

WARMMASTER

My Take on Sportsmanship

John take a look at the human condition – fair play

By John Bennison

I've wargamed for something like 30 years now and throughout that period sportsmanship, fair play or however you want to refer to it rears its head in various guises. I've witnessed arguments in clubs, between friends and sometimes see references to unfair play on the various websites and letters pages in magazines.

It is always “the other guy”. All correspondents seem to be victims of such antics but never the perpetrators. A general theme is that someone will post or write something bemoaning a perceived unfair tactic, rule interpretation or whatever and look for support for his case. Occasionally the other party will reply in defence and a “discussion” will ensue which, as often as not, shows misunderstandings by both parties.

So, when Andy asked if I would try to think of an idea for an article, this subject seemed to be worth pursuing. Although this piece is written with Warmmaster in mind it is equally applicable to most other games. It is all about human nature after all.

Why? Well the one thing that can spoil gaming can be arguments and disagreements. I've been involved in them, from time to time, over the years. Thankfully, as I've become a more experienced gamer and got older and, hopefully, wiser, they are rare. It has, though, taken a conscious change of approach to achieve this. That is because I am reasonably competitive.

Looking at the subject I thought it sensible to analyse the causes and also to go through ways to avoid both instigating and falling victim to perceived poor sportsmanship.

THE CAUSES

I think this can be split into four main areas. The first two revolve around the players. There is the level of competitiveness of a player and his (or her) level of experience with the rules. Then you have the mechanics of play such as dice rolling and moving the models and finally rules and their interpretation. All these can be interlinked in an endless variation of combinations. At one extreme you will get a very inexperienced player who is

hugely competitive. He'll try all sorts and you'll need the rulebook and hawk eyes to track what he attempts to do. At the other extreme is the very knowledgeable player who doesn't care whether he wins or not. In fact he'll probably point out where you are going wrong and help you win. Nether extreme is satisfying to play against. I have to say that honesty, or lack of, is very rarely a factor. Where a player can have his integrity challenged is when temptation rears its head. It's extremely rare that someone will go out of their way to cheat. If you come across this character then don't play them. Mostly though, apparent dishonesty comes out of self-justification of an interpretation of the rules and over-exuberance in the mechanics of play. I'll attempt to show how you can minimise this.

THE INEXPERIENCED COMPETITIVE PLAYER

Although these players are irritating to deal with they are probably the easiest to handle. Their inexperience will highlight all the silly things that they attempt and all you need is sharp eyes and an open rulebook. They will fall victim to both poor interpretation of the rules and playing mechanics. His frustration at his own inexperience can lead to aggression. It is this group who have the potential to change most as they gain experience and harness their competitive edge.

THE EXPERIENCED COMPETITIVE PLAYER

They are much more difficult to deal with. There will be little of the poor interpretation of the rules except where the rules are themselves a bit woolly and then the long “debate” can sometimes ensue. He sometimes will “stretch” the tape measure and argue over a rule that is open to misinterpretation.

THE OTHER EXTREME

Whether experienced or not I think these players are the worst to play. I used to play monopoly with my mother as a child. She never was bothered whether she won or lost. They were the most boring games to play. There is no sense of achievement playing against such players unless you are an extreme version of the competitive player and then it would just get embarrassingly unpleasant to watch or be a part of. They have little potential to develop into a genuinely interesting opponent, as the competitive spirit is not learned. You either have it or you don't.

So let's have a look at where all this poor sportsmanship can rear its head.

THE MECHANICS OF PLAY

Problems can arise here depending on a player's style of play.

Rushing. I fall victim to this. By that I mean I do it. There are two main ways that this can show itself. Throwing the dice and picking them up too quickly or at least before your opponent has time to see what has been thrown. It leads to mistrust. The answer, slow down. I'm a naturally exuberant player and have to deliberately slow myself down. If your opponent is doing this just insist that he slow down so you can count the numbers. The other area to be rushed is the physical movement of troops. I'll give you an example that I sometimes have done. I want to move a unit from a to b but the route isn't in a straight line. In my eagerness to move I guess. Since I'm experienced the guess is



Rick & Ken South – always good sportsmen

usually about right. It is the wrong way to do it though. A guess is a guess so check with your opponent before doing it. In the early stages of a game it won't matter and your opponent is likely to be happy providing you've asked. However, as the game progresses and those millimetres start to make a difference as to whether a unit will get into combat or not make sure that the whole thing is done in an orderly fashion. A similar error is to pick up and move a unit without giving your opponent time to see if the distance is right. I've seen awful rows over this, especially when units are picked up as a kind bundle and plonked down before the opponent has had time to judge the distance himself. This especially is problematic with one or two stand units. Measure and show to give both you and your opponent time to check the distance moved.

