

# Galactic Arena

## *A Threeforged Game*

### Pitch

First contact as a sports movie--humanity is invited to send a delegation to an interstellar Olympics just five years after making contact with a pan-galactic interstellar confederation, and so must send a delegation equally adroit at diplomacy, anthropology, game theory, and athletics to represent the Earth. Its inspirations are a hybrid of *Mass Effect* and *Cool Runnings*, with a dash of *The Player of Games*.

### Introduction

It has been five years since mankind first made contact with sentient alien life. Soon, the first games will begin. Humanity has sent its best team to the Galactic Arena, to represent the human race among the species that make up the Galactic Council and win a place for humanity as a full-fledged member of pan-galactic civilization. The stakes are high!

### Game Setup

To play **Galactic Arena**, you'll need:

- At least two friends willing to spend about 4 hours on this. One of you will be the GM, the rest will be players.
- Some six-sided dice, in at least three different colors.
- A bunch of index cards.

### Humans

Before Contact, people were just... people. Only having someone to compare ourselves showed us how special we were.

Take the first index card and label it "Humanity" on one side. Pass it around and on the other side have each player write a word or phrase that describes something they believe is a fundamentally human attribute, characteristic, or feature. This can range from the prosaic--"uses legs to walk around," e.g.--to the abstract: "hopefulness," for example.

GM, take another index card and label it “Galactic Public Opinion” on one side. On the other, make a table with four columns and rows equal to the number of people at the table plus one. Label the columns, “Species,” “Athletics,” “Culture,” and “Politics.” Put Humanity in the last row of the table, and set its scores for each domain at 0, representing our interstellar reputation with other members of the Galactic Council.

- **Athletics** represents a species’ reputation as tough competitors, able athletes, and strong performers in physical endeavors and mental challenges.
- **Culture** represents a species’ reputation for producing wisdom and beauty--for being able to express the truths of existence and experience.
- **Politics** represents a species’ reputation for driving a hard bargain at the negotiating table, for being difficult to persuade and skilled at manipulation, and for being able to find common cause among factions with diverse interests.

## Aliens

There are many species participating in the Galactic Games, but only a few are destined to influence the outcome for humanity, and our prospects as members of the great pan-galactic civilization. This is how we find out who they are.

Give each player an index card, including the GM. This is the number of alien civilizations with which humanity will have potentially fraught interactions during the game. On one side of the card, label it “Alien.” Then flip it over and on the other side give the alien species a name, like “The Glorf” or “The S’satra” or some other cool alien-sounding species name. Use peer pressure to get players who pick really immersion-breaking names to change them.

Once everyone has named a species, they give their card to someone else. That person picks one of humanity’s traits that the alien species is *better at than humanity* or otherwise *transcends*, writes down how, and then decides whether that gives the species a +1 bonus on Athletics, Culture, or Politics, noting that as well. So a player may, for example, decide that the Glorf transcend humanity’s attribute of hopefulness because they are “sublimely fatalistic.” She decides they deserve +1 Culture for this.

Once everyone has done that for the species in front of them, they hand their card to somebody else, other than the person who gave it to them. Once people have a new card in front of them, they pick one of humanity’s traits at which the alien species is *worse at than humanity*, or with

respect to which it is otherwise *inferior to humanity*. The player then decides whether that gives the alien species a -1 penalty to Athletics, Culture, or Politics. For example, following the Glorf around, the next player might decide that they “use snail-like pseudopods for mobility” and give them a -1 to Athletics.

Keep doing this, alternating *advantages* and *disadvantages* for the alien species, until everyone has written something on every card. The GM takes the alien cards and enters each alien species on one row of the Galactic Public Opinion card. For each category (Athletics, Culture, and Politics), roll a d6 and add or subtract the relevant bonuses and penalties from the alien card for each species. Enter the results to complete the table.

Once this is done, all the alien cards and humanity’s card are shuffled together to form the Galactic Council deck.

