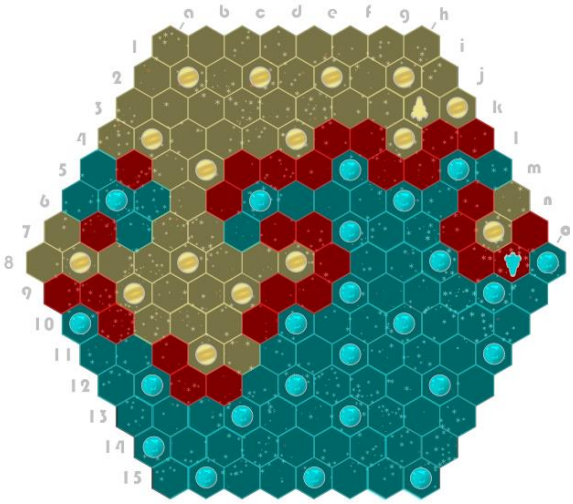
Astralis

"The surface of the Earth is the shore of the cosmic ocean." – Carl Sagan

Astralis is an abstract, area-control, strategy game of space exploration, expansion, and extraction for two players, inspired by sci-fi games such as *Alpha Omega, Twilight Imperium* and *Eclipse*. Players race across the galaxy in an attempt to colonize planets and populate space. The game is won by the player who controls the most territory in the form of planets and the areas of control they exert.



Components

- A hexhex8 galaxy game board (or hexhex7 for shorter games)
- Two colony ship pawns, one yellow and one cyan
- Two sets of 30 planet stones (or glass droplets) in yellow and cyan
- One hundred sixty-nine double-sided control tiles with yellow on one side and cyan on the other
- Sixty contested/conflict tiles in red

Game Concepts

- **Adjacency:** Adjacency is orthogonal. Two hexes, with or without contents, are adjacent if the hexes share a common edge. Contents inherit adjacency. For example, a pawn is adjacent to a hex if the hex containing the pawn is adjacent to that hex.
- **Explored**: A hex is explored if it contains a planet stone or has an adjacent planet stone. Conversely, a hex is **unexplored** if it does not contain a planet stone and has no adjacent planet stones. Initially, the game board consists entirely of unexplored hexes. Explored hexes contain control or contested tiles. Unexplored hex do not contain a tile.

- **Controlled**: A player controls a hex either
  - by having a planet stone on the hex, or
  - by being the only player with one or more planet stones adjacent to the hex.
- **Contested**: A hex is contested if *both* players have one or more adjacent planet stones.
- **Surrounded**: A hex is surrounded if all its adjacent hexes satisfy a given condition; for example, as when all the adjacent hexes are controlled or contested but not a combination of both. Note that hexes on the edges of the board are more easily surrounded. Interior hexes have six adjacent hexes. Board edge hexes have four adjacent hexes. And, corner hexes have three adjacent hexes.

Set Up

1. The game board is centered in the play area, and players sit on opposite edges of the board.
2. Players choose a color, and they take a colony ship pawn and all planet stones in their chosen color.
3. The two-sided control tiles and red contested tiles are placed within reach of both players.
4. Starting with the yellow player, each player places their colony ship pawn in any non-corner edge hex on their nearest edge of the board. See Figure 1, Starting Setup.
5. The second player, Cyan, is given a komi (handicap) of 3.5 points.

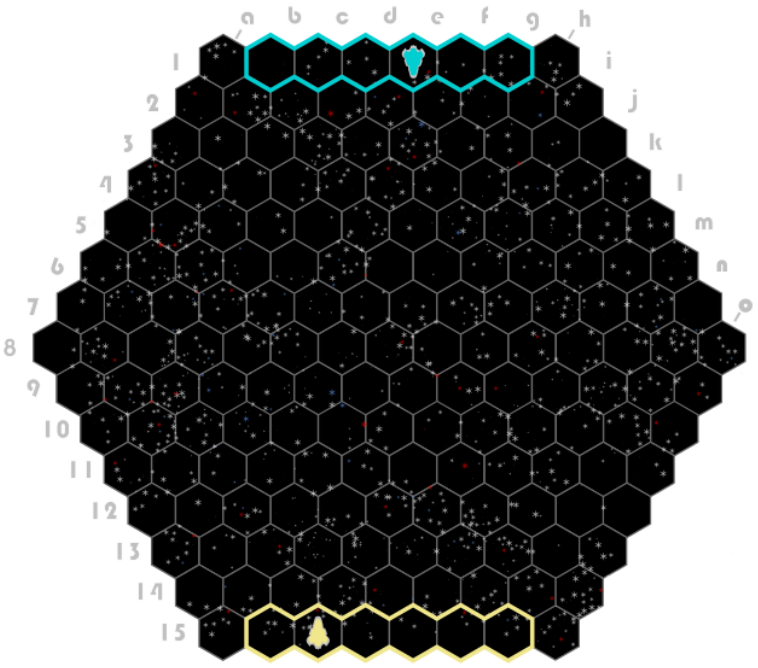


Figure 1. Starting Setup

Players can place their ship pawns in any of the hexes highlighted in their color. Yellow places first.

