

Race to the Meuse and Celles

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Race to the Meuse (Worldwide Wargames, 1983) and *Celles* (Revolution Games, 2013) are both about the battle for the Meuse River crossings during the Battle of the Bulge, December 23-27, 1944. They cover much the same area, at much the same scale of unit size and time. They also share a similar design philosophy of trying to integrate movement and combat. This document is a comparison of the two games, which sheds some light on the progress in wargame design over the course of three decades. I have written after-action reports about both games; these are in separate documents. The two games quickly went in different directions, and so a turn-by-turn comparison would not be useful. Besides that, a single AAR document for both games would be very lengthy.

I. Historical Background

I'm not an expert on this particular battle, and I don't have the copy of *Wargamer* that included the historical article for *Meuse*. Basically, this was the final thrust of the Ardennes offensive. On December 23, 1944, *2nd Panzer Division* swept around the American 84th Infantry Division and headed for the Meuse River bridges, with Antwerp as the hypothetical objective. Only a few armoured companies from the British 3RTR, 29th Armoured Division, stood in their way. However, the American 2nd Armored soon began to arrive from the north, across the German line of advance. In the five days of fighting, the Germans also committed *116th Panzer*, *9th Panzer*, *Panzer Lehr*, and *Furher Belgeit Brigade*. In the end, the German attack failed, and the high-water mark of the Ardennes battle had been reached.

II. Game Features

Some specific comparisons between the games are provided in the table below.

A. *Unit Counters*

Both games represent the units in the German and American panzer/armor divisions as task-organized formations or *kampfgruppen*. The U.S. 84th Infantry division is represented by battalions, and the British armoured units as companies—although *Meuse* has four British units, while *Celles* has only two. *Meuse* represents the panzer/armor division's recon units as essentially the same as the *kampfgruppen*, while *Celles* has them as weaker, single-step units. *Celles* also includes single-step German motorized antitank units, which are absent from *Meuse*. Both games have an immobile unit representing the garrison at Hotton. *Meuse* has a number of immobile 1-strength "outpost" units deployed in key villages and towns at the beginning of the game. *Celles* has a recon unit representing the American 4th Cavalry, which *Meuse* lacks.

Meuse units are backprinted with their step-reduced equivalents. In addition, the German *kampfgruppen* in *Meuse* can split into their armored and infantry components. *Meuse* counters show the units' attack and defense strengths. Instead of having movement allowances, all units are allowed 16 task points (12 during night turns). Differences between unit types (motorized

and infantry) are accounted for by different task point costs to move into different terrain, enemy zones of control, etc.

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Race to the Meuse</u>	<u>Celles</u>
Duration	Dec 23 AM – Dec 27 PM (historical scenario)	Dec 23 Night – Dec 27 Day
Turn length	Three per day: AM, PM, Night	Two per day: Day, Night
Hexes from Hotton to Dinant	29	27
Unit scale	Armor: kampfgruppe or task force, infantry battalion, British company	Same, plus support units
Step reduction	Two steps per unit	Armor: two steps; others one step
Stacking	Two full-strength units	One full-strength task force/KG or two infantry battalions.
Sequence of play	Player turns with incremental activity	Alternating chit-draw by division, unit-by-unit activation
Movement	All units have the same task allowance, with costs varying by unit type and supply	Printed movement allowances, modified by supply, with costs varying by unit type
Zones of Control	Task point cost for entering and exiting. No movement directly from one controlled hex to another.	Movement point costs for entering. Motorized also pay for exiting. Motorized may attempt infiltration.
Combat	Differential, integrated for terrain	Ratio, with die-roll modifiers
Die sides	6	10
Supply	Road-bound, fuel allocation	Trace any path
Victory Conditions	Victory points based on terrain occupation per turn, exiting units, and unit elimination	Victory points based on terrain occupation at end and unit elimination; possible automatic victory for Germans

The front side of a *Celles* unit shows its unactivated side. It has its full attack and defense strengths and a movement allowance, printed in black. The reverse side is the activated side, with halved attack and defense strengths and zero movement allowance, printed in white. Step reduction (which applies only to the armored task forces) is accomplished by using substitute counters.

Both games use color schemes to indicate unit formations. These are more prominent in *Celles*, where the concept is more important. In *Meuse*, formation is used only for fuel allocation.

B. Sequence of Play

The two games differ the most in their sequences of play.

Meuse divides the game turn into separate player turns for the Germans and the Allies. During the player turn, each unit expends task points to move and engage in combat, which may be conducted in any order. The unusual twist is that all units are supposed to expend their task points at the same rate, using an incremental system similar to those used in some naval, air, and space games. Because entering different types of terrain costs different numbers of points, it may be that one unit moves several hexes (along a road) while another is moving from one hex to the next. The counter mix includes numbered chits to mark how many task points units have expended. This sequencing is important because units must begin combat at the same “time,” that is, having expended the same number of task points. This means that units already in position may expend task points doing nothing while they wait for other units to arrive. Also, units may not stack while using road movement. This means that one must pay attention to how many task points each unit has expended, to make sure they aren’t expending the same points in the same road hexes. This system isn’t as intricate as it first sounds. In many game turns, it will be clear that the actions of units on different parts of the map don’t have to be coordinated, and so one can complete their actions sequentially.

