CLOUDSHIPS OF MARS

By Brian Cameron and John Treadaway

Introduction

At last year's Salute the Warlords premiered our Cloudships of Mars game. The programme – and accompanying issue of Miniature Wargames - for last year contained an article on building the ships for the game. This is an article detailing some of the rule systems and play aids used. Cloudships subsequently appeared at SELWG 2005 and will be making its last outing (for the time being) at Salute Zero Six.

Running Cloudships as an openday game has a number of pitfalls which means that it's not suitable for all venues. The play takes place on an aerial hex map of Mars which is 5.5 metres square and – with enough table space allocated for 11 players, 6 umpires and a 'parking area' for destroyed ships where people can view them – Cloudships takes up quite a lot of room. Needless to say, not all venues would be happy allocating the 100 or so square metres to the game so we haven't toted it around the country as much as we have with some of the recent efforts (War of the Daleks, Hammers Slammers and so on).

The Cloudships game

The game is based on Sky Galleons of Mars from Frank Chadwick's inspired Space 1889 series of games. The Victorian period has always appealed tremendously to me and Victorian science fiction even more so. We had played and enjoyed the game for a while before the idea came up of building some large scale models for a display game. As I said above, last year's Salute programme we covered the building of the ships we used for the game. There are a lot of photos and descriptions of scratch building the eleven ships both in that article and on the club's website – www.warlords.co.uk - and, Herculean task that it was, we're not intending to cover that aspect here. For there was another problem to be solved: that of the rules.

Now Sky Galleons is an interesting game but the mechanisms were thought to be rather involved if we were going to do it as a participation game rather than a demonstration game and we really wanted to do it as the former – they are harder work but much more entertaining. In addition there were several areas where we thought that the rules seemed 'clunky': for example although the movement was based on hexagons, the firing arcs were patently derived from a game that used a different system, so there were areas that, at any rate, we wanted to iron out.

The original rules are still available as a reprint in book form although the game itself – rules, plastic miniatures and ground maps - can only be had second hand now. Using other manufacturers miniatures (there are a wealth of Victorian SF ships to be had, some of which are appropriate) and drawing up a hex map is usually not too strenuous. Anyone who want to go this route may wish to look at some of the rules modifications we have introduced – we think that they make for a fast, fun playable game.

Rule changes that we instigated

Movement is pretty straightforward in the game (though we simplified the movement for kites to save some poor player having to get to grips with wind direction and tacking). The complication comes in the firing and damage allocation. The sequence can be summarised as follows:

- Check whether gun is loaded
- Dice for each gun to see if a hit is scored.
- Check whether the gun can penetrate the target's armour. This may involve halving the damage.
- Announce the amount of damage inflicted
- Dice for the type of damage – hull/crew/gun/critical hit
- Crew and gun hits can involve changing crew allocations.
- Critical hits involve dicing further on another chart. The record sheets provided in the game lack any facility to record critical hit effects.

The latter point wasn't much of a problem as we intended to do a large sized control panel type playsheet for the players which would provide all the information they needed about the layout of their ship, the location and type of guns it carried and provision for recording damage (see below).

The problem to be solved as we saw it was to simplify the assessment and recording of damage. Now one of John's favourite games is the SF space combat game Silent Death. This features a rather nice damage track system which we decided to steal (sorry, utilise). In essence this is a series of boxes which represents the total damage a ship can take – when you reach the end of the line that's it, the ship is out of action, usually involving crashing into the Martian landscape! Along the track some of the boxes are blank, merely indicating loss of hull integrity. Others indicate particular types of damage, such as gun loss. We then adapted this idea to Cloudships. Using a mix of experimentation, some attempt at a formula but overriding all this making the damage tracks of sufficient length that ships could remain in action for long enough to provide a challenging game but not so long that the game would take days to play (we wanted to run three games in the course of a day at Salute, and allowing for breaks to re-set and those running the game to catch their breath, we figured that we had to be able to play a game in one and a half hours).

The damage track also made provision for the amount of armour carried by the ship so removing another factor to be separately assessed. Gun loss was resolved by roughly evenly spacing the gun loss boxes along the length of the track (and similarly for crew losses, etc) but bearing in mind that a ship without any guns was effectively out of action we made the last gun loss box almost at the end of a track, so that even a fairly hopelessly stricken could get a last lick. Ships with guns behind their armour had their gun positions placed further down the track to represent them being better protected from fire.

We also made some changes to the game balance to simplify another aspect – reloading of guns. In Sky Galleons Earther guns fire every time but most Martian guns required a turn to reload and we found this awkward to keep track of. We also found that it tended to lead to a style of game in which the Martians always seemed to take a pounding from the Earthers with their superior firepower and thus their main tactic involved trying to ram and board – not easy when the Martian ships are slower and less manoeuvrable! We'd adopted the style of mixing Martian and their Earther allies on each side but recognised that it can be a bit frustrating for those with Martian ships. With both factors in mind we decided to allow all guns to fire each turn. The British guns still tend to have a longer range and roll several dice for hits but it has made the game much more of a gun duel with the Martians still having an edge if they can successfully ram. We now play the game in this style even when we are doing small scale games at the club (i.e. using the board and models from the original game – as you can imagine, getting the ships out and allocating 120 square metres of floor space for the full game isn't always easy so the board game version is an easier option…).

