

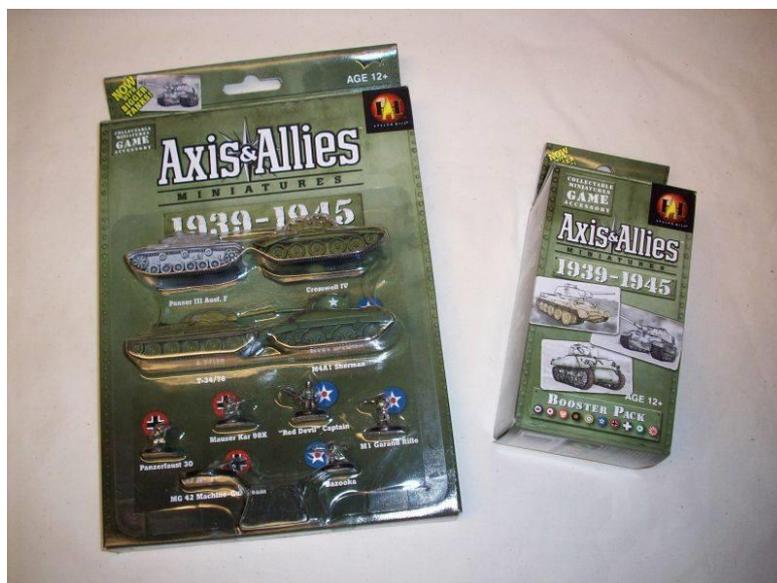
Points Values: Why we love to hate them.

Come on admit it, we have all been there. You are in mid game, all is going well then that very modestly costed unit your opponent has begins to rip through your forces like a mini tornado. It destroys everything before it and all attacks directed at it bounce off harmlessly. You would have won had it not been for it. The unit can't possibly be pointed correctly...or can it?



No matter how much we curse dubious points systems they remain the easiest way to play. Saying bring along X points worth of troops is by far the easiest way of arranging a game there is. Personally, I am dubious of any wargame without a points system. It is not too hard to think of rule sets without points systems that have not caught the gaming public's imagination and wonder if the lack of a points system had anything to do with it. Did Tomorrows War fall into this category? On the other hand I find myself avoiding systems with very weak points systems. Gruntz has huge popularity amongst sci-fi gamers but I don't think the points system alone can guarantee two equally matched forces reaching the table. Perhaps the solution would be some sort of roster. By that I mean you only pick one fancy unit for every couple of standard units but this is problematical for generic games that allow players to create their own gaming worlds. Some people just enjoy the freedom to pick anything they want to play with.

I got into a couple of collectible miniatures systems only to find out in short order that the points systems seemed rubbish. In Star Wars Starship Battles models having higher numerical stats than others somehow cost less points. There were no special rules or features to justify the difference. The authors of Axis and Allies miniatures which I collected for a while actually came out and said there was no numerical basis as to how points values were derived and "players would enjoy discovering for themselves which units represented good value".



I stopped collecting at that point. The game also suffered from horrendous power creep with new models being so much better than anything that had come before.

I played in the local ancients and medieval competition circuit for about seven years using the DBM rules system. The points values in that rule set were fixed in stone, the authors decided that they would never be changed.

In order to try and correct balance issues the capabilities of troop types that appeared too weak or too strong for their points values were regularly amended. This led to some bizarre armies suddenly becoming the army to have overnight.

These included Toltec (ancient Mexican) whose blow pipes became super effective at the stroke of a pen and pre-feudal Scots whose schiltrons (pike like formations) became better value than any other pike troops for a brief period. It also meant certain troop types virtually never appeared like Roman legions and knights classed as ordinary. Ordinary meant the most common type, it was thus acutely ironic they were rarely if ever used. Mind you this was a competitive league and I did spend many happy hours drawing up competitive army lists

Surely there must be a numerical way of getting good points values? Assigning a cost per point in each numerical stat a unit has and a cost for any additional special abilities. Get that right and the job is done is it not? Well no. Getting the differential in cost between low and high stats is very hard. A lot of games fail to make an adequate differential. In those games you have more chance of winning just by selecting the highest stat or best troops available to you. Then there is the problem of special abilities combining to be worth more than the sum of their parts. A high assault stat is worth so many points, a high move stat so many points but is a unit with both only worth the sum of the two?

