2002 International Command and Control Research and Technology Symposium

Sept 16-20, 2002
Loews Le Concorde Hotel
Quebec City, QC, Canada

TOPIC:
C2 Experimentation, C2 Assessment Tools and Metrics, C2 Decision Making and Cognitive Analysis

Information-Centered Systems Analysis:

Modeling, Experimentation and Development

Arne Worm

Swedish Defence Research Agency
P.O. Box 1165, SE-581 11 Linköping, Sweden
arne.worm@foi.se

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Abstract

Performing complex, high-risk, tactical operations requires support by highly capable and effective information management. The military community calls for groundbreaking approaches to demanding mission command challenges. This is beyond reach unless new, cutting-edge solutions can support the humans and systems engaged. We pursued a broad research approach and adopted a combined theoretical and practical perspective to discover novel and effective ways to accomplish this objective. Experiences from this work made it possible to develop theories, methods and tools for modeling, analysis and accident prevention in precarious time-critical systems control in military missions and crisis response operations.

1. Introduction

In military operations, emergency management and air traffic control mission performance relies increasingly on distributed organizations and system architectures to attain high safety and effectiveness without risking excessive resource depletion. The Nature of such complex dynamic processes and operations are high-risk activities, where human and artificial team members together perform tasks requiring extreme mobility, efficiency, agility and endurance. These distributed systems incorporate numerous team players, widely distributed across the whole theatre of operations. They can operate autonomously for certain time periods and in specific areas, but primarily they are forced to co-ordinate their actions very accurately with one another. Tactical commanders and operators frequently encounter violent threats, and critical demands on cognitive capacity and reaction time. In the future they will be making decisions in situations with operational and system characteristics that are highly dynamic and non-linear, i.e. small actions or decisions may have serious and irreversible consequences for the entire mission.

Adequate performance in complex, high-risk, tactical operations requires support by highly capable management. Commanders and other decision-makers must manage true real time properties at all levels: individual operators, stand-alone technical systems, higher-order integrated socio-technical systems and forces for joint operations alike. Highly qualified information management resources are vital to facilitate omni-directional, continuous information and distribution support from the chief executive

level to the team-on-site level. Sometimes even individual operators and sensor systems must without delay be allowed to affect decisions and actions of a senior commander.

Coping with these conditions in performance assessment, system development and operational testing is a challenge for practitioners and researchers. New results, new measurement techniques and new methodological breakthroughs facilitate a more accurate and deeper understanding, generating new and updated models. This in turn generates theoretical advances. Analogous to this, the art and practice of command and control, tactics, techniques, procedures and training are forced to constantly and concurrently strive for perfection. However, this is beyond reach unless novel, cutting-edge solutions can support the humans and systems engaged.

2.   The Action Control Theory Framework

The underlying principle was integration of well-established scientific disciplines into a pioneering research direction, *Action Control Theory*, a framework specifically composed to facilitate empirically based conceptual modeling of dynamic, complex tactical systems and processes and of their states and state transitions. The research areas constituting ACT have until now developed along separate paths of evolution. However, now it is time to investigate what they might offer when implemented in an integrated, cohesive and coordinated manner. Flach & Kuperman (1998) concluded that it is essential to develop a unified, proactive, CSE-based approach in research and systems design for future warfare environments. We agree, and hold a strong belief in the power of integrative research approaches that are built on solid classical and innovative theoretical work, using comprehensive yet simple and robust conceptual and specific models of systems, tasks and missions, supported by advanced experimental and measurement methods and data analysis techniques.

The resulting models will be used for complex, multi-level human-machine systems design in the military, aviation and emergency response domains. Action Control Theory (ACT) is a composite theoretical structure, derived from advances in:

1. Cognitive Systems Engineering (CSE).
2. Systems Theory, Control Theory and Cybernetics.
3. Decision Making in Complex Systems Control and Mission Command.
4. Psychophysiology.

