

# WarpWar: a designer's introduction

*by Howard Thompson*

WarpWar represents something of a break from Metagaming's past gaming methodology. The biggest effort in producing a new game is to make rules revisions as the game progresses through design development. WarpWar was developed primarily from sketchy design notes, and lots of playtesting. Draft rules weren't even attempted until playtesting had produced a reasonably stable game system. There were still three separate drafts of the rules, but these drafts polished the explanation of a stable game. There was no attempt to draft rules for the numerous intermediate versions of the game.

There are many advantages to this new approach. Rules are always the hardest part, for me anyway. It's far easier, though still hard work, to write rules when you know what you're saying is the 'final play' version. Writing rules for unfinished modules, then revising those rules after playtesting to reflect the new version is for the birds.

At Metagaming, one designer is responsible for a game from the initial concept to final production draft. One person is responsible for all planning and testing. He picks everyone's brains and stirs it all into a final cohesive package. The method of finalizing design before writing rules should increase our design productivity. This productivity increase is made possible by having *only* one person responsible for the entire design process. Game design is enough of an art that game design by team or committee will produce less playable and less cohesive final designs, all else being equal. This is even more true for larger, complex games.

The most pleasing development of WarpWar was the increasing complexity of strategies during playtesting. WarpWar has a bit of the feel of chess. As you gain experience with the simple rules structure, the play relationships become more challenging. The diceless combat system further adds to the chess flavor. There are many sneaky movement options. Combat tactics also allow broad opportunity for clever gamers. WarpWar offers you numerous chances to beat your opponent because you can out think or outguess him.

I'd bet everyone who plays WarpWar will change their mind several times as to what is the 'best' type of ship to build. What is 'best' in ship building depends on you, your opponent, and the course of play.

WarpWar's base concepts are simple. You build ships with Power/Drives, Beams, Screens, Tubes (for firing Missiles) and Missiles. If you build a ship with a Warp Generator, it can move from star to star along Warplines. These Warpships can also have Systemship Racks for carrying Systemships. Systemships don't have Warp Generators, can't carry other Systemships, and can't move from star to star under their own power. Systemships are a bit cheaper to build than Warpships.

Ships are simple, with only two basic types available. Yet, each ship may be built in any manner desired. You expend the Build Points to build up ships from the basic components. The variety is endless.

Combat consists of writing an 'order' for each ship on a contested star hex. Power is allocated from the Power/Drive unit to Drives (for ship combat maneuver), Beams, Screens and Tubes (if a Missile is fired).

The Warp Generator, Missiles, and Systemship Racks don't need power from the ship's Power/Drive unit to function during combat.

Each ship is also assigned a combat tactic from the Combat Results Table. The Drive allocation difference between target and firing ship, plus their respective tactic, yields the combat result. There are no die rolls.

You win the game by occupying the enemy's base stars. Each player will have one to three base stars at his end of the map. The map portrays a total of twenty eight stars, many of which are connected by Warplines. The Advanced scenario allows new Build Points each game turn and uses all three base stars for each player. The Learning Scenario and Intermediate Scenario will run 45 to 75 minutes in play. The Advanced Scenario can run 90 minutes to three hours, depending on player skill.

The use of diceless combat and individualized ship building makes WarpWar an excellent 'heads-on' competitive game. We may use it for some convention tournaments in the Texas area. Nothing happens by chance. YOU do it all. You have to

outthink, outguess, and outmaneuver your opponent. It's all up to you.

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*Warpship W04 broke from warpline 2.4 light hours out from Byblos, a K5 orange primary. W04's screens shimmered momentarily with kinetic discharge due to the warp transit. Ship leader Emil Thaylon received status reports in his command module.*

*"SS35 dropped and away under power," stated W04's Power coordinator.*

*"Hold SS36 on standby," said Emil. He wanted to retain one of his Systemships as a surprise or for escape as needed.*

*"Long Perceptors detect two medium mass enemy craft in Byblos II vicinity."*

*"Accelerate Fusions .84 Max direct toward primary," directed Emil. Best to close with the enemy rapidly.*

*"All sections combat ready, condition max alert," said the Power coordinator.*

*“Status check Combat Controller’s tactic program,” said Emil.  
“Update with current Long and Short Perceptor running link.”*

*The Combat Controller was pre-programmed with mission directives and tactics selected by Emil. The continuous update through Perceptors would give it effective combat command of the ship. Emil liked to draw enemy fire as a standard opening maneuver. The first pass would have W04 Dodging at maximum Drive and Screen settings. SS35 would fire one Missile while standing off, not revealing for the moment that it had two Tubes.*

*“Long Perceptors identify enemy as two Systemships, no Warship present.”*

*“Target ships now accelerating .52 our Max toward our position, intercept in 10.4 minutes.”*

