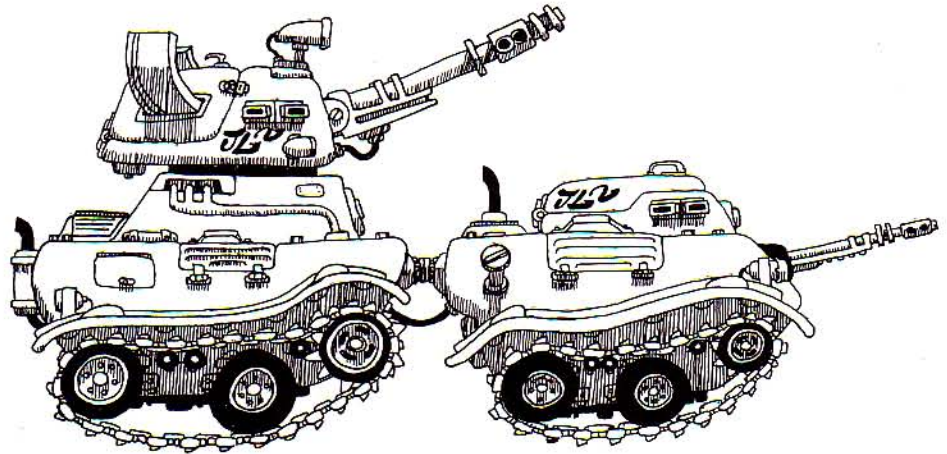


The Unwritten Rules of Rivets

by
Roland Parenteau



RIVETS is a real switch. In most other wargames, the effective strengths of units against one another are immutable, given, undeniable -- a T55 tank unit against an M60 always loses (well, almost always). In those other games, it's up to the players to work with the units and the unit-strengths they are given. That's all the players can do.

In RIVETS, on the other hand, each player *decides* which of his units will be effective against which other enemy units. Not only that, but each player can actually *change his mind* about this fundamental game parameter, right in the middle of the game. This is what makes RIVETS interesting -- and makes pre-game planning difficult, if not downright impossible.

For readers not familiar with the game situation, RIVETS is a game about a battle between two teams of robots. The people have been killed off long ago, but the semi-intelligent robots don't know how to cease fire, so they keep on going. Each player selects his counter-mix from among several different types of robots: Big Boppers, Jack Boppers, Rocket Boppers, Dive Boppers, Light Boppers, and Tiny (pronounced "teeny", of course) Boppers. All the boppers are controlled by the player's Bopper Control and Production Complex, or BCPC for short. The BCPC is also the player's source of replacement units. The object of the game is to destroy the opponent's BCPC.

Before the game, each player "programs" each of the unit-types he has on the board to attack one, and only one, of an opponent's unit-types. For example, I could program my Big Boppers to attack your Rocket Boppers, my Jack Boppers to attack your Light Boppers, and so forth. A given unit can only attack an opposing unit-type it is programmed to attack -- none other. (There are exceptions, but read the rule book to find out.)

A player can re-program any of his units assuming that all the units he wishes to re-program are inside his BCPC.

Combat takes place at the end of each player's turn, after he has moved his units. Any friendly unit which is programmed to attack an enemy unit it is adjacent to does so, by comparing combat factors, reducing the comparison to an odds ratio, and rolling the die. One important point in this game: if the enemy unit is *not* programmed to attack the unit-type that is attacking it, then the attacker resolves the combat one column higher up on the combat results table. This is called the "combat add", and can be a big advantage. It can also be a very unpleasant surprise when you don't get it, but were expecting to.

Given that you are playing a game where you aren't certain which of your opponent's units can attack which of yours, how should you intelligently proceed? Naturally, since you can't know what your opponent will be up to before the game starts, rigid planning is out. You need instead a set of guidelines and "tricks-of-play" to keep in mind. I can suggest a few.

1) *Keep track of your opponent's units.* This rule can be divided into two sub-rules: (a) keep track of which of your opponent's units is attacking which of yours; and (b) keep track of how many units of each type your opponent has remaining, and where they are on the board.

Rule 1(a) seems obvious, but is worth discussing. The only ways you will obtain information about which of your opponent's units are attacking which of yours are by attacking his units, and noting which ones give you a combat add and which don't, or by allowing your opponent to attack your units. Whichever way you get the information (you're likely to get it both ways), don't waste a shred of it. The only way to estimate the likelihood of success of any offensive you want to make is to know what your opponent has in the neighborhood that can attack your units.

Rule 1(b) is a little less obvious, but nevertheless, important. There are situations when you may not want to destroy your opponent's last remaining unit of a certain type. If you destroy it, he gets to re-program that unit-type with his next replacement -- and that might not be to your advantage. If you don't destroy it, on the other hand, your opponent may return his unit to his BCPC and re-program it anyway. Or he may advance it to do whatever his lone unit can do. It'll help your chances if you know what his options are.

2) *Use as varied a force as possible.* This rule, too, can be divided into two sub-rules: (a) especially when advancing on the enemy BCPC, try to have several different unit-types around, instead of just one or two; (b) don't overdo the number of your unit-types programmed to attack one unit-type of the enemy's. You'll lose the combat add, and therefore the advantage of numbers, more frequently. What's more, some other unit you haven't programmed against will more easily get through and do you damage.

3) *Don't be afraid to destroy you own units.* Few things are more frustrating than wanting

to re-program a unit-type to do something useful, but having one little remaining unit louse up your plans and require several turns to make it back to the BCPC. What is the answer to this problem? A poor-odds, sacrificial attack -- after all, these are just robots, remember?

That just happens to be one of the things about RIVETS I find especially entertaining and liberating -- there are no *people* involved in any of the combats. All the historical games from Avalon Hill or SPI, and even the other MicroGames, involve people: people riding around in spaceships, tanks or whatever; or people walking around as infantry, or as just plain people. As a wargamer-with-a-heart, I find it very difficult to justify sacrificing these "peopled" units except under extreme circumstances. I'm just not the kind of guy who can advance a truck unit into the line-of-fire of a whole townful of tanks just to spot their fire. In RIVETS, though, I don't have a problem -- like the back of the rule book says, "What else can you expect from robots with the average intelligence of an electric can opener?"

4) *Use your build points carefully.* There's no point in turning another Jack Bopper loose on the board when you have only one other Jack Bopper left, and its only got one target -- unless the target is a Big Bopper that's programmed to attack your Jack Boppers, and you need the extra unit to improve your odds. Barring that, a wiser course might be to bring the remaining unit back to the BCPC, then re-program both units and unleash them all at once. An opponent with an "unbalanced" threat (see Rule 2) can get a nasty surprise that way.

5) *Have fun with it.* This reminder should go at the front and back of the rule book of every MicroGame. The game is short and plays several times at a sitting. Explore variations. Treat it like you would a game of chess -- after a couple of King's Pawn openings, try Queen's Pawn, then try the Sicilian, maybe the French Defense, and so on. You can't consider yourself experienced until you've tried a lot of variations.

And don't make winning or losing a big deal. I'd much rather lose an exciting game (and start another one immediately) than win a game which cost me a month's worth of Friday nights. Life's too short.