

A Wolf Amongst Men

Cybertanks in The Crucible

The marriage of artificial intelligence and Armoured Fighting Vehicles has been a longstanding one in military science fiction going all the way back to the late 1960s at the very least. It combines the [relative] invulnerability of a tank with the inhumanity of a computer brain, an encapsulation of a dream and nightmare all at the same time. The term 'cybertank' has entered colloquial usage to describe these vehicles, though they may be (or often are) wholly machine-controlled.

It is not a theme discussed within the Hammer's Slammers milieu at least in large part because David Drake has repeatedly noted that he is writing stories about the men and women themselves and not specifically about the technology they use (or even a future history as such). The rules portrayed in *The Crucible* seek to emulate the stories to this end and they succeed in large part...

But sometimes the players of that game yearn to match themselves against the ultimate tank—or even to *be* that tank, facing off against an entire force of colloid minds, a Goliath against so many Davids.

Cybertank Sources

The list is wide and varied. At its top end it includes monstrous units that can lay siege to an entire continent. The middle ground would be typified by large, segmented units with distinctive towers capable of dishing out nuclear fire to cleanse the battlefield. The low end would be more normal vehicles controlled by something other than a human crew. The controlling intelligence itself can range from a 'simple' computer to a disembodied human mind. However, drones and remotely-operated vehicles are not in the same class (and have been discussed within the confines of the main rules). The end result is an armoured vehicle capable of autonomous combat operations independent of human interaction (though many sources incorporate some kind of human hierarchy in the strategic and/or operational decision-making process, which is quite different than the tactical aspects seen on the sharp end).

Relative Cybertank Sizes

Class One

These vehicles are 'human scaled' and present an outward appearance commensurate with the normal AFVs seen in the rules. With few exceptions they operate per the normal rules. They should be able to handle another tank or platoon of tanks crewed by humans.

Class Two

Cybertanks in this class can be present on a gaming board (though often in smaller [15-6mm] scales) but will be considerably bigger than the average AFV. The rules will thus concentrate more on these size elements more than any other. Ideally they can face off against a company or even a light battalion of normal AFVs.

Class Three

Any AFV of this size will take up a large portion of any gaming board at the larger (25-28mm) scale and would be more-than-imposing on even a smaller board. However, they will function similarly to Class Two cybertanks—but they are truly immense constructs and likely will not be seen much on a gaming table. Realistically, Class 3 units can defeat a battalion or multiple battalions of conventional foes.

Designing a Cybertank

Determine Class

If working from a fictional source, identify the physical characteristics of the design in question and corral it into one of the three classes:

- Class 1: May follow any paradigm seen in *The Crucible*.
- Class 2: Bigger than conventional vehicles, but not the biggest ever seen. Think: "several tanks put together".
- Class 3: Completely outsized; think: "a starship that can fight in a ground battle".

Mobility

Again, if working from a story or motion picture fit the motive system to a rules-paradigm.

- Class 1: May use any motive system available in *The Crucible*.
- Class 2: Will often be track-laying armour, but—given the Slammaverse milieu—may also be some type of hover/ground-effect or gravitic motive apparatus.
- Class 3: Will almost certainly be tracked in some form, but grav-propulsion is not outside the realm of possibility given a specific source.

Protection

Specific fictional sources should give a rough appreciation of how resilient a cybertank is to incoming attacks.

- Class 1: Will often match similar *Crucible* AFV elements in Armour values.
- Class 2: Size is not everything, but the bigger a tank, given matching effectiveness not demonstrated in the real-world, would indicate advanced technologies. Therefore, they should have Armour values commensurate with the heaviest *Crucible* armour—or even better.
- Class 3: These will often feature armour that is almost invulnerable to conventional weapons, which makes them not-that-much-fun to play (by normal people who are pointedly not those little people who seem to enjoy trouncing their enemies behind a thinly veiled shield of invulnerability).

Firepower

The source here provides much of the inspiration, but the heavy lifting will have to be done by the designer/player. The reason for this is straight-forward: *The Crucible* portrays events as seen in the Slammiverse series of fiction and therefore concentrates on weapons closely aligned with real-world touchstones, or at least ones capable of being used by and against conventional infantry and AFVs. So, some ‘coaxing’ of the available weapons-systems will be in order.