*“All Crew on station. Damage control ’bots standing by.”*

*Ship chatter crackled continuously in Emil’s ear. The crew of 64 humans, 12 androids, 6 cybers, 117 mobile robots and 1 brain link was readying itself for combat. The constant chatter was filtered to Emil on a priority basis. Chatter on all links was fed simultaneously to the Combat Controller for update monitoring.*

*“Missiles tracking in, 043H/325V. W04 Screens up. Dodge started.”*

*“SS35 Targeted one Missile incoming. W04 targeted one Missile incoming.”*

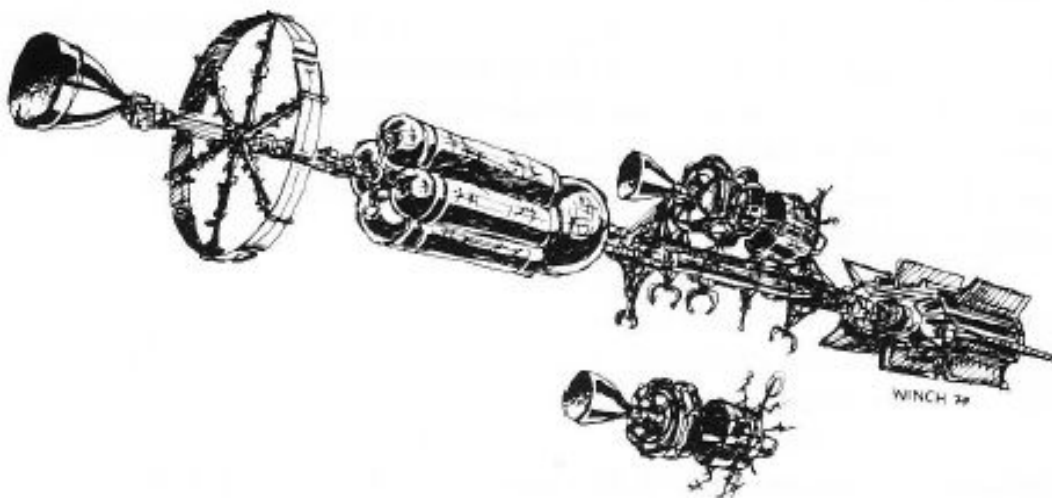
*“SS35 launches Missile D5 at Target 1.”*

*“Incoming Missile W04 D3 by Short Perceptor tracking. Damage control to starboard aft. Projected hit. Screens 87% prob holding.”*

*The enemy Missile on W04 was a near perfect matching hit, despite W04’s maneuvering. Fortunately, Combat Control analyzed the hit as equivalent technology level. The Max Screen powering was sufficient to absorb the vicious energy flare.*

*Emil quickly tapped in a minor tactical correction for the next pass. SS35 had also survived. Both sides had ‘felt out’ the data they wanted.*

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As mentioned, playtesting revealed progressively complex strategies. I'm sure we didn't fully develop all possibilities. Listed here are some of the things we tried. All had some degree of success at some time during playtesting. All would run into problems as opponents learned how to handle each new approach and develop counter measures.

### 1. THE MONSTER BEAM AND SCREEN WARPSHIP.

This ship usually took all Build Points a player had available. The philosophy behind it takes advantage of the fact that Missiles are expended in combat, while Beams can be fired over and over. When a sufficiently large Screen was built, smaller ships had a tough time of it. Also, the large Beam could more easily overpower weaker Screened ships.

2. THE WARPSHIP 'FIGHTER' CARRIER. This is a Warship with all Power/Drive for movement and Systemship Racks only. Its function is to carry a covey of Systemships and drop them for combat. The big ship mentioned in number one could fire on only one target at a time with its Beam. The carrier would come in, drop its covey of small, cheap Systemships (they can only fire one Missile each), and then beat it. The big ship



would chew up some of the fighters, but is also likely to suffer severe damage from cumulative Missile hits.

3. SYSTEMSHIP FIGHTERS. These were developed for use with the Warship carrier. The cheapest version is a Power/Drive of one and one Tube ship that carries a limited supply of Missiles. All it can do is sit still and fire a Missile. But, it is cheap to build and not much loss when destroyed. Several together can make for a nasty opponent.

4. THE MULTI-MISSILE SHIP. After fighter development, Missiles looked very effective. So, it seemed logical to build a ship with a large number of Missile Tubes. This type of ship usually has enough power to do some combat maneuvering and fire a dangerous bracket of Missiles. It gets at least *some* hits each combat round. The shortcoming turned out to be having all your eggs in one basket. Screens have to be down to fire Missiles. This makes a ship vulnerable. The multi-missile ship did prove a viable type, but was subject to some damage.

5. SUPER SPEED WARPSHIPS. This is a relatively weapon weak ship that has a lot of Power/Drive. It can zip around the map in a very pesky manner and retreat from combat

easily. It does lack punch. But, a clever player can plague an opponent mercilessly, forcing him to protect his base stars.

