

Competing Views

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Introduction

Competition wargamers! There's quite a few of these about judging by the number of local, national and international tournaments organised each year. Now some people love competing others loathe it, but competition wargaming remains an established and vibrant part of our hobby.

What I would like to do in this article is look at one small part of the UK competition scene and draw out some long term trends which I hope will be of general interest but before that I would like to say a little about how and why I started to enter competitions.

The Build Up

I returned to wargaming in the mid 1990s after a fifteen year break. I was "recruited" by the Liverpool Wargames Association (LWA)¹ after visiting one of their shows held at the Albert Dock, Liverpool. Later on I joined the Manchester Area Wargames Society (MAWS)². Without the support of these clubs I do not know how I would have maintained my interest in the hobby and I would like to take this opportunity to thank both clubs and their members.

Always interested in ancient, medieval and renaissance wargames, I first learnt to play De Bellis Antiquitatis (DBA), then De Bellis Multitudinis (DBM), De Bellis Renationis (DBR) and eventually in 2007 tackled De Bellis Magistrorum Militum (DBMM). However, the pool of LWA DBx players steadily diminished over the years. By 2006 I had only one regular opponent.

The move to MAWS increased the pool of available opponents and opposing armies. As a consequence my understanding of DBMM deepened and my standard of play improved. I also realised that playing in a restricted pool of players is fine but there is a real danger of establishing "local interpretations" that are at best questionable and at worst wrong.

After struggling to learn DBMM sufficiently well to play quickly and fluidly at club level, the really big step came when I decided to enter my first open competition in 2008. The main motivation was simply to test my understanding of the rules against new players and different armies. MAWS plays host to one or two rounds of the Northern League each year so it was a relatively easy to "dip a toe" in the competition scene by entering one of the rounds held in Manchester. I have to say, despite initially losing more times than not, I was bitten by the competition bug and have played in regional competitions ever since.

Overall it has been worthwhile and enjoyable but I have always been, and will remain, an occasional competition wargaming attending 3-4 events a year.

Pros & Cons

In any wargame there is a certain satisfaction associated with winning but there is also the reflection engendered by losing. I find that competitions provide both but in a more concentrated form.

This is quite different from the stereotypical view of competition players being "über geeks" with poor social skills intent on winning at all costs. In my experience there is not a great deal of difference between club players and those on the competition circuit. The level of sportsmanship is frequently high and there are other benefits to competing:

¹ <http://lwaonline.blogspot.co.uk/>

² <http://maws.org.uk/>

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- An upcoming competition has frequently pushed me to finish a new unit and helped overcome any “painter’s block”.
- I find the sense of occasion and anticipation of the draw to be exhilarating. That is exhilarating with a small “e”; remember I am British.
- Sometimes you face wonderfully painted armies which is a real treat and always inspirational.
- There is a pleasant social side to competitions not least because there is a shared interest and a ready topic of conversation with everyone present.
- Playing two long or three short games in a day can be mentally taxing but totally absorbing; during competitions I never think about work.

Not everything is perfect however:

- My biggest bugbear is the travel involved. Certain competitions entail a very early morning start which I find difficult and a real disincentive as I am not really a “morning person”.
- Some venues can be very cramped and lack the space to accommodate all the players and their paraphernalia like empty army boxes, rule books, scenery etc.
- The success of a competition as an event depends heavily on the skills of the organiser. Those organising the Northern League have had their skills honed by years of practice but I have played in others where the basics have been neglected to the detriment of the event.

Stress Testing

Playing in competitions stress tests rules as well as player’s understanding of the rules. Unexpected and uncommon situations arise regularly, with players leafing through the rules or occasionally asking for the umpire. This is generally a good thing.

This is not about the cliched view of players deliberately looking for loopholes or questionable moves and tactics as this can happen in any game at any level. No, it is about fully testing the rule’s design concepts; game mechanics; rule writing style and layout; and how the authors and the wider wargaming community deal with the need for things like clarifications, amendments and errata.

