

Memoir '44 at the Games Expo

Pevans gets competitive

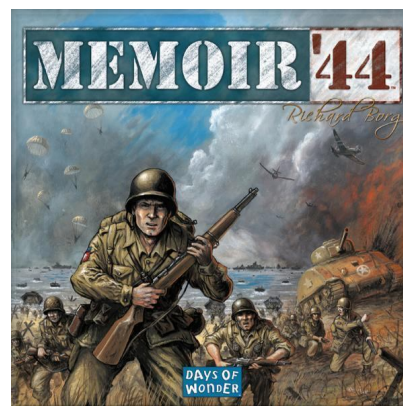
Having decided that I didn't need to spend both days of the Expo tramping around the show, I had a look at what else was on. My eye lighted on the *Memoir '44* tournament on the Saturday. *Memoir '44* is a fun game that I enjoy playing, doesn't take too long and has lots of scenarios to provide variety. I've played in a couple of tournaments in the past, run by the game's designer, Richard Borg, so I signed up.

Tournament organiser Barry Ingram followed the pattern I was used to. The players (there were 12 of us) are randomly assigned as Axis or Allied. We play three scenarios against different opponents, always playing for our designated side. The two sets of players are then ranked according to how well they did in total. The top Allied player takes on the top Axis player in a fourth scenario, playing both sides this time, to decide the winner. The rest of us pair off according to our ranking to have a go at that scenario as well.

The three scenarios we began with were excellent choices: one D-Day landing, one East front and one late Western front. They gave us an interesting mix of settings, goals and special rules. I was one of the Allied players, putting me on the tough side of the draw.

The first game I played was the East front scenario, "Breakout at Klin" (Dec 1941). This uses the off-white 'winter' board and terrain (if it's Russia, it must be snowy!) from *Memoir '44's* expansions. The board for this scenario has several interesting features, including a frozen river (yes, troops can march across, but there's a chance of losing a few!). The Russian forces, mainly infantry, are dispersed across the board. The German force includes tanks and combat engineers to punch through the defenders and exit the board – across the frozen river (there is a bridge)!

The Allied player is hampered by the Commissar rule. Cards (with a few exceptions) must be played one turn in advance! (So that the political officers can check them.) This is painful. However, dogged defence is my speciality and the cards were good to



About *Memoir '44*

Memoir '44 is a simple wargame system for recreating WW2 battles, published by Days of Wonder. Designed by Richard Borg, it uses the same basic system as his earlier *Battle Cry* (American Civil War) and more recent *Commands & Colors* games (*Ancients* and *Napoleonic*) from GMT Games. On top of the core ideas, each game is tailored to the period in question through its specific rules. Each game comes with a set of scenarios recreating specific battles of the period and expansion sets add more scenarios and, in the case of *Memoir '44*, take the game into different theatres of the war.

The game starts with a blank board, divided into sections (left flank, right flank and centre) and overlaid with a hexagonal grid. On to this you place large hexagonal tiles that depict different terrain (hills, rivers, towns etc) to make a map of a particular battlefield. Military units occupy a space (hex) and consist of several playing pieces (plastic models of infantrymen, guns and tanks). The number of

me. I was able to pull back gradually from one defensive position to another as the enemy advanced. The occasional counter-attack on exposed units brought me just enough victory medals to win the game by a slim margin. This scenario is one of those available to play online (www.memoir44.com) and the online stats reckon the Allies only win 20% of the time. I feel even better now I've looked that up. ☺

Second up was the D-Day scenario, "First Assault Wave," which is the landings on Omaha beach. The US forces arriving on the beach have quite a way to go, with several towns at the back of the board as their objectives. Their advantage is that they outnumber the defenders – if they can get ashore. I particularly enjoyed having a destroyer off-shore – effectively artillery with a really long range – to pound the German positions.

My attack broke through on the left, though with heavy losses. I took the town in the back corner of the board with a battered tank unit. This took me to four medals out of the six needed to win. However, my opponent had five! I had one chance of winning: eliminate the defender holding an objective town in the centre of the board and 'take ground' to occupy the town afterwards to gain two medals in one turn. It was 50:50 on one die roll. I missed! The following turn my opponent finished off those battered tanks and I lost 6:3. But it was close. I am cheered to see that this scenario, too, is shown online as only 19% Allied wins.

The third scenario was the intriguing "Schwammenauel Dam". This board has two dams, which the German player can try to sabotage – gaining a lot of medals if they succeed. The objective of the Allied troops is to take the dams before they can be sabotaged. The biggest challenge for the Allies is the terrain: the board is dotted with woods, which slow down movement, divided by impassable mountains. Again, the Allies outnumber the defenders, but have real trouble making the numbers count.

