

On the Bounce

The Design Process

by Jim Wallman

I offered a series of game ideas to Dave Nilsson a few months ago, based on games I was pretty sure I could put on, with the instruction that he could use them to fit into slots in the programme as the need arose. The first of the list that Dave chose was a science fiction hovertanks game idea, called 'On The Bounce'.

I wrote a set of rules by this name about 10 years ago, and thought, therefore, that this would be an easy game to do.

That original game was based very closely on a WW2 tank command and control game I called 'Hell on Wheels' (HoW) - (and which I may dust off for another outing sometime). I thought the idea would work as well for a science fiction environment as it has for an historical one.

Well, that was the idea anyway. Once I'd taken another look at the original 'On the Bounce' rules it became clear that the original approach might not be what I needed.

Lets look first at the original idea (lets call the rules OTB-1). In OTB-1, each player controlled a group of 3-5 hovertanks. The main difference between hovertanks and Sherman tanks being that hovertanks are less terrain-dependent for their movement (i.e. they don't have trouble with hedges, rivers or streams or soft ground).

The player would have his command hovertank, and 2-4 non player hovertanks (NPH) which are moved by the umpire, and who react in accordance with an NPH reaction table.

The idea is that the player issues orders (written on an order sheet) which represent his radio orders to the other hovertank crew. The NPHs then attempt to obey those (as the umpire understands them). When the unit comes under fire, each NPH rolls and consults a table to determine their reaction. The effect of this is that a unit of 4 hovertanks is easy to control when moving forward with no problems, but once the firing starts it is very hard to control them, as each NPH might react differently.

On top of this each NPH crew member has different characteristics, so that some NPHs have good drivers, some good gunners, some good commanders and so on.

Players then have to, typically, fight a battle against a pre-programmed enemy (its easier to run with just one side) and wrestle with their own unit to get it to do what they want.

All of this would work - since it is unchanged, in principle, from the WW2 game that I mentioned, and which has been tested on a number of occasions. But. I just can't leave well alone.

Inevitably, I've been giving the idea some more thought, and I think now that a simple 'find tank and replace with hovertank' approach to the game is a bit pointless. If I want to play the command and control of tanks game, I'll put the original 'Hell on Wheels' which is just the same, and makes more sense because it was *designed as a WW2 tanks game*.

So what was I going to do for 'On The Bounce 2' (OTB-2)

I was aware that Jonathan's long awaited Mexican game was planned for the same day. This would take some time to play and involve the majority of those present, so I also had to have a game that was going to be easy to pick up, and only take about 2 hours to set up and play, and could well involve 'spare' players as people turned up late or drifted into (or out of the game). I have a small collection of 1/300-ish scale SF tank models - used as robot tanks in Berserker - so the scale was obvious. A complex game system was out (although HoW isn't actually complex), since I wanted folk to be able to understand it quickly.

What are my options?

1. Map Game - This would be easy to set up - I have loads of maps. However, since I wanted some tactical detail, I feel the level of a map game is a little too distant from the game I wanted, although it might be an idea for a follow-on.
2. Committee Game - A committee game about Hovertank design. Well I did run a similar game on designing the Future MBT for Europe a few years back, so I guess this has already been done. Possible future committee game for writing Hovertank Doctrine perhaps?
3. Dialogue Game - A possibility, but I feel dialogue games require too much consensus about what is or is not possible. In an unfamiliar SF type environment, the possibilities are just too open ended to get a decent story line going.
4. Role Playing Game - again a possibility - 'A Day in the Life of a Hovertank Crew' - but would take too much preparation, and involve too few people (remember that it has to take an open ended number of people).
5. Megagame: Don't be silly. Surely no-one could do an SF megagame about tanks?.....(or can they?.....bwah ha ha ha)
6. Toy Soldier/Models Game - Hurrah. This has it all, ease of use, clear representation of what is going on, entertaining - plus people have the opportunity to admire my model painting techniques. Disadvantage, requires setting up a terrain, and assumes I have suitable models (which I do).

There are probably some other options, but I can't think of them right now.

Ok, so I was going for a Toy Soldier game right from the start, but I can at least say I *considered* the others, can't I?

I think the one player per unit idea is still workable, but before I get too far into the rules, I have to decide what sort of technology I want to have, and what sort of rationale there is for the combat.

With SF games, this thinking process is generally in reverse to the approach to an historical game. In the historical game you find out what the style of fighting and the doctrine actually was and then fit the rules to it. In an SF game you can decide the style of fighting and tactics you want, and write the rules to encourage it. (At least that's what I always do).

What type of battles do I want?

1. Fairly fluid and mobile.
2. Quickly resolved.
3. Requiring a mixture of weapons platforms to achieve success.
4. Some command and control and/or logistics problems.

