

Frontline Designer Retrospective

Part 1 - Concept

Frontline began back in 2008 when I posted a message on consimworld.com asking people what they thought of me bring our modern day Special Forces board game mechanics back to WWII.

The response was overwhelming, and it was “No!”

The consensus was, there were already many WWII tactical board games on the market, and they didn’t need another one. But, it would be cool to have a WWII tactical card game.

This was both good and bad news. The good news was people were telling me exactly what they wanted. The bad news was it would place the game in direct comparison to Up Front. Up Front is a legendary tactical WWII card game produced by Avalon Hill back in the 1980s.

With both games focused on the tactical WWII combat, it became vital to make Frontline stand on its own. I began with the goal of making a more streamlined, easy to play system. I did this because times have changed. The kind of games people played in the 80’s are not the kind they like to play today. The world is a busier place, and people want to sit down and play a game in an hour with a minimum of rules references.

After playing with some combat system ideas, it soon became apparent that the game would hinge on its terrain system. This is because ground combat is all about terrain. There isn’t a lot of terrain in naval combat, unless there’s an island nearby, and there’s no terrain in air combat. In land combat, the terrain is as important as the bullets. Getting to the trees, out of the open field, or holding the high ground plays a major role in a commander’s battle plan.

One additional huge point, without terrain a game feels like the two groups of soldiers are shooting at each other in a gray misty world with no details or reference points. Not very exciting.

After many revisions, this led to the current terrain system where players get to see the whole battlefield. From the start of the game, you can make plans for which pieces of terrain you want to hold, which you want to avoid, and which you want to deny the enemy. It feels like you’re the commander scouting the battlefield through binoculars.

Along with terrain, I also wanted “move and shoot” to be a core concept in the game. In real combat, soldiers divide into groups. While one group is moving, the other group is taking cover and providing them with covering fire. Picture this. I’m with a group of guys crossing a big open field. Suddenly, I start taking fire from the trees a hundred yards away. What do I do? Simple. I flop to my stomach, squeal like a schoolgirl, and try to get

as small as possible. Shooting back at all, much less accurately is not going to happen. The military figured this out a long time ago, so they split the guys into two groups.

One group advances, while the other takes cover behind boulders, stone walls, trees, etc. This gives the second group two huge advantages. First, the bad guys in the trees will be firing at the guys in the field. It's much easier to aim when bullets are not whizzing by your head. Second, you're lying down behind a tree. You feel safe, and again will have better aim.

Once the covering fire starts, the bad guys in the trees have their own distraction issues. Suddenly, their aim wasn't what it used to be. This allows the guys in the field to slither forward to the safety of the trees.

Once in the trees, the first group provides covering fire for the second group. The second group then crosses the field. While crossing the field, if they can angle to the side a bit to get a flanking position on the bad guys, all the better.

With these goals in mind: keep it simple, terrain is vital, and move/shoot, the quest to design Frontline began.