I thought I was doing well, pushing forward towards the dams and getting my tanks into play (they start parked behind some mountains on the edge of the board with several woods in the way). My opponent was getting close to success with his sabotage, though, so I had to scramble. I took one of the dams,

pieces indicates how well a unit can absorb damage. One piece comes off for each hit and removing the last piece from a unit wins the opposing player a victory medal. Medals can often be gained by seizing objectives as well. The first player to get the required number of medals wins the scenario.

A player's turn starts with playing a Command card from their hand. Each card allows them to 'order' a number of units, either in a particular section of the battlefield or of a specific type. The player chooses the units they wish to order. Then they move any or all of these – according to how that type of unit moves. Once movement is complete, ordered units can attack. Finally, the player draws a replacement card into their hand and their opponent gets a go.

The constraints of the Command cards neatly (and often frustratingly!) reproduce one of the problems of the battlefield commander: getting his subordinates to do what he wants them to. Clearly, the more cards a player holds, the more likely they are to have the right card to counter an enemy attack and the more options they have each turn. Thus, the opposing sides in a scenario will often hold a different number of cards to represent the relative effectiveness/flexibility of the historical armies.

In time-honoured fashion, the results of combat are decided by rolling dice. The number of dice rolled depends on several factors: the type of unit, how far away the target is and the terrain the units are in (sitting in a wood usually gives some protection, for example). The effect depends on what symbols you roll on the dice.

but lost too many units and narrowly lost the game. This scenario isn't online so there aren't any stats on it, but it felt pretty even.

My one win out of three scenarios put me third amongst the Allied players – one player won two scenarios and another picked up more medals in total than I did. This left me playing the third placed Axis player at the final scenario – technically, for fifth/sixth places.

The final scenario was "St Vith," a tricky scenario from the base game. The Allies defending St Vith are in a line of hills and woods in front of the town. The feature of this is that the rear slope of the hills is impassable. This means the German attack, if successful, has to go down one flank or the other (or both!) to get to the town itself. The online statistics, I see, make this scenario fairly even: 45% Allied win, 55% Axis.

I played this as the Allies first and employed my dogged defence technique again. The German attack succeeded in the centre, but then had to turn left or right. What followed was a series of battles between

Each symbol that matches the target unit – or a 'hits anything' grenade – removes one piece. Each flag symbol forces the target unit to retreat a hex, while stars have no effect (unless you've played one of the cards that bring them into play).

In essence, the game is quite simple: set up the board for the scenario; add the appropriate units; play cards to manoeuvre your forces to attack enemy units or seize objectives; roll dice to eliminate the opposition; and win when you've garnered enough medals. However, there's a lot more to it than that. In particular, scenarios do not necessarily provide equal chances for both players. Hence the usual format is to swap sides after playing the scenario once and try again from the other side. Combining the medals from both



Set-up for the Schwammenauel Dam scenario

a few units on each side back and forth across the hills. I was able to bring up my reinforcements from St Vith itself and got a narrow win.

Playing the Axis side for once was a bit of a change. Ooh, Tigers! I spearheaded my attack with the Tigers in the centre, veering right to punch my way through the Allied armour on the hills. Once onto the hills, I was able to wipe out the Allied left flank and then start on the centre. A relatively easy victory this time and a comprehensive win overall.

At the end of the day, I'd played five excellent games of *Memoir '44*, winning three of them and having a thoroughly good time. My thanks to Barry for organising and running the tournament and to the other players for making it good fun. I think I'll be back next year...

games gives the overall winner.

Memoir '44 does not claim to be a simulation. It provides a simple, fast-moving game that plays quickly while giving players a flavour of Second World War warfare. It's a lot of fun to play and, crucially, you can always blame the dice when you lose.

***Memoir '44* online**

As part of my preparation for the tournament, I took a look at the online version of *Memoir '44* that Days of Wonder provide (www.memoir44.com). Annoyingly, you have to download and install client software rather than play through a web browser. However, I decided to give it a try and have thoroughly enjoyed it. A lot of scenarios are available, including those for the Russian, North African and Pacific theatres as well as scenarios designed by players. Having chosen a scenario, you can play the game solo, versus a software opponent, or challenge other logged-on players.

The game plays well on the computer. Without needing to set up the board and physically move pieces, you can easily play a scenario in 20 minutes – though my games with real opponents generally take a bit longer. The 'artificial intelligence' opponents are very aggressive – they will immediately abandon any defensive positions to attack, for example. This makes it very annoying when I lose to them! However, one of the advantages of a computerised game is that you get statistics on what happened and I generally only lose if the AI is rolling significantly better dice than me.

The tournament is now well past, but I am continuing to play *Memoir '44* online – I particularly enjoy the North Africa scenarios. If you're signed up, you can find me there as Pevans, of course, and I'd welcome the opportunity to take you on.

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