Game Play

Game play starts with the yellow player. Player turns alternate, no passing.

On a turn, a player can explore (move), expand (place a planet), update control tiles, and possibly receive a bonus planet or extract (exchange) a planet.

Explore

On a turn, a player must move his or her ship pawn one or more hexes, in any one of the six standard directions, to any hex not containing *any* planet stone or the opponent's ship pawn. Ships may pass over any hexes not containing an opponent's planet stone or the opponent's colony ship pawn. Control and contested tiles never impede movement. Ship pawns can pass over owned planet stones.

Refer to Figure 2, Ship Movement. In the figure, the white dots indicate all the hexes that the yellow ship pawn can move to. The planet at label 'a' is an owned planet. Yellow may not stop at this planet, but can fly over this planet. Planet 'b', an opponent's planet, blocks the path of the yellow ship pawn. The opponent's cyan ship at label 'c' also blocks Yellow's path to the southwest.

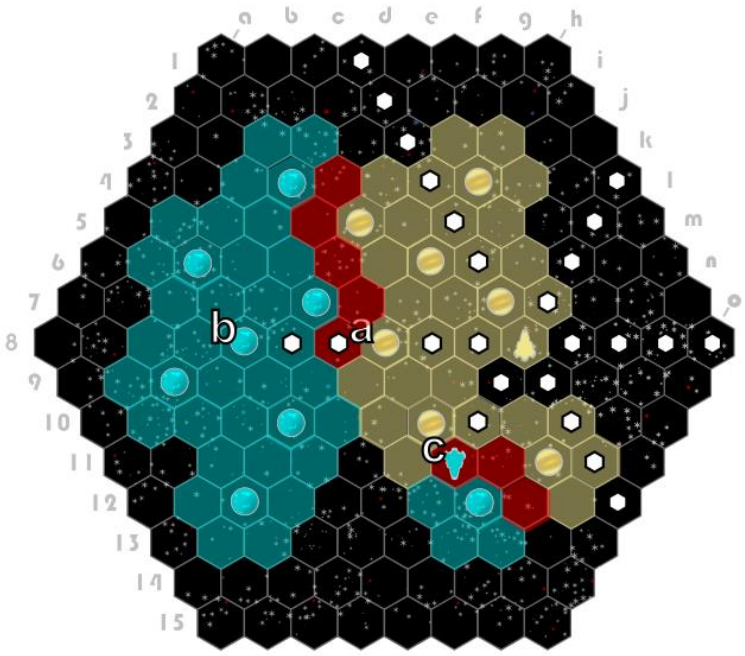


Figure 2. Ship Movement

Expand

When a colony ship pawn reaches its destination hex,

1) the player may (optional) place a control tile own-side up and a planet stone on top in any *one* of the empty unexplored hexes adjacent to the ship pawn.

Note that two planet stones can never be in adjacent hexes. The presence of the opponent's colony ship pawn in a hex prevents planet placement in that hex. See Figure 3, Potential Planet Locations. Sometimes a player may not be able to place a planet due to the fact that there are no adjacent unexplored hexes.

Each planet has a zone of influence which extends to its six adjacent hexes. A player controls one of these hexes if he or she is the only player with one or more planet stones adjacent to the hex. A hex is contested if both players have one or more adjacent planet stones. Yellow and cyan tiles indicate which player controls a hex. Red contested tiles indicate neither player controls the hex. Any hex containing a tile is explored. Hexes without a tile are unexplored.

2) For each hex adjacent to the placed planet, if the hex is newly controlled, place a control tile own-side up in the controlled hex; and if the hex is newly contested, remove the opponent's control tile is replaced with a red contested tile.

3) If a player surrounds an *unexplored* hex with *owned controlled* hexes and the opponent's ship is not in the hex, that player can immediately place an own-side-up control tile and a planet stone in the unexplored hex. In the very rare case that an opponent's ship is in the hex, the planet is awarded when the opponent's ship departs. (Apps, such as Ai Ai, can do this even when a pawn is present.)

See Figure 4. Planet Placement Examples.

