



So, Why Play Alien Squad Leader?

By Alex Self

Why aren't you playing Alien Squad Leader (ASQL)? I do get concerned that the game is easily dismissed by veteran gamers, but why do I think this? After a casual perusal of the rules, I guess it is easy to notice the core 2D6 game mechanics, the limited classification of weapons and armour, and the generic army templates, and make the assumption that this is a simplified game for beginners, with little to recommend it to the veteran gamer. Or, perhaps you are a wargamer that needs his science fiction battles to be grounded in a strong narrative background with game mechanics that represent plausible outcomes bearing some resemblance to contemporary combat experience, so that your imagined miniature warfare is as realistic as possible?

Well, I confess, ASQL does indeed have simplified and stylised core rules, with no coherent background or setting that attempts to explain how all the various factions might co-exist within the same universe. Silly and inexplicable combat outcomes are possible! But this is not an oversight. It is a deliberate development of a game that attempts to satisfy some key requirements. Allow me to explain to you what I had in mind when designing the game.

Big Games with Lots of Miniatures

I like playing big battle games. I originally conceived ASQL as the science-fiction equivalent of the large 15mm Ancient and Medieval battles that I played using the DBM rules by Phil Barker and Richard Bodley Scott. They typically involved hundreds of miniatures. In order to make this work with long-ranged weapons, I had to scale down the numbers to a large-scale skirmish, but I was still thinking in the region of around 100 figures and 3 – 8 vehicles per side, on a standard 6 foot by 4 foot wargames table. It is perfectly possible to play a game of this size with ASQL (a 200 point game) to a satisfactory conclusion within 3 hours. However, to accomplish that, you need streamlined and efficient game mechanics, with minimal reference to the rule book, so that the players can concentrate on manoeuvring their miniature armies and making tactical decisions, not poring over charts and tables.

Incidentally, it is not essential to collect a large army to enjoy ASQL. You can have a perfectly satisfactory game on a 4 foot by 4 foot table using 100 point armies – around 50 figures and 3 vehicles per side. And all within an hour and half.

Tactics over Number Crunching

I have read that a good game allows the players to make many meaningful decisions that give them a chance to influence the outcome of the game by the choices they make. A random factor is required to represent the element of chance, and to provide the excitement of risk, but, on the whole, the choices made available to a player in the game must provide them with the opportunity to win the game by exercising their skill in decision-making, which are, in turn, based on sizing up priorities and probabilities. ASQL provides many such opportunities; which units do you attempt to activate first when your command phase could end (via a failed command test) at any moment? Should you move your units as a group (easier to move, but making a good target) or individually? Should a unit stand and fire at the enemy or seek to out-manoeuvre them (at double speed)? Should your command stands take part in the fighting or keep out of harm's way? Should you seek to degrade the effectiveness of enemy units or attempt to destroy each enemy unit outright?

ASQL is quick. The basic 2D6 mechanics can be easily understood over the course of a single game, but the cumulative consequences of making many, many, rapid decisions over the course of the game is not. And here is where the challenge lies. Especially when you consider that each army template includes a combination of special rules and unit composition which defines their unique strengths and weaknesses in the game, and which may limit or diversify their tactical options.

Competition Friendly

ASQL acknowledges the pleasure of a game that is a battle of wits between opponents, rather than emphasising co-operative/group play, or driving a narrative. The timing of decisions is important, as an outcome can have a knock-on effect that can then be exploited by the next action determined by the active player. Within this context, clever exploitation of the game mechanics is accepted, and even encouraged. Therefore it is important that the rules are relatively "clean" and unambiguous. This is another reason for the simplicity of the core rules, for, as you can imagine, once special rules are introduced, the variety of exceptions to the norm multiplies and it becomes increasingly difficult to anticipate every combination of circumstances that could arise in the game.

Also important in competitive gaming is the perceived fairness of the game, opportunities for optimising army builds, and clear win conditions. ASQL's play testers try hard to ensure that all the available armies possess not only a unique character, but that they all have a fair chance of winning the game, if played well. We acknowledge that some armies are more straightforward to use effectively than others, but we strive to ensure that all of them are capable of winning, especially if the army composition is determined before randomly generating the game scenario. There are no "super-units" in ASQL, but most army templates will force players to make hard choices between a variety of effective unit types.

Generally speaking, most armies will trade-off between durability/firepower and manoeuvrability/quantity, although some of the armies (non-humanoid aliens especially) are intentionally limited in choice. The scenarios have different objectives that have the effect of levelling out the relative capabilities of the armies, and there are terrain placement rules that favour the defender, while allowing the attacker to deploy after seeing where the defender's army is positioned.

