

FLEETS

THE PLEIAD CONFLICT





Skirmish at Eden

Story by Jacob Fryxelius

Admiral Gerald Hunter was inspecting the scene in front of him through the viewport.

- They can't be serious, he stated as he gestured towards the vessels below in orbit around Eden.
- It seems that the ThorGate Alliance got the intel as well, sir, his adjutant commented.
- No matter. They are no match for us. I can't believe they would send such a weak fleet here. Ergonia of all! Even though the protector fleet has left the system, they should realize that they would not get the spoils to themselves. Perhaps this is all they

could muster on such short notice. Again, no matter. Battle stations, Foss. Prepare to launch fighters.

- Yes, sir. Foss saluted and turned on his heel to relay the orders.

It would not be long before the Alliance detected Fleet Valiant, but Hunter had made good the time they were in planet shadow. He grinned to himself as one light after another blinked green on the console to his left. The Valiant lumbered on towards its prey when the com went live. Hunter switched it on and a Pleiad Council envoy appeared and immediately demanded that Fleet Valiant refrain from hostilities, in the name of the charter. Irritated, but unmoved, Hunter replied,

- Not this time, ambassador. Eden is unoccupied - I have clearance. Negotiations are through here.

According to plans, his superiors and their council friends should have declared Eden unoccupied just a few days ago.

- But, what... the envoy began before Hunter closed the com. He was so tired of these meddlers that always seemed to get in the way. But not this time.

- Well said, sir, said his adjutant that just rejoined him on the bridge. They will be in range in just a few minutes, sir. What are your orders?

- Launch fighters and fire at will.

As his fleet prepared for battle and soared forward, Hunter watched the feeble Alliance fleet muster what defenses they had. More transports arrived from the planet surface and the signatures of pesky ThorGate energy ships formed up with some other vessels in front of Ergonia. Those are new signatures, thought Hunter as his fleet opened fire. Missile streaks and laser beams began to fill the viewport, but immediately bright flashed emerged in their way. Shields! I should have known, thought Hunter. It must be a new design. No matter, though. No shields or energy is going to keep my firepower at bay for long.

- Send the fighters to destroy those shields. Hammer them to pieces, he ordered. And log that shield ship signature.

Enemy fighters, hopelessly outnumbered, perished as they tried to protect the shield ships. His grin widened as one after another, the shield ships were destroyed. Then his grin dropped as a green aura began to build around Ergonia and her closest ships.

- No! Blast her! She is escaping! Hunter bellowed furiously.

But it was too late. Ergonia was gone with all the spoils she could carry. How could she engage the drive so quickly? He never could figure the ThorGate Alliance out. Always some new trickery. At least this time it had cost them a lot of ships, he thought sourly.

- Clean up and then tax that planet. And I don't care that they've already been taxed! Send full reports to my quarters. I'm out.

- Yes, sir, said Foss as he watch admiral Hunter stride away in a furious mood. Best not to disturb him for a couple of days. As he watched the scene in front of the Valiant he thought, I'll have things to do anyway.

FLEETS

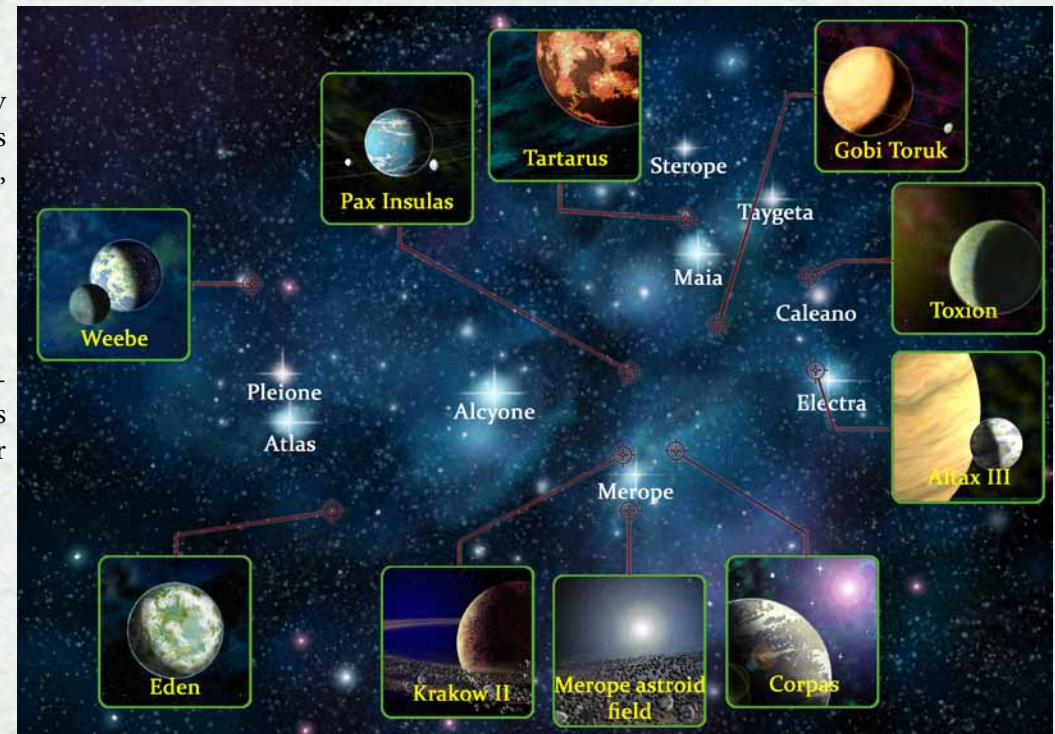
THE PLEIAD CONFLICT

Background

In 3400 AD, mankind has colonized the Pleiad star cluster where mighty corporations vie for control and influence. Each player equips fleets with escort ships and upgrades and uses them to control star systems for VPs. Diplomatic leverage, cunning, and brute force will determine the victor.

