

GRATUITOUS SPACE BATTLES

Manual for Gratuitous Space Battles. Version 1.1

Introduction

Gratuitous Space Battles (GSB) is a strategy / management game and space-battle simulator. The game puts you in the role of Fleet Commander for large, very large, and gratuitously humungous fleets of spaceships. Your mission is simple: Blow up the enemy spacefleet in as total and aesthetically pleasing a way as possible. There is no diplomacy in GSB, there is no option to retreat. There is no way to avoid battle, no negotiation, and no sub-plot. There are just zetta tons of metal and many exometers of organo-silicon circuitry and other alien technologies exploding gratuitously against a background of unfeasibly garish nebulae.

Unlike 'real-time-strategy' games, GSB does not give you direct control over each ship in your fleet. Highly competent Spacefleet Captains have not sweated blood and strained their tentacles for years at the academy to be nano-managed at every step of the battle. Your job as Supreme Commander of the fleet is to design and deploy a balanced battlefleet that ensures glorious victory, and to issue orders on exactly how to kick alien ass. You can then hover behind the battlelines in your command podule and gleefully observe the gratifying destruction of your enemies on the holoscreen.

“Observe the destruction of your enemies with glee”

As Exalted Admiral, your role can best be split into four discrete tasks. Firstly, there is starship design. Thankfully you won't be firing up 4D Starship MAX to actually decide where each girder goes, you can leave that to your minions. Your task is merely to decide the selection of key components for each ship, so as to build a balanced armada capable of defending itself against alien scum, and also causing galaxy-shattering amounts of destruction and ultimately total obliteration of your opponents' spacefleet.

Your second task is to take those expertly designed ships and assemble them into fleet formations for each battle. Because you do not yet rule the galaxy, supplies are limited, and you will be restricted by budget and the availability of trained pilots. These limitations will inevitably determine the capabilities of the fleet you can send forth into honorable battle.

The third task is one of observation. Post-battle stats are fine, but nothing beats being able to see exactly which piece of alien space flotsam managed to breach your shields. Whether you win or lose, watching the battle unfold is a key part of your supreme role. By observing enemy fire, you can identify areas where your fleet was weak, or where a different combination of ships or specialist hardware might have swung the pendulum of fate towards the wormhole of victory.

Your final task is to undertake the post-battle post-mortem. It's no good just randomly throwing the few remaining Captains out of the airlock when you lose. That's so last millennium. The post-modern Supreme Space Commander takes time to analyze why his/her/its ships and indeed the enemy ships got blown apart and others made it back to base with hardly a scratch. Learn from your mistakes. To err is human, but humans have such low standards.

Ship Design

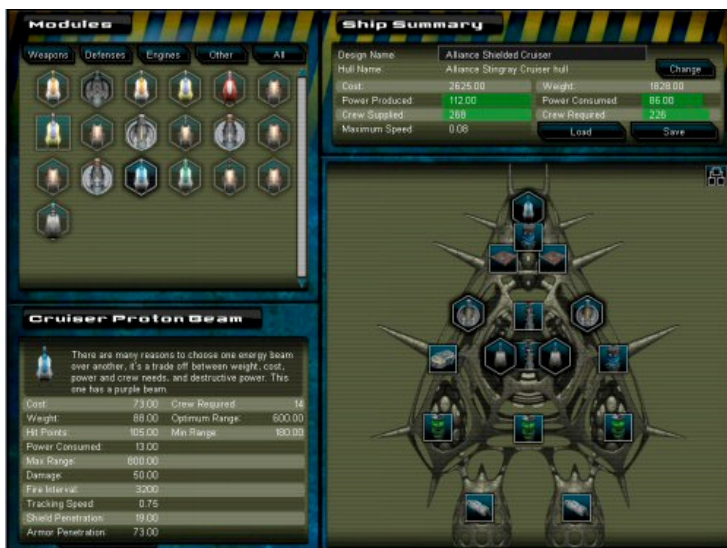
Take time to familiarize yourself with the ship design screen. Work here is vital to success, and although it might not be as glamorous as pushing fleets of mega-cruisers around on the galactic battle-map, it's a key part of how you're going to win whatever huge space-war it is you're fighting these days.

