

House Rules Design Notes

INTRODUCTION

The House Rules document is quite compact and succinct, in order that it can assist play without taking up too much space. The purpose of this document is both to explain the reasoning, and to give an overview of the changes so that players know what to expect.

Why have I done this? Basic BBB has been used successfully for Napoleonic battles after all. There are broadly two issues I wanted to fix, which in turn led to further fixes to provide compensating simplifications.

The first issue is a lack of Napoleonic feel. This was most important in respect of cavalry, which gets the minimum of special treatment in the rules, with even the same figure scale. This clearly works when cavalry often used firearms, and cold steel was of diminishing importance. But Napoleonic generals worried more about cavalry than players would under BBB – with Waterloo being an obvious example. I also have an issue with the treatment of skirmish versus shock tactics, though that is more of a personal hobby horse than something my other game partners worried about. The distinction between the tactics was much less important in the later period, with some special exceptions (the Austrians in 1866, for example, which are specially catered for in BBB).

The second issue feels more like a problem with the game mechanics. The battles are quite slow to resolve. The move distances are large but combat usually results in temporary disorder and the concession of ground, and not as much attrition as might be expected. The scenarios offered focus on geographical objectives rather than destroying the opponent. With each turn representing approximately an hour of real time, this does not feel right for Napoleonic battles, and I suspect the later ones too, though I don't know these well.

So the idea behind these changes is to create a crunchier game with more of a Napoleonic feel. This involves a few extra complexities – to balance which I have simplified some other aspects. This includes the quick reference sheet, which can strip out references to later era weapons, and so become more comprehensive.

CAVALRY

Ratio

The first difference looks quite radical: the figure scale is one third of the infantry one. So if an infantry base is 1,000 men, a cavalry base is just 333 in place of the previous 1,000. This reflects better the space taken up by the respective arms. Indeed with my 15mm figures a base can only fit two cavalry figures in place of six for infantry. Cavalry are some of the most interesting and colourful units on the field, so the lower figure ratio allows more units and figures on the tabletop. This is also historically sound, as small cavalry units could have a very big impact. And cavalry has no firepower, a factor that would otherwise point to equalising the ratios.

Cavalry to infantry combat

In current BBB there is no distinction between cavalry and infantry in the assault table. Players soon learn that cavalry units are not quite the threat to infantry that they expect. And there is no concept of a square formation for infantry: one of the key ways in which cavalry influenced infantry behaviour. Troops in squares had reduced mobility and firefight capability and were more vulnerable to artillery.

To tackle this I created a new combat table to reflect cavalry attacks on infantry (infantry attacks on cavalry are still allowed, but use the old table). If cavalry wins big it does serious damage (4+ advantage it takes out 2 bases; 7+ advantage, it causes wipe out). If it doesn't it tends to bounce off. In the combat table being in infantry in square mode (not actually a formation – explained later) get a +2 advantage. I considered whether to give cavalry an extra advantage if the infantry was Disrupted, but decided that this would take things too far, given how easy Disruption is to acquire in these rules. It means something different from the disorder we are used to in battalion level games.

Cavalry combat with cavalry uses existing rules. The rather indecisive nature of combat feels a better reflection of combat that did not involve firearms, and which often involved feint and manoeuvre rather than the deadly clashes of massed sabres we typically imagine. Cavalry was good at delaying.

Combined arms tactics between cavalry and infantry are limited. If both types of unit attack infantry at the same time, they are resolved in sequence, not together. Cavalry with its low figure ratio can't be used just to bulk up infantry units. Close coordination in the assault between infantry and cavalry didn't happen at the grand tactical level.

INFANTRY

Assault table

Infantry on infantry assaults were exhausting affairs in this era. Formations tended to disintegrate rapidly, in terms of the game's hour long moves anyway. After two or three hours of combat whole divisions seem to vanish from battle accounts, though they do reassemble overnight. This was a matter of fatigue, loss of cohesion and ammunition consumption. There came a point after which it was very hard to persuade infantry to fight: they would feel that they had done their duty. In BBB game terms this is best represented by base loss, and the problem with current BBB is that it doesn't happen enough. There is no base loss in the most common Assault outcomes: +1-3 and -1-3. An important further point is that combat tended to wear down both sides, rather than just the defeated one.

The solution is that for in these limited victory and defeat outcomes both sides take a base loss. That is quite a severe hit when a typical unit might be just four bases, but it is consistent with the rate at which troops were worn down in heavy fighting. To compensate, the draw outcome (the only one that currently involves mutual base loss) equates to a damp squib attack which fails to develop, and where there is no base loss, and the attackers back off.

