



Vanguard Designer's Notes

by Tim Westhaven

What is VANGUARD?

Vanguard is a science-fantasy game in the vein of high flung space opera. I've called it a juncture between Mass Effect and Wind in the Willows. It came about as a science-fiction setting that would engage and be accessible to my 6yr old son and he has had a large input in ensuring that the rules are clear, concise and engaging; but I've worked hard to make sure that experienced gamers will still enjoy and be challenged, and the feedback and experience I've had so far has been excellent.

This isn't a simple monster mash or dungeon bash game, and the rules cover complex concepts such as fly-wi (on the fly wireless) hacking of computer systems, starship design and combat, research and development of equipment upgrades (or power-ups) and social interaction and esperence (psionics).

Aside from the core mechanics the game has its own setting. Based around the planet Ashen, which is much like earth, there are no humans but branches of the evolutionary tree that include pawed mammals and reptiles have resulted in sentient, bipedal species; evolved from many kinds of animals that we know such as mice, rabbits, badgers, moles, squirrels, bears, lizards, foxes and many more. These species have their own cultures their own civilizations and their own detailed histories.

Design features

Philosophy

The idea behind VANGUARD is accessible, adaptable and fun. If a 7yr old can create a character, understand that character's role, represent that character and get comfortable with the rules over a few hours of play ? and if an experienced player can pick up the game, like the mechanics, like the setting and both have an amazing game experience then I will have accomplished what I set out to do.

I'm not trying to break the mould with VANGUARD, I'm not trying to create the be all of science fantasy games, I'm trying to create a fun game that young and old gamers can enjoy together and create memorable characters and stories within.

Modular design

Because I set out to make a game that was accessible to young (7+) and old gamers alike I knew that some things would need to grow with the player as their sophistication grew, that the game had to support complex ideas that older players would expect and that learning gamers would demand later on. So VANGUARD was built with many more advanced rules being modular and able to be substituted or inserted as the GM saw fit. But such modular rules were kept to subjects that were not essential to the game, but were provided to add flavour, a more realistic feel or satisfy the need for more complex interactions within the game environment.

A simple example is damage and healing. In the basic version character's with no health left are not considered dead, just incapacitated/unconscious; a situation that can be easily remedied with the use of medical nanobots or a friend

giving first aid, but also a character who is unconscious gets to roll a luck check each round to see if they recover ? meaning that they were indeed only winded or knocked unconscious in battle and have come-too. This was to protect young players from the devastating loss of their character as well as giving them a round to round action to try to recover ? thereby keeping them in the game. But this rule can easily be substituted for a more experienced and lethal version, where the downed character has a number of rounds in which to receive treatment or face death. The key here, as with the rest of the game, was to make sure that young players weren't made to feel that they fail or had no hope of success but that there was always a chance they could do the impossible.

Base mechanics

The base mechanics of VANGUARD are simple yet versatile and make use of attributes, skillsets and equipment. Dice are limited to D6 as these are commonly available and numerically low for accessibility for younger players. The attributes are linked to the skillsets, but not limited to them. So for example the piloting skillset is linked to the action attribute, but a character might be looking to understand how an enemy pilot is going to react to a certain tactic, and in this the GM may suggest the character uses their Senses attribute combined with their Pilot skillset instead of Action.

This ability to mix and match the seven attribute and sixteen skillsets means that the character and the GM have a broad range of roleplaying options, and also means that there are multiple ways of addressing a problem or situation which favours different characters.

The feedback I've had from game testers has only highlighted that the system supports complex interactions, whether they be physical, mental, social or critical (such as combat) and that the straight forward nature of the base mechanic is a real draw card for many players.

One of the things I love about the mechanics is that there are stepped critical successes and failures and that players receive xp rewards for both, meaning that they learn from their mistakes, not just their successes.

Combat

While combat is handled in a traditional round based manner the order of action is fluid based on initiative, which also determines the number of tasks a character can perform in one round.

Movement is not limited to a number but rather a difficulty, based on the character's movement value the GM decides how far/what movement action the character can perform in the time permitted and the number of tasks used. This has caused some controversy as some players would prefer a hard quantified distance they can travel based on their movement allowance, but I find the difficulty based system much more narrative and less like having a game of chess. An attack can be defended against without the cost of a task and combat is relatively fast with damage being decisive given that a non-hit point based system is used. However the damage and health mechanic means that dying is quite difficult, unless all character's are knocked unconscious or a character is alone and has no means of receiving aid.

Computer hacking

I think this is one of the system mechanics I'm not only most proud of but in love with. I've played so many cyberpunk systems where hacking is not only laborious but really rips the party apart as the hacker deals with their side of things and the other characters either have to wait it out or suffer the split party time frame. In VANGUARD hacking runs alongside the combat rules, you can hack on the fly during combat as an action. But it isn't just a one shot wins it all, networks are still technical, running various programs, sub-routines and defence and attack arrays that can all scupper a hacker's chances of success.

But the hacking rules are light, fast and above all, fun. I took a lot of inspiration not only from the Mass Effect AI hacking using the omnitool but also from Masamune Shirow's Ghost in the Shell, manga and the hacking and computer node structure in VANGUARD shows a lot of the speed, versatility and effectiveness of these influences.

Want to hack an enemies defence turret and turn it against them? No problem. Hack an enemies power armour suit to lock up their hydraulics? Yep, you can do it ? even hacking an opponent?s cyberbrain and using them as a puppet? Sure ? if you?re good enough.

In the game tests this has been one of the great victories of the system, with even the youngest of players (6yr) not only understanding the concepts but using the system effectively.

