

Bugs, Mr Rico!

(Zillions of 'em.....)

SF Ground War Rules For Inter-Species Combat (or 'Chitter-chitter-bang!-bang!' as it's otherwise known.....)

(C)Peter Merritt @09/06/1998 {Vers 1.4}

INTRODUCTION:

This article is to accompany the latest version of some SF rules developed at the South London Warlords & SELWG clubs, hopefully putting the rules into media as well as gaming context. They are intended to create large-scale skirmishes inspired by the recent blockbuster film "**Starship Troopers**" (itself loosely based - *VERY* loosely based - on the Robert A. Heinlein book of the same name).

THE STORY:

Briefly, the story depicts the coming-of-age of a bunch of 'twenty-somethings' while doing their optional Federal (military) service, which is the *ONLY* path to full 'global citizenship' in Heinlein's very dodgy (i.e. neo-Nazi) view of a 'perfect' regulated society. They are spurred into this for a variety of reasons, but all the action is directed against an alliance of insectoid species, co-operating (willingly or not) via some form of telepathic link.

The film is quite episodic, with the action interspersed with news clips and even 'advertisements' for the armed forces, all set against the backdrop of Earth's first (?) interstellar war - it sounds rather disjointed, but actually works well. There is little or no explanation as to *why* this war starts in the film (even the book is pretty vague). It simply uses a dramatic meteorite-bombing of Buenos Aires to trigger the American's (sorry, the *Federation's*) obsession with 'Pearl Harbour' type sneak attacks to justify depicting the bugs as a form of giant 'virus' to be exterminated, rather than another rare sentient race to be studied, understood (and then exterminated). Presumably, this time the Brits hadn't broken the bugs code before the attack, or the high command knew and did nothing as a war was just what was required - just like in December 1941.....(oh, sorry - we're not supposed to talk about that one are we?).

In any event, at least the film is filled with absolute state-of-the-art special effects, and while spaceship-freaks certainly won't be too disappointed, the bulk of the action is concerned with the 'Starship Troopers' themselves (officially designated as 'Mobile Infantry') and their encounters with mainly computer-graphic bugs on various desolate planets. [*In the film, the bugs are the only opposition and lack both the space-travelling technology and their (reluctant) allies, the 'Skinnies' (another humanoid race) which featured in the book version.....*]. Actually it's always been sobering to me to think that these 'hostile worlds' exist right here on Earth, in this case in the less touristy and more deadly bits of South Dakota and Wyoming. Lack of money (and an inability to see actor's faces) prevented the studio from using the original armoured fighting suits from the book (just like small Battletech Mechs, strangely enough.....), and so more extras were recruited dressed in quite acceptable 'chunky' body armour, looking for all the world like a cross between Red Dwarf's 'Crighton' or RoboCop's hand-me-downs!

Meanwhile, on a 'historical' note the more widely-based readers may notice quite a 'colonial' flavour to the general situation - i.e. hordes of low-tech (but decidedly not *stupid*) opponents vs. technologically superior (but outnumbered) player-forces, such as occurred with many of the various late Victorian campaigns in Egypt, Zululand etc. (indeed, the films' director has admitted basing the scene 'Defence of outpost Whisky' on the great old 1963 film of "Zulu", depicting the defence of Rorke's Drift in Natal, 1879). You will find that, although the weapons are different, the *principles* of how to engage and defeat such an enemy - whilst keeping them at a respectable distance - are of course timeless. OK, enough of the background; just see the film (now out on video), read the book then play the game - speaking of which.....

GAMING "STARSHIP TROOPERS":

This background has actually been covered by board-game specialists **Avalon Hill**, who now make TWO very different games on the subject. The original version came out in the mid/early 1970's (I believe), and is much closer to Heinlein's book i.e. a FEW, power-armoured MI's vs a variety of opponents (including bug-allied humanoids, dropped from the film for 'specist' reasons), with the bugs sometimes having access to pre-plotted tunnels. The map boards and all other bits and pieces are good quality, but the whole thing is now very dated. Their latest version, however, is 'the game-of-the-film' and uses *superb* quality materials, including geomorphic boards (with additional terrain overlays for more variety) and photo-image 'flats' type plastic counters/figures, making the whole package a boardgame/miniatures 'hybrid'. Scenarios are based on the film, and the rules would make a good miniatures set. I'd recommend any SF games fan to try these out, but in the meantime I've written my own (as usual), as I'll almost always take 'toy soldiers' over cardboard!