We also tend to forget just how much terrain can affect the relative value of troops. A unit with a longer range weapon than normal you would expect to be more expensive but if playing in an urban environment where lines of sight are very short the advantage is negated. Exactly how terrain is set up can have a huge effect on the relative value of different unit types. I am often amazed at how little guidance rule sets give on setting up terrain.

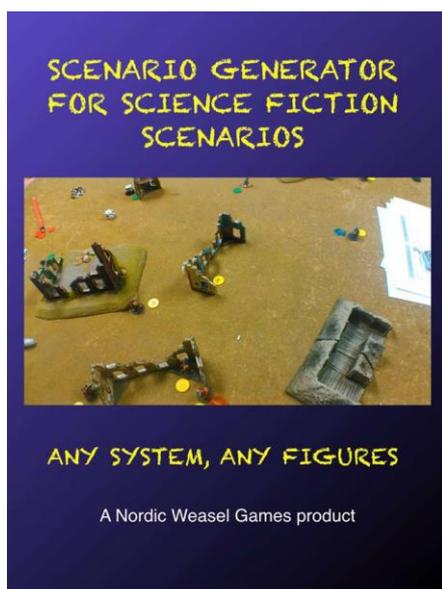
What is the purpose of a points system? I think the answer is to ensure that two forces of an equal points value have a roughly equal chance of winning a game if the two players show an equal amount of skill. Yet even when you consider that statement it cannot be entirely true. If I was playing a world war two game and my opponent chose an army consisting entirely of anti tank guns I would be very disappointed if it had as much chance of winning as a carefully chosen combined arms force. When you think about it a points system which meant any combination of units even if chosen at random would be as good as any other would suck all the fun out of army building and I don't think it could be done. So the question becomes what influence should sound army construction have on the outcome of a game. For me I would say up to about 20%. That is if my opponent has chosen his troops wisely and I have picked things that looked cool without any thought as to how they would fight together, my opponent should win about one in five times more than normal if everything else remained equal. Your mileage may vary.

Mantic's sci fi rule set Warpath (and I am only talking about the mass battle version here) gets a lot of things right with some innovative and fast moving game play. To me however the points system gets an equal amount wrong. No brainer and no hope choices in the army lists abound. I play a Marauder army. My core infantry are called Goran auxiliaries. A basic team costs 40 points and can be upgraded with a heavy machine gun for an extra 10 points. The machine gun gives a 75% increase in firepower for a 25% increase in the cost of the unit. Not really a choice you are going to

debate for very long. In summary I would say the game is decided by army choice before play has begun about 80% of the time. Almost the exact opposite of my ideal.

So the holy grail of a perfect points system seems impossible to achieve and even difficult to define what being perfect would mean. If your points system is not giving you good games change something. Whether that be the rules system, the armies used or how you set up games. Even banning an unbalancing troop type may just be enough.

I have been playing a lot of Laserstorm (generic sci-fi) from Nordic Weasel games and can even admit to having a little input via play testing on the revised points system. It annoys the heck out of me that despite the best efforts of the author and play testers some units still seem better value than others.



The author freely admits that it is easy to play the system and design super units. Recently Nordic Weasel have published a generic, random sci-fi and modern scenario generator and I am super excited to see this alternative to purely points based battles.

It allows games to be set up with randomly determined army compositions (within broad definitions) and objectives, backed up by points values. It takes a little work to mould it to your rule set and probably works best if both players are familiar with the rule set and troops being used. I have not had a chance to try it out yet but it looks like a really interesting and innovative way to set up games.

I look forward to giving it a try. At least if I lose I can always blame the dodgy scenario instead of just the dodgy points values.

- Podsy McPod