

Review - 5th Fleet (DOS, 1994)

The latest example Avalon Hill's revolutionary approach toward game design is 5th Fleet, a strategy game of modern naval combat designed in conjunction with Stanley Associates, a Washington D.C.-based consulting firm that's done business with all the branches of the armed forces. The opening is sort of flashy - a missile launch that lands on the horizon with all the appropriate sound effects - but the actual game itself is a lean, mean, fighting machine.

Eleven scenarios are included in the game, stretching from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden and south to Diego Garcia. A monster scenario covers The Indian Ocean War (the strategic map is covered with spots indicating friendly and enemy units.) Game length runs from nine turns (three days) to 30 turns (ten days). Complexity varies from low to high, and you can adjust the AI from Nominal to High and from level 1 to 3.

Unfortunately, there is no scenario editor. Any new wargame on the market today needs to include one. They certainly don't hurt sales, and actually make the price of the game more tolerable. At least such an editor should be an add on.

The Tactical Reference Screens are adequate, though not up to Harpoon standards. Photos are black and white with minimal data on the actual ship, but will include extensive game values for attack, defense, and logistics. You can choose between subs, surface ships, and aircraft. Many of the photos have unique viewpoints and all are very clear. Choosing equipment categories and moving around in the data base is easily done with a series of VCR-like buttons.

Game play is instinctive and the user interface is easy. If you are a veteran Fleet Gamer or Harpooner, you only need a cursory look at the instructions. To select an action, simply push a button.

The game is well balanced and faithful to the board game in that subs, aircraft carriers, and bases are hard to kill. Since many of the scenarios require you to put bases out of action, it is hard to win; nonetheless, the scenarios are well balanced. The game is much simpler than Harpoon I or II, with which it will probably be compared. The tactical formation editor looks similar to Harpoon I's but actually seems to date from an earlier Joe Balkoski game published in Strategy and Tactics (called Strike Fleet, I believe).

Turns follow the board game sequence. You get to draw a "chit" to see what type of unit you move in a given turn (ships, subs, or aircraft). It's possible for you (or the enemy) to get two or three moves in a row, which can give you a tremendous advantage as you attack enemy units.

The game provides damage or kill probabilities when you decide to attack a target. You can watch the probabilities climb as you increase the number of weapons to the target. This is probably an outgrowth of articles in Avalon Hill's General magazine, where many authors deliver statistical analysis of the success probabilities of any attack. It is a useful bit of information, even if it does not deliver a cumulative probability. I would expect to get a combined probability for an attack combining torpedoes and missiles.

Logistics is fully implemented and you have to watch your fuel and ammo states. If you run out of ammo, you need to just get the unit out of the way and hope he doesn't get seen again (cause you'll never see him again). Some replenishment is possible, but is not important in a short game, so go ahead and empty the tubes at an enemy in a scenario of 12 turns or less. If you own the board game, it might be helpful to keep the map out in order to keep you objectives in mind.

I only have one or two nit-picks. In order to allocate weapons to an attack, you have to click on a +/- display. It would be faster to just be able to type in the number of weapons to attack the target with. Another minor problem is that the display blanks to a "5th Fleet" screen during the enemy turn to prevent you from seeing what the enemy is doing. Enemy movement by detected units should be shown. Frequently you have to guess which type unit to move first without the benefit of knowing what units are now in contact. It's a little unrealistic, but it certainly adds the fog of war to the game.

The game clearly accomplishes its objective of bringing the board game to the computer. My opinion of the game remains unchanged: If you want something less technical and time consuming than Harpoon but still want a challenge, this is the naval game for you.

[Play the demo for this game directly in your browser](#)

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