# Military Muddling

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**The recent dialogue initiated by Jurien piqued my interest and so have taken the editorial liberty of reproducing most of the correspondence in this issue. My apologies to any authors who feel their most important expletive has been edited into polite English, but I hope you enjoy the read.**
**Daniel T Shaw**

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## Events

Saturday 22 November 2008 Anerley Town Hall MEGAGAME: Mystery by Gaslight. To book contact Megagame Makers

Saturday 6 December PET, London Bridge Universe Day - A day of SF games, crisis politics etc - newcomers welcome.

Saturday 13 December 2008 John's House CLWG 2008 Solstice Social: Including: Tim Gow's famous 'Airfix Multipose' game - presented by Jim

Sunday 4 January 2009 Anerley Methodist Church Sinews of the Somme - WW1 logistics game involving railways, horses and lorries...and railways - Jim

Sunday 1 February 2009 Anerley Methodist Church Weird & Brilliant Devilry - the developed version of Jim's London Blitz operations game. It is now possible to actually extinguish fires!

Sunday 1 March 2009 Anerley Methodist Church Barricades & Borders - lots of players needed so bring your friends! - by Brian

See also http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/clwg/ and http://www.chestnutlodge.org.uk/

## How boys become wargamers by Jur. de Jong

Not quite a review of *Achtung Schweinehund* by Harry Pearson

In the end my parents only have themselves to blame. I guess I had just turned 12 years old when we visited the Museum of Amsterdam History where I walked into an exhibition of flat toy soldiers. This was way more interesting than the plastic soldiers that went AWOL at alarming rates in our back garden!

My father traced the source of the miniatures back to a shop in The Hague, the Boutique de la Grande Armée, named after Napoleon's awesome instrument of power. We went there a few weeks later and I found not just flat tin soldiers, but also the round Hinchliffe Napoleonic ranges, which I liked even more. After a short while I spent most of my Saturdays going to the shop, buying an occasional miniature and watching the older men play and discussing military history.

The Boutique was no Friendly Local Gamestore, but a store with a club room attached and only open on Saturday. This was a collection of odd middle aged men, with a leaning to right wing politics that I only grasped later. I remember my embarrassment when I saw one of the members of the club appearing on television representing a neo-nazi organisation and I could only hope my parents wouldn't recognise him.

Due to this and the limited room for gaming at the store, a group of younger players started their own club. In a few years the Boutique's owner would decide to close and emigrate to sunny France. Our club still exists twenty years later.

My experience may have been like that of many other wargamers. It certainly is close to that of Harry Pearson, who grew from playing with Action Man to plastic soldiers to metal miniatures. The first part his book is actually not so much about wargaming but about growing up in 1960s England. Apparently it was very boring and narrow, but 'the war' was around all the time in family stories and popular culture. Fathers, uncles and grandfathers had all served and fought in the army or navy and the threat of the Cold War was very real.

For (war)gamers the book often comes frighteningly close to our own experiences. Upon reading I noted some uncanny resemblances between Pearson's youth and mine. Like him, I remember almost drowning in a pond and the long afternoons wandering about the neighbourhood with my schoolmate Gijsbert, playing cowboys and Indians while we eluded the other boys to sneak to the enemy base.

Pearson further describes his large collection of toy guns. It brought back to me the wonders of the jigsaw, which provided us with wooden toy guns, painted by my brother. My brother was always the more talented of the two of us when it came down to handicrafts. He built the tanks and weapons for our Playmobil armies.

And a few weeks ago I had that moment of instant recognition, stepping into a room in Tate Modern to see the Andy Warhol painting my brother had painted on his 1/20 model plane. Later he built a model of a Fokker DXXI after his own design.

Although I never could match my brother's skill, like Pearson I proved more apt at handling the brush. I never became more than an average painter, but it will do on a wargaming table.

This part of Pearson's account will be very familiar to English wargamers. There are the pioneers of the hobby, like Don Featherstone and Charles Grant. The shows he lists (including Crisis in Antwerp!) are shows me and many of my friends have attended. This means it may have less to say to American readers, who presumably have a different experience.

The latter part is more universally recognisable. You can read Pearson for the interesting trivia on wargames through the ages, its take off in the 1960s and 1970s and the peculiar characters involved in it. There is ample discussion of the way in which wargames have been featured in popular media.

But this also the weakest part of the book, as it moves from Pearson's personal experiences to a more general overview and the omissions stand out. It doesn't touch on developments in the 1990s, when technological advances vastly improved the quality of miniature castings. Peter Gilder miniatures were already much better than the later Hinchliffes, but Wargames Foundry's Franco-Prussian range was really a leap in quality of design and casting. Not surprisingly, those designers came from Citadel, the fantasy miniatures company that later merged into Games Workshop. Fantasy wargaming (and GW) is also sorely lacking from Pearson's account, due to his professed distaste.