Goal of the Game

In Fleets: The Pleiad Conflict every player controls a corporation. Every system that is controlled by only one corporation at the end of the round generates 1 Victory Point (VP) to that player. The game ends when any player reaches 7 (or more) VPs. Then the player with most VPs wins the game.



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Game Components

80 Escort Ships

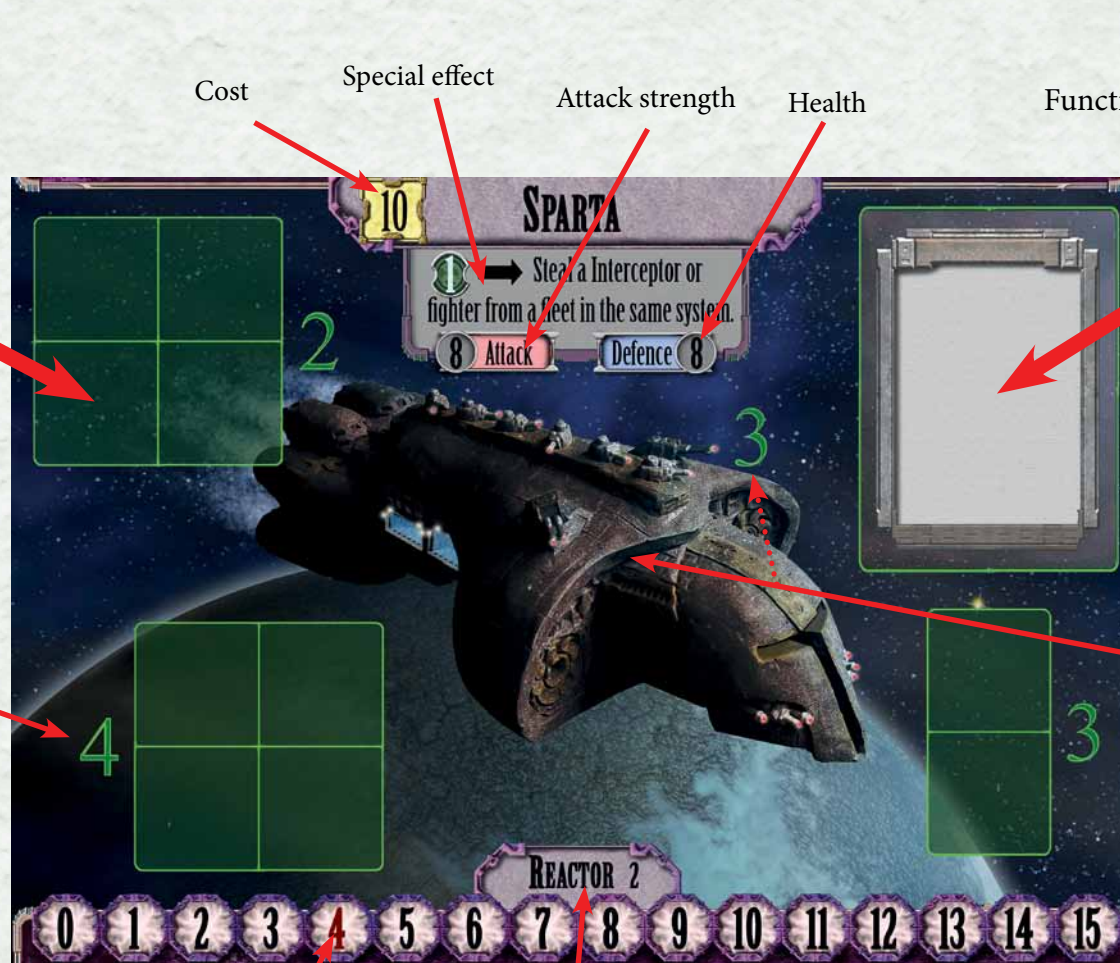
8 different kinds to customize your fleets. Each kind has its cost, size and strengths.



Slots for escort ships

20 Fleet Boards

Consists of a flagship with attack strength and health. The fleets also have space for Upgrade cards and escort ships, as well as energy to use for battle actions.



Cost

Special effect

Attack strength

Health

Function

Initiative number shows attack order from 1 to 4.

Cost

Slot for upgrades

Flagship (and its initiative number). Put damage markers here if the ship is damaged.

20 Dice

For use in battles.

Energy track starting point

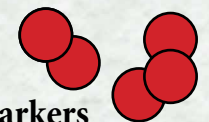
Reactor to supply energy

60 Markers

Used to mark diplomatic points, megacredits, VPs, energy and damage.

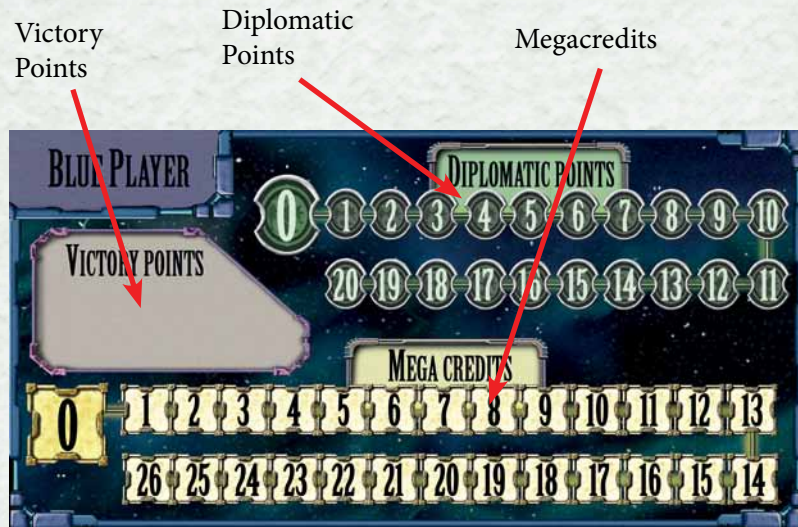
32 Upgrade Cards

Can be bought on a separate market and has various costs and functions.