There is no limit to the number of ship designs you can put together, but you do have a limited number of basic hull designs to work with. Thankfully, all our hulls have been designed in a modular fashion so you can bolt together almost any combination of starship components. A ship is received from the shipyard as a basic empty hull (which may have some minimal power production capability, and provide certain bonuses) which you supplement with modules of your choosing. The ship hulls come in three distinct sizes, fighters, frigates and cruisers. Modules, which you use to equip a ship for battle, include engines, shields, armor, crew accommodation and weaponry beyond your wildest dreams, although evidently not beyond the sick and twisted dreams of the weapon designers.

“Fighters are the spitfires of space”

Fighters

Fighters are the spitfires of space. These tiny one-lifeform crewed vessels are great at zapping at high speed towards the enemy and taking out their fighters. They are also the only craft that can easily attack an enemy ship directly from within its shield. This manoeuvrability comes at a price, so buyer beware. Firstly, piloting a fighter is a highly specialized skill and dispensable (only if you fail miserably at your task) academy-fresh pilot numbers are limited for each battle. Secondly, the variety of fighter modules with which to customize your ship is very limited. Thirdly, a lot of the larger ships have enough armor or shielding to make the fighter weapons all but useless.



Frigates

Frigates are the mid-range ships in terms of speed, cost and weaponry. Standard space-battle doctrine suggests a number of frigates accompany each cruiser. These craft are faster moving than cruisers, and smaller, both of which make them harder to hit by the huge tera-guns. Frigate weapons tend to be fast tracking, which means they can be good at shooting down incoming enemy fighters before they even reach the main line of battle.

Cruisers

Cruisers are the insanely big floating theme parks of death and mayhem that we all know and love. The most gratuitous weaponry and the most impressive gadgets are only available for

these big boys of the fleet. This comes at a cost. Cruisers weigh a silly amount and often limp along at the speed of a Rigelian ultraslug on its way home from a beer festival, making them almost impossible for the enemy to miss.

Modules

Ship modules are specific to ship type. You can't put a fighter module on a frigate, and so on. They also come in two types, standard, and hardpoint. Standard modules have square icons and slots whilst hardpoint modules are shown by a hexagonal icon and slot. The trick is remembering you can put a standard module in a hardpoint slot (a tragic waste of destructive potential), but not vice versa. Basically the hardpoint modules are your guns. You will notice that some slots on each ship hull have lines to multiple points on the ship. This is purely aesthetic, and means that in battle, weapon turrets placed here will be visually duplicated on the ship. It does **not** make them more powerful. It just looks absolute-zero cool.

There are some modules that have diminishing effects when 'stacked' on a ship. For example, adding multiple shield modules will reduce the efficiency of each shield module. You can see the current efficiency of a module by hovering your mouse over its location on the ship.

Although it is legal to leave empty sockets (maybe to save weight or cost), it's generally a good idea to pack your ship full of hardware. You are paying for the hull, and after all this isn't 'Proportional-Response Battles', what were you thinking.

Shields, Armor and Hitpoints

Two of the most important modules in the game equip your ship with shields and armor. You can give ships either, neither or both of these methods of defense. Understanding the way they defend your ships is vital to success. Firstly, damaged armor does not regenerate (although it can be repaired if an appropriate module is on-board), so every shot that damages it will likely be a permanent reduction in its defensive strength for that battle. This means even a tiny amount of armor damage per shot can add up.

On the other hand, shields **do** regenerate over time, until they are completely knocked out by being reduced to zero. Separate shield modules operate independently, so it's possible for 2 modules to be disabled and the third one can still regenerate back to its full strength (albeit giving you one-third the shield strength).