NEW FIRING AND DAMAGE SEQUENCE

To summarise the firing and damage sequence is now:

- Roll for hits.
- Cross off the appropriate number of damage boxes
- Record gun loss and other damage
- Roll for critical hits.

Damage with the guns was much simplified. Each gun retained the ranges from Skygalleons and the 'too hit' result required. For example a British 4inch Short still had a short range of 1 to 3 and a long range of 4 to 6 and still required a roll to hit at short of a 3, 4, 5 or 6 on a d6 and – at long range – a 5 or 6. This was all retained. To cut down on bowling the damage was fixed – in the case of the 4inch Short at 4 damage – but, on the roll of a 'natural 6' on the dice – we increased this by 1 damage to 5.

We did retain the multiple dice throws for repeating weapons – so the Hotchkiss 1 pound repeaters, for example, attacked with three dice: short range 1 to 2, long range 3 to 4. Damage was 1 per hit but – again on a natural 6 – this added 1. In the unlikely event of bowling three sixes with your pompoms, achieving 6 damage could be unpleasant for your opponent!

CRITICAL HITS

We left the critical hits as a separate exercise as it was the range of effects is to wide to fit on the damage track (and shouldn't be that predictable) and it's a bit of fun dicing for it separately.

We looked at each individual ship - both as the original rules dictated and as our models developed (bearing in mind that not all of the models were exactly as per the source material) and tried to assess it's peculiar

vulnerabilities. For example, wooden ships tend to be more vulnerable to fire, sailing ships can be dis-masted and ships with boilers can suffer catastrophic failure of their steam generators. We tried to build these into a critical hits chart that was not a major jump from the original Space 1889 system, but was bespoke to each ship.

When a critical hit is taken (as indicated by the relevant box on the damage track) a 2d6 roll is made and the result applied, either to the fixtures on the ship (a gun is knocked out and a hit marker placed on it, for example) or on to a set of 'warning lights' that we had developed. These moved from amber to red status A green light is replaced by an amber light to indicate that the particular system will be out of action next time. At the end of the turn the amber light is replaced by a red light indicating that the system is out of action, At the end of that turn the red light is removed and the system is back to normal. This is used to indicate trim and steering damage, and so forth. Our ambition was to not have results that needed remembering from one turn to the next – a complication of the original rules - but to indicate with markers what systems were currently 'out'.

ANTI-PERSONNEL FIRE

Lastly, we reduced anti-personnel fire with Nordenfelts and Gatlings to another specific critical hit (specific to the individual target ship, that is). This reflected the dispersion of personnel on that ship, the deck fittings and armoured gun shields, bridge houses etc. The 5 dice system was retained from Skygalleons but – when the ship fired – it counted the number of hits achieved, (hit on a 5 or 6 at short range of 1, on a 6 at long range of 2) and consulted the Anti Personnel chart and applied the result.

All of these ships systems were generated on a PC in a drawing package and printed out and then laminated (two examples are given in this article – a British gun boat and a Martian Hullcutter). As they were laminated, these could be used with felt pens and wiped off (as indeed they were during our trials when we were building the system) but – for the open day game – we manufactured angled wooden 'displays' and fixed the laminated sheets – printed at A3 – onto them with contact adhesive, sandwiching a layer of steel paper (from Magnetic Displays) between the laminated print out and the wooden base. The counters we produced, also on a drawing package, saying 'Hit', 'Fired' and so forth, were all laminated for durability and then mounted onto self adhesive magnetic tape from the same manufacturer. This meant that the playing pieces stick to the display panel giving – we hope – a feeling of running the ship from the bridge, rather than ticking boxes off.

We could also introduce 'patches' for the ships using the magnetic system. Some of the scenarios we developed required re balancing the ship types and we had up-rated 'superior' crews for some of the ships. To convert standard crews to superior crews we made up magnetic patches to stick temporarily over the relevant sections of the display panels.

Other rules changes

One other aspect we changed was the movement sequence. In Sky galleons all of one side moves, then the other. It was felt for a participation game that this could be slightly less than involving for the non-moving side. We thus came up with a random order sequence where there is a card for each ship. At the start of a turn this pack of A4 sized cards is shuffled and ships then move and fire in the as its card is turned over. Ships which are fired on card reply (if they have guns available to do so) or hold their fire for their own move if it hasn't yet occurred – it thus give some decisions to make about the best time to fire.

