

The Case against Points

Why popular points systems for choosing armies don't work

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How many times have you said “they aren’t worth the points”, or “they’re great value for the points” about troops when choosing an army? If there is one thing that is pretty much universal in wargaming, it is the use of points values as an aid in creating armies. It doesn’t matter what rules you use or what period you play, historical or fantasy, modern or ancient, you will probably use an army list which gives a choice of troops and troop types, their minima and maxima, each with a given points value, and a certain number of points with which to buy them. It’s probably more true to say that figure wargaming is defined by its use of abstract points values in creating opposing forces than about any other factor. Even in campaigns (very much the exception and not the rule) points values are often the basis on which opposing forces are calculated. Why?

In theory, it’s about ensuring a level playing field and creating armies of equal fighting value. Used in combination with a set of army lists, they help to ensure that an army looks something like its historical prototype, while ensuring that players’ armies are to some extent balanced in combat power. The points values are supposed to reflect the relative qualities possessed by the troops. So, for example, if you use heavily armoured, high morale infantry, they will be accorded a greater value than unarmoured levies of indifferent morale carrying only as spear and shield. On the one hand, it is an eminently reasonable way to approach balancing games. Any advantage or disadvantage is covered by the points system, so in an equal points game the armies will be of, theoretically, equal fighting power.

Underperforming Romans and other anomalies

However, one of the constant complaints about different rules sets is the costs of particular troop types versus their perceived efficiency. In the ancient period, Romans are a prime example. Roman wargames armies of the Republican and early Imperial periods routinely fail to match the performance of their historical prototypes, leading to complaints and analysis about why. One recurring theme is the relative cost of legionaries versus barbarians. Thanks to points systems which aim to compensate for any advantage, Romans end up paying points for being regular or disciplined troops, for being armoured, and sometimes for their higher morale. The

barbarian rabble opposing them gain through lacking armour, lacking discipline, and being of lower morale (which still doesn’t stop them executing ferocious charges which have the potential to sweep away the legionaries). Under DBM, this means that the Romans, classed as Blades (Bd) cost 7AP as opposed to 3AP for a Warband (Wb). Warband gain from having a quick kill capability versus Blades, and can support a front rank in combat, which means that the Romans will be on +5 against +4. Rear support and quick kill ability do not apparently justify increasing points values, although they can potentially affect game balance.

Interestingly, the points values for many troop types in DBM are the same as they were in earlier WRG rules – were they just carried over without really considering the effect on play? Huns cost 7 points a figure in WRG 5th, 6th and 7th edition rules, and cost 7AP an element in DBM. Similarly, 1st century legionaries cost 7 points a figure in the earlier rules sets, and 7 AP an element under DBM; Celtic tribesmen cost 3 points each then and per element now, and Parthian horse archers cost 4 points then and now. This last example really highlights the points problem. In DBM, light horse are extremely dangerous – almost invulnerable to most infantry, extremely mobile and able to get quick kills against several troop types, they cost half as much as legionaries, who move slowly, get no quick kills (although they have good combat factors against infantry), and get limited rear support.

Clearly the assigned points values do not reflect the relative values of the troop types. They may have reflected realities under rules which stressed armour type, morale classes and weaponry, but they are not necessarily appropriate for newer systems, like the ‘Debbie’ (DBX) rules, which are function based. At present, the only differences Debbie recognises are Regular versus Irregular status, and whether troops are graded as Superior, Inferior, Fast, Ordinary or Exceptional. These are, I believe, inadequate for the rules as they work, and I feel there is at least a *prima facie* case for overhauling the loading applied to the points system. For example, getting a quick kill is a big advantage; should it be penalised by paying more points? Similarly, being vulnerable to one or a number of troop types could be construed as a disadvantage; should there be a points reduction for especially vulnerable troop types? It really comes back to the question of what advantage or disadvantage in the game is worth an

increase or reduction in points value. With the Regular/ Irregular divide, most infantry and cavalry pay one or two points extra for Regular status, yet light troops pay nothing at all; both Regular and Irregular skirmishers share identical points values. In some armies, light troops can give rear support to heavier, but not in others. There is no difference in points values for what can be, in a game, a critical advantage. In Debbie rules, the relative invulnerability of light troops is another point that might be regarded as deserving of extra value. More expensive light troops might be one way to reduce their numbers (and influence) in games to more historical levels (the 'spent' result in DBMM is a welcome addition!).

