

neak Peek: TacOps

by Hartley Lesser

NOTE: Screen shots and information presented in this article are based on a pre-release version of TacOps and are subject to change before final release. This article is not a review.

I suppose one reason I haven't really derived much enjoyment from war strategy simulations is that I found the amount of time required to adequately learn all of the movement and tactical commands far outweighed any personal enjoyment from beating a usually superior foe! Seemed that no matter how much time I spent learning a game's environment, the Germans/Russians/OPFORs already knew the commands as they were either controlled by the computer or a human opponent who was quite adept at war gaming. I usually ended up either not being able to take an objective, lose an objective, or believe I had won only to learn that the time it took me to gain the objective was far over the allotted winning time frame for the action. I sort of gave up on war sims.

I'd heard about TacOps by Arsenal Publishing from some fellow gamers. They intimated that the rumors they heard regarding the product indicated that, despite it's focus on dedicated war sim's, the game had been designed to facilitate a much easier learning path than most previous war sims. Having faith in mankind, I decided to try TacOps and to apply my consumer-enjoyment test to a tactical, strategy title. Know what? TacOps is really a good title! Yep, it's definitely more for the war gamer/strategist, but the outstanding ingredient is that this title could bring those not normally considered strategists into the fold of the war gamer. The title is enormously easy to learn, thanks to a well-written tutorial and Basic Training scenario included with the game.

I played TacOps from the perspective of someone who enjoys well-written games. If I could find enjoyment in getting involved in a war sim, then I believed the title would hold promise for thousands of Mac gamers, no matter their experience level. Those who really were into tac/strats would probably even find more of a delight than I! I'm not totally ignorant of military tactics, having served in Vietnam with the Army, where the realism level was totally at ground level and in your face every day. However, I never commanded the forces you'll find at your disposal in TacOps.

One of my first concerns was that the game required a change to one of the lowest denominators on the Mac—16 colors! This certainly seemed unusual, as most games now run now at a minimum of 256 colors for more realistic and vivid screen displays. However,

the more I played the game, the more I realized that 24-bit color depth wasn't as necessary as it is in other titles. As a pure war sim, the terrain does not require enormous color depth to convey elevation or objects. Also, the hues of the game were designed to present recognizable information to the gamer, no matter if he or she was playing on a color or black-and-white Mac.

he game opens with the refrains of the Marine Hymn to set your gaming mood. The first screen enables you to select whether you wish to play in solitaire mode, against another player, or even via AppleTalk or e-mail over your favorite online service. These are great features and add additional value to the game as you can play scenarios or real-time games over various communications services.

The tutorial is a scenario called "Basic Training" which requires approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your objective is, quite simply, to clear the area of all enemy forces, if you decide to play the U.S. side of the game. Otherwise you may play the OPFOR (enemy forces) side of the game.

The on screen map relays important data to you. The ground that is lower in elevation is lighter in hue. Roads and wooded areas are easily recognizable. Inhabited areas, such as villages, are clumps of black blocks within a defined area. The area where you setup your forces is a gray rectangle which, depending upon the scenario you play, can vary greatly in size. Those areas delineated with black borders are the enemy set-up areas.

Moving around the map is pretty easy—just press the spacebar once and a hand cursor arrives on screen. Now, hold down your mouse button and move the hand cursor in the direction you wish to see. Release the mouse button and the map moves in the direction you

wished. You may also select to have coordinates and a 100 meter grid present as an overlay to your map. For those whose Mac's are equipped with an extended keyboard, your directional arrows also move the map, but in a far easier fashion .

The setup window shows you the units you have available for deployment. When you single-click the cursor on one of these units, the bottom of the screen reveals its identity as well as other pertinent information, such as other units aboard her, current terrain, and so on. You can tell you've selected the unit because the icon becomes highlighted. All you have to do is pick the area within your setup region where you wish the selected unit to be positioned. Move your cursor to that location and click once and the icon moves from the Setup window to the setup location you've requested. You can now clear the setup window from your screen as all units have been deployed. If you decide the positioning is not correct, you must now select the unit you wish to move and also press your Shift key to move it without calling up the unit orders for that icon.

t's time to start moving your icons, and that is accomplished by clicking on the unit you wish to give orders to—the order window for that unit appears on screen. Your designated unit is blinking on the screen to additionally confirm this is the unit to which orders are about to be given. Wherever you click your mouse cursor outside the staging area, you order the selected unit to that geographic location.

