

## The Fall and Rise of Wargaming by Alan Emrich

We've really managed to do it to ourselves since 1972. We walked down the primrose path of wargaming consumerism willingly enough, nominally "looking forward" while losing our peripheral vision. By doing what was best for us as individual wargamers, buying games with more complexity and sophisticated graphics to meet our maturing tastes in historical simulations, we've neglected to remember what is best for wargaming as a whole; for our hobby and the future generations of armchair generals who might come after us.

We've forgotten about wargaming's roots; its very *history*. And about our personal roots and our personal history in wargaming! It's a shame that, as a group, and of all people, we should be negligent of the lessons of *our own hobby's history*! Because we've lost our perspective, because we've chosen to ignore or done nothing in reaction to the warning signs, much harm will come to our beloved hobby of wargaming. As if some great conspiracy were afoot, there are none by guilty parties involved. No one is innocent in this, the case of.

### THE SLOW MURDER OF THE WARGAMING HOBBY

Let's Establish the Historical Foundation

Think back ten, fifteen or twenty years ago when you began in this hobby (as the readership poles indicated that's when you got started in wargaming). In those "good old" days of yesteryear, wargames were often new, exciting and different. Additionally, they were, if not always good, at least *interesting* games. They were made by designers for whom that *wargame* was a labor of love to design and develop (of course, we complained back then, as we do now, that games never seemed to be developed enough). 'Mere were a few real diamonds in the rough out there, an most were at bargain basement prices, packaged in envelopes or zip lock bags.

One thing you could count on fifteen years ago was a diversity of subject matter in your wargames. In those days, with a 500 copy print run, companies could (and did) sell out of even the most esoteric games imaginable! Wargame collectors know about all of these wargames from the countless smaller and "one shot" companies. Games like **Jerusalem 70 AD**, **Ancient Conquest**, **A Mighty Fortress**, and most of the "Avalon Hill Classics" would never see the light of day if published in 1987. (In case you haven't noticed, Avalon Hill has cut back tremendously on the availability of their less popular era and older titles, most of which have gone "out of print".)

In those days, virtually every wargame designer was an "amateur" designer and virtually every wargame company was an "amateur" game company operated out of someone's garage. We were much closer to the hobby then. Closer to being designers, closer to being writers, closer to the dream of starting up our own small wargame company in our copious spare time

### That Was Then. This Is Now.

Fifteen years ago, we were younger and had more energy (and less money) to devote to the hobby. Now we're older, with less time, energy, (hair) and more money to give wargaming. It's evolutionary, isn't it? We, the wargaming market, have 'matured' and wanted better looking more demanding wargames than the ones we started with. We would have expected these be better *games* as well, but it is far easier for game

companies to deliver on games that are *getter looking and more complex* than to actually produce better *games*. And since that's what we're willing to buy, voting with our dollars, that's what we'll get. We are being panderer to, and the simple demographics read like the Decline of the Roman Empire.

### How is Wargaming Being Murdered?

Unlike yesteryear, when we were new to this hobby, wargames today are hidden, overpriced and too complex for new gamers. By 'hidden,' I mean hidden in the marketplace. Twenty-five years ago you could walk into many toy stores ('chains' of retail outlets), look on the game shelves, and see **Monopoly** next to **Scrabble** next to **Gettysburg** next to **Clue**, etc. Now, *what's right with this picture?*

It's a simple matter of perception in marketing. In those days, wargames were just another type of family game, like **Monopoly** or **Risk**. There was no stigma attached to them, and the people who bought D-Day bought it for the same reasons they bought *Careers*, to enjoy a good game. They then became our "cult hobby" of today, with their own magazines (**The General**, now 25, and **Strategy & Tactics**) and likes of you and I as its members. We've "matured" into enjoying more detailed, complex wargames, shunning the now "classics" as to simplistic. In Winston Churchill's words, this may not have signaled the beginning of the end, but it was certainly the end of the beginning.

The kid we used to be, the new wargamer in high school or college, has been priced out of today's wargaming hobby. If he dares to try out a wargame for the first time (shelling out a precious \$25 for his first wargame) and gets turned off by it, he'll never become a part of our much hoped for "Next Generation." If you overtax this next generation of wargamers with complex rules and a lot of mathematics; if you reward him too little for his achievements on the battlefield; *you've lost him for good*. The hobby simply won't be worth his time and trouble. Witness the growth or roleplaying...

