Civil War Simulation Games

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Abstract

“In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

To allow a student to better understand the way a battle develops into either a victory or a loss, simulation games are often used. In fact, the military academies usually use them as tools in the classroom to aid in the instruction of tactics and battlefield theory, as these games provide a dimension of involvement that mere lecture cannot duplicate. One such system, the Blue & Gray series published by Simulations Publications, allows for such objectives to be met. With generally accurate geography and terrain, and easy to learn rules, a player is able to either re-enact the historic battle as it actually occurred, or try a different strategy to see if a different outcome is possible. Focusing on the battle of Antietam (or Sharpsburg), both the good and bad points of the rules, geography, and the people involved in the game will be discussed in depth by making reference to the actual battle, which took place on 17 September 1862.
Civil War Simulation Games
By: Dan Brown

To allow a student to better understand the way a battle develops into either a victory or a loss, simulation games are often used. In fact, the military academies usually use them as tools in the classroom to aid in the instruction of tactics and battlefield theory, as these games provide a dimension of involvement that mere lecture cannot duplicate. One such system, the Blue & Gray series published by Simulations Publications, allows for such objectives to be met. With generally accurate geography and terrain, and easy to learn rules, a player is able to either re-enact the historic battle as it actually occurred, or try a different strategy to see if a different outcome is possible. Focusing on the battle of Antietam (or Sharpsburg), both the good and bad points of the rules, geography, and the people involved in the game will be discussed in depth by making reference to the actual battle, which took place on 17 September 1862.

Today, military simulation games have taken on more than just an entertainment role. The military academies use them as educational tools to instruct cadets in their studies of military theory and battlefield tactics. The main reason for the implementation of these games as teaching tools is the fact that they provide a new perspective to the student that cannot be achieved through lecture and reading alone. These games immerse the student into the role of a commander and teach them through experience what it is like to command. Also, these games provide insight as to the people involved, the tactics that were used, and the results that were achieved. Despite all of these good points, simulation games often leave out details that could further enhance the experience of recreating a historic battle. This is true for the game of the battle of Antietam (or Sharpsburg) from the Blue & Gray series published by Simulations Publications, where these omissions of detail could change the entire way that a player pictures the battle in their mind after playing.

One cannot study a battle, especially the battle of Antietam, without having to study the people involved. The setup of Antietam allows the players to gain a little knowledge as to who was there when the battle was fought, but there is no discussion as to what was going through their minds. For example, General George B. McClellan felt that his reconnaissance reports were incorrect, and he proceeded with caution although he outnumbered Lee’s Confederate army by almost two to one, or 87,000 soldiers versus 41,000 soldiers, respectively. In short, the players only learn who was there for the purpose of fighting, but not why they were there, the politics they subscribed to, or how they felt about the war. These points should be examined, but the impact of the war on the lives of the civilians must also be studied.

In the area surrounding the town of Sharpsburg, there were several farms and homesteads that held families that would be greatly affected by the events of the 17th day of September 1862. For instance, the Mumma’s would have no home to return to following the fighting, as the Confederate troops burned their house to the ground to prevent Federal troops from assuming sniping positions. In another example, the Pry household, situated between the Boonsboro-Sharpsburg Turnpike, and Antietam Creek, possessed an excellent view of almost the entire battlefield. The result of such a good command view: McClellan’s officers simply informed Phillip Pry and his family that their home would serve as the Union command center for the coming battle. In other cases, townspeople were driven from their places of safety (such as the Nicodemus farm), crops were trampled by maneuvering formations, fences destroyed by advancing brigades, and livestock confiscated to feed the armies. These actions all but destroyed the lives of those involved.
who lived outside of Sharpsburg, as they made their living primarily as farmers. Such events are left out of the details of a simulation game supposedly for the interest of simplicity’s sake, but the effects of fighting, according to Frobouck, literally in the “front yards” of the civilians are an important part of understanding the meaning of the American Civil War.

The actual geography of the battlefield is very close to the map provided with the game based upon Antietam. Major landmarks are all included on the map: the town of Sharpsburg, the various patches of wooded areas, the road system, Antietam creek, and the various fords and bridges across it all are depicted in the appropriate relative places. However, the game map lacks other such labeling: Miller’s Cornfield, the proper names given to the wooded areas (the West Woods, for example), and other locations given names after the battle had been fought. These omissions have both a good and a bad side in the educational aspect of playing the game.

The advantage to not having the historical areas and landmarks labeled on the game map is that it allows the player to feel as if he or she is one of the commanding officers who was present at the battle of Antietam. Not knowing exactly what or where everything was located was a major problem for both the Confederate and the Union while fighting around Sharpsburg. For instance, because of poor reconnaissance, Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside repeatedly tried to charge across the Lower Bridge rather than simply using the natural fords that were nearby. As a result, many Federal troops were killed by a small force under the command of Brig. Gen. Robert Toombs that occupied the high ground directly on the other side of Antietam Creek. It may be because of this lack of information that the commanders suffered during the original battle, that the game designers chose not to mark landmarks that have been named for the climactic battle once fought there on the banks of Antietam Creek.

On the other hand, if used as an educational tool, simulation games leave the student having played the game, but still not fully understanding the layout of the actual battlefield. The student may understand why the Union was able to use “sledgehammer” tactics (the name given to the use of superior numbers to continue an attack in the game rules), as the Federal troops held the advantage of numbers, but a student still will not know where Miller’s Cornfield is located where so many Confederates fell on that single day of fighting. In this aspect, the designers seem to show that the game is meant to recreate the battle as a commander would have seen it, while a student must follow a game with a session of lecture or research to discover on what part of the battlefield certain events took place.

