try to place Nazgul or other Dark Power characters directly in the path of Fellowship characters, so that the exact dispositions of the latter may be discovered.” A favorite tactic, then, is for the Sauron player to stack a group of Nazgul on the exit hex of a mountain pass and wait for the members of the Fellowship to come out; since there is only one exit hex, and since the Sauron player knows (by his ability to see the counters on the map) that there are pieces moving through the pass, he is sure of getting a chance to spot somebody. The Fellowship player tries to get through the Nazgul-infested hex one or two at a time (to lessen the chances of being spotted) and the Sauron player rolls each time to try to spot. With enough Nazgul in the hex, he has either a one-third or one-half chance of spotting somebody, and he will do so given enough die-rolls. If, therefore, the Fellowship player attempts to get through Moria (as was ‘historically’ tried), he has two problems, one historical and one not so: he has to face the Servant of Sauron in the Mines of Moria (and he prays that it is not the Balrog), and this is historical; but then he walks out of Moria and must immediately attempt to run

the gauntlet past a group of Nazgul who are outside waiting for them. This latter event is totally ahistorical. Now, please do not misinterpret: I am not one who wishes a game to recreate its historical events (unless, of course, the players so wish). But this is part of the decision-making problem and is elaborated below.

This problem becomes acute at the end of the game. Because of the various movement point costs, a character cannot move both into Mordor and onto Mount Doom in the same turn (and this is correct in itself). Thus, the Sauron player always has at least one, and probably more than one, turn to react to a crossing by a Fellowship character into Mordor. In that turn (or, more likely, those two turns) he can forget about everything else and ship his Nazgul (assuming he has protected as many of them as possible) back to Mordor, placing them on Mount Doom to await the Ring-bearer. As soon as the Fellowship character(s) enter the Mount Doom hex, the Sauron player conducts a search (as per the second method). If he rolls well, he will probably destroy the Ring-bearer; if he does not roll well, he loses the game.

Of course, the Fellowship player can lessen the chances of his characters being found and/or destroyed on Mount Doom in two ways. First, he can send his characters in diversionary marches around the borders of Mordor so that the Sauron player does not know which one bears the Ring. Second, he can send as many characters as he can muster to Mount Doom with the Ring-bearer in an attempt to win the final character battle and have the Ring-bearer survive the attrition. In the latter way, the Ring will be destroyed on the next turn, and the Fellowship player will win. The problem is this: both alternatives would have been thoroughly unthinkable in the book itself. The Fellowship leaders (Gandalf and Aragorn) knew that secrecy and surprise were essential if the Ring was to be destroyed. The diversions were necessary, but not, above all, in the area of Mordor itself; Sauron had to be kept unaware that Mordor was the true objective. Too, even had the Fellowship not been sundered by Boromir's rashness, it is likely that Aragorn would have advised it anyway; it was simply too risky for all eight (Gandalf was dead at the time) to travel together.

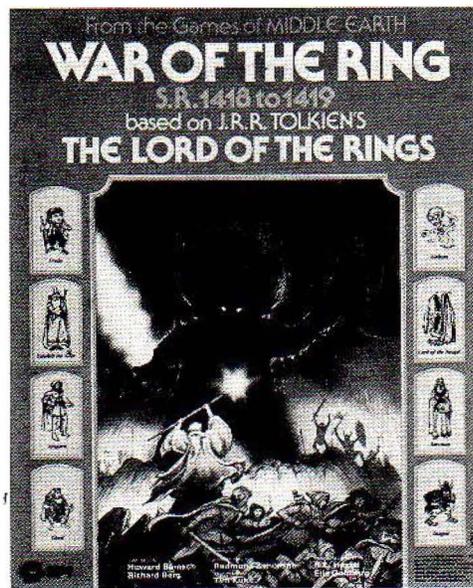
The problem is, then, that both players are faced with strategies that are extremely viable in the game but which were impossible in the book. The necessity for surprise is demonstrated by the following brief quote. It is from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book II, Chapter 2, "The Council of Elrond," and is spoken by Gandalf in reply to a question of the wisdom of carrying the Ring to Mordor:

*Well, let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy! For he is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power, and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter than any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we*

*seek this, we shall put him out of his reckoning.*

Later, in *The Two Towers*, Book IV, Chapter 5, "The White Rider," Gandalf (now the White) reiterates that Sauron is still unsure of the purpose of the Fellowship, and thus that surprise is still in their favor. I return to this a little later.

