

# RIGHT HAND AGAINST LEFT HAND

## NOTES ON THE ART OF PLAYING WITH YOURSELF GEORGE DUGUID

In Phoenix 16, John Poole advocated that the solitaire gamer make use of a system first described by Russ Smith in an article in Moves 12, 'The Solitaire Player vs the System'. In essence, the proposal is that the gamer should devise a number of strategic and tactical plans for each side to cover the different situations likely to arise in the course of a particular game. One of these plans is selected by the roll of a die as and when the need arises. The object of this is to remove as much control as possible from the player as the game progresses: he devises the 'system'; but the system controls the game. The pleasure for the gamer, Poole implies, comes in the main from preparing the plans and observing them unfold on the game map.

Whilst this system has much to commend it, it also has a number of drawbacks which make it less than satisfactory for the average gamer. Most importantly, it can often be difficult enough to devise even one reasonably viable plan, let alone the several alternatives which the method demands. This is probably especially true if you lack a regular opponent — a problem exacerbated by the number of games available, which makes it unlikely that any one game will get the attention and study necessary. Thus, a more practical system is needed if the solo player is not prepared to invest the time and effort required by the Smith-Poole method. What is proposed in this article is an improvement in this respect. It is not a true solitaire system and it does require a certain amount of additional work; however, it should enable the solo player to give himself a hard time. (I should point out at this stage that at certain points in what follows I draw heavily on Smith's article; anyone interested in this whole topic should certainly try to obtain a copy).

The first step in the system is to study the OOB and **group units into higher-level formations**. Thus battalions can be formed into brigades or divisions, divisions into corps or armies, and so on. These formations may, if you so desire, be historically accurate, corresponding exactly to those which the actual commander had under his control. Alternatively, ad hoc groupings can be formed with fluid compositions and fictitious designations. Whichever you choose, the purpose remains the same: grouping units in this way gives a shape and form to the mass of units on each side, with the big picture being considerably simplified as a result. Strategic analysis is easier when 100 counters are thought of as 10: **Highway to the Reich** becomes **Arnhem**; **Fulda Gap** becomes **Strike Force**.

Having done this, the player should then **write out an Operational Plan for each of these higher-level formations**. An Operational Plan is essentially what Russ Smith calls a Strategic Operational Guide with the difference that one (and one only) is required for each formation. It is therefore made up of the following elements:

- (1) A statement of objectives, that is, a listing of what you expect or hope this particular formation will achieve. This statement will normally deal with geographical factors (the taking, holding or covering of defined positions), attrition (the destruction of specified enemy formations or the preservation of friendly ones) or some combination of the two;
- (2) A time-table which should state how long (in Game Turns) you estimate it will take this formation to achieve its objectives. Until you are familiar with the game it is probably best to look ahead for only three or four Turns;
- (3) An order of battle detailing the individual units attached to the formation, this simply records what you will have already decided.

The value of writing out an Operational Plan is two-fold. Firstly, it helps concentrate the mind in the absence of an opponent: it forces you to be explicit about what you are trying to do and why. No longer will large numbers of units head vaguely to where the action is because it seems like a good idea at the time; nor will units with high attack strengths be wasted in defensive roles; and so on.

Secondly, a written plan of the sort described above should be referred to in case of doubt about what to do with particular units. Amongst other things this means that the 'instant reaction' to events should be abolished. If, say, an attacking formation runs short of units it should only receive reinforcements from designated reserves. If you need to reinforce one part of the line unexpectedly, impose a delay of one or two Game Turns before doing so. And remember to draw up new Operational Plans for the affected formations.

Whilst on this subject it is worth mentioning those occasions which, according to Smith, should be used for revising pre-written plans. He identifies four of these: (a) when the formation achieves its assigned objectives; (b) when the formation is significantly delayed in its timetable; (c) when 20% of the formation or of the entire force is destroyed; and (d) in the event of a serious enemy threat to rear areas. When one or more of these conditions exist, it is time to review your Operational Plans.

Thus far you will have grouped your units into a manageable number of formations and prepared Operational Plans for each of these. In other words, you should have a coherent strategy to implement. Now you must turn your attention to tactics, manoeuvring and positioning your units and committing them to combat in such a way as to extract maximum advantage from a situation. To do this, use a technique forced upon the postal gamer: **prepare turn-by-turn Movement and Combat plots for each side**.

