

25 YEARS OF AXIS & ALLIES

★ Bruce Whitehill talks with Larry Harris, the designer behind the popular Axis & Allies series. ★

Larry Harris is probably one of few people in the country who has been doing exactly what he wants for the past 25 years. He is a game inventor—or, more precisely, a *successful* game inventor. Harris' name is associated with one of America's favorite "specialty" games: *Axis & Allies*. It is one of perhaps only three American military simulation games (or "wargames") to have had crossover success in the mass market (the other two being *Risk* and *Diplomacy*, *Stratego* being in a different category of strategy games).

The game simulates World War II, pitting the Axis powers, Germany and Japan, against the Allies, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. Up to five players form teams of the two opposing powers. A complete map of the world breaks up the land area into different sections, similar to *Risk*. Using an assortment of miniature playing pieces representing infantry, tanks, antiaircraft guns, fighters, bombers,

battleships, aircraft carriers, troop transports and submarines, players work together to outmaneuver their opponents. At the same time, players need to deal with products and resources and safeguard production in their factories.

Military Influences

Harris, who turns 60 this May and lives with his wife Kathy in the New England area, invented *Axis & Allies* between the



Larry Harris

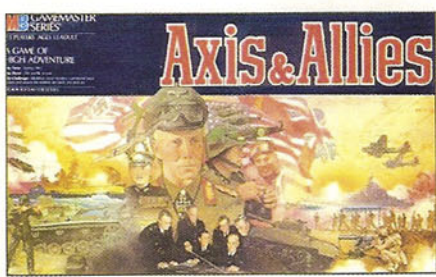
late 1970s and 1981. But this ultimate game for "grognards"—slang for someone who plays wargames—has been embraced by the general public and has spawned one revision and five sequels.

That Harris would develop a military simulation game was no surprise, and his choice of World War II was no accident. His father

was an infantryman during the war, fighting against the Japanese in the Solomon Islands, New Guinea and the Philippines. "I remember talking to him for hours about the war," the younger Harris recalls.

They moved around a lot and the family spent three years in Iran. Eventually, Harris also joined the army, becoming a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division during the Vietnam War. He served in Paris from 1966 to 1971 and wound up staying in France for ten years, during which time he went to school at the Sorbonne and the University of Vincennes, studying the French language and European history.

"I was totally fascinated with the living history all around me, especially World



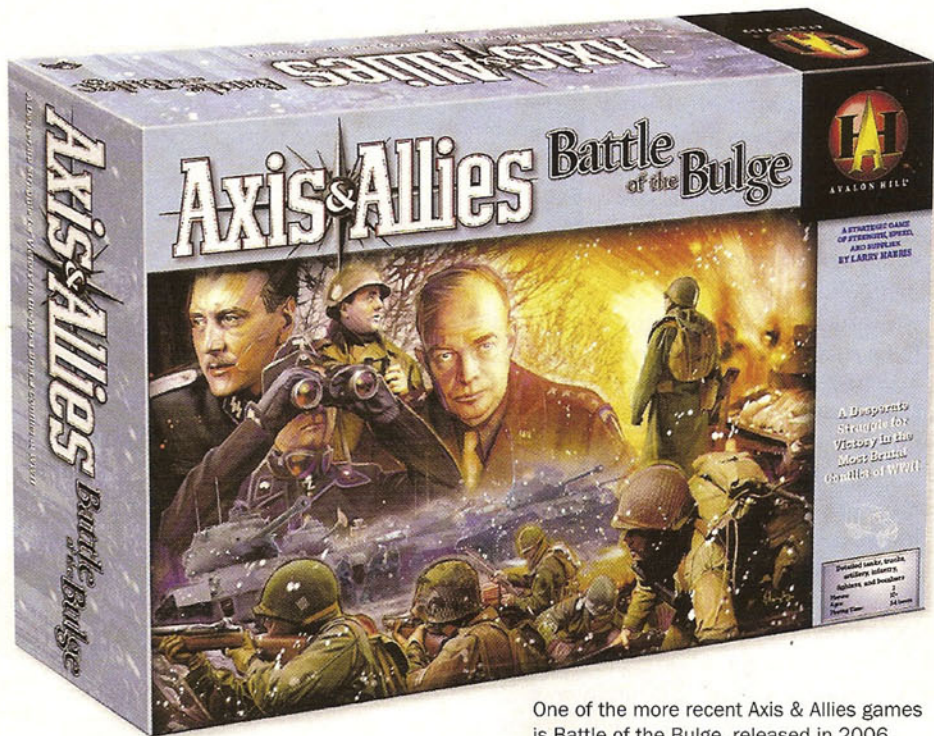
Axis & Allies, which Harris started developing in the late 1970s, was first published in 1981.

War II history," Harris shares. "I had always been interested and intrigued by this period and found myself living right in the middle of it." Harris recounts the many times he visited the Normandy beaches and walked up and down Omaha Beach. He visited old German airfields used during the Battle of Britain. "There was not a World War II memorial or major battlefield that I did not visit."