Here are a few salient points for *Meuse*:

- All of a player’s units move in the same segment
- At least in principle, all units move in a sort-of simultaneous way.
- At the end of combat, all participating friendly units will have expended the same number of task points.
- Unit strengths are unaffected by any activity they take.

In *Celles*, at the beginning of each turn, activation chits for each division are placed in a cup (one cup for each side). There may be one or two activation chits for the same division, as specified for the given game turn. In addition, the turn record specifies the maximum number of activations each side may perform. In most cases, this maximum is less than the number of activation chits in the cup. After determining the initiative, the players alternate drawing chits from their own cups. When a formation’s chit is drawn, the player has the choice of using it to activate all of the units in that formation or a single unit of any formation. Assuming that the former is chosen, he flips all of the units in the formation to their front sides and then proceeds to activate them, one at a time. An activated unit may move and conduct combat, in any order, up to the limits of its movement allowance. If other friendly units are adjacent to enemy units under

attack, they may participate; this does not cause them to become activated. When the unit's activities are complete, it is flipped to its activated side, and the player may then activate another unit of the formation, until he has activated all of them or chooses to stop. Once the formation's activities are complete, the other player draws a chit and follows the same process. If one side reaches its maximum activation limit, the other player continues to draw chits until he has reached his.

Important points for *Celles*:

- Players alternate moving portions of the units during the course of a single turn.
- Each unit completes its entire activation before the next one does anything.
- Once each unit is finished with its activity, it is flipped to its activated side, which has lower attack and defense strengths.
- Unactivated units may participate in combat without being flipped to their activated sides. Previously activated units may also participate, using the strengths on their activated sides.

C. Combat

In both games, units may initiate combat whenever and as often as the player chooses in the course of a unit's activity. However, combat costs a hefty number of task/movement points, and so more than one combat per player turn/activation is rare. In *Meuse* the cost of engaging in combat varies with a unit's supply state and (for German units) whether it has fuel. *Celles* provides for light, medium, and heavy attacks, with increasing movement point costs and effectiveness.

In *Meuse*, all enemy units adjacent to units participating in combat must be attacked. This can lead to the need for soak-offs, in the usual way. At the end of combat, defending units are assigned task point expenditures, which apply against their allowances in the following turn.

In *Celles*, the active unit attacks a single hex. Adjacent friendly units may participate, although they aren't required to. The presence of adjacent enemy units is irrelevant. The sequence of play works for and against the attacker. On the one hand, participating inactive units do not change their activation status. That means they could help with an attack and then have a full turn themselves—possibly attacking the same hex again, or some other hex. On the other hand, if the player wants to move several units into attack position, all but the last one will be flipped to their weaker side after their moves, and so they will provide less support than in a more conventional move-fight sequence of play.

D. Supply

The two games' supply rules differ considerably. *Meuse* forces players to consider supply explicitly. Logistics are more built into the background of the *Celles* system.

In *Meuse*, a unit must trace a supply line no longer than three passible hexes to a road or track, which can then be traced to a friendly map edge. This means that the enemy can put forward units out of supply by occupying crucial road junctions. Those Allied 1-strength outpost units

serve to constrict German supply lines, unless the panzers take the time to clear them. The Germans also have to deal with fuel allocation. At the beginning of each turn, the German player rolls to see how many fuel units each of his divisions gets. In the first few turns, they are likely to get most of what they need, but after that the situation gets worse. Fuel counters are assigned to particular kampfguppen (in supply, of course). Units without fuel pay higher action point costs for just about everything, although their combat strength is unimpaired. By contrast, out of supply units pay even higher costs, may not move more than three hexes, and have halved attack strengths. Naturally, the spearheads (usually *2nd Panzer*) at the Meuse are most vulnerable to having their supply cut off by American units arriving behind them.

Celles uses a “trace any path” supply system, and so supply lines are harder to block. Given the terrain and the season of the year, I have some doubts that this is reasonable. Units are judged as in or out of supply at the beginning of the turn and remain so for the duration. Units that are out of supply at the beginning of the turn are marked as isolated. Out of supply units suffer reduced movement and unfavorable DRMs in combat; isolated units suffer worse ones.

In *Celles*, the supply situation is also factored into the maximum number of activations that each side may take in a turn. Allied units get more activations during the day, and German units get more at night. As the game goes on, the Germans get few activations, which probably reflects their cumulative supply problems.

