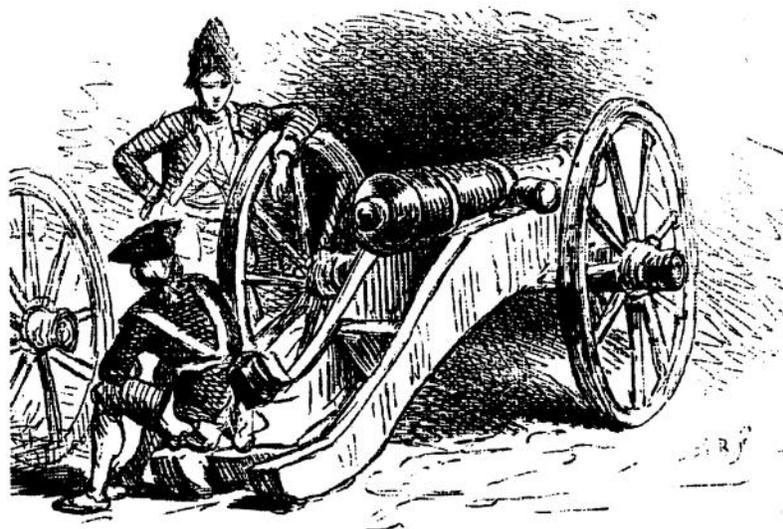




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A Whiff of Grape Shot

We Need To Get Some Perspective On This

by Phil Johnston

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In our last exciting episode, the author tore into the thorny issue of realism, attempting (wielding his two-handed pole pen) to defeat the forces of obfuscation and fuzzy thinking. He waded into the sanguine contest to smite a blow for reason, balance and perspective.

Perspective. Hmm. This idea is critical to a good realistic wargames design. Because of that, and because I think there's good deal more that needs to be said about the issue, this piece will mostly focus on the importance, nature and effect of perspective in wargaming. So, if this topic doesn't interest you, flip to something else.

First, a quick definition of perspective. One dictionary defines perspective, or point of view, as a position from which something is considered or evaluated. Taking this apart in wargame terms, the position is that of the player/commander; the something to be considered or evaluated is warfare. Perspective in wargame design, then, means to develop a system that simulates warfare from the position of the player/commander and his historical counterpart. (For those of you who didn't read the previous article, Webster defines a simulation as the imitative representation of the functioning of one system or process by means of the functioning of another. For us that means representing warfare using rules of play.)

No D&D, Please

The player's historical counterpart is critical to developing perspective, and it is potentially controversial. (To some it borders on role playing, which is anathema to historical gaming.) But, I would argue that wargamers already place themselves in the position of historical characters. When your umpire assigns players to commands, does he usually say, Okay Bob, you're the commander of the Union forces at Gettysburg; Bill you're the commander of Confederate forces? Not in the circles where I game. Usually it's, Bob, you're Meade; Bill you're Lee. This does not require Bob or Bill to take on the personalities or actions of Meade or Lee, à la D&D-style role playing. Rather, it simply places them in the position of a historic figure in a historic event.

Interesting. It seems that wargamers, by nature, gravitate, perhaps unknowingly, toward perspective in their gaming. We want to play the part of commanders; that's what wargaming is all about. (It certainly wouldn't be much fun to play the part of that hapless foot slogger in Wellington's army who described his experience at Waterloo as being, all day trodden in the mud and ridden over by every scoundrel who had a horse.)

The problem is that many rules begin by placing the player in a certain command position, but they don't keep him there. They let Napoleon, from his helicopter, directly control the activities of individual brigades, battalions, nay even individual skirmish companies. The idea that Napoleon could really do that is patently absurd, but for some reason we accept it as natural in wargaming.

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It's a Control Issue

In the last article, we outlined three categories of events on the battlefield and the player/commander's relationship to them. To recap, they are: things he can control, things he can influence and things on which he has no effect. By analyzing the battlefield in this way, rules writers and rules users can focus more attention on what is important to the control and influence activities of the historical commander and less on what he cannot effect. (Another definition of perspective is the capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance. Interesting how all this fits together, no?)

A good set of rules, then, should give a player/commander tremendous potential and flexibility related to things he can control, provide some capabilities for influencing certain other things, and severely restrict his ability to effect the last category of events. Of course, what falls into each category will vary over history and by what level of command is being simulated. So, it's counterproductive at this point to try to make adamant assertions about that. We might delve into more specifics in a latter article.

For now, read historic accounts of battles, or think through battles you've already read about. What kinds of things did an army commander routinely do a corps commander, a division commander? What things were usually outside his control? Make a list. (Try, if possible, not to cite a single incident or two as indicative of a commander's capabilities. True, Napoleon did direct the fire of an individual artillery piece at Lodi, but that does not mean he would do so routinely. Also, keep in mind that he was, on the spot, at the time, not in his helicopter calling in artillery strikes.)