Ahistorical army sizes

A second problem noted above is how points systems affect the size of the army. In Debbie rules this is crucial because army size has a direct impact on army morale. The net result of the current system is that early period armies can field vast numbers of troops, whereas the poor Romans may be struggling to make numbers up, with the result that any qualitative advantage the legionaries may enjoy is negated by the sheer weight of numbers they have to face. In some cases this may be justified, but in most, I suspect not. The advantage of Regular command is also a problem. If troops are expensive, then it may be necessary to forego a general (and hence command control) in the interests of having enough troops on the table. Remember Stalin's comment about quantity having a quality all of its own. Even under other rules systems, the numbers question raises problems. It's all very well to talk about raw numbers, but what if your army fights in a manner that requires big and/or expensive units? I'm thinking here in particular of Hellenistic pike blocks. Under most rules they are pretty much compelled to fight in deep formations. This means that while a unit may have quite a punch, it is still not utilising all its potential combat power. If the rear ranks are fighting at half strength (or just giving a plus in combat), should they not also be costed at half points? This problem has been to some extent recognised in DBM and DBMM (where compulsorily double-based elements cost less) and in Tabletop Games' 'Shock of Impact' rules (where large units received a discount, making multiple large pike blocks quite feasible); should the principle not be extended to cover other advantages or disadvantages? As an aside, the Shock of Impact rules contained a very interesting points and army lists system that was extremely sensitive, and which provided a potential way forward to creating games without points.

With regard to competition play, the numbers situation may also be unrealistic. Did Sumerian armies really number ten to twenty thousand men on a regular basis? Sargon of Akkad is supposed to have had 5,400 men who ate bread in his presence daily. Presumably this represented his 'regular' army to which levy troops would have been added. Taken at around 250 men per element (the standard DBM scale) the army would have been around 20 elements. The average Sumerian wargames army will most likely number nearer 100. Most players would balk at using just the historical numbers, and some

armies get chosen precisely because they can field such large numbers. The use of a points system to generate armies subconsciously encourages players to think of armies as comprising large numbers of troops, even where it is not justified historically

Of course, it is always possible to put a cap on the allowed points totals available to some armies. DBR takes this approach with many armies. For example, Montrose's Royalists can have a maximum of only 300 AP while their Covenanter opponents have no restrictions. But the overall numbers problem still exists. As an example, consider the Eastern woodland cultures of the Americas, the Iroquoians and Algonquins and similar. In DBM, they have no limit on points values. In DBR, they are capped at 500 AP in normal scale games. But even at that scale, the minimum force available - less than 100 AP - works out at about 2,000 warriors - 2 generals (200), 12 warband (1200) and 12 skirmishers (600). The largest 'army' that these cultures ever put together was, as far as I am aware, around 2,000 troops as support for the French in their attack on Fort William Henry in 1757. Even then, the force included contingents from all over the area of French influence and beyond, and was greatly outnumbered by the French force of about 6,000 regulars and militia. Typically, woodlands 'armies' numbered in the tens or, occasionally, the hundreds [2]. The idea of a wargames army representing some 10,000 or 15,000 warriors, is therefore, to say the least, somewhat unrealistic. Even at 1 element = 10 men, the numbers represented greatly exceed the normal size of such armies [3].

Another point regarding army size is what points systems usually do not, or cannot, cover. Again, the Romans of the late Republic and early Principate are good examples. The famed and feared legions are currently perceived in the wargaming world to be little more than speed bumps for many armies, so how did they conquer the whole of the known civilised world? Well, perhaps the answer lies more in logistics and organisation than in combat. I firmly believe that one reason for the Roman achievement was the level of organisation and logistical skill they possessed. Now, logistics is not the sexiest topic on the wargaming horizon, and it is usually omitted from most games except in the most cursory form (like camps in Debbie games). With good logistics and communications, Roman armies could maintain and send armies to wherever they were needed. If they were going to wage war against a bunch of barbarians, then they were going to go for the jugular, and get as many troops there as they could to go for a quick kill. They certainly weren't going to send a small force that would provide little else but trophies and glory for the locals. (The events of AD9 cast a very long shadow.) They were going to make sure they were going to win. It has been commented on that the early empire was remarkably efficient in its use of manpower and could basically supply the troops to where they were needed with minimal delay. Similarly, Mongol armies gained a reputation for using huge numbers of troops because of their ability to communicate between multiple army groups. While they might be outnumbered in a total sense, they could bring

numbers to bear at specific points that would ensure at least rough parity with an enemy, should they need it. Anyone who has used Romans or Mongols on the wargames table might wish for another couple of legions or tumans in the manner of their historical predecessors.

