

International Team's York Town
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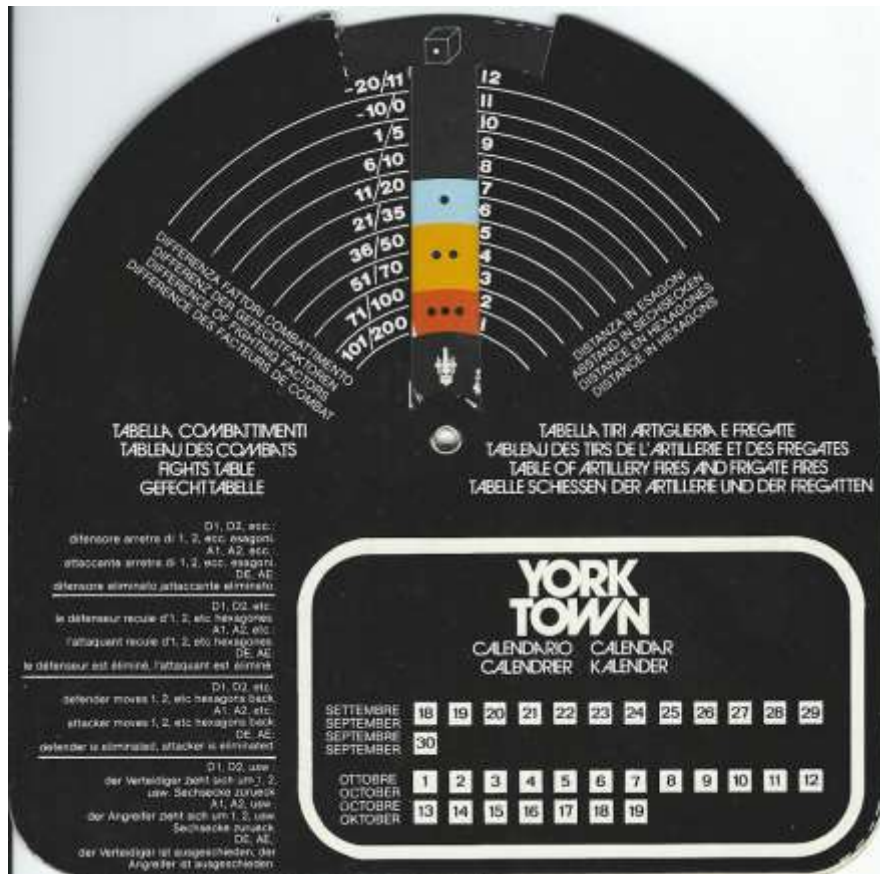
This is a review of the board wargame *York Town*, published by International Team in 1981. The game is a tactical simulation of the siege of Yorktown, Virginia in 1781. In the historical event, a British-led army of British, Hessian, and Colonial loyalists surrendered to a Franco-American army lead by George Washington. This surrender is generally considered to be the end of the American Revolutionary War, although the Treaty of Paris wasn't signed until 1783.

International Team was an Italian manufacturer of jigsaw puzzles. They produced a number of wargames on historical, science fiction, and fantasy themes. They used their background in puzzle manufacturing to produce game maps that fit together like large, simple puzzles. Their unit counters were notable for being hexagonally-shaped. The components were of very high quality for the era. The rules were another matter. They were printed in four languages: Italian, French, German, and English. They have a reputation for being difficult to understand and poorly edited. The English rules (at least) suffer from a number of translation anomalies. Thus, the players are often on their own and must improvise answers to rules questions as they arise. Fortunately, the rules for *York Town* are relatively simple. A set of English rules, constructed by an unknown person, is available on the Web Grognards web site, www.grognard.com.

The map is a five-piece jigsaw puzzle, with four corner pieces and one in the middle. The die-cut counters are hexagonally shaped, with red British, green "Prussian" (Hessian?), blue American, and white French. The 79 single-sided unit counters represent formations from company to brigade, plus artillery batteries and commanders. There are also two double-length counters representing British frigates. The counters show unit type, unit size, historical ID, combat strength, and movement allowance. The combat strengths cover a wide range, from 10 to 100! The strongest units are American militia, while the British have relatively modest strengths. Unit types include artillery, infantry, light infantry, pioneers, cavalry, and commanders. There are also markers for redoubts and very tiny "explosion" markers to show disruption.

Instead of a conventional combat results table, the game's "Fights Table" is a wheel rotating in a cardstock frame. You roll a die and then rotate the wheel until the die roll appears in the window. Then you read off the combat result for the appropriate combat differential. The same wheel is used to determine the effects of artillery bombardment, by rolling the die and comparing it with the range to determine the number of hits scored on the target.

The game's turn record track ("Calendar") is printed on the frame of the wheel. The rules refer to checking off the turns, but that would work only once. Players need to keep track of the game turn on their own, as with a scratchpad.



The Fight Table, showing a bombard roll of “1.”



Complete map, at the end of the first turn. Some units are missing from Gloucester Point. The stacks on the lower right are waiting to enter the map.

Scale

The game is played in daily turns, from September 19 through October 19, 1781. The map scale is not specified, but it's clear that each hex represents a fairly small area. The city of Yorktown is eight hexes long, and the York River is nine hexes across from Yorktown to Gloucester Point. Infantry units can march ten hexes per turn, and artillery has a range of twelve hexes.

Rules

At heart, this game uses Avalon Hill classic rules. The sequence of play is movement-combat. There are zones of control that stop movement, force combat, and block retreats. There is, generally, no stacking. However, there are a lot of complications layered onto this structure.

