

Silent Dark in Review

a deliberately pretentious presentation by:

Flak Magnet



Well, my Silent Dark rules arrived on Monday, Jan 26th, a week after I ordered them. Pretty good turn-around considering I had to wait for the books to be printed.

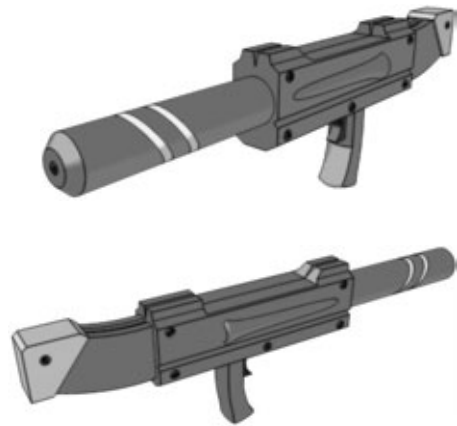
A group of gaming buddies and I have gone together and purchased the Silent Dark rules from www.wolfegames.com. Wolfe Games has a policy of giving a 50% discount on any order of 5 books or more, so we each got our books for \$20.00. That's half off of the list price of \$40.00 for those who are mathematically disinclined. There were 9 of us, and I bought one extra book just in case someone else wanted to pick one up off of us, so our total order was 10 books at \$210.00.

The books arrived in a closely-fit cardboard box and were undamaged. Not overly protective packaging, but more than adequate for the contents, after all, how fragile is paper?

Physical Construction of the Book:

Holding the book in my hands I have a spiral-bound book about 1/4" thick. It has a full-color front and back cover of very light card stock, though the back cover's color consists of mainly black, white and a little bit of a gray-green color for the Wolfe Games logo and website URL.

The pages are "normal" weight, maybe a bit lighter than normal "bond" paper and measure 8.5"x11". There is a CD sleeve on the back cover that holds a regular CD bearing a roughly printed Wolfe Games logo, the CD contains about 226 MB of data which I'll get to later. Something I find disappointing in the physical construction of the book is the lack of a really robust cover, like a plastic sheet on the front and back or some form of lamination for the covers.



Without delving into the content of the book, which is where the *real* value lays, the book looks pretty good by its cover. If you added a protective plastic cover I think they might move OK off the shelves of a gaming store. One hurdle for that might be the price though, Greg Wolfe deserves to make a profit, and I don't know how his numbers work out, but \$40.00 is a quite a price for a spiral-bound book with just under 100 pages, but that's to be expected for a small company's game.

Being a historical war-game fan, I don't really look for glossy pages or color photography, so that's not why I say it's a high price for what it is. Many historical war-games lack any color photos or even *binding* for the pages for that matter. Comparing Silent Dark's presentation with Mein Panzer from ODGW, Silent Dark is half as thick, while costing 25% more. Combine that consideration with the fact that historically-based rules require incredible amounts of research if they're to have any credibility as opposed to sci-fi rules where the author's can just "make stuff up" with regards to unit stats and Silent Dark's price tag seems even steeper. I prefer Mein Panzer's loose-leaf presentation because I was able to choose a binder that suits my purposes, and ODGW provides updates on their web-pages that consist of replacement pages that have the corrections on them, no errata pages to keep track of.

The printing of the cover and the interior pages is crisp and neat, so aside from the lack of protective cover and my personal, perhaps quirky preference for loose-leaf pages the presentation of the book is pretty good.

I'd like to see Wolfe Games provide rulebook updates by providing replacement pages for download seeing as how the book has already gone through two updates (though one of them occurred before any books were shipped). The books are printed "on demand" when they're ordered by a company called Data Source, so revisions are executed more easily than they are with publication runs, but that also makes it easy to wind up with a book that's "out of date" the day you order it. Not a happy thing to have happen when you're buying rules. Greg Wolfe has provided assurances that updates and changes to the rules will be made available to existing owners, which is good.