2.1   Theoretical Constituent I: Cognitive Systems Engineering

The area of Cognitive Systems Engineering (CSE) has grown at an increasing pace since the first significant contributions were published in the 1980s by Rasmussen (1983; 1986), who introduced the concept of skill-based, rule-based and knowledge-based behavior for modeling different levels of human performance. Hollnagel & Woods (1983) made a significant contribution to this field by their definition of a *Cognitive System* (CS) as a Man-Machine System (MMS) whose behavior is goal-oriented, based on symbol manipulation and uses heuristic knowledge of its surrounding environment for guidance. A CS operates using knowledge about itself and the environment to plan and

modify its actions based on that knowledge. According to Hollnagel (1999), the definition has been revised over the years in order to comprise new findings in human-machine systems research and to cover a more comprehensive and fundamental set of system properties: what the system *achieves*, what *objectives* it serves and what its *intentions* are. The current definition describes a CS as a system that can modify its pattern of behavior on the basis of past experience in order to achieve specific anti-entropic ends. For example, in Command and Control (C^2) tasks in military missions a multitude of sensor systems, communication systems, training programs, personnel and procedures are all elements of the total operational system. Viewing this system as a CS permits the integration of all existing control resources; operators, commanders, technological facilities, doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures, organization and training into a coordinated system that safely and efficiently achieves its mission. The use of CSE to model, analyze, and describe such systems performing hazardous, real time, high-stake activities is a powerful approach, given a sufficient understanding by the investigator of the interdependencies and linkages between other research areas and the CSE field.

2.2 Theoretical Constituent II: Dynamic Systems Theory, Control Theory and Cybernetics

By the term *dynamic system* is meant an object, driven by external input signals *u(t)* for every *t* and as a response produces a set of output signals *y(t)* for every *t*. From the work of Ashby (1956), Conant & Ashby (1970), and many others it is well known that most complex systems have *real-time, dynamic properties*; the system output at a given time is not only dependent of the input value at this specific time, but also on earlier input values, and that a good regulator of a system has to implement a model of the system that is to be controlled.

According to Worm, (2001), the combined view of control theory in technical as well in behavioral domains is crucial for success in this research area. When a function is implemented at one level of abstraction, represented at a second level of abstraction and controlled at a third level of abstraction the requirement for timely and complete information varies accordingly. On the other hand, it is not important whether an automated system under higher-order supervision or a highly qualified operator carries out a function or mission, the operators and the supervisory controllers still need to maintain an adequate situation understanding. In most situations the active agents in a dynamic system, such as soldiers/operators and their closest commander or squad leader, operate in a time scale of seconds to minutes. Their commanders and their command and control systems operate in time scales of hours to days. The key issue is to implement a system theory-based framework to cope with such dynamic properties, and of the environments such systems operate in.

The mathematical stringency and powerful formalism of systems theory makes it possible to describe and treat systems as diverse as technical, organizational, economic and biological dynamic systems in basically the same manner: as processes, or clusters of processes, with a built-in adherent or assigned control system. According to Conant & Ashby, (1970), Glad & Ljung, (1989) and Brehmer, (1992), four fundamental

requirements must be met, if control theory should be used successfully in analysis and synthesis of dynamic systems:

1. There must be a goal (*the goal condition*).
2. It must be possible to ascertain the state of the system (*the observability condition*).
3. It must be possible to affect the state of the system (*the action condition*).
4. There must be a model of the system (*the model condition*).

2.3   Theoretical Constituent III: Decision Making in Complex Systems Control and Mission Command

The conventional and classic *Analytical Decision Making* approach, supported by normative theories, reduces decision making to selecting an appropriate action from a closed, pre-defined action set, and to resolution of conflicts of choice. Hence, the analysis of decision tasks concentrates on the generation of alternatives and the evaluation of these alternatives according to some criterion, usually expected value. According to Lehto (1997), Cohen et al. (1998), Wickens (1992) and Kleindorfer et al. (1993), the most familiar classical framework for decision making contains two main parts: *Bayesian probability theory* for drawing inferences about the situation at hand, and *Multiattribute Utility Theory* for selecting an optimal action. There is a lot to be said about analytical, mono-theoretical approaches, especially when investigators and researchers claim they have a stringent and formal theory which "takes care of it all" regarding the host of requirements in need of fulfillment for the theory to hold in a real-world decision situation.

Brehmer (1992) suggested the use of control theory as a framework for research in *Distributed, Dynamic Decision Making*. Brehmer´s research was based on analysis of several applied scenarios, e.g. military decision making, operator tasks in industrial processes, emergency management and intensive care (Brehmer, 1988; 1992). The following results were clarified in these analyses:

– The decision-making was never the primary task. It was always directed towards some goal.
– A series of decisions is required to reach the goal.
– The decisions are mutually dependent.
– The state of the decision problem changes, both autonomously and as a consequence of the decision-maker's actions.
– The situational dynamics require decisions to be made in real time.