Then, look at your rules. Do they reflect the list you made? Do your rules force you to make decisions the historic army or corps commanders did not? Do they let you influence or control things the historic commanders did not normally affect? Do they have provisions that tend to leave the direction of brigades, regiments, battalions, batteries largely to the abilities of subordinate commanders even when there is no player/commander at this level? (There are ways of doing this rather elegantly, but that's also the topic of another article.) If the results of your analysis are favorable, rejoice; you're blessed with a set of rules that, at least in part, realistically simulate command. If not, and if this disturbs you, make noise. Most rules writers claim their products are realistic; hold them to it. Complain. Write angry letters. Tell your friends. Or, at least shop around for something better.

Wait, There's More

As a side benefit, eliminating battlefield micro-management also makes a wargame more playable and, to me, more satisfying. I can concentrate on the big picture and developing a battle plan, rather than trying to direct minor tactics. (Of course in a smaller-scale game, minor tactics may be all there is. But, for the purposes of this discussion we're focusing on larger battles where the player takes the role of army or corps or at least division commander.)

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Perspective-based rules also tend to mitigate in favor of the novice but talented player. In a set of rules with many decision points all up and down the chain of command, the experienced player can use the benefit of that experience at every level to thwart his neophyte opponent. (You know, those little tricks the rules provide to turn events in your favor, sometimes even in the face of history and reason.) Every decision point represents the opportunity to gain an advantage; the more there are, the greater the overall advantage.

By restricting decisions that have significant impact on the game to those few actually made by the historic commander, the novice need only have a working grasp of history, strategy-or-tactics-as-appropriate and a few rules mechanisms to defeat his more experienced opponent. Obviously, hot dice also help.

It's Elementary, My Dear Gamer

From this we can see that complexity not only does not equate to realism, but that in many cases it detracts from it. Take, for example a Napoleonic simulation in which the player functions as a corps commander. The player deploys his divisions, selects a line of attack and can commit reserves. But, the rules also allow the player to determine whether his batteries fire canister, round shot or shell, select individual targets for units in the skirmish screen, decide whether a battalion will form square against cavalry, choose from a variety of column types and change his unit's formations as frequently as he desires, etc. The player can also select different types of musket fire, volley by platoons, volleys by ranks, etc., and whether or not his cavalry will activate an opportunity charge. The player decides whether an isolated unit in will remain in front of the enemy or retire with its comrades, and, of course, what formation it will assume.

From what we've seen above, these rules are detailed, complex but utterly unrealistic in terms of command. No Napoleonic corps commander was forced to make so many decisions or was given the opportunity to exercise so much control. That's why armies subordinate commanders. To be realistic, in terms of command, rules must have provisions that limit the player's ability to impose his will from afar. The rules design perspective then forces players to act within the environment of their historical counterparts. The actions of the subordinate commanders are to be accounted for, but the rules should provide for the chance of independent (and sometimes undesirable) activity on the part of those subordinates. We'll see why this independence is critical to realistic wargame command rules in a future article when we look at fog and friction on the battlefield and tabletop.

By incorporating perspective, realistic command can be at least partly achieved without sacrificing playability. In fact, by limiting decisions, the simulation becomes more playable. Realistic simulations of battlefield command are not the compilation of minute historic detail of weaponry, formations, small unit actions, etc. Instead, they place a player in the shoes of a historical commander with the decisions, limitations and frustrations of the original. That's what I call a realistic wargame.

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And, in conclusion ...

Of course, the discussion must always come back to, What do I want in a wargame? Why do I play? If you have convinced yourself you want to see what it was really like to exercise command in historic armies, focus on rules that focus on what it was really like to command. It seems obvious, and maybe to all the rest of the wargamers in the world, it is obvious. But I know that for a long time I didn't get this idea. I jumped from rules to rules (kind of like Looking for Mr. Goodrule), never satisfied but not understanding why.

When the epiphany finally came, it enabled me to more reasonably assess rules sets, focus on what I wanted and, if needed, modify rules to fit my now clear requirements (without detracting from their playability by piling on all sorts of secondary stuff).

At this point some might scoff at the idea of seeking rules that reflect what command in war was, really like. They say, Wargaming can't be realistic because you're not being shot at. There's no risk of death or wounds to the player. If you want realism, play paintball.

As we touched on last time, realism is a multi-dimensional thing. Physical danger is certainly part of real war, and it is admittedly hard to simulate in wargaming. But there are other things that can be realistically simulated. Some of these most wargamers agree upon, things like uniforms, terrain, formations, weapon effects, morale effects of certain events, etc. These largely describe the environment of the soldier and lower-level officer.

But, what of the environment of the battlefield commander? Interestingly, Clausewitz describes this environment as comprising four elements: danger, physical effort, uncertainty and chance. The first two are hard to simulate in a wargame, the latter are not and should be simulated in any set of realistic command rules. To Clausewitz's list of environmental elements we can add such mechanical elements as time, distance, chain of command, staff work and methods of communications. All these are also open to simulation.

Then, what is possible to simulate in terms of realism and wargame command are: uncertainty, chance, time, distance, chain of command, staff work and methods of communication. And they said it couldn't be done. We'll begin to look at some of these items next time, when we look at fog and friction (uncertainty and chance) in war and wargaming, looking to that master of military theory, belle of the battlefield, doyen of destruction, the one, the only, Karl von Clausewitz.