

GAME PROFILE

BATTLEFLEET MARS

A Believable Science-Fiction Game

by Thomas G. Prutch

Designing the tactical movement system and writing much of the background for *BFM* were tasks that I found very satisfying. I'm of the opinion that the game is more space-operatic than Mr. Prutch seems to feel it is — but then I'm pretty austere when it comes to sf. Something I do wish to carry on from *BFM* is the tactical movement system which I believe can be developed into a standard movement system for many future space combat games. I'd appreciate hearing suggestions on this from those of you that care about such things.

—RAS

Designing a conflict simulation in the area of science fiction immediately brings out strong opinions for or against the game. The opinions are divided between the one group who wants to see a game that is a logical forecast of human development and those who want to see voluptuous women being carried off by the (pick one) Bug-Eyed-Monster/ Evil Space Pirate Dirk Donogood/the Marauding Space Race. *BattleFleet Mars* does not have voluptuous women and totally lacks BEMs/space pirates/alien races. Instead it is a logical prediction of one possible path man could follow to exploit space. I am not going to say that all players will agree with the game's premise, but it is a believable one and the situation is developed logically from it.

BattleFleet Mars (hereafter *BFM*) is a true conflict simulation. Reading the player's notes will tell the gamer that the conclusion of the game is resolved more often by the political/morale points than because of military actions. This is not to say that battles do not occur. They do occur and quite often leave both sides with a morale loss because of the heavy destruction. This will be discussed in detail later.

The game points up a very important fact about initial exploration/development of new territory that is hard to reach. There has to be a strong economic basis behind the operation and when you start playing with economics there is a political tie-in of the operation with the government. If the operation doesn't pay for itself or otherwise becomes a burden to the stayed-at-home group, the political problems force the government to intervene. This is the rationale of the game in a very brief form. The game starts with a corporation having developed space for profit. The worker colonies that were started by the company decide that they should be independent to get a better deal. In the course of the colonies' fight for independence they try to exert an economic stranglehold on the Ares Corporation (the founding company) and the world government.

The existence of the world government is important because it acts as a third player in the game, so the two opposing players cannot just wage war without paying attention to the effect on the populace of Earth. The existence of the world government also explains why there are no vast armadas, formed by nations, floating around in space. All weaponry and ships are corporation-developed technology for mining, converted to war materials. The world government has no space fleet because such a force would not be necessary to enforce policy on Earth and the only people in space are the Ares colonists and spacemen.

The colonies exert their economic power by withholding the raw material they mine and ship to Earth. Ares exerts its logistical control by controlling the technology necessary to repair and replace parts needed for the space units. These controls are in the game as limits on the production and repair points accrued by the colonists and the corporation. As an old sci-fi reader I would say that the game is faintly reminiscent of Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.

Physical Layout

There are two game maps that may be used separately or together (for the campaign

game). The first is the strategic game map of the Solar system out to the orbit of Jupiter. The mechanics of planetary orbit are handled by marks on the orbit lines to indicate the distance moved by any given planetary body in the course of one Earth month. Besides the inner planets from Jupiter, there are four asteroids to be tracked. Movement on the strategic map is handled by a measuring scale which is laid on the board to see how many turns of travel are necessary between the start point and destination. The ships are organized in task forces and the force marker placed in a specially marked box on the map to show how close they are getting to their destination. One turn equals one month.

The best feature of the strategic map is the presence of all necessary charts for the strategic game.

The three-dimensional movement of any developing battles between two forces around a body is handled on the tactical display (note: if the strategic play is not done with the tactical rule interface the battle can be handled in an abstract form as in strategic *StarForce*). The tactical map has two sections that handle horizontal and vertical plane movements. I have found this to be difficult to envision at times during the game but I can see no better alternative. The only other possibility is a multi-layered cube but the expense would be extraordinary.

Fleet Charts are used in the game to monitor ship condition for battle and weaponry installed. The sheets seem to be far more durable than ones supplied with other games using similar charts.

Rules

The rules are well-written and contain the unusual feature of being interwoven with the story behind the game. The inclusion of the story not only makes enjoyable reading but facilitates the understanding and sequencing of the rules. The rules do require some effort to understand because of an entirely new gamespeak language.

The rules are broken into two sections: strategic and tactical. Players will find each section independent of the other for those who wish to play one version. The interfacing of the two rules sets for the campaign has not presented any conflict between the two games. The strategic rules will interest the player who wants to have a political conflict game with military conflict being a minor aspect. The tactical game will appeal to the player who sees himself swooping through space to avenge a wrong or cover himself with glory.



Catapult



Miner



Transport

System Effectiveness

Despite the potential for an incredibly complex game, SPI has produced an easily understandable one. Movement, combat and political operations are performed sequentially by the players. A good deal of the operations require some mental calculations which are aided greatly by the easily read charts in the game. As player experience with the game increases there will be less and less use of the charts because the presentation of data on the charts facilitates memorization.

The problem of orbital mathematics is kept out of the game by handling combat as if it were away from a close orbit of the planet. Therefore the ship flight paths are straight lines in the game. This in turn simplifies the calculations for maneuvering burns (Burning is acceleration via the expenditure of chemical fuel) to a small chart that gives the required fuel expenditure for a velocity change in all three dimensions.