Playability over Realism

The game mechanics of ASQL represent a level of abstraction that does not intend to provide a plausible reason for every combat outcome (you could put this down to the “fog of war”). Consequently, strange and inexplicable things can happen, which may not be to the taste of every wargamer, depending upon the level of credibility that you require in your games. Incidentally, ASQL aspires to a similar level of credibility to that of your average science fiction movie – ie. not a lot! But that should not deter your enjoyment of the game. My fellow ASQL play testers actually find it quite amusing to imagine how say, a group of alien reptilian warriors armed only with spears have managed to defeat a heavily armoured main battle tank in close assault, or why an unscathed unit of elite space commandos on the periphery of a desperate firefight have refused to obey orders to engage the enemy for the third turn running (“it’s the Ort radios sir – the cheap trash isn’t working!”), but that is the kind of luck that can play out.

Straightforward and easily understood game mechanics allow players to quickly ascertain how the game works. With ASQL, this can sometimes have a negative effect, because some players consequently assume that the game has no depth. However, I believe that this enables players to more deeply immerse themselves in the game, and concentrate on the decisions they are making in the full knowledge of the pros and cons attached to any particular course of action. Yes, when a gamer faces a unique alien faction for the first time, there will be new things to learn, but the number of special rules attached to each army template are few enough that they can be explained reasonably quickly to an opponent at the start of the game, and some are iterations of the same rules that apply to other armies, albeit in a different combination. However, as in a game of chess, understanding a number of simple rules is not the same as mastering them.

Not adhering strictly to plausible/realistic outcomes also means that ASQL can include colourful troop-types such as “Primitives”, allowing gamers to field alien natives armed with bows and arrows; bug-eyed, slavering monsters; units of alien zombies; and cavalry charges – all great fun, but clearly unlikely to exist on a battlefield dominated by rapid-firing long-range weaponry.

Creativity over Official Miniatures Ranges

There is no official miniatures range for ASQL, and that’s how I like it. The range of commercially available 15mm science fiction models has increased at a phenomenal rate since ASQL was published by Alternative Armies through its brand 15mm.co.uk in 2009. One of the reasons for having generic army templates is that, within a given theme, the gamer has a wide range of choice in interpreting how that army looks. Also, the scope to vary the number of models per base, and the relatively large infantry base size for squads/fire-teams means that mini-dioramas can be modelled if that is to your taste. And this is important, because I have noticed that there is nothing that a tabletop miniatures gamer likes more than expressing their individuality and creativity in their model armies!

I have already seen how the themes for ASQL army templates provide a jumping off point for gamer’s imaginations, to the point where collecting a model force to represent each featured army can start to become addictive!

And, Let’s Hear it for the Aliens!

The clue is in the title. Yes, ASQL was conceived as an antidote to all those other human-centric science-fiction wargames. Although even the humans get some weird and wonderful army lists such as the Outlaw Gangs, and the Human Far Eastern Mercenaries (not in the current rules, but a free expansion on the 15mm.co.uk website). Perhaps it is only natural that most gamers identify with the armed forces of humanity, but I saw ASQL as a wonderful opportunity to develop some unique and imaginative alien fighting forces, almost all of which are inspired either by science fiction movies, tv series, or existing ranges of wargames models.

Each new alien faction comes with a themed set of special rules that determine it’s character and likely battle tactics in the game, which are usually alluded to in the introductory synopsis that accompanies each army template. In play-testing, we try to limit the number of special rules to the minimum required to make the army markedly different to those already established, whilst at the same time delivering a sufficient level of characterisation that evokes the desired theme.

In my opinion, the (much requested) provision of a system to allow custom-built armies within ASQL would essentially undermine the carefully constructed ethos of the game. The depth and challenge of ASQL lies in facing opposing armies that behave differently to yours, and adapting your tactics in order to maximise your strengths and exploit their weaknesses. There are enough unique army templates, which in combination with the game scenarios, should provide endless re-playability. Allowing players to custom-build their armies removes that commitment to uniqueness, and risks the introduction of countless bland wargames armies without any discernible weaknesses.

A Unique Game System

Many new science fiction rule sets have appeared since 2009, and yet I believe that ASQL remains unique. It’s blend of HOTT/Warmaster style mechanics adapted to long-ranged combat, and combined with faction-specific special rules caters for quick, fun, competitive games, and continues to attract sales of the rule book at a steady rate. Fancy something different from a human-centric gritty sci-fi small skirmish? You never know, you might find an imaginative, big, fast-moving Alien Squad Leader battle a refreshing change.

A.Self. November 2015