Lots of suitable human figures abound in both 15mm and 25mm scales (although the latter is my favourite), with varying degrees of equipment levels from the Denizen 'VietNam-In-Space' range (NOT based on "Aliens" at all, or at least not enough for a judge); to the power-armoured types inspired by the original book. The whole thing is made much more feasible, however, by the recent release of the *enormous* 'Micro Machines' toy range of bugs, dropships, Tac-Fighters etc. in the most popular 'big' 25mm compatible scale, which we use locally. ALL of the bugs in the film are available (warriors, 'tanks', a brain etc.), and if you shop around you can find them at incredibly low prices - £1.99 for a Warrior Bug + three *painted, detailed* 'Dropship' (as opposed to £8.99 and £25.00 respectively from some of the more, ahh, *specialist* SF shops in and around London). If you have trouble finding a supply (outside of the continental United States), you can always try those very helpful SF stalwarts at **Ground Zero Games**, who have just released a very nice range of multi-pose bugs plus "Cal-Tech Troopers" in metal (as well as, while we're at it, all the "Hammers' Slammers" models - but that's another universe.....).

Whilst a large-scale set-up is always impressive, not everyone is looney enough to collect the 140+ models used in the Warlords' game. However, even smaller-scale games can still be exciting simply by balancing the MI's (*remember, that's 'Mobile Infantry', NOT 'Troopers'*) mission and available heavy weapons or air support with the actual number of bug models, if necessary recycling some of the early 'deaders'. Indeed, don't be afraid to mix-in some of the other giant rubber toy 'garden bugs' from Toy Stack or Toys R Us - remember the giant ants from the film "Them!" (as well as some rather more forgettable versions since then), plus of course the ultimate modern 'bug hunt' film, "Aliens"? Of course, if that's not enough variety for you there are always the *reptiles* to consider in inter-species warfare, as in "Jurassic Park" - there are absolutely hundreds of cheap (and not-so-cheap) toys/models around, in all sorts of sizes.....

As a finishing touch, add some 'reddish' lichen and cork-bark rocks (courtesy of Beatties railway dept and/or your local garden centre) to a sandy cloth or tile background, and even some - shock, horror - **Games Workshop** SF buildings (there are at least six very acceptable structures currently available), and you have a relatively cheap set-up. To take the setting further, try the vast collection of resin bits and pieces from **Snapdragon Studio**, **Marbeth Designs** and **Ground Zero Games**, or make it a 'post apocalypse' setting by re-using your WW2 20mm destroyed buildings (preferably *Hovels* and *Old Glory* to start with). The rest is limited only by your imaginations.....

A WORD ON THE RULES:

A full set of the rules should by now be published on the Warlords' own WebSite, but I'd like to say a few words about the principles which underlined them. All the systems used in these rules require that each unit and player/leader must be given a rating which is used to determine general levels of 'efficiency' and 'activity levels' during the game (higher the better):-

Unit's Combat Efficiency (CE) = 1 average dice For use in combat and checking actions

Player Leadership Rating (LR): = 1 average dice For use in 'activating' and directing squads

In a campaign setting, these ratings could be augmented by 'experience points' for successful missions, always remembering to reduce effectiveness if the influx of 'green' replacements for casualties forms too high a proportion. Essentially, the CE rating is used for most combat tasks (1 or more dice per CE point etc.), PLUS any 'skilled' operations such as aiming, engineering, flying etc. It also determines how many troopers will fight effectively without leader intervention. Should players wish to perform tasks not directly covered in the rules, just remember to set the time/test with the unit's CE in mind.

The player/leader character may at first seem superfluous, but in fact is there to 'motivate' the squad and direct it's actions - vital in driving units with a low CE rating (as in real life). Indeed, it is entirely possible that the leader may never actually fire his/her weapon in a game, being too busy keeping everyone else 'active'. As well as activating troopers, remember that their LDR rating dictates the number of separate target areas which may be engaged (each one 'handspan' across).

It is intended that each player commands one or more of these basic units - these are 'squads' for the Mobile Infantry (MI), heavy weapon/specialist teams, or individual support vessels. The actual size of a squad can of course be varied, but I would suggest something in the range of 4 to 8 figures, as used in most 'modern' forces today. The bugs can be operated either by umpires (friendly or not), or by players using a mixture of the simple guidelines given below, and a certain amount of tolerance/fair play.