E. Time of Day

Both games make a distinction between day and night turns. In *Meuse*, units have a task point allowance of 16 during day turns but only 12 at night. The German fuel table is somewhat more generous for night turns than for day, presumably reflecting the influence of Allied airpower. Also, motorized units on both sides suffer combat penalties, to reflect lack of maintenance and the difficulty of moving mechanized units in the dark. In *Celles*, the Allies get a favorable DRM on the initiative roll in the day, while the Germans get one at night. As noted above, the maximum number of activations for each side favors the Allies during the day and the Germans at night. The Allies can take replacements only in the day, and Germans only at night. The Germans also get a favorable combat DRM at night. Infiltration (moving from one controlled hex to another) is easier for both sides at night.

F. Special Rules

Both games have some special rules that don't have a counterpart in the other. The most notable of these are the tactical chits in *Celles*. These chits are placed in the activation cups along with the formation chits. When a player draws one of these, he sets it aside for use later and continues drawing until he pulls a formation chit. These chits give the player certain bonus abilities. Once used, the chit is set aside until the beginning of the next turn, when it is returned to the cup. The chits include:

- Extra Move: The player may activate any one of his units. This chit must be played before using a regular formation chit.
- Combat: The player gets a favorable DRM of 1 in any combat.

- Replacement: The player may restore any one unit to its full-strength side or return any one eliminated unit, at its depleted strength. The Allies may play this only during day turns, and the Germans only at night.
- Allied Air: This has two effects. First, the maximum number of German activations in the current turn is reduced by one. Second, the Allied player may make an air attack on any unit on the map. Possible results are step loss, disruption, or no effect. This is, obviously, only for the Allies, and it may be played only during day turns.

Other special rules in *Celles* include:

- Strategic Movement: Allied units in the day, and German units at night, may expend an extra three movement points if they do not move adjacent to enemy units at any time.
- Trucks: The Allies have a truck counter that can be assigned to an infantry unit. The unit is then treated as motorized.

In *Meuse*, the Allied player is restricted by certain garrison requirements that apply until the units are activated, either by the passage of time or the approach of German units. It also has an optional rule for German air supply drops. It may be attempted only during the day. If successful (and the chances are low), an out of supply unit may receive fuel and is treated as in supply for the turn. Another optional rule adds the *Skorzeny Einheit* infiltration team, which can be used once per game to give a column shift in a night attack, at the cost of victory points.

G. Victory Conditions

The general objectives are much the same in the two games. Crossing the Meuse is the big prize for the Germans. In *Meuse* this is handled in a fairly conventional way, by awarding victory points if the German player has units in supply across the river, and more if he exits supplied units from the map. In *Celles*, the German units never actually cross the river. Instead, the player gains one victory point per turn for every German unit adjacent to the Meuse. If he accumulates 20 points in this way, they are deemed to have crossed, and the German player wins an automatic victory.

In both games, both players also get victory points for occupying certain villages and towns. In *Meuse*, points are accumulated every turn, but in *Celles* the points are awarded at the end of the game. Both games also award points for eliminating enemy steps.

III. Discussion

Both games develop into two distinct combats. One is on the Meuse, where *2nd Panzer* and whatever other German units the player commits battle against 2nd Armor to cross the river while staying in supply. The other battle is in the southeast, along the line Hotton-Marche-Rochefort, where the 84th Infantry, aided by whatever 2nd Armor can spare, try to contain the German thrusts and to slam the door behind *2nd Panzer*. The main strategic choice for the Germans is whether to go big for the river crossings or try to win on points by taking the minor objectives. The American must avoid early losses while 2nd Armor is still arriving and then identify which sector needs the most commitment of forces.

In *Meuse*, the supply rules dominate everyone's thinking. It's very easy for *2nd Panzer* to go charging in, but it can easily find itself cut off from supply by units occupying road junctions well to its rear. Then the game turns into a relief attempt by the follow-on forces to clear some of those roads. Meanwhile, they have to keep an eye on the pesky infantry. Those battalions have little offensive capability, but they are good on defense and can slip through any holes in the German screen to put the relief force out of supply itself. In the game recounted in my AAR, *2nd Panzer* was neutralized and trapped by midgame, allowing 2nd Armored to help 84 Infantry hold the line.

Celles is a more mobile game, because it is difficult to cut off large parts of the map from supply. There is a swirling battle near the Meuse, as the German and American motorized units try to take advantage of each other's mistakes. The infantry has to hug the good terrain and use its truck-mounted battalion as a fire brigade to close gaps or reestablish supply to surrounded units.

On the whole, I found *Celles* more fun to play. The chit-pull mechanism meant that the players need to concentrate on only a small number of units at a time, and so play moves quickly. By contrast, counting the task point expenditures for one's entire force in *Meuse* was a bit of a slog. *Meuse* illustrates the difficulty of coordinating one's own forces, while *Celles* shows that the enemy won't just stand around while you do that. While I didn't like the way that *Meuse*'s supply rules dominated the game, I do think that a road-bound supply line is more realistic for that battle.