6. THE MIDDLE GROUND TACTIC. This tactic was developed as a response to the fast Warship threat to rear areas. There are some key stars on Warplines in the middle of the map. A player would place some relatively cheap Systemships on guard on those stars in order to fragment an opponent's maneuvering range. The guard ships would be shot up easily, but could usually inflict some damage. Sometimes an occasional guard ship can catch the speedsters by surprise.

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*Acrid smoke was hampering Emil's breathing. He switched to suit air even though W04's hull had sustained only minor leakage. Damage reports flowed across the readout in front of him as he momentarily ignored the combat chatter. W04 was still in fighting shape despite some heavy damage. Both Systemship Racks had been blown off. The Beam and Screen projector had suffered 50% damage from overloads and hits. The Power/Drive unit was in the best shape with only 27% damage. SS36 had been blown away. A barely functioning SS35 was still throwing an occasional missile at the two damaged enemy ships.*

*The early phase of the battle had been W04 open full fire with its Beam on the second and third passes, doing target one minor damage. On pass four, W04 had gone to Drive zero with Screens down and dropped SS36, sure to be a surprise to the enemy. Unfortunately, the enemy had chosen pass four to spring its own little surprise. W04 caught a heretofore unfired Beam while Screens were down.*

*After that, the battle went quickly. With the strongest single ship Emil had managed to inflict a bit more net damage than he'd received. The enemy had been forced to split fire between three targets, one of which was too big to easily damage. W04 and the two Systemships had concentrated on one enemy ship first and reduced its effectiveness. Then they'd turn fire on the other.*

*"Targets turning for another pass."*

*"Two Missiles incoming, both on W04."*

*"Damn," muttered Emil to no one in particular. He'd decided to stop dead again with Screen down to pick up SS35 for its protection. The two enemy Missiles could really hurt him.*

*"Missiles tracking in. Beam fired, target two."*

*The whole ship seemed to hold its breath. The two enemy Missiles bore in rapidly. One missed clean but the other hit midship. Emil's command module lost power briefly, while he sweated profusely.*

*"Damage report. Level three hit sustained. Screens dead."*

*"Tracking report. Beam direct hit on target two. Target two Screens blown."*

*That was at least one bright spot. Emil quickly tapped in new tactics. Now was the time to turn and bore in as if no damage had been taken. The enemy knew he was stronger, but not how much.*

*"Hard around, Max Beam, Attack," ordered Emil. "SS35 fire last two Missiles at target one."*

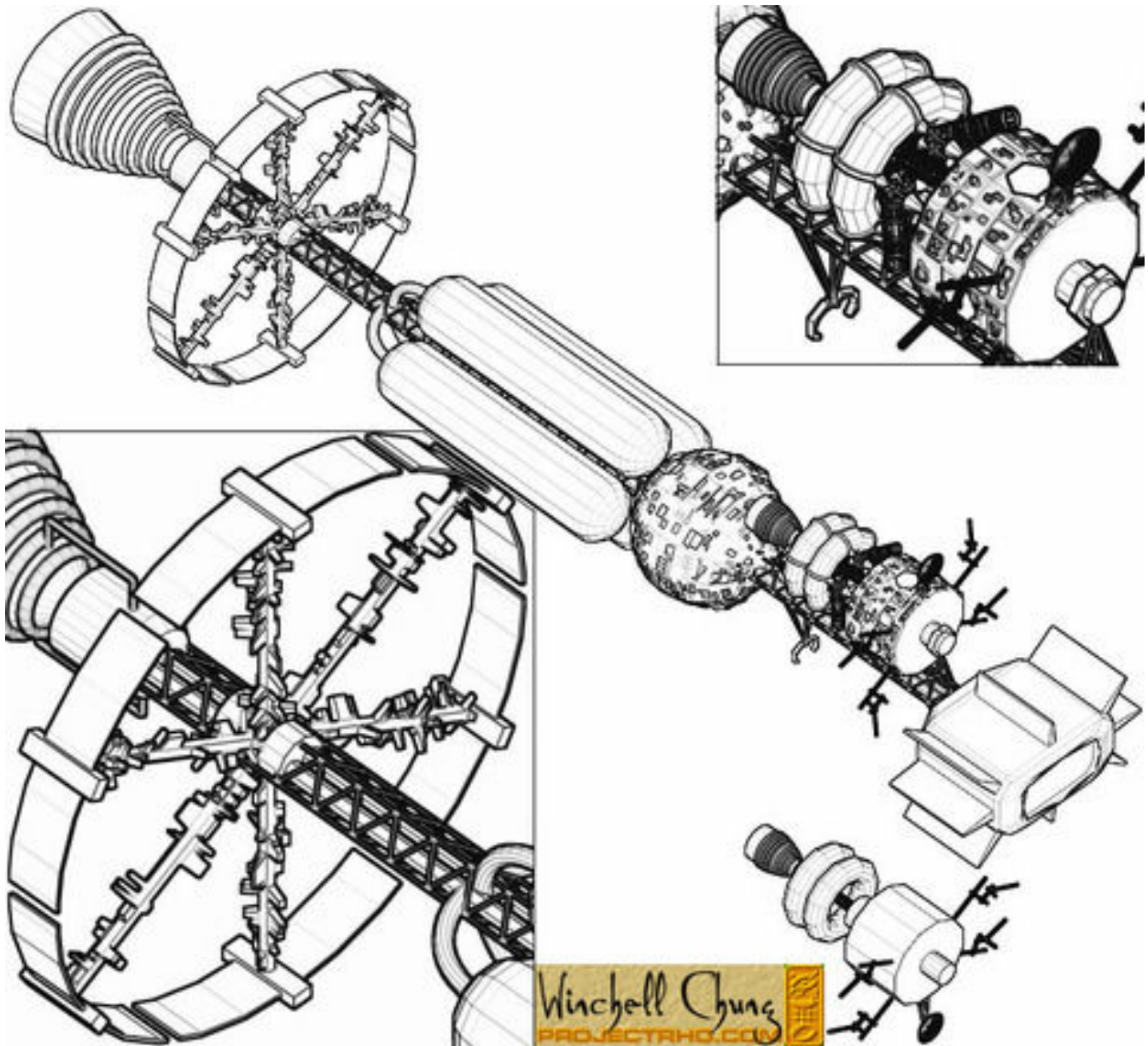
*Emil was taking a risk, but he had a hunch target one was out of action, and he wanted to take target one out before the enemy could think the situation through.*