Naturalistic Approaches to Decision Making

Zachary & Ryder (1997) reviewed decision-making research during the last decades. They elaborated on the major paradigm shift in decision theory from the analytic, normative decision making procedures of von Neumann & Morgenstern (1947), Simon (1955) and Newell and Simon (1972) to descriptive Naturalistic Decision Making (NDM) procedures, described by Klein (1989; 1993a; 1993b) as well as by Klein & Woods (1993) and Orasanu & Connolly (1993). NDM applies to many dynamic, safety-critical

and even dangerous areas of activity such as tactical command and control in military missions, fire fighting, emergency response and medical diagnosis. The work of Zachary and Ryder relates strongly to Control Theory, Cognitive Systems Engineering, Dynamic, Distributed Decision Making, and Command and Control science, and presents a broad approach to decision support systems development and design. The essentials of this paradigm are condensed below:

- Human decision-making should be studied in its natural context.
- The underlying task and situation of a problem is critical for successful framing.
- Actions and decisions are highly interrelated.
- Experts apply their experience and knowledge non-analytically by identifying and effecting the most appropriate action in an intuitive manner.

Tactical Team Decision Making

Tactical decision-making teams in the modern warfare environment are faced with situations characterized by rapidly unfolding events, multiple plausible hypotheses, high information ambiguity, severe time pressure, and serious consequences for errors (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1995). There are also cases when geographical separation or other forms of distributed environments in which the teams operate impose additional difficulties Brehmer (1991). To be able to adapt to these situations, team members must co-ordinate their actions so that they can gather, process, integrate, and communicate information timely and effectively. The accurate diagnosis of team performance shortfalls and the tailoring of subsequent training toward correcting these shortfalls for the team and individual team members require systematic performance assessment from multiple perspectives. Unfortunately, it was the case in the past that operational systems either ignored performance measurement completely, or treated it in an unsystematic fashion. This was particularly true of complex systems where it was difficult to assess performance with a single correct answer, or in situations where there were several individual decision-makers forced to interact as a team.

2.4   Theoretical Constituent IV: Psychophysiology

Traditionally, stress research has been oriented toward studies involving the body's reaction to stressors (a physiological perspective) and the cognitive processes that appraise the event or situation as a stressor (a cognitive perspective). However, current social perspectives of the stress response have noted that different people experiencing similar life conditions are not necessarily affected in the same manner. There is a growing interest in the epidemiology of diseases thought to result from stress. It has been noted that the incidence of hypertension, cardiovascular ailments, and depression varies with such factors as race, sex, marital status, and income. This kind of socioeconomic variation of disease indicates that the stressors that presumably dispose people toward these illnesses are somehow linked to the conditions that people confront through their history of varying occupational and social position and status in the society. The stress response is a warning of a homeostatic imbalance occurring (Levine and Ursin, 1991). This implies that the concept of *model error* from control theory once again can be

applied. The stress response is also mobilizing physiological resources to improve performance, which is regarded as a positive and desirable warning response. The Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress (CATS) describes the phases of the stress response as an alarm occurring within a complex cognitive system with feedback, feedforward and control loops, no less but no more complicated than any other of the body's self-regulated systems (Eriksen et al., 1999).

Within joint cognitive systems performing complex, high-risk military and emergency response missions there is a fundamental and profound connection between human operator physiological stress response and discrepancies between expectancies and experiences. Decision-makers are not free to make decisions when they feel ready to do so. Instead, the environment requires decisions and the decision-maker, ready or not, have to make these decisions on demand. According to Brehmer (1991) this causes stress in dynamic decision-making tasks. In order to cope with this stress, decision-makers have to develop strategies for control of the assigned dynamic tasks and for keeping their own workload at an acceptable level. Coping strategies of individuals are primarily social in nature. The manner in which people attempt to avoid or resolve stressful situations, the cognitive strategies that they use to reduce threat, and the techniques for managing tensions are largely learned from the groups to which they belong. Although the coping strategies used by individuals often are distinct, coping dispositions are to a large extent acquired from the social environment.