Skirmishers

As an alternative to the all-out assault, many Napoleonic armies used troops deployed in open order to fire on enemy formations, replaced as they became exhausted by lines of reserves. The French revolutionary armies started this, but all other nations adopted such tactics at some point. It is often referred to as “skirmishing”, but that word applies to a much wider range of tactics, most of which have no place in a grand tactical game like BBB. This type of skirmishing involved a substantial commitment of strength and generally represented an alternative to shock tactics with close order troops, rather than a mere preliminary.

BBB doesn't really cater for this. By the time of the American Civil War (the basis of BBB's predecessor system, *Fire and Fury*), the distinction between this sort of mass skirmishing and close order tactics had become blurred. The tight close order formations of the earlier era tended to break down into something looser. The skirmisher rules in BBB refer to something different: the presence of battalions of specially trained and equipped light troops to support infantry divisions. This practice had its origins in the Napoleonic era but was less important then. For this reason I wanted something different for the Napoleonic system. Visually I also wanted the presence of skirmish screens on the table rather than just close order infantry blocks.

To represent this most infantry units are given a skirmish (S) capability, which means that one normal base is replaced by two or three skirmish bases. These have the same frontage as normal bases but are shallower. Shock formations (guards, grenadiers, etc), which normally have an Aggressive (A) characteristic, shouldn't have these. It isn't that these formations couldn't adopt such tactics, but that they didn't, and should be used to close quickly.

These skirmish bases may be placed one behind the other and act as a normal base. Alternatively units in Line or Depth formations may deploy them singly up to 3" ahead of the unit. Each base may then fire in Defensive and Offensive Fire. The left and right shifts for skirmishers in the main rules now apply to these bases firing or being fired at. When skirmish bases take a Disrupted result, the unit is not Disrupted, but instead a skirmish base is removed. In this way skirmish bases shield their units from the disruptive effect of fire – but deployed bases can't take part in the Assault. Also it gives a limited life to this advantaged skirmish combat; the specialist troops get exhausted and the main bodies get drawn in. Thus skirmishers are a useful way of disrupting enemy units while protecting your own, though they neutralise each other, and are a diversion of strength. That captures much of the essence of these tactics in this era.

A further point is that deployed skirmish bases don't like cavalry. They will retract if enemy cavalry gets too close.

Squares

Squares have already been mentioned. This is not a formation (taking half a turn to adopt) but a “mode” which infantry in Line or Depth may adopt for defence against cavalry – a bit like using deployed skirmishers, which cannot be done at the same time. This doesn't mean that the whole formation adopts square formation, but that it deploys in readiness for defence against cavalry. The upside is a bonus if attacked by cavalry. The downside is less mobility (movement at half distance), reduced fire effectiveness, and greater vulnerability to fire. There is no penalty in assault combat against infantry, as there is in many rules, because there is not much evidence that squares were particularly vulnerable in this way.

Firing and out of ammo

With the extra complexities brought in, I wanted to include some simplifications too. The fire points modifiers (where you reduce fire points by half, potentially multiple times) are abolished. Instead the table for fire points shows separate rates for units in good order (1½ per base) and Disrupted (1). Incidentally this makes fire more effective than for smoothbore muskets in the main rules, but we were following a suggestion in a magazine article and this level works well. One might rationalise it by saying that the greater use of close order formations made fire more effective.

I also wanted to get rid of the out of ammo rule. Ammunition was an important factor in the era, and it often ran out – but the way the rule worked didn't reflect the battlefield narratives at the grand tactical level. On the other hand, the idea that a usually devastating throw of 11 or 12 has a compensating downside is a good game mechanism. So instead units become Disrupted. This is a rather lesser penalty (and no penalty at all if the unit is already Disrupted), but it takes away a niggly little complexity with a similar effect.

Base recovery

In BBB lost bases can be recovered in the Movement Throw, provided the unit is not disrupted. Given that units that have lost bases tend to be Disrupted when throws are made, it is surprisingly difficult to remember this rule in the heat of a game, when the table is otherwise committed to memory. More to the point, unit recovery at the grand tactical level was not a feature of Napoleonic battles, except overnight. I therefore dropped this for both infantry and cavalry, even though the new Assault rules mean that base loss is more frequent.

