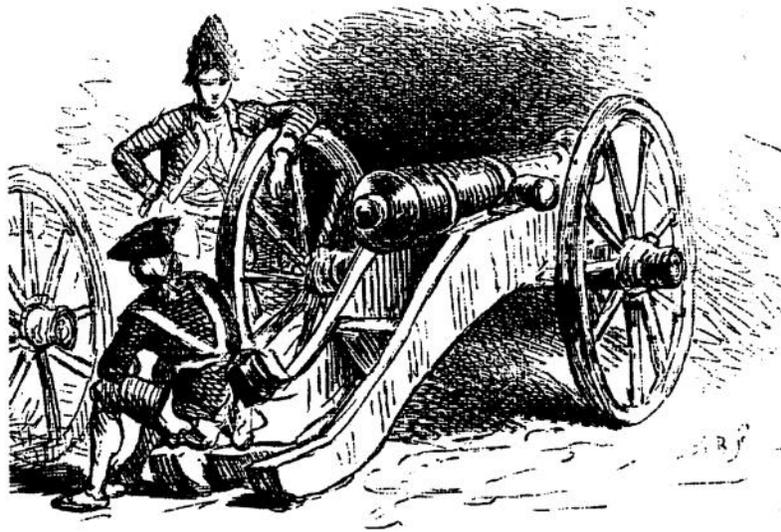




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A Whiff of Grape Shot

Do Wargamers Have a Control Problem?

by Phil Johnston

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I lined up my men in careful order, placing my best guys on my right. Across the field, my opponent formed his forces in a single line to try and stop my onslaught. I planned to launch a crushing assault, followed by a deep penetration beyond his front line. It was sure to work.

When both sides were ready, I flipped the switch and the action began. Several men on my team made straight for the sidelines, one ran backwards into our end zone, and two spun in circles. The ball carrier ... well, you get the picture - Vibramatic Football.

JCVFS and You

What's this got to do with wargaming? Simple. It illustrates one end of what I humbly call the Johnston Chess-Vibramatic Football Spectrum (JCVFS) of rules design. Let me elaborate. At the "Chess" end of the spectrum, players maneuver their units with absolute control, each piece functioning to its full capacity. At the other end, the player has no control over his forces once the action starts. They are arranged to best advantage and then chance and individual characteristics take over. (I had this one plastic football guy who never did anything except spin in place - backwards.) In wargaming jargon, this issue is called command and control.

So, which approach is the more realistic reflection of historic generalship? Obviously neither. But a battle has more in common with the chaos of Vibramatic Football than with the precision of chess. Subordinate commanders make bad judgments, attacks don't get off on time, somebody gets lost. It's what Clausewitz termed "friction," and we looked at it in some detail in past issues.

Unfortunately, most wargames rules are quite the opposite. The army commander determines the movement and enemy targets of each unit - nay each lead figure. Battalions, even companies, become extensions of the player's will. Granted, a unit may fail morale, fire poorly or be temporarily out of reach, but most other events on the battlefield are directly determined by the players rather than by "chance," which Clausewitz identified as the true arbiter of battle.

Analyzing the Spectrum

That's an unfair generalization, you say. Okay, many rule sets today incorporate some rules to regulate a player's ability to command and control units. So, let's take a closer look at different approaches to command and control in wargame design and see where each falls in our spectrum. I'll cite an example or two of each approach.

But let me offer two caveats at the outset: I play some of the games I mention, even those whose command systems I might find wanting, and my analysis is, by no means, exhaustive. If you wrote a set of rules that you believe incorporate some or all of the command and control approaches you believe I favor and I don't mention your game, I'm sorry. I've not played every rule set on the market, but I'm trying.

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I must also note that wargaming, like other "technologies" or social phenomena, is an evolutionary process with identifiable milestones and plateaus. Some (okay, many) people would disagree with me over whether wargames have "progressed" in the last decade or so. But, to me, game design represents the ongoing pursuit of realism (war) and playability (game). If it were not so, we'd be playing H.G. Wells style games and game companies couldn't stay in business.

For the purposes of this column we're going to focus on one half of this pursuit - realism (in command environment and activity). Not that everybody hankers after the newest in realism. It's akin to computers - many users demand relatively little of their computers, a few simple functions and ease-of-use. But, another segment of the market - power users - demand more sophistication. They tend to drive the market, though numerically they comprise a minority.

