

THE GAMES OF The Next War

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with **Mark Saha**

'The next war will be undeclared. It will break out during a period of political turbulence which may have been going on for sometime. The war will be short, violent and will probably end in defeat for the NATO forces. Those reserves that managed to survive the journeys to Europe would be too late to affect the outcome. Unless NATO changes its strategy to restore its policies of deterrence and defense, the war will, at best, result in the collapse of the Federal (German) Republic, the withdrawal of America and the Finlandization' of the rest of Western Europe.'

Julian Critchley
WARNING AND RESPONSE
1978



The following 'Panorama' concerns itself with those games simulating a future war in Western Europe. The ten games are covered in a chronological order so that you may see the changes in interpretation and game design. The first nine games will be briefly covered so that we may devote greater study to the latest, and most spectacular game on the subject, SPI's **The Next War**.

PANORAMA: Is Paris Burning?

We Tend to Believe What We Want to Believe.

Dateline December, 1972: Richard M. Nixon has just been reelected President of the United States by a 'mandate' of the people: Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, of the *Washington Post*, are reporting on the Watergate investigation; U.S. airstrikes are renewed on North Vietnam, while Kissinger and Tho debate peace proposals in Paris; *The Rolling Stones* have just released their first double-album and 'Tumbling Dice' becomes an instant hit; *Strategy & Tactics* #35 has just come out and the issue game is **Year of the Rat**. Avalon Hill's **PanzerBlitz** tops the SPI Games Ratings Chart and **Red Star/White Star** is released, the first game on the 'next war' in Europe — it is an instant success!

Thus, a new genre of games was born. By May, 1973 **Red Star/White Star** was the highest rated game on the SPI Chart, beating out the mighty **PanzerBlitz**. SPI quickly announced the next game in the series, **NATO**. The handwriting was on the wall...

The man behind this new phenomenon in wargaming was James F. Dunnigan. Once again he proved to be the pathfinder for the hobby, and as you will see, Jim also proved to be the main motivating factor in keeping this genre alive. Of the ten games published on the subject since 1972, all but two were designed by Dunnigan (and those two were highly influenced by him).

As you might suspect these games on future wars were not universally accepted by the hobby. In fact, in January 1974, the sensitivity to the subject reached the boiling point when Bill Crandell wrote in *S&T* #42: 'I am stunned to read in *Moves* that you guys are planning to design games for the Pentagon... When you help them train their lieutenants and colonels, you are no longer providing a harmless educational hobby to a bunch of guys who wonder whether they could have kicked the shit out of Napoleon or Rommel, you are encouraging active military officers to think that they can beat whoever-it-is-to-be-next... Doubtless you would take comfort from the idea that you would be saving lives in the event of war by better training American leaders. It is an illusion. You would only be giving the Department of Defense a game like **NATO** which depicts what certain actions would look like if US military units were as good as is hoped. Yet I think you recognize, from the articles that accompanied **NATO** and **Red Star/White Star**, that morale and supply and training deficiencies make it more likely that American units are not as good as they are cracked up to be...you do nothing to save lives, but you encourage false optimism about our capabilities...Decide it yourselves whether you want to take some money and some prestige for a chance to be part of *the next bloodbath*.'

In retrospect we can see that after the above noted controversy, in a sense, there was a moratorium on games covering a future

war in Western Europe. Not until April 1975, when SPI's **MechWar'77** was released, did we see another (almost two years after the release of **NATO**). This period proved to be a turning point in Jim Dunnigan's interpretation of the next war. With **MechWar'77** Jim showed, for the first time, that the balance of power in Western Europe was changing.

In the following panorama I will attempt to trace the changes in interpretation this potential theatre of operations has gone through since 1972. It is important to realize that games on 'future wars' tend to be highly influenced by what the designer *believes* to be the situation. The designer will tend to be less open-minded and objective in his assessment of the balance of power and other important considerations that make the game what it is. A future war in Europe is very possible. In fact, a major 'show-down' with the capitalist world has been seen as inevitable by the Soviets since 1917 and has never been excluded by Marxist/Leninist theoreticians. Therefore, games attempting to simulate the next war can take a *very serious* aura.

