

Drive on Stalingrad SPI Designer's Notes

The series of battles that composed the Russo-German War in 1942 is a game player's dream. The flow of the struggle is beautifully balanced, with a steady stream of viable options and opportunities for both sides, against a background of a steadily shifting balance of power. While if the Germans are conservative, they will never be vulnerable enough to any sort of potent Russian counter-attack, they can only win by taking chances. And while the Russians can afford to give up much in waiting for enough strength to accumulate, they must very meticulously balance the factors of time and space, on the one hand, and their manpower resources on the other to prevent the inevitable German success in the beginning to get totally out of hand.

I was, therefore, very pleased to have an opportunity to work with this situation as a designer. While the specifications for the design were largely set, utilizing the combat system and approximate scale of SPI's successful Panzergruppe Guderian by mandate, there were several problems which I had to address. Among these were (a) the use of air power; (b) the convoluted logistical problems faced by the Germans; and (c) the "predestined" nature of the struggle which tended - because of decisions handed down from the high commanders - to proscribe certain actions on the part of the field commanders.

Before I could face these problems, I found an even more basic one. The original game proposal had been for a game of fairly limited scope - namely, a one-map simulation of the German offensive against Stalingrad in the summer of '42. Now as most people are aware, that is a pretty straightforward affair. The Germans launch an offensive toward Voronezh, and the Russians retreat. The Germans launch an attack toward Rostov, and the Russians retreat. The Russians, thinking the attack on Voronezh is the first leg of an oblique drive on Moscow, fight furiously, tying up the bulk of the German armor for three days, while the resistance to the south melts away and that portion of the Red Army retreats rapidly to the east. By the time the Wehrmacht's northern spearhead is clear of Voronezh and advancing to the southeast, the bulk of the Soviet troops have retreated out of reach of the huge pincers which meet in the vicinity of Millerova. The Germans roll onward to the Don, checked only by a fierce center of resistance at Rostov, and by their own logistical limitations.

Now to simulate this offensive properly, I had to fit Voronezh, Rostov, and Stalingrad on the same map. To do this, it was necessary to tilt the game map so that it ran from the northwest to the southeast. I envisioned a game wherein the majority of the offensive Player's forces would roll off the map to the south after the first half-dozen turns, after which time either the game would end, or nothing much would happen as the Germans caught their breath and the Russians brought in reinforcements. This would be followed by a full scale battle over an area of some ten or so hexes (Stalingrad) while the entire rest of the game-map languished in disuse (all the while great sweeping maneuvers being executed "off-map" to the south) - a very frustrating way to run a game, it seemed to me. I decided to expand the game to two maps, and cover the entire offensive, and expand the scope of the game to include the Russian counter-offensive (if they can indeed mount one). The only problem was that the game had been announced in the Spring brochure as a nine dollar, one-map game. However, we were due to print another brochure just then, and as only eleven people had already ordered the game at nine dollars, we decided to go ahead with the expansion. So eleven people are getting a real bargain.

In making the decision to go to two maps, however, I was determined to limit the dimension of the game in terms of the effort required to play it. The subject was an excellent one in terms of competitiveness (now that it is expanded to include the entire campaign), and I decided to take pains not to "waste" the game by making it impossible for two people to play. All of the other decisions concerning how to handle aspects of the game were taken in the light of this overriding concern.

In *Panzergruppe Guderian*, air power was a "constant" in that there is little Soviet air activity. It was therefore decided to reflect the German air advantage in the combat strengths themselves, making the Germans a little stronger, the Russians a little weaker. The only overt reflection of air power in that game was the "Interdiction Markers." Drive on Stalingrad covers a much larger campaign, both in time and area, and it is a campaign where both sides had significant air support, although the Germans were better supported than the Soviets. Therefore, it was necessary to reflect the air power in a manner that would allow one side or the other to gain local superiority, while the Germans retained the overall advantage, and neither side had "adequate" air support resources. I wanted to do this in a way that, while not totally abstract, would not be so heavy in detail as to detract from playability. I feel the air unit based system that is used fulfills these requirements well. The German logistical problems presented another challenge. I was determined to avoid, as much as possible, the crudely constraining mechanism of using supply limitations to control the German advance, as was done with the rail repair units in *War in the East*. Yet, I had to fleet the very real inhibitions that beset the invaders as they advanced further and further from their bases. I finally decided to give the German Player as much control as possible over his logistical options. This meant, in the end, complicating things a little, as the German Player must carefully distribute and utilize Truck units, repair selected rail lines, and use air units in an attempt to deliver Supply to the right place at the right time. The "lump" aspect of the Truck supply system reflects the necessity to stockpile material over the course of weeks before launching an attack, and the impossibility of sustaining any offensive at the end of a long line of trucks ferrying supplies across the arid Caucasian steppes. This was the situation that the Germans faced in the far south.