Many of these are the same young people are the ones who get into role-playing games during their Junior High and High School years. They are not unaware of wargames (particularly since they are on shelf near the role-playing games and in the New Product Area of your local hobby store). The problem is that they have made a buying decision based on what they want, and what they want is not complex volumes of historical simulation rules. *They want to be entertained, not educated!* (Perhaps is we could again make *entertaining* wargames like the "classics", the education would again be a pleasant by product of the gaming experience. I know that's how it was for me when I started wargaming back in the early '70's).

Thus, we have created a shrinking market by our own 'maturing' tastes. We have created the demand for overpriced, complex wargaming dinosaurs to the point where esoterica and elitism abound in our wargaming hobby. Look at us! It's bad enough that we are seen as atypical Americans; "eggheads," if you will. Yet, even as we tend to be more educated, we're not thinking through on our hobby's future! We *must* worry about wargaming's "Next Generation" or our hobby will be buried with us! Frankly, I care about what games I teach by son, but he's a long way from being ready for **Third Reich!** Doubtless, he'll end up a role-player because, like most kids with the MTV mentality, it's gotta be fast, fun and entertaining. (What I need is a wargame that does that, and gets him to *think* and into our hobby as a side benefit).

### The Demographics of Doom

These statistics came from the Feedback Questions given in past issues of **Fire & Movement**, but they coincide very closely with those found in **Strategy & Tactics** and **Wargamer**.

Our sex is 100% male. That probably surprises nobody, although we all hope, that women will be more open to our hobby in the future as they establish themselves more in a previously male dominated society.

Our age breaks down as follows:

| %   | Age Group          |
|-----|--------------------|
| 17% | 22 to 27 years old |
| 40% | 28 to 35 years old |
| 38% | 35 to 45 years old |
| 5%  | 46 to 59 years old |

Combine our age the fact that only 5% of us have been wargaming for only four years or less, and you can see there is no 'next generation' of wargamers behind us. Our statistics didn't show anyone under the age of 22 responding to the **F&M** Feedback Surveys!

Three fourths of us play *at least half* of our wargaming solitaire because we can't find opponents. We can't find opponents because we're not a growing hobby! And why aren't we a growing hobby?

### A Soul Searching Quiz for Wargamers Who Love Their Hobby

Why are we so intent on keeping the wargaming hobby for ourselves alone, and not sharing it by making it more "explorable" to beginners? Why do we keep wargaming so expensive, so esoteric, and so demanding that we, in our never-ending quest for the illusory "ultimate" wargame, have forsaken our future? You, the grognard wargamer and reader of this article, are part of the problem! *You are even working to perpetuate it!*

Have you forgotten what makes a good *game*? What gives it real excitement and replay value? Have you forgotten your first few years as a wargamer, when everything was exciting and new?

Ask yourself, are you really getting games that are four *times better* than the ones you bought fifteen years ago? (Don't blame inflation, either. The price of your shaving cream hasn't gone up 400%, just your wargames). You're paying four times as much, but are today's wargames really *four times better*? Don't you get about the same percentage of "boring," "turkey" and "rip-off" wargames that you did back when you started in this hobby? Don't you still play your average new game about the same number of times (i.e., zero to two times) before shelving it in hopes that the next game will be better?

What more are you really getting today for an average of \$25 that you didn't get for only an average of \$6.50 fifteen years ago? Think about the games you play over and over again. Is it really because it has spiffy graphics or complicated "realism," or is it because of its replay as a *game*?

### Why the Wargaming 'Business' is Hurting the 'Hobby'?

You are not alone in this conspiracy against the future of wargaming. The guilty parties include us all. The consumer, the reviewer, the wargame manufacturer, the wargame magazine publisher, even the retailer and wholesaler. Like any consumer, marketing affects your demand which, in turn, affects the supply. Wargaming marketing is, perhaps, the greatest threat to our future. Today's current wargame marketing systems, if not

supplemented by more direct appeal with products and advertising, which reach out effectively to beginners, will be tomorrow's demise of wargaming.

There are reasons, *economic reasons*, why the average price of a wargame is four times higher today than it was fifteen years ago; reasons why they don't make games on obscure topics anymore; reasons why game quality "isn't what it used to be" and the size of our wargaming audience is stagnant, even shrinking.

Undeniably, the "business" aspects of wargaming have been largely responsible for its growth. It is important to note that this is almost entirely a growth in sales, not a growth in number of wargamers added to the ranks of the hobby. In effect, this is growth financed by you, out of your pocket, merely because you are better able to afford it (and the industry is in greater need to demand it).

