

How to Run a PBEM TCS Game

The following comments/ideas/suggestions are based on two PBEM Tactical Combat Series games I ran (one of Matanikau and the main one a GD '40 game). I present them here to give you ideas on how you might run a TCS game PBEM. The field is wide open here, and has been largely unexplored I think, so I'm sure ideas will become better refined (and just plain better) as more people run TCS games pbem.

Battalion Approach

A typical TCS turn has a great deal of player interaction, which means that it is virtually impossible to run a TCS game PBEM according to the rules. The first game I ran of Matanikau I had players each control a battalion and give me specific if-then instructions on when to perform overwatch fire, what order to move units etc. This was very complicated and hard on me, because the players never felt like they had full control of their troops, even though they were trying to exercise it.

The solution I used in the GD '40 game was to put the players in the role of a battalion commander and not allow them to manage units individually (unless they really wanted to, but often it only hurt them). Instead of being a typical game where players have full control of their units, it was much more like a Tactical Decision Game where players outline in text their proposed actions rather than speaking in terms of counters, hexes and factors. My role was to inform the player of what they detected and actually push the counters and roll the dice based on their instructions.

Number of Players

The number of players depends on a few things. The Matanikau game had 4 players, each controlling a battalion. The GD '40 game had about 12 players at any one time, one overall commander each, and 5 battalion commanders, who controlled anywhere from a few companies to two battalions. The number of players should depend on the size of the game and how abstractly it is being run. The more abstract the players control, the more units they should probably have. More players means more communication confusion and randomness, which is great (simulating actual warfare better) but can also mean more work for the umpire. I thought 12 was a good number, but wouldn't want to go any more than that, and could easily envision a game that went quicker, had more units per player and had 4-6 players.

Time scale

The more detailed the players' control, the lower the time scale should be. I ran Matanikau at one TCS turn per game turn (20 minute turns). I started the GD '40 game at this level, but because players didn't have too many decisions to make each turn, I moved it up to 2 TCS turns per game turn, and this worked very well. I reserved the right to slow it down if critical decisions needed to be made, which I did once. Another possibility is to begin running a turn and then contacting individual players if new decisions need to be made, but my time was such that I usually could only get one block, and didn't have the time to start running a turn, interrupt it

waiting for new instructions, then continue, so I would simply run 1 or 2 TCS turns per turn depending on the situation.

If the level of control were a bit higher (say each player controlling a regiment and giving instructions to battalions) I could see running 3 TCS turns per game turn, which would be a good speed and represent the time it would take to get info to regimental HQ and orders back down the chain of command. This might be suitable for Black Wednesday, Omaha, and Leros, the big long games.

Instructions

For the GD '40 game, players gave instruction for each company, basically where it was to move, what sort of posture to take, where to attack, how quickly to go, etc. I would sometimes allow players to place individual units, but I found in running the turns that the players were really behind the loop in terms of small unit tactics, so placing individual units was usually a bad idea. I allowed it though to teach them a lesson :-). Some players let me do most of the controlling, others gave more specific instructions, I let each player help decide what level of involvement he wanted.

Op Sheets

I allowed two routes to writing Op Sheets: either each player writes their own or the overall commander writes them for the battalion commanders. The Germans chose to let each unit write their own (Auftragstaktik) while the French commander did detailed Op Sheets for all the French forces (Befehlstaktik). The French had more success, but that was more due to the low level of involvement on the part of the German commander. Perhaps having overall commanders to all the initial op sheets if they want, and letting the players do their new op sheets during the game might be a nice solution.

Op Sheets were done in text, though the French commander had such complex plans that I made him do graphics for me. Make sure you work out what you want in Op Sheets and communicate with the players and give feedback, since understanding of what Op Sheets are varies dramatically from player to player. This is up to you, so decide what you want and then help your players understand what you expect. This will take some time and numerous e-mails. For more on Op Sheets, see the mail I sent to players on Op Sheets at the beginning of the game.

Communications

I chose to channel all communications through me, so while the players knew who was in the game, they didn't know what forces they had or even what side they were on. Each commander had a historical name, and messages were sent through me from HQ to HQ. Radio messages were allowed, sent during the turn (I'd strip addresses and forward them) but each radio message had a 1/6 chance of being intercepted by the opposing side. Carriers were also used, messages took a while to arrive (20-60 minutes usually) but were more secure. I didn't add any special rules on lost/corrupted messages.