A distorted perception of armies

Using points systems can also distort our perceptions of armies. We view them through the lens of rules and points values and judge them accordingly. As an example, in wargames terms, 'heavy' infantry with good metal armour are regarded as better than 'medium' infantry with non-metallic or no armour, and are therefore more expensive in terms of points. The only benefit that a medium infantry figure gains is being cheaper; against that they are usually penalised in combat. Most wargamers will choose the heavy option because it is a better one in terms of most rules sets. The historical army may have seen things differently. As an example, metallic armour for hoplites lost favour amongst the Greek city states for some time, starting in the mid-Fifth century BC, as did the protective (but uncomfortable) Corinthian style helmet. Part of the reason may have been cost, but other factors were equally or more important. Comfort has always been quite a big factor affecting soldiers' choice of equipment (if they have any say in the matter), as are things like convenience, practicality, ease of use, speed of movement and - titter ye not - prevailing fashion and cultural or religious considerations.

What is the solution?

So, we have seen that using a points system can penalise some armies unfairly, can distort army numbers and affect how we view historical armies. So what is to be done? Is it possible to have an element of choice in creating armies without using a points system? There are already some different ways of generating armies that could be used, and probably most gamers can think of more.

At the very simplest level, a points system could be slimmed down to the extent that the real choice is between ordinary, very good and very bad troops or units. The 'Hordes of the Things' rules, DBA's fantasy counterpart, take this approach. Most elements cost 2 points. Rare or special troops (i.e. magicians, priests, monsters and heroes) cost 3 or 4 points. Hordes cost 1 point, and generals are effectively free. And that's it. With ordinary mounted and foot troops costing exactly the same amount, players (in my experience) tend to think what kind of troops they will have in the army, not the relative cost/benefit ratio.

A different approach is taken by Phil Sabin's 'Legion' rules (I haven't played 'Strategos'). Take a historical army, and match it against a different historical opponent. So, for example, you can play Alexander's army from Gaugamela against Scipio's army from Zama. The rules accept that there will be an element of scale distortion, but that it doesn't affect game play and it is certainly an interesting way of generating armies. (The battles are scaled so that there is a roughly parity in the total army points values

whichever battle you fight.) There's no fiddling with points or tailoring armies to new interpretations of the rules. You take an army, and you're given what you're given. If, for example, you want to play with an early Macedonian army, you can pick from the armies that fought at Chaeronea, Granicus, Issus, Gaugamela/Arbela, or the Hydaspes. What you can't do is mix them to try to maximise favoured troop types and minimise others. Each unit does have a points value, used for calculating command and control, and a fighting value expressed in points used in calculating the levels of victory and defeat. This seems to be a much more sensible way of doing things. Veteran units are worth much more, and their loss is much more serious than that of levies. Conversely, mere numbers do not guarantee victory; quality counts.

The Shock of Impact rules had a very complex points system, to which I already alluded. The points were assessed on a unit, not a figure basis, so could incorporate slight adjustments to points more easily. The army lists for the rules provided minimum and maximum numbers of units (and their composition) of different types for each army. They also included a dicing option for choosing armies. Players could dice to build up armies to either a pre-determined points value, or to an agreed number of units. This meant that you couldn't choose the killer units you wanted (unless of course they made up a significant part of the army), but you could get lucky and have all of them. Conversely, if your army list contained a high proportion of levies or poorer quality troops, then it was quite likely that they would also be a good part of your army. Unit sizes could also be diced for, providing an additional element of randomness to the army.

DBA is generally credited with being probably the most influential rules set of the last two decades. Its use of self-contained elements rather than units made up of individual figures was revolutionary, and helped to make games much faster. Its command and control system also made games more realistic, in that it encouraged the use of lines and pauses in battles to regroup and reorganise. When people talk about the changes in Ancient wargaming that DBA started, these are usually the points that they are referring to. However, DBA also used armies of a fixed size. Each army is made up of just 12 elements (units). Whilst this is not exactly an innovation - other rules in the past have done the same thing - I think that DBA was the first set of rules to provide comprehensive army lists for such a system. Some armies have zero choice as to their composition, Polybian Romans for example. Others can have a bewildering choice of forces, like the Italian Condotta army, which has multiple choices for half the army. Most armies have one or two either/or choices in their list. As the general, it is your job to make the best of what you have. You can't select all the good troops, and then use the rest as filler to be bought when you have selected everything else. Those good troops are likely to be only one or two elements out of twelve (As Mr. Barker famously advises, choose an army that you will love even when it loses, because lose you will). If you want to play with more elements, then it is very easy to scale the game

up and use multiples of 12 elements. For Big Battle DBA, the usual size is 36 elements each - three armies, and approaches the size of DBM or other games. This system also has advantages in that it makes army choice relatively easy - there is no juggling of points, just either/or choices, and the relative scarcity or availability of troops can be factored in. It also helps in deciding what allies to use. In BBDBA, an ally is one 12 element army. In normal DBA, you get 3 elements from the list. Everyone has the same number of elements; saves time and reduces arguments. It's worth noting that in DBA Late Republican and Early Imperial Romans do a lot better than they do under other rule sets, including the other Debbie rules.

