

The Ultimate Wargame

Charles Starks' satiric look at recent trends in the hobby makes for amusing reading and is not all that far fetched if one pauses to consider what has transpired in the past year, and the still more grandiose plans announced by publishers for the coming year. The playability/realism debate seems to have been refined to its purest form and wargamers will soon have to seriously consider whether they are game players or simulation enthusiasts.

By Charles Starks



Last Saturday I went over to my friend Bruce's house. With me I had the new *STARSHIP TROOPERS*, which I had pretty much figured out, and a new game as his Christmas present. With every anticipation of a full day of high-quality gaming, for Bruce and I are just about evenly matched, I took the last corner before his house only to gape at three huge tractor-trailer moving vans pulled up in front of his house. Two were in the street and the third had backed up to the garage.

Getting into the driveway was hopeless, so I too parked on the street and hopped out, clutching the two games. The vans were nondescript except for the letters "IT" on the sides. Maybe for International Trucking, or something like that, I thought. Bruce had made no mention of having to move last week, but something could have come up. Not that he was the type who might need to leave town suddenly, as he was pretty well off. He had retired three years ago at age 28 to live off the proceeds of a decade as a Wall Street Whiz Kid, or such like. Since then he had done almost nothing but gaming; he was one of the Old Guard, first seduced by the now-primitive intricacies of *TACTICS II* and from year to year only getting more and more ensnared until today, when he owned virtually every game published (making it very hard to buy Christmas presents for him) and had the entire basement converted over for the use of miniatures, as well as uncountable miniatures and accessories of all kinds. A Super-Gamer, in other words.

The van totally blocked the garage door, so I went around to the front and rang the bell. His wife Mary opened the door and let me in. Mary was also a good friend of mine, although in the past year she had developed the habit of constantly carrying two dice in her hand and rattling them. What was worse was the fact that any stress in the conversation usually impelled her to roll them across the nearest surface, call out the result and then return to the conversation, all very matter-of-factly. This made her difficult at times to talk to, but she didn't seem to notice and Bruce actually seemed to enjoy it, so I had never said anything.

"Hello, Charles. Bruce is out in the garage."

"Okay, I'll go out there. What's going on, anyway?"

"It's it," she replied in a rather strange voice. This was the first I had ever heard her stutter, which was also odd, but she had already disappeared into the living room from whence came a familiar rattle and a call of "Eight".

My friend Bruce is very easy to describe; just picture a Wall Street Whiz Kid who retired three years ago and you have the idea. He still dresses a little bit like his old business self, but not so fashionably, and his obsession with wargaming gives him an odd aura, out of keeping with his clothes. He is a very friendly guy and a lot of fun even in his few moments when he is not gaming; we are one of those rare combinations of good friends and good opponents which are so enjoyable, and the thought that he might be moving away, out of face-to-face range, was uppermost in my mind.

But in fact the vans were there not to load, but to unload instead. Bruce and the three drivers had already filled half of the garage with medium sized cardboard boxes, all identical. As I came in Bruce turned around and yelled to me, "Charles! Just in time to help us out. Come over here and stack these in rows facing outward, but make sure you keep them in the order I give them to you." Obediently I put my two games down and started in. The boxes were completely ordinary, except for the fact that each was marked with the shipping label of a well-known gaming company. After working hard for half an hour we finally got the first truck unloaded, leaving the garage completely filled except for a narrow passageway to the door into the house. The drivers muttered something about lunchtime to which Bruce replied, "Go ahead, since we can't unload the other two trucks until the men with the tents get here."

"Tents!" I cried. "What tents? What is going on, anyway? Saturday is our gaming day and I find you drowning in boxes which you won't even let me look into, despite the fact that they're gaming material."

"Oh, they're gaming material, all right," he answered mysteriously. "Come on in the library and you'll see."

But entering the library only made it worse. Previously the library had been the boardgaming center of the house, crammed with games and game-related books and magazines. In the center had stood a beautiful table just the right size for most game boards and it was here that Bruce and I usually spent Saturday. But now everything including the table had been taken out and the shelves were totally filled instead with a uniform set of books, each about the size of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and stamped with the game company's logo. Bruce reached over, pulled out a volume and handed it to me. "Open it."

As I turned to the first page I was filled with a nameless fear (as H. P. Lovecraft would have described it) and in that single glance at the page it was confirmed. For the title read: *IT!—The Individual, Man-to-man Combat Game of World War II, 1939-1945.*

IT! I had heard vague rumors of the existence of *IT!* from friends of mine in the gaming business, but had dismissed them as somebody's idea of a joke. After all, the concept was impossible; nobody would even be crazy enough to dream about *IT!* But here in my hand was proof that *IT!* existed, though in what form I could not imagine. Accurate to be sure, but playable? I doubted it, although you can never be certain until you've actually tried the game.

Bruce was standing there smirking at me with the same expression on his face as the time that he had defeated me in the final round of the Greater Western Berkshire County Napoleonic miniatures tournament. I was, I must confess, a trifle dazed, and picked another volume at random from the shelves. Number 263, I noted dully. Opening it to somewhere in the middle, I read:

169:32:218:63a—Paratroop Preparation.

1. Paratroops are readied in the Paratroop Preparation Phase. This operation requires two turns. The first turn is consumed in equipping the paratrooper with his uniform and combat weapons. The second is consumed in placing the parachute on the paratrooper and going through the pre-jump checks.

2. Naturally, if the places where the paratrooper performs the first turn and second turn operations are physically separated, an appropriate number of turns must be spent in transferring the paratrooper by foot or vehicle from one location to the other. If this is the case the Phasing Player must, as with all forms of transport, roll on the Transport Accidents Chart to determine the safe arrival of the paratrooper at his destination.