However, like any testing environment weaknesses can be exposed. Sometimes they are critical, sometimes they are merely minor irritations. For example, in my competitive wargaming I began to experience repeated bouts of what the French call *l’esprit d’escalier* with DBMM V1. Win or lose, nearly every game gave rise to at least one pivotal play or circumstance that I later discovered was not legal. Whilst I was learning I suspect I provided as many for my opponents as they did for me. At first I thought it was just my inexperience. I tried harder but they did not go away.

The writing was on the wall for DBMM when I played a couple of club games of DBR using just a two page playsheet and really enjoyed it. The final straw was when I realised that many players were choosing to interpret certain rules to their advantage despite the author’s repeated, and clear, protestations to the contrary.

With the benefit of hindsight I think competition play exposed DBMM version 1.0 as just too intricate and complex for me to really enjoy competition play. I stopped playing DBMM before V2 was released. Faced with a choice between a new version of DBMM and a new set of rules I chose the latter and switched to playing Field of Glory: Ancient & Medieval (FOG AM) in 2010. A fuller account of the

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reasons behind this switch appeared in a 2010 Slingshot article³ which is also available online⁴.

I am pleased to report that whilst playing FOG AM I have yet to experience any really problems with the rules. I went through the same stages as I did with DBMM: learning the rules, test games with my regular opponent, club games then competitions. Once again I used the competitions to test my understanding of the rules and to encourage me to practice and try new tabletop tactics. After my first competition I was pleased with my performance because it demonstrated how well I had learnt the rules; the results themselves were secondary.

This year (2013) I was again faced with the choice between learning a new version, this time of FOG AM, or learning another new set of rules. Like quite a few players I decided to switch rules; this time to play Field of Glory: Renaissance (FOG R). I have always liked the period and decided to make it my primary period for a while. I repeated the process of test games, club games and finally competitive games in double quick time thanks to the impetus provided by playing in three competitions in 2013.

Healthy Hobby?

Playing competitively requires a certain level of commitment and I do not just mean getting up early at the weekend. Competing involves time and money and a certain degree of organisational ability (if only to turn up on time). In my view if enough people are able to achieve this then the hobby in the UK is likely to be in good shape. More importantly I think you can use attendance at competitions as a proxy for the general health of the hobby. On this basis I decided to see if I could trace this commitment through the results of the Northern League (UK) and quantify any trends.

Since its inception in 1998, the League has organised five rounds of two games each at venues around the north of England for 15mm ancient, medieval and latterly renaissance armies. The rules for the year are usually fixed although there have been a couple of funny years where round one used a different set or different version. In 15 years the league has evolved from a purely DBM doubles league to include DBMM (from 2008), FOG AM (from 2008 again) & FOG R (from 2012).

The period from 2006-13 is particularly interesting because it covers many of the major changes in the ancient, medieval and renaissance wargaming world: the final days of DBM as the only rules set, the rise and fall of FOG AM (V1 & V2) and the steady growth of DBMM (V1 & V2) & FOG R albeit both from small bases.

Diagram #1

Looking at the diagram it is clear that the “monolithic” era of DBM ended in 2006 with a sharp decline in attendance in 2007. I have heard it said that by 2006 Northern League players were getting bored with DBM. Since 2008 the overall attendance has been stable if consistently lower than the 2006 peak: down some 30% as measured by the average number of players per round.

The good news is that the Northern League remains viable if increasingly fragmented by external factors. The launch of DBMM V1 and FOG AM V1 in 2008 played a big part in replacing DBM. In contrast the launch of DBMM V2 (2010) had no obvious effect whilst the launch of FOG AM V2 (2012) lead to a dip in the number of people playing these rules the following year. It looks to me like many FOG AM players simply chose to switch to the Renaissance variant rather than learn the new version.

³ Befuddled to Mystified, *Slingshot*, **273**, 43-45.

⁴ <http://blog.vexillia.me.uk/p/articles.html>

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The decline in FOG AM also fits with comments I have seen on the Internet highlighting a significant decline in the numbers of FOG AM players world wide. Of course such comments have to be treated with a certain degree of scepticism until supported by hard data.

