

Animal Attraction

On the Use of Toy Animals as
Decoys and Dummies for
Hidden Deployment and Movement in
Tactical Miniature Wargames

Wellington supposedly said that the whole art of war consists of getting at what is on the other side of the hill. Replicating this on the wargame table is highly valued, but hard to achieve. This rule set is one more attempt at this prize. It is not perfect, but it is a pretty good try; it adds a good deal of uncertainty without imposing onerous burdens on the players, and without requiring a computer or an umpire, and also without spoiling the aesthetic appeal of the tabletop scenery.

The “Animal Attraction” system is comprised of two parts, either of which could be useful on its own: a marker system (the animals and their off-table boxes) and a set of rules covering the detection and deployment of hidden troops.

Part One: The Markers

The typical approach to hidden-troop markers is some variation on the poker chip. Space Hulk, for example, uses “blip” markers that have the strength of the Genestealers concealed on the underside. Other games use numbered disks or counters that are keyed to a roster of actual units. This is all very well and good, but this approach has two disadvantages: one, the look is not quite right (the Space Hulk “blips” excepted), and two, the players cannot see their own troops – they have to turn over the chips, or check a roster.

Some years ago, I tried a different way, based on “Stratego”. The hidden troops were represented by dominoes standing on edge, so that the owner could clearly read the unit designations on the face of the dominoes, but the enemy could see only the blank backs of the dominoes.

This worked a little better, since the player could easily examine and arrange their troops without endlessly picking up poker chips to look underneath, and without having to check back and forth on a roster. On the other hand, the enemy players now had even more incentive to go to the fridge, or the bathroom, or what have you, surreptitiously peeking at the faces of the dominoes en route.

Well, back to the drawing board. A solution would be to add some “shielding” to the top and sides of the marker, to make it harder to peek at it.

Et voila – let’s try off-table holding boxes.

From some 5" x 8" cards, I cut and taped a boxes two inches tall, two inches wide, five inches long, and covered for the forward-most three inches of the top. You can get several 25mm troops inside each box, and only someone standing pretty much straight behind the box can see in.

Next we need to keep the boxes off the actual playing surface in a group; that way, if the enemy suddenly develops an uncontrollable urge to walk around your side of the table, you can just lay a piece of paper or something over the rear openings of the boxes and keep your secrets intact.

Finally, we need a way to keep the position of the troops on the table. We could do the tired old poker chips, but ...

According to Shelby Foote's account of Jackson's surprise attack in the Wilderness, the first thing the Union troops saw were large numbers of deer and rabbits that were flushed out of the forest by the Confederate advance.

At the friendly neighborhood hobby shop, there are sets of toy animals for sale; by getting two matching sets, I had pairs of identical deer, rabbits, squirrels, bears, and so forth. One of each pair goes on top of an off-table box, and the other goes on the playing surface.

In a Viet Nam patrolling game, we used tigers, monkeys, and other jungle animals. In American and European forests, we used deer, squirrels, and rabbits. In a Roaring 20's urban shootout, the approaching gangsters were dogs and cats. When commandoes paddle rubber boats in the pre-dawn darkness, it's sharks, dolphins, and orcas. Helicopters approaching in nap of the earth are various species of birds.

So now we have a way to conceal troops off-table in boxes with open backs, and each box has a corresponding marker on the table; now all we need are some rules to govern who gets to see whom, and when.

Part Two: The Rules

Well, now, that's the rub, ain't it? There are always two big problems with dummy markers: one, where there is no marker, there are no enemy troops; and two, can a dummy cause real troops to be revealed?

I won't claim that the following rules are by any means a perfect solution to this problem, but having worked them over quite a bit, I believe that they are a reasonably good approach to minimizing the dreaded specter of "dummy abuse".

Before we get to the sequence, here are a few basic, invariant rules.

Deployment Radius. The marker indicates a point on the playing surface, and the troops that it represents are in a small, constrained area around that point. When using an

animal marker, that point is the animal's front-most paw, or some other obvious single point of contact with the ground. The troops, when deployed, will be within an X inch radius of that point.

One thing that must be considered when establishing the detection range – if normal visibility in your miniatures game is, say, 24 inches, and you allow deployment within four inches radius of the marker, the lead troops could actually start out deployed only 16 inches apart, not 24. You may need to reconsider the range at which the animal markers stop so that the deployed troops start off in reasonable positions. Similarly, if two animals are within two or three times the deployment radius, they should be detected and deployed whether they are in line of sight or not.

A side effect – and an admitted imperfection in these rules: sometimes the animals fulfill the detection criteria, but when the troops are deployed, they are not in visual contact with each other. Rather than try to fix that, I suggest you embrace it. Two groups could easily become aware of each other without actually seeing each other well enough to shoot at each other.

Terrain Consistency. Troops must deploy in the same terrain feature or terrain type as their animal's paw. For example, if the cheetah's front paw is just inside a patch of brush, then the squad in the cheetah's box must all deploy inside that same patch of brush. Similarly, if the paw was out in the open, the whole squad must deploy in the open. This will prevent the players determining detection using one terrain type, and deploying in a different terrain type.

The Law of Conservation of Dummies. If an animal is revealed to be a dummy (i.e., its off-table holding box is empty, regardless of the mental prowess of the animal), that animal is not removed from the table, but instead is relocated with another friendly animal that has not yet been detected. The player can then secretly rearrange any troops between those two off-table holding boxes; as a result, the enemy cannot be sure about either of those two animals.

The Sequence consists of five steps.

- 1) Determine First and Second Player
- 2) First Player Confirms
- 3) Second Player Confirms
- 4) First Player Deploys
- 5) Second Player Deploys

The details:

- 1) Determine which player is first for the remainder of this detection situation; the options for how to do this are spelled out later.

- 2) The first player must state whether or not the first animal's box contains real troops. (Note that the player DOES NOT state how many or what kind of troops yet.)
- 3) If the first player's animal is a dummy, it is relocated to another friendly animal's position, and the sequence ends here, without revealing anything about the second player's animal. If the first player's animal is NOT a dummy, the second player must now state whether or not the second animal's box contains real troops.
- 4) If the second animal is a dummy, it is relocated; if not (that is, if both animals are not dummies), the first player now pulls the troops out of the first animal's box and deploys them on the table.
- 5) Finally, the second player deploys the troops in the second animal's box.

This sequence reduces, although it admittedly does not eliminate, the amount of information that can be "sniffed out" by an advancing dummy.

Who Goes First

It is important to note that going first in this sequence is a significant disadvantage. This asymmetry is what drives the rule for determining who goes first.

The most symmetrical way to determine who goes first at detection time is to have the players make a competitive die roll. The high roller goes second, with ties being re-rolled. That's about as fair as you can make it, but as we all know, life is not fair, and war is even less so.

Here are some intentionally less-fair alternatives.

- One side, being stealthier than the other, wins any ties in the detection die roll.
- The stealthier side gets a detection die roll modifier.
- The stealthier side always goes second (no die roll required).
- The moving player loses any ties in the detection sequence die roll.
- The moving player always goes first (no die roll required).
- Only one side gets animal markers at all; note that this is essentially what is done in Space Hulk.

Conclusion

As always, your mileage may vary. The “Animal Attraction” rule strives to inject a little uncertainty into the opening phases of a miniatures game, allow for some deception, require a little more scouting and contingency planning, and generally increase the tension, and, I hope, the excitement of the game. And by using the combination of toy animals and off-table holding boxes, it does so without causing more work for the players, and without spoiling the terrain with abstract markers.

And who knows? Maybe in an upcoming game, that tiger will turn out to be a real tiger.