

Battleground Fantasy Warfare

v4.0 Rules



design notes

Authoring the 4.0 version of the Battleground rules has been a lesson in humility. At the start, we were downright hubristic in our confidence that we could get the v3.1 rulebook down to a hundred pages.

“Cut this, cut that, reword a few things,” we said, brimming with confidence, “Could even get it down to eighty pages!”

Oh, past self... my sweet summer child...

Somewhere around page 80, finishing up the Movement & Command Phase, I realized what a fool I had been. And yet, despite failing to decrease the page count so completely that we ended up with a 150+ page document, I am content with the v4.0 rules for Battleground Fantasy Warfare.

“Why?” you might ask. The answer is simple: pictures. So many pictures. Everywhere we could, we included picture examples for our rules, complete with labels and descriptions of the rules in practice. Our initial feedback so far has been that while the main rulebook is larger, it’s an easier read.

The other reason we had an increased page count was that several sections of the v3.1 rulebook simply weren’t presented all that well. Part of any major revision is taking a long, hard look at your rules and accepting where they fail. And in certain cases, we felt there was a need to detail the order of operations for certain rules. And of course to add picture examples!

The end result was a Main Rulebook that was longer than we’d originally wanted, but the intent was always to have a Quick Start set of rules to get players familiar with Battleground. The Main Rulebook could then serve as a reference manual, rather than something to guide players from start to finish.

In fact entire sections of Main Rulebook can be skipped until they become relevant. No point in memorizing the Two's Company rule until it comes up, or to learning the intricacies of the Flyer Keyword until you play with a Flying unit! And of course the Terrain rules will wait for you until you're ready to include terrain in your games.

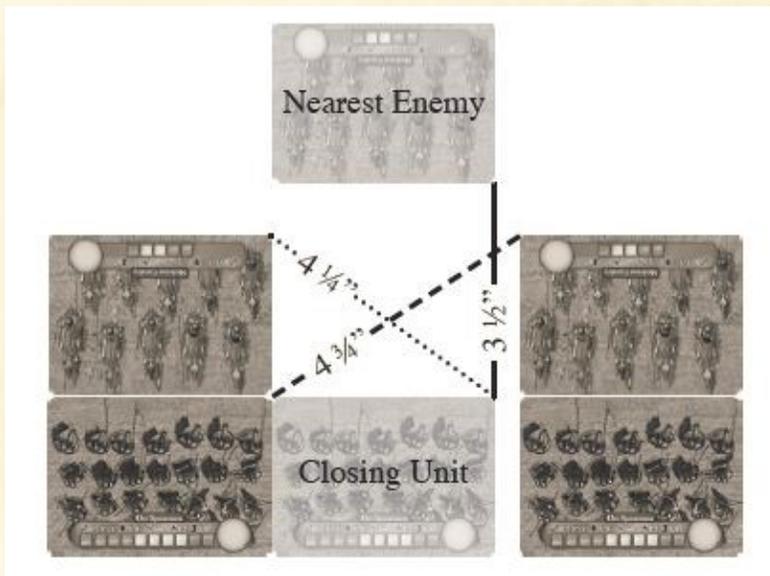
All in all we're very happy with this edition of the rules. Of course that is not to say they are perfect and set in stone. We know there's something we missed that others will find. And we don't dread that! We look forward to finding the flaws and fixing them. These are the advantages of a living rulebook. It can evolve and grow so that the rules are thematic, fun, and as simple as possible.

That said we did make changes. We did this with a focus on making the rules clearer, more thematic, and to improve game play.

Clearer Rules

Most of the changes we made fall into the category of writing better rules. We kept the same outcome but we adjusted the mechanics of how to get there. Usually this was done to make things clearer, although sometimes it was done purely to make thing simpler.

The most obvious example of this is determining which enemies your unit will final rush. Previously, in order to prevent a unit from exposing its flank to an enemy, the rules had the unit measure by 'outside corners' to determine the nearest enemy. It produced this example:



Everywhere else in the rules, units used their front center-point for resolving these things. But in this case units used their corners. While it is completely understandable why the original designers of the rules did this, and in situations like above it made sense. But when units weren't lined up neatly, it became a pain in play. And it resulted in many furrowed brows during demos.

When we looked at this rule, the first question was asked was: what was the rule trying to do? In this case, the desired outcome was that (all things being equal) a unit on Close will charge straight ahead. So our solution was to make the rules say: the unit will go straight forward!

We rewrote the rules so that all units move towards the nearest enemy, using their front center-point as to measure. If the two were equal the unit on Close would move towards the one that was straight ahead. With final rushing, units give priority to enemies that were directly ahead. And of course, we included diagrams!

