

The Very Real Difference Between Historical and Non-Historical Wargaming

The release of the most recent issue of *Miniature Wargames with Battlegames* magazine (#396, April 2016) a significant portion of the content of which was devoted to non-historical wargaming, led me to return to a back issue of *Wargames, Soldiers and Strategy* (#76, December 2014) which had a similar theme. While perusing this issue, some comments led me to ponder the relationships between the numerous and varying styles and genres of wargaming . . . a tangle of intersecting and opposing interests so complex that depicting it graphically might require more than three spatial dimensions.

Discussions of an occasionally furious and bitter nature have raged across the World Wide Web (and through other media, before the internet) over what exactly the relationship is between fantasy/scifi gaming and historical gaming, and the editor of this magazine has chosen to weigh in on the subject by dedicating a themed issue of what is generally a historical publication to "steampunk", the abbreviated, casual term for what could be more accurately called Victorian Science Fiction. Before I examine some of the ideas presented in the issue, I should mention by way of disclosure that I am a purely historical gamer, but I am also an irredeemable relativist and deeply skeptical of anything that claims to be the "best", "only" or "right" way of doing anything, especially in a hobby context. My contributions to the hobby tend to be descriptive rather than prescriptive; more "here's what I do, and this is how" than "you should do it this way". I admit that, although I do not and would not game "steampunk", I found this issue to be very entertaining (as I do any type of gaming that is done excellently, whether it is my chosen genre or not). I keep a weather eye on The Greater World of Adventure Gaming (a term popularized, if not actually coined by the late Pat Condray, prominent wargamer and author of *The Unexpurgated History of the Historical Miniature Gaming Society*) and I follow with interest the many-faceted developments that take place in all sectors of the larger gaming world outside of my own little niche. This is a practice apparently not pursued by all of the contributors to *WS&S*, which may have contributed to the making of statements that are either mistaken or ill-informed.

In this issue of the magazine, Martin Onderdonck, who writes "The Irregular" feature column, begins his article by expounding upon his introduction to wargaming and refers occasionally to observations of his own gaming club. In the course of the article he generalizes his own experiences, and those of his gaming buddies, to the hobby as a whole (a dangerously inaccurate practice, given the many different varieties of wargame experience) and makes several statements . . .

"Historical gaming followed the path beaten by Warhammer."

"Warhammer Historical was one the best things that happened to historical wargaming."

"The wargaming world has caught up to Warhammer"

"[the Warhammer rules] have turned into must-do concepts in our wargaming world, whether fantasy or historical."

. . . which could only have been made by someone with a woefully shallow view of wargaming. While acknowledging that "everything in a Warhammer rules set will have been tried or published before", he seems unaware that it was constructed from mechanics that had been tried and abandoned by many historical wargame designers decades earlier, for good reasons. He also claims that it established an

"archetype" and was built by "the best minds in the wargaming world", apparently without any awareness that he was propounding what would be recognized as unsupportable hype by anyone with wargaming experience outside of a very narrow range.

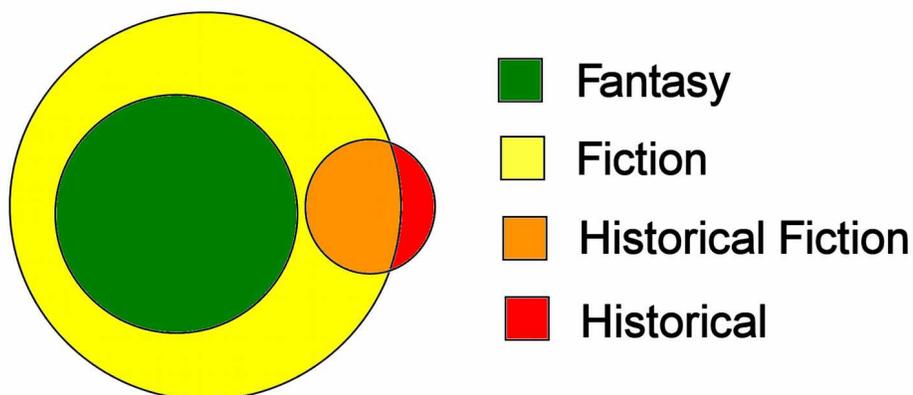
He proclaims that, while *Warhammer Ancients Battles* is "still a fun set to play", it falls short of Warhammer Fantasy because of limited options, viz., "You can put Arthur on a horse, but not on a flying dragon." as if the pageantry, glory and romance of Arthurian England were not sufficient to hold one's interest without dragons. He also makes the mistake of judging the value of a rule set by its popularity. If that is a valid criterion, then we must judge a Hyundai to be an automobile superior to a Mercedes, since so many more people buy Hyundais.

