



Part 3 – Early Design: Hidden Layers (continued) and Unit Recovery

Last time I discussed the scale of

Red Winter, and how and why I decided on a company level game with 90 minute game turns and 425 yards per hex. I also discussed my early design philosophy of embedding “hidden layers” of depth within very simple rules and mechanics. This entry will continue to explore these themes and how they have affected the mechanics governing recovery.

One disadvantage of a markerless combat system like that in Red Winter is the difficulty in showing units of varying states of efficiency, apart from their reduced sides. I wanted reduced units to have the ability to recover to full efficiency, but I didn't want it to be too easy for them to do so. Moreover, I wanted the mechanic to be something simple and intuitive- that is, simple rules concealing a greater complexity- the foundation of Red Winter's design philosophy. The current unit recovery

system is the product of this mantra, finely tuned to provide both depth and ease of play.

Each infantry unit is required to roll a 6 on a six-sided die to recover to full strength. While this may seem overly simple, rest assured that appearances are deceptive. The skeptics will surely ask several obvious questions. Can units keep on doing this indefinitely? What is a step reduction supposed to represent, anyway- a physical loss of manpower, or merely a recoverable morale state? And how can I ever destroy my enemy if he can simply recover over and over again?

Ask, and ye shall receive answers!

Firstly, units that attempt recovery can't take any other action during their Action Phase. Fine, you say, that's simple enough. Simplicity is good, as long as it still provides for a realistic experience and isn't so simple as to be trivial. The “one action” limitation during the Action Phase also provides for some tough decisions. Do I move into a better position where I'm really needed? Or do I sacrifice my turn trying to get back to full strength? I like tough decisions in boardgames, so this is an example of “so far, so good.”

Below: A Soviet medic tends to a wounded soldier. A T-26 tank looms in the background.



Secondly, units can't attempt recovery if they are adjacent to the enemy. Okay, that's another rule that's simple enough, but it really changes things in terms of game play. More on that in a moment.

Most importantly- units gain a +1 DRM to their recovery roll if they are 4 or more hexes distant from all enemies. This provides a realistic incentive to pull battle-worn units from the frontlines while continuously rotating in fresh units. It also means that recovery, in games terms, isn't really as simplistic as it initially sounds based on a reading of the rules. The rules themselves are simple- almost ridiculously so- but there is more going on beneath the surface than what meets the eye. Allow me to elaborate.



You have to figure that when you try to recover a reduced unit, you're wasting a turn to pull them back to a safe distance, then spending at least one turn making recovery rolls, then yet another turn to move back to into the action. So, on average, you'll need at least 3-4 game turns to get a reduced unit back to full strength. During these 3-4 turns, the enemy isn't simply ignoring your other units. The battle has continued, and there's likely to be more reduced units now than when you started the recovery process for your first unit. The net result of all this, in case it isn't obvious, is that you can't simply recover your units each and every time they are reduced, or

you'll lose the game. The number of units which do actually recover is reasonable and believable.

All this doesn't still doesn't address the following: What is recovery supposed to be simulating? A recoverable morale state? Or fresh replacement troops? The answer, in simplest terms, is "both." Going with a markerless combat/recovery system necessitates a bit of abstraction and imagination. However, I do not feel that the end result mechanics are any less realistic than those used in any other wargame. From the current rules: *"Recovery simulates rallying and a return to a coherent structure and, to a lesser extent, an incoming 'trickle' of new troops to replace losses."* While somewhat abstract, this approach makes sense given the unit and time scale. Since most troops are pulling out to the rear areas before attempting to recover, they are probably taking on some fresh troops while they're at it. But mostly they are rallying and "getting their act together." The system also encourages players to keep a reserve force ready. After all, you can't rotate in fresh troops to fill the gaps if you haven't saved any fresh troops for that purpose. So once again, a simple mechanic (rolling a 6 to recover) in fact has many important implications on gameplay. The "hidden layers" of the Red Winter unit recovery system are not readily apparent at first sight, but the subtle implications will quickly surface as a game unwinds.

This still leaves one of our questions unanswered. Namely, what's to prevent a unit from recovering over and over? Well, nothing. However (and here we go with the "hidden layers" again), the Soviet player receives a penalty of -1 to his recovery rolls during the final days of the battle. Since a roll of "6" is needed to successfully recover to full strength, this effectively means that the Soviet player no longer has any chance of success, *unless* he also receives a +1 DRM to cancel out this penalty. This means that the Soviets need to pull back 4 or more hexes from the front just to have a measly 1 in 6 chance of success. That could take quite a few turns of doing nothing else with the unit. Also figure in two turns to withdraw and then return to the frontlines, and on average it's going to take... well, you do the math. The

net result: the number of full strength Soviet units on the map will begin to gradually, but noticeably drop over the course of the game. So the deceptively subtle -1 DRM has an enormous impact on gameplay during the campaign.

Recovery Table (12.3)	
Each infantry unit attempting recovery rolls a die, adjusting for applicable DRMs. A result of 6 or higher indicates success.	
DRMs (all are cumulative)	
Condition	Modifier
1. Soviet unit attempting on December 8th	+1
2. Unit attempting is 4 or more hexes distant from all enemy units	+1
3. Pajari Leader is stacked with attempting Finnish unit	+1
4. Night Turn	+1
5. Unit attempting is Out of Supply	-1

Now let's return to the other topic for this diary entry- counter density. In Red Winter, the counter density is, in fact, low even for a single countersheet game. This is partly because not all units start on the map, and partly because a portion of the countersheet (maybe a third) is taken up by markers and variant (optional) units. On average, there will be only about 40-60 units on the map at any given time toward the latter days of the battle. During the first two days, there will be even fewer- more like 20-30. This low density makes the game easy to set up and easy to complete in a timely fashion. Even the full 32 turn campaign scenario should be playable in about 6 hours- and that's assuming that it continues on to completion with neither player achieving an automatic victory.

Of the sixteen planned scenarios, several are playable in under an hour. A few can probably be completed in 20-40 minutes. These scenarios make for excellent learning exercises. I don't recommend these for competitive play because the number of units on each side is so small (often fewer than ten units per side!) and the outcome of the game can swing wildly based on one or two key die rolls. But for introducing new players to the rules and strategies of the

game, these scenarios are well worth their inclusion.

Note that although the counter density is low, infantry units do have quite a bit of staying power. Again, this is a product of the time and unit scales- company-sized units (about 100 men) over a 90 minute time period. This is not to imply that combats require a lot of wristage for little effect- I've played games like that, and I set out to design a game where that sort of thing doesn't happen. Every combat has a specific result in Red Winter, with one or both players being required to satisfy a certain number of losses. These losses can be taken as step reductions or retreats, with a few easy to remember exceptions (and I say "easy to remember" because they are color-coded in red on the CRT wherever they occur). Players who are careful to keep reserves and move reduced units to the rear can very often recover these units to full strength via the recovery mechanic. The net result of all this: even though the counter density is low, the units don't drop like flies.

Below: Soviet T-26 tank crew.



Next time: The nights were long and cold during the battle for Tolvajärvi. Temperatures plunged well below freezing, and the battlefield was blanketed in total darkness for 16 hours a day! The fact that the battle took place during a new moon didn't help matters. But significant action did take place at night regardless. In the next installment of Red Winter Diaries, we'll examine the night rules as well as solitaire play.

Below: The same Soviet battalion on full strength and reduced sides.