*"Two Missiles coming in Drives set low."*

*"Combat Control projects misses."*

*Emil relaxed. He had them. His Beam would be a dead hit at full power. They hadn't expected him to charge in at full blast. Now to mop up and limp back home.*

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The key is variety. Tactical variety is wide. You can bluff, threaten, and mislead your opponent. In one playtest game I had a ship, my only strong Warship at that point in the game, which was jumped by a multi-tubed missile ship. It was pounding me to jelly. Since the combat was on one of my base stars, I didn't want to retreat. Everything was put into the Warship's Drive and Screen for a few combat rounds in an attempt to avoid the Missile damage. It's not easy to avoid four missiles at a time. But, the Warship managed even though the Screens had to absorb a few hits. At that point, the enemy started running low Missiles. The Warship could start firing back at a ship that now had to have its Screen down to attack and had few Missiles left. In the end my battered Warship held the base, forcing the enemy to retreat for the time being. But, this was only accomplished by being as cowardly as possible for a few combat rounds. If my Warship had tried to slug it out every combat round, it would have been dusted.

Aside from careful ship building and maneuvering, combat is where you directly make or break your game. Each weapon fired either misses or hits the target. A Beam does as much damage as

power allocated to it. A Missile does a basic two hits damage. The Target ship's Screen powering is subtracted from the total of all ships the ship receives.

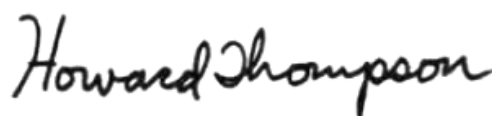
The other major factor is technology. Every four turns of the game represents a new technological level. Improved technology adds to the damage a weapon inflicts and to the damage a Screen absorbs. In the Advanced Scenario, you can save Build Points from turn to turn. There is incentive to delay building so ships with a higher technological level can be built instead. An indirect effect of technology is that it helps offensive ability progressively more than defensive ability. The game will get bloodier as it progresses. This is a desirable side effect in that games tend to be shorter when weapons get relatively more powerful over time.

Another factor in the game is repair and Missile resupply. A ship having fired its stock of Missiles can be resupplied on a player's base. A ship that has been damaged can also be repaired (to original form). This allows a player to make damaged ships reusable as needed.

But, a ship never improves its technological level, always retaining the level at which it was built. When you repair your ship, you may be putting Build Points into a lower technology.

All in all, I'm very satisfied with WarpWar. If the game is fairly popular, there is likely to be an expanded four player version that will be an impatient man's STELLAR CONQUEST. It may be that multi-player WarpWar could lend itself to adaptation as the least complex computer game we'd do.

WarpWar's simple, open-ended format will lend itself to variation and adaptation by gamers. One person commented to me that a game like OGRE or WarpWar is unfinished when so many variations and adaptations are possible. I don't agree. I feel we do better by polishing an excellent, playable, basic system, than by developing all possible variations. Gamers delight in doing their own variations so much; I'd rather give them a solid base from which to extrapolate than do it for them.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Howard Thompson". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

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