4 Player Boards

Keep track of players' money (MC), Diplomacy Points (DPs) and Victory Points (VPs).



1 Rule Book

In which you find a summary of Game Components that tells you that a Rule Book is included in the game.

60 Action Cards

For use in diplomacy and battle.



8 System Tiles

The game board consists of randomly selected planets or asteroids. Each player have their own corner to place their fleets.

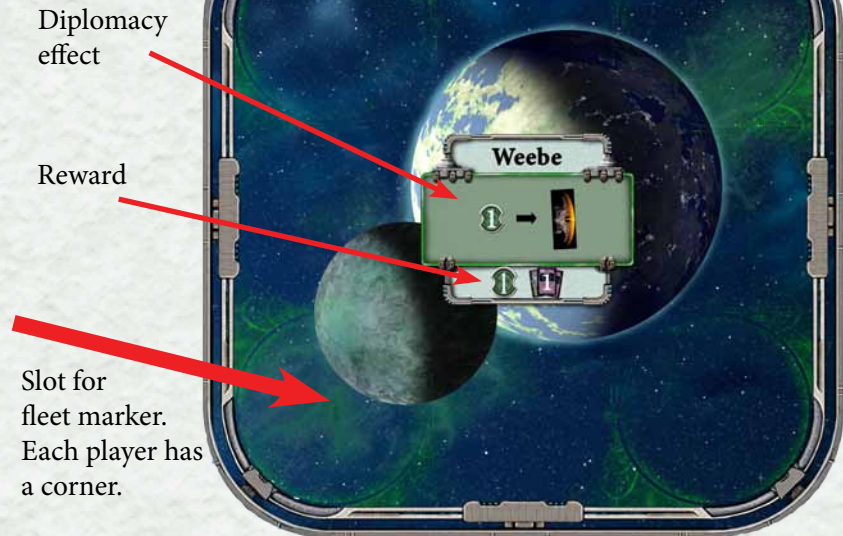


4 Player Order Tiles

To randomize a new player order every round.



20 Fleet Markers



2 Rule Sheets

With game summary and ship overview

Slot for fleet marker. Each player has a corner.

FLEETS



5

3

5

1

2

4

5

(Space for fleets)

(Space for fleets)

(Space for fleets)

(Space for fleets)

5

5

Setup

- Game board:** Shuffle the system tiles. Randomly select as many tiles as number of players, plus one. (i.e. 5 tiles for 4 players). Place them in the same direction in the center of the table. Put the remaining system tiles back in the box.
- Action cards:** Shuffle the action cards and put them in a pile, face down. The action cards are either diplomatic action cards (green) to be played in the diplomacy phase, or battle action cards (purple) to be played in the battle phase.
- Markets:** Shuffle the fleet boards and upgrade cards (yellow) and place them face down in 2 separate piles. Turn up the top 3 fleets and the top 3 upgrades and place them in 2 rows. These are now the market and the items can be bought by the players on the Market phase. The market always consists of 3 fleets and 3 upgrades. When someone buys a fleet or upgrade, it is immediately replaced with the top card from the respective pile. A fleet or upgrade that is destroyed in combat will go to the bottom of the pile, and may thus be available again on the market later on (see Phase 5 - Battle).
- Nice piles with stuff:** Sort out markers, escort ships, fleet markers, and dice into separate piles and make them easily accessible for all players.
- Player Boards:** Each player gets a player board, representing a corporation, and 2 markers. Each player starts with 26 megacredits, 6 diplomatic points and 1 action card.

The Corporations

In the Pleiads, there are 4 major corporations that players can choose to control. These have been the main actors in the colonization of the Pleiads and are now both wealthy and strong, controlling their own battle fleets. The rivalry between these giants have now escalated into open warfare... Will your corporation be the victor?

PhoboLog

The first corporation to reach the Pleiads, PhoboLog got a head start and is now in a position to challenge even the strongest competitors. PhoboLog specializes in ship building and space technology.

The ThorGate Alliance

Energy giant ThorGate arrived in the Pleiads, forging a strong alliance with lesser factions, making them one of the top contenters for power in the Pleiads. Many planets and corporations are dependent on ThorGate energy technology.

Teractor-Olympiac

A conglomerate of several martian and earth-based corporations after the terraforming of Mars, Teractor-Olympiac are great colonizers and terraformers, as well as being one of the strongest corporations in history.

Poseidon

Weapon technology and money is a powerful combination. Poseidon is poised to strike and claim whatever they can in the Pleiads. Several planets have already surrendered to their rule.

The corporations have equal starting conditions.



The Round

We are ready to start. Every round consists of six phases where the players will be able to build fleets, deploy their fleets, use diplomacy, then battle and finally collect VPs and other rewards. Finally all players withdraw their fleets and start a new round.

The round consists of these phases:

1. Player order
2. Build
3. Deployment
4. Diplomacy
5. Battle
6. Rewards



Phase 1: Player Order



Every round will have a new, randomized player order. Shuffle the Player Order Tiles (shown above) and hand them out randomly. This decides the player order during the different phases, always starting with the player with number 1, then number 2 and so on.

