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Not so long ago monster games seemed the wave of the future. However today mini games fill the shops and SPI, who were once producing a new monster every two months, have now abandoned them. While the SPI experience with monsters certainly indicates that teams of professional designers with limited time cannot continue to turn out satisfactory monsters to order, interesting games in this field are still coming from designers whose commitment to a certain subject is such that the design becomes a labour of love. Jack Radley's Eastern Front game *Korsun Pocket* is one such and another is Marshal Enterprise's *La Bataille d'Austerlitz*.

The Marshal approach to games manufacture is certainly different. Ditching feedback, they produce nothing but large games on Napoleonic battles, using the same system each time (so far they have tackled Eylau, Talavera and Austerlitz).

Just how unusual the Marshal style is can be seen as soon as one opens the zip-lock bag. The first thing to catch the eye is the counters. In place of the usual one colour for each nationality plus a unit type symbol, all units, French, Russian and Austrian, are in colours corresponding to regimental uniforms and, in some cases, with regimental emblems on the counter. Since these emblems are also in colour, some counters have up to six different colours on them. The result certainly conveys something of the spectacle of a Napoleonic army drawn up in battle order. It is also extremely confusing. For example, it seems that, as well as Russian infantry, some French cavalry also wore green as both sets of counters are the same colour. However, confusion is only just beginning. There are three sheets of unit counters, all three of which contain some French and some Allied units, with nothing on the sheets to indicate which is which. Then, for some obscure reason, half the counters on each sheet are printed upside down.

The result of all this is that when I sat down to play the introductory scenario (which needs about twenty counters), I was still looking for the counters an hour later. Then it dawned on me that French counters use a different type from the Allied for their numbers. I'm sharing this discovery with Phoenix readers, since it's stated nowhere in the rules.

Next come the maps. There are four of them depicting the battlefield with hills, forests, streams, lakes, villages and roads. Although less colourful than the counters, they are still somewhat distinctive, with woods and villages represented not by symbols but by small drawings, in the manner more usually associated with fantasy games.

The rules, too, are rather unusual. It is evident that the designers have a very considerable affection for the era of Napoleonic France which manifests itself in many ways, some of them, one assumes, not intended seriously. The various members of the design team have awarded themselves titles such as Maitre de la Salle and Duc de Fontenay and the bibliography includes such surprising items as the music of Mozart and Beethoven. The victory conditions explain that, although the Allies win if Napoleon is killed, this act earns them the hatred of many, some of them, one assumes, not intended seriously. The various members of the design team have awarded themselves titles such as Maitre de la Salle and Duc de Fontenay and the bibliography includes such surprising items as the music of Mozart and Beethoven. The victory conditions explain that, although the Allies win if Napoleon is killed, this act earns them the hatred of many, some of them, one assumes, not intended seriously.

All this is fairly amusing but I was less happy about the importation of French terms into the rules. The use of period terms such as tirailleurs for skirmishers is fair enough and adds to the atmosphere but the designers feel the need to go further and invent French equivalents for stock gaming terms, such as calling ZGCs zones d'influence.

Still the main function of a rule book is to explain the game clearly. The designers start at the beginning: "The reader should look on these rules as not some sort of legal document subject to the perverse mental gymnastics of the mad barrister searching frantically for the smallest of loopholes."

This approach is fair enough provided the rules are really written so that the designer's intentions are clear. In this area I feel that, in view of the fact that the game system is a highly original one, the rules could have been explained rather more thoroughly, with examples of play given. In some areas it will take several readings to see exactly what the designer has in mind. Ultimately the information one needs is usually there but it can take a lot of finding. For example, the firing rules are, as written, incomprehensible until one turns to the fire table in a separate booklet. The rules inform you that the band of the Imperial Guard has a favourable effect on the morale of nearby units but do not tell you what the Guards Band counter looks like. (I presume it is the one marked "GB" but it would be nice to be told).

Having mastered the counters and the rules, on sitting down to play what do you find? The answer is a very interesting system which is worthy of examining in some detail. Each unit is rated for fire power, melee strength, morale and the number of steps (or increments as the designers call them) it possesses. These range from 5 for French skirmishers to 20 for a Russian infantry regiment. Losses are taken in steps which are recorded by a counter under the unit.
The system's various elements certainly offer an extremely detailed and interesting view of Napoleonic grand tactics. However, any simulation from a minigame to a fantasy computerised wargame must inevitably simplify. Paradoxically, the more detailed a simulation is, the more obvious it becomes what is left out. Look for example at the way that games for many years accepted the series of decisions (like deciding which units to attack) without asking basic questions like: what were the real objectives of the conflict? What were the real forces involved? Why were the battles fought? These kind of questions are not raised in the simulation, but they are crucial for an understanding of Napoleonic battles.

Similarly, the very detail of LDBA makes what has been omitted more obvious. In particular there is one very surprising omission. The rules include a clause determining in which directions units may attack, but facing has no effect on defense. This means that the more the attacking force is close to its target, the greater the chance of a successful attack. As a result, the more the attacking force is close to its target, the greater the chance of a successful attack. As a result, the more the attacking force is close to its target, the greater the chance of a successful attack.

In the end we come to the recurring question about big games. Can you actually play it? With the reservations, the answer is yes. There are several small scale scenarios which, even though they use only a small number of computers, still require a lot of decision making (whether you consider it worth your while to pay for a big game if you are only going to play the small scenarios is another matter). Certainly everyone should start off with one of these small scenarios since, in the end, the rules are simple. The choice of scenarios will refer to the rules frequently and it will not always be easy to find what you want. Unfortunately, even in the small scenarios, deployment is a cumbersome process. Once the scenario is set up, the players must then turn to the Order of Battle to see what the players' divisions consist of. (This would matter less if the counters were less obscure).

To conclude, the rules and graphics of La Batalla d'Austerlitz show a great deal of talent and originality and the game will certainly be of interest to all fans of Napoleonics or giant games. However, the confusing presentation of the game's information and the final effects of the players' movements could improve this (and perhaps produce a game on a smaller scale). Furthermore, the game could be greatly improved by adding a more realistic representation of the environment and the weather conditions.