

Board Wargaming Basics

An Introduction to mini-games

by Dr. Christopher Cummins & Joseph Miranda

Over the next several issues, we will introduce readers to basic concepts in board wargaming. We will be using mini-games from Decision Games to illustrate those concepts. This line of mini-games is a great place to start because of their small size, subjects from ancients to modern, and variety of map type (hex and square grid as well as point-to-point). Some of the games are solitaire (play against a system generated opponent), and, best of all, every game is part of a series and has series (or system) rules. Series rules are a base set of rules for multiple games. Once one game is learned, additional games are then playable with the same base rules (but individual games still have short exclusive rules to model specifics aspects).

Basics of Maps and Battles

by Christopher Cummins

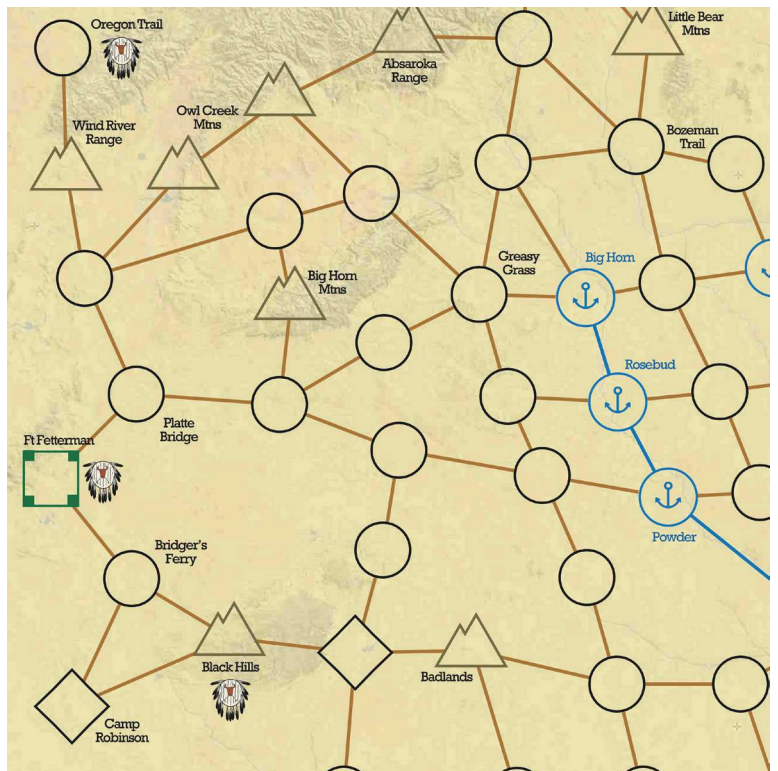
We start with Custer's Final Campaign (CFC). Most readers will recognize Gen George Custer and the Battle of Little Bighorn (25 June 1876). This game starts at the beginning of the campaign in March 1876 with the U.S. Army and Indians emerging from their winter quarters and camps scattered across the Great Plains. Play simulates the efforts by the two sides to achieve or defend widely separated objectives as well as engage in decisive action to eliminate the forces of the other side. The U.S. Army player wins by eliminating six Indian units, while the Indian player wins by eliminating four U.S. Army units or by occupying all four Indian objectives.

Looking at the game map, players see a point-to-point map. Instead of the traditional wargame hex grid, the map has points connected by lines. The points have terrain that effects movement and combat in important ways, including some differences between the forces. An open circle usually indicates clear terrain (clear terrain being the most passable for movement and having the least opportunity for defensive combat benefits).

The other part of point-to-point maps is the lines between the points. Movement is essentially going from

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>>Mr. Miranda has designed over 400 games, mostly of the board variety but has been on the team for several computer game designs. He has worked mainly with Decision Games but has also done contract work for the Center for Naval Analysis and the Air Force Office of Scientific Research. Mr. Miranda is a former Army officer and has been a featured speaker at numerous modeling and simulations conferences.



one point or space to the next. A movement rate of three would mean a unit could move three spaces. Sometimes the lines themselves effect or restrict movement. In CFC, there are land lines and river lines. River spaces stop all units (both sides) from moving further; however, the U.S. Army has one river fleet unit that can transport U.S. Army units along the rivers.

