

Originality and audience

snapSHOT is the cross between two ideas that I've had in my back pocket for a good few months before starting this project. More precisely, I've had a basic story premise revolving around a prisoner of war having to escape from their captivity for about 4 months and a desire to work with the combat system from the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series for about 7 months.

At conception, *snapSHOT* was going to take a slightly different path from what it ended up taking. The initial concept anchored itself around the combat system. As mentioned, the system is taken from *Ubisoft's Heroes of Might and Magic* (HOMAM) games. To be more precise, the version of combat that I leaned on for inspiration was the version present in *HOMAM II: Gold* (1996) and in *HOMAM III: Restoration of Erathia* (1997, HD remaster: 2015). I highlight these games from the series as they hit the high-water mark as for how the game felt. While this is first and foremost my opinion from my personal experience with the series, this also appears to be a consensus based on the reviews from the base games of the fourth and fifth editions.

To provide a short description: HOMAM uses a turn-based combat system with different stacks of units that a player (or enemy CPU) command on a hex grid. This is a bit of an oversimplification as it omits the magic (spells) and siege elements of combat – but those are less important in the context of *snapSHOT*. (The screenshot from the game below also helps show the idea behind the system.) It is this core system that I wanted to bring into a new context.



My initial research into the kind of contexts I could bring it into branched in two main directions. The first of these was looking into other turn-based strategy games like Hoyoverse's *Honkai: Star Rail* (H:SR) and the *Civilisation* franchise. From this, it became clear – between wanting to avoid HOMAM's non-combat gameplay and my desire to try and avoid relying too much on going for pure strategy – that the new context needed to have some element of contrast with the combat system. In this case, that mostly clicked when looking at how *H:SR* has a world in which the player can roam with combat triggered by attacking enemies placed in that world.

This led to the second branch of research where I investigated ideas that would provide that contrast; for example: the *Arkham* series by Warner Bros. The decision I made at the time was to go for something like this where there would be clear action gameplay and then certain events would trigger the turn-based combat.

It was at this time - with the core mechanic, basic narrative skin ideas, and idea for the unique element – that the design decision to have a clear A-side and B-side for gameplay was made. This is simply because this was the way in which two styles of gameplay that were chosen because they clashed could be integrated into one game. The A-side would, as the thinking went, be the hook with the action and hero's story of this POW while the B-side would be the serious side of the game where some of the heavier beats could also be dealt with. Looking back, the clash here is obvious.

The target audience for *snapSHOT* had, at least in my head, always been the serious strategy game player. This was, in retrospect, an assumption that had been grandfathered into the game from the go with the anchor point being the adaptation of the *HOMAM* combat system. This kind of gameplay tends to be limiting on the audiences that it successfully engages to people who enjoy strategy and wargamers. At the same time, the A-side of the story acts as an obstacle for someone looking for to reach that specific gameplay. On top of this, the opposite problem exists for those who feel the turn-based strategy is interrupting their action game.

This is where the focus shifted and the design of *snapSHOT* effectively shifted to version 2 of the game, making the call to change the anchor point for the game to the underlying narrative. The reasoning was twofold. Firstly, the change allowed me to change more about the combat system than I otherwise would have allowed myself to. Secondly, it allowed for a change in the target audience that made a bit more sense for a game like *snapSHOT* by also creating more buy in on the RPG side of things.

At this point, considerations were also being made as to adapting A-side gameplay to reduce the clash that created these issues. Looking at games like *Baldur's Gate 3* and the *Dungeons and Dragons* TTRPG system with the new perspective led to the game becoming more about actively engaging with the story of the main character and interacting with the world as a prisoner of war rather than just going after enemies

constantly. This was also when changes occurred to the narrative to create the 5-act structure the story now has and to add the rest of the MC's troop in to provide the environment in which the character can both lead and fail.