Players very quickly see the problems associated with two or more bodies maneuvering in space. It takes time and fuel to change direction. A scenario played by gamers not familiar with *BFM* will find the opposing forces quickly running out of fuel as both groups fly helplessly off opposite ends of the tactical display. This ability of the game to show real problems encountered in space maneuvers rapidly turns the person who sees himself jetting around with unlimited power and fuel into a dissatisfied player. Those that can understand the physical laws represented in the maneuver rules will enjoy the game and win.

It is the fuel/maneuver rules that inspire my first criticism of the game. When a ship (on the tactical display) runs out of fuel it is considered to be drifting helplessly. Recovery of the unit is determined by die roll and whether the unit is drifting around a friendly or enemy-held base. This is perfectly logical. *But* — a ship can be traveling at maximum possible speed by burning all fuel points *except one point*. This ship is *not* considered to be helpless despite the fact that the one remaining fuel point cannot seriously affect the flight of the ship. I suggest that ships must retain sufficient fuel at the end of a scenario to bring themselves to a halt on the tactical display. Then the ship could logically switch from the chemical fuel maneuvering rockets, used in local planetary space, to the fusion power generators for deep space flight between planetary bodies. Otherwise there is no logical way for the ship to correct its trajectory to bring the ship to a friendly base within the time limits of the game.

As mentioned earlier in this article, combat is with equipment that was modified from its original purpose. The bulk of the combat is with lasers normally used to mine the raw materials by cutting asteroids, small moons, and general space debris into small enough sections for a ship (called a "catapult") to launch on a trajectory to Earth for processing. These lasers are capable of inflicting severe damage on an enemy ship caught in the beam of one laser. When the lasers are used simultaneously in groups of

three, called a Laser Firing Group, these weapons can annihilate any ship caught in the group's beam. This is the second weak point of the game as the rules (or the story) do not even hint as to why this capability should exist. There is no reasonable way to suggest how three separate ships can so accurately coordinate their fires.

On the strategic side of the game there is an effective demonstration of how space flight requires long-range planning. If a player plans to launch a fleet towards Jupiter from Earth (on the fourth game-turn for example) he will not be able to use that fleet at Jupiter until three turns later. If an opposing fleet decides to move away from Jupiter, or another opposing fleet causes a problem at the home planet, then that fleet in transit to Jupiter is worthless for several turns.

Overall *BFM* succeeds in far more of the mechanics of possible space flight/combat than it fails. In the more abstract problem of political opinion and morale conflicts the player is simply going to have to accept the point scales and die-roll results tables. There are no readily apparent inaccuracies and who can say what the success rates would really be if a colony agent tries to assassinate a corporation official? Or exactly how many points of Earth morale correspond to a successful or bungled attempt? The results are reasonably balanced so no player should leave the game crying "foul" because he disagrees with the charts provided.

Strategy

In keeping with SPI's *de facto* policy of including player's notes with their more elaborate games, a gamer will find several pages of discussion and suggestions at the end of the rules booklet on different strategies that players should use. These suggestions are the result of the pre-publication testing and are well worth the reading. This is especially true since *BFM* has many features not familiar to gamers from playing other games.

There are two major strategies that I have seen in playing the game that are worth following. The first is repair before building new units. It is far faster and cheaper to keep several damaged ships operable than it is to build a new ship from scratch. If you have to build ships the catapult ship is the deadliest force away from a base but it has a weak repair capability. If you aren't going to fight with anything but lasers (more on combat in the tactics section) then the transport is the best bet to build because it has excellent self-repair capability.

The second strategy is how the player thinks of the morale index. Do not plan an operation strictly from the aspect of how much your morale should go up. This logic quickly finds the player on the losing side. All too often a planned operation backfires and the player trying the operation finds his morale index heading for the center of his planet. The best mental approach is to plan on how to drive the morale of the opponent down easiest. Then the friendly player will find his side coming out ahead even though he may not necessarily gain many points.

This is not to say that gambles should not be taken. After all the gamble that fails was a stupid idea, but the gamble that succeeds was brilliant strategy.

Tactics

As in strategy, the player definitely has to read the player's notes. Repeated playing showed up several more tricks. The first was in using a laser firing group. Always make a laser group out of three ships with identical maneuvering capabilities. This not only makes it easier to keep planning to a minimum but prevents one ship from running low on fuel and forcing the group to break up.

The second trick deals with combating laser groups. The group can easily eliminate a single ship/missile/fighter that tries to attack the group. If the player opposing the laser group does not have a group of his own, then his best bet is twin ships to attack. Each of these ships should launch either a missile, or fighter if so equipped, *simultaneously*. This way the group is at a disadvantage for one or more of the following reasons:

(1) The two missiles form a salvo and, like the old submarine tactic, prevent the group from out-maneuvering the missiles/fighters.

(2) If the missiles are launched closely enough to the group, there will not be sufficient opportunity for the group to eliminate the missiles before detonation. If the group tries to engage one missile with one ship (for each) the group will not be operating effectively. Also one ship beam does not have a great damage capability compared to a group beam.

(3) The odds that one or more ships will be seriously damaged increases to a near certainty.

General Comments

The tactical scenarios will provide short games for gamers with only a couple of hours free for play. The strategic game, with tactical combat handled by the abstract method, is suitable for several hours to one day of play. The full game with tactical/strategic interface is best played on a weekend so players will not feel rushed.

One easily done variant, for gamers wanting several tactical battles other than the scenarios, is for the players to divide the asteroids and Jupiter between them. Ignore all planets from Mars to Mercury and the rules for the strategic game — except for transit movement. This can be considered to be a quarrel between colonies and will give sufficient ships for several extensive battles without drawing the game out for many hours.