Conversely, the business interests are also largely responsible for wargaming's decline. Decline in numbers of *real wargamers*, that is. They're making more money, but adding fewer good *games* and fewer hobbyists than ever before! Will they milk us and then abandon us when we get old because there is no generation to follow us? Only time will tell...

### Once Upon A Time in the Wargaming "Business"

When wargames started selling in reasonable quantities, and companies started making money from the speculative business venture of publishing wargames, the wargame business grew. Staffs grew, offices grew (and had to be met), rent increased, etc. Therefore, the need for companies to make more money became fast apparent. Where to raise that money became the burning wargame business question of the day.

Simple economics would tell you that lowering costs and raising revenues is the answer. To lower the cost of a game, you can produce more of them (the "longer" the print run, the less you pay for each individual game produced), or you can save money on production in design, development and graphics.

To raise revenues, one must increase sales. This is a by-product of marketing. Marketing in the business of wargaming today is done to increase sales at the retail level (the more stores that sell your wargame, the "longer" the print run you can have, and the lower the price of each game). An increase in retail sales, to a wargame company, means an increase in orders from wholesalers, who supply the games to the retailers.

Unfortunately for the wargame companies, wholesalers only pay about 35-45 cents on the dollar, and generally pay a month or two after receiving their bills. Because a wargame company must still make a reasonable profit of a game, at 40 cents on the dollar, is it any wonder that, after wholesalers and retailers mark up their profit percentages, the average price of a wargame has risen in proportion to the amount of distribution at the retail level? Consider that the wargame, company will see about \$5.00 per game, on average. Deduct the costs to create it, package it and ship it, and you can easily see why no one ever got rich as a wargame company mogul.

### So How Can More Stores, Carrying More Wargames, Hurt the Hobby? That Doesn't Make Sense!

Simple, wargaming's not a "cheap buy in" hobby anymore. Twenty-five bucks is a good chunk of change, and not something any potential

new hobbyists is going to splurge on impulse. Wargames are not any "impulse item" no matter how many store shelves they sit on! Nor are they priced competitively for the younger, Jr. High/ High School/College student market (like it was back when you and I were that market). The spiraling cost of wargames means we, as but a single generation of hobbyists, have had to single handedly finance the so-called "growth" of our hobby. Yes, we are better able to afford it, but at a cost in real hobby growth.

We are guilty, as consumers, of exacerbating this problem of expensive, complex wargames as well. After all, the wargame companies, retailers and wholesalers are only meeting our demands. When we stopped buying wargames companies through the mail, whether through fear of a mail order scam like **Liberator Games or Attack Wargames**, or because we wanted to support our local hobby store, we were unconsciously "voting with our dollars" to raise the price of wargames. We said we were willing to pay more for the convenience of an over the counter purchase. By making our hobby more "available" through wider distributions, we have inadvertently made it less available to newcomers through price increases. We have, in effect, accidentally shot ourselves in the foot!

Nowadays, by our voting with our dollars, we willingly pay \$25 for a wargame today, safe in the knowledge that "that's about what they cost." Well, it shouldn't be. Remember, the reason it is, is because you let it!

### Now It's "Better Sales Through Better Graphics" Rather Than "Better Games Through Better Development"

The issue of forsaking future generations of wargamers aside, at least now we can go to our local hobby shop and shop for new wargames. Don't we compare them and make subjective buying decisions right there at the store shelves, buying this game in favor of the one next to it because we have compared and shopped and we think we are buying the better game.

No. Won't we, as consumers, ever learn? Since we have herded ourselves into the local hobby or game store to buy our wargames, we are now, more than ever, buying better-looking games, rather than those better playing games. Perhaps the saddest way of all we vote with our dollars is by responding to wargame advertising and colorful, 'sales oriented' graphics.

Don't deny that SPI's old **Borodino, Winter War and Battle for Germany** aren't good wargames just because they had two color maps had box art! We are buying way too much "sizzle" with all of the fancy graphics, rather than the 'steak' of an excellent playing wargame. Graphics are nice, but certainly no substitute for a good game! Look at the games that have given you the most replay value. Are they necessarily the best looking games you've ever owned? Probably not. These expensive graphics are, however, necessary to get you to shell out 25 bucks at a hobby shop to buy a wargame these days!