Note that although I have compared the *presentation* of Silent Dark to Mein Panzer, the games themselves are completely different in what they offer and the way they offer it. Therefore, I am comparing only the physical presentation of the rules and not the games themselves. That would be comparing apples to orangutans.



A breakdown of the contents of the book:

1-7 Inner title page, Table of Contents, intro to G.U.T.S.

and the obligatory general intro to war-gaming.

8-10 Very basic intro to principles of play.

11-37 The core rules, everything from creatures and weapons to vehicles and buildings (and how to destroy same).

38,39 Building an Army list the Silent Dark tournament-legal way.

40-43 Tournament Play rules including 6 different scenarios and their parameters.

44,45 Full page art.

46-78 Sample Army lists and fluff for 5 different factions

79-83 Tactics and strategy guide

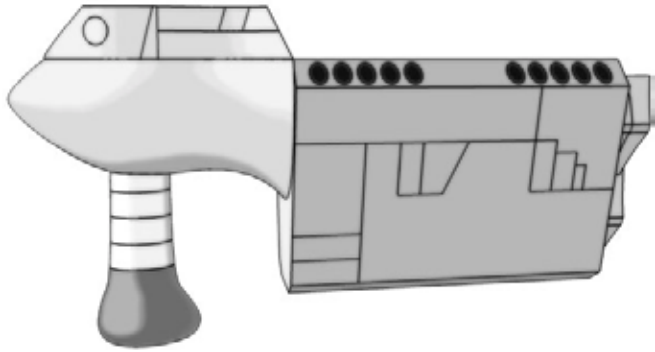
84-85 Design system documentation

86-97 Silent Dark's back story

98 About the Author

Contents of the CD:

According to Wolfe Games' website, a core part of Silent Dark is the design system. Indeed, most of what drove my interest in buying the rules was the openness and flexibility promised by the design system and the option of using whichever models I choose for the game. That design system is contained on the CD.



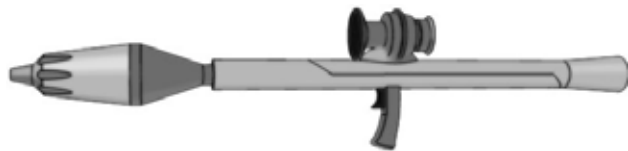
As I mentioned above, CD contains about 226MB of data, but not all of it is purely rules-oriented data. Included on the CD is:

Adobe Acrobat Reader, design system tutorials in the form of AVI files, the first iteration of the Sample Game, a short story, some optional rules, the installation program for Open Office 1.1.0 for windows, and miscellaneous autorun files to enable the CD to autorun when inserted into the CD drive of a PC running windows.

After quickly checking out the extra stuff, I noted that the Design System consists of a single Excel file that's about 2.5MB in size. From what I've heard, the spreadsheet does not behave well inside of Open Office, so Open Office's inclusion on the CD is a bit puzzling. From what I've read, I guess it works "well enough" in Open Office but not perfectly. Greg Wolfe has re-written the design system in JAVA, which should eliminate problems for customers without MS Office or those that don't run Windows. When I opened the design system file from the CD-ROM, a likely reason for it's odd performance in Open Office presented itself: Macros. Compatibility with Macros are the bugaboo of any office application that needs to work with MS Office file formats.

Da Rules:

The first few pages of the book describe G.U.T.S., the actual rules of Silent Dark and Wolfe Games' core intellectual property. Where Silent Dark is essentially a Sci-Fi setting with some pretty radical presumptions about air-power and artillery counter-measures, G.U.T.S. is supposed to be universal. In theory, G.U.T.S. should be suitable for playing anything from a Fantasy game to a Civil war-game all the way up through a Sci-Fi game. That's the theory; the presentation of G.U.T.S. that exists in the Silent Dark rules is NOT the G.U.T.S. of theory. It has lots of potential to be developed into something truly universal and live up the hype, but it isn't there YET. Greg Wolfe has stated that it'll take some time and some doing to get there, but he'll be working on it. From what he's said, I'd look for more genre-specific books using G.U.T.S. as the core rules before he starts working toward a one-stop, be-all, end-all version of G.U.T.S. itself.