There are different advantages to be early or late in the player order. For example, during battle it's good to be early, because your ships may act first in each initiative stage. On the other hand, during deployment it's an advantage to see where your opponents are placing their fleets before you have to place yours.

Phase 2: Build



During the build phase the corporations construct, buy and organize their fleets. The players take turn (following the randomized player order from phase 1), doing the following:

1) Buy fleets and upgrades:

Buy fleet boards and upgrade cards from the markets. For fleets, pay the cost for the fleet (yellow box), then take it from the market along with the corresponding fleet marker. Also place a marker on the start square of the energy-track (4 energy). For upgrade cards, pay the cost for the upgrade (yellow box) and place it on an empty card slot on one of your fleets. Fleets and upgrades are immediately replaced with new ones on the market, and you may continue to buy more fleets and upgrades if you like.

A player may not own more fleets than there are systems in the game.

2) Buy escort ships:

Every fleet consists of a flagship but also has slots where you can place escort ships. Different escort ships have different sizes and must also be placed facing right, (same as the flagship). This means, for example, that a cruiser (that takes 2 slots horizontally) cannot fit in a single slot, or in a double slot that is vertical, but it may fit in a horizontal double slot, or taking up 2 slots in a 4-slot box (the 2 remaining slots

can be filled with other ships, see the example).

Buy as many ships you like by paying their cost (see yellow boxes on the rules sheet) and put them on empty slots on your fleets.

Escort ships may be rearranged within a fleet during the build phase, but they may never be moved to other fleets. Once they are built they belong to that fleet. You may also discard ships from a fleet, if you like, but you get no money back.

Tip: To speed up the game, the next player may start his build phase as soon as the previous player is finished with buying fleets and upgrades from the markets (step 1).

Tip: It's often good to have defensive escort ships, like interceptors and shield ships, or your enemies can fire directly on your flagship to destroy it!

Example: A fully equipped fleet.



Phase 3: Deployment



During the deployment phase, all players take turn placing their fleet markers on the systems they want to control this round. Every fleet that you own must be placed on a planet, and you may only put 1 fleet on the same planet, so you have to spread out your fleets.

The first player chooses a system tile where he places one of his fleet markers. Then player 2 places his first fleet on a system and so on. All players take turns deploying 1 fleet at a time until all fleets are deployed. Remember to place your fleets in your “own” corner on the system tiles, so it’s easy to see which fleets belong to which player.

If 2 or more fleets are deployed on the same system tile, there will be battle between them. But before that happens, the diplomacy phase may change the situation...

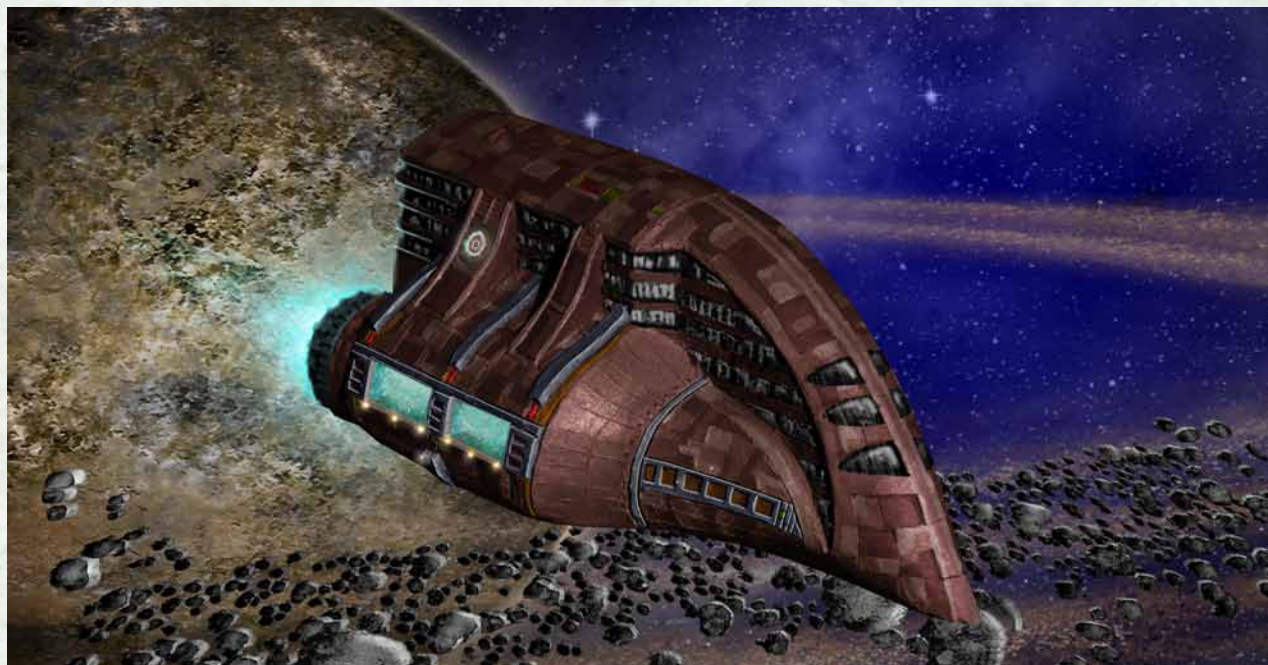
Phase 4: Diplomacy



The players take turn doing 1 diplomatic action at a time. You may choose from the following actions:

* If you have a fleet on a **system**, you may use that system’s special diplomacy effect.

* If any of your **fleets** have a diplomacy effect, you may use it. (Only a few fleets have diplomacy effects. Look for the green diplomacy icon.)



