

BATTLEFLEET MARS

PART ONE JOHN EVANS



Battlefleet Mars is an S.P.I. game of conflict in the solar system set late in the 21st Century. The opposing sides are the powerful Earth-based Ares Corporation and the Martian Colonists who are lead by their Cabal or Martian Free Traders. Closely observing the struggle is WORD — the World organisation for Resource Development — roughly speaking the government of Earth. WORD will have an abstract yet important part to play in the game. The physical setting of the game is the planets as far out as and including Jupiter, and also the important Asteroids.

Opening the box up and examining the maps will surprise many a wargamer — there is not a hex in sight! There are 2 maps, basically green/white on black; one being the strategic map which depicts the orbits of the planets and asteroids mentioned above, the other the tactical map — a pair of squared grids used to simulate combat in 3 dimensions. There are 400 counters representing space ships, bases, planets, asteroids, missiles, fighters, task force markers, agents and various informational markers including velocity markers for the tactical game. The rule book is quite thick, although there are charts to be removed from the centre of it; separate are a pair of Time/Distance Trip Measure charts of intriguing and unusual design, a pad of Battle and Fleet Status records and 2 6-sided dice.

Battlefleet Mars is basically a 2-player game, though the tactical game may be played multi-player at a pinch with more than one player controlling the ships of each side. More than this, **Battlefleet Mars** is 2 games in one, comprising:

- 1) The Strategic Game and
- 2) The Tactical Game

Both games may be played separately, the former in the form of a campaign game, the latter in scenarios, or may be played together, with the tactical game intermeshed within the strategic game for the resolution of combat. This will extend the struggle by many game hours but will result in greater complexity and involvement, and for some players, enjoyment and satisfaction with the game.

I would like to examine the games separately and begin with the strategic game.

THE STRATEGIC GAME

The strategic game involves the use of the strategic map which depicts the orbits of the planets and

asteroids, divided into segments of one earth month which is one game turn. At the end of each turn, each planet and asteroid counter is advanced one of these segments or planetary positions anti-clockwise with the orbit of Jupiter used as game-turn indicator. It is interesting to note that 3 asteroids share the same orbit. At the head of the map are the various charts, tables, tracks and indices essential to the play of the game. These are very clearly laid out, with the all-important Morale Index taking pride of place in the centre.

The rules to **Battlefleet Mars** begin with a short introductory story to help you get the feel of the game; I like the idea and the story very much. Throughout the rules a "Commentary" is placed before the main body of the rules for a particular function, such as Interplanetary Movement of Ships, so that the intention of the rules can be made clear to players, and what the rules are designed to reflect. Some of the rules can be tough going but these commentaries certainly help, as does the "General Rule" paragraphs and I recommend toying with the game with the counters on the map for a few practice turns and soon it will all fit neatly into place.

The rules themselves include the planetary movement of ships, measured in a set number of "Game Turn Trips", combat (only at planets/asteroids), refuelling and rearming after battle, morale of the home population — the will of which to fight will decide the outcome of the game —, agents, revolts, counter-revolts, truces, negotiations, sabotage, production and logistics.

Set-up time is short as you deploy ships, bases and agents on the strategic map, mostly at planets and asteroids, but with some ships in transit. The counters — red on black and black on red for the Martians and blue on black and black on blue for Ares — look spectacular deployed on the map and there are some very nice touches: the astero-logical sign for each planet is printed on its counter and transit box and the agents look very natty in their flared trousers. The ships are soon replaced by task force markers which will cover the game with a cloak of uncertainty, though each task force must contain at least 1 ship.

The first turn requires some reference to the rules as it is different to a normal game turn. The rules are well structured with cross references in the text, so problems are minimal — I did have some problems with the allegiance of bases but eventually worked out that they follow the allegiance of their planet/asteroid. Deployment of agents is critical: each side should look not just to the revolt but to the future before deciding where to place their agents. I recommend that each side deploy at least one agent at their own home base and at least one at their opponent's home base. Martian agents are fewer but individually better than the Ares guys, so Mars should adjust his agent's deployment accordingly. These agents will influence home and enemy morale and various clandestine activities; hence a short sighted deployment could restrict your effectiveness in the game — there is more to the struggle than a punch-up in space. However, agents will be required on Jupiter and the asteroids too, so quite a bit of judgement is required, although this will come with experience of the game system.