Pearson did a short bit of research on board games, quoting a member of boardgamegeek.com. But looking at his activities, this was solely as research for the book and he hasn't returned to the site in ages. Its summary treatment makes you wonder why it was included at all.

Yet, there are positives here as well. When Pearson writes about people he is at his funniest but also at his most perceptive. The discussion by two wargamers of how women ' just don't get it' is hilarious. And so is the way in which wargamers try to distance themselves from related hobbies, such as fantasy and live role playing, re-enactment and collecting. I can only confirm Pearson's many stories of long standing feuds and disagreements in the wargaming scene, and at some times I felt I knew who was hidden behind the nicknames.

By the end of the book, at last, the stream of loosely connected anecdotes, stories, trivia and observations get tied up. Pearson makes fun of wargamers, their mushy clothing, their weird lingo, their obsessive collecting, their feuds and petty disagreements. And yet, he loves them. Whatever you may think of the style and content of Pearson's book, it is the first venture into what wargaming actually means to those that play it.

"In the end, every man needs a place unto himself, to escape from the dreariness of daily life." Or so Pearson thinks. But is it really just escapism? Is there no fundamental difference between wargamers and stamp collectors, flower decorators and plaid makers?

In that sense the book is confronting to everyone of us. Many of us feel at least slightly uncomfortable at the geekiness of our hobby and the company we engage in. To most wargamers, it is a hobby. A consuming hobby, but also one that isn't very harmful, although in pacifist circles it was long seen as suspect. Wargamers may not always be the most socially apt, they may have weird laughs, lax standards of hygiene (we all have stories), bad taste in clothing and a limited range of topics for discussion, but they are generally kind and responsible.

I myself haven't been positive always about my gamer friends, but I've come to realise that there is a part of our lives that we share. And unlike Harry Pearson, I do know of many of them whether they have a family and what job they do. This is in the end my problem with Pearson's take on wargamers. To him they seem to be people sharing the same hobby but little else. Something to be embarrassed by and to hide from your 'cooler' friends.

But the horrible truth for those that are uncomfortable with this company is that they themselves share at least a number of those traits, and that condescension for fellow players also reflects on themselves. And in all these respect the difference between wargamers and boardgamers is very small.

When Pearson expresses his unease about being a wargamer, his friend TK retorts: "We work hard, we don't smoke, we don't gamble, we don't go down to the pub, we don't chase after women and we don't sit in front of the telly all night moaning there's nothing on. We have a hobby that's given us decades of fun, helped us make hundreds of friends all over the world and we don't do a drop of harm to anybody. What's sad about that?"

How right he is!

## Response to How boys become wargamers by Andy

I haven't read all of Achtung Schweinhund as I've only dipped into it when staying at Brian's. I would only make the following points:

1) The author is a journalist so it's not going to be a pure autobiography; he's going to construct a story to make points - and, as you say, we will al recognise points about ourselves.

2) Equally we will see things that strike us as entirely unconvincing - for example the author seems to have access to undreamed of riches - buying Action Men - not in my family and the photos of my family look like a classic 1950's family - which we were. And I still remember seeing a Hinton Hunt metal figure catalogue in the late 1960's and finding it incomprehensible that someone would pay the same money for two metal figures when they could buy a whole box of Airfix. As for constructing regiments or armies - who are these people...

3) But yes, a great book.

I agree that we will all recognise something of ourselves and the wargame scene in Pearson's book. But I think the hobby has become more complex in the 80's and 90's. Wargame Developments, Chestnut Lodge and other groups looking seriously at games and trying to move them from pure ('mere') games etc to something more serious, that can actually teach or illuminate something about the history. Pearson doesn't say anything about this.

But then that may be because from the point of view of the hobby CLWG, MM etc are so peripheral that they don't count and the hobby is the same as it ever was - geeks painting toy soldiers to have a game of ludo with coloured playing pieces.

Those who have more involvement with the hobby than I can comment on whether it has changed between, say, 1975 and now.

## Response to How boys become wargamers by Peter Merritt

There is one (potentially) insidious trend I can see which is different to my 'early years' pre-WD etc, and that's the influence of dear old Games Workshop...

I would argue that, from geek to the most esoteric wargamer, we're all very, ah, 'individualistic', let's say (not always my wife's first choice of adjective). In the 70's and even 80's, the only mass area of common ground was for ancients players, the vast majority of whom (whether into competitions or not) used the WRG sets. True, other sets existed, but they were about as peripheral as - CLWG?

