

# **Wargaming the Australian Frontier Wars: Modelling the Soft Aspects of Conflict**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines how the Australian frontier wars may be represented through tabletop wargaming by prioritising the soft aspects of conflict, namely morale, perception, cohesion, and the shaping influence of Country. It argues that conventional wargaming frameworks, which privilege visibility, firepower, and decisive engagement, are poorly suited to modelling the dispersed, uncertain, and environmentally conditioned character of frontier violence. Drawing on historical scholarship and rules design practice, the paper proposes an approach in which these elements are treated as core system drivers rather than as secondary modifiers. It demonstrates how Country may be understood as a system of constraint, how pressure may represent cumulative loss of control, and how limited information and structured orders may recreate decision making under conditions of uncertainty. It concludes that such an approach provides a more historically grounded and analytically rigorous mode of representation.

## **Introduction**

The Australian frontier wars present a persistent difficulty for representation within tabletop wargaming. The dominant conventions of the form assume clearly bounded engagements, identifiable forces, and a battlefield in which visibility and control may be reasonably established. These assumptions are embedded in the structure of most systems and shape how conflict is translated into rules.<sup>1</sup>

The frontier wars do not conform to these expectations. Violence was episodic, localised, and frequently indirect. Engagements were often brief, inconclusive, or avoided altogether. Movement, observation, and anticipation shaped outcomes as much as, and often more than, direct confrontation.<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that the representation of such conflict requires a shift in emphasis from the visible and measurable aspects of warfare to those elements that structure behaviour under conditions of uncertainty. These are described here as the soft aspects of conflict and include morale, cohesion, perception, and decision making. Central to these is the concept of Country, understood not as terrain in the conventional sense but as a lived and operational environment that constrains action.

The argument advanced is that these elements must be treated not as peripheral influences upon a system primarily concerned with combat, but as the foundation of the system itself. Only by doing so can wargaming move beyond the reproduction of isolated events and begin to model the conditions under which those events occurred.

## **The Problem of Representation**

Conventional wargaming systems are structured around clarity. Players are typically able to observe the battlefield, identify units, and assess positions. Even where uncertainty is introduced, it is often

partial and temporary. The underlying assumption remains that the game space is ultimately knowable.

Such a structure aligns with forms of warfare in which visibility and coordination are central. It does not align with the Australian frontier wars, where visibility was often restricted and knowledge incomplete.<sup>3</sup>

Henry Reynolds has shown that Aboriginal resistance frequently relied upon mobility, evasion, and selective engagement rather than sustained confrontation.<sup>4</sup> John Connor likewise emphasises the decentralised character of frontier conflict, noting that it operated outside the organisational frameworks associated with formal military campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

When conventional systems are applied to this context, they tend to privilege those elements that are most readily represented, namely movement, combat, and casualty. In doing so, they marginalise the conditions that made those elements meaningful. The consequence is not merely an incomplete model but a distorted one, in which the most visible aspects of the conflict are treated as the most significant.

This distortion has interpretive implications. By foregrounding engagement, such systems imply that conflict is primarily resolved through combat rather than through movement, perception, and the management of uncertainty.

## **Soft Aspects of Conflict**

The soft aspects of conflict are those elements that shape behaviour without being reducible to direct exchanges of force. Morale reflects the willingness and capacity of a group to act under pressure. Cohesion describes the extent to which individuals function as a coordinated unit. Perception concerns the information available to actors and the interpretation of that information. Decision making refers to the selection of action within constrained and uncertain conditions.

These elements are not discrete. They are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. A failure of perception may lead to flawed decisions. A decline in cohesion may undermine morale. Together they form a dynamic system in which behaviour emerges from interaction rather than from isolated variables.

Michael Walzer's analysis of the experiential dimensions of warfare underscores the importance of understanding conflict as lived reality rather than abstract structure.<sup>6</sup> Although his work is concerned primarily with ethical evaluation, it draws attention to the necessity of incorporating subjective conditions into any attempt at representation.

Within a wargaming framework, this suggests that the central task is not to simulate combat outcomes in isolation, but to recreate the conditions under which actors decided whether and how to engage. The soft aspects of conflict provide the means by which such conditions may be modelled.

## **Country as Constraint**

The concept of Country is fundamental to any understanding of the Australian frontier wars. Country is not equivalent to terrain as commonly represented within wargaming. It is not a neutral surface upon which action occurs. It is a structured and meaningful environment, shaped by long term interaction and embedded knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Bill Gammage has demonstrated that Indigenous land management practices produced landscapes that were actively maintained and understood in detail.<sup>8</sup> This knowledge encompassed movement routes, seasonal variation, and areas of concealment and exposure.

