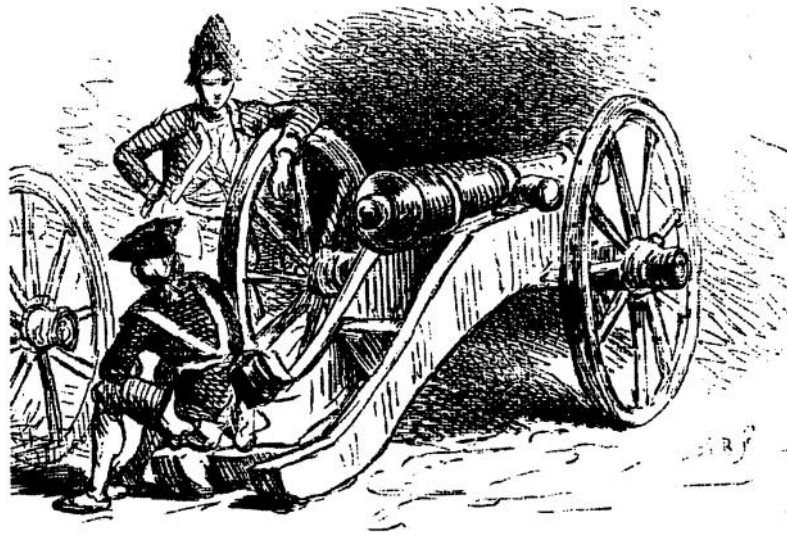




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A Whiff of Grape Shot Whose Reality is it Anyway

by Phil Johnston

Article 1 in a series originally published in *Historical Gamer*, September 1994.



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Who's Reality is it Anyway
by Phil Johnston

Playable! Realistic! Playable! Realistic! It reminds me of the old Lite Beer from Miller commercials — Tastes Great! Less Filling! Wargamers want, or think they want, rules that are both playable and realistic. Most rules writers tout their products as being just that.

So the debate rages — which rules are truly realistic; which are more playable? The problem is that many gamers, myself included, have suffered from fuzzy thinking when it comes to these issues.

What do we mean by realistic; what aspects of warfare do we want to realistically simulate? Or, playable for whom; playable such that a novice can grasp the entire body of the rules quickly or playable in the sense that the basic mechanisms can be grasped readily with a little effort? (How much effort detracts from playability?) Or playable in the sense of quick to run through a game?

My own search for the perfect wargame (or wargames) led me to start wrestling with these kinds of questions. So, what follows is some of the product of my own fevered gray matter. My hope is that we can begin to move the debate beyond the chanting of Realism/Playability mantras and examine what each of us might really want in wargames — and why.

As an aside, I know that wargamers, like car buyers, bring their own prejudices and tastes to the marketplace. I do not wish to attempt to impose my own opinions on anyone; I just want to get to the underlying issues that are currently clouded by the rhetoric.

Let's first dispense with my own prejudices. I like games, and I like history. I like simple games, and I like complex games. (You get the idea.) I try to judge wargames against what they claim to be — quite often a very tough standard, but it's the one they've set.

So to begin, what is a wargame anyway? I know — you know one when you see one. However, we really need a more concrete definition. Wargames are a very diverse lot, so let's keep the definition simple. A wargame is an attempt to simulate some aspects of warfare using an agreed-upon set of mechanisms. There, that wasn't so bad; was it?

Next comes my read on the wargaming public. Most wargamers I know look upon this hobby as a distraction and opportunity for some light-hearted fun. I often am numbered among them as I step up to the table to roll dice and watch my figures sprout little black casualty caps.

However, there is a portion of the wargaming public who, at least occasionally, seek something more from such a time-consuming and expensive hobby. Speaking for myself, while I like playing games, it was my interest in history — not gaming — that led me to explore wargaming as an adult. Wargaming provides the means to — in some ways — take a battle or war off the pages of a book.

History is not simply a simulation of what happened, but also why it happened and how things

Who's Reality is it Anyway
by Phil Johnston

might have turned out differently. Wargaming presents the possibility of “fooling with” the variables and seeing how the results differ from the historical outcomes. But, as any high school science or math student knows, the validity of the results depends, in part, on the accuracy of the equation.

Yes, the truth comes out. I'm one of those realism nuts. Before you write me off completely, let me emphasize again — there's nothing wrong with playing with toy soldiers and having a lot of fun doing it. I do just that quite regularly. I would add that there's nothing wrong with pursuing “experimental history” and having a very satisfying time doing that.

I don't wish to saddle people who are looking for a quick and simple game with difficult rules that distract from their fun. I do want to encourage those who are seeking to write rules that scratch my itch for history, and I am willing to expend some time and effort on their products. After all, I already spend time, effort and money on the research and painting of armies, creation of terrain, etc. If I am willing to invest in the that kind of realism, why not invest in the simulation itself?

So then, what is realism anyway? What is important to realistically simulate and what's not so important? Well, that's something we will begin to look at. Among the things some wargames try to simulate are: terrain, uniforms, troop formations and movement, the operations of firepower, the effects of time, morale, close combat, command and weather.