## The Arena Deck

Create the Arena deck. It contains the following cards, representing the sequence of events

- The OPENING CEREMONIES card. It always goes on top. Label it “Opening Ceremonies” on both sides.
- The CLOSING CEREMONIES card. It always goes on the bottom. Label it “Closing Ceremonies” on both sides.
- One GAME card per alien species. Label it “Arena” and put “Versus the [species name]” on the other side.
- One EVENT card per player. Label it “Arena” and have each player choose one of the following events to put on the other side.
  - Diplomatic Summit
  - Formal Gala
  - Bar Crawl
  - Media Interviews
  - Art Exhibition
  - Trade Fair
  - Planetary Safari

Shuffle all the GAME and EVENT cards together. Put the Opening Ceremonies card on the top and the Closing Ceremonies card on the bottom.

## **The Competition Deck**

Have each player take an index card and label it “Competition” on one side, then flip it over and on the other write the word “Like” followed by a sport, game, or other competitive activity on the other. That player will pass the card to another player, who will write one of the following words or phrases: “except,” “combined with,” or “using.”

The second player then gives the card to a third player, who will complete the phrase by filling in the blank as indicated below, thus creating a competitive event something like, “Like baseball using anti-gravity pogo sticks,” or “Like football combined with skiing,” or “Like track and field except on a rotating ring in outer space.”

- except [with a significant rules difference or on special playing field].
- combined with [a vastly different but possibly complementary activity].
- using [some strange piece of playing equipment or protective gear].

Gather the Competition cards together and shuffle them up.

## **Humanity’s Team: The Galaxians**

Each player (except the GM, of course) gets to create a character who is a member of humanity’s team in the Galactic Games, the Galaxians, all of whom are talented athletes as well as highly trained diplomats with impeccable scientific credentials.

### **Character Attributes**

#### Glory

Each human Galaxian begins the game with 0 Glory.

#### Wealth

Each human Galaxian begins the game with 0 Wealth.

#### Skills

Each human Galaxian begins with one point in each of the following skills, and distributes an additional six points among them, with a maximum of four in any one.

- Brawn (Athletics): Strength, endurance, and toughness.
- Speed (Athletics): Moving quickly and with precision, agility, and grace.
- Tactics (Athletics): Quick thinking, short-term planning, and leadership.
- Humanities (Culture): History, philosophy, and languages; general knowledge.
- Art (Culture): Aesthetic expression and performance.
- Science (Culture): Natural and physical sciences, including medicine.
- Empathy (Politics): Understanding others' goals and motivations.
- Presence (Politics): Raw charisma, charm, and interpersonal force.
- Game Theory (Politics): Logic, strategic reasoning, long-term analysis.

### Personal Goal

Each human Galaxian selects a personal goal from the following list:

- Have the most Glory of any human Galaxian.
- Have the most Wealth of any human Galaxian.
- Ensure that humanity's Athletics reputation is the highest among the Galactic Council.
- Ensure that humanity's Culture reputation is the highest among the Galactic Council.
- Ensure that humanity's Politics reputation is the highest among the Galactic Council.

## Into the Arena

The game proceeds in turns, representing a span of time equivalent to a few Earth days or as much as a week, during which there is time for travel to different competition venues, training, scoping out the competition, schmoozing, and meeting local aliens. Each turn, draw a card to determine what event is central to the turn's activities; this will either be an athletic contest or a non-athletic event. Allow players to take action to suss out what's going on, and then roll for the team to determine the large-scale effects of the event.

## Taking Action

When a character wants to take action at any point during the game, the player describes what he or she is doing and the GM tells the player what skill represents that. The player rolls a number of dice equal to the skill and selects the desired die from among them (usually the highest). The GM usually rolls for the opposition, usually a number of dice equal to the Athletics, Culture, or Politics score of the alien adversary, unless a PC is the object of the character's action.

If the player rolls higher, he or she picks one. If the player rolls higher by three or more, he or she picks two. If the opposition rolls higher, there are complications for the acting character. If the opposition rolls higher by three or more, he or she picks one (detrimental to the acting character).

