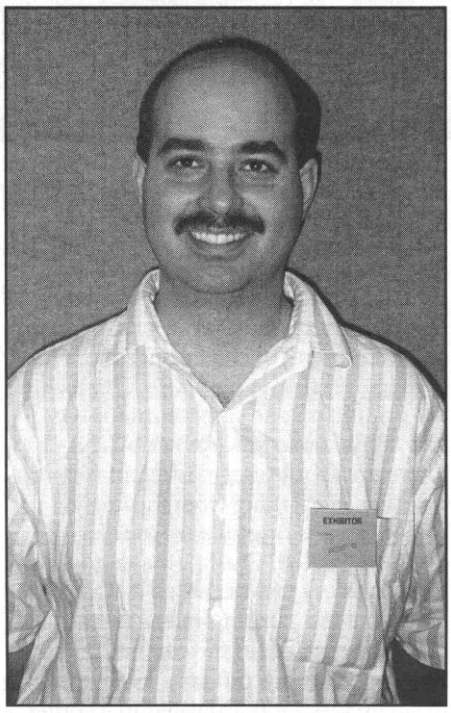
Interview: Dan Verssen

BY JAY C. SELOVER

In the course of preparing an article on *Thunderbolt/Apache Leader (TAL),* I had the opportunity to spend an evening chatting with Dan Verssen, designer, and Holly Johnson, lead playtester, about *TAL* and *Hornet Leader (HL).* As it turned out, I received a copy of *TAL* in order to do the article before Dan had even seen a copy of the final product, and I had the pleasure of showing him how his design looks "in final production". Dan started playing wargames in high school, and his design credits include *Modern Naval Battles* (3W, 1989), *Star Force Terra* (3W, 1991), *Hornet Leader* (GMT, 1991), and *Thunderbolt I Apache Leader* (GMT,1992). *Modern Naval Battles* and *Hornet Leader* are *Charles S. Roberts Award* winners.

I didn't want our conversation to preempt any *Designer's Notes* Dan was writing on ***TAL*** for this issue, so I steered towards some less common questions. I couldn't, however, resist asking right off how one can maximize the chance of winning; especially against "Good" or "Elite" enemy troops. Of course, that question didn't elicit a single, simple answer. Dan did say that he has seen almost as many "styles" as he has seen players of ***TAL;*** it really is a game that



allows you to explore widely variable strategies in play. Dan did say that *he* tends to concentrate his thinking on the primary strike. His first decision for each "day" of play is to plan out the target for the primary strike and the forces best suited to attack that target. Dan likes to plan the primary strike based on where his pilots' skills match up best with the likely target types of the intended target. When I mentioned that I already have developed an aversion to going after SAM-heavy targets in a primary strike and that I like to choose a primary target which is likely to be heavy in trucks and infantry, Holly offered that her feelings were completely different. In her extensive experience, she has grown most fond of the standoff weapons (Hellfires and Mavericks) — she hates going after infantry in a primary strike (infantry is tough to hit if it goes "to cover" and you can't use standoff weapons against infantry at all; you have to fly over them and hit them with cannon fire or, preferably, Rockeye cluster munitions).

Another interesting difference was that I tend to plan my secondary strike before the primary, working to keep my force strength at just the right level to get the odds I've decided I want (what we used to call "factor counting"). I then take the other forces I can afford, and use them for the primary strike. My thinking has always been that since I have personal control over all of the actions in the primary strike, I can more easily adjust in that area if the attack forces are not best suited to the targets; while it would be a waste to miss a die roll modifier on the secondary strike by a small fraction. Dan plans both the primary and secondary s trikes together; it's just as important to him to get the right mix of pilots and aircraft for the primary target as it is to get the odds on the secondary strike. Dan said that he often uses a "limited" secondary strike, attacking at only 1:2 in order to get a 50% chance of reducing an enemy battalion by one step.

I asked Dan about the *Special Conditions* and *Mission Events* in *TAL* (which are handled very much as in HL). The die rolls needed to trigger these make them less likely to occur in *TAL* than they were in *HL.* I wondered if that had been a conscious design decision, and Dan indicated that it had. He said that this was a conscious choice on his part, he wanted to reduce somewhat the chances that events outside the player's control would significantly affect his chance of success. Explained to me that way, I found it hard to disagree. I must admit, though, that I still enjoy drawing those cards, crossing my fingers and hoping for an "F-lll Strike", but usually pulling a "Major Enemy Offensive" instead.
On a lighter note, I asked Dan who came up with the names of the pilots and crews in *TAL.* Seeing *Laser* and *Nitro* show up in *Apache* cockpits made me wonder if Dan was an *American Gladiators* TV fan. No, it turns out, the names have been something of a group effort. Dan proposed many originally, Game Developer Gene Billingsley and Art Director Rodger MacGowan made suggestions, Dan made counter suggestions, it sounded to me like this might have been the most contentuous aspect of designing the game. Dan says that the *Montana/Nitro* crew was his. He had