Nearest Enemy: *The Pikemen will Final Rush the Scout Cavalry.*

Although Knights are Visible to the Pikemen, in Distance, and there is an Open Path to their Nearest Open Side, they are not Nearest Enemy. The Scout Cavalry are the Nearest Enemy because they are Most Directly Ahead.



The owning player can of course Direct Control the Pikemen and have them Final Rush the Knights.

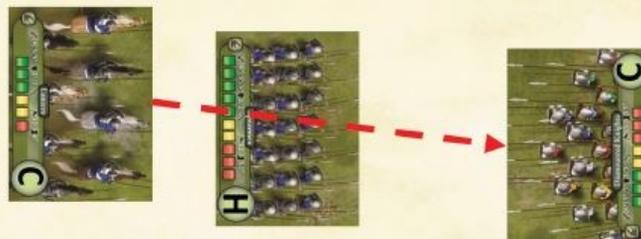
Several other rules required this sort of revision because they weren't clear, and were open to interpretation. For example, the V 3.1 movement rules states that a unit moves towards an enemy as quickly as possible, without a guide as to what constitutes "as quickly as possible." And if a unit's most direct path wasn't the fastest, they could use the Indirect Path rule. But what is a direct path and what is the fastest route?

Now you could say that these phrases have common sense definitions, and if you're trying to exploit them you're being That Guy. However sometimes situations come up where two honest players can come to two equally plausible interpretations. And if the rules don't provide guidance as to which interpretation is valid, that's a failure of those rules.

With that in mind, we refined the rule that a unit draws a line from its front center-point to the enemy's center-point. The unit moves towards that enemy to shrink that line as much as possible. If there's multiple paths, the unit moves along the one that most shrinks that line.

For the Indirect Path rule, we built off this same structure: if the line goes through another unit or impassible terrain, then use the Indirect Path rule.

Indirect Path: *The Lancers should move towards the Dismounted Knights but the line goes through the Spearmen. The Lancers have two options...*



More Thematic Rules

Other rules were changed to provide a more immersive experience. To match the mechanics with the story behind a rule. The best example of that is the Fearsome rule.

In v3.1 the Fearsome ability resulted in a penalty to offensive stats. We didn't feel that was something that evoked fear in a player's mind. Fearsome wasn't scary, it was a tax. More accurately, it was an audit: an annoying thing that happens at random.

While there were obvious rules that evoked fear, such as have unit automatically fail Rout checks, these were discarded as unbalanced. And even if we balanced an idea like that, it didn't feel like a lot of fun.

When we returned to brainstorming, we tried to imagine what Fearsome looked like. What did a unit do when it failed that Fear check?

In the end we felt the scene in Return of King best captured it. During the Battle of Pelennor fields, the enemy is battering down Gondor's front gate. Gandalf is rallying the men, telling them to stand fast, when a bunch of Trolls smash through. Even Gandalf has a momentary look of panic. The men are smashed aside, their formation broken as they no longer are listening to the White Wizard.

What does it mean when a unit no longer listens to its general? To us that meant No Command Cards. You can tell your men to strike true or stand firm, but they aren't listening anymore. And when you try to bolster their spirits with a card that gives a Courage bonus, you discover them shaking in terror rather than heeding your words.

Of course, units will pass their Fear checks most times. High Elf Celestial Guard are rarely intimidated by slaving Trolls. Even peasants will pass their check half the time. Fearsome is still a gambler's ability. You have to be willing to adapt to the unexpected bonuses it can bring you.

With any revision we made (or didn't make), we applied that rubric: does it feel like it should? Does the mechanics of the rule reinforce the description of the rule. This was a place where we were willing to let stand a little complexity (e.g. Skirmishers or Flying Keywords) to get the feel of it right.

Improving Game Play

This is the area where we made the fewest changes, but those changes were the biggest. And no change was bigger than the ones we made to shooting: the Ammo Rules.

The name is a misnomer. The Ammo Rules are actually a package of rules designed to resolve a specific issue with Battleground. When Battleground was conceived it was meant to be a relatively fast game where the decisive action happened quickly and where players fought until their last unit card was removed.

Those two concepts are in tension with each other. Often the former prevailed: players fought until the battle was decided and then called the game. Rarely did players fight to the bitter end. And why would they? You could spend the next hour playing to a foregone conclusion, or you could set up a second game.

Units with ranged attacks assumed the latter, and were designed to play to that degenerate endgame. These units only shot on their turn, and spreading out the total damage they would inflict over the course of an entire game. By contrast a unit with melee attacks would do damage on both player's turns.

So if a game played until the last unit card was destroyed took 16 total turns (8 for each player), then the ranged unit would spread out the damage over those 16 turns. A similarly costed melee unit would do the same amount of damage, but would do it in the first 8 turns.