Overall it seems that the Northern League is both stable and set fair for the future. This appears to be a direct result of the flexibility of both the organisers and the pool of players in responding to the external changes in the wargaming world. However, in preparing the statistics for this part of the article I came across two trends that you may find interesting.

Too Many Draws?

As a DBMM player I was used to finishing almost all my League games with one army broken well within the time available. With my FOG AM & R games I have continued to finish most of my games within the time allowed. Looking around after finishing my games I noticed that many FOG games were drawn and only ended when time was called. I wondered if this was a general pattern for FOG so I began looking at the average score per game as a way to identifying the extent of drawn games.

Before discussing any data I should explain the Northern League scoring system for FOG. For the last four years games have been scored out of 20 plus bonuses as follows:

- Players share 20 points depending on the losses inflicted on each other: the more losses inflicted the higher your share of the points. For example a narrow "winning draw" would be 11-9.
- Breaking your opponent's army outright earns 5 bonus points. For example a complete outright victory would score 25-0 or a narrow win 16-9.
- The League also operates an army class system based on the percentage of superior and other troops in an army. Breaking an army of a higher class earns up to 5 additional bonus points. For example a stunning outright victory against an army two classes higher would score 30-0; one class higher would be 28-0.

These numbers are important because if you add together all of the points in a particular year it is essentially the sum of pairs of winning and losing scores from each game (which must add up to 20 points) plus any bonus points awarded to any outright winners (with possible bonuses of 5, 8 or 10 points).

Dividing the total number of points by the number of games in the year gives an average combined score per game. It is important to note this is not an individual's average score. The average score per game cannot be less than 20 and could be as high as 30 if every game was an outright victory against an army two classes higher. More realistically the closer the average is to 25 the more outright wins have occurred or conversely the nearer the average is to 20 the more games have been drawn. In this way the average combined score for FOG reflects the number of drawn games.

It would have been really interesting to use this approach to compare FOG AM and DBMM to see which system was the most decisive in a competitive setting. Sadly, it's not possible because the scoring systems differ in one crucial aspect: there is no equivalent in DBMM of the 5 point bonus for breaking an army in FOG.

For the last four years DBMM players have shared 25 points, win lose or draw. As a result, decisive games of DBMM have the same combined scores as drawn games unless bonuses apply to the former for breaking a higher class army (the army class bonuses apply equally to DBMM and FOG) and

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therefore, unlike FOG, you cannot use average combined scores for DBMM to estimate the number of drawn or decisive games.

The differences between the rule sets, and the different scoring systems, are most obvious when the average score per game is plotted against the annual average number of teams in a round:

Diagram #2

The diagram clearly shows DBMM games averaging a little more than 25, as would be expected given the scoring system, and the FOG games (both AM & R) scoring midway between 20 & 25 indicating a reasonably high proportion of draws. There may have been many so called “winning draws” but they were draws all the same.

Two things emerged from this analysis that surprised me a little:

- FOG AM has a tendency to produce more draws than FOG R as shown by a higher average score per game. I had expected there to be little or no difference.
- The average score for FOG AM has been in decline since 2010. In 2010-11 the average score for FOG AM was 22.8, falling to 22.4 in 2012 and to 21.2 in 2013.

Looking at the FG AM data more closely I was intrigued to see that the average score for FOG AM varying so directly with the average number of teams in a year. The relationship appears almost linear. It does not seem to be the case with FOG R and I wondered what lay behind it. Could it simply be related to the number players involved or was it an artifact of the data presentation?

Why Is It Foggy?

I am aware that broad averages can sometimes hide trends and also make things look more related than they really are. So instead of using yearly averages I re-examined the data for FOG AM using the average score and number of players from each round. As I suspected the trend is indeed quite simply explained.

Diagram #3 v1 or v2

At this level of detail, what is so striking is how clear and consistent the trend actually is. I repeated this analysis using the number of teams per round instead of the number of players. As FOG AM is essentially a doubles competition with the occasional single player team I wanted to be sure it made no real difference to the correlation. It does not.