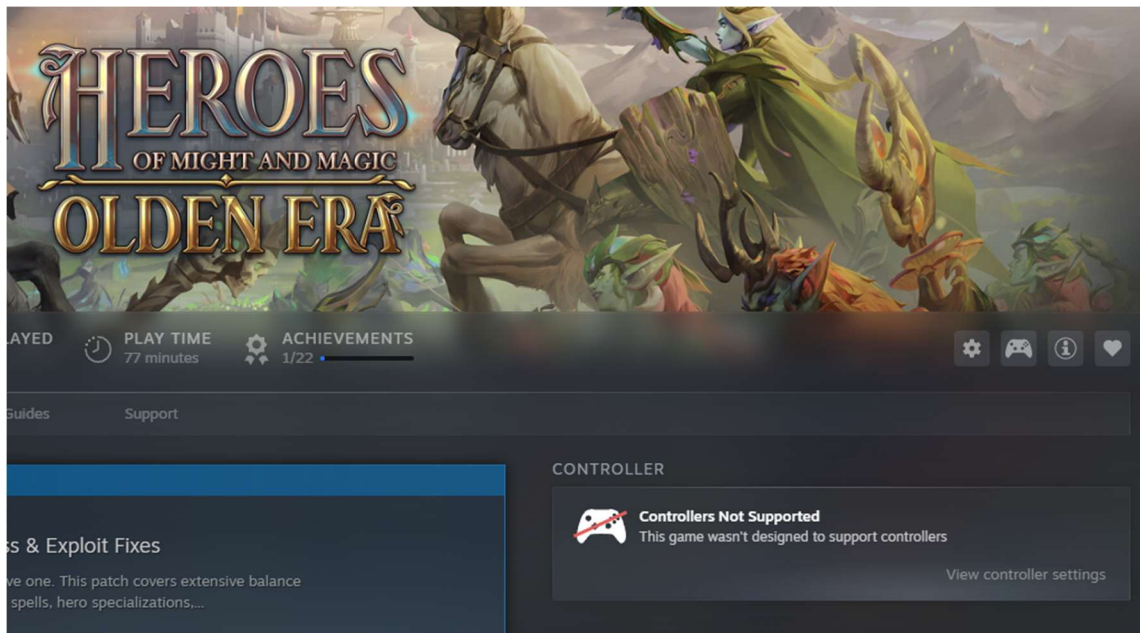
While this does cause *snapSHOT* to lose some of its uniqueness, it brings it back into an explored market (and one that is known to exist). However, it does still maintain originality with its specific story theming, split of 'present' action and memories and introduction of the combat system into a more clearly defined narrative structure (rather than being limited to mostly flavour text in between stages of a campaign).

In terms of the final target market, the audience ends up being a mix of the armchair strategists and serial role-players. Despite some of the confusion I introduced for myself, this is roughly what it was from the outset given the initial mechanical idea was for somewhat of a wargame scenario. Admittedly, it is a broader audience than what the games *snapSHOT* was inspired by have, but this is also because it expands on the core, tested market.

Platform

The choice of platform is restricted heavily by the gameplay. The control required for the combat encounters on the hex grid makes it impractical to play without keyboard and mouse peripherals. While it is technically possible to make the system controller compatible, the analogue sticks would end up acting as mouse controls for the encounters anyway. This practical need for keyboard and mouse effectively requires the target platform to be PCs.

This is also demonstrated with the release of *HOMAM: Olden Era* (franchise reboot released 30/04/26, during this project). As of the end of the project, it has only been released on Steam and does not support controller inputs (see image below) because it also encounters the same issues with UX and UI when dealing with combat on controllers.



When considering the downstream impacts of this decision, it primarily impacts the A-side of gameplay.

Discussions of Design Decisions

Simplification of combat

Compared with the source material, the combat system is simplified in a few core areas. Firstly, damage can only be dealt by units on the field; secondly, the combat order is fixed for each scenario; and, thirdly, units must act on their turn. Between these three factors, the feel of combat diverges from that of the inspiration material (HOMAM) not insignificantly.

As a consequence, for example, there is a shift away from being reliant on tactics and reactionary gameplay towards having a greater strategic focus and more wholistic plans for each combat encounter. This is both a desirable change from a narrative perspective, as it more accurately reflects the characterisation of the player character as a strategist rather than a tactician, but also from the perspective of how combat encounters are viewed.

Rather than encounters being viewed (as easily) as different starting arrangements for the same gameplay, the greater weighting on making an appropriate strategy for each encounter highlights the necessary changes in playstyle and makes each encounter feel more unique and able to stand independently.

Furthermore, the simplification makes the game more accessible for players as the number of factors that they need to track off the screen is reduced and combat becomes a bit more predictable while still maintaining some variance. This is mainly

possible as the presence of combat encounters is also controlled far more than it is in the inspiration material. In those games, there is a need for the additional complexity to maintain variance enough to keep combat replayable given how frequently combat occurs and how tactical it is in those situations. Without that same pressure, it makes more sense in the game context to keep combat more accessible and strategic.

