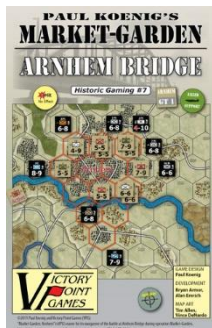


# Review of *Paul Koenig's Market-Garden*

## By David H. Allen

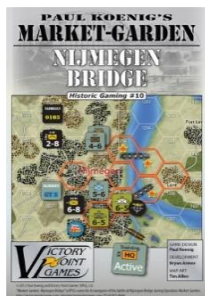


As a teenager in the early 1970's I read the three WW2 battle narratives by the late, great Irish author Cornelius Ryan. The one that stood out in my mind was *A Bridge Too Far* since I had never before heard of that flawed, failed attempt to end the war early (I suspect because it *had* failed!) I once even braved a Kansas thunderstorm that threatened to either drown out the soundtrack or cut the power to the movie theater where I watched the film version one summer day. Also, one of my long-term, "back burner" projects is to recreate the Market-Garden campaign in miniature, using three or four tables linked by bridges as the "highway to Hell."

So, without first looking into any reviews, I indulged myself and purchased *Paul Koenig's Market-Garden* trilogy of games focusing on the Allied airborne assaults in the Netherlands in September 1944. Although they are two-player games, it turns out that they incorporate some features that make them work well for solo play as well. While they may be difficult to find (at last check they were no longer listed in the Victory Point Games online store), the reasons why they make good solitaire games are perhaps good lessons for solo players considering other games for solo play, as well as for designers looking to enhance the solo-playability of their own designs.

The three *Paul Koenig's Market-Garden* (PKMG) games were sold separately, and include *Arnhem Bridge* (published 2011), *Eindhoven Bridge* (2012), and *Nijmegen Bridge* (2012). Two are packaged in zip lock bags and one (Nijmegen) in a small box. The Nijmegen game comes with a board-mounted map, while the other two come with maps printed on heavy paper. All of the maps are 11"x17" and nicely illustrated. Each hexagon on the maps represents about 600 meters of real distance. Each game comes with forty 1/2" square counters and twenty-eight 5/8" round game markers, all printed on both sides. Each 1/2" counter represents a battalion (or battalion-sized unit). The round markers, a 4-page Standard Rules booklet, and one page Optional Rules sheet are the same for all three games, and each game comes with one sheet of Exclusive Rules.

I must admit, on first unboxing (well, un-zip-locking in the case of the Arnhem and Eindhoven games) I was a bit disappointed. The maps are small, the counters few, and the rules short. A check of the back cover of the bag art confirmed that the publisher doesn't make any pretense about the complexity of the game, rating it a 3 out of 9. What intrigued me, however, and why you are reading this now, is that the publisher rates the solitaire playability of these two-player games as very high (8 out of 9). Really? As someone who has played many *many* games solo (including many games never designed to be played solo), I think I have an intuitive feel for what can make or break solitaire play of a 2+ player game. So, I was intrigued and decided to play a few games solo and see if the 8/9 claim holds. Surprisingly, I believe it does, and for good reasons which I will now explain.



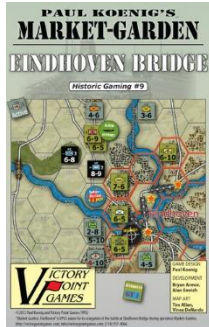
One aspect of the PKMG games that makes them solitaire-friendly is that they are small in scale. They are quick to set up (the counters are back printed with either starting hex or turn entry) and quick to put away. The maps don't take up much precious tabletop space. Historically, there are no more than two or three divisions involved in any of the three battles, so with each counter representing a battalion (or battalion-sized unit), fewer than 40 counters are needed for both sides, and not all of those are going to be on the map at the same time.