Although the rules don't describe it as such, before the movement phase there is an artillery fire phase. Artillery has a range of 12, and there are no line of sight restrictions.¹ They may not move and fire in the same turn. Each artillery unit fires individually, with the only consideration being range. One rolls a die, consults the combat results wheel, and reads off the number of hits the target receives. As one might expect, shorter ranges are better for inflicting hits. If a unit accumulates 4-7 hits in one fire phase (possibly from more than one battery), it is disrupted. A disrupted unit attacks and defends at half strength until the end of its player turn. If a unit accumulates 8 or more hits, it is destroyed. For units in town and redoubts, and for artillery batteries themselves (including frigates), the requirements are doubled: 8 hits for half-strength and 16 for elimination. Units at half strength get tagged with little "explosion" markers to mark their status.

After the British artillery batteries have fired, that side may move and attack with its frigates. Frigates have a movement allowance of 15, and they have to pay movement points to turn. Each of them acts as two artillery batteries. They can move and fire in any order. This makes the vicinity of the river a very dangerous place for the Franco-American forces. If a frigate can move into short range (say, 5 hexes), it has a good chance of eliminating a target with its two shots. Frigates may also transport ground units.

¹ I decided on my own that artillery should not be allowed to fire through town hexes.



One frigate transports evacuees from Gloucester Point while another supports defenders against a French assault

After artillery fire comes movement. With large movement allowances and few terrain effects, the units are pretty mobile. Units that move entirely on roads² get an extra four movement points. Streams have to be crossed at bridges, and only light infantry can enter the marsh hexes that cover the British right flank.

After movement comes combat. Combat is based on strength differences rather than ratios. Results are eliminations and retreats. Retreating units must retreat in a straight line, sometimes as many as 8 hexes. For the British, boxed inside of the town, that can be a killer. Units have a facing, and if they are attacked in their rear hexes they suffer combat strength reductions of up to 15 points. This, of course, makes a much bigger difference for a 20-point light infantry battalion than it does for a 90 point militia brigade. Commanders can stack with any units, and they add their 20-point strength to combat. However, if a commander is eliminated, then all of the units of that nationality (of the four in the game) suffer a 10 point loss in strength for the rest of the game.

There are many special rules for fortifications, which, of course, figure prominently in a siege game. Three different terrain types have some characteristics of fortifications: redoubts, town walls, and town hexes. Redoubts are single-hex structures outside of the town walls. Some redoubts are printed on the map, and more can be built by pioneers spending three turns constructing one. Stacking within redoubts is two units. Units in redoubts are doubled on both attack and defense, and they suffer no facing penalties. Zones of control do not extend into or

² Which the rules call “streets”

out of redoubts. This means that units adjacent to a redoubt need not attack, and units inside a redoubt may choose to attack only one enemy unit even if they are surrounded on all sides. As noted above, units inside redoubts need twice as many artillery hits to be affected by bombardment. Enemy units approaching a redoubt may not attack the turn they enter the adjacent hex. They may attack if they began the turn adjacent. Redoubts are never destroyed, only captured. Town hexes double defense strength but not attack strength and do not allow stacking. Town wall hexsides function much like redoubt hexsides in terms of movement, zones of control, bombardment, and attack strength. However, units inside town walls may not stack, and they are not doubled when attacking into other town hexes (not through walls). Like redoubts, town walls are never destroyed: there are no breaches.



French and American troops assault the outlying redoubts.

Play

The game begins with the allied forces marching onto the map, except for some that begin adjacent to Gloucester Point. Even using road movement, it will take a couple of turns before they are in contact with the outlying redoubts. . I set up the British side with two of their precious three artillery units in redoubts, thinking to damage the attackers on their approach to the town. This didn't work out all that well, as you need concentrated artillery fire to eliminate units. Disrupting them just delays them a bit. It's a nice question as to whether the player should try to capture the redoubts or just mask them. The worst that could happen would be the garrisons could sortie, but that would lure them out of their defenses and onto ground where they could be attacked. I did spend time reducing the redoubts, which at least taught me a bit about how the fortification rules work out in practice. The best idea is to concentrate artillery bombardment to disrupt or eliminate the defenders before attacking. Because of the way the movement rules work, the defenders will have at least one chance to preemptively attack (with doubled strength) the assault troops, and so you have to take that into account when selecting your attacking force. I had the French troops try to take the redoubts near the river, and they got badly cut up by fire from the frigates. They eventually pulled back out of effective range and established a blocking position to prevent the garrison from trying to win by exiting the map. This was the only situation in which I found it worthwhile to build a couple of redoubts with the pioneers.

There was a bit of skirmishing between the British and American light troops in the marshy area on the left side of the map. The British were trying to flank the French and fall upon their artillery, but the more numerous American light infantry arrived in time to drive them back.

Out on Gloucester Point, the Allied units were barely enough to clear out the British, who also benefitted from the support of the frigates. It could have gone the other way.

After getting control of the redoubts, the Americans and French closed in on the town. They waited to bring up their artillery before moving their infantry forward. The lack of ZoCs across walls is a two-edged sword. Both sides can choose the hexes to attack. Although the attackers suffered some notable losses, the concentrated artillery was able to disrupt or destroy enough of the garrison that the attackers were able to get into the town. After that, it didn't take long to reach the point where 10 allied units were inside, triggering an American victory. The whole game ended pretty early, on September 24 (the turn record goes through October 19).

Conclusion

This isn't a bad little game, once you figure out how the rules work. It is more like a battle game than a siege, however. The Franco-American side doesn't have to build saps and parallels. There is no bombarding the walls until a breach is made. It all moves rather too quickly. That means you get a quick playing, simple game, with rather nice components. On the other hand, it doesn't tell you much if anything about the history. In that respect, it's not much different from some of the games from Avalon Hill or SPI from the same era.



Preparing to storm the town.



Victory