The Landing: Gallipoli 1915 — Recreating a historical World War I battle as a solo tabletop game

Interview with Joe Schmidt

The Landing: Gallipoli 1915 is a new table-top game published by Catastrophe Games LLC.[1] The company's motto is "Historical games made differently".[2] That, plus the fact that their new game is about a very specific and generally little-known battle of World War I,[3] got our History sense tingling.

So, we set out to interview Joe Schmidt, the author of *The Landing*, and learn more about how the game came to be. Keep reading to see all the cool behind-the-scenes stuff that we discovered.

Before we start talking games, would you mind sharing a little bit of your background with our readers? What led you to create tabletop games?

I've been playing games ever since I was a little kid. It started with games of Chess with my Dad and then turned into *Risk, Stratego, Axis & Allies, Battle Cry*, and many others. One of my favorite things to do was to take the pieces from a game to see how they would work if I mixed them with a different game. (One of my favorites was taking the pieces from *Risk* and setting them up

on the *Stratego* board with the hotels from *Monopoly*.) Looking back, I realize now that these were my baby steps into game design. I've been actively designing games for about a decade now, and made the decision in 2017 to make it my main hobby.

Your new game, *The Landing: Gallipoli 1915*, has just been released. It is described as a "narrative solitaire wargame"[4], but what exactly is that?

This game was inspired by all of the incredible primary resources that I found while I was researching the Gallipoli Campaign. The letters and stories of the veterans of the conflict are moving examples of our shared humanity. So, when I decided I wanted to design a game about the beginnings of the ANZAC campaign I wanted to make sure I shared these stories.

The Landing is my attempt at creating a wargame that tells the tragic story of the individual soldiers at Gallipoli rather than the glory of battles won or lost. Its purpose is to give the player the tools of war, but not

to honor them. To tell a story about the futility of the conflict, and the bravery of all of those who fought. To write and attempt to understand the slightest idea of the pain they experienced.

What were the main challenges when designing *The Landing*? In what ways is creating a solo experience different from designing a "regular" game?

The biggest benefit of designing a solo game is that your individual playtesting in the design process can be really exciting. I still design the games that I want to play, so working on a solo design is really exciting because I am essentially always trying to beat myself at my own game. I feel that solo games also allow for a more narrative experience, so it really allowed me to focus on creating a full experience.

In a solitaire design you have to make the player feel like they are playing against a challenging opponent. The idea here was to create a vibrant AI that would be somewhat predictable, but also create a "fog of
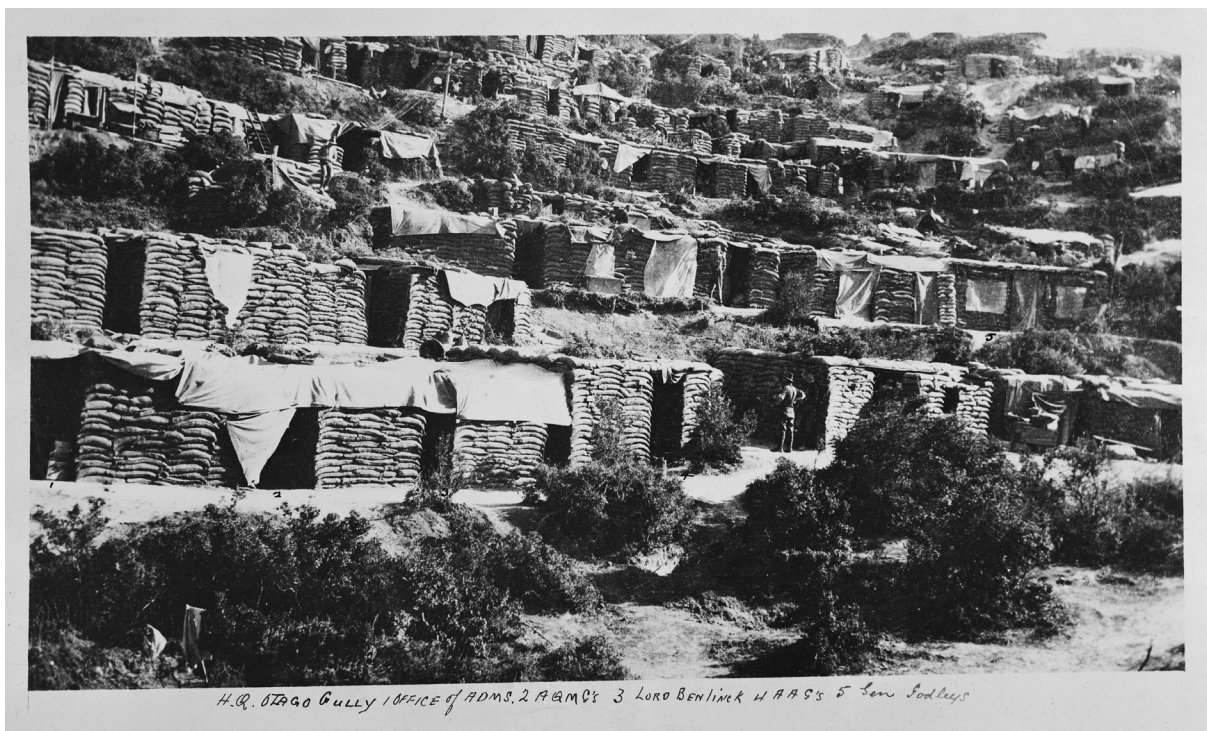
Otago Gully Headquarters; Gallipoli, November 1915. Photo by Lawrence Doubleday, from the archives of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (NMNZ CA000316/002/0011).