3. Formal Representations Derived from Action Control Theory

We have already discussed the importance of models for systems control and situation understanding. However, we will go a little deeper into some of the concepts introduced in the earlier sections. I will begin with a more formal definition Worm (2000) of what a model is. A model is a system $C \cong [E, M, Y]$ constituted by:

1. A modeled system or mission environment $E = f(E, L)$ with the total set $E = \{e_i\}$ of possible states that can occur, and possible actions or laws $L: E \rightarrow E$. For example, E could be the set of key presses of a computer operator or the physical world. Then L is the behavior of the operator or the laws of nature.
2. A modeling system $M = f(M, R)$ with internal model states or representations $M = \{m_k\}$, and a modeling function, which is basically a set of rules, $R: M \rightarrow M$. For example, M could be a numerical or symbolic data set, a sequence of neural signals or a reconstructed course of events in a mission. Then the rules R are the processing activity of a computer, the synaptic electrochemical transmissions between a network of neurons, or the decisions, orders and actions of the unit commander and his staff.
3. A representation function $Y: E \rightarrow R$. For example, $Y = \{y_n\}$ could be a measurement vector, a perception, or an observation.

When the functions L, R, and E commute, then we have $m_k = R(m_{k-1}) = R(Y(e_{i-1})) = Y(L(e_{i-1})) = Y(e_i)$. Under these conditions C is a good model, and the modeling system M can sufficiently predict the behavior of the mission environment E. Then C is called a generator of predictions about E. On the other hand, there exists a possibility that M is a

model itself, implying that C in that case is a meta-model. In that case C does not generate a prediction directly. Instead it generates *another model,* which in turn is capable of generating predictions at other levels of abstraction, aggregation and complexity. Hence the notion of situation understanding can be described as a hierarchical knowledge structure, recursively generating predictions about the world and itself, thereby empowering the cybernetic system (cognitive system, agent) to make decisions about its actions. An alternative and more general interpretation of the model concept can be found in Conant & Ashby (1970).

3.1   Mental Representations

According to Rouse et al. (1992) and Rouse et al. (1993) the importance of accurate and comprehensive mental models cannot be overestimated. A mental model synthesizes the steps of a process, and organizes them as a unit. Allen (1997) described the main evidence of people developing and utilizing mental models as follows:

1. *Prediction* of process steps and future course of events.
2. *Explanation* of the cause of an event.
3. *Diagnosis* of the reasons for malfunction.
4. *Training* of operators, maintainers and other users.

To be able to share, develop and discuss mental models together with other people, *conceptual models*, i.e., models of mental models are of great help. Allen (1997) described various classes of conceptual models: metaphors, surrogates, mappings, task-action grammars, plans and propositional knowledge. The mental model concept is illustrated in Figure 1.
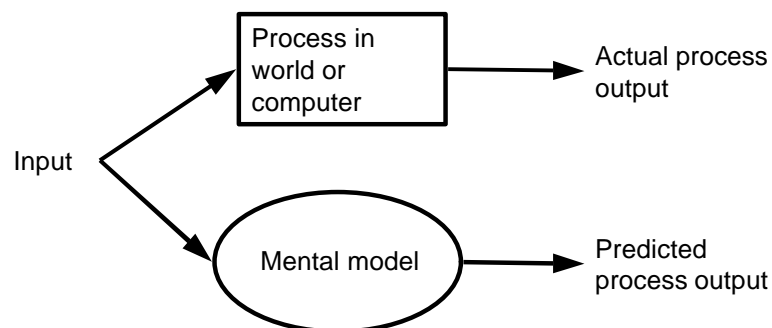
Figure 1. A process and the mental model of that process. (Source: Allen, 1997)

The model condition, or Conant's and Ashby's law of required model-regulatory identity (Conant and Ashby, 1970), that stipulates that every good regulator of a system must be a model of that system, is of course also valid when mental models are considered. This was commented by Hollnagel (1999) who described the importance of Ashby's law of requisite variety to mental model development and minimisation. Hollnagel advocated a cybernetic or functional approach to modelling of human operators

and of the mental models of their surrounding environment. A mental model can be seen as the basis for generating input to a system, in order to keep the variety of the system within given limits.