Paving the way

Story by Jacob Fryxelius

Delegate Wosan was retreating to his chambers to change his clothes. They were damp with sweat, and no wonder – not only was the Pleiad Council Hall suffocatingly hot, but the vote had been a tough one too! Still, they had made it, he thought with satisfaction.

Aridor, a sure supporter of opening Eden up for corporate action, had suddenly turned around and voted against it, arguing that the protector fleet was only temporarily away for maintenance. Wosan had depended on Aridor and on the vote to go though! The Valiant was even now on its way to Eden to claim it. But then a last-minute bribe to ThorGate had worked. ThorGate had voted in favor of the proposition, its allies following suit.

The bribe had been almost too easy, but Wosan didn’t worry too much about that since it had saved his own skin. Whew! Yes, he definitely needed a shower. And a massage. He was looking forward to the evening reception.

* Play a **diplomatic action card** (and pay the DPs indicated by the green icon).

* Pay 2 DPs to **retreat** one of your own fleets back to your hand.

* Pay 6 DPs to **force an opponent’s fleet to retreat** from a system, back to his hand. You must yourself have a fleet there to force your opponent to leave.

* You may **pass** and let the next player continue. As long as everybody else doesn’t pass, you may jump in again with an action on your next turn, if you like.

When all players have passed consecutively, the diplomacy phase ends.

Phase 5: Battle

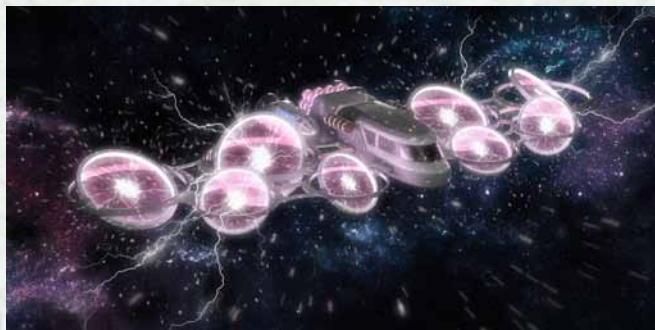


If more than one fleet is standing on the same system, the fleets will battle each other. In battle, every ship decides which enemy ship it wants to attack. **Every ship must fire, but may only attack once per battle.** If there are more than two fleets at that system, you may decide if you want to focus on one opponent or divide your forces on different opposing fleets. You may also choose between attacking the escort ships or go for the flagship of a fleet, or both. If the flagship of a fleet goes down the fleet is lost and immediately taken out of the game. (See 'Attack')

You may not attack your own ships or choose not to attack with your ships; every ship must attack an enemy.

If there are battles in more than one system the same round, the first player in the player order decides in which order to resolve the battles.

Non-battling fleets: Fleets that have retreated or have no opposition at their systems are not involved in battles but may use their ship effects and flagship effects that do not affect enemy fleets (like collecting energy, money or heal damage). Do this before resolving the battles (See Ship Effects). You may not play battle action cards.



2

Initiative: The battles are divided into initiative stages. Initiative value for every ship is marked with large green numbers from 1-4 on the fleet board. These numbers indicate when the ships will act during the battle. The players perform their initiative stages one at a time, according to the player order.

There are 4 initiative stages:

Stage 1: The first player attacks with all his ships marked with initiative 1. The first player may also play battle action cards and use ship effects before or after firing his ships. Casualties are removed immediately when killed. When the first player is done, the next player starts to perform his initiative 1. When all players have performed their initiative 1, the battle moves on to stage 2. (Note: It's unusual for ships to have initiative 1. Instead, this stage is mostly an opportunity for the players to use battle action cards before the real fighting begins.)

Stage 2: The first player attacks with his ships with initiative 2. He may also play more battle action cards, and use ship effects, if he likes. When he is done, the next player starts his initiative 2, and so on...

Stage 3: And so on...

Stage 4: And so on...

After stage 4, the battle is over.

If two players have ships with the same initiative, the player order decides who fires first. Destroyed ships are removed immediately and may not return fire or use effects.

Some battle action cards or upgrade cards may alter the initiative values temporarily, but initiative may never be lower than 1 or higher than 4.



Battle Action Cards: When a player performs his initiative he may also play battle action cards (the engaged fleet pays the energy cost in the purple icon). Even if a player has no ships in that initiative stage, he may still play cards. A player may use his cards and ships in any order he likes, but when the next player has begun his initiative (playing cards, attacking or using ship effects) it's too late for the first player to play more cards. Only cards marked with "reaction" may be played during an opponent's initiative.



Ship effects

These effects are summarized on the rule sheets. Special effects may only be used 1 time per ship and battle (including special effects on flagships).



Fighter: Attack 1 - Health 1 (Cost 1)

Special effect: After his normal attack with 1 die, you may also choose to pay 1 energy from the fleet to make 1 extra damage to the same target.

Example: A fighter attacks another fighter but misses. Then he pays 1 energy to give him 1 damage and take him out anyway. Or: A fighter attacks an interceptor and rolls a hit. The interceptor has health 2, so the fighter pays 1 energy to give him the extra damage that will kill it.

Interceptor: Attack 0 - Health 2 (Cost 1)

Special effect: Reaction - You may pay 2 energy and sacrifice your interceptor to stop an attack before the dice are rolled.

Example: The opponent's battleship is attacking your flagship with 6 dice. You decide to stop the attack by paying 1 energy and discard your interceptor instead. If the dice are rolled already, it's too late to use the interceptor.

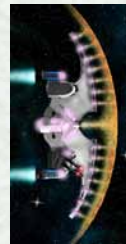
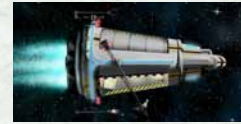


Cruiser: Attack 4 - Health 4 (Cost 3)

No special effect.