In his one-line comment at the close of the column the editor states (hopefully with just a touch of irony) "Rumour has it that the original Warhammer was formed around the solid principles of historical wargaming."

Indeed.

In his editorial, Guy Bowers quotes an email from Stephen Howe in which he says "I don't think one flavour of playing with model soldiers is different from another, fantasy or historical." This is, of course, perfectly true . . . if you play with them both in exactly the same way. It ignores, however, that there are ways of playing historical wargames that are quite distinct from the way in which fantasy games are played. Mr. Howe's statement speaks more to the narrowness of his own experience in historical wargaming than it does to the nature of either genre. Bowers goes on to comment that there is an apparent, but artificial "divide in the hobby between what is historical and what is fictional." Semantics gets in the way here since there is, of course, historical fiction as well as nonfiction, and most historical wargaming *is* fictional since it is grounded in scenarios that are not strictly historical and yield variable outcomes. This is entirely beside the point; the divide actually exists between what is historical and what is *fantasy*, not fiction.

Consider the following simple diagram:



All fantasy gaming is necessarily fictional, because it contains elements that never did and could not exist; magic, fabulous creatures, and imaginary technologies, for example. Only a small portion (probably much less than the red portion of this diagram would seem to indicate) of historical gaming is non-fiction, hewing closely to actual recorded events and orders of battle . . . and even then the

games may occasionally have outcomes inconsistent with the historical record (unless they are mere walk-throughs of historical events, which is then not a game but an animated diorama). The fiction area of the diagram that is neither fantasy nor historical (in yellow) would include counter-factual, alternative, or even "future" histories, along with any setting that could conceivably have happened but did not. It is self-evident that the divide between fantasy and history is not artificial; it is fundamental and real, and this divide extends itself directly into games that address fantasy or history as subject matter.

An oft-heard objection to the pursuit of history in gaming is that we weren't there, we can't know what really happened, therefore it's all just fantasy anyway. This point of view not only demonstrates an inability to distinguish between fantasy and fiction, but also fails to see a distinction between constructing a game with numbers and mechanics that attempt to model aspects of historical events, and just making it up. It's a given that a historical wargame will never recreate history completely or accurately, but that's not the point, either. As Gavin Schmidt pointed out, "Models are not "right" or "wrong"; they're always wrong. They're always approximations. The question you have to ask is whether a model tells you more information than you would have had otherwise." That wargaming can provide insight into warfare is a truth that has been accepted by military professionals for centuries.

Wargaming began, as far as detailed documentation can reveal, in the late 18th and early 19th century (although there are hints that it may have originated, in some form, centuries earlier) as an attempt to recreate as accurately as possible the interactions that occurred on the battlefield, for the purposes of instruction. It is hardly surprising that professional soldiers in the Age of Reason would assume that the intricacies of the art of war would be amenable to reason. It was originally solely the purview of military professionals, but as its popularity spread through the 1800s individuals outside of the military began to take an interest in it as an intellectual exercise, and recreational wargaming was born. (For a more detailed treatment of this subject, see my essay "Let the Games Begin!") The original recreational wargames were almost universally fictional in nature (the most notable exception being naval wargames) until the latter half of the twentieth century when many recreational wargamers became increasingly interested in achieving greater congruency with the historical record. At the same time, other styles of gaming (board wargames, role playing games, fantasy/scifi miniatures, and computer games) emerged and became massively popular, eventually mostly eclipsing the original, historically based miniature games.