Boarding actions were also simplified with individual crew (as per Sky Galleons) replaced with boarding parties. We also used the same mechanism for grappling as for boarding on the basis that its easier to remember one mechanism than two.

RAMMING

In the event of a ram attempt, each ships captain side dices using a d6. +1 is added to the dice if a ship is steam powered. If rammer scores higher it hits. If the result is tied or the rammer scored less then he misses and the ships pass each other.

Damage from ramming: All ships have a Ram Value marked on them. The rammer inflicts its Ram value on the target – this is enhanced by plus one damage if the ship actually has a ram fitted. But all of these ram values are marked on the ship display sheets.

GRAPPLING AND BOARDING ACTION

Conduct grappling as per a round of boarding action (see below). If successful the attacker grapples.

Boarding action: each side rolls 1d6, adds current boarding value, marked on the ship display sheets, which is the total of remaining boarding parties (which may have been reduced by attrition) and may include a +1 for each anti-personnel weapon (Nordenfelts, Gatlings etc) which remain undamaged (on the basis that they can support boarding actions). The ship with the lower combined score reduces its boarding value by the difference in scores (casualties of the fray); the ship with the higher score still reduces it's boarding value – ie the number of boarding parties it has - by 1. In the event of a tie, both lose 1 BV.

The Boarding action will be finished for that turn. Next turn the ships may fight again and will continue until the combat across decks is resolved.

If a defending ship's Boarding Value – it's actual tally of boarding parties, not the supplement added by working anti-personnel weapons (if any) - is reduced to zero, the ship surrenders. If the reverse happens and the defenders are the winners – ie they have more boarding parties left than their attackers - the boarders retreat to their own ship, the grappels are cut and the defender is free to move off in its next move. Or – alternatively – they may surge back to their attacker's decks and carry of the action!

Manufacturing the game components

The ships and their manufacturer were covered in some detail last year, as mentioned above. For those who haven't seen the web site or looked at last year's programme, the only thing that needs to be said is that the ships involved were all scratch built to some extent. Models were either converted from commercially available products – everything from model sailing galleons to Star Wars toys – or manufactured from balsa, dense grade styro-foam, plastic sheet or other products and had components added – crews and deck fittings - from a variety of manufacturers including Copplestone, Foundry, Rafm and Riveresco. Appearing in some of the photographs this year are wall sections for a Martian fortified 'manorhouse' – first components for the ground game for Cloudships that we intend for the future. These were scratch built by John Treadaway and cast by Old Crow.

The game 'floorplan' – and aerial map of the play area – was manufactured by spray painting a large tan coloured cloth with emulsion paint put through a spray gun driven by a compressor. Scenery – as it's all meant to be flat – was indeed made that way: Buildings, canal-side areas, bridges (and destroyed bridges for bomb results) and outlying farm houses were all drawn using the same computer package used for the control panels (XaraX for those who wish to know these things) and then printed out on a large, flatbed inkjet printer. They were then all spray-mounted to foam core poly-board and placed on the floorplan. Hexes were drawn on the floor plan using a template (sometimes not as, er… accurately as we would have wished!).

The ships were all fitted with perspex rod mounting fittings which sit in clear perspex and acrylic stands mounted on clear acrylic hex bases about 500mm across. They are adjustable in height (we reduced the height bands available in the game to three – high, medium and low).

The ships are all moved by a dedicated ship moving umpire who goes barefoot on the play area (and sometimes dresses up for the pleasure!) and is in communication with other umpires by 'etheric wireless telephony' Well, alright: walkie-talkies with headsets. The game is big enough that the only way that the 6 umpires can communicate with each other ion a crowded noisy room is via radio. The only way the games master can raise the attention of the 11 players is with a ship's bell and a megaphone!

In conclusion

There were several things we learnt from our ambitious plans for this game.

Sometimes adapting rule systems from existing ones can be almost as difficult as starting from scratch and – several times – we wished we had just started afresh. The models are all borderline too heavy for their bases or – depending on how you view it – the transparent bases are too fragile for the task asked of them. It might have been better to go for something more substantial and less transparent (chrome tubing was discussed at one point). The instrument panels were a real winner and the magnetic mounting of counters and the wooden panels – while not cheap – gave a 'substantial' quality to the gaming components for the players and meant that the pieces stayed where they were put: definitely one idea we will re-use.

All the rules and the control panels can be found on the Warlords website at www.salute.co.uk/cloudships.htm. If you get the chance, try some ideas out and we hope you enjoy the game.Remember: if you want to try the game our way you don't have to spend hundreds of hours building large-scale ships! Just print out the materials we have supplied and give it a try.

Obviously, if you do want to make lots of models, this Salute programme contains inspirational shots (as does the programme for last year) and more can be found on the website mentioned earlier. But remember to set aside some modelling time in your calendar…

For those who want to try the game out and missed it at last year's Salute and its appearance at SELWG 2005, why not try it out at Salute Zero Six at ExCel.