ARTILLERY

Scale

The BBB artillery ratio is high: 24 guns per base for the standard 1,000 infantry per base. That is three or four batteries. This gives rise to a couple of issues. First the space that a base takes up is more like that a single battery, so if players are lucky enough to have a number of units available these can be combined to quite devastating effect. It also does not reflect the often more distributed use of artillery in this era. So I have halved the ratio, and so doubled the number of units. But we have also halved the fire points, so that two units fire at the same effect as one under the original rules.

This has two side benefits. First it allows us to eliminate the rule about reduced batteries. Instead the base is removed in the event of a base loss result, just like other units. The other is that the greater number of batteries allows us to reflect different types of artillery, which adds a bit more colour – something you get from different technologies in the later era. Most important is horse artillery, which moves more quickly but fires at a slightly reduced effect, both because they used lighter weapons and carried less ammunition. Then there are the heavier reserve batteries (12pdrs), which had a different tactical niche. Finally I allow for converged howitzer batteries. This was frequently done ad hoc in this era, although occasionally armies had howitzer batteries in the order of battle. This last is may be a detail too far, but I do like to have howitzer models on the table.

Moving and firing

Under the main rules it takes half a move to limber or deploy your artillery. By and large this means guns cannot keep up with troops they are supporting. This may be fair enough for the big units, often with long ranges, that are represented. But Napoleonic artillery was more flexible than this. Instead I adopt a rule from *Age of Eagles*, another *Fire and Fury* system for Napoleonic games, albeit on a lower scale and greater level of detail than BBB. Artillery can now limber and make a full move, or make a full move and then unlimber, but not fire. Or it can unlimber without moving and fire at full effect. But it can't do all three in the same turn. This is more flexible while at the same time still restricting the ability to move and fire. It also has the benefit of eliminating another case where the weapons fire at half effect, allowing the elimination of the fire points multiplier step.

Artillery in close support

In our games we noticed some awkwardness when artillery units were operating in close proximity to infantry. In these rules artillery bases can be explicitly attached to infantry units. When doing so they are assumed to be under joint command and acting in close cooperation. They are subject to the same Movement throw (unless one is Disrupted and the other is not); they are a joint target for fire; and they count as a single unit in close combat. However, they may fire at separate targets, and move to different locations, when the close support link would be broken.

Artillery in assault combat

Artillery could be quite vulnerable. Instead of being treated as a normal infantry base in Assault combat, artillery on its own is overrun automatically unless it is able to stop the attackers with Defensive fire. The exception is where the artillery is in a redoubt or equivalent, when it counts as an infantry base.

Silenced, Disrupted and Out of Ammo

I felt that some simplification was possible, so Silenced and Out of Ammo status have been done away with. We never liked the Silenced status, with the batteries limbering up and running off. This may be how things were in the ACW, but it didn't fit with Napoleonic battle accounts. Artillery batteries were often silenced by fire, but they tended not to run off to the rear. Instead artillery is Disrupted, just like infantry and cavalry. Like infantry, Out of Ammo status is also replaced by Disrupted.

This meant that some thought needed to be given to how Disrupted status affects fire, especially given the aim of doing away with the points modifiers. Disrupted artillery cannot fire at ranges over 3". Neither can they be used for Offensive fire. However, they can fire as normal in Defensive fire at close range. Artillery crews were often very brave in defence of their pieces, and this defensive capability even when disrupted reflects the ability to keep firing canister in self-defence.

WHAT I DIDN'T DO

Cavalry types

Wargamers often like to give different characteristics to light and heavy cavalry, and sometimes add a further category of medium cavalry. Lancers and cuirassiers also often get separate treatment. In grand tactical games, though, I felt that the standard BBB characteristics sufficed. Heavy cavalry should normally be treated as Aggressive.

Rifles

Rifle battalions were often assigned to infantry divisions, and in the British army at least, achieved considerable status. Mainstream BBB provides for this with its Skirmisher characteristic. However, I wanted to use this to reflect mass skirmisher tactics, where most men were armed with ordinary muskets. It is in fact hard to show that these rifle-armed units made much difference at the grand tactical level, and Napoleon was never tempted to go down this line. Elite skirmisher formations like the British Light Division could be given extra skirmish bases, and perhaps allowed Aggressive or Devastating Volleys status too.

Minimum unit sizes

When units drop to a single base, they are removed from play. Indeed, single base units are impractical on the tabletop. However at the grand tactical level divisions did fight on, even when a division was reduced to something like a couple of battalions in strength. There is something to be said for letting single base units combine to form new, albeit Spent, two or three base units. But the rules required to regulate this are disproportionate to the likely rather minimal effect on the game, so I have not pursued this.