3.2 Tactical Joint Cognitive Systems

The point of departure in this ACT-based systems modelling endeavour was the definition of a Tactical Joint Cognitive System (TJCS). The concepts of a Tactical Joint Cognitive System are depicted in Figure 2.
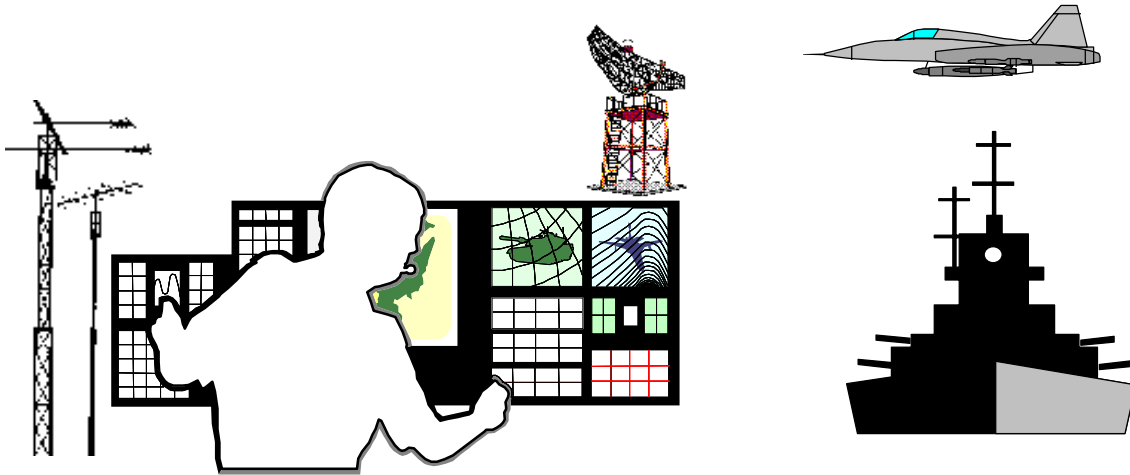

Figure 2. The Tactical Joint Cognitive System.

A Tactical Joint Cognitive System is an aggregate of one or several instances of four principal sub-system classes:

1. *Technological Systems*, for example vehicles, intelligence acquisition systems, communication systems, sensor systems, life support systems, including the system operators.
2. *Command and Control Systems*, consisting of an information exchange and command framework, built up by technological systems and directly involved decision-makers.
3. *Support Systems*, comprising staff functions, logistic functions, decision support functions, organizational structures, and various kinds of service support.
4. *Tactical Teams*, composed and defined according to (Salas et al., 1992) as: "Two or more people who interact, dynamically, interdependently, and adaptively toward a common and valued goal/objective/mission, who have been assigned specific roles or functions to perform, and who have a limited life-span of membership."

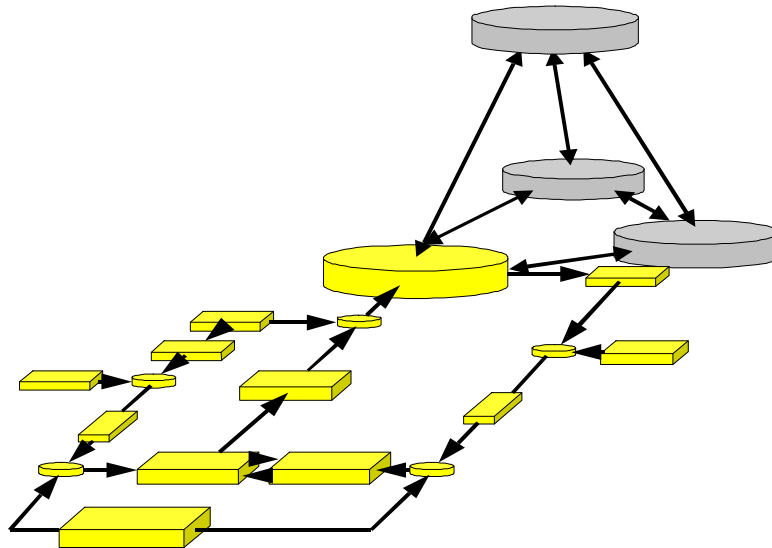*3.3   Mission Execution and Control Models*