3. In addition to this, the paratrooper may not put on his parachute unless the existence of said parachute has been confirmed by the normal production, delivery and packing process (see 502:73:124:28f). Once all these operations have been performed, the paratrooper is said to be equipped, and a Paratrooper Equipped marker is placed under the paratrooper to signify this.

169:32:218:63b—Boarding of Paratroops.

1. Paratroops must be carried on planes if they are to act as paratroops, and only on planes conforming with the Plane Readiness criteria as explained in 422:09:234:60r."

But I could read no further; the enormity of the whole concept was just too much for me. "*IT!*?" I asked feebly.

"Sure," Bruce replied. "As in 'This is it!' The designers thought it would be a nice touch; they explain that in the introduction. The rules came yesterday," he continued, indicating the library with an expansive wave of his hand, "and I stayed up until 2 AM getting the room cleaned out and the boxes unpacked. When I got up this morning I went right to work on the errata sheets in those two boxes, but the vans came and I had to leave that. Did you notice how the rules are in ring-binders so that the errata can be inserted right in the rules? They've thought of everything."

"Everything?" I moaned, saying the first thing that came into my mind. "What about the errata?"

"Well, you have to expect some oversights in a game of this scope."

"Two cardboard boxes of oversights?" Suddenly another wave of fear struck. I was almost afraid to ask. "What's in the boxes in the garage?"

"The counters, of course. Three trucks full of counters—well, the third isn't quite full. Look here," he said, bending over another carton, "I saved this one out of the pile. It has the first 25,000 leaders of the Third Reich. See, here's Hitler, and Goering, and Goebbels, and Speer, all the big ones, and each with a combat factor, movement factor, efficiency rating, political reliability rating, and economic reliability rating. Goering's economic reliability rating is almost the lowest in the game," he chuckled.

"Are all of them in silhouette?"

"Oh yes, down to the last 75-year-old in the Volkssturm. The same with all the civilian counters, weapons counters, vehicle counters, ship counters and plane counters. The first two volumes of the rules deal exclusively with counter identification. I've only glanced through the rules so far."

I couldn't stand it any longer; I had to get out of the room. I went into the living room and gazed out at the vans. Mary was at the other window already, going through a repetitious series of automaton-like motions. First she would stare at the vans, then bend down, roll her two dice across a low coffee table, announce the result, then straighten up again to stare at the vans.

Bruce had followed me into the room. "All for a very reasonable price, too. Only eight ninety-nine."

"That's even more impossible than the existence of this monster! You can't produce something like this for \$8.99!"

"No, no, I meant eight hundred and ninety-nine dollars. Shipping charges bring it up to almost a thousand." He joined me at the window and stared outside with the most disgusting look of pride and acquisition combined that I have ever seen.

"The tents?" I asked.

"Those are just temporary, to store the other two truckloads of counters and the board sections. It would be kind of awkward keeping them in the house."

The board! I hadn't even thought about that. The rules I could handle; after all, it was only about the same size as the reference section of our local library. The counters were harder but I could deal with them too. No more actual space perhaps than the entire yearly supply of office forms used by the New York City government. But the board! God no, that I just could not conceive of.

Bruce prattled on. "The board is coming tomorrow, by truck. It's printed in 4' x 8' sections on heavy stock in 194 distinct shades of color. They say it's the most accurate game board ever printed."

I was starting to get a little hysterical. Somehow I had to make Bruce see the craziness of this entire operation. His whole life hung in the balance; I mean, if it took uncountable numbers of people six years to conduct the war the first time, how long would it take one person to recreate it, even on such a reduced scale?

"If you don't even have room to store all the counters, where are you going to set the board up?" I screamed at him.

"That's all set already. I just bought 31 acres of that old farm two streets down; 30 acres for the board and 1 for the administration building. My architect is working on that now. He still hasn't come up with a definite design plan, since we can only estimate the amount of filing space it will take to sort out all those counters and keep them separated. Plus we'll have to have a room for the rules and another room for record keeping. Then once we get that finalized he has to start work on the building to cover the game board; I've bought enough clear fiberglass to provide both a backing and a cover for the board, but the counters will still be exposed. He's going to get a schematic of the board together so that he can put the supporting pillars in the least used spots and at the same time use them to hold up the catwalk system we'll need so that I won't accidentally disturb any of the counters. We should have the land cleared off by spring and hopefully the buildings completed by fall. That should give me enough time to read the rules over once quickly and make a start on punching out the counters. I have my father and two uncles in there somewhere and I'm looking forward to finding them."

I saw that it was too late; Bruce was far gone in the grip of *IT!* and I could do nothing to help him. It was time to save myself while I could. After all, I like gaming but the prospect of doing nothing, and I mean nothing *but* gaming for however many years this monstrous project would take was unbearable. Besides, I rationalized, maybe after a few years he'll get bored with *IT!* I began making excuses as I edged toward the door.

"Well, Bruce, you know I'd love to get into this with you but what with Christmas coming up and the convention in July and all my commitments . . ."

He cut me off. "Of course I don't expect you to play *IT!* out with me. After all, you don't have a copy. I'd be glad to buy another one," he began hopefully but the instant terror which I felt must have appeared unmistakably on my face for he continued on. "Anyway, the company people tell me they've only sold two other copies so far. One to a guy in Texas and the other to some Post Office Box number in Argentina. Argentina is a little far for correspondence so it'll have to be the guy in Texas; I hope that he's a good player though."

"You don't mean . . ."

"Of course," Bruce replied. "Play-by-mail."

It was only when I had reached home after a frenzy of savage, high-speed driving that I realized I had left my copy of *STARSHIP TROOPERS* at Bruce's house. I haven't gone back for it yet and I never will.

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