After the turmoil of the initial heady days of the revolt, both sides will emerge with a number of ships which are kept track of on the fleet status record. Although several copies of the fleet status record are provided, players are advised to photocopy or make-up more (!). One ambiguity in the fleet status record arose with reference to case 9.53: is "0" box to count in the criterion "reduced TO zero" or not, and if not, what is the "0" box function when using the tactical abstract system of

combat? We decided the box was not counted and it did not apply to the tactical abstract system but to the tactical game intermeshed within the strategic game. This is no final word, of course, but was arrived at after a great deal of discussion. A further criticism of the fleet status record, and with it the battle record for the tactical game, is that the information boxes are small which makes pencil marks difficult to erase and leads to confusion.

Digressing further from the main theme of the game, I must mention one real source of confusion and dirt in the game: "damage" nomenclature. Although the rules give comprehensive definitions of terms used, nomenclature concerning "damage" is slack. Using the tactical abstract system, there is "damage" and "major damage"; using the tactical game there is "damaged", "damage", "seriously damaged", "minor damage" and "major damage", not to mention "crippled"! Maybe this is nit-picking, but it can lead to frustration, particularly in the Scenarios. However, I must stress that only "seriously damaged" is improperly defined and the intentions are simply sorted out and rationalised.

Meanwhile, back at the strategic game, — the identity of your ships — called catapults, miners and transports — and bases has been noted on the fleet status chart. Catapults must be serviced for warfare at a friendly base and some combat — which only takes place at Planets and asteroids, — will have taken place immediately following the revolt. Renegade ships will have fled asteroids and planets which are oppositely aligned. Ares has several ships under production and is usually well-placed for an offensive. The war is underway: I'll explain the mechanics of the tactical abstract and then illustrate what I've discussed in a sample game.

But in case you get the wrong impression, **Battlefleet Mars** is not just a military game — the political effects are very important: the game can even be won by one's agents and the morale of the home population decides the victor. WORD will have its say too.

The tactical abstract system compares the combat strength of opposing forces in orbit around the same asteroid (combat is mandatory) as a percentage of attacker to defender. The appropriate column on the Tac. Abstract CRT is consulted, a dice thrown and a split result obtained for attacker/defender respectively. The figures are the % lost in strength of the respective force which is converted to an actual number of strength boxes to be lost on the percentage loss table. These strength boxes are then ticked off on the fleet status record, weakening ships. As the game progresses, ships may be equipped with missiles and fighters, giving muscle to a task force.



SAMPLE GAME using tactical abstract combat system.

The Martian revolt took Mars, Jupiter, and the asteroids Ceres, Pallas and Juno, although the "persuasion" at Juno resulted in the neutralisation of the base. The base was quickly repaired, Martian defences consolidated and industry placed "on line". 2 miners and 1 catapult were placed at each asteroid by both sides for production purposes. Mars held a catapult for each asteroid and Jupiter and Earth held a catapult for Vesta, the only loyal asteroid. This is essential for production and logistics — players should take special note of 15.25 for the importance of Jupiter to production.

Both sides' catapults were armed, and Ares attacked Jupiter and Pallas on turn 3. The Martians smiled as these attacks were beaten off. Earth morale sank.

Ares decided something had to be done and quickly. The home scene was turning ugly. Assassination of Martian agents had been ineptly bungled. Rabble-rousing on Mars wasn't helping much. WORD had turned its back. The Ares fleet grew stronger with more ships and the provision of missiles. More than a coup de main was to be attempted; a concrete strategy was forming. Due to its minor orbit, Earth was closing on Juno. The strategy of asteroid-hopping as earth closed on them was about to begin!

When Juno fell neatly into an Ares 2-turn trip and was furthest from Mars, Ares struck. Task force E set off with 5 catapults, 6 transports and a miner (a mistake, as a second miner would have placed a captured Juno immediately on line) and savaged the Martian defences. Earth's flagging morale lifted and the successful defence of Vesta soon afterwards turned Ares attention to Pallas, the next asteroid on line. Victory here would put Earth Morale back up to where it was at the start of the game for the first time since the war began!

