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# "All Players are Created Equal"

Virtually all military conflict-simulation games are unfair, i.e., one side or the other has a better chance of winning. Players (and some game designers) have attempted to deal with the problem of imbalance by modifying victory conditions, altering forces (by providing additional Orders of Battle) or by changing Combat Results Tables (see Bias for Better Balance, *MOVES* no. 1). The difficulty with these approaches and most others, is that they usually require the making of qualitative judgements and are therefore fallible. Also, such balancing modifications tend to destroy the historicity of the game.

Actually, a very simple solution exists which requires no alteration of history or fiddling around with tables: Matched games. To balance any game, Players simply play the same game twice, changing sides for the second game. The total performance of a Player in both games determines whether he wins or loses the match. In this way, the inherent advantage of a given historical army is effectively cancelled out since both Players are given the opportunity of using the stronger army.

The following is an outline of the Match-game system which will provide Players with the basis for setting up Match rules for most of the games in existence:

## CHOOSING THE GAME

(A) The game to be played should be one with which both Players are thoroughly familiar.

(B) If the game is one with alternate scenarios and Orders of Battle, Players should jointly make the decision as to which situation will be played in the two-game Match. If agreement is impossible each Player shall roll the die once. The high roller will choose the scenario, or if the game includes alternate Orders of Battle, choose one of the Orders of Battle of one of the sides (and the low rolling Player chooses the Order of Battle for the remaining side).

(C) Players shall decide by the toss of a coin or the rolling of the die, which Player will play which side first.

## DETERMINING MATCH VICTORY

### General Guidelines:

The victory conditions of most games fall into two general categories:

- (1) Point Score Victory or number-of-units-destroyed, and
- (2) Territorial Victory.

Usually, the quality of victory is expressed in a three-tier grading system: Marginal Victory, Substantive Victory and Decisive Victory (or some terms similar to the foregoing). In some games, the victory conditions depend upon a combination of points gained, territory captured and with the Level of Victory determined by a ratio of Friendly victory points to Enemy Victory Points.

The problem presented then, is that of developing a cumulative two-game score that will truly reflect overall Player-performance.

(A) In games which have no graded levels of victory the Match is won by winning both games. If the match is split (one Player wins the first game using side A and the second Player wins the second game using side A) then a tie-breaker must be used to determine the match winner.

**TIE-BREAKERS:** if the game has a point scoring (or number of units destroyed) victory condition, compare the net points achieved by each victor (subtract the loser's points from the winner's points in each single game in order to arrive at the net) to determine the Match Winner.

If the game has a territorial victory condition, award the Match victory to the Player who achieved the objective sooner. If both Players attained the objective in the same Game-Turn, award the match to the Player who suffered the lowest losses (in terms of Combat Points) in the single game that he won; if this also results in a tie, the Match is a draw.

(B) In games with graded levels of victory, the Match Winner is that Player who achieves the highest *net* level of victory. Most graded Victory Conditions allow for three levels of victory: Marginal Victory, Substantive Victory, and Decisive Victory. The following Match Point Values should be assigned such victory levels:

*Draw* (if possible) = 0 Match Points  
*Marginal Victory* = +1 Match Point (*Marginal Defeat* = -1 Match Point)  
*Substantive Victory* = +3 Match Points (*Substantive Defeat* = -3 Match Points)  
*Decisive Victory* = +6 Match Points (*Decisive Defeat* = -6 Match Points)

At the end of the match, each Player totals his Match Points and divides by two. Compare the resultant net Match Points to the preceding value scale in order to determine the Match level of victory attained by the winner.

*Example:* Player A achieves a Marginal Victory in Game One (+1 Match Point) and a Decisive Victory in Game Two (+6 Match Points). This yields a Match Point total of 7 which, when divided by two and compared to the Match Point Values, indicates a Substantive Match Victory.

*Example:* Player A achieves a Marginal Victory in Game One and suffers a Marginal Defeat in Game Two; his net Match Points are zero and the Match is a draw.

(C) Some games have graded levels of victory for only one side. In such a case, treat a victory by the side which is not graded as a decisive victory (6 Match Points).

## PLAYING A SERIES AND DETERMINING THE SERIES VICTOR:

The best indication of the relative skill of two Players competing in a given simulation game can be attained by Playing a Series of three Matches. The six games which comprise a Series will begin to provide the Players with statistical information about their relative playing abilities and will also have a leveling effect upon any streaks of luck experienced in a given game.

Unless the game is a fast-playing one, Players should not attempt to finish a series in a single day. The fatigue effects resulting from such an attempt would probably poison the validity of the later games. The most feasible approach is to play a single match per day (or in the case of long-playing games, a single game per day).

At the end of the series, total up the Match Points achieved in each single game, and divide by six. Compare the result with the Point Victory Values to determine the winner of the Series.

In games which have simple win-or-lose victory conditions, count each victory as 6 Match Points, and each loss as -6 Match Points. Divide the Series total by six in order to obtain the graded Series Victory Level.

## DEVELOPING HANDICAPS

So far, the techniques given allow a *game* to be balanced. What follows is a method whereby the Players differing abilities may be balanced.

As is often the case, one's regular opponent may be a substantially better (or worse) Player. To prevent boredom from setting in and to allow two Players of disparate abilities to compete on an equal footing, a handicap can be developed by using the information derived from playing one or more Series.

Take the total Match Points achieved by the weaker Player in a given Series and subtract it from the total Match Points achieved by the stronger Player. Divide the difference by three to obtain the Match handicap for the weaker Player. In every subsequent match between those two Players this handicap should be added to the Match Point total of the weaker Player.

After playing one Series using the handicap, Players should revise the weaker Player's handicap upward or downward depending upon the results of that series. To do this, Players should develop a weighted average (one which favors the most recent information). Evaluate the score of the Series just played in its raw form (without using any handicap) and develop a handicap based solely on the results of that Series. Take this new handicap number, double it and add it to the old handicap number. Divide the total by three. The result is the new handicap to be used in the next series.

Players should keep careful records of their Match and Series histories, paying special attention to raw scores and handicap trends. Players should keep in mind that their relative handicaps apply only to play of the same game (or game system) between the same two players. To develop generally applicable handicaps, Players would have to participate in a large number of Series with a wide variety of Players.