**CLAUSEWITZ IS ALIVE AND WELL IN THE USSR:
A Panorama of Games on the Next War**

RED STAR/WHITE STAR [SPI; 12/72; Design: James Dunnigan; Development: John Young, Kevin Zucker, and Bill Sullivan]

'Red Star /White Star is an unrealistic and obsolete game...' This was Jim Dunnigan's appraisal of his own design in the January 1974 issue of *MOVES* magazine. Many gamers were quite surprised to hear this as they thought they were playing *the* game on the subject, but Jim knew two things that they didn't: (1) that his interpretation of the balance of power was slanted towards the NATO forces, and (2) that the game needed to be updated with new advances in the state of the art. Jim had designed **Tac3**, **PanzerBlitz** and **Combat Command**, the predecessors of **Red Star/White Star**. From all this experience he knew that tactical games were extremely difficult to design with a high degree of realism and he had some new ideas on how to improve the tactical game system, so he was not afraid to say one of his own 'babies' was obsolete.

Red Star/White Star comes with a 22x34-inch mapsheet depicting a battle area in southern Germany on a scale of 300 meters per hex. Each game turn represents 61/2 minutes. There are over 500 unit counters, silhouette style, representing everything from Soviet T62's to helicopter gunships. The unit scale is battalion/regiment. There are ten scenarios.

In its time **Red Star/White Star** was a gem. It was exciting to play and a real challenge, especially for the Soviet player. Since the Warsaw Pact forces are on the offensive in most of the scenarios they tend to advance on the NATO units in entrenched, prepared positions, most notably towns and cities. What develops are modern day sieges. There are single-hex and two-hex towns which tend to channel the Soviet advance. When the larger towns are reached the Soviet player is usually met by a 'knuckle sandwich' of NATO firepower.

I always found this game to be interesting and quite flavorful, the type of game you play over and over, always looking to improve your tactics and making plans for a rematch.

NATO [SPI; 7/73; Design: James Dunnigan; Development: Robert Felice, Stephen Bettum, and Hank Zucker]

As **Red Star/White Star** simulates the tactical battlefield, **NATO** simulates the operational and strategic situation. It is on a brigade/division level. The 22 x 34-inch mapsheet covers all of West Germany and parts of the surrounding nations and the North Sea. The game scale is 10 miles (16 kilometers) per hex with two-day turns. It uses a two-phased movement system and a relatively 'bloodless' combat results table.

NATO was the first operational-level game to place atomic weapons in the hands of wargamers. Many were struck at first

with the moral question of employing the unspeakable weapons of doom on a game map, should I or shouldn't I 'nuke' the bastard? As some pondered this profound question, others wanted more 'realism' and were advised to put a match to the mapsheet for the true feel of nuclear combat!

There are four basic scenarios — M+ 1, M+31, with or without the nuclear option. M+1 simulates a rapid, surprise attack on a peaceful Western Europe with a relatively weak Warsaw Pact facing a scattered NATO defense. The actual balance of power in terms of game factors on the first turn of M+1 is: Warsaw Pact 100 attack/60 defense against NATO's 137 attack/144 defense factors. As you can see, Ivan's got little to look forward to. M+31 is the mobilization option wherein both sides 'think World War One' and mobilize their forces for the 'big push.'

Both types of scenarios usually wind up being nothing more than mobile trench warfare, because of a high unit density. In fact, this stalemate result has long been the hope of NATO theoreticians. They want a long war so they can bring in their reinforcements. Needless to say, the Warsaw Pact wants just the opposite.

A couple of real aces for the NATO player are the Tricap and Airmobile divisions. They are NATO's *stosstruppen* as they infiltrate the Soviet spearheads and cut them off. Another ace for the NATO player is the Reliability Probability Table. This table covers the rebellion of Warsaw Pact countries, and three of the seven countries (East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Rumania) have a 50% chance of rebelling. If all of this wasn't enough for old Ivan to worry about he also has the possibility of Chinese intervention!

Essentially the game mechanics favor the NATO player. The Warsaw Pact player cannot make rapid advances for fear of out-running his supply units. Thus, the gains in territory tend to be small and supply becomes Ivan's ultimate headache.