And so it was. Mars, playing for time and more ships, suffered a depression of morale. Ares decided upon a final assault on the Martian home planet.

A confident task force E left Pallas for Mars and task force A left Earth for Jupiter as a diversion, to ensure final victory and in a belief that the Corporation now could not be stopped.

The battle at Mars went well for the Corporation at first. Overconfident, the Ares commander decided not to apportion losses evenly amongst his fleet, but to lose whole ships. The Martians stayed cool and judged the situation carefully, apportioning losses more evenly and finally gained supremacy. How were the mighty fallen — the proud Ares task force was smashed and a lone catapult limped back to Earth with not even 1 of the Martian bases neutralised.

Attempting to make up at Jupiter what had been lost at Mars, Ares attacked once more. However, Ares misjudged the strength of the Jupiter garrison and reinforcements from Martian Ceres sealed Ares' fate: a lone transport limped back to Earth and a truce ensued.

Confident that the people of Earth would stomach this no longer, Mars waged a political war and built up her fleet. Mars had retaken Pallas prior to the truce and quickly placed Pallas "on line", bringing in further raw materials, but more importantly — these raw materials were not going to Earth!

Ares saw only treachery as a way back. A massive task force descended upon an unsuspecting Pallas, bathing in the truce, and promptly broke the truce by military action, taking the asteroid in a bloody battle. A rigged press convinced the people of Earth that this was a major victory and Earth morale recovered.

The Cabal (Martian Free Traders) were shaken and Ares prepared for a decisive strike at the heart of the revolt — Mars. 2 huge task forces were built and the distance between Earth and Mars was but a 1-turn trip (Game Turn 17). Ares launched their forces.

The Cabal were not unprepared. 2 sizeable task forces had returned to Mars. Ares counter-revolted, but the Cabal dealt with this quickly. Upon the arrival of the Ares force, the Cabal made the supreme sacrifice and took a terrible gamble. All Martian ships left for Earth on a 1-turn-trip. The inevitable occurred and the Ares force quickly overcame the 2 Martian bases defending Mars. Mars was theirs but the Cabal refused to give way and did not surrender. Everything now hung on the play of one last card.

Earth is defended by 6 bases. The defending garrison of ships comprised 2 catapults, 2 transports and 2 miners. The whole force was armed with missiles. However, only 2 bases could be brought to bear at a time, and when only 2 bases remain, they must fight singly.

The battle began with heavy losses on both sides. Ares lost her first base and 1 ship and 2 martian miners ceased to exist. The next round saw more casualties and another base was gone. The Martians cursed their luck as the 3rd base took a further toll of the Martian ships with it, though with the demise

of the fourth base the end was in sight. The remaining 2 bases fell quickly and good shooting blew the remaining 2 Ares miners from the "sky". Earth had fallen! And Earth rolls first on the Morale Index — Martian Victory!

Play of **Battlefleet Mars** taught me several things about the game and its subject and also emphasised to me some important concepts in military thinking. At the risk of sounding bland, I would like to discuss a few of the things I had a very enjoyable time learning.

1. The game illustrates that one effective way to counter an attack or offensive is to mount an attack of your own somewhere else. The concealed strength of the task forces — you only see the code marker on the map — helps a lot in this. I must say I really enjoyed the doublethink which allows both counter-attacks and diversionary attacks and almost any sort of play you can think up.

2. Feints can be very effective: heading for one planet/asteroid and then changing course to another can throw your opponent, putting you one small but very important step ahead of him.

3. A plan is important, and should co-ordinate the military, political and economic aspects of the game. Be prepared, too, to exploit your opponent's lack of one (opportunism).

4. Note the point of origin and destination and length of trip in game turns for task forces undertaking interplanetary movement. The first two points are mandatory but the third is very helpful. Multiple changes in transit allocation appear complex but soon become easy; remember, all you require is the origin and destination of the LAST trip, and noting how long it was, a quick reference to the ship transit tracks on the map will inform you how much of it you've done.

