

*September Storm* is a fine and focused game, confronting the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and not trying to do much beyond that important task. The game is well-presented, with thick icon-based counters, a subdued but detailed and quite handsome map, and a rule-set that amply covers major processes without overwhelming the player in detail. The order of battle is comprehensive, and combat resolution system is straightforward. The game takes on an unwinnable historical situation and largely confirms that outcome, without unnecessary chrome and with only the barest of special rules to consider. This is history accurately featuring a fading heartbeat.

At the same time, by drawing on the central traditions of wargaming—hexes, movement points, degraded status, supply that is easily calculated and combat that is resolved in the usual fashion of dice and charts—*September Storm* is more of a squall, a strong and welcome shower to relieve the heat but not end the drought. It promises thunder and lightning but ends up mostly grey. The Germans hit hard, though they slog more than slice: there's not a lot of open-steppe running. The Poles are left to plug holes and pray, staving off collapse, but ending up only postponing the hour of reckoning, not avoiding it. It's realistic in many respects (though there is more battering than blitzing that goes on) and demonstrates that once the invasion was on, Warsaw's hopes were off. The Polish player has little hope of running out the clock and thereby finding salvation from afar—and that is what a true simulation should be, if the inevitable rather than options are what the game is designed to portray.

Indeed, simplicity in approach (and there is much to recommend that) means that alternative outcomes (apart from favourable die rolls) are unlikely, probably impossible in *September Storm*. There are no optional rules for foreign intervention (though the game ends following Turn 15, when the Red Army comes in) or other potential events (a slow start in Poland might have emboldened some on the German General Staff to move against Hitler—unlikely but not impossible) beyond operational-level alternatives. The austerity creates plenty of space for house rules, but little guidance what those might or could be.

More vexing is that while *September Storm* is cast as a solitaire game, it's really a solitaire-friendly game. There is no solitaire-system and no bots; there are solitaire instructions to the player about what German forces should be doing, where their emphasis should be, but this is merely guidance, and makes one wonder why the Poles are not the ones represented as the solitaire side. Were the latter the case, a single player could conceivably roll for activation and then an additional roll indicating the direction of Polish units to move to address German advances or breakthroughs. As matters stand, the single player needs to play both sides, and there is none of the uncertainty or tension that often accompanies genuine solitaire games.

While it is not clear why *September Storm* is advertised as a solitaire game, its appearance does raise the question about what qualifies as a solitaire game. One definition might be if the game system takes control of at least one of the actors away from the person at the table. How much control is sacrificed could be the next question. A game that relies on dice rolling more than decision-making is not a simulation so much as a casino. If the planning and conduct of war—or any military operation—rests on luck, there is not much reason for anyone to sit down and make choices. (Napoleon may have wanted generals who were lucky, but he never downplayed the talents that gave them the rank in the first

place.) Solitaire games should take away some of the decisions, but not rob the player of agency. That's what machines are for, not board games.

Likewise, a solitaire game is not a contest in which one player plays *mostly* one side, and simply guides the other side. There is no true system in that approach, and it does not distinguish solitaire games from every other game, even multiplayer ones in which it might help to have a split personality or perhaps some training in the theatre arts.

Solitaire games should proceed on the assumption that one feels alone in one's decisions while being confronted with circumstances that have the sensation of confronting an opponent. That opponent could be anything from another commander to uncertain conditions. Something else must be happening (possibly driven in part by the player's own moves but not necessarily—weather can be a factor that appears and disappears) that is largely out of the player's *direct* control. In a solitaire game, the system (or non-player, if that's better) must be not only offering choices but taking them—making decisions. Moving German forces on a map towards reasonable objectives per the *September Storm* rules makes the Wehrmacht a player (and the player a German commander), instead of part of a system apart from the person at the table. That approach provides an undeserved amount of agency to the person at the table for both sides, moving the player from potentially being good to pretty much being God. It's war-gaming as solitude because there's a single player, but it's not strictly a solitaire *system*.

*September Storm* is a handsomely presented, well-organised, and very sound simulation, and it might end up being an excellent 2-player contest. Regrettably, it is not a solitaire design of Case White. That experience awaits another game, hopefully building on the excellent qualities residing in this simulation.

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