Mechanics: Attack 2 - Health 3 (Cost 3)

Special effect: At the start of a battle, remove 2 damage from any ships in this fleet. Note: The mechanics may heal damage every round, even if the fleet is not involved in battle.



Shield Escort: Attack 2 - Health 3 (Cost 3)

Special effect: Reaction - You may pay 1 energy to stop 2 damage to 1 ship in your fleet. This effect is used after the dice are rolled, when you know how many hits your opponent got. Shield Escorts may also shield themselves with this effect.

Example: An opponent attacks your flagship and gets 7 hits on their dice. You pay 1 energy to take away 2 damage, so your flagship "only" gets 5 damage instead, and survives. Or: A fighter attacks your shield escort and gets 2 hits (using his special effect). Instead of taking the damage, you decide to pay 1 energy to prevent it.

Generator: Attack 2 - Health 3 (Cost 3)

Special effect: When the generator attacks, your fleet gets 2 extra energy.

Note: Generators generate energy every round, even if the fleet is not involved in battle.



Battleship: Attack 6 - Health 5 (Cost 5)

Special effect: Beside its attack, it may pay 3 energy to shoot 2 missiles on 2 different targets. The missiles counts as 2 separate attacks. Each target gets 2 damage. Missiles may be shot

before or after the normal attack but in the same stage. *Example: You want to attack a flagship with your battleship. You start with firing 2 missiles to take out the 2 interceptors. One of the interceptors is blown apart but the other interceptor is saved by an enemy shield escort. "Rat's ass", you think! Then you try to attack the flagship with 6 dice, but your opponent throws away his interceptor to stop the attack before you roll the dice. "I kill him next time", you think.*



Refinery: Attack 3 - Health 5 (Cost 5)

Special effect: When it attacks, it may pay 4 energy to get 4 MC. Note: You can use the refinery effect every round, even if the fleet is not involved in battle.

About energy: It's important to have energy on a fleet to be able to use the ship effects and play Battle Action Cards. Without energy to use your interceptors, for example, your flagship is an open target. It's not allowed to move energy between fleets (except through some Battle Action Cards) and you may only use the energy of the fleet that is involved in the battle.

Attack: When a ship attacks, it first chooses a target and then rolls as many dice as its attack strength. It is important to clearly state which ship attacks and which ship it targets, and to give the opponent a chance to react with cards or interceptors before dice are rolled. Every die showing 4, 5 or 6 is 1 hit each, and damage is marked on the ship with red markers.

Example: A player points at his cruiser and says: "This cruiser attacks that battleship", and points at an opponent's battleship. His cruiser has attack 4, so he rolls 4 dice. The dice show numbers 1,2,5,5, which are counted as 2 misses and 2 hits. The opponent puts 2 damage markers on his battleship.

If a ship gets damage equal or more than its health, it is destroyed and immediately removed from the game. If a fleet's flagship is destroyed, then the whole fleet is immediately defeated and removed from the battle. In that case the fleet board and upgrade cards are turned face down and placed in the bottom of the market piles. Escort ships that are not damaged return to the player and may later be placed on other fleets during a build phase. Damaged ships are discarded.



Debacle

Story by Jacob Fryxelius

- Bank left, Ziggy! There - I got him. Close call.
- Thanks, Myon. We'd better... Hey! They're targeting Ezreel!
Where are our interceptors? No!

Their flagship was big, but so was the enemy fleet, and now they could see Ezreel's shields flickering and failing under the heavy bombardment. Helplessly they watched the flagship die, huge chunks being blown off into space. No! We're lost! Ziggy felt despair begin to squeeze his heart.

His home these last six years, blown to pieces, along with many of his friends.

Numbed, he was dragged back to reality as the intercom was transmitting from cruiser Zebulon.

- ... group at Weebe. Repeat: The battle is lost. All survivors disengage and regroup at Weebe. Good luck and God save us!

Looking out at the approaching swarm of ships, Ziggy thought: Yeah, we're going to need both before this is over. Debacle! He turned his fighter to close with Zebulon and make a warp-link to it. Before being able to escape, though, there would be some wild evading to attend to.

Phase 6: Rewards



The last phase of the round goes to collect VPs, rewards and new resources to the players before the next round begins:

1) Go through the systems one at a time. A player that is alone at that system gets 1 VP. Then give all fleets there the rewards for that system. It might be energy, action cards, megacredits or diplomatic points (See the icons on the system tile). Energy rewards are only given to the fleet you have there. Rewards are collected even if there are 2 or more fleets on the planet. After the fleets have collected their rewards, they withdraw to the players' hands. Then move on to the next system for VPs and rewards.

2) Beside the planets' rewards, all players get 6 megacredits, 2 diplomatic points and 1 action card. Every fleet gets energy equivalent to their reactor value.

3) **If any player reached 7 VPs, the game ends. If not, a new round begins. Ties are won by having the most diplomatic points.**

Good luck in the Pleiads!



Taxed

Story by Jacob Fryxelius

Farmer Golinda watched the sky intently. Yes, it was a lander, coming down towards the starport at the capital just beyond the horizon. But it didn't have the usual blue exhaust of the PhoboLog landers. And it was less than a week since the last lander. Who this newcomer was she couldn't say, but new masters usually meant harder taxation and lower prices for her vegetables.

Medusa wasn't a very fertile planet, never would be, it seemed. Medusa was a mining world. Few crops could thrive and those who did weren't very tasty. With loads of excellent

food coming in from Eden, the competition became harder every year and she hardly made a profit anymore.

Golinda saw another glint in the clouds.

What? Two landers? There, another one coming through the clouds. Something must really be going on up there. Someone must really be in a rush to get resources off the planet, and it isn't PhoboLog.