For Indigenous groups, Country constituted a system of knowledge that enabled both mobility and concealment. For settlers, the same environment often represented uncertainty and risk due to limited familiarity. This asymmetry had direct consequences for how conflict unfolded.

In modelling terms, this suggests that Country should be understood as a system of constraint. It defines what may be seen, where movement is possible, and how actions are interpreted. It narrows the range of available choices rather than simply modifying their outcomes.

Deborah Bird Rose's work reinforces this interpretation by presenting Country as relational and active rather than inert.<sup>9</sup> To incorporate this understanding into rules design is to shift the role of environment from passive background to active determinant.

## **Perception and Uncertainty**

A defining characteristic of the frontier wars is the absence of complete information. Actors rarely possessed a clear or reliable understanding of the position, strength, or intent of opposing groups. Visibility was limited, communication was uncertain, and interpretation was often required.

Lyndall Ryan's research into frontier violence highlights the uneven and fragmented nature of encounters, reinforcing the centrality of uncertainty in shaping behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

In such conditions, action is based upon perception rather than certainty. Decisions are made in response to what actors believe to be occurring, rather than to an objective and fully known situation. This introduces the possibility of misreading, hesitation, and disproportionate response.

Fear operates as a continuous condition within this environment. It is not confined to moments of direct engagement but informs movement, posture, and timing. The anticipation of contact is as significant as contact itself.

For wargaming, this requires that systems limit player knowledge and allow for error. Perfect information removes a central dimension of the conflict. By contrast, partial and uncertain information creates a decision space that more closely reflects historical conditions.

## **Cohesion and Outcomes**

In many wargaming systems, outcomes are determined through attrition. Units remain effective until they have suffered sufficient losses to be removed from play. This model assumes that destruction is the primary mechanism of resolution.

In the frontier context, such an assumption is not supported by the historical record. Groups frequently disengaged before reaching the point of destruction. Cohesion could deteriorate under pressure, leading to hesitation, fragmentation, or withdrawal.

This suggests that outcomes should be understood in terms of function rather than physical elimination. A group that withdraws or fails to act has effectively lost, regardless of its numerical strength.<sup>11</sup>

To model this requires a shift in emphasis from casualties to capability. Cohesion becomes a central variable, and its degradation becomes a primary mechanism through which outcomes are determined.

## **From Concept to Mechanic**

The translation of these concepts into a playable system requires a reorientation of design priorities. Country must be implemented as a system of influence that shapes visibility and movement. Perception must be limited through hidden states and incomplete information. Morale and cohesion must be represented as processes that degrade over time rather than as binary conditions.

Pressure may be used to represent the cumulative effect of uncertainty, exposure, and loss of control. Orders may be structured in such a way as to constrain decision making, requiring players to commit to intentions without full knowledge of their consequences.

Such an approach ensures that the player operates within a system defined by uncertainty and constraint. Decisions become meaningful not because they optimise outcomes, but because they involve risk within an incomplete and shifting understanding of the situation.

## **Demonstration in Play**

A simple example may illustrate the interaction of these elements. A patrol moves through dense Country in which visibility is restricted and movement uncertain. The presence of an opposing force is unknown.

The player must decide whether to move cautiously, preserving concealment, or rapidly, gaining ground at the risk of exposure. This decision is made without full knowledge of the environment or the position of the opposing force.

If the patrol becomes exposed, the opposing force may act, initiating a brief engagement. The result is not prolonged combat but disruption. The patrol is suppressed and withdraws.

No decisive engagement has occurred and casualties may be minimal. The outcome is determined not by destruction but by loss of control. The patrol has failed in its objective.

This example demonstrates how outcomes may emerge from the interaction of perception, pressure, and environment rather than from combat alone.

## **Conclusion**

The Australian frontier wars require an approach to wargaming that differs from those developed for more conventional forms of conflict. Their dispersed, uncertain, and environmentally conditioned character cannot be adequately represented through systems that prioritise visibility and combat.

By foregrounding morale, cohesion, perception, and Country, it is possible to construct models that reflect the conditions under which decisions were made. Such systems emphasise constraint, uncertainty, and the interaction of environment and behaviour.

In doing so, they move beyond the representation of events and towards the modelling of experience. This provides a more accurate and analytically useful means of engaging with the frontier wars and demonstrates the potential of wargaming as a tool for historical inquiry.

## Footnotes

1. John Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars, 1788–1838* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002), 3–10.
2. Henry Reynolds, *Forgotten War* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2013), 1–15.
3. Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars*, 56–78.
4. Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1981), 102–130.
5. Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars*, 80–102.
6. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 144–152.
7. Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 7–12.
8. Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011), 23–45.
9. Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 45–60.
10. Lyndall Ryan et al., “Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788–1930,” University of Newcastle, 2019.
11. Reynolds, *Forgotten War*, 121–145.

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