The G.U.T.S. rules that are presented in the Silent Dark book are tailored to fit the Silent Dark genre, which is set in the 26th Century and has "all of the futuristic trappings one would expect in such a setting" according to the rulebook. There is a lack of air power or artillery as it is explained away by the back story in which shields and interception systems make them essentially obsolete. That feels like a convenient justification for omitting them, because if that's the case, then how does an invading force manage to land ANY ground units on the planet without the landing craft getting blasted out of the sky by the omnipotent interception systems?

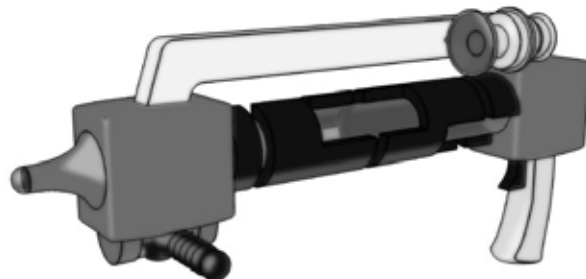
Shrug Anyway, within the Silent Dark background, however, the absence of long-range arty and air support is just part of the setting. Silent Dark's rules are also heavily building/urban oriented, making Artillery overkill and air power less valuable anyway.

Since I am more interested in G.U.T.S. the rules and design system myself, so many of the limitations and "problems" I perceive are probably magnified in my perspective because I don't actually intend to use the Silent Dark setting in my gaming. If I wasn't planning on applying Silent Dark's rules to more generic gaming, I probably wouldn't even notice.

Even so, omitting off-board artillery and air-power from a Sci-Fi skirmish war-game isn't a death-knell in my opinion. The following paragraph explains why:

There is a valid school of thought that for the scope of combat represented in skirmish scale war-gaming, artillery and air support have no place. He whose artillery or air support arrives first wins simply because they'll have the firepower to eradicate anything on a skirmish table. So if you can buy into that line of thought even a little, then the only skirmish scenarios worth playing are those that lack air and/or artillery assets on *both* sides. Then again, gamers want to play with "all the toys", so even though I really don't mind them being absent, other gamers might miss them.

There *are* options for indirect fire, so as long as a player is willing to put a model on the table, they can have something very like short-ranged infantry-support artillery, it'll just be expensive in the points system and deadly, not to mention subject to getting destroyed during the game which is as it should be. Anyway, IMO there is validity in the "artillery/air power is out-of-scale for skirmish war-gaming" argument so while I'd prefer to see such rules present in G.U.T.S., they aren't a "war stopper" for using G.U.T.S. as presented in the Silent Dark book even without the justification presented in the Silent Dark background.



Hopefully, Wolfe Games will be a successful venture for Greg Wolfe and future iterations of G.U.T.S. will fill in those blanks, making G.U.T.S. truly universal without exception or caveat. As it is presently, however, G.U.T.S. being universal is a promise that isn't delivered on from within Silent Dark's design system. In fact, the author of the rules has explicitly stated on his Yahoo group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wolfegames>) that while G.U.T.S. is intended to be universal, the points-based design system for Silent Dark is *not*.

It *is*, however, a very flexible and enjoyable set of rules even in its current incarnation, and Greg Wolfe promises improvements in the future. I would really like to see the design system mature into a truly generic design system suitable for converting WWII vehicle data into stats as well as making up Sci-Fi settings of the player's own imagination, and I think that's where Greg Wolfe plans on heading anyway.