So, more taxes then. Maybe even a new governor. Just what we need, she thought sourly. You'd think that the extensive mining industry would be the ones to pay for 'protection' since that was always the demand from off-world, but no, everyone was taxed. Taxed until starving. And now taxed again.

400 years earlier...

Discovery

Story by Jacob Fryxelius

Chief Analyzer Gordon Brack of the Teractor-Olympiac corporation sat at his desk. To his right, the glass wall offered a view of Candor Chasma in all its splendor. The Valles Marineris had always been spectacular, but the terraforming of Mars had made it a breathtaking marvel of cool lakes, lush islands and sky-reaching canyon walls. Gordon, however, had all his attention on the reports on his desk. ThorGate had these last few years increased their ratio of omni-crypted messages. Of course, there was no deciphering them, but it told him that something was going on. The messages were mainly being sent between the headquarters and analysis department (which was to be expected for any top secret project), but also to their space docks at Triton. This had gone on without anything notable happening, but now the quarterlies contained reports of increased omni-crypted messages in Planetary Gardening as well, and following a similar pattern. Maybe... yes it could be that the 'gardeners' had actually found out what ThorGate was doing. Hmm. We better find out too if it is important enough for Gardening to tag along.

Gordon took a closer look at the page with message details. It seemed that Planetary Gardenings colonial board may be in on this one too, and maybe even their terraforming department. No surprise there, he smiled wryly. That was their main department after all, with all the legacy and experience of the great Ecoline and Inventrix!

A light flashed on his desk.

- Yes?

- Dr. Meldoc wants to see you. He says it's important.

- In 4 minutes, Gordon said, switching off. He rose, filled his glass and walked over to the glass wall, taking in the view. He was used to it, of course, but it usually helped him clear his mind and allow new strands of thought. He should be grateful to Ecoline and Inventrix he realized, for having contributed so much to his planet. Pity they refused the offer to join Olympiac

when they had the chance, before Teractor entered the picture and made it diplomatically impossible. Well. Teractor may be an enemy difficult to reconcile with, but they do pay top credits for what they want. With over a credit a year, my family's not going to starve anytime soon.

The door opened behind him and closed, Dr. Meldoc waiting for Gordons initiative. Good old Meldoc! Head of Observations subdepartment, Meldoc was always polite, but his eagerness over his findings could sometimes carry him away. Even if his intrusions were often not very helpful, a few times they had saved the corporation millions of credits. And when he wasn't helpful, he was still amusing. Gordon turned around and gestured towards the visitor seat while he returned to his own.

- I have exciting news for you, my dear mr. Brack! He could hardly contain himself. It's not happened in a decade or more! Fantastic! Absolutely fantastic!

- WHAT is fantastic, doctor? He couldn't help smiling.

- On my watch on tuesday evening I came upon - no, wait, it was monday evening. Or was it tuesday? Today is... nevermind. A strong warp signature, sir! And not just any warp signature - its apparent speed is 0.882c! Meldoc said triumphantly, waiting for Gordon to react.

Hmm, that was indeed slow. Only a colony ship would be that slow. Allowing for the light-return time of the signature, real speed would be (he worked on his wristpad) 7.35c. Just in line with the last of the colony ships, and no lighter ships would willingly be that slow.

- A colony ship, he said.

- Yes! After decades of refining the art of colonization, we set out again! They must finally have figured out how to make colonies stable, growing and prosperous, despite the inevitable isolation from Sol. A-sol-ation, get it? Get it?

- I get it. Quite funny. So where is it heading? And who is it?

- Well, the measured distance to the warp signature - which was really strong I tell you - was 0.28 light-years, so with a speed of 7.35c and allowing for light-return that means the ship left Sol 116 days ago, that is almost 4 months. So we checked our records from that date and found the corresponding take-off signature. It had escaped our first scrutiny by being cleverly concealed by other warp traffic and by a large moon, Triton, Meldoc said with a smile.

So this was what ThorGate has been planning. But another colony? Really? None of the 30-odd exo-planets colonized so far had been able to hold up. The long distances even to the closest stars were such that travel took many years even with the latest warp-drives. Even a really small probe could, in best case, reach a speed of 25c, enabling it to travel the distance in a year or so. The colonies had been effectively isolated from any meaningful exchange and help. Societies stagnated, trade was in decline and many colonies experienced civil wars that mother Sol could only watch from afar. No, the colonies were a big disappointment. What could have changed?

- So where are they going?

- That's the thing that baffles me, sir. We figure they are heading for Aldebaran, which lies 68 ly away - more than doubling the previous colony distances. Don't ask me why - Aldebaran is an orange giant and could not possibly have any suitable planets. With a smile Meldoc continued: But it also seems that they're not very good at aiming, because their course is off by a few degrees! They are actually heading for the Pleiades star cluster which lies 380 ly away! They will all be dead before they reach any star at all! Isn't that priceless! Hahaha! Can you believe it? Hahaha...

While Meldoc sat there chuckling to himself, Gordon pondered the news. No, he did not believe ThorGate would make such a blunder. Somehow they apparently meant to send a colonizer to the Pleiades. Generation ships had been designed before, even though they had not been needed for any of the colonies so far, and farther settling seemed utterly pointless in view of the 'successes' of the current colonies. They must know something we don't. And Planetary Gardening has caught on to it as well, he reminded himself, realizing the seriousness of the situation.

- Meldoc, I need you to do some more scanning. See if there are any other signatures in the direction of the Pleiades. And scan every warp signature leaving Sol, in any direction! I must know of every interstellar ship.

Meldoc looked perplexed, but nodded and left the room. Gordon transferred Meldocs dig-report to his console and switched on the comm.