To sum up, I think the simple points per figure/element approach based on armour, weapons and morale is obsolete and needs to be addressed. At the very least there needs to be a complete reassessment of elements in function based rules and how they operate in the game. In the different rules sets I used as examples there are four different approaches to creating armies, all of which are, I think, better than the current system.

1. A very simple points system for units, based on the relative availability of troop types for the army. For example, light infantry in a Galatian army are not so common, and would be more expensive than in a Lusitanian army where they would form about 60% of the force. This could be based on a basis where n is the cost for the average unit, and other units are rated as $\frac{1}{2}n$, $2n$ or $3n$. (*Hordes of the Things*)
2. Armies based directly on the actual compositions in particular battles, as far as the information available allows. Obviously this would mean that some armies would be 'open to creative interpretation', and that others would have a massive choice of composition, but it would certainly stimulate more research into the whole question of numbers in ancient battles. Points values are used not to organize armies but to calculate levels of victory at the end of the game. (*Legion*)
3. Randomised composition of armies, either through dice or cards. This can be to an agreed total of units, or to a points total. Again, I would suggest that in the latter case any points system is kept VERY simple (as in (1) above). (*Shock of Impact*)
4. A set number of units, with choices being limited to either/or and always totalling the same number on both sides. (*DBA*)

Any of the above systems would help to minimise the focus on accountancy and 'cost-effectiveness assessment' skills in favour of generalship, or making the best of what you have. Note that army lists in some form are still necessary. I do not advocate ditching army lists, but I do suggest that their format and construction be amended. Nor am I completely opposed to using points values to organise opposing armies. What I am trying to do is to move the use of points values away from representing a cost of figures or elements in terms of equipment (and theoretical effectiveness) and more towards expressing a 'rarity value'. The examples of rules that I have mentioned

are those that I know and am familiar with. I'm afraid I don't know enough about the army lists in 'Armati' (although from what I have seen, they would come pretty close to the first ideal, giving a simple points value for a unit rather than for figures), 'Conquerors and Kings', 'Vis Bellica' et al, nor the new 'Field of Glory' set (nor at the current price am I likely to!) so if they incorporate the elements I argue for here, then I apologise for omitting mention of them. The past few years has seen a great increase in the realism of games. Perhaps the next step forward is to increase the realism of army selection.



Sources

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Rulesets

- De Bellis Antiquitatis, Wargames Research Group
 De Bellis Multitudinus, Wargames Research Group
 De Bellis Magistrorum Militum, Wargames Research Group
 De Bellis Renationis, Wargames Research Group
 Legion, Society of Ancients
 Shock of Impact, Tabletop Games

Notes

- I. Tallis & Stillman, p.18.
- Malone The Skulking Way of War, Starkey European and Native American Warfare, 1675 - 1815. The casualties suffered in many of the battles were minimal by Eurasian standards, but were considered severe in the local context. To the best of my knowledge, the situation had been the same prior to the arrival of Europeans in the New World, and even allowing for the resulting population decline, there is still no evidence for any form or scale of warfare other than that encountered and described by the colonists.
- The recorded numbers available may have been inflated by native politicians who wished to gain more favourable trade or alliance terms from Europeans; the British colonists had been led to believe that the Iroquois were to be able to raise some 9,000+ warriors in the mid-eighteenth century. In reality they could barely scrape together 1,100 through all the areas they controlled, with only 350 in what was to be the main area of operations, the Ohio valley (Anderson, p.20: see also his account of the Walking Purchase, a spectacular fraud perpetrated by the Iroquois against the Delaware, purely for commercial and political gain, showing that native peoples were adept as Europeans at exploiting weaker neighbours, p.22-23).
- See Luttwak, Intro and Chap. 1. I cannot provide the exact reference; my copy of Luttwak has walked. However, the Introduction and Chapter One deal with the general strategic situation and the approach of the Julio-Claudians to the problems of the empire. Their approach was basically to have client states provide border security where possible, leaving the legions free to intervene where necessary. Mobility for the army was provided by the imperial road system.