

## Making history: The story of modern wargaming

By Kip Allen

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Modern wargaming started in 1953. That was when Charles Roberts designed the first true board wargame, "Tactics." It featured a conflict between two hypothetical powers. Cardboard pieces represented the units that were moved on a map with a grid of squares. A die roll matched to a series of charts determined the outcome of battle.

Roberts realized he had tapped into a new market. In 1958, he founded the Avalon Hill Co., which is the granddaddy of wargame companies.

Wargaming has been a major part of my life since my high school days in the early 1960s. My gaming companions and I waited impatiently for whatever new game Avalon Hill would release, which happened no more than once or twice a year. By 1963, "D-Day," "Bismarck" and "Stalingrad" occupied my weekends.

Almost as important as the games themselves, Avalon Hill published "The General," a magazine dedicated solely to the new hobby. One of the most important aspects of the publication was its "Opponents Wanted" column. For the first time, wargamers across the country were able to network and actually form a sense of community.

When I left for college in the turbulent '60s, wargaming went with me. There, I found like-minded spirits who enjoyed the intellectual challenge. Interestingly, the hobby seemed as popular among the anti-war crowd as with the ROTC cadets. As an aside, the English writer H.G. Wells, an avowed pacifist, was an avid miniature enthusiast. In fact, he wrote one of the definitive books on miniature gaming, "Little Wars." When asked how a pacifist could enjoy such a pastime, he replied, "Lead soldiers to not bleed. Neither do they leave widows and orphans."

Still, there was something missing in the hobby. The games were just games, albeit complex, they were not especially realistic. That started to change in 1966. That was the year Avalon Hill contracted with a young writer named Jim Dunnigan to design for them. Dunnigan soon produced "Jutland," "1914" and "Panzerblitz."

This game opened a new vista in the hobby. Dunnigan was a meticulous researcher. He incorporated accurate terrain factors as combat multipliers, made accurate estimates of historical units' strength and performance and added logistics. In short, his designs were not games — they were simulations. Dunnigan proved that actual or hypothetical military situations could be accurately portrayed in a game format.

Dunnigan also had some ideas of his own. He believed that there was a market for accurate, complex simulations; he believed the market could bear more than one or two releases annually and he believed that the gaming public wanted a publication that was more than just a house organ, as the "General" had become. As a result, he started Simulations Publications Inc in 1969 and took over publication of a gaming/history magazine, *Strategy & Tactics*. His predictions proved correct and the subsequent decade proved to be the "golden age" of wargaming.

Naturally, gamers such as myself became dedicated customers. In 1973, I moved to New York City seeking fame and fortune as a broadcaster and writer. Neither happened and I wound up with a lot of time on my hands. SPI was headquartered in Manhattan where I was living. SPI asked opened its doors every Friday night to local gamers who would playtest games in progress and prepare critiques for the designers and developers. Naturally, I volunteered. I joined an eclectic group that included a legal aid lawyer, a nuclear scientist, a micropalontologist and a bunch of pimply-faced kids who were united by our hobby.

Several months later, Dunnigan offered me a job as a developer. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I worked on a dozen or so games and helped on the magazine until 1976.

I could name-drop and tell war stories about SPI until the proverbial cows came home. Suffice it to say that those three years were among the most remarkable in my life. Never before or since have I worked with such a group of talented, brilliant and dedicated people. Frustrating and aggravating at times, but they were absolutely brilliant.

As I mentioned, Dunnigan was a fanatical researcher. He was always running surveys to determine what our customers wanted and sought new ways to satisfy that desire. Perhaps the most important discovery he made has a direct bearing on computer gaming, although no one realized it at the time. That was that the vast majority of gamers played by themselves. This is standard in computer gaming with today's AI technology. At the time, it was a revolutionary concept.

We had a computer at SPI, a big brute of a machine that was programmed with punch cards. Bob Felice, one of our programmers, designed two in-house games, one a science fiction wargame and the other a lunar lander. However, we could not see a commercial application for them because most people didn't have computers in the 1970s.

Yet, there were signs. One was in the neighborhood bar frequented by the SPI R&D staff following our regular staff meeting every Friday. Besides the cold beer, great pastrami sandwiches and collection of Irish music on the juke box, was a video device with a new game called "Pong." There was always a waiting line to play.

Another major development happened across the country. Rick Loomis founded a company in 1970 called Flying Buffalo in Scottsdale, Ariz. Flying Buffalo ran a line of computer-moderated play-by-mail games. For the first time, a computer was used directly by players.

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At about the same time, young visionaries such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were about to start a revolution of their own. Cheap, easy-to-use home computers were the ideal platforms for the interaction of complex rules and situations. Throw in the Internet, and gamers across the globe not only could communicate directly with each other but could even play against each other in real time or by e-mail.

That bring gamers in general and 'Pooners in particular to the present.

What about the future? Your guess is as good as mine. What is certain is that there will be more changes and exciting times are ahead.

-Kip Allen

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