So far, so ordinary, but this is only part of the story. In order to inflict damage to armor, a weapon needs to have sufficient armor penetration power. Without armor penetration being higher than the average armor strength for a ship, the shot will bounce off, achieving nothing. Think of hitting a watermelon (low to average armor) with a tennis ball (low penetration power) where not much happens, compared to firing at the watermelon with a high penetration cruise missile which results in impressive cabin splatter Pollock style and finding seeds in your hammock for months to come. Average armor is the total armor strength of all the ship's armor modules, divided by its number of modules. This can be viewed in the ship stats window, which (depending on how gratuitous your observation podule is) is either at the bottom of the design screen, or launched through the 'graph' button at the top right of the ship window.

Shields have a similar capability with their 'resistance'. Some shields have high strength and low resistance, and vice versa. A shot that hits with a shield penetration value less than the shield resistance will have zero effect. This is VITAL to understanding the defense of your ships. Some ships could be totally invulnerable to some weapons. In some cases, combinations of ships will be required to take down an enemy cruiser. One ship may be firing shield-damaging weapons, and once they are down, other ships in the fleet will fire armor-damaging weapons to break through to the hull.

Shield Stability

There is another, sneakier way to overcome enemy shields without just getting big, high-shield-penetration weapons. You can 'destabilize' shields using special shield-destabilizing weapons, such as the frigate disruptor bomb. These devices reduce shield stability, and once it reaches zero, the shield will flicker off entirely for a short period of time, leaving the ship defenseless just long enough for a plucky space-gunner to deliver a red-hot beam of high energy explodiness.

Close-Range Attacks

Another tactic is to get fighters in so close to a ship that they actually attack from within the shield bubble. These attacks effectively bypass the shields entirely. This sounds attractive, but be aware that the enemies armor will still be in full force, and the fighters will be an easy target if the cruiser in question has some dedicated anti-fighter defense lasers or missiles. This is also a good reason to not rely 100% on shields for defense against the enemy, especially one that is fighter-happy. A cunning Space Admiral might screen his cruisers from fighter attacks with a line of cunning anti-fighter frigates to ensure they are turned to space-dust before they even get within range.

Hitpoints

Every module on a ship has a number of hitpoints, and this represents the physical strength of that piece of equipment. Once the shields and armor are destroyed, further hits on your ship will damage the individual modules, reducing their hitpoints. When a module's hitpoint score reaches zero, it is disabled. When all of the modules on a ship are disabled, it will explode in a tastefully choreographed ball of flame and you won't be getting your deposit back.

Ship Capabilities

Every ship module has a giga-ton of data associated with it. Selecting a module will display details about it. You can view the modules in one big group, or by selecting the tab buttons at the top of the 'module picker'. Depending on which modules you select, the final capabilities of your ship will vary.

The speed of your ship is a measurement of the combined thrust of its engines, against its total weight. Turning speed is directly related to speed. Some modules have lighter (and more expensive) variants, which may appeal to you. Apart from weight and speed, you will want to keep an eye on crew and power requirements. Basically, you have to supply room for all the crew you need, and power for all the energy you use. This means that almost every ship will need a crew module (or multiple modules) and some power-plant modules. It's a bit of a balancing act to get the right combination of components so you are not wasting power supply or crew capability. Be thankful you don't actually have to balance on one tentacle whilst deciding. You cannot save a ship design that violates the crew and power requirements. The starship design council will slap you in the tentacles if you even try to do this, or more likely, they will just disable the 'save' button.

Saved Designs

Once you have re-arranged the components on the selected ship hull, you can save it with whatever design name you like. Although infamous Space Admirals gravitate towards names such as 'Galactic Death Cruiser' or 'Glorious Chariot of Laser-Fury!' you might start off with more helpful names such as 'Long Range Beam Cruiser' to aid you later during fleet composition and analysis.

Unlike most games, GSB does not give you a big pile of ships to play with. The few ships you are given at the start of the battle are just examples, and any true Space Admiral would be better off ditching them and designing his/her/its own ships from scratch.

Missions

So you have a vast array of expertly designed floating platforms of giga-death, and you are eager to teach Johnny-Alien a lesson. Not so fast. We can't just hurl spaceships at our enemy like a farmer feeding his space-chickens. Your ships will need to be placed into a formation, and given their orders. If you haven't done so already, you need to select the 'battle' option from the main menu, and pick your fight...