Both units were costed correctly, but the timing of their damage was different. However that timing is crucial. Early damage is more valuable, because you can break through the enemy and end the game. By front-loading all the damage, the melee unit had an advantage. turns (i.e. 8 turns for each player) and the melee unit would do the same damage in the first 8 game turns.

The more ranged units a player takes, the bigger the issue this discrepancy becomes. Once a player takes two ranged units, they are almost committing themselves to sitting back and shooting. Except that only two shooting units wouldn't give a player the firepower they needed. A player was forced to load up on ranged units or take none.

That not only commits the player to playing a certain way, but also dragged out the length of the game. Battleground is not meant to be a 4-hour game. It's meant to be a decisive game, played in two hours at the most.

Ranged units simply weren't as effective unless played a very certain way, and increased the game length. For both fun and effectiveness, players were often better served to take the points they'd spend on a Bowman unit and instead upgrade other units to be better at melee. This situation was simply not acceptable to us.

We tried several incremental changes but none of them worked because none of them addressed the timing of the damage. We kept coming back to the fact that the amount of damage ranged units did was right; it was just the timing that was wrong.

With the issue phrased correctly, the solution almost presented itself. Let ranged units shoot every turn.

The result was an immediate failure. It made ranged units more powerful, but it didn't change the dynamics at all. Players were still incentivized to hang back, only now they got extra turns of shooting while they did. Many of our playtest games were Battleground Verdun.

We ended up scrapping the idea and moving on. It was almost a year later, when other ideas didn't pan out, that we returned to this concept. In retrospect the reason for our failure was obvious: we had changed the timing of the damage, but also increased the amount. We needed a way to cap the damage output of those ranged units.

"Wait a minute," came the eureka moment that seems anti-climactic years later, "Archers don't have unlimited arrows. Hell, even machine guns run out of ammo eventually!"

Battleground already had an Ammo Rule. The v3.1 Pila & Javelin Keywords used ammo, which itself was inspired by the Red Dragon's fiery breath ranged attack. The Red Dragon even had an icon on the unit. Players mark the unit card for standing orders, for tracking damage, for special abilities. Why not have a set of boxes for ammo?



This began the long process of writing, rewriting, and playtesting for what we now call the Ammo Rules. We also took guidance from real world examples. Because even though this is a fantasy game, it does have a basis in reality. We asked our selves how fast would a trained archer shoot? How many arrows did they carry? (Answer: about 12 shots a minute and 60 arrows, respectively).

That means an archer could shoot continuously for 5 minutes before expending all their arrows. Now, of course it's doubtful an archer would fire continuously like that. There'd likely be tactical ebbs and flows. But even we were very conservative and triple the amount of time it takes to use all of their ammo, that's only 15 minutes, which is far less than the length of an average battle.

This told us that were on the right path. Furthermore, we got some very interesting feedback from our playtesters. We were told that shooting every turn felt right. After all, one playtest said, units fight every turn. Why could ranged units shoot every turn?

The effect of the Ammo Rules had was to create parity between ranged units and melee units. Both could have a decisive impact on the early and middle stages of the game. The Ammo Rules didn't modify the amount of damage. They only alter the timing of it, essentially by "pulling" it forward in time.

And we incorporated a way that ranged units could get more shots: spending a Command Action to erase an ammo box. Thematically this can be directing runners to resupply the unit with quivers of arrows (or whatever ammunition). This preserves the option for a player who wants to hang back and shoot with his or her ranged units. In this way we are adding to the possible play styles with Battleground.

We're fully aware that the Ammo Rules are a major change. But we feel that it is one that will improve game play, and it is something we have been testing for over three years now.

We also know that most factions don't have the ammo boxes on the unit. It is our hope that we reprint factions quick enough that this won't be an issue for long. In the meantime, we have included a guide in the rulebook as to how many ammo boxes units get (based on their maximum range). And we also are working on

a stopgap solution for players to have ammo boxes on clear sleeves. This is something we will announce when it is finalized.

We hope you've enjoyed this glimpse into the design process for Battleground Fantasy Warfare. Obviously, we couldn't detail every change as most came with months or years of playtesting and deliberation. To lay out the thinking behind them all would take volumes.

However I hope we have conveyed our due diligence in making these changes. Although we were fearless in our willingness to made (sometimes radical) changes for the better, we were not careless in our efforts.

We hope you enjoy the new rulebook. We hope that you find it simpler, clearer, and more fun. We thank you for being with us through this process, and we hope you'll join us on April 23rd to make the Men of Hawkshold a success!

Till the Next Missive. . .

The Outlaw Alchemist