Rules for Using Cybertanks

So, now that the basics of the design are formulated into rough-gaming terms, it is time to see how they perform on the gaming table.

General Rules

Tactical Unit or a Detachment:

A cybertank will often be its own Detachment, especially at the higher levels. A Class 1 unit may act as either a TU in the conventional sense or as a solitary detachment in its own right per the source material. Any cybertank of Class 2 or higher will always be a Detachment in its own right because they are comprised of subsystems that fulfill the definition of TUs.

Movement:

Cybertanks, seeing as they are without human crew, can generally move faster than AFVs which house bodies that must remain combat-effective at all times. Therefore, treat all cybertanks as having a **Fast** rating for whatever their motive system is. Alternately, allocate

them either of the following Elite Skills as appropriate: *Blitzkrieg* (+1d6 LPs for Movement Only—Leadership) or *Leadfoot* (Add additional **Slow Move** to every move— Vehicles).

In addition, because they lack crew and will most likely be using very advanced motive and power sub-systems, allow them the ability to enter all types of Water obstacles. Keep in mind that anything but a Hover, Grav, or Flying vehicle type will be *under* the Water and thus not subject to most attacks (Artillery, perhaps, notwithstanding).

Protection:

Whether because the lack of a crew means the cybertank can be almost literally an armoured box with weapons ports or because a higher tech gradient allows for better materials-science, cybertanks often seem to field better protection than conventional armour. Thus, treat them as being *Hull Down* in all aspects (+1 DV to all armour locations—Vehicles). Most cybertanks in fiction have extensive defensive systems, so each should have some kind of Strip-Mine or Drozd type system. Many will have *multiple* such systems, not only for redundancy but to increase their effectiveness against infantry swarms.

Firepower:

Amongst other things, most cybertanks are depicted as having advanced sensor systems; if this is the case with your cybertank, give them the *Sniper Pod* Special Rule from Update 3 (http://www.hammers-slayers.com/pdf/update_3%20web.pdf). Players will need to get creative in assigning their cybertanks their main weaponry. It is suggested they think outside the box a bit—obviously the weapons will be at the larger end of the *Crucible* spectrum but that need not be an end to the discussion.

Some suggested ‘tweaking’ of the standard systems might be in order, without making yet more weapons-systems to keep track of:

- Artillery systems make good substitutes since they have decent anti-armour and – personnel capabilities. Think about removing the ‘direct-fire’ penalties and you have a good superheavy weapon. Also, you can ‘plus-up’ the weapon by varying the number of shots (from 1 to 6).
- Big weapons often have low rates-of-fire. That is partially a result of the stories the weapons are described in (such as the Nonesuch 25cm monstrosities) but also a bit of game-balance (else everyone would be packing 25cm powerguns on their light tanks, not so?). Try removing the ‘Fire Every Other Turn’ restriction on a 25cm powergun for a cybertank main gun and see what happens to a Slammers’ company team.
- For smaller weapons (and even defensive systems), try out different weapons-classes. A defensive apparatus does not *have* to be Strip Mines. It could instead have the game-stats of a Vehicular Flamethrower if not the look and aesthetic value.

Leadership and Quality:

Because cybertanks are typically a Detachment themselves, they should be accorded a rank per the normal rules.

- Class 1 should be a **Lieutenant** , Class 2 a **Captain** or **Major**, and a Class 3 a **Colonel** or higher.
- If the cybertank is nominally sentient, then feel free to accord it at least one Leadership Elite Skill. A suggested ratio is 1d6/3 for Class 1, 1d6/2 for Class 2, and 1d6 for Class 3.

A cybertank should be at least a Veteran and a Class 2+ should likely be Elite. If a force can make such a unit combat-effective, they probably did not skimp on the artificial intelligence component.

Morale:

Generally speaking, cybertanks are immune to any type of Morale mechanism. To put this in context, a player at the helm of a force on a *Crucible* table is commanding (albeit tiny) troops who may or may not march blithely to their doom (or impending victory if things are looking grim and they are not omniscient!). A player in command of a cybertank 'is' that controlling intelligence and may push an ultimately suicidal attack...or not if the player is being reasonable and wants to 'save' the tank for another, more advantageous, fight.