"Floating platforms of giga-death"

Choosing A Mission



At the start, you will only have the option of the first battle. The opportunity to fight bigger and more glorious battles will come when you have proven yourself with this trivial encounter. Different battles will pitch you against various enemies (of which we have three). Battles will be fought in different locations, and there may well be spatial phenomena to deal with. In some cases, a nebula may reduce weapon range, or ship speed. This is worth noting before you go any further.

The mission selection screen also shows you three boxes that indicate if you were previously successful in battle on medium, hard or expert difficulty. There is no 'easy' option. If you wanted easy, you should not have signed up

for the space navy and you are not fit to take command of a fleet of Andromedan space mites.

The two key things to be aware of when selecting a mission are the number of pilots available and the fleet budget. All this nonsense about money not being a problem for equipping the space-navy is nonsense. You have to win this war on a budget. A gratuitously huge budget, but a strict budget nonetheless. The politicians back on the homeworld have better things to spend their money on than endless spacefleets. They need to build mega metropoli, nano-factories (on the scale of things, more expensive than you might think) and zero-g swimming pools (vital for party fund-raising).

Survival Mode

Most of the missions are 'skirmish' missions, which involve fighting against a single fixed enemy fleet. There are also 'survival' mode missions, which pit you against endless waves of enemies attacking from all directions. Skirmish missions can be uploaded as challenges to other players, whereas survival missions are strictly single-player affairs. However, survival mode allows you to upload your high score and pour scorn on the feeble attempts of other, lesser

admirals to match your heroic success. You can tell which mission is which by the icons on the left of the mission names.

The Deployment Screen

“A smorgasbord of devastation”

The deployment screen is where you place the individual ships in battle formation and issue orders on how to engage the enemy. This is your last opportunity to influence how the battle will play out for your fleet, so take the time to get things right. Don't forget that cruisers move slowly, and fighters move quickly. Position is as important as orders. Once you are happy with a deployment, you can save that for later use. You can have a large number of different saved deployments for each mission.



The map in the center of the screen shows your fleet as green starship silhouettes, and the enemy fleet for this battle as red ships. The highlighted area around your fleet is your ships' 'deployment zone'.

Ship Positions

To move one of your ships, you can click and drag it around the screen with the mouse. Don't drag a ship outside the deployment zone, or it will be deleted. When you select a ship, a series of overlaid circles will display. These are the weapon ranges of that ship, and you might find this useful in terms of positioning the fleet. Right clicking any of your ships opens up a menu to delete or rename them.

Editing the Fleet

The first mission comes with a partially-assigned fleet, but you will probably want to edit this, and will need to build up fleets from scratch for future missions. The list of available pre-designed ships is shown as icons in a strip to the left of the deployment map. These are ship designs, so you can add as many or as few as you like to your fleet (within limits). To add a ship of that type, simple drag it onto the highlighted deployment zone of the map. To remove a ship from the fleet, either drag it out of the deployment zone, or select it and hit the delete key on the keyboard. Be wary of accidentally deleting ships when moving a whole group of them in formation.

There are three factors that limit the number of ships you can add to your fleet. Firstly there is the number of available pilots (each ship requires a single pilot, whether it's a fighter, frigate or a cruiser). Secondly there is the limited budget for the fleet. Thirdly there is the amount of 'honor' you can earn from the battle. Every credit that you leave in the budget without spending is converted to honor if you actually win the battle. If you win a battle by a comfortable margin you might well be tempted to go back and have another go with a cheaper fleet in order to rack up more honor. Cunningly, the Admiralty honor department will only credit you with your highest level of honor reached for each battle. You can't keep replaying the same battle with the same fleet and accumulate more honor.

Deploy an ARMADA OF DOOM

For large battles where you may want to deploy a large number of identical ships, there is a faster method of deployment. You can right click a ship design and select 'mass deploy'. This turns your cursor into a compact and efficient ship-placing machine, where you deploy a new ship of that type with every mouse click. Fun though this is, you can stop doing it by right-clicking or selecting an existing ship. A faint outline of the current ship is drawn behind the cursor when this mode is active.

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