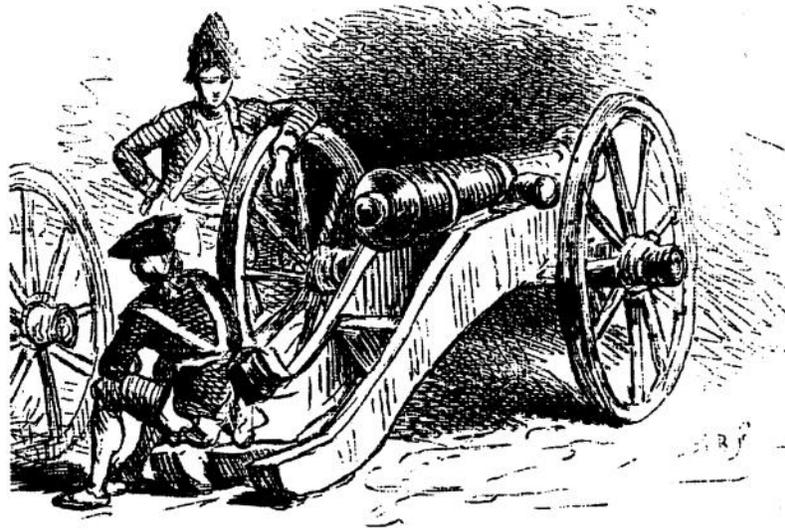




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A Whiff of Grape Shot

Where Does 12000 Words Get You?

by Phil Johnston

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Where Does 12000 Words Get You? by Phil Johnston

This issue of Historical Gamer will complete my first year as a columnist in the wargaming hobby. I think that's a big deal, anyway. Others might not. In those 12 months, I've written more than 12,000 words on war and wargaming and, I hope, shed some light on those subjects.

We've covered a lot of ground in this year, discussing everything from old beer commercials and realism vs playability to fog, friction and the many flavors of wargame design. Since this article represents something of a conclusion - both to my first year in Historical Gamer and to the line of analysis we initially embarked on - I thought we might do a little review.

It's kinda like those last few weeks of school; we'll see where we've been and what we might have learned. Hopefully, this will fill in a few holes for those who've not read the whole series and will provide a concrete foundation for future discussions.

Once upon a time

The nightmare started when we began looking at realism in wargaming - is such a thing possible? Is it desirable? Does it exist anywhere?

Answering these questions have occupied us for almost a year and required a number of interim questions and answers, like what is wargaming after all? Is realism a singular issue or are there a variety of types of realism? What are the essential elements that make up real warfare and real warfare for what categories of participants? First, some definitions: a wargame is an attempt to simulate some aspects of warfare; a simulation is an imitative representation of the functioning of one process or system by the functioning of another; thus, a wargame is an attempt to simulate certain parts of the system or process of warfare by developing a set of mechanisms that function as an imitative representation of those parts. Fair enough. (It took a lot more words in the first go round.)

What do we do now?

What should we attempt to simulate? That depends on whose reality you want to recreate on the tabletop. Usually, it's some commander's reality - army, corps, division, brigade, squad, etc. In other words, we must first define the perspective of the players who will be involved. Who do they represent? A historic, singular role, like corps commander, or everybody from corps commander on down to the smallest unit commander? A friend of mine calls this the Will of the Fatherland role. Obviously, the latter is hopelessly unrealistic. Otherwise you have a situation where the battalion commander has a direct Vulcan mind meld link to the entire chain of command - that's even better than radio.

So, pick out a role or perspective and stick to it. And, since most wargames put the players in charge of large units - brigades or higher - that's what we adopted for our discussion. Next, we had to examine that commander's reality. Reality is quite a concept, especially when you

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try to break it down into its essential characteristics. But, fortunately, there's help. Clausewitz expended far more words than I have on this subject and concluded that four elements define the environment of war, from the commander's perspective. These are: danger, physical exertion, uncertainty and chance. To these qualitative elements, we can add mechanical or quantitative elements such as time, distance, chain of command, staff work and methods of communications. Physical exertion and danger are relatively hard to simulate, the rest are not.

So, we now know what is possible in realistic wargaming. Many of the mechanical aspects of war vary throughout history as commanders moved farther away from the front lines and command structures became more sophisticated. Thus, any analysis of them must be conducted in the context of a specific epoch in the development of war.

But those two environmental elements Clausewitz identifies, uncertainty and chance, haven't changed much in the last several millennia, except in how those elements sometimes manifest themselves. We spent an entire article looking at uncertainty and chance, also known as fog of war and friction. In brief, we saw that uncertainty or fog of war involves the availability and accuracy of information, while chance or friction relates to the myriad of cause-effect relationships on the battlefield that combine to upset a commander's plans and frustrate his efforts.

We saw that most wargamers have too little of fog and friction. They know much more than they should about their own forces and the enemy's, and they are able to turn their will into battlefield events too easily and smoothly. Obviously, things go wrong when your will and subsequent events begin to bump into the will and events of the enemy. But Clausewitz argues that much of the friction in war stems from the actions of your own troops - they being human and liable to err - not from the actions of the enemy.

