

*Panzer Battles* is one of the more interesting magazine games to come out of *Strategy & Tactics* during the Dunnigan/Simonsen era. Its goal of depicting armoured warfare during the Second World War is met in the main, though the game appears to be both limited and expansive at the same time: limited, because it presents only three battles, two of them near the end of the war; expansive, because it seems at some points to be unfortunately looking for instructions about what it all means for a potential Warsaw Pact clash with NATO. The latter is clearly evident in David Isby's excellent if overreaching article that accompanies the game, seeking to connect what is a brilliant synopsis of the battles with what Soviet armour would face if it assaulted Western Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s—a strained sort of comparison.

The game itself is a bit of a strain, seeking to squeeze in as many aspects of armoured warfare as possible, from firing range, facing and penetration to doctrine and leadership. Players can be excused from thinking that they're not overall commanders so much as overbearing officers seeking to dominate every decision on the battlefield. Command and control are depicted as identical. By injecting operational missions such as "bounding" and "overwatch"—concepts and practices foreign to both German and Soviet armour doctrine—the effort becomes overloaded and sometimes the game clanks like a cranky tank.

This is also a simulation that, for all its efforts to inject fog-of-war, demands that players act as if God can only be found in the details. Indeed, in the attempt to be inclusive—to capture three different battles with one heavy set of rules—some awkward outcomes appear. There's off-board artillery for the Arracourt scenario only, but strangely not the airpower that German commanders subjected to it there say was decisive. The depiction of the battles for Gazala in 1942 barely address the sudden appearance of sandstorms that halted combat. And the Berlin highway encounter as presented implies two evenly matched armies in a classic meeting engagement, when the Germans were struggling just to field a fighting force. If attention to detail is what's driving a simulation, then they probably need to be the right details.

One emerges without much of a sense about which tactics worked against what adversary on what battlefield. The game as a whole might have been more instructive if the scenarios would have shown how armoured warfare in the Second World War evolved from, say, France in 1940 to France in 1944.

Still, *Panzer Battles* at least works to show how the designer thinks these specific battles unfolded. Arracourt appears as a confused encounter born of failed expectations, a scramble to adjust by both sides, trying to bring some order to more than the usual chaos, a meeting (and retreating) engagement instead of a set piece battle. Gazala is a dance, an effort to grapple with keeping one's own forces together, and neither side being able to land the decisive blow. The clash on the Kuestrin highway comes off as desperation—the Russians eager to generate momentum and make haste, the German force looking to avoid being relegated to speed bumps, and both sides, even with experience, error-prone. Even if not wholly accurate, the experience is engaging and the tension real.

The major takeaway seems to be that where armoured warfare in World War 2 is concerned, it was a battle just to have a battle—that bringing organised violence to bear on an enemy so that one achieves a meaningful result is difficult enough. There's probably too many moving parts packed into depicting that problem in a military simulation (line-of-sight abruptly becomes an exercise in somewhat complicated algorithmic calculation). But attentive players will realise that while they might have thought panzer battles were direct, deliberate, and decisive, real-life commanders knew better and had to plan accordingly. That's a major lesson in its own right.