

May 2022 Special Entry – 2-year publishing anniversary - The First Turns of a GGDM Game

I used to play in a free PBEM (Play-by-Email) fantasy wargame a couple of decades ago. It was called Empire Forge, it was fully computer-moderated and I played about 18 games over a couple of years, won a few, usually placed in the top three in any game. The game could host up to ten players and when enough players had signed up, the game began automatically. Players were sent a computer file that had their starting position on the map, along with their starting units, gold, magic goodies and such; the game was run on a UNIX server, written in Java (I think) and the players had output file display programs on their computers. Because it was a computer game, there was a ‘fog-of-war’ element to it, you can see areas controlled by other players (and their starting location), but not what was in an enemy area (in the sense of military units) unless you had a spy there or were adjacent. Most players started with one providence and the majority of the map was then a big open continent plus islands and sea areas, and the early game was a race to grab as much as you could while conducting diplomacy and feeling out the opposition.

This is normal for multi-player free-for-all type wargames, whether board games (like Risk) or computer games (like Lords of Conquest or Colonial Conquest – I am dating myself), and whether they are fantasy or science fiction or somewhere in-between. I’ve also played in a Diplomacy board game-variant PBEM game that operated in that way, a feudal Japan game setting that operated in that way, and a Stellar Conquest board game PBEM game variant where stars and planets replaced providences, but basically the same set-up and early turn grab-and-feel fests. The ‘early game’ in those types of games ends when there are no ‘neutral’ or unclaimed areas remaining on the map or playing area and then the middle-game becomes a competition between fully-developed player positions in various shifting alliances.

Diplomacy is also a very important part of the early game in multi-player wargames, especially online, as players begin to see who they can cooperate with to their benefit and who will be their competitors. And which players they simply like or dislike; languages can also be an issue. But most importantly, they seek to avoid early accidental conflicts (most players want to wait until they are ready and pick their own fights), but most of all, every player is looking for the player position that is not submitting turns and not responding to diplomacy – that is, a dropped position, a player who signed up but never submitted a turn or played a couple of turns and dropped out. Dropped early positions can really change the game by giving some players an easy route to grabbing a lot of territory very quickly without worrying about conflict (it is an inherent design flaw of such games). So the art of playing the early game is to find out who isn’t playing...

Decisions and choices made early in the game, priorities established without full knowledge of what may happen later (think of Mahjong Solitaire for example) may doom a position to obscurity or extinction – every strategist knows that. Same goes with businesses, technology, countries, entire planets in the ‘real’ universe.

(Powercow the Destroyer)

So after I had been playing Empire Forge for about a year, I had probably completed 10 games; I was usually playing in 3-4 games at a time, oftentimes with overlapping players since we were all playing in multiple multiplayer games at once (and yes, I had a full-time professional job too). I was at that point, a well-established and generally feared/respected opponent. At the beginning of one game, I found myself situated on the map near the starting location of the Northern Trolls race. The name of the player was one I did not recognize from our pool of the usual veteran players and so I easily concluded it was a new player. I try generally to be gentle and helpful with new players so I emailed him about where our border should be when our expanding positions met.

I soon received a reply from “Powercow the Destroyer” (most players used their normal given names in the game) that definitely gave the impression that the new player was a young male, maybe a young teen or perhaps as young as 11 or 12 years of age. So I tried to give advice, explain the workings of the game, and help him along because we all want new lifetime members of our hobby. But it became clear that “Powercow the Destroyer” as the player signed his emails, didn’t seem to understand he was in a wargame. Despite all of the magic, dragons, fantasy units, Empire Forge was still basically a wargame. And not a fantasy role-playing game. And he was here for role playing; probably why he picked the Trolls.

I tried to make him understand that while you can role-play a little in e-mails, Empire Forge was not a fantasy role-playing game in any sense; it was a wargame, sort of a turbo-charged fantasy version of the venerable Risk board game. We were 'talking past each other' in the sense of Plato's Republic. Our emails became a back and forth argument with me becoming exasperated, and in the final email, I think I said, “Well, you roleplay and I’ll wargame and we’ll see who has more fun!” At that point, the early game was coming to an end, so I just overran his territories and he was out of the game in a couple of turns because you can’t role play if you have been eliminated from the game for owning no territories! You also can’t wargame from extinction either. Extinction tends to be the finality of all things.

(on GGDM as a game)

GestaltGenesis/Day Million, a macrosocial simulation game (“GGDM”), is in a sense a multiplayer wargame like those described above, I have never denied it. Anyone who has read the beginning sections of GGDM will immediately see the multiplayer online turn-based wargaming influence in GGDM; I admit in the opening sections that GGDM was designed as a free PBEM game, but that in the intervening years, there may have developed other technologies and platforms which would be better for running GGDM.

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But however much GGDM reflects my experience with PBEM wargames, I have intentionally designed it to be different in several game-changing ways:

- The set-up process in GGDM is more complex leading to a greater variability of starting positions, they are not pre-boxed or standardized positions with a special ability or two. The set-up process is quite thorough and protracted, consummate with the complexity of the game that follows, and that may not be for some players who want to just jump in and play with a prefabbed position (it is possible players may ‘drop’ during set-up!), but conversely, the complex set-up choices gives players more investment into their starting position. In this sense, it is like ‘rolling up’ a character in a popular role-playing game, a process which is designed explicitly to engage the players in creation of their player character.
- The location of all starting positions is not known to all in the beginning of the game. Certain positions will by choices made by the players, have their starting positions known to all other positions in the game; there is an asymmetry built into the Primal States of the positions, having more industry and population base means everyone knows your starting location, whereas positions that begin with less population and industry may have a slight technological edge and their starting location is not known initially, but they are behind in development of colonies, industry and population.
- Two features of the ‘map’ or starting playing area will significantly change the early game environment, from those based on classic Earth-like maps. First, territory is not exclusive, because the game territories are expressed in planetary systems, it is possible for positions to intermingle and it doesn’t have to be zero-sum unless some xenophobe wants to start a war. Second, the playing area is capable of expanding infinitely with the game; the availability of ‘backyard expansion’ away from the core playing area gives second options reducing the ‘gravity’ of the initial playing area (as opposed to a land-based fantasy game). In this latter sense, there may be no clear demarcation of when the ‘middle game’ begins compared to the one described above for standard multiplayer wargames.
- Diplomacy is usually open in multiplayer wargames from the beginning, the game either provides everyone’s e-mail address or a PM system whereby players can contact each other and exchange e-mail addresses if they like. Some games have tried to vary the system, for example, not providing e-mail addresses until two positions meet on the map; players find ways around this, especially if many players are in multiple games together. It is up to the participants how this is handled in GGDM, but generally it is assumed that diplomatic communication in GGDM will be the same as in other games. GGDM only makes the distinction between ‘gray diplomacy’ – player diplomatic communications that do not involve the Concierge (or Game Master in other games), and First Contact – which begins the ‘official’ diplomatic contact between two ‘races’ in the game.

(getting Medieval on your hiney)

Early game development and diplomacy is so important... In another game of Empire Forge, we were using the map of Medieval England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (for those familiar with medieval England, let's say that the game map was an approximation at best). I think I started with the Kingdom of Wessex. Two players started in Ireland. Early in the game, I formed an alliance with the player from Southern Ireland (Munster); I'd not played with this person before, but I understood he had completed a regular game of Empire Forge that I was not in. He decided he had a great plan: He wanted me to give him most of my gold for the first few turns so that he could build a huge army and eliminate the other Irish competitor and later in the game he'd return the favor and support me. Yes, he was serious, or maybe he thought me a chump?

Uh...no. I am sure it was a great plan for him. But not for me, to give away all of my gold to him in the early game would cripple my early game development to the point that by the time he would be able to reciprocate, it would not make a difference. And if he decided to not reciprocate, at that point, what could I have done about it? Agreements in a game like this are enforced with steel, no quarter. I explained that to him, he didn't seem to get it entirely, and while we remained nominal allies, each of us proceeded to our own wars unable to meaningfully assist the other. He was never able to dominate Ireland, and in fact, another player invaded by sea in the middle game – apparently at the invitation of the Northern Irish player – and it turned into a three-way cage match. For my part, I ended up in a war with Mercia and Northumbria that bottlenecked and stalemated on a narrow front in the middle of England (I think I ran over Kent on the first turn or two, probably a dropped player). I would have preferred to invade France (I can see why the option was historically attractive to the English!), but that wasn't an option on the game map...

Early game development in GGDM remains just as critical as in any other multiplayer wargame of the type described here, however, it is a much more complex and protracted process due to the number of factors in the game, the extensive set-up process and Interpretations and Interventions. However ill-considered my ally's plan was in the Empire Forge game, it would be nearly impossible for a position to give away substantial RPs to another position early in a GGDM game, in part because of the vast interstellar distances involved and the mechanics of Cargo Ships.

(GGDM is a human game)

But the most important difference between something like Empire Forge and GGDM is that Empire Forge was a computer game program and what could be done was limited by what the computer program allowed and was designed to do (barring any glitches). A computer wargame like Empire Forge is like an equation – an equation is never more or less than its parts, when you resolve an algebraic equation in school, you realize that there is nothing in the equation that wasn't there to begin with, nothing is added by you

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solving the equation. Absolutely zero; you are not allowed to change the math in the process of solving an algebra test problem.

The designer/programmer of Empire Forge believed in complete automation; his goal was to fully-automate Empire Forge so that it would run on its own, infinitely I guess, without need for intervention from him. I think he was tired of working on the game and running the game; when I started, the game's magic system was unfinished and he didn't seem inclined to finish it, or maybe he had run out of ideas, until I wrote proposals to finish the development of the magic system. He implemented them in the program and they became part of the game play from that point forward and I think the game was much improved by it. However, that may have been the final piece for him and he likely felt the game was finished, whereas, I felt there were still a few things to be implemented (I guess you can see that tendency if you read the GGDM text) and the rules text needed to be rewritten and expanded (e.g. I had created a FAQ page that had over 200 FAQ). He also wanted me to take over running the game so that he could work on automation, but I was not interested in being moved to the GM position, I was still having great fun playing the game and socializing with my pool of players, friendly competitors and allies in multiple games at once, while still thinking about my own GGDM project.

So eventually, our relationship soured, I left Empire Forge, and I do not believe it is now running and has not run for many years. Perhaps you can sense how these threads came together in GGDM when viewed strictly as a game design: GGDM, as I pointed out many times, will never be a game program or wargame like Empire Forge, it cannot and is never intended to be fully automated, it is never intended to be a game in a box. This of course means that being the Concierge is a demanding position – I made clear in the text throughout that the Concierge is another 'position' in the game – and that will make GGDM unattractive to potential organizers but on the other side of it is the reward of having a game that is not limited by what the computer program will allow, that is and can be greater than the sum of its parts, where humans can introduce things into the game that did not previously exist, as long as their imaginations can find a way to express it within the complex and flexible mechanics of GGDM play.

And lastly, perhaps an ode to "Powercow the Destroyer," GGDM has the potential for role-playing and is not strictly a multiplayer wargame in the traditional sense. Because the game is emergent narrative and group storytelling, I viewed it as a 'hybrid' game and elements were introduced, such as Type 4 Fundamental Realities, Thesis Statements, and Concierge Interventions that could or would encourage moderate role playing and development of position personas.

By Charles W. Phillips