The next step is integration of these concepts into a Tactical Action COntrol Model (TACOM). The principal components of the TACOM are the Mission Environment, the Tactical Joint Cognitive System, the Situation Assessment function, and the Cognitive Action Control function, derived primarily from the work of Brehmer (1988; 1992), Klein (1993a; 1993b) and Worm (1998c; 2000). From the TACOM the Mission Execution and Control Model (MECOM) is constructed, as illustrated in Figure 3. The MECOM consists of one or several TACOMs extended with control theoretic components, to handle system disturbances, model error, and to allow an adaptive and balanced mix of feedforward and feedback control.
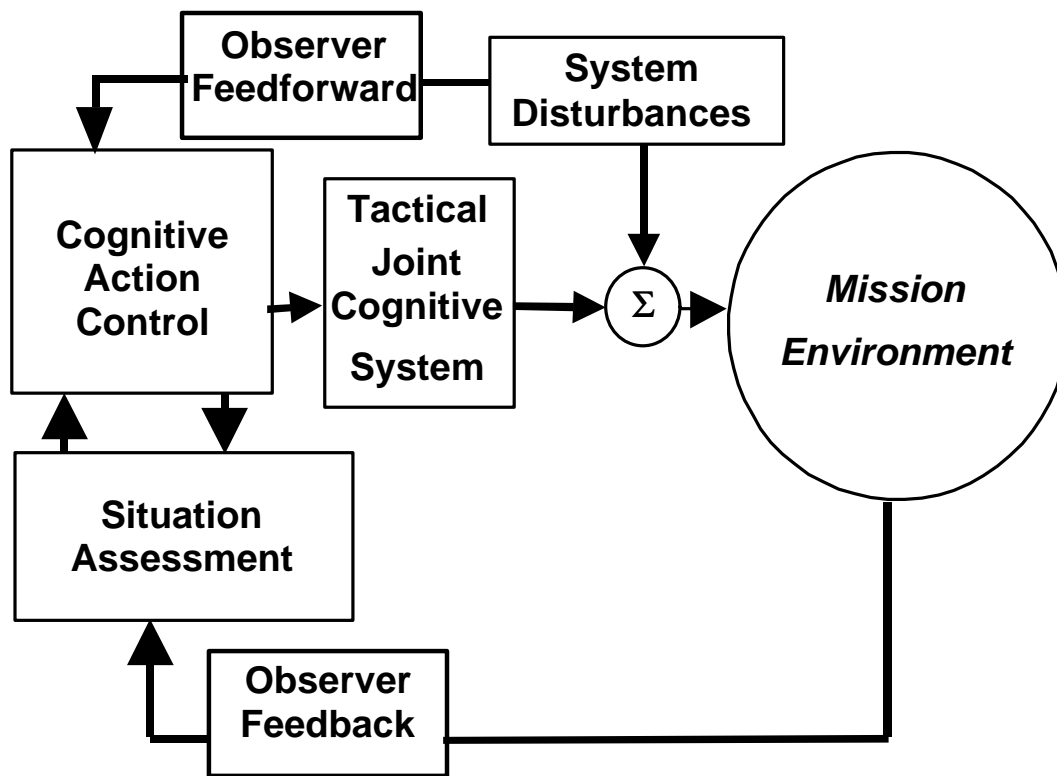
Figure 3. The Mission Execution and COntrol Model (MECOM). This is a simplified version of the full model for greater clarity and for editorial reasons. The full model is depicted in Worm (2000).

3.4   Model Combination and Aggregation

The last step in the model formation process is combining and aggregation of several MECOMs into unilevel and multilevel MECOMs, respectively, as presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. A simplified example of a MULTI-level Mission Execution and COntrol Model (MULTI-MECOM).

4.   Methods: The TRIDENT project

In earlier publications (Worm, 1998b; 1999b; 1999c) we have reported on the progress of what would later be known as the Tactical Real-time Interaction in Distributed EnvironmeNTs (TRIDENT) project. The primary objective of TRIDENT is to develop a coherent and straightforward package of theoretically sound and empirically validated methods and techniques for human-machine systems analysis in the setting of tactical mission scenarios. The components of TRIDENT are described in Worm (2000) and are summarised below:

– Using the Action Control Theory (ACT) Framework for conceptual modelling of dynamic, complex tactical systems and processes, of their states and state transitions.
– Identification of mission and unit state variables, and of action control and decision making mechanisms for process regulation (Worm, 1998a; 1998b).
– Mission Efficiency Analysis (Worm et al., 1998; Worm, 1999a) of fully manned and equipped units executing full-scale tactical missions in an authentic environment.
– Measuring information distribution and communication effectiveness (Worm, 1998b).
– Measuring workload by means of the NASA Task Load Index (Hart & Staveland, 1988).