I felt a tension between wanting to be 'realistic' and messing with the players minds, i.e. warping messages, cutting down communication, having radios malfunction etc. but also seeing the game as a GAME where players wanted to be in contact. Most players felt isolated enough as it was, even though communications were better than they would have been on the battlefield. So I have a few observations on how communications might be handled:

- If the turn-around on turns is very fast and only a few players are involved, you can probably be real strict on how much can be communicated, and develop special rules for broken radios, sending messages in the clear, etc. Perhaps a system like in the CWB would be good where commanders have a number of command points each turn which can be spent on communication, planning or control. That way when in combat you won't be sending unnecessary general updates to other players, etc. And coded radio messages would take more command points. I like this idea, but it would have put too much strain on the GD '40 game I ran.
- Use a system like I did, centralizing communications but allowing players to communicate pretty much at will within reason (I put a cap on 2-3 pg. long radio messages). It keeps the players involved, creates some confusion, and isn't too hard on the umpire.
- In a big game that focuses more on execution of plans, it might not be a bad thing to let players talk freely. This takes away a lot of the tension from playing blind and alone, but focuses on the social aspect of playing a game and talking about it, and frees the umpire from having to moderate communications. This would be best for a game with a large time scale and little direct control (say at the regimental/divisional level).

Deadlines

The GD '40 game ran at about 2 weeks per turn. The Matanikau game I did on a weekly turnaround, which left the players pretty breathless by the end :-). The more players, the longer the turnaround because important players will be out of town, in the hospital, etc. I thought 2 weeks was OK, about 10 days would be good too (I wouldn't go any longer than 2 weeks or players begin to lose interest because it's going too slow). I allowed 1 week deadlines after sending out the last turn results. It usually took me a week to find the time to run a turn, hence the 2 week turnaround. If you have enough time on your hands, you could run a turn right after the deadline, and do a clip of 7-9 days per turn. That would be great, but I didn't have the flexibility for that, since running a turn took me about 7 hours in total (5 for the game, 2 to get the orders sent out, communications catalogued, video tape made, notes taken, etc.)

Running a Turn

One of the hardest things was keeping all the Op Sheets straight. Since they were of such varying length etc. I ended up keeping a shorthand list of Op Sheets along with their weighted turns, status, etc. Expect to spend some time each turn ordering, updating and working with Op Sheets.

Running the game was like playing it solitaire, but always referring to the players instructions for guidance. Often unusual/unexpected situations would come up, and then I would roll randomly

to decide a course of action if it wasn't clear. I generally tried to run the units as smart as I could, because no one like their troops doing dumb things, though every now and then I might assign a small chance for something like that. While perhaps 'realistic' it does cut down on enjoyment of a game when your troops disobey or simply do something really boneheaded, so I tried to keep that to a minimum.

I made a video tape of the game for a replay, so at the end of each turn I taped the board and discussed the action that took place. This is really my only record of the 'blow-by-blow' and was good for me when doing the recap at the end of the game, and also for the players, who could get a copy of it and finally see what was happening. I didn't use a tripod for filming, but I would recommend doing so if you have one sitting around.

What to Report

I deliberately underreported things to the commanders to represent where their focus would have been. In the middle of combat, I gave no information about events farther away, and only limited info on adjoining units (enough to know where they were and sort of what they were doing, but not much more). Casualty counts I only gave when the players took some time to reorganize (usually a turn or so). Each battalion had a HQ unit that I made to represent the commander and his staff. If a company headed away from the battalion on a flanking move, then I didn't report much for it (only if it stopped and tried to get its radio working or send a runner back). So commanders had some motivation to keep their troops together, and stay close to the battle.

If the HQ was overrun, the player was out of action and lost control of the unit. This was motivation to keep the HQ back a ways, so I liked the tension in the decision making.

Knowing what to report is tricky sometimes, because players want as much info as they can get (of course!). So being too tight-lipped is frustrating, but being a veritable font of information goes against the limited intel. Players seemed to be pretty tense about the situation because they didn't know what was out there, and that is exactly the effect I was trying to achieve!

Hidden Units

I had to develop some rules for spotting units. I put them in the rules, but next time I may just keep them to myself and answer questions from the players as to whether there is good cover or not. I'm a big Tacops player, so I sort of internalized the way it was handled there, which I think is pretty good. I have some suggestions below.

Air/Artillery

I used separate artillery spotters, but I don't think it was worth the extra complication. Overall Commanders gave me their artillery priorities (i.e. which units had precedence) and then players made their arty requests to me and I assigned them based on the OCs priorities. This worked pretty well I thought.

With air support it was similar. OCs set basic areas and target types, and I ran the air automatically. Players could request airstrikes on certain areas, but I think they forgot about that and thus made few requests.

Keeping a history

I began with keeping records on all communications to use to create the replay, but this quickly became too overwhelming, so I stopped saving messages and instead simply forwarded them. Towards the end of the game I thought of using the Web for the replay, and then wished I had kept records of everything. I think that this site does a good job at organizing and presenting the various aspects of the game. If I could start over again, I would do web pages for each turn while it was fresh, and then keep them for my own reference during the game and have a big web site ready by the end without the 2 days it took me to do the one for the GD '40 game.

