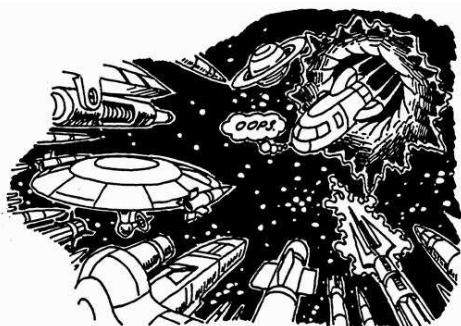


Galactic Encounters of the PBM Kind:

GALAC-TAC Returns

by: Genny White



Long ago, in a PBM galaxy not so far away, I was invited to play a game with a bunch of close friends. It was

Galac-Tac, which had

been in circulation since 1982 and had been played by hundreds of gamers. I had the opportunity to play with its creators and beta-testers, and had a blast. Fast-forward to 2010, when I found myself one of the new owners of the game (and its parent company, Talisman Games). My husband Davin Church, our associate Doug Neman, and I took what was already a pretty great game “on paper” and began moving it to the web. Gone are the postage stamps and hand-entered orders mailed to the game’s operators (although that COULD be arranged!), but the basic concepts of the game are still there.

When you begin a game, you find yourself with a quadrant map (basically saying “You Are Here”), a report with a small handful of ships (a starter kit of exploratory scouts, colonizing cargo vessels, and defenses for your Home World), and the knowledge that out there somewhere in a vast galaxy are ten or so other players with the same starting info for *their* Home Worlds, and an eager appetite for the territory around *you*. So the challenge begins... you type up your orders and send your scouts out to evaluate the neighborhood and stake your claims, develop new resources, build more ships, and eventually run into the other guys and test your theories of economic planning, ship design and fleet construction.

Our new interface is still in Beta-testing, but we’ve played test games and seem to have most of the bugs worked out. When time permits, we

tinker with the web page to add new features. It’s fairly “bare bones” right now, but it still beats writing down your orders and mailing them to the GM! The website lets you enter your orders (offering some general purpose suggestions for rookies), and now provides a ship-designing utility. There are also star maps available on the website, to give you a glance at the current state of the universe. Our instruction manual is more or less the original one from the 1980s, and certainly needs some updating, but it is basically accurate and covers the basics of game play well. It will be my job to clean that up eventually, whenever I find that elusive creature “free time”.

One of the best tools for players is the downloadable **GTAC** (Galac-Tac Assistant) program, which has a *lot* of nifty features that haven’t made it to the web yet. You can use GTAC to develop your strategies, analyze your fleets and economic structure, and view or print elaborate customizable color maps. GTAC’s extensive mapping utilities let you pick custom colors for every empire, and design your choice of symbols to identify the status of the stars you’ve explored. It’s quite amazing. (Read: “Knocks your socks off, compared to a plain ol’ black and white sheet of paper.”) Order entry in GTAC includes error-checking your orders *before* submitting them to the website, and letting you type in future orders to keep your game strategy flowing. When you’re ready, GTAC sends your orders up to the website. Then you download your next turn report from the site and let GTAC update all your data. Saves a lot of wear and tear on the old pencil.

The initial period of the game, when everyone is bumping into each other for the first time, discovering the value of their local stars, and starting to establish trade routes and borders, is my favorite time. I’m not as good at creating effective ship designs and building balanced fleets, but of course it’s very satisfying when I make a decision to go for something and get that

report back saying I at least survived the attempt! Although the distribution of stars is random when a new game is initialized, there is a fairly even chance for everyone to have a good balance of valuable territory within a turn or two of home, and Home Worlds are always at least a minimum distance apart. So, off you go, hoping to be the first one to find and claim the best of the stars in your area, before the neighbors come calling.

At the beginning, I wanted to name every star I colonized, and every ship I built. However, near the end of my last game, I owned about 181 stars plus a dozen PCs (Production Centers). I couldn't keep track of that many names for all the colonies. Likewise, I had hundreds of little fighters, scouts, and cargo vessels (2,261 ships in all), and generating names for them would be too tedious. So, I just used generic names for those, set them on regular routes or joined them into fleets, and just focused on the big picture. When we were playing with our friends, part of the fun was trying to hide our identity as long as possible. We all knew each other, with our play styles and strengths and weaknesses, so we'd come up with an empire name and maybe name our PCs, major ships, and design classifications something that went with the theme, and see how long we could remain anonymous. Other players didn't see the names of our stars or ships unless they beat 'em up, so we were just the Mysterious Folks Next Door until actual conflict began.

I went nuts with maps in the old days. Back in the early 90s, I printed a huge wall-size map several feet across, attached it to a cork board and hung it on the wall, and then used colored push-pins to represent all the different empires I encountered. I tied thread in a loop from my own colonies to the PCs they fed to represent my supply routes. It was gorgeous. I think I still have that map somewhere, sans pins and threads of course. The one-page quadrant maps are much more practical for keeping on your desk to scribble on, and a new one can be printed any time you need it. I still kept the colored pencils handy when the turn reports came in, so I could see at a glance where everyone was (everyone I

had run into so far, that is). The GTAC program came along later, which made my old wall map pretty obsolete, but boy, it was fun!

In addition to all the handy stuff GTAC lets me do, I also used to maintain several spreadsheets to keep track of which colonies belonged to which Production Centers, where my major fleets were and what their composition was, what ships I was building and where and when they would be completed (BIG ships can take multiple turns), etc. That last game fizzled out in 2010 when I just got too busy to keep it up. I was winning... but the last remaining player wasn't going down easy. I don't recall how I got in that exalted position. I'm pretty sure it was Davin's tactics and advice, and I just kept up the "clerical end" of the game. It has always been great to play as a "team" with a more experienced player. (But it sure is fun to blow up your spouse, or plot against the younger generation. Remember, the family that slays together, stays together!)

Life certainly gets in the way of gaming, sometimes... I haven't been able to play for quite a while now. But thanks to the renewed interest being generated by this great little publication, I've certainly got the "itch". Perhaps you're in the mood for some galactic conquest, Gentle Reader. Grab some friends and sign up for a new game at www.talisman-games.com. You can even play solo against the computer, which lets you get a feel for the game and try stuff out before you encounter other human players, which we highly recommend. (I assume your friends are human...) Then get ready for the real thing – your Home World glimmers in the midst of the Great Unknown, ready to be the center of a huge and triumphant empire!

Maybe
I'll see you
out there.