In general, the combat system is designed to be simple yet mathematically sound, being entirely based on the use of one or more d6's - no fancy polyhedral dice here! The unit CE, for example, seems quite a narrow range at first glance, but true effectiveness is measured (roughly) by the SQUARE of the number - so CE's of 2 or 5 actually represent vastly different levels of capability (4 vs 25), which certainly comes out in the game! A good unit with more dice to roll can therefore either make certain of a good hit on one target, or spread their effective fire more thinly, thus risking letting one through! The tension is maintained by umpires forcing players to allocate numbers of dice *before* any are actually rolled..... The effects of firepower on bugs (and other things) fall into four main categories - slow the target down; stop it in it's tracks (or take cover); kill it (or render it 'combat ineffective'); or of course miss.....

Nor are there any traditional 'morale checks' as such, these being directly factored into the 'slow/stop' results for speed of play. Besides, like much 'colonial' warfare, the human MI forces tend to be quite self-confident as well as being far from home/retrieval/base and facing fanatical opponents not renowned for taking prisoners, so running is not really an option - you either fight or die (again, very colonial). I can only say that these systems have worked well in very similar ways with other firepower-based 'skirmish' level games at the club, ranging in period from Seven Years War America, through Napoleonics, Indian Mutiny, and WW2/Korea, as although the weapons have changed, the motivational factors among human opponents have remained more-or-less constant.

SCENARIOS:

Players can either roll for this at the start, or let an umpire secretly pick the mission, perhaps blending-in two or more elements to keep players guessing..... The following scenarios are not exhaustive by any means, but simply give an indication of the range of encounters possible - as already mentioned, our colonial past contains many, similar incidents which can easily be adapted to the facts of life (and death) in the 25th century.....

*** AMBUSH VALLEY!**

- **MI:** march through/drop into the area (escorting <?>; supply unit, scientific recce team); must exit with <?>% effectiveness; could request evac by dropship?
- **BUGS:** Warriors attack from all sides, PLUS 'Tanks' appear from tunnels at random points (can always be particularly nasty and 'burst out' of hidden caves in rock formations.....)

*** ISLAND ONE[R]** (pronounced 'Is-land-whan-ahr'.....sorry):

- **MI:** Must conduct 'fighting withdrawal' to their dropships; 1pt per MI off-planet at end; loading limit approximately 12-20 MI per ship.....try 'Zulu Dawn' on video!
- **BUGS:** Increasing pressure from bug-groups, all types (random entry); they keep coming! No tunnels (for first few turns), but zillions of Warriors.....

*** BRAIN SURGERY:**

- **MI:** Find the lair of the brains behind the bug force, then capture or kill it/one of for study.
- **BUGS:** Stop the MI; may be assisted by 'allies'.....or creators? The last one is there to allow for the use of high-tech opponents who may have bio-engineered the bugs.....

*** O'ROURKE'S DRIFT:**

- **MI:** must defend outpost against all-comers; assisted by on-site heavy weapons and air units..... heavily based on 'Zulu!' Check film for details.....
- **BUGS:** must overrun the outpost; may possibly use tunnels for 'Tank' random appearance; allow a couple of 'Plasma bugs' as AAA support if using Tac-Air

*** "DEATH FROM ABOVE"** (motto of the 173rd MI):

- **MI:** drop onto & eliminate bug unit 'on the bounce', use plenty of air support/ transports etc. PLUS may optionally give the MI 'Jump-Packs' /power-armour to increase mobility.....
- **BUGS:** hang-onto the overrun outpost, or kill more MI than they kill bugs; another variation is to escort a 'brain bug' off-table (possibly to a tunnel entrance, to keep players guessing)

*** BUG CITY, U.S.A!**

- **MI:** must place gas-blowers at all tunnel entrances to KO brains for capture; takes time to set them up and turn-on, after which Bugs cannot approach them (easily damaged, however.....)
- **BUGS:** maximum effort from all bugs incl. AA, flyers etc.; keep a couple of 'recycle bins' for killed bugs, then return them after one turn.....

*** FIRE IN THE HOLE!:**

- **MI:** use some geomorphic sheets of card or paper to lay out the bug's TUNNEL system; umpire lays sheets either at random or as parties proceed; objective could be rescue, egg-chamber raids, or simply search & destroy; need to be careful with explosives in tunnels!

- **BUGS:** delay the MI while 'royalty' escapes; could dig new tunnels & emerge behind the players (the book talks of "....a 'frying bacon' sound.....").

* **WIPERS ON FULL!**

- **MI/HS:** this uses the real 'heavy mob', as featured in the excellent "Hammer's Slammers" series of books, with a few hefty hover-tanks and infantry mounted in APC's; must be a challenging scenario, tho' to balance the tremendous firepower.....

- **BUGS:** everything you've got - and then some!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS etc:

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