- Assessing team member psychosocial mood by means of the Mood Adjective CheckList (MACL, Sjöberg et al., 1979).
- Assessing situation awareness (Endsley, 1995) as a function of mission-critical information complexity (Svensson et al., 1993)
- Measuring level and mode of cognitive, context-dependant control of the team members, and identifying what decision strategies were utilised by the team and team members.
- Applying reliability and error analysis methods for investigating failure causes both in retrospect and for prediction (Hollnagel, 1998).
- Validating identified constructs and measuring their influence using advanced data analytic procedures.

5. Studies

Numerous battle management and emergency response studies have been carried out in which we used every opportunity to test, refine and augment the modeling, measurement, data collection and analysis concepts of TRIDENT. Implementing these ideas for tactical mission analysis in potentially dangerous, stressful and cognitively complex environments showed to be very effective.

Using the TRIDENT concepts for analysis and evaluation on aggregated system levels has so far been very rewarding, with high acceptance among the subjects; trained and skilled professionals performing their daily tasks in their accustomed work environment. However, we have also experienced some critique. It is occasionally claimed that reliability and validity of subjective workload ratings are insufficient. For that reason we considered incorporating a measure of workload and stress which is commonly accepted in the scientific community. We considered hormonal response measures, inspired by the results of Svensson et al. (1993), who studied workload and performance in military aviation, Zeier, (1994) who studied workload and stress reactions in air traffic controllers, and Holmboe et al. (1975), who studied military personnel performing exhausting battle training. We designed a study in order to elucidate to what extent hormonal physiological stress indications are linked to the rating, observation and data collection methods normally used in TRIDENT to assess workload and tactical performance. The details of the study are described in Worm (2000).

6. Results

From the studies a number of particularly interesting causes of mission failure or poor performance could be identified. The predominant error modes were:

- Timing of movement and of tactical unit engagement.
- Speed of movement or maneuver, which is especially important in the initial phase of engagement.
- Selection of wrong object. The environments of ground warfare or emergencies offer many opportunities for choosing wrong objects, in navigation, in engagements, or in visual contact.

After a retrospective cognitive reliability and error analysis using the Cognitive Reliability And Error Analysis Method (CREAM) developed by Hollnagel (1998) we found that mission failure or poor performance in every case could be attributed to:

– Slow or even collapsed organizational response.
– Ambiguous, missing or insufficiently disseminated, communicated and presented information.
– Equipment malfunction, e.g. power failure or projectile/missile impact.
– Personal factors: inexperience, lack of team training etc.

Empirical results through the four-year project life suggest three potentially significant mechanisms influencing how the team is able to execute mission control, which consequently also influences mission efficiency:

1. Time-dependant filtering functions like defense and coping mechanisms according to the cognitive Activation Theory of Stress (Eriksen et al.; 1999, Levine & Ursin, 1991).
2. Performance limiting factors due to specific mission and task situation factors and resource requirements (Reason, 1997; Hollnagel, 1998; Worm, 1998c; 2001).
3. Balance between feedforward and feedback in mission-critical action control (Reason, 1997; Worm, 2001).

7. Conclusion

We have for a number of years struggled towards building a foundation for analysis and evaluation of high-stake, life-threatening tactical missions in various work contexts. Although earlier results indicate that a workable, reliable and valid result has been achieved, the question is still if the findings are generally applicable. The theoretical achievements were a complicated and arduous venture, in that we have constantly striven for empirical evidence. Nevertheless it is obvious that a scientific breakthrough has been achieved. We argue that the ACT / TRIDENT approach can be used as an advanced systems engineering support and will facilitate:

1. Identification of limiting factors of a specific individual, unit, system, procedure or mission.
2. Assessment of the magnitude of influence of these factors on overall tactical performance.
3. Generation and implementation of measures to assist, control and improve insufficient capabilities and contribute to successful accomplishment of future missions.
4. Methodological support in future integrated C3I systems.
5. Improving training programs for tactical decision-making and resource management.

Studying individuals is an effective, reliable and valid way to probe the function and efficiency of an organization, performing complex tasks in an ever-changing mission environment. I will continue to work with collected data, and use the results from the analyzed scenarios to tune and adjust the theory, models and methods in order to obtain a

coherent and cohesive framework for human-machine systems analysis of tactical mission settings and scenarios. I will also develop computerized versions of the test instruments, if possible with built-in tools for data analysis and graphical presentation, so that researchers and investigators not familiar with the background and early history of this project can benefit in their own work from my achievements.

Acknowledgements

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