In the Northern League for the last four years, there has been a definite link between the average scores for FOG AM games and the number of players (or teams) in each round with higher scores (and less draws) being much more likely when there are more players involved.

I did not see any evidence to suggest the rule changes introduced in FOG AM V2 (2013) had a direct effect on the number of draws. However, it does look like the new version has had an indirect effect by reducing the number of players in each round in 2013 which itself increased the number of draws.

One can only speculate about the reasons behind this correlation but the one that appeals to me most is

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that rounds with low attendances had fewer casual players reducing the opportunity for “easy” outright victories. Plus reduced numbers leave the more dedicated, and experienced, players to battle it out [sic] amongst themselves in hard fought draws.

It is not really possible to say with any certainty whether FOG R is affected in quite the same way as FOG AM. On the data available so far it does not appear to be. However, FOG R has certainly been a more decisive game than FOG AM in the last two years. This may be because, only may be mind you, that the relative “newness” of FOG R means that the pool of players in 2012-13 included a broader spectrum of abilities than say the 2013 pool of FOG AM players and as a result decisive results somewhat easier to come by. It’ll be interesting to see what happens in 2014.

Sadly, it is also not possible to say if this trend is a reflection of a broader national trend or just a regional quirk because comparable data is not readily available. Even so the trend serves to highlight one of the downsides of competition play: you have to be prepared to lose a few games along the way especially as a learner or an out of practice, occasional player.

Final Thoughts

The attendance figures for the Northern League for the last eight years shows a relatively stable competition scene in terms of the absolute number of players involved, with no sign of any major decline or consistent downward trend or since 2007 and the demise of DBM. This is one sign of healthy hobby.

However the last eight years has seen enormous change: in 2006 only one rule set was used compared to three in 2013. This is indicative of the increasing fragmentation of our hobby brought about by increasing choice and product innovation. As competitions rely on the existence of a viable pool of players, fragmentation is slightly worrying especially if new players don’t enter competitions.

As well as quantifying the long term popularity of individual rule sets, the current data from the Northern League highlights some tantalising differences between rule sets. Most interestingly, it looks like FOG R provides a more decisive game than FOG AM despite sharing many core concepts and mechanisms.

In the long run it is important that localised competitions like the Northern League continue to offer both a high standard of enjoyable competition and viable pools of players for whatever rules they choose to support. The importance of these factors is shown by the somewhat disconcerting four year trend with FOG AM where the declining numbers of players has been accompanied by an increasing number of drawn games. Whilst drawn games can be hugely enjoyable they can also be immensely frustrating. If the decline in player numbers is actually caused by the number of drawn games, and this is something of a “big if”, then the long term popularity of FOG AM may decline further (at least in the Northern League).

Finally, writing this article has made me re-examine why I play in competitions and what I want to get out of the whole experience. It boils down to two very simple benefits. Firstly, to play against a broader range of opponents and armies than I could with either my friends or club mates. Secondly to test my skill against better and more experienced players thereby improving my own standard of play. Since 2008 I have found that my regular, club wargaming has benefited greatly from attending the occasional competition. Even when I loose they are always great days out. In the future I will continue to compete and I hope this article will encourage at least one reader to enter a local competition for the first time. Good luck.

