In Review: Twilight 2000 (Former-GDW: Now-Tantalus software)
By Matt Geisler 04/02/00

Why review a now-defunct game you may ask? Well unlike Gamma World, this game never really died, just the manufacturor. There is still a strong following of die hard fans (myself included) who keep building or adding to this game, even when threatened by lawyers on copyright infringement. I still consider it the best RPG to depict the modern (1900-2100) era, and the core game mechanisms are good enough to generate near future (dark conspiracy) and far future (Traveller New Era) games. For those who enjoy GURPS like time crossovers, or if you just want to learn one set of rules and be done with it, then this is the system for you.

Game Mechanics:

PCs are build around abilities and skills. Experience from gaming is converted into individual skill levels, which allow the PC better chance at a specific task (i.e. Rifle-shooting, Auto Mechanic, Interrogation). Battle experience allows a PC to be cooler under fire, and get more done in a 30 second turn, while inexperienced PCs are forced to spend precious time hesitating. This makes it possible for elite commandoes to glide into the middle of an enemy encampment and pick off most of the sentries before they have had time to respond. In the basic game scenario (post-apocolyptic Europe), there is also the matter of equipment. Players start off with a bunch of millitary hardware, but probably not enough to last very long, they have to spend time scrounging around, building up an arsenal, or maintaining/assembling a working vehicle which will get them home.

Versions:

The first version (ed 1.0) of twilight 2000 came in a black and green boxed set, with two rule booklets and a bunch of pamphlets (maps, radio transmissions, price lists, character/vehicle sheets, errata). Skills were based on 1d10 dice roll. Version 2 came in a yellow boxed set with one large rule book, and some cut-apart counter sheets and tactical maps. A lot of the encounter tables were filled in, and rules for vehicular combat were simplified and streamlined. There was a more complete system of pre-generating characters by tracing their careres before the war started. In addition, the world was fleshed out a little more, allowing characters to migrate almost anywhere in the world. The best version, and the one compatible with other systems is version 2.2. This final version incorperated a 1d20 system of skills, where the old skill (1-10) was added to a controlling ability (also 1-10) to generate an "asset" which was the number or less to roll on 1d20. This changed the game dramatically for low-skill values, and meant that high skilled PCs were only 2-3 times more likely to succede (as opposed to 5-10 times more likely in the old version). These versions covered small scale and personal conflicts, to help with larger scale conflicts (20+ combatants), there is a quasi-wargame called Last Battle, also produced by GDW as a game accessory.

Game Mechanic Weaknesses:

Even this final version of the game still has two critical shortfallings. Firstly, the difficulty of any task changes in steps of doubling or halving. For example, to hit a target at medium range is ½ of that of close range, and a long range target is ¼. While this might be alright for marksmanship, it probably is too much of a leap for other tasks (like driving a car through rain vs dry weather). To fix this I would urge GMs to use additive/subtractive modifiers more, rather than the multiplicitive ones recommended by the game. Finally Vehicle combat (especially aircraft) is still fairly abstract, and somewhat unsatisfying. I liked the 1.0 edition somewhat better in this regards, even if it was more complex. In any case, far too much attention is made on exactly what happenes to a round after it hits a vechicle, and too little about how that round came to hit in the first place. IMHO once a round hits a vehicle, it usually kills it, unless it is of the wrong type (insufficient penetration). The game should concentrate on all the manouver, spotting, and accuracy of how to hit in the first place. This is in total contrast to the platoon scale wargame Assault produced by the same company, where spotting the enemy was of the first importance.

Scenarios and modules:

The basic scenario is of world war three in Europe, spreading into Asia and India-Pakistan. The war involves an initially limited exchange of atomic weapons, but all sides finally shoot off their entire stockpiles. The PCs are soldiers in the US 5th mechanized division stuck behind enemy lines somewhere in Poland. They begin the game after their HQ is overrun and the last radio transmission is "good luck you are on your own now…". It's up to the PCs whether to spend their resources trying to get back to friendly lines and home, to stick around and start rebuilding Poland out of the anarchy the ravaging armies have left it in, or to strike out in a new direction, seeking adventure. Very few army units larger than 500 men exist, and most aren't following whatever few orders they receive from scattered jury-rigged HQs. Rumors abound that back home, the US government has been demolished and the nation has broken apart into smaller countries. The soviet units still left in Poland are more likely to make a deal for gasoline or gasohol than fight. Modules cover Eastern Europe, Russia, and the journey home to a shattered USA. An optional set of rules I have written (link below) allow players to start gathering up all the scrap metal and battlefield debris and start up a salvage and repair business. Other websites abound covering both technical aspects of the game, and campaigns in various parts of the post war world.

A second official scenario package is called MERC 2000, which takes an alternate timeline in which there is no war, but the US decays into crime and corruption, while the world becomes increasingly violent with many smaller wars. There is a supplement specific to Tailand called BANKOK, CESSPOOL OF THE ORIENT, a GAZATEER of various other parts of the world, and SPECIAL OPS, covering both espionage and "dirty tricks". Players are special "black ops" agents, or mercenary soldiers. Their equipment often depends on their patron (the one who contacts and hires them), who may or may not be who he appears to be.

Other unofficial scenarios have been crafted. Some are post apocolyptic such as the ZOMBIES scenario, based on the films of George Romero. VIRUS is based on a modern epidemic in which an extraterrestrial virus causes the near extinction of humans. Other scenarios take place in WWII, capturing the flavor of recent films such as Saving Private Ryan, The Thin Red Line, or classics like The Wild Geese, The Dirty Dozen and so on.

In addition to the modules, the real strength of this system is the attention paid to detail in the equipment supplements. The Infantry Weapons of the World supplement, covers firearms from black powder weapons to post-modern caseless munition assault weapons. Other supplements cover heavy weapons (rockets, artillery, mines, flamethrowers), armored vehicles, aircraft, and watercraft. Though I would have to warn you that the rules for aircraft are very abstract.

Conclusions:

The Twilight 2000 core rules, along with the attention to details is excellent, and I believe without equal in simulating small arms conflict for a small group of characters and their foes. It tends to break down (becomes too abstract) in simulating vehicular combat, especially aircraft and helicopters, or if the scale of the conflict becomes too large. The basic scenario is very rich in detail and in opportunity for adventure. The game is easily converted to alternative scenarios cast anywhere in the modern era. Action-adventure movies are thus a good source for game ideas. A final testimony to the flexibility of the core rules it that they are fully integrated with Traveller: New Era (set in the far future), and Dark Conspiracy (a sort of X-files like near future game with demons and ETs).

Matt Geisler's Web Page http://website.mciworld.com/~matt.geisler@mciworld.com/scifi.html

Other Excellent Twilight 2000 Web pages

http://www.angelfire.com/nc/kensar/   http://loonz.freeservers.com/t2k/index.htm

http://www.humanwaredesign.com/t2k/index.html http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Orion/6278/