But in an era when you can go to a model shop and a box of plastic figures of a troop type I've never even heard of(!), GW has taken an important strategic position in the hobby by 'cutting off our supply lines' of new players (and new ideas). Now, perhaps the bulk of these potential recruits may be 'just' gamers - but a kid would have to be very dedicated to break this mould, and face the same problem as early wargamers or 1980's non-WRG rule users, i.e. where do I get an opponent.

On the other hand, the Warlords rolling survey of the 4000+ paying Salute attendees indicates about a 25-30% flow of 'newbies' to the show each year, a trend which has remained fairly constant since surveys began over five years ago.

## Response to How boys become wargamers by Jim

I was waxing lyrical on this very topic with a couple of folk at Salute this year and Julian Fuller was challenging the 'GW is sapping the hobby' line - so we stopped a couple of passing 'young people' and asked them. Interestingly that particular non-representative sample were not wedded to GW - and said their friends were quite open to other games ideas. That may be one of the most important things about Salute though - it is a mixing bowl of different gamers who get to see other games, ideas and people

outside their normal circle. One certainly still sees a lot of youngsters enthusiatically playing participation games - and if that continues some at least might be turned away from the 'dark side'. What I sometimes wonder about is where are the 20-something equivalents of us. Most of the group (and people like WD) were very active in our late 20s and early 30s doing lots of things - writing rules, organising events etc. It strikes me that the same people are still at it. When I was in my 20s I wrote rules, started a wargames club and was organising COW weekends for WD and getting involved in the first megagames - and generally ranting about the hobby. At about the same time Brian was organising Salute and active in the Warlords. Others of you were doing all manner of things - writing articles, running participation games, writing rules, generally being active. Does anyone know of anyone of that age cohort doing that now? And if they do exist, why haven't we heard of them? Where are the young players fed up with the GW mainstream and looking to do their own thing?

## Continuing the Debate How boys become wargamers by Jur

There is one big difference between the 1970s and 1980s (when WD and CLWG started out) and now and that is that in all fields of connected hobbies: miniature wargaming, boardgaming, roleplaying, volume and professionalism have increased substantially. Look at the difference between Flames of War, Fields of Glory and the photocopied rules of yonder, or compare the production values of SPI and Victory Games to those of Fantasy Flight Games and Phalanx now. Look at the quality of miniatures from Hinchliffe, through Citadel and Wargames Foundry to Freebooter and Hasslefree. Behind this are major improvements in desktop publishing, casting methods and printing, driving costs down, but also a revolution in marketing and business models.

This has had an effect on gaming as well. More activities are now organised by companies, whose goal is not to recreate historical feel or accuracy, or even to generate as much fun as possible, but to sell products. The people who organise are now paid to do it. Similarly, people don't write rulesets for the heck of but, but to earn money. More manufacturers now provide rules and miniatures as a combined package. They have no incentive to show players different approaches, different rule sets or different manufacturers.

These developments also mean that there is a much broader range of finished products available 'off the shelf' which means less preparation time and more playing time. Very few people manage to keep up a decent rate of painting once they leave school or university.

This leaves less room for independent activity. Players can use commercial products. Enterprising young gamers are drawn into commercial organisation as staffers and developers. I was at the Essen board game show last weekend and all these youngsters are demoing commercial games.

And just maybe, we old farts are boring. Every now and then there's talk that the old farts should play 40K and Warhammer Fantasy Battles just so they then have access to the youngsters and work their subversion from there. I don't know. For some the price will be too high, for others the results may not be as strong as they'd hoped.

But the best thing for more creative game development, I think, is to have it rooted in a broader community. So as not to starve, it needs to feed on young people who come in for other reasons and who start out playing commercial games. Maybe, as an exclusively game design club, CLWG is limiting its options and access to a broader group of players.

## Continuing the Debate How boys become wargamers by Andy

Interesting view Jurrien but actually I don't think the fundamentals have changed. Yes, 'professionally produced' rulesets are now much glossier than they were thirty years ago and they are mostly rubbish just as WRG had sexy carboard covers and a stapled spine rather than in the top left corner and were rubbish.

The people that broke away from this faced the same challenge in 1980 as someone would now. Like Jim, I wonder where the 20 and 30 year olds are setting up modern WD or CLWG groups are. I think it is

important to bear in mind that the number of those people as a proportion of the hobby was always very small but they seem invisible now whereas many people had, I think, heard of WD even if the ideas were not for them.

I guess these people are doing something entirely different - and probably online.

