

THE IMPORTANCE OF TACTICS

By Steve Bowkett

Appears here with the kind permission of the author.

THE CITADEL of Time was thronged with creatures from ten thousand worlds. Some of them had travelled halfway across Infinity to be there for the momentous event. This was the most important day in the history of the little blue planet of Tiempus—for the multicoloured eyes of the universe were watching and waiting for the contest that was soon to begin.

Shortly after sunrise the crowd reached its peak. Nearby the space dock was crammed with vehicles of the most varied and wonderful design, ranging from the sleek transdimensional discs of the Xi Saucerians to the foggy globes of mist belonging to the mysterious Nebulon race. All of the colours of the visible spectrum, and some that were beyond, were represented by the multitude of creatures moving to their places.

Eventually the lights in the Citadel faded and a metallic tension filled the air. The darkness deepened, save for a single patch of golden light illuminating a small podium set at the heart of the gravity-defying galleries that surrounded it.

A table materialized suddenly on the podium. And then the players arrived—Etherius, last of the demigods, who formed out of a swirl of silvery light. He cut a gaunt figure as he pulled up his chair and sat down. But this shape of flesh-and-blood was just a convenient shell fashioned for the purpose of the game.

His opponent was Chronos, a huge, silver-hulled being who strode powerfully in from the wings and took his place on the massive structure of scaffolding opposite Etherius's flimsy chair. A steel smile crossed Chronos's mercury-grey lips. Etherius glowed a little more brightly.

The game they had come to play was one of the most ancient in the cosmos. Earth beings called it chess and here on Tiempus it was being used in place of a mighty war that had been threatening to tear apart the Zanthic Supercluster of galaxies for half a million years. Rather than allow what would be unimaginable destruction and suffering,

the Overlords of Reality had decided that the opposing forces in the conflict would each send a champion to play this game. The outcome would decide how the great galactic conflict would be settled. Both opponents had learned the rules well. Both understood the importance of tactics...

Now the little table between Chronos and Etherius expanded in a way that a human mind would barely understand. Space twisted around itself and an incredibly rich and complicated scene appeared within it—a vision of the cosmos complete with suns, planets, moons, war fleets, aliens... It was a chessboard of the stars.

The creatures that had constructed the field of play—the Ultrons—insisted that the board was a projection in quasi-space, which included the minds of all those who were observing. But some people feared that it was too closely attached to reality, and that the game would be played out with actual lives being lost. Cleverly the Ultrons had not denied this, because the added excitement had certainly boosted visitor numbers here today, and sales of the pocket version had soared.

Since there was no time limit on the game, and since both players were almost immortal, no one in the audience expected to live to see its conclusion. But to be there to witness perhaps one or two moves would be the high point of a lifetime.

And so it was. Chronos had won the toss of the coin and elected to make the opening gambit. The tension was extreme as he commanded a battle fleet to enter a random exit black hole. This meant the warships could pop up anywhere at any time to wreak their terrible havoc.

Etherius countered by constructing a wall of dark matter around the cluster of worlds where his most powerful warriors were stationed. That should put a stop to Chronos's devious plot!

A month passed. A year went by. Move was followed by countermove. The game ebbed and flowed with no clear advantage either way. Then Chronos introduced a rogue quasar among Etherius's warrior ranks and wiped out a million brave souls.

There was a gasp from those still alive among the audience. Chronos was playing by the rules, but he was on the very edge of disregarding them. One of the Overlords of Reality checked the players' manual and decided that Chronos had not stepped over the line. His move was allowed. He was, however, warned to think carefully before following this line of play.

Etherius became thoughtful. He was enough of a sportsbeing to compliment Chronos on his cleverness and said that he would need to consider his next move at length...

There was a minor commotion a few decades later when some plant beings from the planet Gerania were found to have sprouted tiny offspring. The officials were in a quandary as to whether the sproutlets should be made to pay for their seats.

Etherius sat in motionless silence, studying the battle-board intently. Chronos leaned back and waited patiently. He knew he had the upper hand. He knew that whatever his opponent was likely to do, Chronos's own countermove would wipe his forces from the face of existence.

Years drifted by into centuries. The centuries mounted up into millennia and then into aeons. Thousands of generations lived out their lives and passed on. Stars grew old and guttered out like candles in the night. The universe aged and endless peace reigned among its peoples.

Over further centuries even the super-hard stones of the Citadel of Time started to crack and crumble. Eventually the two opponents, the officials and the faithful robot servoids sat among ruins. A cold dead wind shrieked across the desolate landscape of Tiempus. Even the Ultrons had evolved beyond recognition and moved away to pursue other business opportunities.

In the mauve darkness at the end of time, Etherius glanced up from the board. He noticed that Chronos looked a little rusty around the lips, and waited a month to make sure that his ancient enemy was still awake.

Then Etherius leaned forward and Chronos frowned. Incredibly, even his brow showed the hairline fracturing of extreme age.

Etherius put a thin finger to his even thinner lips and appeared to be puzzled. "Forgive me," he said, "but is it my move?"