Admittedly, there is no way to simulate the fact that Sauron did not dream that the goal of the Fellowship was the destruction of the Ring. Every historical simulation has as its one basic unreality, the problem of hindsight, and *War of the Ring* is no different. Part of the problem was solved by the designers in the inclusion of two types of victory for either player: a Ring victory or a Military victory. This, too, is a valiant attempt at simulating uncertainty as to the victory conditions, but it fails in that the powers of the West sought only for a Ring victory; the Council of Elrond demonstrates that point. A military victory, which they saw as hopeless, was also futile; without the destruction of the Ring, Sauron could only be delayed, and then not for long. But I do not criticize the game's victory conditions. The Sauron player has already read the history and knows exactly what the Fellowship player intends to do. The victory conditions as they stand are as accurate as they could possibly be.



But a valid compromise was possible in the design between the uncertainty in the book and the hindsight in the game. Had a system of hidden movement for the Fellowship characters been adopted, all of the major problems in the game would never have existed. There are only nine characters in the Fellowship; thus there would be, at the very most, nine plots. And a clean hidden movement system would have allowed the Fellowship player to plot by merely naming the final hex into which each character would move each turn; the actual path would be unimportant, because the search system would also be revised. Also, as some of the characters would probably travel together, stacks

could be plotted together, resulting in even less bookwork. Yes, the game would be slightly more complex, and complexity is something that SPI was understandably trying to avoid; after all, the appeal of a Tolkien game is wider than the normal wargaming audience, and SPI realized that the opportunity existed to draw many more people into the hobby. The effort is to be applauded, and the game had to be fast and basically simple (but not simplistic) to achieve this purpose. In avoiding a hidden movement system, the designer ensured that the game would be easy to learn for non-wargamers. But those non-wargamers are also Tolkien devotees, and in ignoring hidden movement the designer also ignored the most vital part of the simulation; the Tolkien fans are not going to miss that fact. And, as a result, they may be turned off completely.

Why do I keep harping on a hidden movement system, you ask? Simple: the Sauron player knows too much. He knows what the Fellowship player has to do to win, and he knows where the Fellowship characters are at all times. He also knows how many there are, but this is accurate: in the *Two Towers* passage mentioned previously, Gandalf says, "He knows now the number of our Company that set out from Rivendell, and the kind of each of us." He even, says Gandalf, "has long known that the Ring is abroad, and that it is borne by a hobbit." But throughout the book he had only vague ideas *where* the characters were. Indeed, it is precisely because he did not know that Frodo and Sam had slipped into Mordor that the Ring was destroyed in the end. Instead of having his Nazgul awaiting the expedition on Mount Doom, as the game designers would have us believe, Sauron had them fighting abroad while the Ring was right under his nose. The proof is in *The Return of the King*, Book VI, Chapter 3, "Mount Doom." Frodo and Sam are at the Cracks of Doom, and Frodo, overcome at last by the evil of the Ring, has put it on his finger and claimed it for his own.

*The Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and his Eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain to the door that he had made; and the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash, and all the devices of his enemies were at last laid bare. . .*

*From all his policies and webs of fear and treachery, from all his strategems and wars his mind shook free; and throughout his realm a tremor ran, his slaves quailed, and his armies halted. . . The whole mind and purpose of the Power that wielded them was now bent with overwhelming force upon the Mountain.*

An historical game must be able to recreate the history which it simulates. The Fellowship player can win in *War of the Ring*, but he will never win by totally surprising the Sauron player. Instead, the Sauron player will be waiting for him, and it will never be possible to have "his folly revealed to him in a blinding flash." Knowing the victory conditions gives the game the

## True Ring [continued from page 10]

unreality that is common to all historical simulations; knowing where the characters are at all times, however, eliminates any accuracy that the game could hope to achieve. If *The Lord of the Rings* is considered to be the definitive text of the War (and it must be so considered), then Messrs. Berg and Barasch have but given us a beautifully written historical novel.

I do not here propose a system of hidden movement for use in the game; I have one, but it is insufficiently playtested to be included here. Suffice it to say that one can be added with no additional materials needed except a piece of paper. The Search System has to be revised (or the Sauron player will never find anything); but as it will change searches from things based on luck to things based on at least some skill, the revision will be worthwhile. Do not toss away the game if you do agree with my criticisms of it; it is far too valuable even as it stands. Simply revise it a little, and it will then become, in all probability, one of the best in anyone's collection.

Many areas of the game, most of them excellent, need to be dealt with, but that is

not my purpose. I hope I have brought to light a very major flaw in a very major effort. If Mr. Berg is true to his word that he will follow the progress of his games, then he will hopefully consider the above comments. I have attacked the game; I hope the designers will either admit the fault or defend their creation.

A number of years back, in an issue of *Rolling Stone*, a reviewer said of the Band's then-new album, *Cahoots*, that he could not decide if it were a flawed masterpiece or a perfect failure. This article has attempted to show the same indecision towards *War of the Ring*. The album proved, over the years, to be the latter. I hope that the game, with all the things that it has in its favor, will prove to be the former.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Foster, Robert. *A Guide to Middle-Earth*. Ballantine Books: New York, 1971.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Methuen: Toronto, 1971. I attempted to obtain the American Ballantine edition in order to cite passages more accurately, but it is no longer available in Canada and I have long since given away my last copy of it.

