

SPI's

SCIENCE FICTION

GAMES

REVIEWED

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Star-Force: Alpha Centauri

This game was SPI's first venture into the field of science fiction games and to date is one of the best-selling games they have ever produced.

The actual play of the game is fairly complex, although experienced players should find no difficulties.

There are two levels of play, the 'basic' game and the advanced game. The basic game, as its name suggests, introduces one to the basic mechanics of play, that is movement and strategic combat. Movement is by the instantaneous transition from hex to hex (known as shifting) on a stellar display which is about 30 light years on all three axes. I say all three axes because Starforce employs a three-dimensional system of movement and, although this may seem complex at first sight, it isn't really and one soon gets the hang of it.

Combat is fairly abstract in the basic game, using a simple "differential" CRT, but in the advanced game this aspect of the game is altered by transferring combat to a tactical map. However, although it adds a considerable amount to the game, it does tend to be time-consuming.

There is a total of fifteen scenarios in the game, one of which is for Solitaire play. As for the others, the first few are designed for play with only the basic game and use few units and thus are fairly useful for learning the mechanics.

Other scenarios are designed only for the advanced game, whilst others can be played with either. Perhaps the best two scenarios are the last two, which involve a race known as the Xenophobes who, to put it simply, try to destroy everyone. What makes these interesting is the fact that the Xenophobe units use hidden movement, which means their opponents must guess what they will attack next, a job which is none too easy as well as time-consuming. A Xenophobe scenario can take up as much as 12 hours if not longer to play.

To sum up, Starforce is a fascinating game and certainly worth getting. Starforce has been on SPI's best selling list 14 times (up to Issue 60) and, as they say themselves, anything which is on the list 6 times, gamers should find as a valuable addition to their collection.



Outreach

This game is SPI's latest offering in strategic science fiction games. The game scale is much larger than Starforce (which would fit into one hex on the Outreach map), the hexes being approximately 1,200 light years across. The time scale of the game turns is "Generational" which I take to mean about 3 turns per century.

The play of the game is fairly simple. One starts by exploring hexes, such action which, if successful, yields a point value or potential value of the hex. This is important since the potential value is the maximum amount of resources (or system points) a Stargate on the hex can yield and the total amount of resources available governs how many new ships can be built and whether the ones already in service can remain so.

Movement is, as in Starforce, by means of "shifting", the instantaneous transition from one hex to another. The amount of distance which a ship can cover is only governed by attrition and the player's civilisation level, so theoretically, it is possible to travel an unlimited distance, although in practice this is not practical due to attrition. The civilisation level of a player (mentioned above) is a fascinating aspect of the game. It affects almost all the game functions. Firstly, the maximum distance one can travel when not starting from a Stargate is its square, known as the civilisation level range (CLR). The CLR also limits shifting from Stargate to Stargate, for a unit which shifts less than the CLR from 'gate to 'gate may continue shifting. Thus it is possible to have a chain of stargates with continuous shifting within it.

Inter-player reaction is fairly complex, using an "interaction matrix" whereby

players choose if they are to be hostile, neutral or friendly. Mutually friendly players share extensive benefits from each other — such as mutual use of Stargates, whereas mutually hostile players double all losses in combat. In addition to other players there are "Autonomous forces" which act independently according to a set of rules and thus add more interest to the game as they may suddenly attack you if another player declares war.

Fate is an interesting aspect of the game. Each Game Turn there is a roll on the fate table, which produces one of three basic results:

- (1) dissolution of one's forces by up to 90%
 - (2) creation of autonomous forces
 - (3) an increase in one's civilisation level
- The last result is conditional upon the expenditure of wisdom chits before the fate die roll. These chits are fairly precious, being brought from the centre of the galaxy, where they are fairly difficult to get.

Of the scenarios provided in the game, there are one each for one, two, three and four players and one for one to four players. The first two (for 2 and 3 players respectively) are introductory, not using such rules as wisdom chits and the relevant fate table results. The third (solitaire) scenario must be misprinted as it is mathematically impossible to complete it in the number of game turns permitted (I suggest 35 is a good alternative).

All in all, I consider Outreach to be one of SPI's best games, and well worth the money. However, would-be purchasers must be warned that some of the quality of the UK printing is below the normal SPI standards, in particular the counters are fairly poor. Nevertheless, I should not let this distract anyone from what is after all a fairly good game.