Anyway, on to what the rules *are*, as opposed to what they are *not*:

They are easy to read and concise, pretty simple stuff (a good thing), and intuitive. I had a pretty good idea how most of the stats and weapon types introduced in the full rules (but missing from the sample games) would work after reading the descriptions but before reading the game mechanics, they're just that easy to understand. Before our full rules arrived, my group had played two sample games, and the quick-and-dirty rules for cover that we made up to spice up the sample game are almost exactly what is contained in the full rules, kind of funny actually.

The core rules are IGOUGO, which is to say that after determining initiative, one player executes actions with ALL of his models then the other player does. Another initiative is rolled, and so on. I personally dislike IGOUGO turn sequences, but Silent Dark has aspects to it that are intended to mitigate the "first turn advantage" that exists in many IGOUGO games, such as dodging which permits off-turn models to move toward cover as they receive fire while decreasing the chances of a hit, and counter-attacking, in which a model exposes itself to the incoming fire for a single "hail Mary" return-fire attack on the model attacking it. Another mitigating factor cited by the author for the IGOUGO turn sequence is that initiative is rolled each turn, so just because you get the first turn initiative doesn't mean that the other guy won't get a "double-turn" by winning initiative in the second. (It also doesn't mean that he will either.)

There are other options for how to use certain weapon types to deny areas to the enemy that I like quite a bit, but I still don't care for the IGOUGO aspect (call me prejudiced and closed minded, but only to my face). After some play test runs to either dispel or confirm my prejudice against IGOUGO, I'll probably give the optional unit-activation rules a go.



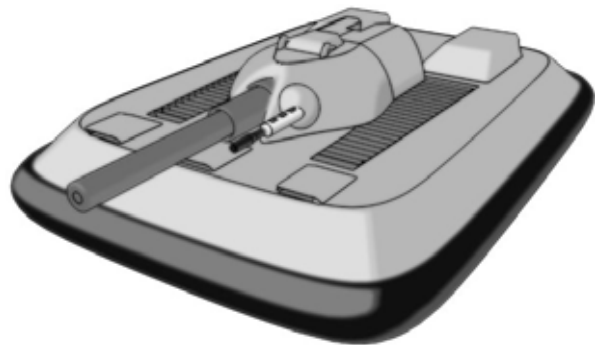
There are a few Optional Rules besides alternating unit-activation including morale and non-lethal weapons. The Optional Rules are different from house rules in that they are legal for tournament play as long as *both* sides of the table agree on their use. Examples of Optional Rules cover morale, unit activation as I mentioned earlier and non-lethal weapons. More Optional Rule will be released on the Wolfe Games website as they are developed.

The rules have a nice approach to infantry support weapons (machine guns, etc.) that I like quite a bit. As I hinted at above, there are weapon types that deny areas to the enemy. These weapons lay a template out between a player's turn and anything moving through that template runs the risk of getting hit by that weapon. I think that's a great alternative to the "over watch" concept and I think it will do a nice job of representing the sustained suppressive fire capabilities of those types of weapons a lot better than just giving them a high rate of fire and killing a lot on the controlling player's turn as is done in most other games.

Something else about the game's approach to weapons is the concept of "one shots". As far as ammo goes, there are two types, infinite and one-shot. Designating a weapon as a one-shot lowers the cost (and size) of that weapon by a *lot*. So it's possible to design a very powerful tank-busting weapon and give it to your average run-of-the-mill grunt. Suddenly, über-heavy tanks aren't the rolling gods of the battlefield anymore. They have as much to fear from some disposable weapon-toting dweeb as they do from other tanks, which is a pretty interesting dynamic.