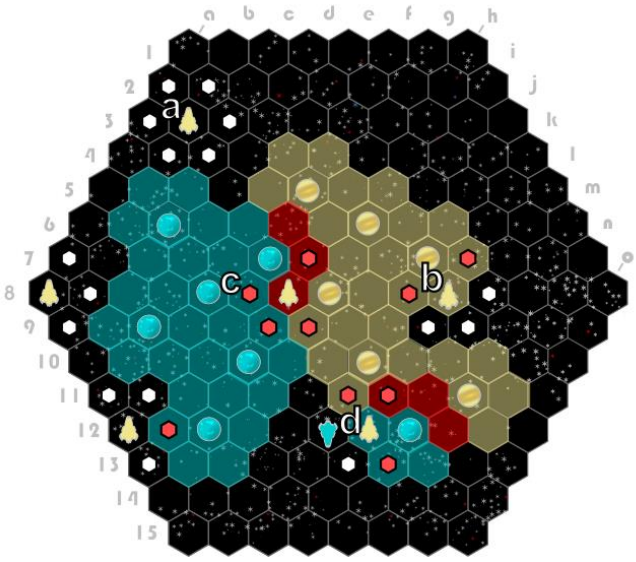


Figure 3. Potential Planet Locations

White dots indicate usable *unexplored* locations for yellow expansion planets. Red dots are not usable because planets may not be placed adjacent to any planet, regardless of color.

Ship 'a' can place a planet in any of its six adjacent hexes.

Ship 'b' cannot place a planet adjacent to the previously placed yellow planet.

Ship 'c' cannot place a planet in any adjacent hex.

Ship "d", a planet cannot be placed in the same hex as the opponent's ship.

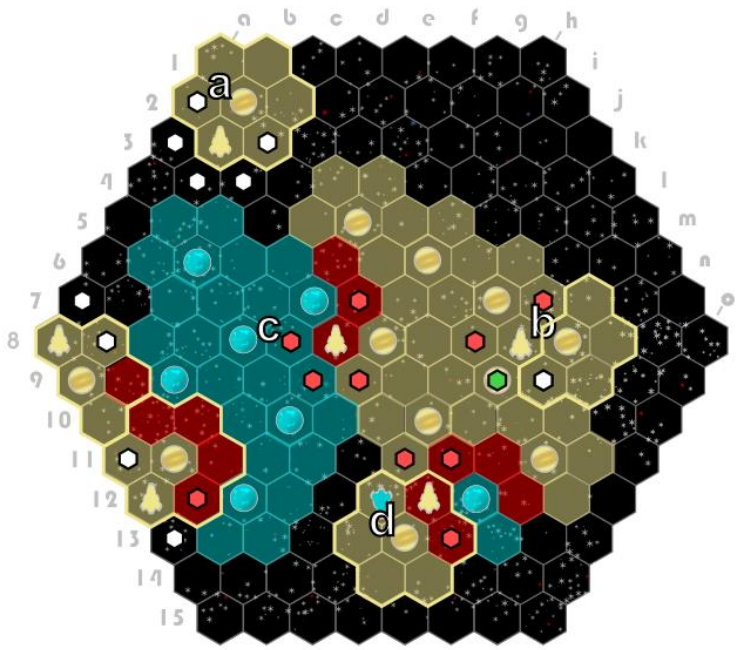


Figure 4. Planet Placement Examples

The areas highlighted with yellow borders indicate changes caused by planet placements.

Planet 'a' is a straightforward expansion where Yellow gains 7 hexes/points.

Planet "b" generates a gain of 6 hexes (5 + 1 bonus). Note that two hexes were already controlled by Yellow. The planet highlighted by a green dot is a **bonus planet** gained because Yellow surrounded an unexplored hex with yellow control hexes. A control tile and planet are placed in the surrounded hex.

The ship at 'c' cannot place a planet. Yellow gains no new hexes.

Planet 'd' only gains 5 hexes, but Cyan loses 2 hexes. An overall change of 7 points.

Extract/Exchange

4) If after placing a planet stone, a player surrounds an opponent's planet with *contested* hexes, the active player may extract the opponent's planet stone, flip the associated control tile and replace the planet with his or her own. Then, each formerly contested hex is reevaluated, and if there are no longer any opponent planets adjacent to the hex, the hex's status changes to controlled.

This replacement is in addition to normal planet placement. Conquering a planet is a significant gain and will often lead to winning the game… but not always. See the *Sample Game* below.