Another aspect of these games that make them suitable for solitaire play is the chit draw system. Each regiment or brigade (2-5 battalions each) is activated for movement and combat only when its HQ counter is drawn at random from an opaque container. All units in that regiment or brigade can move and perform combat when their HQ is active, but each unit must finish movement and combat before another unit can move and fight. (To make it easy to associate an HQ counter with its on-map subordinate units, they are color-coded to match.)

Chit draw activation has two major effects on solitaire playability. The first is the creation of a "fog of war." Since you (the solo gamer) cannot know which units are going to be activated next, the predictability and complete control that you would experience using the more common "I-go, you-go" turn sequence is absent. That uncertainty creates a natural tension and serves as a kind of low-level (albeit random) artificial opponent. The other thing the chit pull system does is to make it easy to know which units have moved and performed combat or not in the current turn. No need to mentally keep track of dozens (hundreds?) of stacks of cardboard counters, trying to remember all by yourself which units you have moved already or not. If the units' HQ counter is drawn and up to bat, then those two to five counters can move and fight (hopefully most of us can keep track of five counters....). Otherwise, units have either already been activated, or they have yet to be activated, this turn. This makes it very simple to walk away from a game halfway through a turn, then pick back up again simply by pulling the next chit. Nice.

Stacking is interesting in that two, and only two, friendly units can occupy the same hex. I can't comment on designer Koenig's reasoning behind that, but I do find that it keeps the stack height down and therefore prevents them being toppled by fat fingers. Moreover, the stacking limit holds *at all times*. That means that you can block the movement of friendly units if you are not careful where to stack other friendly units. 'Nuff said. Consider yourself forewarned.

Combat is untraditional and, to be honest, required a bit of grace before I came to accept it fully. There are three combat types; Full Fire (no moving, attack at full strength), Mobile Fire (move up to half, attack at half strength), and Close Combat (defender fires first, then back and forth until someone retreats or is destroyed). Simple enough. Combat is resolved by rolling a d6 and comparing it to the attacker's strength. An attacker either scores a hit on an enemy unit (die roll less than the attacker's strength), exchanges hits (die roll equals attacker's strength, in which case both attacker and defender take a hit), or the attacker misses. The remarkable thing is that, while units have specific attack strengths, there are no defense factors for individual units. So, a 5-5 (attack-move) infantry unit is just as likely to score a hit on an 8-9 armored unit as it is on a 3-5 infantry unit. Weird, and somewhat unintuitive.



I finally came to grips with this design decision by embracing the adage “the best defense is a good offense.” That is, the best way to defend yourself is to attack your enemy before they attack you. In game turns, that means a 8-9 armored unit can defend itself better than a 5-5 infantry unit because the armored unit is more likely to knock the infantry unit out of the game before the reverse occurs. In other words, the game rewards being aggressive on offense. As someone sometime probably once said, “Attack! Attack! Always attack!”

Another oddism that I feel helps make this game solo-friendly is the complete lack of zones of control. While you can’t move *into* an enemy-occupied hex (unless to initiate Close Combat, which is usually a bad idea), you can move right past them, freely moving from adjacent hex to adjacent hex. Wow. Even with relatively small maps, that rule and the low counter density makes it difficult to cover all of your flanks and block your enemy’s every avenue of advance. The result is a very fluid game with a lot of maneuver – enough to keep a solo gamer occupied. Some may argue that this is ahistorical, and they might be right, but in these games much of that kind of slipping past the enemy undetected is going to happen inside the cities that cluster around the very bridges that were the objective of the Allied forces. So, it is not unimaginable that, for example, British troops might slip down alleyways and duck below hedges to pass within yards of German soldiers without being seen (heck, Sean Connery did it!).

Finally, and this is probably already apparent to the reader, these games play quickly. After the first tentative play, once the rules are understood and committed to memory, a game can easily be played in under an hour. There is a place in every gamer’s diet for a light snack now and then, no?

While there is much detail and game play that I left out of this review (terrain effects, Optional rules, etc.) I hope I have generated some interest in these games. If not, hopefully my assessment of their suitability for solo play, and the reasons for that, has given you something to think about.