Vehicles are more complicated than creatures, but not excessively so and I think they'll work out well once my group gets down to play testing. Vehicles have two stats for damage, one representing the actual structure of the vehicle, the other representing the reliability/robustness of the inner workings and power-supply. Weapons

can be designed with a malfunction stat that makes them more effective at causing malfunctions to vehicular targets. Each time a vehicle takes damage, there is a moderately complicated process by which you determine whether or not it's malfunctioning as a result. The malfunctions on the chart include degrading the energy the vehicle has available, passenger/crew hits, ammo explosions and fires. Some things that I find missing or odd about the chart is that there are no results that destroy weapons systems or freezing turrets (if any) on vehicles. Once that secondary stat drops below a "redline" value, everything just stops working except the vehicle's ability to move. So weapons are essentially indestructible and you instead have to wear the vehicle down to keep it from shooting (or kill the crew).



Vehicles can be designed to carry crewmen and passengers, and rules for passengers firing out of a vehicle are covered in the full rules, another detail that gets overlooked in a lot of rules. Since you have to design and buy the crewmen of the vehicle as separate creatures, you can have them climb out and join the fight if the vehicle is kaput-ed. Just remember to arm them with personal weapons too if that's your plan.

Vehicles have acceleration, deceleration and top speed stats. The way the rules work, incoming fire, hazardous terrain (for the movement type) or just trying to drive too fast can cause building to crash into objects. That's good to have represented. There are also rules for ramming that are used to crash through buildings, crush smaller vehicles, or even run over enemy troops. That's nice to have in such a simple set of rules, since most games fail to address some or all of those things.

There are rules covering creatures swimming, climbing and jumping over chasms that are also overlooked in many skirmish games.

Buildings are handled with quite a bit of detail. The idea is that your buildings are represented on the table with a printed out map of the interior of the building that you just set on the table. There are rules for moving through doors, blowing them off their hinges and even blasting holes in the walls. The scenario parameters provide guidelines for determining how many of what types of buildings are to be used for the game, of course GMs can design the scenario as they deem appropriate. I myself prefer 3D buildings, but I can really appreciate the value of having the interior of a building really matter instead of just calling all of the action in a building a "close assault." I think it'll be very interesting to cover a table with the layout of a building with multiple floors and staircases in order to see how the action flows.

In play these rules are deadly. If you leave a troop exposed at the end of your turn and the enemy gets clear shots at him, he's almost certainly dead. In addition running headlong into hand-to-hand combat across open fields apparently doesn't work all that well in the 26th Century. I like that, it's a good thing.

The Design System:

As I mentioned above, the design system is a 2.5MB Excel spreadsheet. It has multiple worksheets, each focused on the different types of things that are design-able in Silent Dark. If it's a stat used in the game, then the design system allows you to set it.

You just point and click and the design system updates the points cost as you move between cells in the spreadsheet. There are design validation features built into the design system so if you create something bogus you're prompted about it and if you add a stat that requires another stat to be modified your prompted then too. It's pretty slick actually, even if it was designed on a Microsoft product.