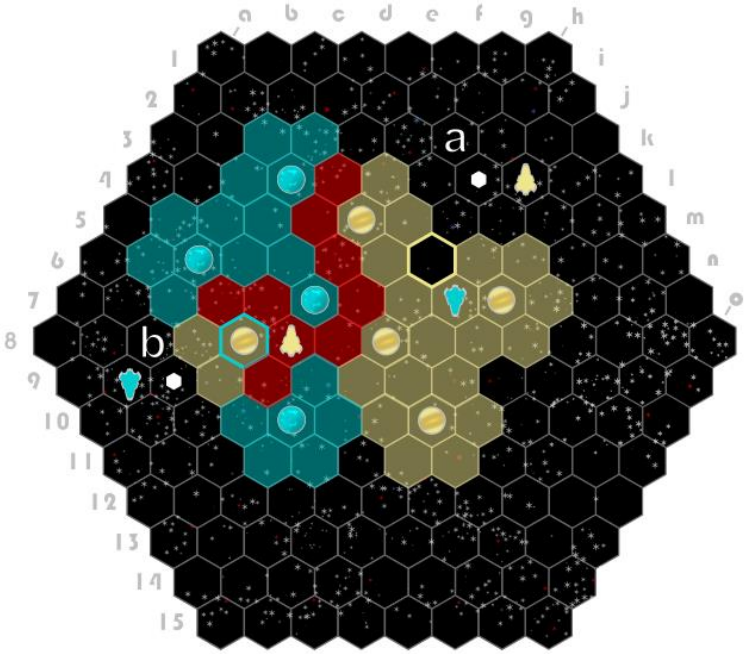


Figure 5. Bonus Planets - Targeted

Yellow and Cyan are targeting their respective highlighted hexes to obtain a bonus planet. The white dots indicate where each player will place a planet.

Case a: Yellow will surround an unexplored hex with controlled hexes.

Case b: Cyan will surround an opponent planet with contested hexes.

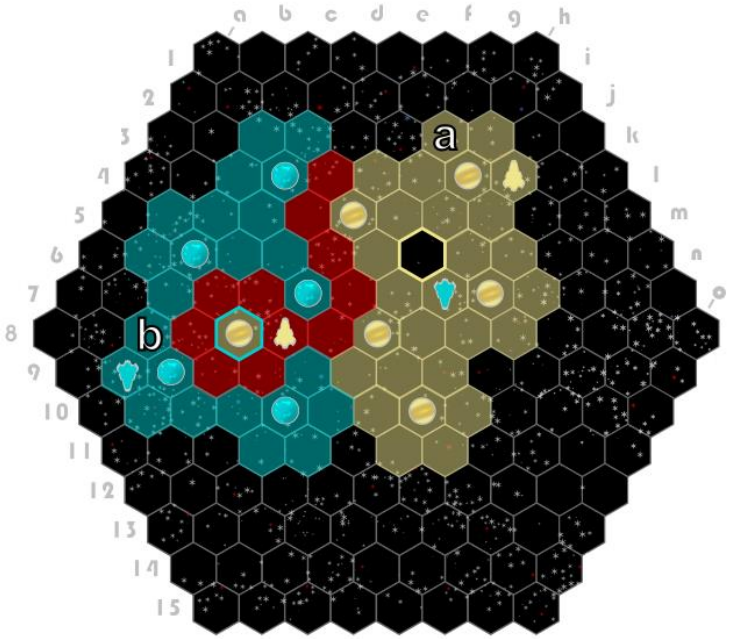


Figure 6. Bonus Planets - Surrounded

Normal expansions result in the above situations.

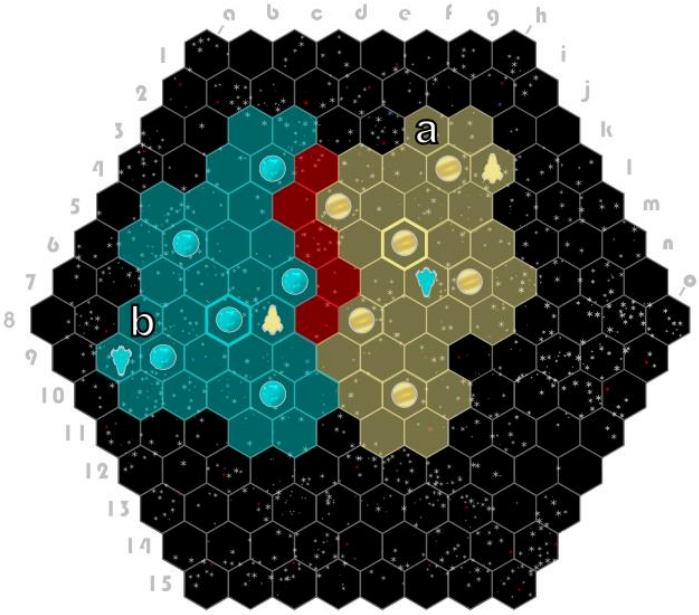


Figure 7. Bonus Planets - Awarded

Bonus planets are in addition to the single planet placed during colony placement.

