

L'Ete des Boxers: Quelle desastre!

A game review of a Vae Victus magazine game on the Boxer rebellion. Issue 136. Vae Victus is a French language gaming magazine. English translations of the rules usually appear within a few weeks of publication.

Overview: This is a solitaire game covering the Boxer Revolt in the Forbidden City Beijing 1900. The player controls the various foreign delegations while the system handles various Boxer and Chinese regular forces as they try to wipe out troops and civilians as well as burning as many foreign compounds as possible. How well you succeed in stopping this determines your level of victory or defeat.

The course of play is determined by drawing from a deck of cards. Some turns are fairly quiet with a random event or bombardment. Others, result in an all-out assault. Not bad for a magazine game except.....

POSITIVE POINTS: Vae Victus always seems to have outstanding graphics. There's a lot of interesting detail on the game counters and the map is usually small enough to fit onto a desktop. Ideal for play while you're travelling.



Above left: A thumbnail of the board, divided into areas . Boxer movement is determined by arrows. Above right: The British and whatever allies are on hand try to hold off the Boxers at the American embassy which is currently burning.

The game flow is directed by drawing cards from a deck, a concept that hasn't been done in many games. It leads to a great deal of unpredictability and hoped-for anticipation of the next draw. You are hoping for a break to give time to draw replacements.

NEGATIVE: Unfortunately, this game has a number of problems. The biggest ones are the rules which needed a bit more development and a blind playtest or two before the game went into publication. There were too many ambiguities and holes in the system which caused a lot of slowdown in play the first few times the game as played. I found myself flipping back and forth in the 16 pages trying to look up key sections covering combat, hoping I hadn't forgotten a key die roll modifier.

It appears other gamers had similar problems as this resulted in five pages of "faq's" the designer insisted wasn't errata but a further explanation of the rules. This is typical of so many magazine games but it doesn't have to be this way.

The Boxers enter in large, killer stacks that forces the player to put together similar large stacks to try and muster enough fire and melee power to try and kill off the Boxers and end combat for another day. This resulted in a lot of clumsy handling of units and constant additions of combat factors and DRM's. This gets tiresome and slows down play.

Finally, the card draw mechanism controlling play appeared not to have been tested enough. In one of my games, I drew four black face cards resulting in four days of full-on Boxer assaults without any respite for the badly depleted foreign legations. The Forbidden city burned as a result.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS: This was a great idea that wasn't properly developed. It's one of those game you play once or twice, then forget about for the next decade or until your widow donates to a Charity shop. Magazine publishers are under tight budgets and don't have as much time to put a game together as with a boxed game. However, some effort could have been made to put the charts together on one or two pages and published online. This costs nothing and saves the poor gamer from constantly flipping through the rules. SPI discovered this back in the 1970's. Secondly, an example of play or two reduces a lot of ambiguity.

Playtesting is a key part of game development, Vassal makes a blind playtest feasible and easy to do as there are volunteers willing to test if the game is ready for publication. If this had been done, 55 Jours might have been the best solitaire magazine game to appear since Operation Olympic. As it stands, it is a failure.

VERDICT: Un desastre. The designer deserves the guillotine.