

## II. REVIEWS

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### IN THE REALM OF SIMULATION WAR GAMES. PANZER CAMPAIGNS: POLAND '39 – THE MOST REALISTIC GAME ABOUT THE POLISH DEFENSIVE WAR OF 1939

**Abstract:** *This article discusses the recently released simulation computer game Panzer Campaigns: Poland '39 – the most realistic game about the Polish Defensive War of 1939. Characterizing the game's mechanics, taxonomy, and AI behavior, the author highlights its high realism, resulting from its scale and representation of military detail. Comparing it to other role-playing games, the author discusses the advantages of this type of game for historical simulations and its educational value at the higher education level.*

**Keywords:** *war games, Polish Defensive War of 1939*

On May 9, 2025, Wargame Design Studio, a renowned and respected developer of computer wargames, released Panzer Campaigns: Poland '39 (PzC Poland '39), a game dedicated to the Polish Defensive War of 1939 (also known as the Invasion of Poland, Polish Campaign or September Campaign), the first phase of World War II. Poland '39 is one of over 30 games in the Panzer Campaigns series, covering World War II campaigns. Like all other games from this studio, the Panzer Campaigns games are based on a classic hex-based war engine developed since the 1990s, focused on historical accuracy, highly detailed simulation, and long gameplay. In this system, the game is played in individual turns – in the Panzer Campaigns series, one turn is 2 hours of real-time. Turn-based gameplay allows for the use of PBEM (play by email) mode – very popular among WDS fans. The map is divided into hexagons – in the Panzer Campaigns series, 1 hex corresponds to 1 km<sup>2</sup> of terrain. All this makes Wargame Design Studio's games some of the most realistic simulations of armed conflict available commercially (it seems that “War in the East/West” by 2BY3 Games and the latest games in the

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“Decisive Campaign” series by VR Designs may be competing in this regard).

It’s surprising that Wargame Design Studio has only now decided to release a game dedicated to the campaign that launched World War II. After all, given the maneuvers and pace of operations, the testing of armored capabilities, the massive use of air power by one side of the conflict, and the differing doctrinal assumptions of the Polish Army and the Wehrmacht, the Polish Defensive War seems to be an interesting area not only for analysis in the field of military history but also for role-playing simulation games. To date, this topic has not been particularly explored by video game publishers – in fact, the September Campaign in “modern times” appears in games such as *Decisive Campaigns: Warsaw to Paris* (2010) and *Strategic Command WWII: World at War* (2018). However, the significant simplification of gameplay in these games means they can only be considered conventional simulations. For comparison, it’s also worth mentioning board games, where the size of the map imposes limitations, especially when simulating a conflict on an operational scale. The only option to play the entire September Campaign is the 2011 board game “Poland 1939” (published by “Taktyka i Strategia”), which features an impressive 140x100 cm map for board games, depicting the entirety of Poland. Simplified rules, a unit scale essentially limited to divisions, and a somewhat rigid gameplay style, however, prevented this game from being among the top-tier titles from “Taktyka i Strategia”.

Considering the above, “Panzer Campaigns: Poland ‘39” is, in fact, the first realistic simulation of the September Campaign. It should be added that the simulation is extraordinary in terms of both the scale of the game and its realism. The map scale is an impressive 956,565 hexes, encompassing the territories of Poland, East Germany, the Free City of Danzig, East Prussia, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, the USSR, Hungary, and Romania – making it the largest map published in the series to date. The map features various navigational aids for such a vast area – five zoom scales and a miniature representation of the entire map, facilitating orientation. A major plus is its linguistic accuracy – not common in English-language games. The names of towns, rivers, and forest complexes are generally correctly placed (although without Polish diacritics).

Players, taking on the roles of each side of the conflict, can play through as many as 77 scenarios (with each scenario covering different variants of the same campaign/battle; for example, six scenarios cover different phases and potential variants of the Battle of Bzura). Scenarios are divided into huge, large, medium, and small, depending on their scale, and cover various stages of the September Campaign, culminating in the Battle of Kock (October 2-6, 1939). The huge scenarios deserve particular attention – there are 12 in total, each beginning on September 1, covering the entire territory of Poland, and considering various variants, such as earlier mobilization of the Polish Army, limited Allied operations on the Western Front, Soviet neutrality, and even the Red Army’s arrival to the aid of the strug-

gling Poland. Large and medium scenarios simulate combat in specific theaters of operations, while small scenarios cover combat zones within those theatres. The longest scenarios have as many as 348 turns, shorter ones – from 4 to 158 turns.

It's worth devoting a few words to the game's taxonomy. As the above description suggests, PzC Poland '39 is played, depending on the scenario, on a strategic-operational scale to a tactical one. Regardless, in each scenario, the basic unit at the player's disposal is the battalion (there are also numerous independent companies, squadrons, batteries, and even artillery platoons!). Generally, each battalion, if the player so chooses during the game, can be further divided into two or three companies and later reunited. The level of detail and realism is impressive. For example, the Polish 16th Infantry Division consists of a division headquarters, divisional units (a divisional cavalry squadron, a cyclist company, a motorized anti-aircraft battery, a light artillery regiment, a heavy artillery squadron, and an engineer battalion), and three infantry regiments. Each regiment has a distinct headquarters, infantry battalions (which can be divided into companies), a reconnaissance company, an anti-tank company, and an artillery platoon. All of these units are playable. Fortunately, the game designers included the ability to color-code units belonging to a given division/large unit, making it easier for players to identify similar tokens representing individual units (NATO symbols are used). Other features include highlighting units that have used up movement points, are isolated, disorganized, low on ammunition, and so on.