Measuring. yes this can fall down when rushed but I've seen (and done) some daft ones in my time. The ones to watch are experienced players here because a nice measured and apparently open manoeuvre can hide inconsistencies as follows.

The Wheel. you move your first stand a properly measured maximum distance and your opponent is watching in a relaxed manner. Your second stand gets move and a furrow appears on the brow of your opponent. The second stand has moved further. So often do I see a player starting with the nearest stand (correct for charging) and then moving the rest almost as an afterthought. Measure from the furthest stand and you'll avoid that one.

Movable Obstacles. You've moved all but one stand of your unit and now find that the last stand has to "squeeze" in. The squeeze causes the loosely placed obstacle to move; oops. Don't squeeze. Measure before placing and if in doubt get your opponent to do it. Often he will allow something that could be denied because he doesn't want to be seen as nitpicking.

The Shuffle. you move your unit and then realise that you want to change its destination so you slide it a short distance over to where the new destination is without taking your hands off it. Even if this is a shorter distance don't do it. Ask and it will usually be agreed. If you are pushing it though and there is doubt over the distance moved then you'll have to concede. This usually happens when you rush. I know, I've done it.

THE RULES

Ah, what fun can be had with the interpretation of these. Many a row has gone along the lines of "It means that" followed by "No, it means this" and then an impasse.

However, first off, the relevant rule being quoted needs to be found. Many is the time that players have spent valuable playing time trying to find the relevant passage to back up or refute a disputed move. Now this is obviously going to happen more frequently with inexperienced players. Patience and knowledge of the rules will help reduce the effect of this. Where there is going to be a more subtle problem is with the experienced player. He may know where the rule is in the book but may have read it differently. He may even be right, so you've got to hope that it is a well-written rule. If there is still no agreement, resort to the dice. Having said that I was once victim to a unique try on. My opponent did something that wasn't in the rules. I pointed

this out to him and rather than acknowledge the error (I think he knew he'd made a mistake) he suggested that his way of doing it was actually in the updated rules shortly to be released. I let him get away with it as the action he was trying didn't make a lot of difference and, more to the point, he'd caught me with my cavalier attitude to moving stands.

That I think is a key point. I've stopped pointing the finger because I know I'm as guilty as the next when it comes to getting carried away and interpreting rules, distances and the rest in my favour.

HOW TO BE A SPORTING PLAYER

Ok this does sound patronising and you'll maybe harrumph and think to yourself "But I am sporting". I'd be so bold as to say that if you have any competitive edge at all you will sometimes fall prey to the mistakes I have illustrated. Over time I have tried to adhere to the following practices with the result my games now have less interruption through disagreement than they used to.

The Dice. Roll and show. Let your opponent see the result and, just as important, announce the result before you pick them up. It is surprising how often a mistake can be made in the eagerness to get on with the game so take your time.

The Tape Measure. be clear to what and where you are measuring to. And don't, if at all possible, start bending the tape measure. If the unit has to move in a line that is not straight measure it in stages with a straight edge. If you are going to bend give your opponent the opportunity to check.

Moving the Units. again be transparent. Tell your opponent what you are doing. It is at this juncture that he will challenge you if he thinks you cannot make that move. Then move them a stand at a time to give your opponent time to challenge should he think there is something amiss.

All the above are really common sense and should be equally achievable whether you are new to the rules or not. However, with the best will in the world they get forgotten in the heat of the game. I think we all need a reminder.

The Rulebook. have it at hand and also have any updates or amendments. This is one area where only experience can help and this is where the newbie has to be a little more wary. Again, though, a reasonable common sense understanding of the written word should do. If an experienced player makes a claim just get him to show it in the book. As the experienced player you need to be patient.

So there you have it. A short illustration of one man's view on "Sportsmanship". I have met very few players who do not commit some of the fouls described above. At various times I have committed them. I've come to the realisation that I would rather play someone who is prone to such behaviour than one who is not. At least he wants to win so beating him will be satisfying. As long as he is aware of his tendency and takes proper preventative action then a good game will ensue. A player who never commits fouls of the nature described is probably uncompetitive and therefore may not be a great player to play against. This is a generalisation I know but is borne out by my own experience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John is an experienced Warmaster player and winner of last years Warmaster Tactics competition. John has spent the year writing (as well doing his day job!) writing his 'My Take on...' articles. Look out for more soon.