MECHWAR'77 [SPI; 4/75; Design: James Dunnigan; Development: had Hardy]

After a two-year hiatus the update of **Red Star/White Star** arrived on the wargaming stage — **MechWar'77**. It had all that Dunnigan had promised and more — simultaneous combat and movement, panic, range attenuation, etc. The 21x33-inch mapsheet featured a battle area in Northwestern Europe on a scale of 200 meters per hex and 1-6 minutes per turn. The only question remaining was the balance of power. Had Jim Dunnigan changed his interpretation? Only a thorough playing of the ten scenarios could answer this question...

What became instantly clear to me in my first games of **MechWar'77** was that no individual weapon or weapon type dominated the battlefield any longer. Every unit had its own value and could attack or defend with some degree of integrity. Although tanks maintained the greatest firepower and protection strength, they had now met a new and deadly foe — anti-tank guided missiles! The lessons of the 1973 Middle East War were much in evidence in **MechWar'77** as Soviet Sappers, Snappers, and Swatters took their toll of M60 platoons on the road to Zeuzleben.

The scenarios were more exciting and varied than those found in **Red Star/White Star** (with one even depicting a Sino-Soviet confrontation in Manchuria!). As in **Red Star/White Star**, NATO units remained quite powerful in defensive positions. Yet, the outcomes of many of the games I played were not as lopsided as in **Red Star/White Star**. The Soviets were even winning, in fact, they were winning nearly 50% of the time. **MechWar'77** was indeed a new interpretation by Jim Dunnigan of the balance of power in Western Europe — neither side was now dominant, we had reached a level of *parity*.

Just like **Red Star/White Star** before it, **MechWar'77** proved to be highly successful and popular and in only five short months, from the date of publication, it topped the SPI Games Ratings Chart. But it, too, will more than likely pass into oblivion as a 'new' **MechWar** is slated for an early 1979 release.

WURZBURG [SPI; 6/75; Design: James Dunnigan; Development: Irad Hardy, Jay Nelson, Ed Curran, and Howard Barasch]

Wurzburg (the actual name of the city is Wurzburg) is one of four folio-size games in SPI's MODERN BATTLES quadrigame. As a folio game **Wurzburg** should be a simple, clean game — it is. It is also a hell of a lot of fun to play, which explains why it topped the SPI Games Ratings Chart (in the Post-WW II section) off and on from November 1975 to February 1977. **Wurzburg** is a game that can be enjoyed by novice and hardcore gamers alike.

There are four 'wild' scenarios — **Advance to Contact**, which is a meeting engagement just outside Wurzburg; **Siege of Wurzburg**, which is an insane slugfest for the city proper; **Granschatzer Wald**, which captures the fear of being outnumbered; and **Main River Line**, which recreates a NATO counterattack on a Soviet-occupied Wurzburg. These are all exciting contests which test a player's gaming skills thoroughly.

But even with all of **Wurzburg's** popularity it soon became the next controversy on games simulating the next war. Why? In 1975, Simulations Publications Inc. decided to begin distributing wargames in Western Europe (a new market place for them). The West German magazine *Der Stern* ran an article on the game entitled, 'Atomic War under the Christmas Tree' and quoted from **Wurzburg's** Designer's Notes, 'This is a meeting engagement that rapidly turns into a slugfest in the city of Wurzburg.' The publisher of *Der Stern* soon started receiving numerous letters of concern from the population of Wurzburg. Again, the sensitivity expressed was sincere and thought-provoking. A future war in Europe might prove interesting, entertaining or even 'fun' to a wargamer in the comfort of his living room or den, but to those who live in places like Wurzburg, the idea was revolting. Nevertheless, the game is played today and will continue to be played.

As in **MechWar'77**, **Wurzburg** reflected Dunnigan's view that we had reached parity in terms of the balance of power in Western Europe. The next release on the subject proved to be quite a surprise...