Clausewitz also contends that war is conducted in a twilight where some information is wrong and other information is grotesquely exaggerated or distorted. Thus, figuring out what is true, is the first challenge of command - not something most wargamers have to struggle with on the table. Then, turning your decision (based on your assessment of what's true) into actual events in the face of enormous friction all along the chain of command is the second challenge. Clausewitz compares this struggle to moving in a resistive medium, like walking in deep water. It takes tremendous effort to accomplish even minimal results.

What do generals do?

In this very uncooperative environment, the player (and the historic commander) undertook the activities of war. So, the second fundamental question is, "What do generals do?" Taking this apart, we saw that there are three categories of effect a general can have on the battlefield. First, there are things over which he has a high degree of control. These include his own thoughts and words, his own movements, the movements of units to which he is directly attached and the issuing of orders (not necessarily the results of those orders).

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Second, there are the things over which he has influence but not truly effective control. These include the actions of nearby subordinates through orders, the morale of a nearby unit and, less effectively, the actions of a more distant subordinate. Of course, a subordinate might, for any of several reasons, act contrary to the commander's will.

Finally, there is a very large category of events over which the commander has no control - the actions of individual battalions, companies, and batteries from which he is remote (either in geographic terms or in terms of chain of command), commanders with whom he has no operational communications, time, distance, weather, etc.

We now have the basic parameters by which we can assess wargame design for realism. The requirement can be phrased thus: place the player in the role of a real individual and that individual's environment, keep him there and enable the player to engage in the activities of that individual within the limits of effectiveness as they historically existed.

Playability too

The neat thing about this paradigm for realism is that it actually makes wargames simpler and more playable. By limiting the knowledge base and activities of the player to those available to the historic individual, we streamline the player's interaction with the rules. Fewer decisions to make mean faster play, less opportunity for gamesmanship and more realistic results. The remaining events on the battlefield can be abstracted into mechanisms in which the player has little involvement.

This is not to say that the complexities of the battlefield are ignored. Mathematics allow us to retain that complexity while keeping our interaction with it simple. Huh? The bell curve. Without going into the gory details, we looked at how a series of subsidiary events and conditions can be used as modifiers to a dice roll without sacrificing the natural complexity of the event - if the roll creates a curved result rather than a strictly linear result. That's the difference between a 2D10 roll and a 1D10 roll. The odds of rolling any number on the latter are the same as any other number, while some results on the former (an 11) are much more probable than others (a 20).

Since conflicting modifiers to a bell curve tend to push results toward the large indecisive center, we can include a variety of factors in the equation without unrealistic distortion. Thus, several elements (such as better morale, a flanking position, the effects of fire, etc.,) must be present in order to significantly change the probabilities for given outcome. Low-chance outcomes (such as the Iron Brigade routing in an initial combat) can be included but given a low chance of occurring. The more typical battlefield results are rendered more typical since they fall in the large center area of the bell curve. And, modifiers in one side's favor tend to push results toward one (decisive) end of the curve or the other.

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Miniature Men

Finally, we analyzed the various types of command schemes now in vogue among wargame designers, using the soon-to-be-famous Johnston Chess-Vibramatic Football Spectrum. The two ends of this spectrum are chess, where players may move their units freely and with complete control, and Vibramatic Football, where players have no control over events one action begins.

We looked at the strengths and weaknesses of each type of wargame command approach and where each fits into the JCVFS. Generally, the types of command control are as follows: 1. The army autocrat. Here players may issue orders to their subordinate units virtually without restriction. Very chess. 2. Pointing to victory. These rules assign a commander a number of command points but give the player a lot of flexibility on who they can spend the points on. Slightly less chess, since usually there are not enough points to go around, and some units are out of control. Other command environment issues are not addressed. 3. In the cards. Determining units for activation by cards, these rules do little to represent the command environment or those factors we have identified as available for simulation. Very chess. 4. Knee bone connected to the thigh bone. Also known as command radius. This identifies distance as a factor in command, but it largely ignores time. It is as if the units have short range radios; if they're in range, they can be given orders freely and instantly. Very chess, but with restrictions on the length of a player's arms. 5. It's timing. Finally, time is treated as a factor. Commanders are given skill ratings, which determine how long it takes for their units to activate orders. Significantly less chess, but still there is little uncertainty about how long activation takes and relatively little role for chance. 6. Three step program. As currently used, this involves giving commanders skill ratings that provide them with a basis for determining the number of commands they may issue, somewhat randomized. Orders may be issued freely, but distance between commander and subordinate require a minimum passage of time for the order to traverse. Then, the speed with which the subordinate obeys depends on skill, national ratings, battlefield smoke, other stuff and chance. A player cannot predict the turn of activation with any degree of accuracy. Fairly vibramatic.

So, I guess the conclusion is that yes, realism in wargaming is achievable. We can identify the key elements of the commander's environment, provide the player with a substantially matching environment, give him the capabilities and limitations of the historical counterpart and keep the simulation relatively simple. And, we have seen how different rules designers have over the years attempted to create this realism and how effective the various approaches have been. That's not bad for one year's work.