Likewise in wargaming, the diehard realism types, the so-called foggers, have a profound influence on design. If you don't believe that, look through the introductions or designer notes of your games. See how many talk about the designers' perceived need for a "more realistic" treatment of this, that or the other thing. Quite a few.

But, as I confessed in an earlier column I, like other foggers I know, for a long time had only the foggiest notion of what constituted realism. Hence the various rule sets that I have played over the years. Only by beginning with the question, "What do generals do?" did I begin to sort the various aspects of realism into priorities. Since I represented a general, realism in a wargame must begin with the general's reality.

Back to the point - realism in wargame design is evolutionary. What once was leading edge is now unfashionable. Not that the rules aren't still fun and worth playing. I'm not denigrating the value of any wargame; I'm only trying to analyze their command and control characteristics in a historical frame of reference.

Type 1 - the Army Autocrat

Enough introduction, caveats, premises, exceptions, etc. On to the matter at hand. Remember when we looked at Clausewitz we concluded that the aspects of the command environment that could be realistically simulated were uncertainty, chance, time, distance, chain of command, staff work and methods of communications. Let's see how the various approaches to command and control compare with this model and the JCVFS.

We begin with the first type of command and control - the army autocrat. Here players maneuver their units largely without restriction. They typically write orders, very detailed orders, for each unit. Or in some round-robin fashion they declare orders, again in excruciating detail. General figures give a bit of a bonus for morale or something, but that's about it. This is one of the earliest types of command and control, and it's still quite popular. Witness WRG-style rules and Covered with Glory as examples.

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This approach falls squarely on the "chess" end of JCVFS and gives more control than if the general and each unit had radios. (Ask anyone who's been involved in modern military maneuvers how much control a radio gives a commander. It's not as much as might be expected from the technology. Friction kinda gets in the way.) It also incorporates few, if any, of the command environment elements we've identified.

The limitations of the autocrat are apparent. On the one hand the player/commander can directly and thoroughly control all his units - not a historically accurate ability. (This column does not have the space to explore why this is not historical; I refer you to earlier issues of Historical Gamer.) On the other hand, the figure/commander - the little blob of lead - is used simply to generate the odd +1 and can be placed anywhere without regard to his placement's effect on command and control.

Type 2 - Pointing to Victory

Foggers who realized the limitations of the autocratic approach began casting about for something more realistic. One result was command and control based on command points. One example of this is the optional command limit rules in Johnny Reb. Here a command figure has a certain number of points to spend each turn, usually depending on historic skills. He spends them to move or activate units. Now we're moving slightly away from the "chess" approach.

This is clearly an improvement over type 1. Neither player/commanders nor figure/commanders have control over all their units at one time - except in limited circumstances. However, placement of the figure/commander is not usually critical, and the player has tremendous flexibility and control over units he spends points on. When he wants something to happen it happens right now. For those units it's as if the player was leading them in person - and you can't be in more than one place at one time. Or, it's like the army has a handful of radios, and the player passes them out to units from turn to turn, assuring instantaneous response from units in critical positions. But still, it's an improvement.

Type 3 - In the Cards

In the quest both for more uncertainty in command and greater playability, some rules use a card system to regulate command. On to Richmond and Washington's Wars are examples. Usually, written orders are dispensed with. Instead, players move their maneuver units in an arrangement based on the luck of the draw and some modifiers.

This doesn't really limit player's control over units; rather it limits the order in which units may be moved. This goes a certain way toward reflecting uncertainty, since the other player may do something that interferes with your ability to coordinate movements. But, of the other command environment elements we see little simulation.

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Type 4 - Knee Bone Connected to the Thigh Bone

A general's position was important, especially in the 19th Century and earlier. Ta da, the command radius rule - the knee bone connected to the thigh bone or short-range radio solution. Here everything depends on placement. If the brigade is within the command radius of the division commander who is within command radius of the corps commander who is within command radius of the army commander, then everyone moves instantly and within absolute control. Otherwise the units out of command move more slowly or some such thing. Two popular examples are Napoleon's Battles and Firefly. See the illustration on page 11 of NB.

Although the knee bone approach seems like a dramatic shift toward the football end of the spectrum, it's not. Basically, everyone has a very short range radio or telephone lines. A more skilled commander may have a more powerful radio - so Lee's walkie-talkie carries rather than McClellan's. But, if everyone is connected, then the army commander can move orders down the chain of command instantly, or at least within an absolutely predictable time.