Many of the most recent generation of wargamers seem only marginally concerned with, and often completely unaware of the hobby's origins. This lack of perspective leaves them unaware that fantasy and science fiction gaming is a very recent offshoot of an ancient and venerable practice, with its roots very firmly embedded in reality. I have even run across gamers who thought that historical wargames were a recent, niche development of fantasy and science fiction gaming(!). Fantasy and Sci-fi gaming came very late to the dance and, in spite of its current popularity, had no influence on the development of the more general hobby until the last few decades. In its recent explosion of popularity it has differentiated itself from its ancestor so dramatically as to become virtually a different hobby altogether.

Wargaming being primarily a social hobby, social divides have arisen between those who embrace the newer styles as part of a larger and increasingly diverse hobby and those who persevere in the original, historically based games. Conflict and friction have developed over space in gaming venues, retail establishments, and hobby publications and invective flies back and forth, with those who clung to the older style accusing the others of being juvenile and frivolous, and the proponents of the newer styles characterizing the others as stuffy and elitist. Other rifts opened within each genre between those who

prefer rigid, tournament-style games and those who indulge in more cinematic and narrative types, between those who savor bottom-up, nuts and bolts simulations and those who enjoy top-down command studies. These differences are often highlighted and aggravated by vocal proponents of one faction or another who are all too ready to disparage the others and defend their own favored genre and style as superior. Under these pressures, the already small hobby of adventure gaming has inevitably splintered into even smaller, niche sub-hobbies. (I make no value judgment on this trend; I merely note it as fact.)

However, some of the most strident declarations come not from the fans of a particular genre, but from the generalist gamers who blithely cross between genres and styles in pursuit of a good game. For these gamers, the game is all-important and the subject matter is either secondary or irrelevant. They seem to prefer themes that are colorful and dramatic, but they are indifferent to the source of the material, be it taken from the pages of history books, literature, or film. The miniatures or other game components have no meaning for them beyond their function in the game, and the mechanics of the game have no significance for them beyond their utility in winning. As far as they are concerned, any game with historical playing pieces is a "historical wargame", regardless of any dissimilarity between what happens in the game and what actually happened historically.

For someone who comes to wargaming primarily because it is a vivid and dynamic way to engage military history (that is, someone for whom the subject matter is of primary importance), this attitude is difficult to understand; and, because the history of war is a grim and serious subject, it definitely rubs the historical wargamer the wrong way when someone insists that what he is doing is no more than "playing with toy soldiers", and can never be anything more. This is akin to claiming that, because you only use your pencil to draw stick figures, therefore my pencil cannot draw a portrait or a still life. Though there are superficial similarities between historical and non-historical gaming (the use of dice, miniatures or counters, maps or terrain), a profound difference lies in the way in which they are used. If games were not capable of being anything more than play, they would not find such useful and widespread application in business, the military, and the social sciences.

Even more obnoxious is the generalist gamers' insistence that the purely historical gamer must include other genres as being part of his hobby, and must welcome them at venues where historical gamers gather to partake of their mutual interest in military history. This is patently ridiculous, akin to insisting that an association of landscape artists must include house painters because they also use brushes and paints, or that a gathering of bakers must include barbecue chefs because they are both "just making food." This blindness to disparity is a natural result of indifference to the content and purpose of historical gaming. The inability (or refusal) to perceive a difference between historical gaming and other genres does not mean that no difference exists, any more than the inability of a color-blind individual to perceive a difference between red and green means that they are the same color.

It is not that I have anything against fantasy/scifi gaming . . . quite the contrary. In my younger days, I spent many hundreds of happy hours immersed in the pursuit of dungeon denizens and the clash of starships and orc hordes, but as my fascination with history grew my interest in things which are merely wisps of the imagination faded. The allure of historical gaming is that it illuminates events which actually happened, to people who actually existed. The broad sweep of history (military history in particular) and the myriad details that unfold throughout, define who we are as humans and what we are capable of, and therein lies its great weight, meaning, and irresistible attraction . . . and therein also lies The Difference.

I do not play wargames for the sake of gaming; it is one means among several to enhance and explore

my understanding of history. While other genres of game can be colorful and entertaining to observe, I find actually playing them to be pointless, and profoundly uninteresting. If historical gaming were to disappear, leaving all the other genres as the only options, I would stop gaming.