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Diagram #1

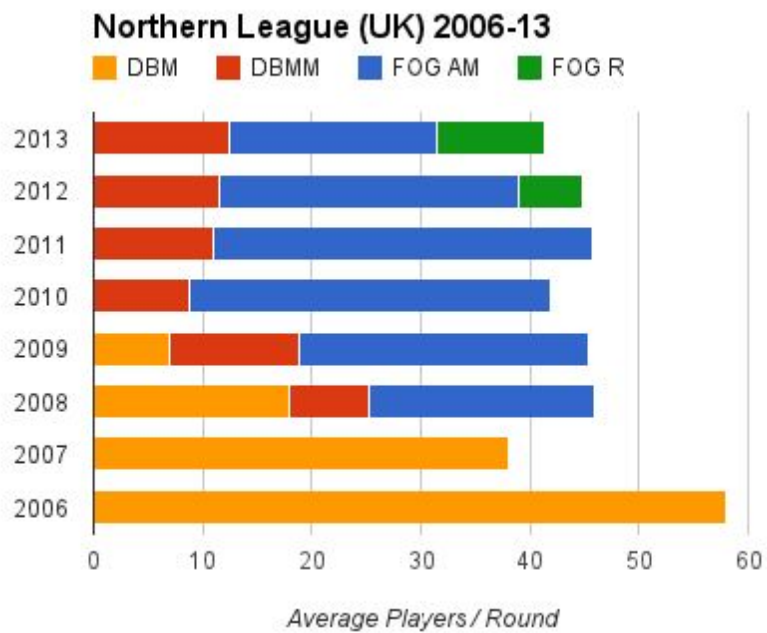


Diagram #2

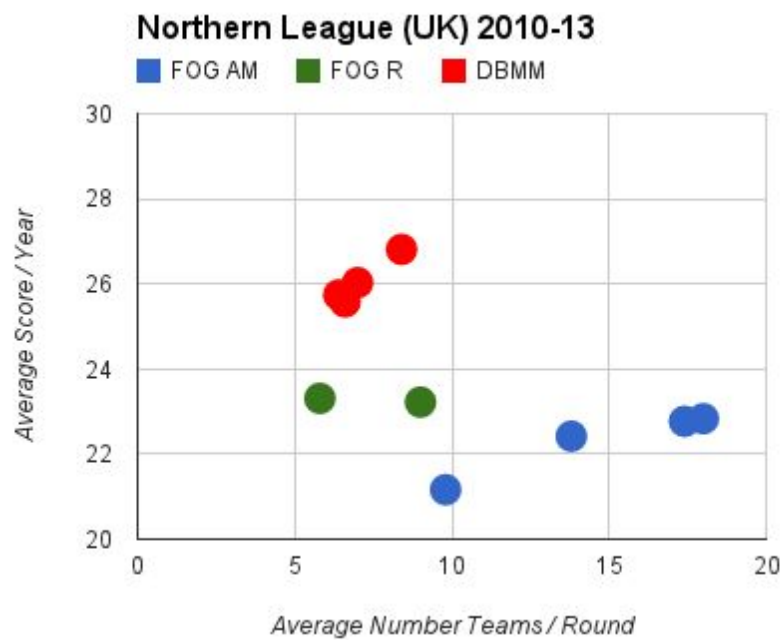


Diagram #3 v1

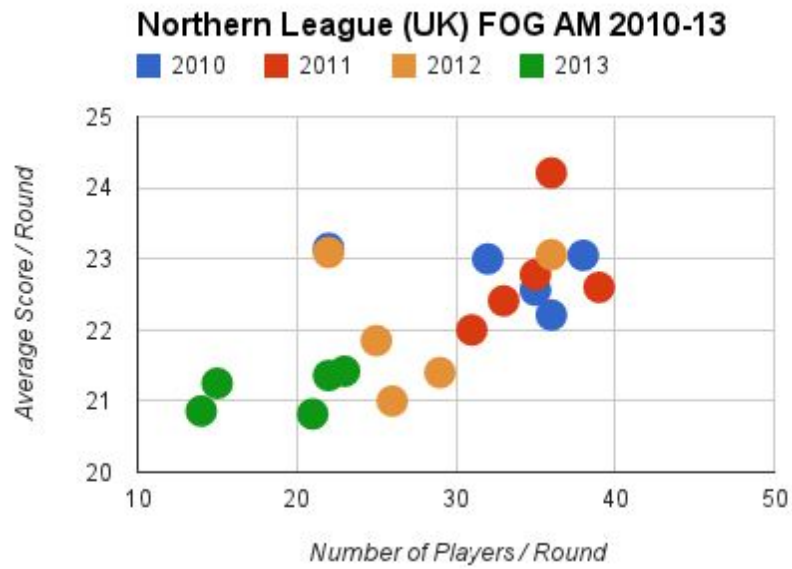


Diagram #3 v2

