

# Galac-Tac

## The GTac Assistant

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Galac-Tac is an old-fashioned game, of course, since it was originally designed for play-by-mail. But that original environment imposed some limitations on the way players' turns could be accepted and their turn results returned to them. In particular, players must write up turn sheets with minimal information as unambiguously as possible (to facilitate data entry) and the reports returned were simple text printed on paper (in color, no less). (The earliest version of Galac-Tac also included 17"x22" color-plotted hex maps with your position drawn on it. As far as we could tell, these were the first ever color-drawn turn maps in the PBM industry.)

Managing these paper-based turns was a chore for players, but we did such things willingly in those days because it was the best option we had. Over the years, though, personal computers were becoming more common in homes and it made sense to see what use could be made of them to help us play these paper-only games. In the beginning, we entered the most important information off our turn sheets into the PCs of the day and had them keep track of our information in a slightly more manageable form. As technology and communications between these PCs improved, more options became available.

By the time modems were more commonplace and made direct computer-to-computer communications feasible, I started working on a full-scale program to help me play Galac-Tac. I called it the GTac Assistant (or just GTac), and it has grown and helped my friends and me play Galac-Tac ever since.

### Goals

The primary design goals of GTac were to:

- Download turn reports directly from the Galac-Tac master computer system.
- Store the information from those reports on the home PC for easy access and cross-referencing between turns.
- Assist in the interpretation and presentation of the current game position to make play easier.
- Assist in the production of the next turn sheet (turn input).
- Transmit that turn sheet directly to the master Galac-Tac computer system, avoiding difficulties both with producing readable printed turn sheets and with manual data entry.

Satisfying these goals made playing the game easier and more enjoyable for both the player and the Game Master. The programming started on DOS systems using modems, moved up to using Windows and BBS systems, and now in the Internet age it's doing what everyone expects all game programs to be able to do – use graphics to interact with players and the web to interact with the game system.

### Features

The GTac Assistant is now a Windows-based application (written in a programming language called APL) that you can install on your own system to help you play Galac-Tac. The Galac-Tac website can show you copies of all of your empire's turns, but GTac also keeps a record of everything that's happened in a more concise internal form, right on your own PC. It can, for instance, show you summary reports about your empire, keep track of additional information that you enter, export data that you can use in other ways, help guide you in building your turn input and uploading it to the web server, and, most usefully of all, it can show you composite, auto-updating, interactive, graphical maps on your screen that you can customize.

## Using GTac

Let's take a look at some of the features that are available to you...

The first thing you would do with GTac is create a new galaxy data file to store data from the Galac-Tac galaxy that you just started play in. There are three main facilities here that you'll use a lot: download a game turn, display a map, and enter your actions for the next turn. You'll also be able to produce a few different kinds of reports and use various tools, as needed. Let's discuss each of these areas.

### Download Turn

Downloading the latest turn from the Talisman Games web site is a simple matter of selecting it from the menu. If this is the first time you've downloaded a turn, you'll be asked for your Talisman Games user name and password (since you don't want anyone else getting your turns). Each turn, GTac processes the data from the web site and adds the new information to its local database.

### Display Map

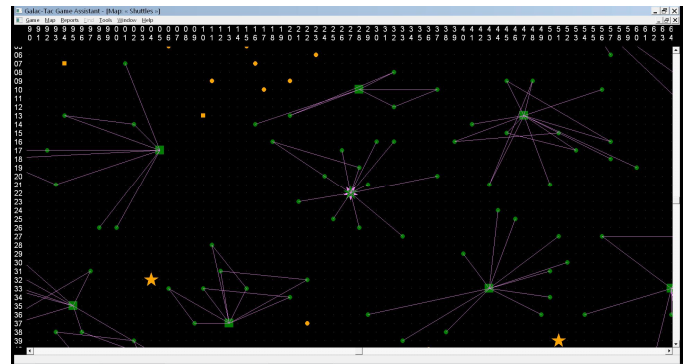
This is probably the most exciting feature of GTac – the ability to create your own map designs that are automatically kept up-to-date each turn of the game. I may have another article one day discussing more about how to accomplish this magic, but for now let's concentrate on the built-in maps that are available.

