

Battle for Baghdad

Developer's Notes

Those of you who have been around a while will quickly discover *Battle for Baghdad's* pedigree. What remains to this day one of my personal favorites, and to my mind, perhaps the best game design to date pitting asymmetric factions against one another, is Avalon Hill's venerable *Dune*. When the MCS Group design team was blue-skying a design on the then current situation in Iraq, we wanted very much to produce a game that dealt with the political battles as well as the kinetic ones, and would highlight the specific issue spaces of the various factions involved. It didn't take a large imaginative leap to recognize that the *Dune* system contained many of the elements we sought. As has been standard wargame practice for decades, we adapted these elements while adding in many innovations.

Joseph very quickly put together a prototype and we began spending the bulk of our Saturdays playing, reworking, and redesigning. Additionally, we made long distance phone calls to various military officers in-theater to get their insights into the situation to verify that we were indeed capturing the essence of the situation. The process took about eight months of pretty much continual playtesting and development. At the end, we believe we have come up with a product that accomplishes everything that we set out to do.

One of our first challenges with the design was trying to understand what constituted victory for any given faction. Initially, the end game conditions were simply control of some number of specific zones on the map. However, we quickly realized that this would not be suitable, and that each faction really needed their own unique victory conditions. That determination rested on two essential elements. The first was representing what a plausible satisfying end-state was for any given faction; the second was having some semblance of play balance.

As a matter of personal game development philosophy, I've never been particularly concerned with play balance. To my mind, a situation only illustrates its historical or real-world counterpart if it effectively illustrates the actual challenges inherent in the situation. *Battle for Baghdad* was an exception to that philosophy in that there was little purpose including a faction if that faction had no real capacity of reaching a satisfactory end-state for itself. For example, if control of territory was what was needed to win the game, NGOs and Jihadists really stood little chance of success. But more importantly, it would fail to capture their reason for being there in the first place.

Developing custom victory conditions for each faction entailed some interesting challenges. The first, of course, was that they be at least allegorically realistic, which is to say that they must represent some actual challenge or dilemma that that real-life faction faces. As a result, some factions have victory conditions that are quite linear: for

instance, for Sunni's and Shi'ites it's simply go forth and conquer, whereas the NGO must play a very sophisticated game of alliance and tolerance to pull out a victory. What's more, the number of players who are in the game will have a lot to do with which factions are playing. NGOs, for instance, stand little or no chance of success in a three player game, but have a substantially better chance with six players. Hence, we included the rule determining which factions are in play with fewer than six players.

Now all of that said, I would not be so bold as to make the claim that the game is completely balanced, for it is not. However, during our playtesting I made it a personal mission to make certain that I achieved a victory with every faction in the game, and I was successful in that. The NGO is probably the most difficult faction to play, and I would say that certain types of players will probably never achieve victory with that faction (i.e., those who tend towards aggressive solutions). That said, every faction does have the capacity to realize its victory conditions.

Another challenge that having unique victory conditions for each faction brought to the game was that, because none of the victory conditions are mutually exclusive, it is quite possible for multiple factions to achieve victory simultaneously. As a result, if you wish to achieve victory for your faction alone, you not only must manage your own efforts, but be certain to know the victory conditions of your opponents and act to hinder them. This effect was, in fact, quite intentional. The point was to demonstrate that the resolution to the situation depended a great deal on the personalities and competencies of the players themselves. What's more, certain factions lend themselves more to one style than the other. This fact will have a lot to do with how balanced the game turns out to be for you.

A key element to managing your faction is a thorough understanding of what it means to have initiative and the resultant ability to set the price of the arms bazaar and determine the first player. The value of this, we noticed, was lost on many of the new players whom we introduced to the game. Having the initiative models things like winning elections, gaining influence, having information superiority, etc. and is purchased through the expenditure of political capital, the Political Points being the currency of the game. The first thing to notice is that when you bid for initiative, you are conducting a dollar auction, which is to say that what you bid you will pay, whether you win the initiative or not. What this represents is that whatever you spend trying to gain public influence is a sunk cost that you cannot recover. It is also important to understand that the winning initiative bid is also the cost of additional arms bazaar cards for that turn, thus if you have a large amount of political capital, you can price other factions out of the market.

Winning initiative allows you to determine who will be the first player for that turn. This is a crucial decision in many cases. You have two essential concerns to balance. If you need to bolster your political position and gain intelligence on other player capabilities for that turn, you should chose yourself as first player; whereas if you are more concerned with military objectives for the coming turn, you will wish to go last, since

you will be able to have the final move on the board without any other player being able to react to you.

During the Arms Bazaar phase, the first player (not the initiative player) will draw a number of arms bazaar cards equal to the number of players in the game. He will look at all of them and choose the card that he wants the most, then pass them counter-clockwise. This process gives the first player a political advantage for that turn in that he gets to pick the strongest card in the lot, and also gains some understanding of the other capabilities that will be present among the other players for that turn. Once this process occurs, any player can then purchase arms bazaar cards by paying political capital equal to the highest initiative bid for each additional card. Thus, there is reason to want to make those cards as expensive as possible, regardless of whether you wish to be first or last.

This means there is an entire political sub-game where players are engaging in behind the scenes deals and such to outmaneuver each other on the map. The game therefore requires a certain subtlety in player strategy. It's not enough to accumulate more political points than the other players, you have to use them in such a manner as to gain the ascendancy on this higher level. This puts the US player in a real dilemma because the US needs to accumulate political points in order to win the game.

As for combat, the idea is to get you thinking not in terms of overwhelming the enemy with maximum firepower, but rather to use just the right amount of force to gain your tactical objective. Remember, that most of your combat strength will come *not* from the units you deploy but the Command and Tactics card you commit. Losses you take even when winning a battle represent units and logistics being "burned up" by operations as well as casualties. As one might expect, you can win battles but still lose the war.

One thing we did in playtesting was to cut down on the number of extraneous game elements. For example, originally each player had several extra special abilities. Some of these abilities slowed down the game play while not really adding to simulation quality. So we dumped them. Players are, of course, free to develop their own house rules as they see fit if they have elements they would like to add to the game.

--Jon Compton