- Please get me all available data on the Pleiades, categorized and structured. And tell Intel and Traffic to double their watch

on ThorGate and 'Gardening.

- Yes sir.

He looked out the glass wall again. Colonies in the Pleiades? Whatever for? Well, that's what I'm going to find out. And I doubt I'll be home for dinner, he thought as he watched the Pleiad info fill his console screen.

A week later Gordon had compiled a list of unusual traits of the Pleiades Cluster. It was one of the closest star clusters. It had several nebulae. It had mostly hot, blue stars. Meldoc had reported several small planets in the cluster, bringing the known total up to 31. The stars and planets seemed to contain the ordinary elements, although Merope was a bit unusual in that regard. It had an asteroid belt with some abundance of iridium, beryllium and encased argon and helium gas. He-3, according to a poster by a PhoboLog scientist at the Olympus Interplanetary Conference some 70 years ago, dug up by Intel. The Pleiades counted around 1000 stars, had a diameter of 40 ly and were most notably far, far, FAR away.

What was the problem with the colonies? Communication, no doubt. But the Pleiades are even further away, a lot further. So what could... wait. The Pleiades are distant to Sol, but they are VERY close to each other. He checked his data - often less than a light-year apart! That would mean travel times of weeks, not years. The previous colonies were never close to each other, but here they could be. Very close. Worlds in reach of each other could trade and support each other culturally and scientifically. Still, he thought doubtfully, interstellar space travel is expensive, even with the mass converter. And the Pleiades are so distant. There is something more. Something...

He checked his data again. And again. Something... Then his stomach turned to ice. Before he could even put words on his conclusions he felt his heart sink and his knees go weak. Not only would there be synergy between the worlds of the Pleiad Cluster. Not only would they offer new scientific opportunities. They also had helium-3. It took him a while to remember something he had learned in school all those years ago, that helium-3 was an ideal fuel for the fusion reaction required to initiate the mass converter. The problem was usually a shortage of helium-3, but there it was, waiting to be harvested from the Merope asteroids. The Pleiades could thrive, grow and given

time develop into the first interstellar empire, even surpassing Sol! Indeed, outclassing it, he realized. The Pleiades could grow to become the center of human civilization!

And ThorGate was already on their way to claim it. And Planetary Gardening too.

Well, Teractor-Olympiac is not that far behind, he thought. If I can convince the board of directors to act quickly and forcefully, we may still be the ones to win this prize in the end. With his jaw set, Gordon began working on a report to present the board of directors with. They would not be pleased with the development so far, but Gordon worked away with the grim satisfaction of a man with a task.

The light on his desk flashed.

- Yes, what is it? he asked irritably.

- Guess who?

He was not really in the mood for a chat with Meldoc, but let him in by habit.

- Again I have a surprise for you, my friend, said Dr. Meldoc with his usual intrigue.

- I'd be surprised if you didn't, Gordon answered sourly.

- Ah. Hahaha. Good one. Want to hear it? We found another colony ship warp signal going for the Pleiades! Isn't that something! Speed 0.871c and distance 49 ly. It was quite tricky to find it and we...

- Wait, wait, wait! 49 ly?? Did you lose a couple of decimals or something?

- No, no, sir. 49 light-years. Isn't that marvellous! Although this one is also a bit off track. We...

- Hey, stop it! 49 ly at a speed of... 6.8c, that would mean those colony ships left Sol... 56 years ago!! He quickly checked his console. There had been no colony ships from Sol for over 150 years. But the speed checked with an older colony ship model.

- But they didn't leave Sol, sir. That's the thing - they seem to originate from Ashkelon. Very strange, I must say, but it explains why no-one seems to have any record of its departure. Now that it has travelled a larger portion of the distance we are able to see its warp signature when we look towards the Pleiades. A bit off to the side, and quite weak, but still visible.

But Gordon wasn't listening anymore. His heart sank as the secrets were revealed to him.

PhoboLog! Ever so clever. First to realize the poten-

tial of the Pleiades. Their Ashkelon shipyards being both remote and disregarded as part of the colonial decline. Using that cover to secretly launch a generation ship for the Pleiades and then keeping their little mouths shut, shut, shut. For over half a century! Unbelievable, but there it was. Their colony ship must be arriving just now, settling, mining and claiming planet after planet for decades to come. No competition - oh, they knew they were going to lose if they had any serious competition! But now they don't, for another 50 years. Considering ship building time, ThorGate would also get a head start, of about 10 years. To be sure, neither PhoboLog nor ThorGate, nor Planetary Gardening for that matter, could stand toe-to-toe with mighty Teractor-Olympiac, but that head start could pretty much even things out.

- Did I tell you that the signature is actually comprised of 3? Meldoc continued. It is weak, but still stronger than what could be expected from a single colony ship, and if you analyze the wave patterns it becomes 3 distinct warp waves quite nicely. Oh, and when we backtracked their trajectory from Ashkelon, we found several weaker, but faster, signatures going towards the Pleiades as well. Consistent with old freight ships, I believe. Now, wasn't that a surprise for you?



Credits

Game design: Daniel Fryxelius

Assistant design: FryxGames & Thomas Fryxelius

Graphic design & artwork: Daniel Fryxelius

3D modelling: Michael Nilsson

FryxGames thanks: Thomas Fryxelius and the play-testing group in Gråbo, all our family and our fans. And, of course, our Creator.

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The logo for FryxGames is rendered in a golden, ornate, serif font. The letters are thick and have a textured, mosaic-like appearance. A small, stylized dragon or winged creature is perched on top of the letter 'Y'. The logo is set against a dark, starry space background with a large, curved horizon of a planet (likely Earth) visible in the lower right.