The vast scale of the game is, on the one hand, a great advantage, but on the other, a serious limitation of playability. Considering the "manual" control of units, the campaign level is difficult to play, as even viewing the game map is difficult, not to mention the time required to complete it. Ideally, the map could be reduced in size and implemented on a divisional-regimental scale with the option of separating battalions (or at least limiting the number of divisional and regimental units, as was implemented in the excellent *Decisive Campaigns: Ardennes Offensive*). However, Wargame Design Studio doesn't use this approach in other games in the series, and it's also absent from PzC Poland '39. One reason is likely the realistic depiction of unit strength – PzC Poland '39 doesn't use abstract strength points, but rather considers the actual numerical strength of a unit, expressed in the number of soldiers, mechanized vehicles, guns, etc. The number of modifiers is also limited, primarily taking into account two fundamental factors: morale and fatigue.

The game's mechanics emphasize command (army headquarters at the corps/operational group, division, and regiment levels), morale, logistics (entrenching, destroying and rebuilding bridges, laying minefields), and maneuver. Compared to the aforementioned "*Decisive Campaigns: Ardennes Offensive*", supply issues are somewhat simplified. The system accounts for variable weather conditions (rain, fog, snow). The artificial intelligence, while not a significant drawback,

isn't exactly a strength. Especially in large-scale scenarios, it's characterized by limited flexibility and difficulty managing thousands of units – a strange passivity, exposure to fire, and a lack of coordination.

The game's flaws are even more numerous. Among them are:

- Disproportionately high casualties. During the scenario covering the Polish Pomeranian Army's operational zone (human vs. AI), daily Polish losses (on September 1st, when a significant portion of units had not yet entered combat) reached 1,692 soldiers (presumably killed, wounded, or missing) and 9 cannons, while German losses amounted to 2,046 soldiers, 10 cannons, 16 vehicles, and 1 aircraft. Official Polish losses during the entire September Campaign were 95,000-97,000 killed and 130,000 wounded. Official German losses were 16,343 killed and 27,280 wounded. When attempting to play the entire campaign, this can result in excessive "bleeding out" of units (without taking into account events such as encirclement, unit breakdown, etc.).
- The road system used. The game developers included only two road classes, while the 1939 Polish road map (which is certainly quite objective for its intended purpose) includes five road classes. This means that on a huge map, the road network is simply too sparse, and units are often forced to move through fields or forests, which, with the modifier applied, essentially immobilizes a given unit.
- The ability to operate with isolated units. Even in the event of a clear cut-off unit, it does not lose its cohesion and maneuverability and can move in close formation behind the enemy army, but in reality, it would disperse during the game.
- No possibility of a cavalry charge or fighting in horse formation at all. While the mythologized cavalry charge was rare in the Polish Defensive War, it did happen, something the game designers, despite their meticulous approach to the campaign's realities, failed to account for.
- The operation of border units. For example, the Polish Border Guard is present on the game map as units representing individual outposts that make up a police station, deployed along the Polish-German border (quite haphazardly, by the way). Most often overtaken on the first day of war by German fast units, they wander around the map, heading towards the nearest "large units". This ahistorical treatment of this formation is incorrect and negatively impacts playability. It seems that a much better solution is found in board game developers from "Taktyka i Strategia" publishing house, where the cost of crossing the border is calculated in movement points.
- Overestimation of the value of fortifications. Polish units, which were quickly broken through in reality, can put up very strong resistance in the game if they

manage to dig in. This can lead to ahistorical situations – for example, infantry battalions blocking for a long time German panzer divisions.

Users post a number of other minor comments regarding the location of individual units on the map, errors in the *Ordre de Bataille*, and so on on expert and fan forums. Many of these comments could undoubtedly provide suggestions for the game's developers to improve at least some of its elements. It's also worth noting that Wargame Design Studio is known for frequently updating its products, even those dating back many years.

The above-mentioned errors and shortcomings do not affect the overall experience of *Panzer Campaigns: Poland '39*, which, as noted above, is an impressive production due to its realism, level of detail, and scale of gameplay. From the perspective of an academic teacher specializing in simulation games and military history, I must point out its undeniable educational value for simulating the campaign that began World War II. Taking into account the limitations of realism inherent in all simulation games, such as the elimination of the stress factor in command, player omnipotence (including commanding the entire armed forces), etc., the game can be used as a support tool for analyzing the key issues of this campaign. Aside from its obvious cognitive value, with the use of appropriate modifiers, it can, under simulated conditions, foster desirable traits in student players, such as cooperation, planning, consideration of objective factors, and achieving set goals.