war" that could catch the player unawares. This mystery allows the player to tell a story. Using the mechanics of the game in the same way an artist would use paint and a canvas. Because of this the mechanics of *The Landing* are really baked into the narrative, and I am really proud of that.

The very title of the game, *The Landing: Gallipoli 1915*, already makes the theme crystal clear for many people, but it might leave most people in the dark. The Battle of Gallipoli is a little-known chapter of World War I, so would you kindly briefly describe it?

The campaign was an invasion of British, French, and Commonwealth Forces against the Ottoman Empire on the Gallipoli Peninsula in an effort to seize the forts protecting the Dardanelles and access to the Ottoman capital at Istanbul. While the campaign ended in defeat for the Triple Entente forces, its impact still resonates deeply in the history of Australia, New Zealand, and modern-day Turkey. So much so that April 25th is celebrated every year by Aussies and Kiwis as Anzac Day, and is commemorated with a ceremony at Anzac Cove in Turkey.

Why did you choose Gallipoli to be the backdrop for your game?

It all started thanks to my lovely wife, Melissa. She was invited to a photography workshop in Australia and we decided to use the opportunity to turn it into a vacation for the two of us. So, I decided that I would study and design a game to bring with me on the trip. After some searching, I came across the story of the Gallipoli Campaign and was really taken by the legend that had been built up around it.

Then I decided that I would use the free time I had while my wife was in her workshop to turn it into a research trip as well. I visited the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and spent a couple days there trying to learn as much as I could from the artifacts and resources there. Seeing the boats that landed on Anzac Cove and reading the official histories was a really moving experience, and made me realize the responsibility I had as a designer.

What is the player's goal in *The Landing*? And what do they have to do to achieve it?

The Landing tells the story of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) landing on the beaches of Gallipoli in the early morning of April 25th, 1915. You are a Lance Corporal, a Non-Commissioned Officer in the Australian Army. You must lead your fellow Aussies and work together with your Kiwi and Indian allies in the desperate fight to take and hold the heights overlooking the Dardanelles.

Over three Rounds, you will use Operations Cards and Action Dice to push your troops across the 6 Terrain Cards that make up the battlefield. Your AI opponent will fight you from better ground and with equal ferocity. You win by having the only counters on the 6th (last) Terrain Card by the end of the game. Otherwise, you descend into the horrors of trench warfare.

Can the player "rewrite history" and change the outcome of the Battle of Gallipoli?

To an extent, but yes. If you are able to take and hold the 6th Terrain Card (which represents the 3rd Ridge and objective of the operation) then you win the game. But it would have been more of a pyrrhic victory than anything else. Most scholars agree that the campaign was doomed from the start, and that was a key element of the design for me. I wanted the player to experience the futility of the campaign, and the level of difficulty really allowed me to do that.

How faithfully does the game reflect real-life events? And what number of historical facts could you bring into the game?

I feel that The Landing does a good job of abstractly reflecting the real-life events of what happened on April 25th, 1915 while also providing an enjoyable gaming experience for the player. While all of the history is there (from the locations to the unit badges), we did take some liberties. For example, because of the random nature of the Terrain Card setup it is possible for the map to be ahistorical. But even this was not without

Otago Gully Headquarters staff; Gallipoli, November 1915. Photo by Lawrence Doubleday, from the archives of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (NMNZ CA000316/002/0017).

some degree of historical accuracy.

The famed Anzac Cove was never actually meant to be the landing zone for the invasion. So, the maps and orders that the officers had for their soldiers were off from the get go. The random nature of the Terrain cards is meant to represent this. The player has an idea of where they need to go, but they don't know what stands between them and their objective. Game design is an art, but historical game design also requires thorough research and historical fidelity.