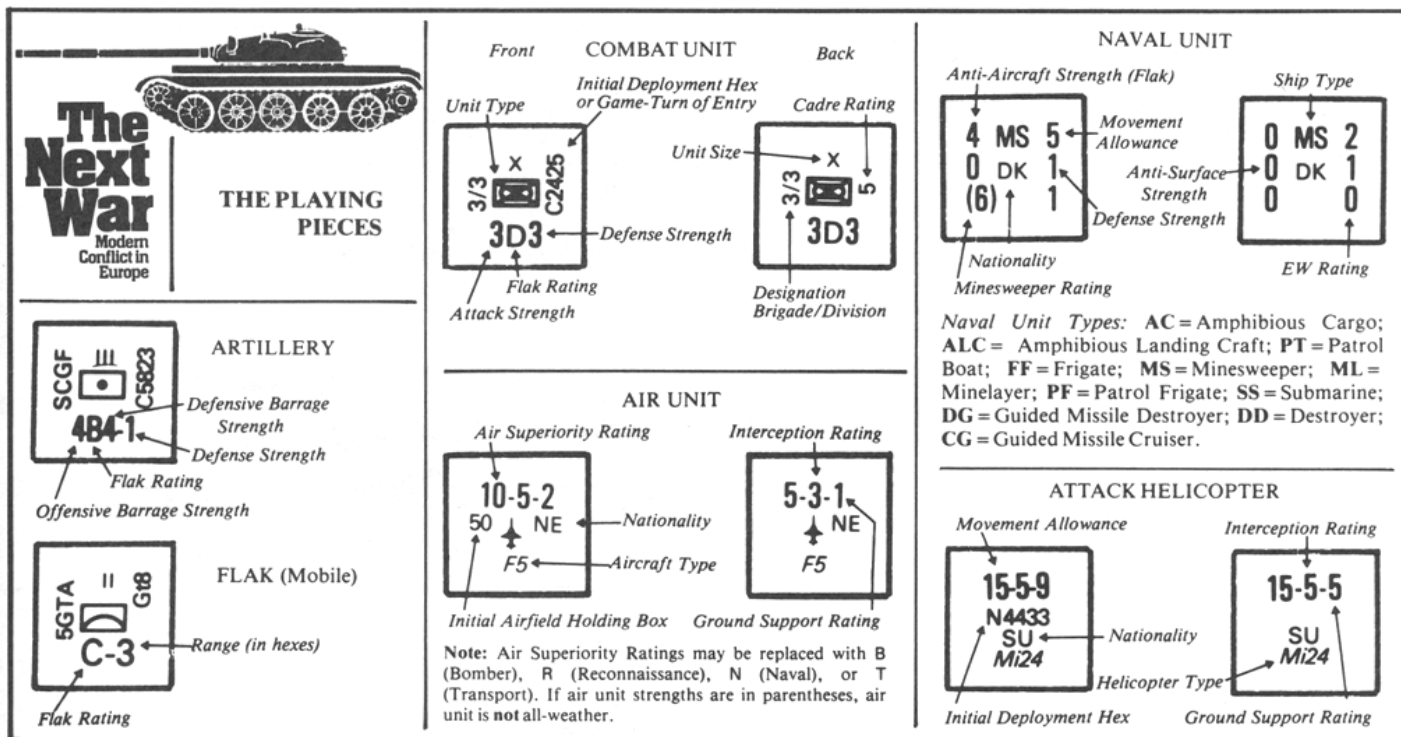
REVOLT IN THE EAST [SPI; 5/76; Design: James Dunnigan; Development: Christopher Allen and Redmond Simonsen]

Dunnigan had only hinted at a rebellion within the Warsaw Pact with his Reliability Probability Table in **NATO**. One simply rolled the die to see which, if any, nations rebelled. The actual course of events was left to the gamer's imagination. With the release of **Revolt in the East** Dunnigan showed just how fragile the Eastbloc Alliance is. The roots of conflict within this 'alliance' can be traced over the past 200 years, the most recent examples being the 1956 Hungarian Revolt and the USSR's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Revolt in the East comes with a 22x16-inch mapsheet depicting most of Eastern Europe on a scale of 56 kilometers per hex and one-week turns. The unit scale is corps/army level. The core of the game is the Warsaw Pact Table which represents a chain-reaction revolt of the Pact. It is obvious that the game is 'biased' to produce a revolt, which draws in NATO forces from Western Europe. The greatest headache for Ivan, in the game, is the reunification of Germany.