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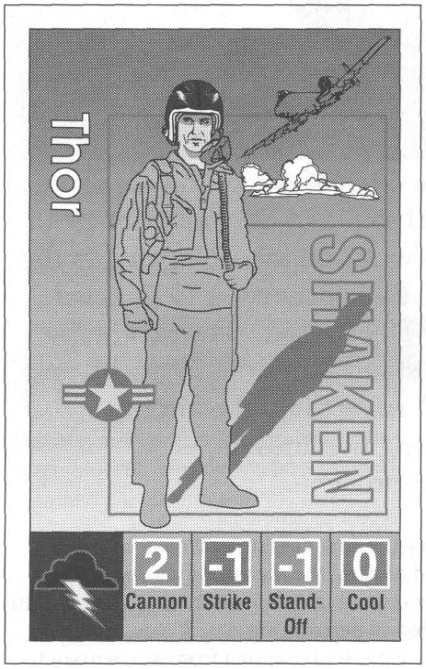
originally suggested "somebody" and *Nitro* (he doesn't remember the original pilot's name). Gene came back with *Ripper/Nitro,* and Dan finally won out when he thought of football star Joe Montana. Dan also lays claim to the *Shadow/Laser* team, but allows that Rodger came up with the *Rock/Mac* team. Even veteran hobbyist Richard DeBaun gets a mini-credit from Dan for his contribution of *Daddy-O.*

During our discussion of the actual designing of the game components, Dan indicated that starting with *HL* and continuing with *TAL,* Rodger MacGowan did *all* of the graphic design and development of the game components. The artwork was done entirely on the computer (Dan points out that these are the first boxed wargames to have *all* of the component design and artwork created on the computer). Each card in *TAL* consumes 0.5 - 1.0 Megabyte of computer memory for storage. And the Mission Display takes over 3.0 Megabytes. Apparently, there was a significant design analysis curve getting the system ironed out with *HL,* since Dan estimates that Rodger got through the graphic design and development work, plus pre-press production for *TAL* in about two-thirds the time needed for *HL.*

Speaking of *Hornet Leader,* I asked Dan to comment on that game as well; what has he seen so far in watching people play which surprises him. Two things came up - failure to consider "multi-tasking" (as Dan phrased it), and overkill in certain areas. On the first point, Dan has always felt that there is value in considering an F-18 armed for both air-to-air and air-to-ground combat; but he very seldom observes players considering this option. As Dan explained it, there are a couple of ways to consider this option. If a pair of *Hornets* is carrying long range weapons (HARMs, Mavericks, or Harpoons), the team can launch them at the target during one of the first two steps in combat, and the *Hornets* can then transit up to the air-to-air combat box, where they can use wingtip Sidewinders during a later step. Conversely, a pair of *Hornets* could also be armed with a mixture of Sparrows and air-to-ground weapons if there is a chance of a heavy *MiG* threat. In this



scenario, that pair of *Hornets* is in air-to-air combat during Step One of combat. Hopefully, the extra firepower will make the air-to-air situation more secure for the later steps, and that one "multi-tasked" pair of *Hornets* can then head down to an Approach Box for the later steps. Dan's observation is that players tend to lock in on one roll only for each pair of *Hornets;* if they decide early on that they will use eight F-18s on a mission and that each of air-to-air and air-to-ground combat will get four, then the planes get loaded in line with that scenario without much consideration of other options.

The other observation which Dan made was about the tendency of players to "overkill" one area in *Hornet Leader.* There are three distinct "elements" in a mission; air cover, SAM and AAA suppression, and destroying the target. Dan said that almost everyone he has watched play tends to over-emphasize one of these areas and load the mission to "overkill" that area without even realizing it. Which area will be over-emphasized doesn't seem to follow any trends; about one third of players load more air-to-air *Hornets* than they are really likely to need, about one third load up heavy with HARMs, and about one third sacrifice the other ordnance to carry bombs and Mavericks. Of course, "sacrifice" is the operative word here. You never have the luxury in *HL* of carrying all that you want of the munitions you want, and if you carry any more than you really need of one type, the chances are very good that you can't carry enough of another type to do the job!

As a final note, I wondered what is on the horizon for the *Air Leader Series.* Dan is already working on a couple of new twists. He has been working on a *Hornet Leader* expansion entitled *Danger Zone* (see *In the Pipeline* in this issue). *Danger Zone* will include the addition of other Navy attack aircraft. Dan is looking to add F14 *Tomcats* and/or A6 *Intruders.* These would be fully represented by aircraft and crew cards, and would be added to the *Hornet Leader* system in a yet-to-be-determined manner. Another intriguing possibility is to link the various missions in a campaign so that your success (or failure) on a mission influences the conditions for your next mission. As an example, Dan explained, let's say that you fly a mission against a large airfield. If you score a *complete success,* this might mean that you could reduce the *MiG* cover for your next mission by one level (since there are fewer enemy planes around after your success against the airfield). By the same token, a *complete failure* might mean that you must bump up the enemy air cover by one level for your next mission! That one mission (the airfield) has a fairly distinct immediate effect; there could well be more subtle effects due to success or failure against other targets like atomic facilities or chemical plants. Effects could be felt immediately on the following mission or they could build-up gradually. And the effects could be designed to impact almost all of the parameters used in the game; air defenses, SAM defenses, target hits required, Special Condition or Mission Events cards, munitions levels, *Hornet* and pilot availability, or many others. With these possibilities to look forward to, I will be eagerly awaiting this design team's next product!