What's terrific about this feature of the game is that after you've given a unit specific movement orders, you may request a demo of the move itself. This enables you to see exactly how that unit will move in real-time when you are finished giving it orders. You have the chance to edit this move if it does not meet your expectations. You can erase each move singularly, or all of them at once. However, you cannot edit a move between the first and last move. Once all of your units have received (or perhaps NOT received) orders, you move into the Combat Phase of the game.

The Combat Phase is totally automatic—you cannot alter or hinder the progress of the sim at this juncture of play. This phase lasts for exactly one scale minute. Things can become fast and furious at this juncture—enemy units previously undetected may fire upon your unit.

You'll hear the sound effects of the incoming round, the explosions against your units (if there's a hit), and perhaps sub-units within your main unit (like troops riding inside a troop carrier) rapidly exiting that unit to become icons on their own.

As is revealed in the well-designed tutorial, perhaps one of your motorized units is in serious trouble. Once the Combat Phase is over, you receive the Unit Orders window. Retreat may be on your mind, but only the kind of withdrawal to a more secure area that can be concealed by something like, oh, smoke grenades. Why, sure enough, in the Unit Orders window under Delayed Orders Controls, there are the initials "SG" for smoke grenade. Perhaps you should fire those, then find cover, such as in a low ground area protected by high ground regions.

If you wish to know exactly what capabilities a specific unit possesses, you select the icon with your cursor and then click on the Unit Info button in the Unit Orders window. You receive complete Unit Info in another window. You can even request a photo of that unit to enhance your military edification. In my case, I wanted to see exactly what an M-1 tank looked like and requested that photo.

Information about the current unit, such as at what distance it might be identified and fired upon by an enemy, all help you to consider various tactics. Additionally, you'll learn about such critical matters as installed armor protection, weapons capabilities, number of personnel, and the like. If a specific item requires additional study, the button to the right of the identified object calls up even more info, as well as a photo if you wish. In the case of the 7.62mm Machine Gun, which I wanted more info on, I received the text data without problem. But when I clicked on "Photo" I was informed there was no photo of the item. If this were the case in the actual, finished version of the game, I would prefer to see the "Photo" button in the text info window grayed out, indicating such pictorial identification was not available for this item.

As your games become more and more complex, you'll find the Duplicate Move order really helpful. After a lead unit has received orders, you may select another unit (or units) and have them duplicate the first unit's moves. You can also delay secondary unit moves in multiples of 15 scale seconds. When you're dealing with a number of units that you need to give similar orders to, this capability saves a great deal of time and worry. And fret not about units that might stack upon one another as they complete their movement orders. When it comes time to re-order them, simply click on the stack and the icons spread out, allowing you to easily select the appropriate unit for new orders.

You can see two additional movement relationships for your units by using Command-U to change the unit symbol type. You'll note that the icon representing the units changes to one that shows tactical disposition or directional icons.

Your off-screen military support is awesome. From artillery to air support, you determine if and when such are to be used. Laying down a barrage of 105mm shells can be most effective if your tanks and infantry have been pinned down. Perhaps a barrage of smoke would be MOST useful. Throw in F/16s and F/18s, or even an AV8, and you have some radical power at hand. Er, don't forget your enemy has such capabilities as well!

Load and unload your troops from your armored personnel carriers. Use terrain as your method of outfoxing your enemy. The complexities of this title are enormous, but fantastically, they've managed to bring the command structures down to a most usable, graphical level, quite appropriate for novice and advanced war simmers.

I would like to see the inclusion of speed control for various elements at your command. Sometimes it's wise to have unit(s) move more slowly through specific terrain, perhaps to

draw fire for an air strike or artillery barrage. The way the game is set up now, everything moves at a generalized speed. This does not hamper play, but would be a nice additional feature for the publisher to consider.

One conclusion you could draw from TacOps is that any ground war these days is going to be exceptionally destructive of human body and mind. Kill zones are frequently littered with the remains of once-proud warriors in this title, and as such, are certainly indicative that war is not a healthy pastime, albeit a necessary one at times. Those who already enjoy war sims will definitely enjoy TacOps. For those new to this environment, you couldn't pick a better title by which to learn the game. Even though my copy of the game was still in beta, I found the code and gameplay to be enormously stable. I can only imagine the finished, production version will be of like stability.

TacOps appears to me to be a title of enormous potential, not only because it'll bring new military strategy tacticians to the table, but because it further expands the Macintosh as a viable platform alternative for war gamers. I have no hesitation in recommending to anyone they purchase the finished, production version of this title.