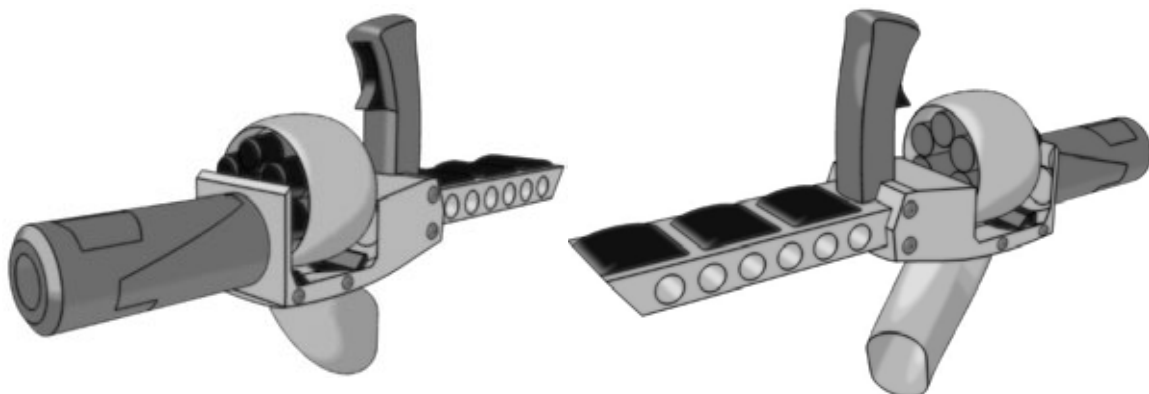


Each design worksheet also has an associated "output" worksheet. In the "output" worksheet you'll see an organized chart of the stats you've selected for your new creation, there is also an area to enter 'fluff' text. If you're using MS Office, you can copy-paste this chart into MS Word and even insert a picture into the word document in order to create a nice reference-card for use during your games. I intend to format the word document to put my created creatures, equipment and vehicles on 3"x5" cards, just for giggles.

As cool as the design system is, it's all computer based. Doing the math by hand would be tedious and cumbersome. If you or your gaming buddies don't own a computer, Silent Dark is probably not for you. If you don't own a computer, talk to your community elders and make sure that war gaming isn't against your religion anyway, as you're obviously Amish! (Just kidding.)

The java based design system, just released as I wrote this review, consists of a set of web pages that fulfill the same roles as the Excel file. Each page is focused on designing either creatures, different types of weapons or vehicles. What's missing from the java design system is a nicely formatted output page as well as some information on the calculations that go on in the background, so if you're looking to shave a few points from a creation here or there, it's harder to tell where you can shave them from. It's also a series of web-pages, so you have to open them either in separate browser windows and make notes/printouts to design your army in a piece-meal way. Greg Wolfe has said that in the future he intends on developing the java design system into something more cohesive and usable but that another design project currently demands his attention (per the monthly freebie #2). Greg Wolfe says that polishing up the design system is "on the list."

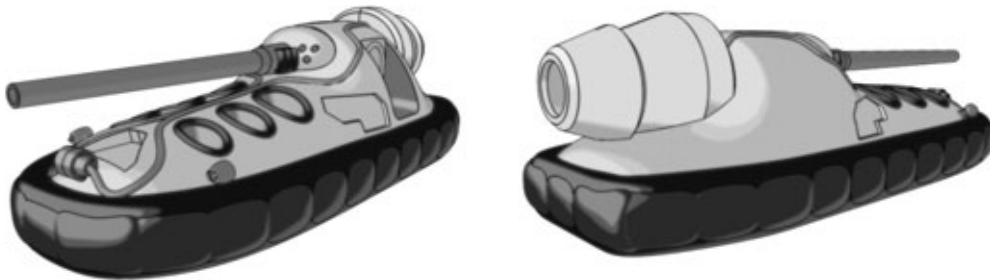
Something about the points that is neither good nor bad but bears mentioning: The numbers involved here are HUGE compared to most points-based games. A 50,000 point game might involve just 25 grunt soldiers at around 2000+ apiece for the troops and basic weapons. This may seem unwieldy at first, but it's just math, really. The stats in the game have a large range compared to most other war-games, so while the weapons skill in one game might be a number from 1-6, weapons skill in Silent Dark is 0-100. With stats having that high of a range, either point values move over a couple of decimal points, or you start tracking tenths and hundredths of a point. Outside of the design system, it's still just simple math (and the design system handles the hard stuff) so it's really no biggie.



