



Miniatures Vs. Mech War '77 & Firefight



MIKE DOE

I am particularly interested in fighting hypothetical modern tactical armoured warfare, so I was very pleased when SPI released Mech War '77 in April 1975 and Firefight in August 1976. I have now played both of these games extensively and in this article I want to try to compare these games with gaming with 1/285 - 1/300 minatures.

In these days, cost is a very important factor in anything and wargaming is no exception. The economics of miniatures wargaming can vary enormously according to which firms micro-tanks you prefer. For example, these are the current prices for a US M60A1 tank:

Company	Price	Scale	Rating
Skytrex Ltd	8p	1/300	4
Heroics	10p	1/300	6
GHQ	16p	1/285	10

(Ratings are out of 10; 10=best)

I think GHQ represent the best value for money because they are superb miniatures and when painted well look very effective - true micro-armour not micro-blobs.

Therefore 17 M60A1 (a company) would cost £2.72p. Add to that the cost of supporting infantry and APCs, SP Mortars and Anti-tank vehicles and the cost becomes quite formidable - then there is always scenery - although being in a wargames club can help a lot in this area. Anyway, a figure of between £5.00 - £10.00 would be reasonable for an Armoured Company plus support elements. This compares with £4.99 for Mech War '77 and £7.75 for Firefight, assuming you don't subscribe to S&T.

As for complexity, both Mech War '77 and Firefight are rated between 6-7. However, when the basic rules are grasped and their implications understood the games do become an exercise in tactics.

However, most beginners to modern gaming tend to prefer miniatures to the boardgames because it is easier to think in terms of miniature tanks rather than cardboard squares.

Now, which is the most realistic/accurate? It is difficult to make objective conclusions here because the war in which these games are set has not yet been fought (luckily!).

When talking to die-hard miniatures gamers about Mech War and Firefight, many of them displayed the attitude that because they use small tanks and trees their games are automatically more realistic and accurate simulations than a coloured map and cardboard counters. In my opinion, however, this is a wrong attitude.

The big advantages of miniatures are the visual impact of the vehicles, and the point that it is obvious on which part of a target vehicle a shot fired at it is likely to fall, ie the 100mm gun of the T55 has a very much better chance of knocking out a heavily armoured Chieftain on the side armour than the heavily armoured glacis plate.

On the other hand, an umpire is nearly always needed when using miniatures to settle any arguments about off table fire, or which terrain blocks line of sight and which doesn't. Also, one side will usually be employed on the board already and will

want to carry out movement which the enemy cannot see. This means that every move must be written down in detail and given to the umpire. When there are a lot of men and vehicles in use it can become quite a slow process. One thing that spoils a lot of miniatures games I have watched is an unrealistic-looking ground scale, which is usually used to offset the vast "killing ranges" that are offered by today's weapons systems.

The advantages of Firefight and more particularly Mech War '77 are that the battles are fought over a larger area allowing more opportunity for manoeuvre and secondly very little book-keeping is required. This can be speeded even more by writing with a chinagraph pencil on plastic-covered card the indirect fire and game-turn tasks.

On the whole, the boardgames require less set-up time and less playing time (especially Firefight): both are easily finishable in an afternoon.

The indirect fire system in Firefight is highly detailed and is quite the best system for off table fire I have seen.

An advantage, or disadvantage, depending on which way you look at it, is that on the whole you require less 'luck' in the board games, ie at +8 a D-2 is assured, therefore plotting two fire tasks at +8 is certain destruction, whereas a series of low scores with miniatures can make a superb tactical deployment worthless - I do not believe in a certain hit!

One disadvantage of the boardgames, in my opinion, is that the morale (panic) rules (totally absent from Firefight) are decidedly inferior to those in the miniatures rules I have seen. Units only have morale tests when they come under fire and you do not have units in a column away from the main battle area suddenly driving in all directions, as is possible in Mech War '77.

Fixed scenarios are another disadvantage of the boardgames. The opposing player only has to look at the O.B. to see exactly what forces his opponent has. In miniatures each vehicle can be allocated a points value and each side given a total number of points. Then each player is allowed to choose vehicles and weapons up to this maximum value. Perhaps the method could be adapted to Mech War and Firefight (see Designing your own scenarios for Mech War '77 Footnotes Moves 27).

Also, when deploying forces it is immediately obvious that players can see at a glance what they would never know in a real situation. Dummy counters help but where there is no counter there is no unit! Short of using a method the same as miniatures with an umpire there is no solution, and using an umpire would slow down the game a lot and mean that it would lose one of its advantages, in that it is a TWO-player game.

I have briefly given a few advantages and disadvantages of each system. In the end it is down to personal preference - I play boardgames and miniatures and enjoy both.

I should like to hear the views of other gamers, perhaps from other periods, on the miniatures v. boardgames issue.

THE COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO BOARD WARGAMING

by Nicholas Palmer

Published by Arthur Barker

Price £6.50

Reviewed by Allan Frost

Mr Palmer has certainly put a great deal of effort into this masterpiece, and with his vast experience has succeeded in producing a classic work on wargame theory and practice. Every self-respecting wargamer should acquire it - although rather on the pricey side it is well worth purchasing, for there is no other book on the market to compare with it, and the benefits to be obtained more than outweigh the cost.

The book itself is a well produced, clearly illustrated, definitive 223 page tome on all aspects of board wargaming as they exist at the present time. It begins with a short journey through the evolution of wargames and ends with a Sample Game - The Battle of Nordlingen (which will be familiar to many as one of the best games produced by SPI), complete with tactical analysis and clear photographs of the state of the game after each move.

The bulk of the book, however, deals more specifically with the nitty-gritty aspects of strategy and tactics, supported by numerous examples from games such as Stalingrad, Third Reich, Panzerblitz, Dreadnought and others. Whether you are interested in pre- or post-1900 warfare, land, air or sea combat, all has been revealed - and there are several problems for the reader to solve. (The answers are also given in one of the Appendices, but don't cheat!). In my opinion, whatever your status (novice or expert) the advice presented by the author can only serve to increase your chances of winning - indeed, there are two chapters written solely for that purpose. Although gaining victory over the opponent is the object of all wargames, the information and advice proffered on the strategic and tactical elements must lead to a greater appreciation and further enjoyment of wargaming. Readers of Games and Puzzles No63 (August 1977) will already have had a foretaste of the book and cannot fail to have been impressed by its quality.

There is also a chapter consisting of short reviews of most games currently available. In a book this size comprehensive reviews would be an impossible task, apart from which the various magazines on the scene (including the "Phoenix") already provide ample coverage. Nevertheless, Mr Palmer provides sufficient information to help the reader decide which games may suit his interests and abilities; any further details required on games can be obtained from the names and addresses of games and magazine publishers, and clubs in the United Kingdom which are listed in another Appendix.

Finally - as an added bonus, at the end of the book is the SPI produced "Introduction to Strike Force One", complete with playing counters, which serves as an illustration to newcomers to wargaming of the basic system used in most games.

No doubt this book will be regarded as the book on wargaming; certainly it will be a Herculean task for anyone to better it.

Can you afford to be without it?