

Johvi 2029

Onside Report

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Johvi 2029 was probably the fourth iteration of the main Brigade/Battalion urban game I'm developing for my PhD. The first version I showed at COW2023, the next at Kings Wargaming Week in 2024, and then a much modified (but overall worse!) version at COW 2024 under the name of COBE/Brick By Bloody Brick.

This new version is heavily influenced by the work I've done in developing OPUC (which I also ran at COW 2025), and there are now quite a few shared mechanics.

The main aim in the latest rewrite was to try and streamline systems and reduce playing time, without sacrificing too much of the nitty-gritty of urban combat at this level. In terms of the main design features:

- I've kept my use of areas and urban terrain zones unchanged since the last version – and in fact play on the same map – as that seemed to work well;
- I've still kept the game at 2 Down, so the battalion game had platoon manoeuvre units. I keep debating whether to make 1 Down versions of both this game and OPUC, but fear that too much will be lost – I might just have to try it anyway;
- I've kept the Capability Cards, but by focussing the COW2025 session on only the Engage part of the full NATO USECT model played in the COW2023 game I could reduce the card count (and also starting the game *in media res* as first blows are exchanged saved more time).
- The ISR (recce) model in previous versions used far too many dice rolls, the ISR Points version in OPUC seems to work well and so has been adopted.
- Likewise the Civil Effects Checks in OPUC do what I need quite slickly and have also been moved across.
- Fires bombardments across lots of units, all in different urban protection, and all with their own armour value, also consumed time, so now I a) aggregate all Fires, b) don't allow overlapping Fire Missions and c) work out the impact on the modal unit/area, and then apply a simple one worse/better to other units depending on their situation
- Likewise, all direct fire and assaults are also worked out with aggregated combat factors, which saves time and leads to slightly more rapid degradation and so more decisive engagements;
- I binned, for now, the comms check element.

As for how the game played ... I think I still have some more work to do! We managed to get through a couple of turns, and I think people recognised what I was trying to do and the complexity at the problem, but at the moment the view as that still feels more like a simulation than an enjoyable game. Even with the streamlining there still seems to be too much dice-rolling, and there was some good and constructive criticism and ideas about how to resolve this, and other, issues. In the game both players made much use of their artillery, which just neutralised pretty much everyone. The Russian's did manage to inch forward, and even gave a Challenger hidden in the wood a scary moment, but it was going to be a tough break-in battle. Had the game played longer then most of the fire missions would have been used up, the Russians would have had a better foothold and we'd have been able to move beyond the break-in battle to the main engagement. As one player said it was just about to get interesting when we stopped, and as Alek suggested it may have been an idea to have started even more *in media res*, with the break-in battle complete, artillery spent, and the street fighting about to start.

The key question for me is whether I now do the open heart surgery to move on to a fifth iteration of City & CEMA, or whether I need to start from the ground up with a whole new approach. The more I think back on the session the more I think that the biggest issues were a) the scenario, which had a preponderance of artillery fire to effect and defeat the break-in, which led to almost everyone being neutralised, and b) the impact area of the fires was possibly just too great (although informed by data), and it would have been a very different game with single area impacts. There are no doubt a lot of other tweaks to make, and I'll certainly take up the offers I had to review the rules, but with a few days distance I think the game is more recoverable than I felt on Saturday night. What was heartening was that Estonia 2029 the next day was far better received, and shares many elements with City & CEMA, and so I'm sure there's a way forward one-way or another.

A fuller set of Designer's Notes, and hopefully a fuller and evolving Game Provenance document which provides the sources for most of the data and rules, can be found on the games homepage at <http://www.taunoyen.com/games/city&cema>. Once the problems have been fixed (or even as they're being fixed) there should also be a Tabletop Simulator version available, probably by the time this Onside comes out.

Thanks as always to everyone who played in and commented on the session, and completed the survey forms – all very constructive and I'll feed the observations and ideas into my PhD research and into the next version, or Son of CEMA!