Victory hinges on control of key cities since they are 'all-important' in industrialized nations. The Soviet player must react rapidly to each revolt and crush it, otherwise he's in deep trouble. The Soviet ace is airborne troops which can strike areas ground troops can't reach in one turn. The game can be nip-and-tuck all the way.

Revolt in the East is fascinating conceptually, but doesn't quite hold together as a game. The scenarios are, generally speaking, unbalanced. The game also lacks a realistic 'feel' about it. Nonetheless, it should be in your library of games if you're interested in this field of study we call 'the next war.'



WARSAW PACT [JagdPanther; 7/76; Design: Stephen Cole; Development: Allen Eldridge]

In *Fire & Movement* #6 Mark Saha stated that, ...SPI's simulations on NATO/Warsaw Pact conflicts are generally slanted to reflect Jim Dunnigan's belief that despite numerical inferiority, NATO enjoys massive superiority in both 'software' (trained manpower and tactical doctrine) and tactical hardware.' He went on to say that *JagdPanther's 'Warsaw Pact*, for the first time, gives a look at the 'other side' of the hill.' At long last we had a game that reflected the Soviet interpretation of the balance of power. Here was a milestone game that deserved a very close look. Mark did just that in his Battle Report in *F&M* #6.

Warsaw Pact's 17x28-inch mapsheet depicts roughly the same area of Central Europe as SPI's **NATO** and **Revolt in the East** on a scale of 25 miles (40 kilometers) per hex and five-day turns. The unit scale is corps/army level. It uses a fairly standard game system which proves to be quite effective on this scale. As in **NATO**, supply is extremely important in **Warsaw Pact**, but it is handled much more generously for the Soviet/Eastbloc player. It can actually work to his advantage by doubling, tripling, even quadrupling his combat strength. The scenarios are set in three time periods (1967, 1974, and 1981) and various environments (Hasty, Surprise, and Limited War). Of these, the 'Surprise' attack best reflects what might happen in a future war in Europe. Undeclared wars are a phenomenon of the 20th Century, e.g., Pearl Harbor 1941, Operation Barbarossa 1941, Korea 1950, the Arab-Israeli Wars, etc.

*'No war is just if it be
not notified and declared...'*

Isidore of Seville
6th Century A.D

Therefore, we will more than likely be faced with another in a series of 'unjust' wars. So, **Warsaw Pact** is an important game in terms of presenting us with the Soviet point of view and also in terms of giving us an alternative perspective to future war.

FIREFIGHT (SPI; 8/76; Design: James Dunnigan and Irad Hardy; Development: Irad Hardy and Frederick Georgian)

Firefight was paid for by the US Army (at a cost of \$25,000) as a game to train, primarily, infantry units. The game's purpose was stated in the Designer's Notes — 'One rather obvious

reason for the Army wanting the game is so that they can 'play around' with their tactical concepts on paper before taking a lot of troops out to do it in the field, and, of course, before they have to do it for real...' Oh, how Bill Crandell must have cringed reading this!

Firefight is played on two semi-geomorphic 22x34-inch mapsheets depicting an area of 'typical terrain' in central Germany on a scale of 50 meters per hex and 40 seconds per turn. The unit scale is 2-4 man fireteams.

Where this game really shines is in its clear modeling of modern weapons; its stress on combined-arms tactics for effective operations; and in showing the importance of terrain and suppressive fire in neutralizing an enemy force. The alternative fire and movement by individual opposing units is the most revolutionary and practical innovation in the game system.

The rules are designed to add complexity gradually and are written in a conversational style rather than the typical SPI legalese. There are numerous scenarios included with the game and many more in back issues of *MOVES* magazine.

In past tactical-level games infantry units often wound up as some sort of 'carpet' for enemy tanks to drive over or as professional concealment experts. They couldn't stand up to enemy armor and thus proved worthless. Not so in **Firefight**. Infantry survivability and reduced armor omnipotence is the name of the game.