## Continuing the Debate How boys become wargamers by Andy

I think Andy has hit the nail on the head with his last comment - a great deal of the young people that would have been gaming 'creatively' are probably doing stuff with computers. There are online roleplaying games, huge tactical and strategic battle games and a whole raft of other nonsense. I spend more time playing games on the computer than face to face games.

Computer graphics will render soldiers much better, and faster than you can ever paint them. To some extent we should credit GW with keeping the figure-collecting and painting part of the hobby alive, when it would otherwise be fading faster in the face of collectable card games, huge online worlds and electronic soldiers that you don't have to undercoat and varnish (or store)!

Much of what seems to have happened in the hobby reflects changes in the wider society (unsurprisingly):

- growth of the consumer culture
- greater wealth (well up til now anyway)
- loss of DIY type skills and reliance on mass production and buying
- loss of patience
- growth of instant gratification
- more automation and less effort
- less time?
- less interest in history, heroism and traditional values
- decline in militarism
- downplaying of masculine values and the importance of competition in the education system
- accelerated adolescence

My own (speaking as someone who has barely a week left of his twenties I just fall into the category being discussed) experience:

- Fascinated by war movies as a kid
- Always loved boardgames
- First real exposure was at the National Army Museum summer games aged about 7
- Spent many years writing rules and playing with toy soldiers
- But reverted to GW products in my teens because that's what the other kids wanted to play (and had)
- Computer games
- Roleplaying at school and outside, where we wrote our own rules
- LARP, where we did develop our own system
- Started going to CLWG aged 15
- Schoolfriends mostly lost interest in wargaming (girls, beer, music...)
- Reliant on CLWG for 'creative' gaming
- Games soc at Uni only into GW and D&D
- Back to CLWG after uni, but my contemporaries who are into games are all really into commercial boardgames, roleplaying or computers, rather than figure games or CLWG type games.

CLWG saved me from GW hell! But, having been hooked by little painted soldiers (I think it was a colonial skirmish Brits v Pathans) at the NAM, it was probably the GW products that kept my interest up in my early teens before I joined CLWG...

## Continuing the Debate How boys become wargamers by Peter

How do we find the CLWG geeklets of the future, or simply subvert (I mean, convert) others with a possible creative bent? Well how about telling people how much absolute fun these games have been, as well as intellectually satisfying? For various reasons I have recently been re-reading some of the old Featherstone and in my opinion much better Charles Grant books, Miniature Warfare articles etc - not for the rules (aargh!) but for the battle reports. They are still inspiring.

It was seeing war and pirate type films which got me going. Then seeing and reading about actual games inspired me to go further. Only later did inspiration come from direct reading of actual historical events.

## Continuing the Debate How boys become wargamers by Nick

My experience over the last 5 years has been mostly with boardgames. Games like "Settles of Catan", "Carcassone" and "Puerto Rico". These are commercially published board games, designed to be played by between 3 and 6 players in under 2 hours, usually with a non-military theme.

What is still alive and well within in this niche area of gaming is the DIY game designer. There are still many guys out there designing and play-testing their board-games, usually within the confines of their own gaming clubs. But in May this year I was at an international game designers festival, which game designers from France, Italy, Germany, Romania and Switzerland attended. All shared a similar vision and passion. They had lovingly created games using cardboard, paper, clip art and scanned images; they had bought lots of wooden chips, figures, and counters; and they had written up their rules, mostly in their own language, but most had an English translation.

But the big difference between the CLWG or WD designers is that all of these board-game designers were aiming to get "published" by one of the game publishing houses. It was why they were doing it. They were pefecting their game, so they could get it published. I generally find in CLWG we run our games once, possibly twice. We seem to be more about the experience of designing and playing and talking about it, than to go commercial.

## Continuing the Debate How boys become wargamers by Andrew Hadley

The group of gamers at Trev's games fortnight are an interesting parallel. They tend to be much more interested in the games themselves, but also enjoy discussing and dissecting the games, not just playing them. The key difference to me seemed to be that they didn't seem especially interested in discussing possible rule changes or options.Oddly, this doesn't mean they don't produce games. But those games are seen as products (for sale or not) rather than objects of academic or intellectual interest as processes.

The 'CLWG experience' is much more about the process, and what we learn from the game and its design, rather than creating an end product. Even our megagames tend to develop over time rather than ossify. I tend to remember the CLWG games when I learnt a lot about the period, or saw an interesting or novel mechanism, rather than when the game was well balanced and presented. I suspect the opposite is true of many gamers, especially in the 'younger' generation.