Finally, I had to deal with the question of political considerations, and ultimately, the real constraints that were placed upon the military commanders by the demands of their superiors, rational and otherwise. This was the last problem that I tackled, and one which was solved during the development of the game, on consultation with the other people working on the game as well as with constant reference to the actual historical sequence of orders from "on high." Early playtests of the game uncovered a tendency for the Germans to cross the Don in force, and sort of push aimlessly in the direction of the Volga, never quite reaching it before running out of supply and steam, and then being destroyed by a late Russian counteroffensive. Now the only reasonable military justification for an attack across the Don in the vicinity of Voronezh is - as the Russians accurately surmised - a sweep to the north and the east aimed at enveloping Moscow. (Indeed, as mentioned before, that was the meaning that Stalin read from the initial push towards Voronezh.) But the subject of the game is not any such hypothetical offensive, but rather, the German drive towards the south and east. In that context, there is little reason for the Germans to cross the Don north of Stalingrad, when they can instead use it to anchor their extended flank, maintaining a defensive line somewhat closer to their logistical network. Hence, I felt justified in limiting the players, in their

representation of the military commanders, to examining the options that were actually feasible in the light of the political/grand strategic constraints that they could not themselves affect. Some Players may find this artificial, but I feel that the system provides both variety (with the random walk Hitler Directive Table) and a lot of options, even with the constraints.

I thoroughly enjoyed working on Drive on Stalingrad. Although the project did not provide me with a tremendous opportunity for breaking new ground, it was a real pleasure to do a game on a situation that is ideal from a competitive point of view. Furthermore, I believe that Drive on Stalingrad is a successful exploration of the limits of playability, in that it is a game which can be easily played in a weekend, and conceivably played in a single day by two players. Since that is precisely what I wanted to accomplish in doing the game, I am satisfied with it.

A note on titles - as those who noted that this game was announced as *Road to Ruin*, advertised as *Drive to Stalingrad*, and released as *Drive on Stalingrad* may suspect, we had a bit of trouble deciding on what name to use. The original title used in the feedback suggestion was *Road to Ruin*, a perfectly reasonable title - indeed retained as the subtitle - but a decidedly negative title. Games with pessimistic names have a rather desultory record at SPI - witness *Lost Battles* and *Fall of Rome*. So, one night early in the summer, Redmond Simonsen and I sat down to discuss a list of alternatives which I had compiled. I wanted a title that would allude to two facets of the campaign that I considered significant: (a) the "double-edged" aspect of the struggle in that both sides had chances, and (b) the fact that the Germans had directed their offensive toward widely divergent objectives. Redmond wanted a title that would have a high "recognition" value.

The geographical feature of the map with the highest recognition value, obviously, was Stalingrad. Hence, he favored any name that included Stalingrad. I was uncomfortable with that suggestion, as the game clearly encompasses more than the German offensive against Stalingrad. I preferred titles such as *Drive Across the Don*, or (my personal favorite) *Thunder Across the Don*, which alluded - albeit allegorically - to both the action in the South and the Russian counter-blow. Despite several helpful suggestions from other members of the R&D staff - *Loudly Flows the Don*, *Hold that Don!*, *A Steppe Too Far* - we were unable to resolve the issue, and resorted to a convenient "subscriber seminar," where a panel of randomly selected New York area subscribers overwhelmingly seconded Redmond's opinion.