Triangles often indicate rough or mountainous terrain. In CFC, the triangles have a notch to give them a mountain peak appearance. Their effect is to stop U.S. Army units from further movement while Indians may continue. Diamonds indicate towns and their effect is the opposite: U.S. Army units may continue moving while Indians must stop. This simple mechanic gives each side a movement advantage in some parts of the map and a disadvantage in others. For example, the Indian player will have an easier time getting to the Oregon Trail objective because the only path to it goes through the Wind River Range space (see map photo), or they might move through a rough space in order to put that stopping terrain between one of their forces and U.S. Army forces.

Looking at the counters (see counter photo), readers will see an icon indicating the unit type and a number indicating combat strength. Combat occurs whenever a force from one side enters a space occupied by the other side. Each side lines up their units to the side of the map. Each side rolls a die and high die (defender wins ties) has Tactical Superiority, meaning they get to fire first. That player selects any one of his units and rolls a number of dice equal to the combat strength printed on the counter. The dice result is compared to the Battle Results Table. Every “six” eliminates one enemy unit, and every “five” panics one enemy unit. The opponent must first choose the units to eliminate (remove for the rest of the game), then the units to panic (flipped to their back side—they may not fire again during this combat). The firing unit is then adjusted to show it has fired (rotate the fired counters or pull them back from the battle line).

Then the opponent chooses a unit and fires with the roles reversed. These rounds continue until one side has no more units to fire at which point the side with extra units fires the rest of its units. If, at any point, either side has all of its units eliminated or panicked, they have lost



the battle. The panicked units are retreated to an adjacent space and flipped back to the front side. If both sides have units that were not eliminated or panicked, then another round of combat occurs.

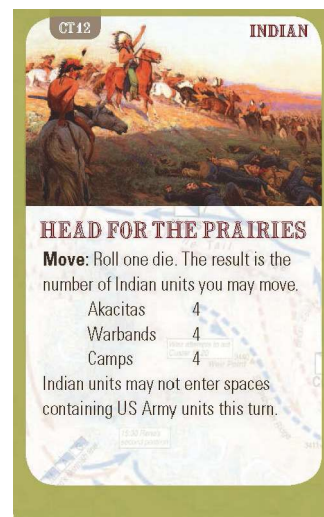
Custer in the Cards

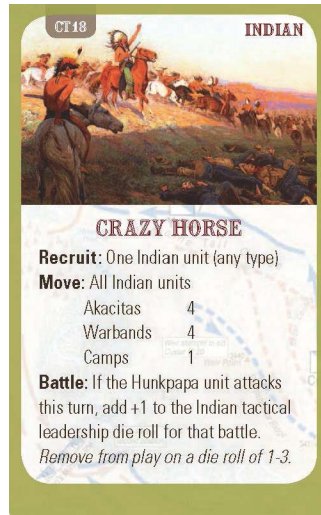
by Joseph Miranda

Picking up from last time, CFC is an operational-level wargame of the Yellowstone-Little Bighorn campaign of 1876. The historical campaign pitted elements of the U.S. Army, spearheaded by Custer’s 7th Cavalry Regiment, against the tribes of Plains Indians and saw the latter’s last great battlefield victory. U.S. Army units represent regiments or detachments while Indian units are groupings of warriors. The game map stretches from Fort Lincoln in Dakota Territory to the Oregon Trail near the Continental Divide.

The central game system is built around a set of Campaign cards (hence the series title, “Hand of Destiny”). The cards provide several advantages in game design, especially one emphasizing low complexity while maintaining a modicum of historical realism. Each player has a set of nine cards. Most of the cards generate operations. For example, the card Terry Column Advances permits the Army player to move all units in Terry’s command (including the 7th Cavalry). Since the Army has three different columns (Terry, Gibbon, and Crook), the cards create the historical dilemma of coordinating different commands in a situation of limited intelligence and lack of instantaneous communications.

The Indians have a slightly different command procedure. Most of their cards, like *Head for the Prairies*, generate a random number of war-bands that the player may move. This models the chaotic situation where the Indians relied on tribal consensus for raiding, and this could go to extremes. It also presents the Army player with a dilemma since you never





know if the other side's next move will involve a single warband or the combined Plains Indian warriors!