For example, the major wargame producers (West End, Avalon-Victory, GDW, etc.) have all 'advanced' over the years to having a full time graphics department. These people are being paid a living wage' (from \$20,000 to \$40,000 per year). If a company like these produces three wargames and a half a dozen people, the cost in graphics salaries alone per wargame averages over \$5,500. Who pays this salary? This cost must be passed on to someone, and you know who "someone" is. We're not talking about 19 games per year per

company anymore, like SPI in 1972. Today's average of three wargames per company with graphics salaries figured in adds much more to the cost of a wargame than having it designed! A "freelance" designer is doing well to get \$1,500 to \$2,000 for a truly excellent wargame design. \$5,500 for graphics and \$1,500 for a design; this is putting the cart where?

So, you've got your freelance designer getting, say, an average of \$1,200 per design. Combine this with company full time employees (administrative, marketing, developers, secretaries, bookkeepers, etc.) and you have "big bucks." So, the cost of new wargames today is still high from the "big companies," even though they enjoy the benefit of larger runs. The hobby is no longer "an innocent hobby," But a business that is much more to heavy than the "lean and mean" days of the '70's and we, the *wargame players*, are paying for it!

The "major" wargame companies (and some of the smaller ones) must decide now to stop socking it to us. We want good games at fair prices. While we're "hooked" on our hobby enough to make us willing and able to support companies that refuse to move from the high rent district, new recruits won't. Let's get back to work! The formula is really very simple; no low price, introductory level wargames no future.

### The Decline of Wargame Quality Since Wargaming Became a "Business"

And therein lies another problem, since wargame companies have to make payroll, buy fancy graphics, pay rent, buy and lease more equipment, etc., product quality suffers to meet deadlines so the bills can be paid. In the rush to get the product out for Origins or the Christmas buying season, development is usually what must be sacrificed to save time (since often production time cannot be). This is, perhaps, is why some people complain that "magazine wargames" are often inferior to boxed wargames, due to the rush involved to meet the bi-monthly publishing schedule (fortunately, magazines now plan much further ahead and "cushion" their production schedules to allow for more development time. Thank you 3W). We all know that development is often what makes the difference between a diamond and a dog. Just how much can you enjoy novel games on your favorite topics that are only half-baked in development? Haven't you got stacks of games on your shelf right now, each with some interesting innovation, that you don't play because they aren't fully developed enough to be good games? Imagine some newcomer to the hobby who plunks down \$20 to \$25 dollar for a nice looking game on an interesting topic, only to find out that:

1. It's too complicated to learn without an experienced player to teach him the game, and
2. The game itself is not a good game, which is what he's paying for.

This now consumer, this new *hobbyist*, is now someone we've lost. Probably for good. He's paid the price for steak, but all he got was sizzle. Inside the box was an average, 1989 wargame with the two things this hobby currently provides which will really turn off that poor guy: complexity and an incompletely developed design. This is the insult added to the injury of the \$25 price tag.

Here is the real crime. The killing of neophyte gamers with ever more complex, high prices wargames. This is the modis operandi of the murder of our hobby.

### Gone, Gone, Gone are the Days of Our (and Our Hobby's) Youth

The circumstances which brought us into this hobby fifteen years ago are not available anymore. Think about your humble beginnings as a wargamer. Think back to the first wargames you bought, whom you bought it from, what you paid, and what you got.

Didn't you, those many years ago in the early 1970's an before, actually order some of your wargames *through the mail*, purchasing them directly from the companies that produced them? I know I did. I used those SPI and Avalon Hill mail order forms and sat by my mailbox for weeks. I responded to the ads in S&T and F&M by sending off my checks to "Obscurity Games," while I anxiously awaited their newest product (and hoped I would not be getting ripped off in come sort of mail order scam). Things were like that back then. SPI was built on S&T magazine and the direct sales mail order business generated by that magazine for SPI games.

Think about it. Those direct, mail order sales, bring the wargame company offering them 100% of the game's price. No "middle men." Thus the sales income they made from a \$6.00 wargame sold through the mail was \$6.00. To make that \$6.00 through the distribution chain would instantly raise the price of the game to \$15 for your average SPI boxed game back in 1972?

Let me put that question another way. In 1973, the largest wargame ever produced, **Drang Nach Osten**, was released by an obscure new company called Game Designers' Workshop. It was sold, by mail order only (largely through ads in **Panzerfaust**) for a whopping \$13.75, plus a dollar for postage. **Unentschiden**, its companion, was soon released for a massive \$12.85, plus a dollar for postage. Now, let me ask my question again. Would you have paid \$15 for a copy of SPI's **Soldiers**?

Inexpensive, "mail order only game" no longer exists. They were once everything to the growth of SPI back in 1972. In that year, SPI did over \$270,000 in direct mail sales of product. I don't believe any wargame company today does that kind of volume in direct sales. Let's face it; we shop in the stores now.

