

Wargamer – What Tribe Are You?

TimSmith, Jan 2022

Wargames and wargaming bring us together, but we all see that we differ in our preferences within wargamedom. While we differ in our wargaming motivations and purposes, most of us gravitate toward one or another orientations or inclinations that can be identified as ‘types’ or categories: in other words, we form *tribes*. I think it would help us all if we could know a rater’s or reviewer’s ‘tribal’ biases before reading their comments, and a designer’s underlying intent before investing in his game. The following is an attempt to sort this all out (a bit of academic ethnography, if you will).

These orientations and purposes shape our preferences in wargame selection and design criteria and the opponents and wargaming experiences we seek. Designers and developers are wargame tribesmen as well, and tend to produce games (or ‘conflict simulations’? – depends on your tribe) that reflect and satisfy given orientations more and better than they do others. These preferences involve familiar distinctions such as game vs. simulation, realism vs. playability, competition vs. analysis, and re-enactment vs. experimentation. So allow me to offer a tentative list and description of them and ask you: *to which tribe do you subscribe?*

I see six tribes, which appear to divide into two three-tribe ‘clans’, the first trio being in the great majority:

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|---------------------|--------------|
| 1. Competitors | 4. Analysts |
| 2. Historians | 5. Operators |
| 3. Epic Adventurers | 6. Teachers |

The Tribal ‘Cultures’

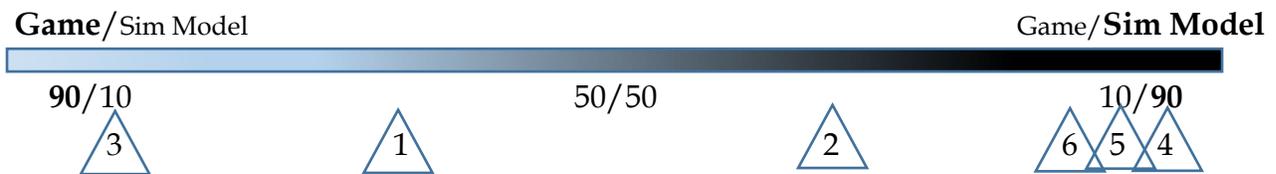
- 1. Competitors, who take a ‘Tournament’ Orientation:** this was the classic orientation with which Avalon Hill gave birth to the hobby (discipline?), asking the electrifying question – ‘can you out-general Napoleon?’ (Or Lee, Guderian, Yamamoto – name your iconic war-master.) Competitors seek competent opponents and pursue victory. They attend conventions and compete as champions. They will master a small set of games in order to prevail in battle. What competitors want from wargames is enough ‘realism’ (historical/technical accuracy) to serve as a basis for treating game play as a meaningful surrogate for generalship.
- 2. Historians, who take an Experiential Orientation:** these wargamers seek immersion in lived history, wargaming that faithfully re-creates the circumstances of great episodes in military history, enabling re-enactment through which one can share the experience of the great military-historical actors one is role-playing. For these ‘tabletop re-enactors’, the design emphasis is on realism that bounds players to the problems that historical actors faced, in the framework within which they experienced it.
- 3. Epic Adventurers, who assume a Literary Orientation:** these contenders transcend the routine of daily life to confront the demands of decision-making in a world-historical setting, seeing the gaming experience as a dramatic ‘narrative’ that ‘tells a story’ of risk and opportunity, challenge and response, glory or failure, agony and ecstasy. For them the design requirement is for a balance between player ‘agency’ and fate that embroils them in an epic contest of wills amidst the ineluctable fortunes of war. What they do not want is an epic struggle with rules so complex or illiterate as to distract from the actors’ role in a stage-play whose plot they struggle to control.
- 4. Analysts, who adopt a Scientific Orientation:** here James F. Dunnigan and SPI are the classic exemplars, who extended the emphasis on alternative strategies and tactics to encompass expe-

rimentation with 'what-if' alternatives such as force capabilities (force structures, orders of battle, initial dispositions – that is, initial conditions in general), enabling deeper analysis of structural causes of observable game-play (experimental) outcomes so as to better evaluate historical decision-making and understand military theory. Thus did the wargame grow into the *conflict simulation* (simulation *model*, technically). SPI games and accompanying *S&T* articles were designed as much to support data analysis as to enable game play. For experimentation and analysis, good design emphasizes historical and technical accuracy sufficient to ensure that the quantification (unit values, combat & terrain tables) represent real-world probabilities accurately enough to enable causal analysis.

5. **Operators, who take a Planning Orientation:** these professionals employ scientific analysis to support real-world problem-solving, taking the same approach as the analysts but less for developing theory and more for supporting real-world decision-making. Their design emphasis mirrors that of theoreticians but is used to support practice. Analytic planning, of course, is typically a military-professional pursuit and extends the wargaming into more complex and expensive domains that optimally include a mix of wargaming, computational M&S and field/fleet exercises.
6. **Teachers, who serve a Pedagogical Orientation:** educators and trainers use wargames as teaching tools for junior officers and analysts (service academies, war colleges) or for civilian K-12/college students (especially politico-military games aligned with school curricula). Game-based education is enjoying increasing popularity in support of established curricula, for which military wargaming is suited primarily for professional military education, although card-driven general history/diplomacy games have great civilian utility. For pedagogical purposes, accurate depiction of cause-and-effect is vital (especially in training, where teaching the wrong lessons – 'negative training' can be fatal). In general teaching requires accessible designs that model deep truths elegantly (parsimoniously), so as to enable valid learning.

All of these orientations need wargame designs optimized to meet user preferences and serve their purposes. For this, the tribes and their preferred wargames can be classified across a spectrum from games for playing to tools for analysis. This roughly corresponds to the old 'realism-vs,-playability' debate, albeit only roughly. The following band is one interpretation. Analysis, planning and training (4, 5 & 6) clearly focus on the analytic side, whereas various gamers/analysts might offer alternative placements for the other orientations. 'Re-enactment' (2) forces or at least imposes incentives for players to replicate history, which can tend to emphasize simulation and constrain player agency. By contrast, 1 and 3 emphasize player agency – in fact, they emphasize the player first and foremost. 4, 5 & 6 offer wide-ranging agency, but only across a set of historically/technically valid alternative possibilities.

Wargame: Game or Simulation Model:



So, in sum then: what tribe are you?

And do I even have the list right? Am I missing any? Have I described them right? What would you add or change?