I have to say that **Firefight** is truly a tactical *tour de force* which vividly recreates the 'feel' of modern combat. It shows great strides in game research and is extremely interesting in terms of interpreting the balance of power. **Firefight** actually reflects the official point of view of *both* sides! We've really come a long way from the myopic **Red Star/White Star**.

Firefight is indeed the most accurate and realistic simulation on modern tactical combat available today. Its only major shortcoming is in its lackadaisical treatment of command control. It will soon have a 'brother', as **Cityfight** is being prepared for release by SPI.

FULDA GAP (SPI; 6/77; Design: James Dunnigan; Development: Thomas Walczyk)

Here, at last, was the game I had been waiting for. Not too

large or too detailed in its scale, instead, a true operational level simulation on the next war. In helping Ray Lowe prepare his Battle Report in F&M #9 I really got to know this game. Jim Dunnigan's superb talents were once again in evidence as he transferred his highly successful 'untried unit system' from **PanzerGruppe Guderian** to **Fulda Gap**. Now there was no set assessment of strengths and weaknesses, as we had experienced in **NATO** and **Red Star/White Star**. The course of action in each game was now clearly in the hands of the individual players.

The 22x34-inch mapsheet depicts the Fulda Gap which funnels westward from the East German border to the West German cities of Frankfurt and Mainz and the Rhine River. This is one of the two major passageways the Warsaw Pact is expected to use (the other is the North German Plain as simulated in **Bundeswehr**). The 'Gap' is bordered on both sides by mountainous terrain and is defended principally by United States and West German forces.

The play of the game is clean and fluid and truly captures the 'feel' of modern combat. There are three scenarios — **Tripwire** which simulates a surprise attack; **Advance Warning** with NATO forces in prepared positions; and **D+7** which covers action after the first week of the war. Airpower, tactical nuclear weapons, helicopters, airmobile troops, paratroops and more, are all included. This variety is essential in trying to simulate a future war in Europe, as the Soviets have no intention of fighting 'clean'. They will pull out all the stops. It is really foolish to believe that the Soviets, having made the decision to go to war, would leave the choice of weapons and weapon systems to the West, ignore our weaknesses and play 'our game to our rules.' That is why chemical warfare in **Fulda Gap** generally incapacitates the NATO forces for two full turns. The Soviets are not 'hung up' about using chemical warfare as we are; in fact, its use is standard Warsaw Pact offensive doctrine.

Another key element that is nicely handled in **Fulda Gap** is supply. In the later stages of the game both sides tend to exhaust their supplies. Then, depots and convoys become the 'lifeline' both armies depend upon.

After numerous games and many discussions with other players, I am convinced that **Fulda Gap** marks another turning point in Jim Dunnigan's interpretation of the balance of power — the Soviets now have a 'slight edge.'

BUNDESWEHR (SPI; 7/77; Design: Virginia Mulholland; Development: James Dunnigan and Mark Herman)

This is **Wurzburg's** younger brother. It uses essentially the same rules and game system and is on the same scale. Thus, Ginny Mulholland, a new, young SPI designer was given a proven formula to cut her teeth on. She needed only follow the **Wurzburg** recipe of simple, clean fun and she would have a real winner. She did, and **Bundeswehr** quickly shot up to the top of the SPI Games Rating Chart — who says lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place?

The game depicts a Soviet attempt to force an advance across the North German Plain (Luneburg Heath) — a succession of rivers, woods and bogs — aiming ultimately at linking up with Warsaw Pact forces driving up from the Fulda Gap and the Hamburg area.

The principal NATO defenders on the North German Plain are British and West German troops. The forces here routinely perform 'wargames' to test their preparedness against a Warsaw Pact assault. (Recently, a knowledgeable West German remarked, 'During the past 18 months NATO has played five wargames, and my country has been 'defended' five times, and destroyed five times.')

In short, **Bundeswehr** is clean, simple and fluid, like **Wurzburg**. It is more a game than a simulation and should be seen in that context whenever discussing the 'real' situation on the North German Plain. It differs from **Wurzburg** only in its use of the 'untried unit system' and special rules concerning river crossings (which is part of official Soviet Offensive Doctrine).