With the death of low cost, entry-level wargames, we have forsaken our best recruitment tool in the enlistment of future generations of wargamers. No longer car the kid you and I one were picks up a wargame magazine and read all of the ads for interesting new wargames at affordable prices. In these days, you might be tempted to splurge on a few games at a time. Sure, some were turkeys, but you could afford a few of those and still give the hobby another chance. The games didn't swamp you in complexity, either. You didn't need another wargamer to teach you those games; you could learn them all by yourself just by studying the rules a bit. Most were easy enough for us to "quick fix" the turkeys anyway!

#### Meeting The Hobby Through Strategy & Tactics Magazine

Many of us did exactly this. Imagine the outreach of a military history magazine with a game in it. Every person who is interested in military history could pick up an issue of S&T and become a potential wargamer. Unfortunately, too many won't.

They will see those large (The average wargame map, 22 x 34 inches, is bigger than the average boardgame board, and 200 little bitty cardboard pieces is more than Trivial Pursuit) complicated games, which are there for us, the grognards. The serve little use as products of outreach to new wargamers who picked up S&T because they like military history. This is a terrible shame.

Perhaps, with smaller half-sized wargames of a lower complexity level, S&T could really benefit

the hobby far more. Remember S&T's numbers 50 through 53? That's exactly what SPI did, producing **Oil War, WWI, The Punic Wars and Battle for Germany**. All games with lower complexity levels. All were good and playable games. All were also only half-size (which might be why they were so well developed into good games, because a lower complexity, half-size game could be better produced within the constraints of a bi-monthly magazine production schedule). We, the readers, selfish grognards that we are, nearly mutinied and demanded "real, full size" games again. The point again is made about turning our backs on newcomers and good games, for better graphic presentation and more complexity. This is a glaring, bi-monthly example of our problem finding a "next generation" of wargamers. We're not shaking their hands through our best medium, S&T.

#### Is There no Future For Wargaming, Then?

What is important is to see what each of us can do. We must create our own hope, if there is to be any, or we will certainly end the hobby when we're gone. Here are some suggestions for:

- **The Manufacturers**, or course, can produce and advertise more introductory wargames. They need not be marketed to us, either, but rather to the neophyte who is considering his first wargame purchase.
- **The Retailer** should also be certain that the game he is selling to the new wargamer (or his mom shopping for the right gift) is really a good introductory game. This means less profit because it is only a \$12-\$15 game, rather than selling the \$25 or less. Ultimately, it is in his best interest to se I a game that will keep this beginner in he hobby for years to come.
- **The Game Magazines** have to recognize the need for and unique place of introductory wargames in our hobby. Something should be in every issue of every magazine to assist someone who might be meeting our hobby for the first time through the pages of that magazine.
- **The Reviewer** must be made more sensitive to the introductory level wargame, and not simply pan it as "simplistic." Conversely, every flashy looking, complicated wargame cannot be heralded as good. Reviewers should always consider a game's replay value, rather than what you'll get out a game the two times you play it. In this way, good games can be recommended to beginners (and to us all!).
- **We, the grognards**, must also help. It is time to adopt a prospect and play those introductory wargames with them. In doing this, you will discover again what wonderful little wargames they are, and enjoy them anew (especially when seen through the eyes of the beginner across the table from you). We must shepherd this newcomer to good games, not merely the complex monster we are enjoying these days. We've got to look out for his needs, and help him grow in the hobby.

Well, one era has certainly ended: the era of growth in the wargaming hobby. We were it, the beginning and the end. If there's going to be a new beginning, then we must understand how all of what is today has come about, and how we can best cooperated to ensure our future of wargaming.

*[Author's note: I wrote this article a couple of years ago and just spruced it up a bit for his magazine. I am happy to say that some trends are improving. On the up side, games like GDW's **Blue Max** and 2nd Edition **A House Divided** are back in print again. 3W has produced **Modern Naval Battles Card Game** and, hopefully, will produce other card games. TSR has also produced some introductory wargames, and S&T is starting to move in a smaller, less complex direction with their games. All of these are good signs. Just to be fair though, on the down side, the prices of all these 'introductory' products has continued to rise: GDW's **A House Divided** is around \$22, **Modern Naval Battles** is around \$20, an issue of S&T is now \$12.50... Well, you get the idea. Even with their increased availability, the pricing is still pretty high for a Jr. High School Student, isn't it?]*

*Alan Emrich is the former President of Diverse Talents, Inc. and has worked on design and development of 3Ws Modern Naval Battles Card Games.*