No firearms

For a game set in a modern war, this is a bigger call to make than it may first seem. The decision to go for no firearms fundamentally changes how different aspects of the story can be written given what the characters would have available.

However, the presence of firearms would fundamentally undercut the whole combat system. If armies had access to firearms, they would almost exclusively use them as their weapons and there would not be the presence of different types of troops (and melee troops) that is needed for this kind of combat system to be viable. This meant that not having firearms was less of an option and more of a constraint placed on the game.

The downstream impacts of this constraint are mainly felt in the later acts of A-side gameplay. The guards at the prison camp have mostly melee weapons to protect themselves, raiding the armoury only gives the soldiers melee weapons, and the final escape doesn't have the same feel when the presence of sniper towers is replaced by archer towers.

It is this game feel consequence that led to the change to having 'guard patrols' outside the main camp structure over archer towers. While the towers would have been preferable from a purely mechanical perspective as they add siege effects to the breakout sequence – the archer towers don't receive the same deference as sniper towers (from some admittedly basic testing) as they feel less intimidating. This leads to players feeling the siege mechanics are more unfair as they feel like an artificial difficulty increase rather than a narrative instrument's natural conclusion – seemingly because of the skin and context.

In the end, those towers were removed based on the feedback from the focus group as the ground patrols were the solution that optimised across mechanical integrity and player feel – despite that optimisation being a lower net result than would have been liked.

Ranged units

Despite the firearms ban, there are 3 (4 if upgrades are counted) ranged units in the game: archers (and warbow archers), grenadiers, and crossbowmen. These have been the most difficult troops to try and create the stats for.

While there is a basic design principle that the units should effectively be glass cannons (fragile but deal high damage) as the basic cost benefit, this leads to the main levers for balancing being their damage and range.

The stats for the grenadiers are something I am reasonably happy with at this stage – although testing at a larger scale would likely impact that assessment. By contrast, the archers in particular keep ending up either too strong or too weak.

This is mainly a challenge because archers appear in scenarios throughout the course of the game. To make the archers feel viable in later scenarios, their damage output needs to be enough to contend with high health units that may charge them down. However, appearing also as a unit in the first scenario means that the archers must also be toned down enough to not simply dominate the early levels.

In theory, this was a problem that the upgraded warbow archers was meant to solve. However, as they are ranged units, it is very easy for them to also dominate the field if enemy units cannot reach them on the field. As such the comparative buffs they have are also compensated for with a couple of stat reductions to try and keep them balanced. This in turn means that they are not suited for all scenarios as they, at least significantly enough as to affect the encounter design, play differently.

With significantly more testing time, the likely outcome would be to reduce the number of archers in each scenario with them also receiving a slight stat buff per combatant. The issue with this is that it moves the archers away from being the glass cannons they are intended to be towards more all-round troops which would require far more data to make that call on.

The decision as of writing, however, is to leave them slightly on the strong side of the equation. From a game feel perspective, it is more detrimental to have a unit that players think is objectively weak compared to a slightly strong unit where players want to use them.

Flat vs percentage defence

While most comparable games to *snapSHOT* use flat defence stats (value is subtracted from incoming damage), *snapSHOT* uses a percentage defence stat. This is mainly done to scale across different stages of combat encounters. While most units' stats are self-regulating as they are calculated using the number of combatants, defence does not use combatant numbers as a factor. As such, the stat must have some element of proportionality – hence the use of percentage defence.

Enemy exclusive troop types

Initially, the intention was not to have any troops exclusive to either the player or enemy faction. The thinking behind this call was that it would reduce friction in onboarding

players to the different quirks of each troop type (as they can learn the mechanics by using the troops they'll face rather than being caught off guard by the enemy) and the scenarios would come across as "fairer" (an aim targeted at improving game feel).

The call was changed later into development for two reasons. Firstly, having exclusive troop types would increase the variance possible between scenarios allowing the dynamics for each to be more precisely guided and more engaging. Secondly, the notion of "fairness" was weakening with the direction the narrative design was going; the enemy faction as characterised do not care too much as to whether all their actions are above board. As such, adding exclusive troop types to the enemy faction also fits narratively.

Custom hex tile indexing system

While there are options for addressing coordinate points on a hexagonal grid (like HECS and axial), these are not intuitively human readable. This adds significant friction to both designing and testing on the grid, particularly with grid setup.

Initially tested as an alternative candidate, the system used (all non-aligned axis positions have a unique value) was easier to use in development and was therefore adopted. Consequently, it has propagated through the design.