Case a: If a cyan ship were present in the targeted hex, the yellow planet would be awarded when the cyan ship moves.

Case b: A bonus planet is always awarded when an opponent planet is surrounded. In addition, control tiles are also conditionally awarded!

Game End

The game ends when all hexes either contain a planet stone or are adjacent to a planet stone, that is, there are no unexplored, black hexes remaining on the board.

Winning the Game

To determine the winner, players count the number of control tiles they have on the board. The second player (Cyan) adds a komi of 3.5 points to his total.

The player with the highest total wins.

Sample Game

Use left and right keys to walk through the game.

Designer Comments

As an avid game player and collector, I particularly enjoy conquest games. I own eight or nine copies of *Risk* (with various themes), *Dust*, *Alpha Omega, Twilight Imperium* and *Eclipse* to name a few. As a game designer, I have, for a long time, wanted to create a good conquest area-control abstract game. *Astralis* is my best attempt so far. Game play is simple -- move, place a planet, determine control -- but at the same time *Astralis* feels like a sweeping, conquest game. The blocking aspects and the possibilities of planet conquest make the game challenging and add tension.

Komi is used in place of a 122* placement protocol. The komi of 3.5 points causes the lead to swing back and forth by 3.5 points, at least until one player makes a weak move. You can observe this phenomenon in the *Sample Game* above.

It is important to note that each turn should be used to maximize your score. Gains of 7 points are normally optimal but gaining bonus planets and conquering planets can add many more points! To play well, study planet placement and how it relates to scoring. Other strategies include:

- using your ship to block and possibly deflect your opponent's ship, and
- creating lines of owned planets to enable quick transit across the board late in the game.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the game mechanics in Astralis were inspired by ideas found in *Radius* by Rey Alicea, *Partisans* by Luis Bolaños Mures and *Go* (the venerable "surrounding game"). Thank you, Rey and Luis, for fine game designs. I would also like to thank Stephen Tavener for adding *Astralis* to his Ai Ai suite of games! And for his introduction of a contested graphic, which will makes it easier for players to see threaten planets and how many unexploded hexes remain on the board.

Variants

While designing Astralis, several variations were considered and play tested. Here are a few that seem worthy of mention.

Astralis: Simplified Turns

This variant plays the same as Astralis but no control tiles are used during the game. At the end of the game, players place the control tiles in order to determine a winner. In this variant, the turns are simpler -- just move, place a planet, and check for bonus planets. However, players are more likely to miss bonus planet opportunities. There's more of a fog of war feel to this game.

Astralis: Dice Planets

Players may find it bothersome to place and count control markers. Alternately, players can use dice instead of planet stones. Each die's pip count will indicate the number of controlled hexes adjacent to the die. When placing a planet die, the die starts with six pips displayed. The pip count is reduced by one for each adjacent contested hex. In addition, each contesting opponent die is also reduced by one. When the game ends, players count the pips on their dice to obtain their scores. Note that these scores can be used but will be inflated due to the fact that some controlled hexes will contribute to the pip counts of up to three owned dice. The game plays easier but will also plays differently from the standard *Astralis* game. Players are more likely to pack their planets together rather than spread out.

Beeline

In this variant, bee pawns move like Chess queens. Movement is blocked by flower stones and the opponent’s bee pawn. Upon arrival to a destination hex, the player may place a flower stone in an empty hex which is directly in front of the bee's path provided the flower will not be adjacent to any other flower. When players can no longer place a flower, the player with the most flowers on the board wins. The second player gets a komi of one-half point. This game feels like a race at first and then a maze game. Scores do not have much variability which is a con.

Dispersed Go

In *Dispersed Go* stones can be distributed to any empty hex that is *not* adjacent to any other stone. Each stone can have up to 6 liberties, as determined by its 6 adjacent hexes. A liberty is lost whenever *any other* stone is also adjacent to the hex. Like-colored stones are connected if they share a common adjacency to one of these hexes. A group is one or more connected like-colored stones. A group of stones dies and is removed from the board when all stones in the group have no liberties. This is fairly difficult to achieve because "eyes" can be easier created. (Eyes are hexes that the opponent cannot occupy or place adjacent to.)

Ref: https://sites.google.com/site/theowlsnest02/home/astralis