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MILSketch

[Discussion Board on this Wargame Review](#)

Publisher: [Historical Software Corporation](#)

Designers: [Historical Software Corporation](#)

Price: FREE!!!

Reviewer: [Pat Proctor](#)

NOTE: In the interest of fair disclosure, in addition to being an active duty service member, I am also the founder and lead developer for [ProSIM Company](#), a computer wargame developer.

In the US military, there are two types of tools for drawing operational graphics on maps. The first set of tools, the automated battle command systems (ABCS), includes an alphabet soup of different military systems: Command Post of the Future (CPOF), Maneuver Control System (MCS), and Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2), to name a few. These tools are challenging to learn and use. They also use specialty map formats, so importing map images is usually impossible.

Because of all of these limitations in military tools, the more commonly used tool is Microsoft PowerPoint. It is not customized to military use and will only take maps in standard image formats. However, the program is intuitive and can export drawings in many different formats.

It is against this standard one must judge the newest offering from the gentlemen at Historical Software Corporation. The same crew that brought us TaLaCoSi (Tactical Land Combat Simulator) is offering a free program for drawing operational graphics on maps called MILSketch. The program is available for download here <http://www.historicalsoftware.com/HSC/HSCdownloads.htm>.

The Package

MILSketch self-extracts and installs painlessly. In addition to the program itself, the package contains three free map images (the National Training Center at Fort Irwin and two maps of Eifa, Germany). The package also includes three military manuals FM 3-90, *Tactics*, FM 101-5-1, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, and MIL-STD-2525B, *Common Warfighting Symbology*.

These last two manuals are terribly dated. The FM 101-5-1 is ten years old and was superseded by the FM 1-02 in 2004. The MIL-STD-2525B here is eight years old and was superseded by a newer version in 2005. This would be nitpicking, except that it has a substantive effect on the actual software. More on that in a moment.

The Help Tools

The program installs with a 17 page PDF instruction manual, complete with color screen shots and a brief tutorial. It is not exhaustive, but with the manual, some experimentation, and a little patience, one is able to quickly jump in and start using the program. However, some help on the particulars of the many dialog boxes, would have been useful.

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The MILSketch page at the Historical Software Corporation Website includes a short video tutorial that is helpful as well. It can be found here <http://www.historicalsoftware.com/HSC/HSCmilsketch.htm>.

The program also includes a very short in-program help page as well as a page of acronyms and military terms. Unfortunately, the bottom half of the help window in which these pages appears was off screen and inaccessible on my machine (I have a widescreen monitor).

The Program

The program itself is relatively straight forward to start using. Simply start a "new sketch" and load up a map image. MILSketch will accept bitmaps, JPEGs, and GIFs. If you have a map in a military data format, you will have to export it into an image in one of these formats. MILSketch will allow you to stretch the map image, but you will have to use another program if you wish to crop the map.

Once the image is loaded, you can use MILSketch to add standard NATO symbols, unit boundaries, lines, text, and other map symbols and features. I cannot think of a single item missing from the package. Just about anything one would ever want to add to a map is here. However, each feature has interface quirks and problems that really hurt the utility of the program overall.

The unit symbol tool is probably the strongest feature of MILSketch. There are hundreds of different unit symbols. You can add text to the different sides of the symbol. You can add unit size markers and other "modifiers" to each symbol. You can even rotate and stretch a symbol.

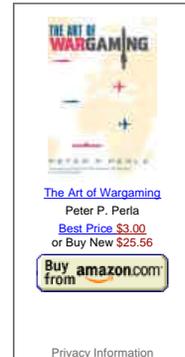
However, there are a few problems with the unit symbols feature. First, because MILSketch is based on the older standards of FM 101-5-1 and MIL-STD-2525B circa 1999, many symbols that are commonly used in today's automated systems are missing from MILSketch. Most notably, the individual vehicle icons seen in FCB2 and MCS systems are not here. Another issue with the unit symbol tool is that, once placed, a symbol cannot be edited. You have to delete the object and redraw it. If you have already placed a symbol and moved on, you will have to undo all subsequent work to replace the symbol. (This is actually a problem with the whole program, not just unit symbols.) Finally, there are no "tool tips" or labels for the different symbols. If you are not well versed in military symbology, you are going to need those manuals that ship with the program.

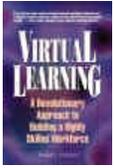
Line drawing is even more problematic. Drawing a single line on the map requires a myriad of clicks, buttons, and dialog boxes. There is a limit on the length of a single line. For some reason, lines are not placed at your click locations, so you have to drag every line into position after you draw it. The tool does allow you to draw specialty lines like mines, obstacles, and forward lines of troops, but drawing these objects suffers the same woes as regular lines.

Unit boundaries are completely broken. I ended up using the tool to place the boundary marker and text, and then the separate line tool to actually draw the boundary.

The Verdict

MILSketch beats all of the military systems out there. That is not a bad accomplishment for a free program. But MILSketch is not going to cause the military to kick its PowerPoint habit any time soon.





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