A Billion Suns: Interstellar Fleet Battles
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By Mike Hutchinson; illustrated by Paolo Puggiloni

Review by Paul Le Long

This is a very ambitious game that goes well beyond simple space battles. Indeed, in the introduction, the author states that this isn't just naval wargaming in space. There are of course rules for the things you might expect – moving, shooting, different types of spacecraft from fighters to battleships and a lot of optional advanced rules to flesh that out. All of this works well and there are some very nice touches – for example, when a fighter wing shoots at an enemy fighter wing it does so using 3d6 and requires scores of 3 or lower to hit. When a battleship shoots it can be rolling as much as 4d12 which sounds impressive (& it is) but this is less effective against small craft like fighters where you need to score 3 or lower on each die to hit – quite easy on a d6 but less easy on a d12. That is very elegant.

But the heart of these rules lies in campaign play and in game set-up. You play not an admiral or military leader but the CEO of a private company. Missions are contracts which you complete in order to turn a profit. You can deploy as large or small a fleet as you like – the larger your force the more expensive it is to hire and therefore the less profit you make on a contract. So you want to do the job with the cheapest possible force, powerful enough to get the job done but small enough to maximise profits. It's unregulated free-market capitalism at its worst!

Each game will feature three contracts. These include destroying space junk, kidnapping scientists, scanning planets and space stations, strip-mining space ore and so on. Many contracts will force you to set up extra tables. This is the really ambitious bit – games can be played over as many as four tables. The tables can be any shape or size and are linked by jump points (spawn points basically where ships can materialise on a table and jump between tables). Ships cannot travel between tables other than by jump points, replicating the fact that space really is very big.

So what does a game look like? Players do not choose their forces at the start which is very different. You generate (randomly) three contracts, set up 1-4 tables depending on the contracts – there will be objectives on each table – old satellites, planetoids, cargo ships, asteroids etc. Then players take turns doing things like placing jump points on the various tables and deploying ships via their jump points. Then there's a tactical phase where you divide your attention (& resources) between accomplishing the various missions, attacking the enemy, manoeuvring on the table and travelling between tables. If you are struggling you can also cut into your profit margin by bringing in more forces. It's worth saying here that it isn't just the size of your force that's important, it's the composition – a fighter wing, recon wing, utility ship, corvette and battleship are all useful in different situations. Figuring out how much and what to use, as well as when and where to deploy those assets, are a big part of the game.

Campaign play is all about forming a corporation and building up your bank account through contracts while cutting the throats of your competitors. It all has an unpleasant, amoral capitalist feel – the game certainly does not feel heroic. I haven't actually tried the campaign game yet nor have I tried the advanced rules (dealing mostly with tactical play) since the game has only just been released and has been landing on the doorsteps in the past few days of those like me who pre-ordered it. The game sold out before even going on general sale so there was certainly some buzz about it.

I would encourage you to download the free play aids from the website (abillionsuns.space/downloads). These include various quick reference sheets that are very useful and save a lot of time during play, a 'helm display' which is a necessary play sheet on which you record your orders and profits, as well as a measuring tool and various counters and tokens (including ships).

Also available as a free download and of most interest here is a solo play rules variant. In the solo variant, instead of the cat and mouse game between two players, the soloist takes on contracts and sets up the table as normal and then deploys ships to fulfil the contracts. Then there is a chance that a randomly generated force or even several forces of piratical competitors try to claim jump your contracts. The enemy are controlled by a simple but effective AI when they are on the table. So, your job as CEO is to maximise profits by fulfilling contracts but judging when to cut & run when the opposition gets too much.

In conclusion, although there are some clever rules for space combat, this is not primarily a game of naval battles in space or aerial dogfights with lasers. Campaign play, force allocation, risk management and economy of force and maximisation of resource and profit are the key points of the game. Also, playing different but linked games over multiple tables includes an element of three-dimensional chess that is quite challenging tactically. The solo rules feel good and are more than just an afterthought as they are in some games (where they exist at all). I think 'A Billion Suns' is a daring concept that works well and delivers an entertaining game.

Recommended for those who want something different beyond the usual Jutland in space type of game.