The first choice is just called a "Blank" map. It shows a lot of empty space (a grid of dots) with white five-pointed stars in their proper locations for this galaxy. This map, or any of the other standard maps, can be used as a starting point to custom-create maps of your own design.

For convenience, there are a number of pre-defined maps available so that you don't have to create your own for commonly-needed information. For instance, you can ask for a map where your enemies' stars are each colored differently, or where you can see your shuttle routes displayed to make sure you're collecting all your PV income.

All maps provide a list of coordinates on the edges so you don't get lost. Hover your mouse cursor over a star, and it will tell you its location and some basic game information about it (information that you have discovered to date, of course). Double-clicking on a star opens a box showing you many details, including what ships are there, what ships you have nearby, distances to other stars, and the complete summary of everything that's ever happened at that location. Right-clicking on a ship in one of those lists gives you the option of issuing a command to that ship without having to type it into your list of actions manually.

The big benefit of the mapping facility, though, is simply being able to see your empire rather than just looking at list of ships and coordinates on a report. This is a tremendous improvement over the old printed text maps with penciled notations and hand-drawn ship paths, and they can still be printed with up-to-date information whenever desired.



An example of a "shuttle route" map.

### Enter Actions

This opens a spreadsheet-like grid where you can enter your actions that you'd like performed on the next game turn, much like writing out the old paper turn sheets. However, this is a "smart entry" system.

First of all, it helps you enter valid Galac-Tac commands by spelling out the command name for you as soon as you've typed only a few characters. Then, it makes notes for you in the grid reminding you of what arguments are needed for that command, so you'll type them in correctly without having to constantly refer to the manual. Each of these arguments is also checked to make sure it's valid, and then many of them are also checked to see if they're reasonable. For instance, a star location must be entered in the form 99-99 and it

will object if you try to enter anything else. It will also remind you with a warning if there's no star actually at that location on the map. It will let you enter incorrect or questionable actions if you insist, but it tries its best to make sure you're not making inadvertent mistakes.

When you're done entering actions, you can ask GTac to check them for other common mistakes, such as giving a ship two conflicting orders, or spending more PI than you have available. When you're happy, you may then upload these actions directly to the Talisman Games web site for processing on the next due date.

Other options are also available, such as viewing the actions for older turns, typing in planned actions to be held for future turns, printing your action list, sorting the actions into a reasonable order, and even downloading actions that you entered on the web site when you were away from home.

### ***Reports***

Reports come in several flavors. One, for instance, is a printable report that gives you a one-page overall summary of the important things happening in your empire. You can just display it on the screen, of course, or show just one section of it if that's all you're interested in.

Another report shows an on-screen list of all the ship designs that you've created (including the initial default designs). This makes it easier for you to choose what kinds of ships you'd like to build.

A third useful report is a current display of all your Production Centers and how much PI you have available to spend there. It includes columns for how much you've spent so far with your currently-entered actions, and how much is left. These numbers update continuously as you enter actions, so you'll always know when you're running out of PI.

### ***Tools***

There are several tools available to make your game play easier. For instance, designing a new ship type is a complicated and detailed process on paper, but the Ship Designer tool makes it a snap. Just enter what you'd like to have on your ship and it gives

you all the specs, costs, and limitations for your proposed design without any fuss.

There's also an export tool that will give you access to GTac's database of information for any custom work you'd like to do on it. For instance, you may wish to build your own spreadsheet using all the stars that you own and your list of ships to do a special analysis for an attack you're planning.

Editing screens are also available to directly change some kinds of information that GTac stores. A list of star information is kept, for instance, but a game buddy may have told you about data he has collected that you would like to record without having obtained it through the game system.

### ***The Last Word***

The GTac Assistant does get updates and improvements from time to time, and suggestions are welcome. Of course playing Galac-Tac the old-fashioned pencil-and-paper way works fine, but getting computer assistance from the GTac Assistant to help you at every stage of play makes it **so** much easier, and more fun, too! Be sure to download a free copy from the web site and give it a try.