

The Air Leader Series - Past, Present, and Future

The Air Leader series of games started back in 1991 with the release of Hornet Leader. The solitaire game placed the player in the role of a squadron commander for the US Navy's FA-18 Hornet strike fighters.

Whenever I'd tell people about the game, they'd always ask, "Is it a card game, board game...?" and I'd respond with, "Well..."

Hornet was a new kind of game. It used cards to hold data, but you didn't hold the cards in your hand. Nor did you play them. The cards were used to generate missions and to represent your pilots and aircraft. The game did use a board and counters, but most of the counters were used to represent weapons and pilot status. Also, because each pilot had his own unique set of skills, and could gain experience and improve, the game also had a mild role-playing element. All in all, it was a difficult game to describe. Twenty years later, I still have a hard time describing Hornet, but luckily, we now have google for those who are new to the series.

I designed Thunderbolt+Apache Leader a year or two later. The core concept was the same: solitaire, command a squadron, manage your pilots, blow-up the bad guys, but the details of how the two games worked were very different. For you TAL fans out there, yes, we plan of revising and releasing TAL. Hopefully in 2011.

Skip ahead 10 years. I dusted off Hornet to re-release it in Vassal/PDF format, and found the old game somewhat lacking. While a solid design, it had not aged well. It was too complex, had too many procedures, and had far too many die roll modifiers.

For any one taking notes on game design philosophy, die roll modifiers always seem like a great idea during the design stage, but they are the best way to kill the feel and flavor of a game. Here's why. People use the emotional side of their brains to feel and become connected to a story, which is what a game is. When you force their brain to do math, they switch the logical side of their brain, and you suppress their feelings and emotions. This instantly turns an exciting mission deep into enemy territory into a mathematical exercise with little pictures of airplanes.

Anyway... I revised Hornet Leader and named it Hornet Leader II. I know, very creative. I streamlined the mechanics and simplified the game while keeping all the core concepts of flying over other people's countries and blowing stuff up. Over the course of 3 expansions, I added new types of aircraft like F-14 Tomcats, A-6 Intruders, AV-8B Harriers, etc. Overall, I was very happy with the design.

Flash forward to 2010 and the release of Phantom Leader. Phantom built on the HLII design and took it a step farther. The game added some very cool new options for spending Special Option points that changed mission planning on a high level. Phantom also incorporated the Politics track to capture the politically imposed limitations of the Vietnam Air War.

This brings us to Hornet Leader – Carrier Air Operations, our newest game in the Air Leader series.

The original plan for HL-CAO was simple: gather the components from HLII and its 3 expansions, replace all the art, and release it as a printed game with high quality components. Then I started looking at the games. They were good, but not perfect. As time passed, I revised a rule here, and added a new one there, until we're at where we are now, with a highly updated game.

Here's a list of the major changes to date. During the next few weeks, I'll detail each of them (and probably add to the list):

Situational Awareness

Target Traits

Reworked Ordnance Counters

Helmet Fire

Stand-Off Range Band

Bad Event XP

New Special Option point Scale

F-35 Stealth

Situational Awareness

This is a new pilot skill. The skill range is 0 to 3, with most pilots having a 0 most of the time. As with most skills, a pilot gets more of them as he progresses in experience. A pilot gets 1 Situational Awareness counter each mission for each point of skill he has.

A Fast pilot may discard a counter during a Slow step to attack. A Slow pilot may discard a counter during a Fast step to attack. This attack is in addition to the pilot's normal attack that turn.

At the start of each mission, you get to select the most experienced pilot flying the mission to be your Flight Leader. The Flight Leader can use each of his counters as normal, or expend them for other pilots during the mission as you see fit.

The E-2C Hawkeye support aircraft have a built-in ability. They can always expend their counters for other pilots.

This new skill adds a great deal of flexibility and decision-making to pilot selection, arming, and Over Target tactics.

Hornet Leader Target Traits

Way back in 1991, Hornet Leader's target stats were all pretty generic. Without the artwork, it would have been hard to distinguish an Armored Enemy Force from a Factory, or a Naval Fleet.

This was improved in Phantom Leader when target traits such as “Soft” were introduced. We have taken this idea to the next level in the new game. Traits now include:

Hardened – Subtracts 1 Hit from each attack

Small – Subtracts 1 from ATG die rolls

Improvement – Once drawn, the target card remains available for selection until you destroy it. Until destroyed, it grants the enemy an advantage.

Secondary – In addition to flying the normal Day’s mission, you can allocate your remaining pilots and ordnance to attacking one of these targets.

