

Preamble¹

This year I stopped playing DBMM and switched to Field of Glory (FOG) in a search of more fun in my ancient and medieval wargaming.

I wrote about my experiences during the switch on my wargaming blog The Waving Flag² where the posts proved very popular. Earlier this month I was approached by the Slingshot Editor and asked if I would consider combining the various blog posts into a print article for Slingshot.

So, ever biddable, here is an account of my switch from DBMM to FOG. It looks at the reasons behind the sudden change, how I found FOG, a list of my likes and dislikes, and closes with pointers for those considering doing the same.

Befuddled?

I started playing DBMM at the beginning of September 2007 shortly after its release. Prior to that I had been playing DBM for more years than I care to remember. It is fair to say that at first the transition from DBM to DBMM seemed easy but I soon realised there are significant differences between the two and that I was getting things wrong. This was the beginning of my befuddlement. To improve my play I studied the rules and produced various playing aides until such time as DBMM became second nature. I began posting these on my blog in 2007 where they eventually formed the series you may know as “DBMM for the Befuddled”³.

From 2007 onwards I worked hard to understand the intricacies of DBMM and improve the quality of my play. Initially, I made progress and got past my early befuddlement relatively easily. I succeeded in “unlearning” DBM and in 2009 even played in a few competitions. However I began to experience what the French call “l’esprit d’escalier”⁴. Win or lose, nearly every game gave rise to at least one pivotal play or circumstance that I later discovered was not legal. When I first encountered this I thought it was my inexperience. I tried harder but it wouldn’t go away and I suspect I provided as many of these plays for my opponents as they did for me.

So why change?

The pivotal event came in January 2010 when I played DBR against my regular and long standing Sunday afternoon opponent Graham Hutchinson. This was our first DBR game in almost two

¹This article appeared in Slingshot 273, November 2010

²<http://blog.vexillia.me.uk/>

³<http://blog.vexillia.me.uk/search/label/Befuddled>

⁴http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L'esprit_de_l'escalier

years. Within half an hour the rules had come back to me and all I needed was a two page quick reference sheet. This was more like it. This was fun. More importantly, in the pub afterwards, Graham commented on how much more relaxed I was. It was this comment that led to the first discussions about FOG. We settled on FOG mainly because of the large player base; both locally at the Manchester Area Wargames Society (MAWS)⁵, and regionally in the north of England.

I now view the “l’espirit d’escalier” effect as the major factor sapping the enjoyment I got from playing DBMM. There were others. The process by which DBMM moved towards version 2.0 was fully exposed by the high volume Yahoo! DBMM list. This steadily drained what remained of my enthusiasm for DBMM. The openness of the process is to be applauded but far too often the list offered far more heat than light.

On reflection I think DBMM version 1.0 is just too intricate and complex, as well as broken in places, for me to really enjoy the experience. I know that DBMM version 2.0 has attempted to rectify the problems but from my reading of the drafts the issue of complexity is deep seated and remains. In the end the thought of having to learn a new version of DBMM in 2010 was just too much. It was time to move on, try something new and hopefully have some fun.

A plan!

Deciding to change rules sets is one thing; doing it is another. Graham & I decided that, to get the fastest possible start, the first thing we had to do was get someone to show us what to do. We were fortunate that James Hamilton, a very experienced FOG player, agreed to run a game for us in early April. We choose a game featuring Mongol Conquest vs. Early Russians that we had played many, many times under DBMM. This ensured we could draw direct comparisons between FOG and DBMM from the very first game:

- Under both DBMM and FOG the battle is between quality regulars and numerically superior irregulars. The FOG game was as close fought and interesting as any of our DBMM games with a narrow Mongol victory after both camps were taken.
- The longer turn sequence in FOG increases the complexity compared to DBMM but the absence of bound specific combat factors and complex gradings means that FOG seems simpler overall; even after one game!
- Unlike DBMM, FOG does not have a PIP system and nearly everything moved every turn. Under DBMM I would often wait for a set of poor PIP dice to hamper the Russian advance. With FOG this was not going to happen; some Russian charges failed but they still moved forward.
- Using cavalry and light horse the Mongols broke a battle line of spear, with supporting skirmishers and secure flanks, by a combination of shooting and a well timed charge or two. This felt right. Under DBMM this would have been a very hard and potentially costly thing to do.

⁵<http://www.maws.org.uk>

- The absence of weather, time of day, and stratagems, together with the simple terrain placement rules in FOG, lead to a very rapid start to the game. The alternate deployment of battle groups helped this. Unlike DBMM there are no maps, command rectangles or baggage placement to deal with.

In short it went very well indeed for a first game and was really enjoyable. So, in the pub after the game, we decided to give FOG an extended run and roughed out a plan for the six months to September 2010.

Firstly, we decided we had to play a few FOG games without any help; keeping roughly the same armies to ease the transition. Next we wanted to try the high medieval period with knights, heavy foot and archers. We also thought we should play with a “silent” umpire to check what we had learnt and prevent us developing bad habits. Finally, we agreed that the true test of our progress would be entering the penultimate round of the Northern League at Halifax in September as a doubles team.

This was a reasonably ambitious plan but having a few goals actually helped rather than hindered our progress. Surprisingly, things went pretty much as planned and on 19 September Graham and I played FOG in the Northern League doubles competition at Halifax without making complete fools of ourselves; we ended the day with a big loss and a big win.