Leadership is also a factor in the game. The Army *Sheridan* and Indian *Crazy Horse* cards allow each side to move all their units. This gives players the chance to act decisively if they have maneuvered strategically. It also means having to keep an eye open for a surprise move across the prairies.

The draw of the cards brings in factors of friction and fog of war. Each side is presented with challenges and opportunities. You might forge ahead with a column only to find the other side has you surrounded and is moving in for the kill.

There is a "mechanical" advantage to using cards. By placing various rules on the cards, this reduces the need for players to consult a rules book or game charts. This facilitates play by having the rules up front where they are readily accessible.

Each side has a card with a random event. *Dissension in the Councils* causes a random number of Indian units to head home but also reshuffles the deck so discards can get back into play. Similarly, the *Nelson Miles* card gives the Army several bonuses but only if three or more friendly units have been eliminated. The condition reflects Gen Nelson Miles being called up in the aftermath of the destruction of Custer's

command at the Little Bighorn battle to take control of operations.

Overall, the cards provide a narrative of events for the game. Players in Custer's Last Campaign have an opportunity to gain an otherwise elusive victory on the Great Plains in that famous campaign of 1876.

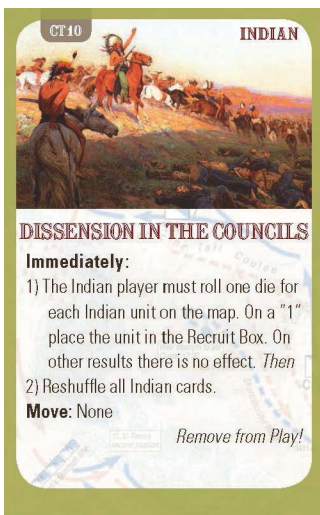
Other games in this series include *Khyber Rifles* (British in Afghanistan, 1840s) and *Lettow-Vorbeck* (British versus Germans in East Africa in World War I). Also related are *Caesar's War* and *Belisarius' War*.



**COMING
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in the
Marine Corps Gazette
April issue:

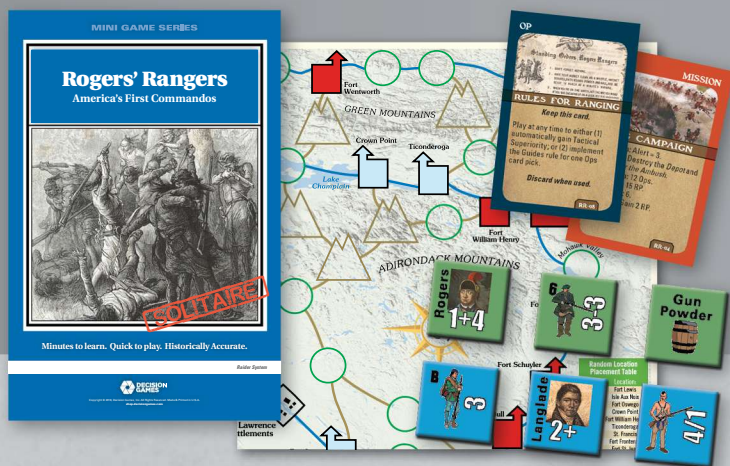
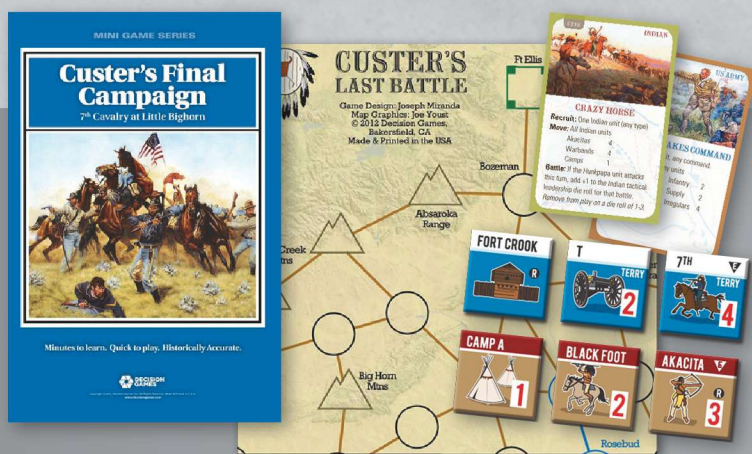
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