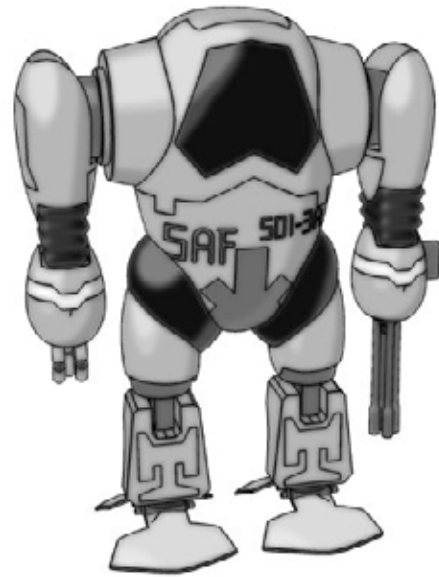
In use the design system is very flexible, don't think anyone ought to have too much trouble converting their army of choice into the Silent Dark rules that system, or even making up one from scratch, which is good since that's the point. What I am not convinced of is that the design system is 100% balanced +statistically-peaking+. It seems to be very easy to waste points if you follow a concept closely rather than try to optimize your points with a general concept in mind, you can wind up with a hugely expensive creation that's going to be less useful than its points would suggest. That's my first impression, though I may be proved wrong in practice. So if you're a gamer that likes to play wildly extreme armies, you just might need to be prepared to lose games a lot or compromise your quirky impulses to the considerations of working with the points system. Looking at the army lists in the book though, variety isn't really a problem, so you'd have to really be pushing toward the extreme end of extreme to really be throwing points away.

Note that I said “statistically speaking” above. Since everyone uses the same design system, it's going to be balanced. Certainly some combinations or points-tricks will be more optimal, but it seems like there are “break points” built into the design system that makes point-tricks tweak-able. So while having stats being X Y and Z is a highly efficient break-point, X+10 Y-5 and Z-5 might be just as efficient. Just because the points system might not stand up to statistical analysis of probabilities and all that nonsense doesn't automatically mean it's broken as far as actual game play. If it *is* broke, Greg Wolfe promises to fix it.

Something I don't like about the design system is how equipment (weapons, etc.) and vehicle point values are NOT modified by the weapons skill of the creature using them. *My dislike of this is more of a quibble over game design philosophy than an actual belief that the design system is broken.* A 2400 point machine pistol in the hands of a Grunt with 50 MSW (the weapons skill stat) is no more or less expensive than the same weapon in the hands of a Demigod with a MSW of 80 or so. On one hand that makes sense, a gun costs the same to produce no matter who you issue it to, and if Silent Dark was a campaign-based game I wouldn't have mentioned it since the economy of a long-running campaign would eventually hamper the fielding of specialist weapons and troops. Silent Dark ISN'T a campaign-focused rule set, so the effectiveness of a weapon in the hands of the troop actually carrying it onto the battle field *ought* to have an impact.



I can understand why a games designer would like to avoid considering that though, if you're going to take into account the weapon skill of the wielding creature to adjust the cost of a weapon, why not consider all the stats? If a creature is more durable on the battlefield, then the gun would stay in the game longer, so shouldn't that modify the cost of the weapon? It's a slippery slope kind of thing that would probably make my head explode if I tried to figure out the math for it, so I can understand any game designer lacking a masochistic love of crunching numbers avoiding that can of worms. In defense of the existing design system Greg Wolfe points out in his opinion, the increasing cost of creature weapons skills (the higher you go, the more it costs to go even higher) addresses the relative



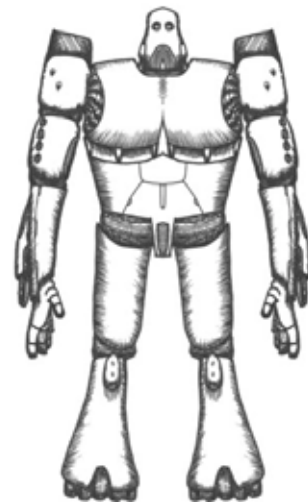
effectiveness of weapons in the hands of different troops. It very well may, after all, he's played more games than I have. Either way, more points ARE actually spent putting the same gun into the hands of an elite troop vs. a grunt, so it's quite possible that it works. Greg Wolfe insists that it does work in a balanced way, so time will tell.



Of course since everyone is using the same design system, it might just all work out fine in the end. Well, everyone is using ALMOST the same design system: Modifications have been done to the ranges of stat values that are reflected in the java design system but not any available version of the Excel system. It's an annoying, trivial, nit-picky thing that I hope gets ironed-out reasonably soon.