- Obtain information held in secret by the GM (usually an alien species' scores, but possibly the result of a die roll that hasn't happened yet).
- Establish or confirm a fact about someone or something as true.
- Add a die to a particular team pool (friendly or opposed) for the next test.
- Remove a die from a particular team pool (friendly or opposed) for the next test.
- During a team test, move a rolled die from one pool to another.
- Restore a lost skill point.
- Augment one's own or another's skill for the next action.
- Acquire a point of Glory, if appropriate.
- Acquire a point of Wealth, if appropriate.
- Increase humanity's Culture or Politics reputation, if appropriate.
- Reduce another species Culture or Politics reputation, if appropriate.
- The acting character avoids complications, side-effects, or unanticipated consequences emerging from the action, such as losing a point of skill to fatigue, injury, or confusion, losing Glory or Wealth, enhancing the reputation of a different species, or sullyng the name of one's own.

## **Resting Up**

A character who, when given the opportunity to take action, opts instead to rest up, may restore up to two lost skill points.

## **Events**

The card draw determines the nature of the event that is the focal point of the current turn.

### **The Opening Ceremonies**

The game starts at the beginning of the first week--you've just arrived at the first planet or space station the games are being hosted on, found your quarters, and unpacked. Soon it's time to get ready for the Opening of the Galactic Games. The GM describes the opening ceremonies, making it as alien and surreal as possible. Introduce each alien species delegation as they enter the

ceremonial hall. Then have the Earth delegation enter, and have each player describe his or her character.

### **Athletic Events**

When a “Versus [Alien Species]” card is drawn, the GM pulls a card from the Competition deck to determine what the sporting event the team must play is like. The GM then invents details and describes the action.

The GM secretly determines the line on the athletic action by comparing the Athletics, Culture, and Politics scores for the two competing teams.

- The team with the higher Athletics score is favored to win the game.
- The team with the higher Culture score is better liked by the fans in the arena.
- The team with the higher Politics score has the referees biased toward them.

Players can take action prior to the game’s start to find out about the line, and during the game to contribute to the team’s performance.

Each team rolls a pool of dice reflecting its Athletics, Culture, and Politics scores (minimum zero), assigning one die from each pool to be its result. The team with the highest Athletics score wins the event; break ties by consulting Politics and Culture in that order. Human Galaxians gain one point of Glory each time they win a game, and humanity’s Athletics reputation increases by one.

### **Non-Athletic Events**

When any other event is drawn, the GM pulls a card from the Galactic Council deck to determine on which planet the event takes place. The GM then invents details and describes the scene, during which time characters may take action.

### **The Closing Ceremonies**

When the Closing Ceremonies card is drawn, the game ends.

## **Ending the Game**

Once the Closing Ceremonies card is drawn, assess the team’s performance. Roll three dice, one for each track. The track with the highest roll matters most. Narrate an epilogue for your character based on what happens to humanity and whether or not you achieved your personal goal.

- Athletics: Winning this track means that humans are acknowledged as the Champions of the Galaxy. Losing it means that we are regarded as feckless laughingstocks. If this matters most: victory means humanity is enlisted as mercenaries in the ongoing galactic war against the Rebellion; loss means humanity is enslaved as cattle. Any other result implies that Earth remains a little-visited backwater.
- Culture. Winning this track means that humans are acknowledged as a civilization of refinement and grace. Losing it means that we are regarded as boorish provincials of barbarous tastes and revolting customs. If this matters most, victory means that humans are sought after as teachers, lecturers, and artists throughout the galaxy, and tourism to Earth makes the planet a cosmopolitan port of call; loss means that humans can only find employment as menial servants and experimental test subjects among the civilized species of the galaxy. Any other result implies that, regardless of its virtues, Earth culture is condescendingly regarded as quaint.
- Politics. Winning this track means that Earth is granted full member status on the Galactic Council. Losing it means that provisional status remains in force. If this matters most, victory means that humanity's entry to the Council marks the beginning of a galaxy-wide golden age; loss means humanity is forced to join the Rebellion by increasingly oppressive Galactic Council policies. Any other result implies that Earth is accepted as a promising junior member of the Galactic Council.