I think perhaps the education system and the methods of parenting have to shoulder some of the responsibility for this. Schools do not teach problem solving or creativity - they teach you to adopt a rigid approach to approaching a given task, and that there is a 'right' answer or certain facts that are relevant. This goes completely against the CLWG ethos, where there are few right answers, rarely any winners and the focus is on innovation rather than results. Exploring one's one interests gives few benefits until graduate level so most kids haven't had the rewarding experience of detailed study of history just for the joy of it. This educational problem is exacerbated by the frequent lack of parental interest in stimulating children's intellects and curiosity, and the void is filled with TV, computer games and the urge to buy stuff rather than make it or invent it.

## Continuing the Debate How boys become wargamers by Andrew Hadley

I miss CLWG for the discussions about how games are made but less for how they are played. Because they are a test bed they are often not properly worked through and so as a game - where one has a set of challenges and a fair stab at making them work, these are often frustrated because the systems break down. Or even if they don't the game breaks down because someone thinks it has, or disagrees with the chosen mechanisms, or has a short cut to improve them or else would just rather discuss the mechanisms or the history or whatever.

I suspect that many gamers just want to play a game; not wanting to wade through discussions about how to make it work, how to address play balance or to give up their valuable time on a work in progress.

Whereas a game perfected to publishing status is perfected in that it has been seriously road tested and should be playable and balanced (and listen to the howls on boardgame geek or consim world if it isn't). So when I played *1960 Making of a President* last night, I got a balanced and well presented game that gave me and my opponent a fair stab at victory, a balance of tension and fun. We did not have the sense of having been robbed by a faulty subsystem or a seriously unbalanced game. Whereas had we played my stillborn American politics game on the same subject my opponent would have perhaps not had the same feelings.

It's hard enough getting to grips with any new game (however few rules there are) without having to worry about whether it will work or not, or be fair even if it does.

Which is of course to miss the point on fairness and balance, because I know CLWG isn't about balance or fairness, rather how the systems work and do they reflect reality and are they fun to play. Which is fair enough but people like playing games because they have a point, and even if not expressed as hated victory points, you are trying to achieve something and if you can't or fail it is still disappointing if the game has robbed you of what you were trying to achieve.

Part of me still wants to get back to those designs, to build things that work, that plays 1960 for the game and yet still imagines ripping it apart and tinkering with it. Because the difference between most gamers and the folk who do CLWG is the seeking forever to tinker and amend, never to accept the design for what it is, to go beyond most gamers and their house rules – at CLWG we make up the rules – which is a very heady process.

While CLWG offers a home for that kind of people, it feels like an anachronism, like the Corinthian spirit in professional sport. What you have is a bunch of committed, interesting people designing things to be played (most of the time) by a very small group of like-minded people, rather as 19th century folk sitting around of an afternoon making up their own parlour games. Sometimes CLWG games go on to be Mega games, but these are again just the same idea writ large and with better catering (Mrs Boundy does a mean bacon sarnie). They don't make money, or if there is an excess I cannot imagine it much covers the time and labour that went into making it. So they're really done for the love of it, for the smile on a designer's face as he sees his game being played and enjoyed.

If I was a creative game designer type bursting with ideas (which those who'll remember me know I'm certainly not), I could hang out with a bunch of nice guys and do things for the sake of it. Or I could develop something that was good enough to sell. In the exact same way that if I was a talented cricketer (and fortunately none of you have seen me bat) I could hang out with a park cricket side, or I could see how far my talent would take me.

I would find interesting is if CLWG produced the odd commercial game. However, what would that do to the ethos of the club?

## Continuing the Debate How boys become wargamers by Jim

Speaking completely personally, the thought of selling my stuff in the crowded commercial games market is up there with watching paint dry. I am quite happy that I get several thousand downloads a month from my rules site (28,000 last month), and regular emails from all over the world saying that people like playing my rules. That is only possible because there is a group of enthusiasts like CLWG with whom to design and play the games.

Cottage industry it may be, but for some of us, as is obvious, that is just fine.

## Pictures

CLWG members at the Battle of Waterloo at the Royal Logistics Corps Museum on 30/31 August.

## CLWG AUTUMN DESIGN DAY

Thanks to Jim for arranging the one-day event after the disappointment of having to cancel the weekend. It was a good meeting with quite a spread of sessions: game movement mechanisms, Robs cold war stuff, Mukuls multi track games, and Arthurs fanyasy battle game. Arthur, Jim, Mukul, Brian and Rob enjoyed chatting, trying out several card-based mechanisms and having the opportunity to run a test game of the Old Trousers Fastplay Battle game rules from the Baccus 6mm website.