Dispersed – Each ordnance counter cannot inflict more than 1 Hit to the target.

This means that a column of enemy tanks (Dispersed) will now be mechanically different than a factory.

By adding uniqueness to the targets, it also allowed weapons to take on unique attributes.

Consider this. Up until now, a column of tanks and a factory might both require 10 Hits to destroy. So, do you take Mk.82/83/84 iron bombs or AGM-65 Mavericks? Answer, up until now, it really didn’t matter.

In real life, you’d use Mavericks against the tanks and iron bombs against the factory. This is because Mavericks are a 500 pound guided weapon with a small (150 pound) warhead. They are great at hitting small mobile targets, but don’t have much of an area effect destructive capability. Iron bombs, also known as dumb bombs, are not guided, but they do pack a lot of explosives into their metal casing.

Hitting a moving tank with an unguided bomb is tricky. Hitting a large factory with Mavericks will not cause widespread damage.

Now it matters.

In the next addition, we’ll cover some of the ordnance updates that make choosing your weapons a whole new experience.

Rework Ordnance Counters

We’ve also completed an extensive revision of the ordnance counters. The original counters back in 1991 were just kind of eyeballed. We’ve now used a spreadsheet to calculate all their values. This makes sure they are balanced when you take into account their destructive capabilities, weight points, range, etc.

Here’s a nice comparison, the AGM-65 Maverick vs. the Mk.82 iron bomb...

1991 version of the counters:

AGM-65: Hits 4/11 at range 0, 6/12 at range 1, Weight: 1

Mk.82: Hits 4/10 at range 0, Weight 1

2010 version of the counters:

AGM-65: Hits 5 at ranges 0 to 2, Weight: 1

Mk.82: Hits 7/10 at range 0, Weight 1

In looking at the 1991 counters, there is very little reason to take Mk.82s. The AGM-65s hit virtually the same at range 0, and they can even hit at range 1. They both weight 1 point.

Compared to the 2010 counters, where the AGM-65 hits much easier, but can never score a second hit. They both weigh 1, so that is even. At this point, the AGM-65 is looking to be superior, because while it can't score 2 hits, it does have a much greater range. This is balanced by AGM-65s costing 1 Special Option point.

This corresponds to real life very well. The AGM-65 is a more sophisticated weapon than a Mk.82. The Maverick is packed full of electronics, a rocket motor, and other high-tech pricey stuff. The Mk.82 has a metal shell, explosives, and a detonator. A Maverick costs the Navy more money to buy than a Mk.82, and likewise Mavericks will cost your squadron more.

Let's take a look and see how this relates to targets.

In the 1991 version, a factory (target #20), required 9 hits to destroy, and Ground Forces (target #4) required 12 hits to destroy. The targets back then did not have special traits.

In the 2010 version, a factory target requires 14 hits, and a ground forces requires 10 hits and has the "Soft" and "Dispersed" traits.

If you look at the 1991 counters, AGM-65s would be a better choice for both targets because they hit easier and you can even fire them from a distance. So, I'd load-up on the Mavericks until I used them all, then load the remaining weights (reluctantly) with Mk.82s.

The 2010 counters provide options that are more realistic. True, each AGM-65 can only score 1 hit, but the ground forces Dispersed trait caps hits at 1 anyway. The Mk.82s also become a much better choice for hitting the factory because they can score 2 hits.

We've also included the Mk.20 Rockeye in the new game.

Mk.20: Hits 8/11 at range 0, +5 to hit Soft targets.

The Mk.20 is a great weapon in real life to attack infantry and vehicle targets because it is a cluster weapon. It spreads hundreds of hand grenade-sized bomblets over an area the size of a football field.

In the game, the Mk.20 is also great against Soft targets due to its +5 bonus. This also makes it a great weapon to equip pilots who have less skill in air-to-ground attacks.

Helmet Fire

I want each Leader game to have its own unique feel. My goal for Hornet is to give the player "Helmet Fire".

From www.helmetfire.com...

"To a naval aviator, it's a term that describes an over-clocked mental state. This is usually caused by: a lot of things going on (all at once); multiple decisions that need to be made (right now!); and having very little time to sort out competing priorities (before something gets bent or broken)."

To do this, I provide the player with easy to understand choices, give him a limited number of resources, and present him with a clear objective to accomplish. I use lots of math to make sure everything is balanced, and then turn him lose to solve the puzzle of how to blow-up stuff while still bringing his pilots home safely.