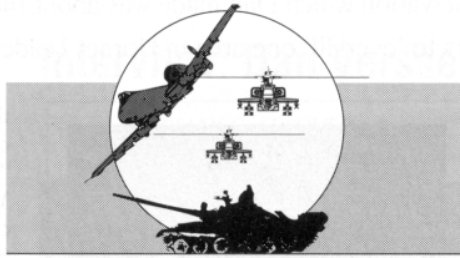


DESIGNER'S NOTEBOOK

BY DAN VERSSEN



GAME HISTORY

Gene Billingsley first presented the idea of designing *Thunderbolt+Apache Leader (TAL)* to me in December of 1990. At that time we were finishing up work on the first game in the *Leader* series, *Hornet Leader (HL)*. By February of 1991, I had put together the first prototype of *Thunderbolt*. The prototype involved moving the aircraft on a stand around a hex grid, and a fair amount of "flight mechanic" rules to fly the aircraft. Gene's reaction was somewhat along the lines of "Hmm. I don't know about this approach..."



By May of 1991, I had thrown away the first version and created a new prototype. This version was based around the idea of flying the aircraft over a 10 x 10 grid of squares. The enemy targets were then placed within the squares. The A-10s were limited to performing *Attack* vertical, horizontal, or diagonal path. AH-64s were free to move from any square to any square. Gene's comment was "I like this one better, but..."

Sometime during the summer of 1991, I thought of the idea of using cards to represent terrain. The idea of having a separate Air-to-Air Combat Area (like *Hornet Leader*) was also thrown out. The first version of the game to use Terrain cards left a fair amount to be desired. There were only four Terrain cards. Combat was controlled each turn by a *Combat Situation* die roll. This die roll would indicate the Situation in each quadrant. The Situation then dictated which aircraft were in a position to attack or be attacked. The overall result was aircraft being required to *hover* in the same card turn-after-turn waiting for a favorable die roll, which would allow your aircraft to attack. Gene's comment was, "Well..."

By late summer I had expanded the Terrain cards to ten and had removed the *Combat Situation* die roll idea. At that time, the Display sheet had randomly arranged areas to hold the Terrain cards. The areas were connected with movement lines to indicate where an aircraft could fly from turn to turn. At the time, Terrain cards depicted different types of terrain: Clear, Forest, Hills. There was also a system to randomly move the enemy targets around the Terrain cards. Gene's comment was "It's coming along..."

By October of 1991 the game had pretty much evolved to its current form. The Terrain cards were arranged in an organized fashion. It took a few late nights to come up with the *Obstructed Edge* idea for the Terrain cards, and how to explain it. A major effort was also made to cut down on the number of modifiers. It was at this time that Gene and I decided to add the strategic element to the game.

The Sector Map adds a whole new level to the game. In *HL*, the conditions under which a Mission is flown is dictated by the Mission Briefing cards. Overall, the Mission Briefing system contains a balanced assortment of Missions. Some Missions are easy, while others are difficult. The player, however, was never given any control over the basic Mission parameters. *TAL*'s strategic system gives the player control over the basic Mission parameters. A player is given free rein over which aircraft are sent against which enemy Battalions, and what type of munitions they have to fight with once they get there.

THE LESSONS OF HORNET LEADER

First of all, for those fans of *HL*, don't be misled into thinking of this as a "*TAL* is a better game" point of view, because it isn't intended that way. But, it would also be a mistake to think that Gene and I could have put as much work into *HL* as we did, and not have learned something along the way.

One point mentioned in feedback by players was the large quantity of die roll modifiers included in *HL*. As a result, *TAL* contains a drastically reduced number of die roll modifiers.



An example of this is the chit-draw system for taking damage. The system could have been presented as a

large table with a long list of modifiers. I designed the chit-draw system in order to reduce table referencing and modifier adding. In my opinion, the chit-draw system is not only a simpler system, but also a more flavorful system. Drawing 2 Hit counters and having both be negated by "AH-64" has a much better feel of dodging enemy fire or having it glance off the armor, than a "-2 to be Hit" die roll modifier could ever accomplish.

One aspect of die rolling that we did learn was, when a die roll is required, keep the results consistent. In *HL*, a high die roll may be good for the player on one table and harmful on another. In *TAL*, high die rolls are always good for the player.

PLAYER PERSPECTIVE

Player Perspective is another way of saying, "from who's eyes is the player viewing the game from". While designing *TAL* the idea came to me that the player's perspective should evenly flow from one point of view to another. It also seemed important that once in a new point of view, the player should loiter there for a fair amount of time before moving to a new perspective. If a player is making tactical decisions one second, don't make him look at the strategic picture the next.

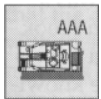
Here's how this all translates to *TAL*...