What kind of historical source material did you use while designing *The Landing*?

Whenever possible I always try to use primary sources. The two key ones for me in this design were Charles Bean's *Anzac to Amiens*[5] and the wealth of documents that have been digitized by the Australian War Memorial.[6] Then it was important for me to understand the study of the history of the campaign. Reading Peter Hart's *Gallipoli*[7] and other scholarly articles allowed me to put the primary sources in their proper place in time, and to tell the story of the ANZACs with an authentic and modern sensibility.

When preparing this sort of game, is there a golden balance between real-world History, creative license and gameplay? If so, how do you achieve it?

Yes! This all goes back to games as art. At the end of the day, I am designing a simulation. The history and lessons I implement in the design are my choice, but if I can't forge a balance between entertainment and fact then I'll either end up with an arcade version of the history or an unplayable historical journal article.

My golden rule is always to create a thesis and design around that. What is the history I want to represent, and what is the experience I want the player to enjoy. For *The Landing* the thesis was that the Gallipoli Campaign was a story of incredible bravery in the face of a near impossible task. This was founded in the history and historiography of the battle, and told via accessible and interesting mechanics.

Besides *The Landing*, are you involved in the development of other historical games?

I always try to keep myself busy with new designs! I recently worked on a game about Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Rider's charge up San Juan Hill called *Kettle Hill*.[8] It shares a lot of the mechanics we refined in The Landing, and it was a great opportunity to talk about the impact that the Buffalo Soldiers had on this famous battle. It's currently in development, and should be published by Catastrophe Games sometime next year.

There are many games out there, tabletop or otherwise, based on real historic events. Do you believe game designers have a responsibility when representing history in their games?

The greatest responsibility a historical game designer has is their fidelity to the subject matter. History is the story of our shared humanity, and the way we tell that story resonates loudly. So, when a designer chooses to use history as their background, I believe it is their responsibility to do so thoughtfully. This was something I thought about a lot when I was designing *The Landing*.

1914-15 Star medal awarded to Private Frederick J. Verney of the Samoan Advance Party; maker unknown, England, 1916–1920. From the collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (NMNZ NU006147); CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Do you think you will pick the interest of some players in learning more about Gallipoli and World War I? And if you do, could you recommend them some references about it?

The best place to start is the Australian War Memorial's digital archives.[9] It gives you access to thousands of letters, journals, reports, and photos from the Gallipoli Campaign. And, it is all free! You can spend hours upon hours just looking through their website, and all from the comfort of home. And if you ever find yourself in Canberra, make sure to visit it. It is a trip I'll never forget.

I'd also highly suggest *Gallipoli: A Ridge Too Far*.[10] Edited by Ashley Ekins, this is a collection of the works of historians from seven of the countries that participated in the fighting at Gallipoli. I'd also highly recommend Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli*[11] and the *Gallipoli* miniseries[12] done by Australia's Nine Network. Both are really well done,

Short Magazine Lee-Enfield Rifle Mk III* (typically abbreviated SMLE); BSA, England, 1915. This bolt-action rifle was the standard British infantry rifle during World War I. From the collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (NMNZ DM000426); gift of the New Zealand Army, 1964; CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

and serve as an excellent visual recreation of the campaign.

ABOUT THE TEAM

Joe Schmidt is a dad, husband, and board game designer from Berkeley, California. Joe can be reached via Twitter at @josephnschmidt. The team over at **Catastrophe Games** is led by Tim Densham, Aiden Brooks served as the lead developer on *The Landing*, and Grace Densham was the artist for the game. You can find out more about them and their games at their website, catastrophegames.net.

NOTES

[1] https://www.catastrophegames.net/products/the-landing-gallipoli-1915

[2] https://www.catastrophegames.net/

[3] On April 25th, 1915, the forces of the British Empire (mostly the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, or ANZAC) landed at the Gallipoli Peninsula. There, they fought against the Ottoman Turkish forces and ultimately lost.

[4] https://www.boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/313876/landing-gallipoli-1915

[5] Bean, C.E.W. (1946) Anzac to Amiens: A Shorter History of the Australian Fighting Services in the Great War. Australian War Memorial, Campbell.

[6] https://www.awm.gov.au/

[7] Hart, P. (2011) Gallipoli. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[8] https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/310766/kettle-hill

[9] https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/official-histories-rolls-unit-diaries

[10] Ekins, A. (2013) Gallipoli: A Ridge Too Far. Exisle Publishing, Wollombi.

[11] 1981. Associated R&R Films.

[12] 2015. Nine Network. 7 episodes.