Throughout all this time, "Axis & Allies was being born in my head," Harris remembers. "World War II was becoming something I wanted to completely understand. I would study maps and endlessly read books about the subject. The next logical step, it seemed to me, was to put together the dynamic elements."

He started to develop "what if?" scenarios and began to plot actions on a world map. "I would take into account what the different warring nations could produce, what the major weapons were, the geopolitical realities, what they *did* do and why." Then he wondered whether all these ideas could be turned into a game. Soon, the game 1942, as it was called then, was born. "I had invented a game that dealt with most of the strategic aspects of World War II," Harris notes.

Now all he needed was to get his game published. He presented it to



One of the more recent Axis & Allies games is Battle of the Bulge, released in 2006.

French game manufacturers without any success. Yet the companies' praise for his game was encouraging. Finally, one manufacturer, Nathan Games, asked if Harris could do other games. Within a short time, Harris was a "professional" game designer. "I was getting paid for it!" he enthuses.

Harris spent three more years in France, completely immersed in game design and the game business. "I was doing okay and was making a living [but] it was becoming time to return to my own country," he says.

Sometime after he got back to the United States, Harris went to a local Connecticut hobby shop and spoke with Pat Flory, the owner. Flory, the person who eventually came up with the name "Axis & Allies," introduced the new designer to "four guys who were, for the most part, schoolteachers" and were publishing, among other games, an unusual and unique style of game, Ace of Aces. They called themselves Nova Game Designs and in 1981 brokered a deal with Harris to publish Axis & Allies. Harris then went into a limited partnership with Flory and produced two new games: BroadSides and Boarding Parties and Conquest of the Empire.

Harris then heard from a headhunter "from out of the blue" that Milton Bradley was looking for another game designer, and he was soon brought on board. At the time, Milton Bradley was looking into the possibility of selling to the game "hobby" market. When

Axis & Allies Versus Guadalcanal

Axis & Allies, which purports to simulate the entire range of World War II, is designed for five players, each controlling one or more world powers: the United States, the United Kingdom and Russia or Germany and Japan. Often the game is played with only two players—one representing the Allies and the other the Axis.

Using a combat system based on dice rolls, players control territories, manipulate naval, air and land units, and attempt to improve unit potential. The game has undergone the usual revisions in its long history, and the 2004 update includes new units, such as destroyers and artillery, and puts forward revised unit capabilities plus new victory conditions.

Larry Harris' latest innovation is Axis & Allies: Guadalcanal, which focuses on one of the war's key battles. Players re-create the pivotal fight that began in August 1942 and lasted for six months. Centered on and around the island of Guadalcanal in the southern Solomon Islands, this conflict was the first major offensive launched by Allied forces against Japan and was considered one of the most significant of World War II. The game "incorporates crucial elements into game-play that were key factors in the historical campaign, such as airstrip construction, troop and supply transport, and furious land, sea and air battles."

Axis & Allies: Guadalcanal, published by Avalon Hill, is designed for two to three players. The game comes with a board showing the area of conflict in the Pacific and 172 combat unit playing pieces, along with various plastic chips, supply tokens, a "battle box" and the obligatory 12 six-sided dice.



Axis & Allies: Guadalcanal is Harris' newest addition to the line.

the head of marketing selected three games on the retail market as examples of what the company was aiming for, he had no idea that all three had been invented by his newest game designer. Harris reached an agreement with his former Nova partners, and a deal was struck for the three games to be sold to Milton Bradley. It was 1984, and the beginning of Milton Bradley's highly successful "Gamemaster Series."

Harris went on to design many more games for Milton Bradley, which became part of Hasbro, before he moved on to the newly established east coast office of the west coast giant Mattel.

Not wishing to move his family to California when Mattel decided to consolidate, Harris moved on to Coleco and then became an independent once again when Coleco went bankrupt. He profited from the success of his Thin Ice game after its sale to Pressman, and he partnered



The Axis & Allies line includes miniatures games.

with Mark and Bob Sullivan to form Atyer Leisure games. Later, he joined Parker Brothers, also owned by Hasbro, connecting him once again with his Milton Bradley beginnings.

A Long Legacy

"Axis & Allies is very dear to me," Harris says. And it should be. The game is the most successful of Milton Bradley's Gamemaster series, was selected for Games magazine's Hall of Fame in 1995, was inducted into the Origins (an international game players' convention) Hall of Fame and has become a popular dedicated playing site on AOL.

In fact, the Internet is awash with Axis & Allies forums and information. There is a Dutch production board, Korean rules, double-blind scenarios, a battle calculator, lots of references to the original Nova game and rules, and countless variants. There is a CD version of the game as well as a series of Axis & Allies miniatures. And Harris' love for Axis & Allies has prompted him to create a revised edition, plus Axis & Allies Pacific, Europe, Battle of the Bulge, D-Day and, his latest, Guadalcanal.

Determined by a piece of history and a place in France nearly 40 years ago, Harris' legacy will undoubtedly live on for years to come. [A:]