At the start of a Day, the player is the air base commander. His considerations

Thunderbolt + Apache Leader

must take into account the advancing enemy Battalions, the range to each, their threat capabilities, his own aircraft, support forces, supply status, Pilot status, friendly ground forces, and the overall goals of the campaign. A player might spend five-to-fifteen minutes looking through the enemy Battalion cards, his own aircraft readiness status, his Air Base Points, etc.

The player then shifts his point-of-view to being the squadron commander. It is now his job to assign Pilots and Aircraft to specific enemy Battalions. In doing this, the player must consider the skills of his own people, and the capabilities of each Battalion to be engaged. This step may take five-to-ten minutes.



The player then resolves the Secondary Mission. At this time the player is the squadron commander back

at the base listening to radio traffic as his people engage the enemy. Once the decisions have been made concerning the Pilots and Aircraft to fly the Secondary Mission, the player is not given any

say as to how they are tactically resolved. The modifiers are calculated, the dice are rolled, and the Hit chits are drawn. For me, this has a good feel. While back at the base you, the commander, may hear that a AAA Vehicle Popped-Up under *Rebel* and blew him away (i.e. You rolled a '1' for *Rebel* when determining "Effect on Friendly Aircraft", and drew a *Killed/Crash Serious Hit counter*), but there isn't anything you can do about it. You may also "see" *Viper* limping home with smoke pouring out of one engine as she struggles to safely land (i.e. You drew an "Engine" Hit counter for her Effect). But again, there isn't anything you, the squadron commander, can do besides watch from the control tower and hope she makes it. Resolving the Secondary Mission may take five minutes.

The player's point of view then shifts to the briefing room. He studies the Primary Target card and the types of threats his people are going to face. At this time the player is making generalized tactical decisions, such as: how aggressively his aircraft will maneuver once at the target, what types of enemy units to watch out for, will his aircraft hang in the battle if enemy aircraft arrive, are they happy with reducing the

enemy to half, or do they keep pounding until the enemy is eliminated, etc. While thinking about all this, the player is arming his aircraft with the specific munitions required for the Mission. This planning step may take five minutes.

During the Target-Bound Mission Event phase, the player is half-way between a commander and a pilot. The player is given a feel for being in combat and for some combat decisions (i.e. Should his aircraft expend munitions to neutralize a AAA Site encountered along the way, or should they let it take some shots on the way by and hope it misses).

The player then finds himself over the enemy forces. Suddenly, he's flooded with tactical considerations: threat evaluation, terrain obstructions, which obstructions can be taken advantage of, which are detrimental, force allocation, the ever increasing threat of enemy air interdiction, loiter time winding down, friendly aircraft taking damage, munitions running low, gotta act fast...

During the Home-Bound Mission Event phase, the process starts to reverse itself. The player is taken half-way out of the cockpit.

While conducting Pilot readiness Checks, and Returning Damaged checks, the player is once again the squadron commander, talking to his people to get a feel for their status and receiving reports from the ground crews.

The strategic phase places the player once more in the role of air base commander. Which is where he starts the next Day.

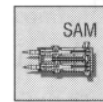
THE STORY OF PEOPLE



HL and *TAL* include something that very few other games do. They give each Pilot a name and

individual skills. When work began on *HL*, Gene made it clear that the game was to cover not only the mechanics of air-to-air and air-to-ground combat, but also the human side of commanding a squadron. At the time, I didn't think it very important one way or the other. Looking back, I think the inclusion of Pilot cards is a major reason for the success of the two games.

Think about it. There are a large number of "combat" books and films which cover everything from historical ancient battles to fictional future battles. The books and films which are the most successful are the ones which present believable characters that the reader (or viewer) grows to care about. I think that same concept carries over to games. Games which do not have the leaders and their subordinates represented in some tangible way will at best be interesting studies of equipment interaction, but they will never contain drama.



This was all brought to my attention while at game conventions. While talking about a particularly success

ful or unsuccessful Mission, players talked about the game from their Pilot's point of view. They would not say, "...and then two *Hornets* broke off from air-to-ground and went air-to-air, both engaged the *MiGs* and downed one each, saving the guys hitting the target..." They would say, "...and then *Cowboy* and *Lightning* broke off from air-to-ground and went air-to-air. I would normally have had *Cowboy* slide into a Wingman position, but he had been doing well in air combat that Campaign, so I put him up front and let him take his best shot..."

The conclusion that I've come to is that although people may like to compare the relative merits of different aircraft, missiles, bombs, etc. A good story of a heroic leader and his men waging desperate battles, will be remembered for far longer.

CONCLUSION

I am very happy with the game's final form. The main reason *TAL* evolved to the point that it did was solely due to Gene "The Rock Thrower" Billingsley. Rodger MacGowan and Holly Johnson are two of the main reasons for the game's final quality. Rodger is responsible for producing an incredible package and all the game components in record breaking time. Holly was the main playtester for all, yes *all*, of the game's versions. Special thanks also goes to Mike Anderson for helping out with the research and playtesting.