Esperence (Psionics)

While not essential I wanted to have the option for psionics, the ability for the individual to have a mind so attuned that they could conquer the universe itself. The mechanics of esperence are just as simple as the rest of the game, but esperence is a binary condition ? you either have the ability or you don?t, and if you have it you can use it. This makes the use of esperence immensely powerful. Even a basic esper can have terrifying power, but there are limits and also the ability to expand an esper?s talents and refine their skill in their known abilities.

In VANGUARD esperence is a known science and anyone can go and study to become an esper, unlock their hidden potential, but there is a limit to what abilities can be learnt and while a powerful esper can stand against even a mech their mental and physical limits provide a counterpoint to this power.

Starship design and combat

VANGUARD will have its own starship design mechanics and combat. My son and I are very visual people and we like to see a battle play out on the table top so there are rules for how the ships work internally as well as externally and the rules are in place for whether a GM wishes to play any space confrontation purely on a narrative basis or if they want to have the ships flying around the table in dogfights and engaged in ship to ship conflict.

There are unique ships and weapons in the VANGUARD universe and we?re looking at rules that will really bring to the fore the idea of large starship combat on a par with fleet combat of the 17th and 18th century where boarding a ship was preferable to scuttling it, taking the ship, cargo, provisions, salvage.

These rules aren?t finalised yet, they?re still in development and playtesting and the design philosophy of the game as a whole must be carried through to these rules as well. I would love it if a 7yr old felt just as comfortable building their own ship design as an experienced player, this is extremely difficult given that I also want the ship systems and components to be modular and affected by a ship?s power supply and size.

This sort of thing is easy to fudge but I want a design system that?s fun and engaging to mess around with, to test out new designs and, to some degree, for those who are interested, to experiment looking for the best design they can.

Mining, salvage and power-ups

We?re including rules for mining resources from planets and asteroids, these resources can then be traded, refined and sold. Additionally there are rules for salvage, and salvage can then be used in building new things, whether it?s bits of equipment or whole starships. This allows the players the option of being merchants, miners, engineers, traders, freelance salvage crew, ?roid jockeys and even planet scouts looking for new rich caches of natural resources.

But the other thing the VANGUARD universe has allows for the creation of power-ups. These are unique add-ons that character?s design themselves and manufacture themselves for specific pieces of equipment. So you could create a thermal enhancement for your optics or a modification to your rebreather allowing you to breath underwater like a fish drawing oxygen straight from the water.

The character?s must find salvage and other unique parts that they then use in a design of their choosing and either manufacture the power-up themselves or find someone else to.

Experience and teamwork

Teamwork was an important part of what VANGAURD wanted to be. There had to be clear benefits to working as a team and in providing support to your party members. These are worked into the mechanics of the game.

As mentioned above character's earn experience points not only for great successes but also abject failure and earning experience is a team matter, if one character earns experience the entire team does. So in helping your teammate succeed your increasing your own chances of success.

The setting

On the planet Ashen the nutwerks, hoppolites, molen, badgerians and mausers came together in peace to be prosperous. Despite their cultural, racial and ideological differences their peace and prosperity lasted centuries and united they formed the confederation.

The heart of the confederation was the world capital Varmisk a city both grand in scale and great in culture and while there were always struggles and tensions within the confederation in the end it was not from within that destruction came.

When the Tanarii came, they came with a thunderclap and struck at the heart of Varmisk and in that great city what hundreds of years had built was undone in a matter of days. The inhabitants of the city fled and arguments long thought forgotten have begun once more.

But not everyone is willing to see the dreams of a peaceful future disappear in fire and dust...

The first thing that everybody notices is that VANGUARD is anthropomorphic characters. The main reason for this was because of my son's love of such settings as Redwall, Mouseguard and TMNT.

The world of Ashen has a developed history and the species have their own cultures, their own histories and their own politics.

Three branches of the evolution tree developed into sentient races. These three branches are the varmint (including the five confederated species), the pretadors and the reptyles.

Without going into too much of the setting background the varmint species eventually gained homelands and broke free of constant pretador and reptyle attacks.

Within the varmint species (other than the five) there is plenty of scope to play most other small mammals; including possums, chipmunks, hedgehogs, etc.

The pretador species are a broad group that include many of the species that people have been asking about; otters, weasels, ferrets, wolverines, foxes and wolves and some feline types (you may notice the absence of dogs and cats - for good reason). The most infamous of the pretadors (although also the least in number) are the howlers, terrifying pretadors, well known for their intelligence as well as their habits for slavery, blood sports and carnivorous appetites. They always travel in packs following the strongest of their brood and while they have a code of honour it is full of caveats and loopholes that only a howler would know. There are infamous pretadors, known as Wolven, giant fierce beasts that hold a special place in varmint myths and legends, most say the wolven long since died out but rumours from the far south of eastern pretador, near the jungles of Arika, tell of giant, hellish beasts that some say could be none other than Wolven - if the rumours are true...

And lastly the reptyle species; the oldest cultures on Ashen and perhaps, as far as the varmint species are concerned, the cruellest. The reptyle species include lizard and serpent anthros (and a number of amphibians). While there are snakes amongst the reptyles species they are kept as almost demi-gods, fed on fresh mausers or hoppolites, and listened to as interpreters to the reptyles gods.

There are 'upraised' canine and feline species (woofers and felin) but these have very special rolls within the vanguard universe which will become apparent later.

I don't intend building species information for every animal/canine/feline/reptile there is. I think there will probably be a few major ones covered in the core book and maybe some guidelines for building others, so that if GMs want a specific 'race' they can write it up themselves. I have a short list, mostly compiled by my son's favourites (and a few of my own) that I'll try to get around to but for now just focusing on the confederation.

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