Galac-Tac: Commands to Conquer

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This continues a series of articles about Galac-Tac, a classic PBM game of galactic conquest that has been around since 1982. This article will discuss the commands used in Galac-Tac to initiate combat in the game system and how they differ in their effects.

There are five commands that can be used to start a fight: Attack, Defend, Patrol, Secure, and Sentry. They do so against any and all enemy ships present, regardless of what the enemy's orders are and whether or not the enemy has weapons. Once any ship at a given location starts combat, all ships (except scouts who escape detection) participate in the combat. Ships without weapons simply try to escape the fighting, but they remain targets and may be chased down and destroyed.

Let's begin by discussing the defensive options before moving on to the offensive ones.

The Combative Commands

Defend

For your primary defenses, you'll want to give your ships the Defend command. These ships represent your major emplacements that guard against a direct attack by enemy forces. When in this mode, ships are always ready for a fight. Weapons remain manned and there is constant vigilance for enemy incursions. The ships are positioned near the center of the star system to directly protect the habitations there. If any enemy appears in the system your ship immediately fires its weapons and combat begins.

Ships are usually placed on Defend in Home Worlds (HWs) and other Production Centers (PCs), since those are in the most need of protection. Ships on Defend can also be given "standing orders" to help fine-tune their behavior when combat begins (see below).

Patrol

In order to find out what an enemy's defenses look like (e.g. how big a fleet does he have), you would send in a ship in Scout mode to see if it can size up the opposition. Therefore, there is also a need to protect your own systems against the same tactics being used against you.

To accomplish this use the Patrol command. Patrolling ships spend their time in the outer reaches of a star system, where Scout ships do their work. Consequently, they are very thinly spread out and cannot reinforce one another. Their primary purpose is to simply spot the enemy's scouting ships and call in the rest of the defensive force to eliminate them. If the patrolling ship has weapons, it gets to shoot on the scout immediately. After that, all combatant ships move quickly to the central area of the star system where the entire fleet then engages in the combat.

Each patrolling ship has only a small percentage chance of catching any given scout, but in larger numbers a patrolling fleet can catch them nearly all the time. Patrols are also mostly used in HWs and PCs to provide protection against this sort of intelligence gathering.

Sentry

While HWs and PCs need continuous protection, colonies are not usually as critical. Colonies are not often left completely unprotected though, since scouts permanently placed there can monitor your economic system continuously. Since it is more expensive and time-consuming to set up permanent patrols in a large number of colonies, a rotating sentry may be set up instead.

A ship or fleet given Sentry orders is given a list of two to four locations to protect. They then automatically proceed from location to location, one stop per turn, and then start back over again at the beginning of the list. This continues indefinitely until given other others. As it stops in each system, the sentry performs the duties of a patrolling ship. Hopefully the sentry will have weapons because they are often the only protection available in such colony systems.

Secure

Defensive commands (except for Sentry) apply to the ship's current location and the ships do not leave the system. On the other hand, offensive commands are designed to attack other systems, which means that you have to move to their location. The offensive commands are therefore all movement actions where you make your attack upon arrival.

Secure is the simplest of the offensive commands and means "take at all costs". Securing ships will therefore leap directly into the central area of the star system and immediately begin engaging the primary defenses there. Weapons will be manned and armed before moving, so they can begin firing at the very beginning of combat. All securing ships fire at will at any available target of opportunity; they do not offer any more detailed control during combat.

Attack

The Attack action provides more flexible control of the combat. To begin with, attacking ships arrive on the outskirts of the system (where Scouts and Patrols roam). They then size up the opposition much like a Scout would. The Attack action offers the ability to abort the attack at this point if they seem to be too badly outnumbered.

The Attack action may be given a maximum SSD to attack and if the enemy has a fleet bigger than that, then the attacking ships would turn and run away. The enemy would observe this, but wouldn't be able to catch them and force them into combat this turn. Otherwise, the attack continues and the attacking ships move into the central portion of the system where full combat with the defenders then commences. Attacking ships can also be given additional "combat orders" to help fine-tune their attack (see below).

Fine-tuning the Fight

Galac-Tac is primarily a strategic-level game where the supreme commander (you) directs your ships and fleets to various locations to engage in combat and other activities. Once each combat commences, though, battle tactics are directed autonomously by the commanders and ship captains on the spot and you are simply informed of the results (if any ships survive to tell the tale). However, you may sometimes give "general directions" on how you'd like them to organize the battle.

When ships are in Defend mode, you may optionally give them direction with the Standing action. For ships that are in Attack mode, you may optionally provide similar direction with the Combat action. The two actions (Standing and Combat) are otherwise identical and can only be used with the Defend and Attack orders, respectively.

For either of these, you may direct that each of your weapon types try to target something in particular, when feasible. You may request that they target mostly other weapons systems, or main-body systems (shields, hangars, & cargo bays), or engines. You may also request targeting of (motionless) platforms in preference to moving ships. Or, some weapon types may be directed to concentrate their fire on Drones or Missiles in flight, providing a defensive "covering" fire.

Each weapon type may be individually specified, and each ship or fleet may be given a separate Combat or Standing action. For instance, you could have your whole fleet fire its T-Types (Missiles) mostly at platforms, its P-Types at any target of opportunity, and its Drones only defensively at incoming Missiles. These are not guaranteed targets, but only suggestions for concentrating fire.

In addition to giving your ships general targeting instructions, there is one more control that can be specified here. Since missiles (as ammunition) are expensive and can be logistically difficult to replace, you only want to use them against large enemy fleets and not against pitiful little scout ships or other insignificant opponents. So these commands also allow you to specify a minimum SSD size that the enemy fleet has to be before T-Type (Missile) weapons will be brought into action. This keeps down the waste of expensive ammunition.

These targeting guidelines are specified by supplying three numbers (each from 0 to 6) in the action indicating the desired target type for each of your weapon types, optionally followed by the minimum T-Type SSD.

Strategy in Force

Using these different commands in the right combination when going into battle can transform a large combat from a randomly violent encounter into an organized strategic triumph. Use them thoughtfully, in combination with your best ship and fleet designs, or suffer the consequences of the enemy doing the same to you.