## THE DESIGNER SPEAKS:

*Mr. Randall has applied himself to a valid "problem" area in WOTR, one that caused both Howard B. and myself no end of problems. He also has supplied his own answers to the reasons behind the present Search System: hindsight and playability. They are why the game is like it is, and we have no intention to redo the "system".*

*However, the Search System as written is somewhat flawed, and that should be corrected. Two items are paramount, one a complete change, the other a clarification:*

1. *The results of a Search (that is, being Spotted) remain in effect until the end of the Game-Turn in which the Search occurred. (Thus, no more hiding in the next county.)*
2. *Search in Mordor (i.e., Gorgoth and Nurn) is automatic in that the Sauron Player need not draw a card to search in Mordor. (Spotting is still a die-roll result.)*

*A complete errata will be forthcoming for WOTR, although a second edition rules booklet is available (for \$3; sorry folks). The errata sheet (free, when it comes out) should be available this Fall.*

—Rich Berg

## Secret Search [continued from page 11]

and the first condition is met. Obviously condition 2 can be met by changing columns from turn to turn.

Condition 5 (dummy hexes) can be met by adding dummy hexes to the code list and letting player A use the first half and player B the second half of these dummy hexes, as though they had units there.

The above system does not satisfy condition 4. From the final result, if there is a match, player A, knowing he used column 3, sees that the final result was column 7, deduces that player B used column 4, and immediately decodes all B's positions.

The solution to this is to give each player only part of the table. It is not sufficient to give one player half the table and the other player the other half since, by following the table creating system given above, the other half could be worked out.

To illustrate the means of avoiding this difficulty, suppose we have 56 different things to code (the reason for this number will emerge). The table would then have 55 columns if written out in full. If we give one player columns 7, 14, 21, 28, 35, and 42, and the other player columns 8, 16, 24, 32, 40, and 48, each has a choice of six columns, and it is not possible to calculate one part of the table from the other. This can be proved, but it is messy. As a byproduct, it is now impossible for the two codes to accidentally reproduce the original hex numbers. Also, the resulting code is not in either list.

This is, in essence, the code system I propose. There remains the question of the overlong code list. SPI maps are numbered by joining two two-digit numbers, one representing the map row, and the other the map column. These numbers, on an ordinary

single map game, range from 01 to about 35 for rows, and 01 to about 50 for columns. If these numbers are coded separately, perhaps using different columns, a much smaller coding list can be used. Of course, in case of a match, the players will now be able to see how many other hexes in that map row and that map column their opponent occupies. For fanatics, this can be made more difficult by coding the first and third digits separately from the second and the fourth, but it is doubtful if the extra security is worth it.

For this coding, a table with 56 codes is adequate, and, as noted above, enables each player to have a choice of six columns. Since rows 37 to 56 do not occur on the map, I suggest that one player use map rows 37 to 46, and the other map rows 47 to 56 as dummy hexes, combined with whatever map columns they wish.

When matches in the doubly coded lists are found, each player decodes the number and gives the result to the other player who then applies his own decoding to find the hex in which the meeting took place.

It sometimes occurs that a player searches for the other player's units. Thus if player A is searching certain hexes for B's units (using radar or whatever), A codes his search hexes and gives the result to B. B codes the hexes his units are on and gives the result to A. Each then codes the other's list. B then compares the lists and decodes any matches he finds, and gives these values to A. A then decodes this list. The effect of this is that B does not even know what hexes he has been discovered on (he does, however, know how many times he has been discovered).

To round off this article, I have added a summary of the method, and a sample of a size 56 table, giving each player a choice of six columns. My game computer has pro-

duced a table with full map coding — hopefully the vast public demand will enable me to make some arrangement with SPI. Unfortunately the table is too big to fit into this magazine. I also have a USN map version and AH version.

## Summary

One player should have part A of the attached table, and the other should have part B.

1. Each player lists the hex numbers he occupies, adding as many dummy hexes (selected from rows 37 to 46 for the player with table A, and rows 47 to 56 for the player with table B, with the column arbitrarily chosen) as he wishes or is permitted.
2. Each player selects a column (1 to 6) in his table. He then, for each hex, looks up the first two digits of the hex number in the table's left hand column, and writes down the corresponding two digits from the column he has chosen.
3. Each player selects another column (or the same one if he wishes) and similarly codes the last two digits.
4. The players write a list of these coded hex numbers in some arbitrary order, and exchange lists.
5. Each player then encodes his opponent's list as in 2 and 3, using the same table columns for the first two and last two digits as he did in 2 and 3.
6. The resulting lists are compared. Where a match occurs, each player (using the same columns again) decodes the matching numbers and gives the result to his opponent who then decodes it himself, to get the actual hex number of the meeting.