Specific Rules

Class One:

These cybertanks perform similarly to their conventional brethren as pertains to Terrain interaction, expenditure of Leadership Points, and combat actions (attacking and taking damage).

Class Two:

Overview

A cybertank of this class will be a Detachment in itself. It will be comprised of a varying number of TUs, each with a specific function: a Motive System, Offensive Weapons System, and Defensive Weapon System. Often, there will be more than one of each type. For multiple Motive Systems, divide the overall speed of the cybertank by that number and keep track of how much movement ability is lost for each lost Motive system. The loss of a Weapon System (of either type) will reduce that capability to match.

Movement

A Class 2 cybertank will probably care relatively little about terrain given its size and unworldly power. It should ignore most Vegetation and Rocks/Rubble. However, it will be very susceptible to terrain such as Swamp, where it will become stuck on a roll of 1-4 on 1d6. It

should be allowed to cross significant obstacles such as anti-tank ditches and tall hills but cliffs should still make an obstacle for it (usually this should be delineated prior to the start of play). Alternately, give it the Pathfinder skill (Treats Difficult Terrain as Clear).

Protection

Accord each System an Armour Value in keeping with the relative resilience of the cybertank as a whole and the individual part itself. However, because it is an individual component, only give it a 'Front' value. Thus, a Motive System (of which a given cybertank might field four) might have armour of '8-9' because it is protected, but not as much as the Offensive Weapon System main-turret which might feature a '12' or even '14' (try cracking that!). By comparison, an individual Defensive Weapon System or secondary Offensive Weapon System might have a '10'. Do not forget the *Hull Down* special rule above (or simply incorporate it into the DV first-off).

Unless the opposition has planned for such an armoured monstrosity bearing down on them, halve all mine attacks since they are engineered for normal-sized AFVs and will have less effect on something the size of a military air-lifter. Similarly reduce Close Assaulting infantry because the cybertank is so much larger physically, not to mention lacking the access points and inherent weaknesses of a vehicle requiring a human crew and sensory inputs.

The key here is to illustrate the massiveness of the cybertank at this scale by breaking it down into manageable parts (from a gaming standpoint). This system will also preclude the cybertank from being taken out with one lucky shot; notice there is not a "command" or "headquarters" system to take advantage of. Instead, it must be battered down, bit by bit—and the damage it will be doing to you in the mean-time...

Class Three:

At this point, the cybertank has gone past much of the ability to be represented on the tabletop—inasmuch as it pertains to a skirmish game such as *The Crucible* (which tops out at roughly company-level actions). If you insist though, play it as a very high-powered Class 2. Have some fun with it, perhaps turning any Building, Vegetation, or even Road Terrain into Rubble that it crosses. However, because of its vast size in comparison to the playing area, perhaps give it significant penalties:

- Reduce or eliminate the ability of its main guns to target foes within a meter or so (of actual space)
- Impose turning restrictions to reduce its (otherwise impressive) overland movement capabilities.

Sample Class Two Cybertank

Troll Block E

- Single Detachment
- Elite Major (10 LPs)
- Fast Tracked+ Additional Slow Move 60 cm
- Component TUs
 - 4x Movement Systems (each DV9 & worth 15 cm at 25mm scale) totaling 60 cm
 - 2x Offensive Weapon Systems (each DV13 with Main gun: 15-25 cm Artillery; Shots 4, FP 5/6, Range NA-Infinite)
 - 6x Offensive Weapon Systems (each DV11 with Secondary Guns: 5-10 cm Artillery; Shots 2, FP 4/4, Range NA-Infinite)
 - 6x Offensive Weapon Systems (each DV11 with Missiles: MLRS; Shots *each can fire only once unless destroyed first*, FP 5/4, Range (NA [no short or medium]))
 - 12x Defensive Weapon Systems (each DV7 with Anti-Personnel Units; Vehicle Mounted Flamethrower: Shots 1, FP 3/2, Range Short)
- Elite Skills
 - Pathfinder (Treats Difficult Terrain as Clear; *may enter all Water*)
 - Hull Down (+1 DV to all locations)
 - Field Mechanic (Ignores Damage on 1-4 on 1d6)