To make a Movement Plot simply take a sheet of lined paper (one for each side) and write the strength and designation of each unit down the left-hand margin. Opposite each unit note its starting position in the first column. In successive columns, enter the number of the hex into which the unit moves each Game Turn. The point of having a written record of this sort is to enable you to experiment with alternative moves. A move is only made when you are satisfied that you can do no better: the puzzle value of the game is maximized, free of the constraints of an impatient opponent.

So too with the Combat Plot. Here you should list every combat you propose to carry out in that particular Game Turn before resolving any. Study the odds, the probable results, the effects of the worst possible result, etc. For each combat, write out all possible retreats and advances the phasing units will make before rolling a single die. The effort which this requires will be amply repaid by the tactical expertise which you will gain. (Incidentally, should you temporarily have to call a halt to a game, the best point to leave it at is once you have drawn up the phasing side's Combat Plot. When you return to the game, you will immediately have something to do, something which will ease you gently back into the game without any 'Now where was I?' feeling).

And that's all there is to it! Three simple principles to help the solo player to make a game of it. To reiterate:

- (1) Group units into higher-level formations;
- (2) Write out an Operational Plan for each of these formations;
- (3) Prepare turn-by-turn Movement and Combat Plots for each side.

To conclude by stating the obvious, this is not a solitaire system in the sense that John Poole would recognise it; however, insofar as it breaks the flow of the game, induces concentration on one thing at a time without losing sight of the overall situation and encourages thoughtful play, it is system which will be of use to the solitaire gamer.

# WHAT'S NEW?

## RIFLEMAN DODDS

Novelty is an interesting word for, like so many words in the English language it has a considerable number of meanings. Let's look at the first available in a good standard dictionary. "Novelty: newness." Now there's nothing there to which one can take exception. The novelty of opening a new edition of S&T and finding out what the boys in the back-room have dreamt up for us this time round. The novelty of examining the new game and maybe even finding that the rules are not in need of further correction or emendation — a novelty indeed! But all of these aspects of novelty are pleasing. What's next in the definition? "unusual appearance" Like S&T not being delayed by shipping strikes, storms, purges in New York or simply SPI moving house again. A novel and unusual appearance but perhaps I'm not being quite fair to all concerned ... after all who can legislate for storms, strikes and house moving?

Another definition please. "anything new, strange, or different from what was known or usual before." It was upon an aspect of this rock that St. James of Dunnigan sought to build his church. "Let us have about us," he cried, "no old, stale and well known game system. These are but childish things and like such things must be put away!" And the subscribers did nod their heads and did rub their hands with glee and there came forth amongst them a veritable flood of improvements upon the old, tried and tested. And Lo! there was much reading of rules upon the face of the land. And there was muttering but the reading and the writing was the first day and the great scribe Simonesen did set forth the law and did make all rules to be written after his manner and all did so write or they profiteth not. And the writing and the reading were the second day. And St. James did say we shall make all games different so that the novelty of the game shall be also the novelty of the rules and we shall call the rules and the game the "game system" and this will allow me to go on making up games about the Ardennes Offensive until I get bored of it or, for a novelty, get it right. And there will still be a newness and a difference from what was known before.

And there came amongst the people some who did cry aloud and say, "Enough already. For you gave unto us a system and you did change it. And you gave unto us a Quad which was to be for a sign that the rules would be unchanging in them and Lo!... ye did change them. Give us only a game that will play without too much homework. Give us, we beseech thee, less research for novelty and move development of *your* tried and tested systems in which we believe and for which we thank you. Turn not again to the false god of the "War in Europe" and/or the Pacific but give us once again a good, playable game." But St. James heard not for he was already off on the search for another novelty.

I don't know if you have had a close look at issue 72 of S&T but in the Feedback they are asking us about owning computers. I do know that in the States the cost of a computer system is probably a lot lower than the same one would cost in this country. To get a middle sized machine of the sort described in the Feedback, e.g. a level 2, 8K, TRS-80, or a Commodore PET, would cost in the region of £600. Now I'm a games player and if the pools come up I *might* just be able to be silly enough to spend something like that for my games... but look what else they are asking us about. Questions 78 — 83 asked us to state what kind of programmes (software) we would like to see SPI produce. Writing a computer program is difficult enough but SPI asking us that in the issue with the two page built in errata ....! Don't they know the first rule with computers is, "Rubbish in — rubbish out"? Last definition of novelty: "a small, usually cheap, manufactured article of unusual or gimmicky design."