So, it's like chess where the player has to be sure his arms can reach all the pieces on the board. Something might interfere with the neatly arranged lines of communication, but as long as the network is not disturbed, units are absolutely controllable. Unfortunately, this too misses reality: the general's reality. The impact of subordinate commanders interpreting orders, confusion, smoke or just the realities of space and time (i.e. it takes time for the courier to ride from point to point, for the order to be read, recopied and forwarded) should create more scope for chance - friction. This approach does little to address these elements. However, it does incorporate chain of command and distance as command environment elements.

Type 5 - It's Timing

Type 5 does address the issue of time. Here, a player issues an order. But, it requires a certain amount of time for the subordinate to act on that order. Often the amount of time is a function of the commander's skill. This is an improvement, since at least the impact of time has been added to the mix, along with the effects of differing skills. Empire III provided this breakthrough concept in the early 1980s, and the current version of the rules carry through this approach.

As mentioned earlier, realistic command environment rules should simulate uncertainty, chance, time, distance, chain of command, staff work and methods of communications. Type 5 rules incorporate several of these elements.

Type 6 - Three Step Program

What might be the latest breakthrough in command and control rules is based squarely on the foundation of perspective: the role, activities and environment of the historic commander.

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(Again, please see the earlier columns for a discussion of perspective.) This approach groups events into three categories - control, influence and helplessness. And it incorporates time and distance.

The earliest rule set incorporating this approach - that I know of - was Complete Brigadier. Here, the player/commander corresponded very closely with the figure/commander. He could issue orders (written in short-hand) to any unit on the field. However, the order had to be sent to the unit, which took time. And, if the unit was moving, well then, the order had to catch up. At the same time, the orders were required to be terse and realistic - like "Battalion, In Line, Forward March," not "go three inches forward, wheel to the right, move around the fence, advance again and attack the right flank of the enemy infantry after the cavalry has forced them into square."

Alternatively, a player/commander could place himself (figure/commander) in physical contact with the command stand of a unit and tell it to do something like "follow me." There was no command radius, per se, just the interaction of time and distance with the existing methods of communication. And there were a few pieces of interesting chrome, like orders getting lost if the courier passed too close to the enemy and was shot or captured.

What Complete Brigadier lacked, and these were critical deficiencies, were chance and uncertainty. The order always moved at the same pace, making its arrival largely predictable. Another quirk was that orders had to be issued to each unit every turn, which is not terribly historical. But, this was still a breakthrough - perhaps unnoticed and unheralded but to me at least as significant as the concept of time/skill pioneered by Empire III.

The current banner bearer for this approach is Legacy of Glory. It also incorporates time, distance, staff work (in various modifiers for certain individuals and nationalities), chain of command. It also introduced chance, a die roll. And, the just-published supplement to the rules emphasizes uncertainty. Instead of a player rolling a die and finding how long it will take before an order is activated, he just rolls a die. If he rolls high enough - with the modifiers for staff, distance, smoke, and other stuff - the order activates, if not, he rolls again next turn with a better chance of activating. Thus, no one knows in advance when the order will activate, a nerve-wracking and frustrating situation.

Legacy of Glory represents the farthest move yet toward the Vibramatic Football end of the JCVFS and perhaps is the most inclusive of the command environment elements. The player/commander is severely restricted in his ability to control events once battle is joined and the effects of friction multiply. Chance and uncertainty (especially in the newest version) dominate, and the mechanical aspects of command are largely accounted for.

What I Meant to Say Was

I feel compelled again to say that I play and enjoy a number of the rule sets (with different

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command systems) mentioned above. And all we've looked at is command within the confines of the environment defined through our study of Clausewitz. Obviously, there are other factors which can make or break a set of rules - playability, firepower simulation, formation rules, etc. While the command environment must be central to a set of rules that accurately simulates battlefield command, it is not the only issue involved. So, I've neither criticized nor praised any rules for factors beyond the scope of this analysis.

The three-step system may represent the next stage in the evolution of wargame design; certainly it's not the last word. I hope that, as other rules have done, this design approach will form the basis for the next evolution, or revolution, in wargame design in pursuit of the elusive goal of realistic command simulation.