The Training Value of Tactical Decision Games at The Marine Corps' Basic School By 1stLt Christian D Palmer, USMC

I'm kind of hesitant to include them in a discussion of wargaming systems, since I don't know that you can really call them games. Since there's no mechanic behind them, they're really just guided discussions, and since there's no iteration, they only show a single tactical decision in a vacuum. No mechanic, no turns, not necessarily even any clear results.

Most of them just amounted to an instructor giving us a SALUTE report (note 1), followed by a two or three minute time limit to come up with a plan, then one or more students would brief their plans. After that, all of us would tear the plans apart. Obviously, there was no right answer, so it's classic free play, but, without a mechanic, the quality control for TDGs mostly depended on using instructors or moderators with combat experience.

The training value came from the questions that followed, and no matter what the plan was, both the students and instructors would question every assumption it was based on, bring up the possibilities of outcomes and responses to outcomes, and even bring up support concerns (e.g., "okay, now you've got them there, how are they going to refuel?"). Some of the best discussions of weaponeering I've ever heard have come out of relatively simple TDGs.

Another nice thing about TDGs is that when your instructors have different backgrounds, you can guarantee that their experience will bleed through into new concerns that the students have to take into consideration (e.g., comm, logistics, maintenance, etc.).

But the real beauty of the TDG is that, since there's no mechanic, just a moderator, there's nothing restricting the actions of the student (or the extent of feedback and consequences for those actions). TDGs are good, low tech free play. What's more, they're fast, cheap, and work just as well in a lecture hall as in a small group discussion. You don't even need a sand table.

The two problems with TDGs are that:

(1) They don't capture the human elements that would affect decisions at the tactical level (e.g., fatigue, fear, etc.), and

(2) The decisions don't simulate the cycle of immediate consequences that must be dealt with after making that first decision (i.e., there's no Boyd loop in a TDG [note 2]).

And admittedly, those are big problems. I've known plenty of lieutenants who were great in a TDG, but couldn't translate it into an ability to quickly and accurately perceive a real life situation in the field (regarding either capabilities or concerns), much less the abilities to quickly develop courses of action and their likely consequences, or to make rapid and circumspect decisions based on those possible consequences. And even officers who can make the leap from paper to the field and retain those abilities aren't necessarily capable of translating a rapid, circumspect decision into a coherent order and delivering it.

That said, I don't know if there's a single silver bullet wargame for free play training, but, even if TDGs aren't perfect, they definitely seem to be a key piece of the puzzle.

Notes Note 1: A SALUTE report gives a snapshot of enemy status, and consists of the enemy's Size, Activity, Location, Unit, Time observed, and Equipment.

Note 2: The Boyd Loop is the iterative decision-making cycle of Observing a situation, Orienting yourself to it, Deciding what to do, and Acting. The Boyd Loop was named for Col John Boyd, USAF, who first posted it. However, due to the names of each step (i.e., Observe, Orient, Decide, Act), the Boyd Loop is also known as an OODA Loop.