In my opinion, standardizing on the java design system is preferred since players won't need to have access to

Microsoft Word to have a fully functioning system. For that to happen though, the java design system needs to be developed more as mentioned above to make it more cohesive and to provide the level of functionality available in the excel version. For what it's worth, its development that's already planned, but it'll take time.



The Art:

Bluntly put, the art in the Silent Dark book is cartoon-y for my tastes. There is too little detail on the most of the vehicles, robots and equipment, and many of the humans look like they're wearing micrometer-thin body-suits with armored plates levitating over strategic locations. Not that I bought the game to admire the artwork, but if Wolfe Games starts making Greg Wolfe thousands of bucks, I respectfully suggest he hire a graphic artist, as well as a guy to critique his designs. Then again, it's art, and there's a distinct possibility that I have no taste.

From a military standpoint, many (not all) of the vehicle or weapon concept drawings are just silly from a practical standpoint. It's important to note though, that Greg Wolfe has admitted that when he's designing some of the art that aesthetics will win out over practical design considerations every time if he has his say. Silent Dark is his game, so I guess he gets his say! Like I said, I didn't buy it for the pictures. (Yeah, I read it for the articles, honest!)



The Silent Dark background:

The actual back story that's available off the website (as well as included in the back of the book) is pretty interesting, but the "fluff" included in the sample army lists toward the back of the book is in my opinion campy, shallow and a little disjointed. As usual, this isn't a "war stopper" for me as I am less interested in the Silent Dark setting than I am G.U.T.S. and the design system. Though considering that pages 44-98 contain the sample army lists, strategy guide and background story, that's more than half of the book.

Conclusion:

I'm glad I own Silent Dark. There are some things missing from it that I'd prefer to have the rules cover, but what is covered is clean and well done and justifications are provided by way of the background for the missing things. On the surface these rules appear to have very few warts and I think the game will play fast and be enjoyable with tons of room for building and tweaking armies to every player's tastes. I look forward to playing it.

If you've never been able to bug the snot out of a games designer, and want to, browse over to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wolfegames>. The author of Silent Dark is really darned responsive to questions and comments posted on that list. That willingness to discuss the rules and consider changes to them is what really made me decide to purchase the rules. If that level of dedication persists I don't see how Wolfe Games could fail to improve G.U.T.S. from the pretty darned good game it is not into an even better game that could give the big-boys a run.

At the \$20.00 I paid for my copy of the rules, I'm quite happy with the purchase. If you and your friends can agree to order together so that you can take advantage of the standing 50% off offer for orders of 5 or more copies I strongly encourage you to do so if only give yourselves a basis for developing your own house rules. If you can't scrounge together enough people to get that discount, hopefully I've provided enough information to make you feel informed about the good and bad of the rules and that you'll consider spending your \$40.00 on them, they're a solid set of rules, and ultimately, it's the rules that really matter.

--Flak Magnet

Email: flakmagnet@tabletop-battlezone.com

Product: Silent Dark (WG100)

Price: \$40 ea. (Standing 50% discount for order of 5 or more.)

Author: Greg Wolfe

Published by: Wolfe Games (by <http://wargamer.data-source.com/sd.html>)

Publisher's URL: www.wolfegames.com

Official Mailing list: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wolfegames>

Full-Disclosure type stuff:

These are all my own opinions, yours may differ. Greg Wolfe was given an opportunity to read, respond to and discuss this review with me prior to my sharing it with anyone. I considered his input and edited this review as I deemed appropriate based on our discussions. I did not make any changes as a result of pressure from Greg Wolfe, nor did Greg Wolfe offer or provide any incentives to change the content of the review. Any changes I made as a result of Greg Wolfe's input was the result of my seeing something in a different light than I did before discussing it with him or as a correction for something I just got DEAD WRONG!

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