What are the rules implications for this:

1. Mobility - few penalties for moving and firing. Not much to be gained by hiding or digging in.
2. Speed. Weapons fairly lethal. Record keeping minimal or absent. 'One hit kills' style.
3. Provide a mixture of types. The obvious mixture would be weapons that are an equivalent tanks, infantry, aircraft and artillery.
4. Make orders difficult to issue or impose command delays. Make ammunition consumption quite quick to encourage resupply (although probably not worth trying in a short game like the one I envisage).

So, some troop types:

Hovertank - fast, well armoured combat vehicles mounting 'smart' anti-hovertank missile launchers, gatling cannon and an array of clever ECM and other whizzy stuff (I'll make something up later, as needed). Moves using ground effect system, and can cross most terrain and 'hop' vertical obstacles up to 4 metres high (with a short run-up). (= the equivalent of a Main Battle Tank).

HoverCar - very fast, lightly armoured combat vehicles with a couple of smart missiles and a gatling cannon. (= armoured car or light tank).

HoverBus - very fast armoured troop carrier, with gatling cannon (= MICV)

HoverGun - lightly armoured vehicle with a long range Gun on it. (= SPG)

HoverRLS - lightly armoured vehicle with long range rocket launcher on it. (= MLRS)

Atmosphere Interdiction Remote (AIR) = a remotely piloted combat aircraft. Effectively a sort of super-Harrier, controlled from a bunker or a ship. Can fly supersonic or hover. Carries a variety of weapons. Tends to have a short loiter-time though, and vulnerable to SAM fire.

Combat Infantry - men (and women, of course) in advanced combat armour, with environmental protection and all sorts of whizzy stuff. (= grunts). These would be organised into squads of 4 and would carry a selection of weapons, including smart missiles (to KO tanks), directed energy weapons (DEW) and clever ECM and targeting devices.

Old Kit - recognisable 'modern' weapons such as Challenger IV (UK), the Powell Tank (USA) and the Tiger 3 (WEU) are still in use, although not very effective against the Hovertank.

Combat Assumptions

The assumptions I then build into the rules (none of this is spectacular or original) are:

- a. Infantry have considerable firepower and can take on Hovertanks at close range, but lack mobility on their own. Due to the dispersed target infantry represent, they can benefit from cover or close terrain (such as built up areas).
- b. The Hovertank's main adversary is another Hovertank.
- c. Long range artillery is useful where a stationary target has been identified, but is less useful against moving targets.
- d. AIR has very powerful short-term striking power, but tend not to hang about, and are dependent on there being weak SAM AA defences.

Scenarios

It is also relevant, and quite important, to consider the type of warfare I would envisage, since this informs the tactical doctrine and the mix of forces. Obviously, you don't have to agree with my analysis of the future world - it just suits the game I want to do. As Dave Boundy said 'this is not a simulation' (well actually this is a simulation, its a simulation of my universe, as I've described it).

The time is around the middle of the next century. There are two worlds - the wealthy northern nations (brought closer together by the binding force of capitalism and multinational corporatism) - and the rest (the poorer, southern hemisphere).

With massive water shortages in Africa and Asia, immigration pressure is growing on the North (and a few other wealthy nations). From the European point of view, the Mediterranean has become the Front Line, and there is

continual conflict in Southern Europe as externally-inspired terrorism and insurgency increases. The sponsor nations of the South find terrorism a cheap and effective means of putting pressure on the North. The North responds increasingly by punitive expeditions into North Africa and the Middle East (where a much reduced Israel is holding on grimly to a Northern way of life as a island of wealth in a sea of envious neighbours).

Warfare is therefore mostly of the 'colonial' type. High tech armies are inserted (usually from the sea) to achieve specific missions, and then usually pulled out again. Northern forces place a considerable emphasis on not leaving anyone behind (the PR gain to the enemy would be too great) and on building a reputation for being able to hit hard wherever they want. The Hovertank is, of course, a very expensive piece of technology that poorer nations find hard to emulate, and it is ideal for seaborne assault (they just drive over the sea and onto the land). It is also a symbol of Northern power.

I think you can see the sort of scenario that develops naturally from this. Personally I think its a bit more interesting that a stand up toe-toe slugging match between 'equal' opponents. The Southern armies will have old fashioned infantry, perhaps some old MBTs (slow, poor armour, gun armed, tracked) and perhaps some aircraft. The North have fantastic new sleek, evilly beweaponed machines of destruction. But the North must lose nothing, whereas the South tend to be indifferent to losses. The punitive raid approach also gives a reason for small forces and quick actions (hence limiting the action to the number of models I have).

Lets see how it goes.