5. Taking losses: using the tactical abstract system, cross off the "extra" boxes on bases, catapults and transports when using fighters or missiles to keep as many ships (and their missiles/fighters) in play as possible. Keeping damage down will also conserve logistics points.

6. Garrisons: garrison the home planet at all times for either a determined defence or a risky counterattack at your opponent's home planet. Keep a reasonable garrison, if possible over and above the "on line" requirement, on the asteroids and Jupiter. Remember the necessary catapults for this at one's home planet.

7. Venus and Mercury: useful for raids and sneak attacks due to their shorter orbit.

8. Agents: deploy thoughtfully. Don't be afraid to move them.

9. Overview:
a) Mars starts well.
b) Ares comeback, possible advantage.
c) May the best planet win.

Keep going to the final die roll; all is never lost in this game. Game turns are quick, and though the game can be fairly long, interest and excitement are maintained throughout.

10. Criticisms:
a) The rules concerning cometary orbits could be clearer; it looks like they were written before the map was finalised, but the intention is clear enough.

b) Case 8.52 contradicts with the use of the Time/Distance Measure. I prefer to follow 8.52 and concluded that the wording on the dotted lines on the T/D Measure was misleading. A ruler can be handy.

11. Questions for S.P.I.
Q1 Can a base taken by counter-revolt use the captured fighters in tactical abstract system combat?
Q2 Can the Martians arm transports with a missile/fighter capacity using the tactical abstract combat system, having built such transports?

But enough of the tactical abstract — next time I'd like to describe the tactical game and comment upon it; it is almost a separate game in itself.



A REVIEW OF NEWS, GOSSIP AND RUMOUR COMPILED BY DOUG DAVIES

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Following the recent massacre of the R&D staff at SPI, shell shocked survivors are reported to be in a state of suspended animation awaiting the next firing, demotion or resignation. The lack of remaining personnel inevitably resulted in a temporary lull in titles entering the production schedule. The latest games to start development include **Kursk**, an operational treatment of the Russian 1943 victory which utilises a modified PGG system and was designed by Brent Nosworthy before he became the latest victim of the purge. Jim Dunnigan is working on **Medieval**, an unusual game covering the fortunes of several factions and Houses over the course of the Middle Ages. Besides the **Suez To Golan** game I reported last time the Mech War package now contains **Red Star/White Star**. A further title involving the Arab-Israeli conflict will be **Across Suez** which will replace the dreadful **Strikeforce** as an introductory game. Good news from the R&D side is the return to the fold of Terry Hardy.

The situation with regard to future S&T issue games is at present rather unclear. The game for issue 75 may be on a potential Sino-Soviet war, and is being designed by Stephen Donaldson, but at the moment it is untitled. In the event that this title is not ready in time two of the odd Quads, **Murfreesboro** and **Eylau**, will probably take its place. Issue 76 will contain a game on the Gallic Wars.

SPI have rushed out a new boxed version of **The East Is Red** in the States, apparently in response to the Chinese attack into Vietnam. I wonder if we will be subject to one of Redmond's periodic fits of soul searching over the morality of wargaming following this?

Meanwhile a whole host of games have entered the production schedule at GDW, several aimed at an Origins release date. The most ambitious of these will be a five map boxed game entitled **Desert Victory** which will cover the entire North African campaign of World War II and is being designed with the accent on playability. Still concerned with the desert will be **Beda Fomm** a series 120 game showing the classic victory of General O'Connor over the Italians in 1940-41. Shifting over to the European Theatre GDW plan to release **Fortress Holland** a one map boxed game illustrating the German attack in 1940, and **Road To The Rhine** a two map game covering the period of the breakthrough from the Normandy beaches in 1944 which includes both Market Garden and the Battle of the Bulge. For science fiction addicts there will be **Delta** which involves conflict in an asteroid belt over mining rights, and **Snap Shot** a game featuring tactical combat aboard a star ship. This last item is part of the ongoing Traveller series which will shortly be spawning its own magazine **The Journal of the Travellers Aid Society** which it is hoped will capture the same type of audience at present enjoyed by D and D. Finally GDW are releasing a further four sets of their System 7 miniatures sets.

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