A lack of labeling on the game map is not the only shortcoming of the Antietam game. The landscape is not exactly like what the actual terrain looks like. For example, several of the hills that are present in the land surrounding the battlefield of Antietam have simply been reduced to “Rough” hexes on the game map. This simplification has occurred mainly to accomplish two things within the game. First, the land had to be distorted slightly to fit the features onto a hex-based map. The most noticeable changes are the bends of Antietam Creek, and the shape and positions of the roads surrounding the town of Sharpsburg. Secondly, most hilly terrain, such as the area where the Pry home was built, has simply been reduced to what the game designers call “Rough” terrain, as the game system does not consider elevation to be of much importance in the Blue & Gray series. In short, the geography is laid out well enough to allow a player to study the battlefield to get an idea as to what the commanders faced, and the difficulty terrain may have played in the results of certain assaults, but the changes in geography made for the sake of the game

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prevents the players from getting a picture as to what the terrain on the battle of Antietam was truly like.

Tactics or the study of their implementation is an integral part of the study of any war, but it is especially important in the American Civil War, as the tactics were far outdated by the weapons of the time. In the game meant to recreate Antietam, there are a few rules that do not allow the players to learn about, understand, devise, and implement their own tactics. This is because the rules do not allow for such a practice to occur if they (the rules) are followed to the letter. These rules limit the players by not giving them the chance to use their own maneuvers and tactics in an attempt to "alter" history, in essence, changing the outcome of a battle with a new battle plan and understanding why a certain side was victorious (or was destroyed) in a particular battle. In some cases, the rules serve to force the players to behave like the commanders that were present.

One such example of the rules dictating how the battle will develop is the special Union movement rule in the Antietam game. This rule specifically says that the Union may not move any more than ten units per turn. This rule is probably the direct result of McClellan’s order for maneuvering his troops during the actual battle as is seen in this excerpt from a letter sent from Assistant Adjutant-General Lewis Richmond to Brig. Gen. S. Williams concerning the orders given to Burnside from McClellan himself:

...an aide from General McClellan came to him and said that General McClellan was not sure that the proper position had been indicated, and advising him not to hasten the movement until the aide had communicated with the general commanding. 9

This is a perfect example of how hesitant McClellan was to head into battle, often feeling that his reports were wrong, and that he was vastly outnumbered. In this way, the rules are written so that the player doesn’t charge headlong into battle and instead, behaves more like McClellan, and holds units back (through no desire of his own). On the other side of the table, the player that has control of the Confederacy has been given command of Lee’s highly mobile army. The result: the Confederate player can move as many units as he wishes to utilize his advantage of interior lines. The official rules do not allow for any battlefield innovation and more or less force the players to follow roughly the same tactics that both Lee and McClellan used during the actual battle. One can easily see why in this version of Antietam, the Confederacy almost always wins.

To counteract this unbalanced maneuverability scheme, the students studying the battle on Antietam at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, use house rules, or rules that have been rewritten by the players in a specific playing group, to govern the movement of the Union forces. Instead of being limited to only ten units to move per turn, the Union player now rolls a single six-sided die to determine the number of units allowed to move. Using this system, the player in McClellan’s position can now move between five and seventeen units depending upon the player’s roll. With the ability to move more units, the Union player can try to implement more of his own tactics and see if a larger mobilization can change the outcome of the battle and turn what was historically a draw into a overwhelming Union victory. The ability to try new tactics, especially in the context of the military stalemate of Antietam, can give a student insight as to how the commander can affect the entire outcome of a battle.

An area that should be a major focus of any battle has been extremely neglected, almost completely left out of the Antietam game, namely, the discussion of casualties, not just the dead, but the wounded and the dying as well. In the actual battle of Antietam, the day’s fighting amassed a total of over twenty-six thousand dead, dying, or wounded in

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battle. In a game recently played to recreate the 17 September 1862 confrontation, the players managed to cause over forty-four thousand casualties by the end of the game. In this situation, the players definitely are the winners, as they can simply pack up the game and go home. The commanders that were on the field that day had to deal with the death and injury of thousands upon thousands of soldiers.

This lack of concern for those who die in battle takes away from what the players learn about war. The author actually had to calculate the casualty rate from the aforementioned game results based upon the scale--there is nothing that deals with the death of troops in battle. The students who play this game do not appreciate how many lives were lost in their recreation of Antietam. By having no consequences for the death toll, the players may perform as a commander was supposed to command: seize the objective with no regard to losses. However, if the players were to understand how many have died under their “commands,” they might replay the game behaving a little more like McClellan, who was often unable to send troops into battle, for he could not deal with so many dying under his command.

Another final result of playing the game must be considered--the victor. Antietam has been described as a draw, with no side able to declare a decisive victory. What if a different end result is achieved? What if the Union were to wipe the Army of Northern Virginia out of existence? What if McClellan’s enormous army had been crushed? These questions are ones that may arise in playing simulations of historic battles, as they could change the entire course of the American Civil War with a Confederate victory. Such an outcome could mean that the Emancipation Proclamation would never be instituted, or that the Confederate invasion of the Union could have continued, and the course of the Civil War would be changed immensely.

Overall, the simulation game of Antietam has both good points and bad points. For example, the players get a first person feel as to what it’s like to command an army, but they may not realize what they are doing to the civilian population in the process of having a battle in that area. Also, the terrain that they study may not accurately reflect the real battlefield on which the actual battle was fought. Lastly, rules often govern the decisions that players make, and the study of tactics, both the historical and the ones that the players implement may be affected as players are forced to behave like the historical commander. Despite all of these downfalls of the Antietam game, it still provides a base to further research, discuss, and understand the battle that was the single bloodiest day in all of America’s history.
Endnotes

9 War of the Rebellion, p. 314.