The Good, the Bad and advice for the Mystified

Overall I am pleased with the FOG rules and my progress as a player in the last six months. I am still not as quick as I would like but I am certain that it is only a matter of time. My DBMM armies have transferred easily to Field of Glory and I have enjoyed using both my Mongol Conquest and Later Polish armies. I have had to adapt my style of play a touch but not too much. More importantly, I have yet to experience any of the “l’esprit d’escalier” moments that undermined my enjoyment of DBMM. In six months I have gone from mystified FOG novice to first time competition FOG player. Based on this, here are the observations and pointers I promised:

What’s good about FOG?

- The terrain placement system is truly brilliant; simple and easy to use.
- The rules are clear and straightforward; if not well indexed.
- The basic rules and concepts are easy to understand and memorise.
- It is not as difficult to play as the rulebook makes it appear.
- There is a solid logical structure in FOG without too many exceptions.
- Each of the five phases is relatively simple and self consistent but they need to be kept apart.
- There is not a lot of “chrome” to learn like exceptions, stratagems, weather, seasons etc.
- The battle group concept works well as does the idea of Commanders.

- The game is fluid and feels dynamic; very different from DBMM.
- Cavalry can attack, evade and manoeuvre well; it just feels right.

What don't I like about FOG?

- The rulebook is a boring read. In play the pictures, but not the examples, get in the way. There's more than a touch of the "Wargamer's Pretentious" style of prose in evidence.
- After playing DBx I find the troop definitions overly complex. For example cavalry, average, drilled, bow, and swordsmen still seems long winded if not outright cumbersome.
- There is a layering of simple mechanisms in FOG that is daunting at first. It then becomes a touch tedious. For example: in combat you have to work out how many dice and at what factors; roll them; work out the winners and losers; work out the factors for any cohesion tests; roll more dice; roll a final dice for risks to Commanders in combat. It gets worse if you have poor, superior or elite troops as there are quality re-rolls to deal with. This "dice layering" is a major barrier to playing quickly; not insurmountable but a barrier nonetheless.
- Using the official play sheet. Unsurprisingly, it is designed as an aide memoir for experienced players but as a learner I have seen it cause more problems than it solves. The factors from all phases are lumped together and it is all too easy to apply factors in the wrong phase.
- In the early games it was hard to follow up initial breakthroughs and finish off an opponent quickly despite the fluid movement possible. It has got easier but I am still not convinced FOG is inherently decisive.

What were the hardest things to learn?

- At first sight the five phase structure appears onerous and overly complex but it is important to do things in the right order. Just as I started to get the hang of things I found I was missing things through lapses in concentration.
- Complex melees can be particularly intimidating. Even a 2 against 1 seemed hard at first. The thing to do is split the dice based on opponents and factors; roll all the dice; and then tally hits given and taken by each battle group involved.
- Applying points of advantage (POA) was initially a little tricky because the effects aren't the same for shooting (2 to 6) and melee (3 to 5) and POAs don't cancel one another out in shooting but do in melee.
- The way dice are used in FOG is very different from DBMM. When rolling to hit on a score of 4 or more, a 4 is as good as 6. In DBMM rolling a 6 is everything. This was a big psychological shift.
- The cohesion test is king! I know it says this in the rules but disrupting your enemy is more important than removing a base. This is because the system is designed to cause cohesion to drop away sharply; it is a very slippery slope you do best to avoid.

What would you recommend a newcomer do?

- Get someone who's played FOG before to introduce you to the game. This will show you that the game is fun right from the start.
- Do not play large games. 800 points may be OK for doubles or experienced players but 650 is far better to begin with. Smaller games are quicker and less likely to induce headaches.
- Be patient with the rules. Playing without help will be slow at first and the rules will feel a touch cumbersome. Play to learn do not play to win.
- Learn your army by playing a few games with an almost static list. Give yourself a chance to learn the strengths and weaknesses of your battle groups before trying something different.
- Play other people as soon as you can. This stops you developing bad habits and also shows you how others play the game.
- I can only echo the common advice to keep the full turn sequence to hand at all times and do not be afraid to pause a game while you refer to it.
- The rulebook stands up well in games as a reference source but the index is very poor. Print a copy of the FOG Players' Index⁶; it helped me to find things really quickly.
- Do not use the play sheet at first. Use the tables in the rule book or produce your own "Learner's QRS" by splitting the play sheet into the separate phases. The latter uses more paper but it simplifies each phase by reducing the list of factors involved at any one time.

Conclusion

I have enjoyed playing FOG for the last six months however I would not say the transition was an easy one. It felt a bit like an old dog learning new tricks at times. A lot of effort was required but it has been worthwhile because I am enjoying my wargaming once again. I am now more worried about strategy and tactics than the rules.

It is important to stress that I prefer FOG because it has fewer serious negatives than DBMM; not surprising really as neither set of rules is prefect. Both sets are built on a strong underlying frameworks but they achieve depth and fine detail in very different ways. DBMM uses exceptions, bound specific rules and complex grading structures. FOG tends to layer simple mechanisms: five relatively simple phases to form a turn; and hits, cohesion testing and death rolls for combat outcomes for example. Crucially, FOG keeps exceptions and special cases to a minimum. For me this difference makes it easier to play FOG; the framework can be relied on most of the time and there are far fewer special cases to memorise.

⁶http://www.fieldofglory.com/player_index.html

Finally, I hope this has been of interest to you gentle reader, especially if you are considering playing Field of Glory. As to the future, I have quite a few games still to play in the remainder of 2010 including the final round of the Northern League in November. Then Graham and I have to decide what to do in 2011. Will we tackle Field of Glory Renaissance, stick with DBR or will we enter the Northern League seriously and play as many rounds as possible? Exciting times.

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