Doing the video was also key, as I didn't have to keep hex locations for all the units. If the ultimate disaster were to strike (i.e. Cat Attack or Baby Blitzkrieg) I had a pretty good record of where everything was on video. I also had maps of each turn which I used to draw the game maps for the replay. So I think the video thing worked very well and would recommend it to anyone wanting to do a replay. Still photos for exact set-ups would have been nice, but I didn't really miss them, as the web site is plenty big as it is.

Special Rules

Here are the special rules I recommend considering as a basis for PBEM TCS games:

Changes to opsheets

A) First of all, I would like opsheets to clearly indicate the boundaries between units. These should be crossed only under dire circumstances, because of the possibility of friendly fire. I will strictly enforce them, as commanders who fire into another units zones often end up with a court martial.

In order to overlap on opsheets, units must have orders in their opsheets on how to proceed. Thus if you want to pass through another unit without penalty, they must be aware that you are coming. You cannot fire into another units zone unless both opsheets specify that you are allowed to (and the area fired into should not be in the path of maneuver of the unit whose zone it is in, i.e. supporting fires only).

Passing through friendly units: When passing through a friendly unit (specified on the opsheet), only one formation may move during that turn. This means someone holds while the others pass through. This shouldn't be a big deal, but it may slow down a force for a turn or two to wait for another one to pass through.

I don't feel that I can nail everything down in this general rule, being as there are many different kinds of military 'borders' and ways of interacting. To those writing opsheets: coordinate them with general zones of operation (which your overall commander should be able to declare). I'll interact with anyone doing opsheets in order to get an acceptable one done. Thus I won't

penalize anyone for not 'guessing what I'm thinking.' I will try to leave enough flexibility while getting the spirit of zones of operation.

B) Preliminary instructions may NOT be issued to units in any sort of contact. If a unit has declared failure on an opsheet, it must first execute its failure instructions before it can execute any preliminary instructions on a new opsheet.

C) Units without orders: A unit without orders retreats after 3 turns of contact ONLY if it is significant contact (i.e. not pot-shots, say at least 1/3 the size of the force without orders). Because I'm reffing this, I can establish the necessary force. Note that it has to be perceived enemy forces, not actual hidden ones.

Spotting Units

Units are either spotted or unspotted. Unspotted units cannot be targeted for point fires or direct SFAs (though note firing on hexes without targets below). Units become spotted when they fire and an opposing unit can trace a valid LOS to them, or according to the spotting table below. Note that overwatch restrictions are in play as per TCS 3.1, so it is possible that you can spot a unit but not fire movement-based overwatch at it because of range restrictions.

Spotted markers on your units are removed at the beginning of your action phase.

Note that it is possible to fire and then become unspotted if you get the next action phase (initiative flip-flop). That could prove interesting...

COMMENT- If you are on defense in good terrain and cease firing for a turn, this represents taking up new positions, so you have to be spotted again. If you keep shooting, then you remain spotted.

Area Fires may be directed at hexes without a spotted target. Such fires are resolved at 1/2 firepower. EXCEPTION: use the rules in 11 above for units that are hiding (if we decide to keep that rule).

Spotting Range

| Infantry: | Billiard | Open | Partly Prot | Protective |
|------------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Move Mode | Unlim. | 6 | 1 | 1 |
| Fire Mode | 15 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Dug-In | 10 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| | | | | |
| Vehicles: | Billiard | Open | Partly Prot | Protective |
| Move Mode | Unlim. | Unlim. | 15 | 10 |
| Fire Mode | 15 | 15 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | | |

Note that units moving on roads can be spotted at any range, as long as a valid LOS exists.

Any AT gun than is 37mm or less is treated as infantry for spotting. Other arty is treated as vehicles.

What happens when you move into a unit that you didn't see? An automatic assault-style combat ensues, depending on the moving units. (i.e overrun, consolidate assault of assault).

SFAs

Units cannot combine for an SFA if they are from different companies. Support weapons may join any SFA that is conducted by units in their formation (so Bn weapons can support any SFA conducted by units from their Bn, etc). This encourages people to keep companies together, and makes support MGs and IGs more important because of their flexibility. Someone else suggested something like this on the net a month or two ago, but I forgot who it was. Naturally everyone can still fire on a hex; these fires are simply resolved separately. EXCEPTION: If units have a cross-fire, they may combine freely with other friendly units in an SFA without restriction.

Summary

Well, that should be enough to get you started! I found that the limited intelligence, limited communications, and Op Sheet restrictions really made for a wonderful simulation. I have never seen a game play so much like the things I read in military history. Player personalities, grudges, misunderstandings, etc. played a big role. Huge holes opened for exploitation, and opportunities were lost due to timidity. Players ended up blaming each other (to me at least :-)) and that sounds EXACTLY like the stuff I read! In all a wonderful experience for me, and I encourage some of you to try it out!

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