First, one more definition. The dictionary defines a simulation as the imitative representation of the functioning of one system or process by means of the functioning of another. So then, the usefulness or accuracy of the simulation correlates directly to the nature of the “simulating” system or process. A wargame is an attempt to simulate certain parts of the system or process of warfare by developing an imitative representation of those parts.

Now we begin to have some useful parameters to begin judging rules systems by. What parts of warfare does a certain set of rules claim to simulate? If it accurately provides an imitative representation of those parts, then to that extent it is a realistic simulation. But, there may be other parts of warfare that can just as legitimately be subjected to imitative representation. If another set of rules accurately simulates these, then the rules are, to that extent, realistic.

So then, the question becomes, what do I as a player/commander regard as the important parts of warfare to simulate? Speaking for myself, if I am taking the place of a commander, then the most important are those that revolve around the historical commander and the environment in which he functioned. That must be the determining *perspective* of the wargame design.

A set of rules that provides an imitative representation of a weapon's firepower or the march step of a soldier can simulate those parts of warfare, and that is important. However, those parts of warfare are largely outside the sphere of influence of a division/corps/army com-

Who's Reality is it Anyway
by Phil Johnston

mander on the battlefield. What about the actual systems or processes that affected the activities of a commander — aren't these worth attempting to simulate?

So then, a set of rules that provides realism in terms of weapon ranges and effects, movement rates, etc., but ignores the processes and systems of command cannot hope to claim to be a simulation of battlefield command. By extension, the level of realism of the simulation of battlefield command is directly proportional to the extent that the rules systems and processes provide an imitative representation of the historical systems and processes of command.

Did you notice the little italicized word I slipped in a couple of paragraphs ago? If you did, add +4 to your next dice roll for superior intellect. Yes, perspective, or point of view, is the key to any good design — whether we're talking paintings, automobiles or wargames. Perspective provides the unity of focus that is essential to a quality design — it also makes the design easier to grasp and understand.

Perspective asks, Who is the person playing this simulation? To whom does he correspond on the battlefield? What are the essential elements that characterize this commander's environment on the battlefield? What kinds of decisions does he make? What are the obstacles to his accomplishing what he wants to do? What battlefield events can he control; which can he influence, and which are completely outside his ability to affect?

Rules should reflect these issues. No historic personage, no matter how great a military genius, can control everything. There are some things he can exercise virtually absolute control over — himself, his words, his movements and the issuing of his own orders. Other things he can influence but not control — the actions of immediate subordinates (through orders), the morale of a nearby unit.

Some things are completely beyond his reach — the actions of individual soldiers or unit commands on a distant part of the battlefield, commanders with whom he has no operational communications, time, distance, the weather. Perspective focuses the rules on simulating what is essential to the commander's battlefield environment.

Unfortunately, many rules writers don't seem to realize this (a few do). Some — the traditional realism school — pile on rules to simulate all kinds of things, and the player drowns. Others — the equivalent playability — school cut most of these away and pick a few basic mechanisms, creating one-size-fits-all rules that ignore important changes in warfare. (Honest, I just read an ad for a set of rules that claim to simulate warfare from 3000 B.C. to 1900 A.D.)

So, are realism and playability mutually exclusive, or do they lie at opposite ends of the rules design spectrum? If you define realism as an attempt to simulate as much as possible and playability an attempt to simulate the fewest number of basic mechanisms, then yes. Rule smiths over the years, myself included, have deluded ourselves and you into just such a trap.

Who's Reality is it Anyway
by Phil Johnston

But perspective frees us from that trap. Through whose eyes are we viewing the battlefield: the commanding general, division leader, brigadier or 1st Sgt. with his handful of men? Simulate his reality and you have a realistic wargame. (Obviously, there are some things it's better not to attempt to achieve, like being killed. But the risk of death or wounds to the player/commander can, and should, be simulated. A very simple mechanism might be that if the commander is killed, the corresponding player is out of the game; but this kind of discussion will have to be taken up in another column.)

By building rules around a unified design perspective, rules can become both more realistic (in simulating command) and more playable (by abstracting events over which the commander has no control). Obviously, the more complex the historic command environment, the more complex its simulation must become to pursue realism.

Some wargamers believe realistic warfare is unattainable using miniature figures. True, at least when it comes to the element of personal danger. (Though some equivalence on this issue can be achieved.) I would argue, though, that a realistic command environment in war, if not perfectly attainable, is substantially obtainable and certainly worth pursuing. In some senses, the very pursuit of this ideal is the primary benefit — much like the pursuit of quality. You may never reach perfection, but you certainly improve the product.

Where does this leave us? Game systems, then, which create a more accurate command environment are inherently more meaningful as an exploration of historical battlefield command and commanders. These help me to understand why certain commanders acted as they did in a given circumstance and how the decisions they made had intended and unintended consequences that determined the outcome of a battle. I can appreciate much more the genius of a Daun, knowing, at least partly from my own wargame command experience, the limitations under which he operated. Likewise, I judge Ney less harshly than I might, for the same reasons.

It comes down to this: know what you want in a wargame. If you want a realistic simulation, decide what you want to be realistically simulated. Then, hold the rules writers feet to their own fire. It's like the Oldsmobile commercial says, "It's your money. Demand better."