

RPG REVIEW

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The Great Space Operas

Interview with Terry K. Amthor ... FATE Red Planet ... Deserted ships for Star Frontiers ... Spacemaster/Rolemaster Campaign ... Star Trek, Spacemaster, Star Wars, Traveller, Star Wars Force and Destiny, Starfinder, and Hyperlanes Reviewed ... Annihilation Movie Review

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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EDITORIAL AND COOPERATIVE NEWS

Editorial

The space opera is one of the great epics in fiction and of course in RPG gaming. The vast expanses of space are enticing and the prospect of travelling in great vessels between the stars to exotic and alien locales suites the inner explorer that we, as a species, seem to have carried as a genetic and mimetic heritage. In science fiction literature, we are very familiar with classic space operas such as the Foundation series by Issac Asimov, and the the Lensman series by E.E. "Doc" Smith. Yet even with the term itself was first coined - way back in 1941 in the fanzine-journal Le Zombie by Bob Tucker, the space opera was described in reference to soap operas as a "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn, spaceship yarn". And much of the criticism is indeed justified. Because as long as there is tale of epic voyages they are told from a particular perspective, which not surprisingly fits the culture and the norms of the authors. So often the protagonists of the space opera are clean-cut male humans of a paler skin tone using the English language. The humanoid bug-eyed aliens are a threatening Other, designed to be conquered or beaten into submission. It is, to use a popular music phrase, it is the use of "rough justice" to "get the girl .. kill the baddies and save the entire planet" (Pop Will Eat Itself, 1992). The use of lyrical content of the Western genre is deliberately chosen. Genre boundaries are fluid and the influence of the Westen on Space Opera is well recognised, none more obviously than Star Wars from the 1970s, but also with Firefly from the 2000s.

This is also the case in roleplaying games. This particular issue of RPG Review is dedicated to the great space operas,

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and despite the name one may be surprised to see that the namesake itself, FGU's Space Opera (1980), does not feature in the page count (it did, however, receive a review in Issue 16, June 2012). Instead we do have the battle of several giants in terms of reviews that haven't been published in RPG Review ; FASA's Star Trek (1983), ICE's Spacemaster (1988), WEG's Star Wars (1996), Mongoose's Traveller (2008), FF's Star Wars Force and Destiny (2013), Piazos's Starfinder (2017), and Scrivened's Hyperlanes (2017). It is hoped that one can see that this represents a rather wide selection, but in style and across the hobby's history, of various RPGs that broadly fall into the "space opera" category.

In addition to these we have an interview with Terry K. Amthor, most famous for his work on Shadow World, Rolemaster, and Spacemaster. Originally his interview was going to be in the last issue of RPG Review on world building. It was also appropriate that he featured in this issue. Appropriately, there is also a story outline using a number of products that he was responsible for. In addition there is our regular gaming 'blogs, however this issue is narrowed down to only include featuring MegaTraveller (very appropriate) due to space considerations, pun not intended; you will note that this an extremely text-heavy issue.

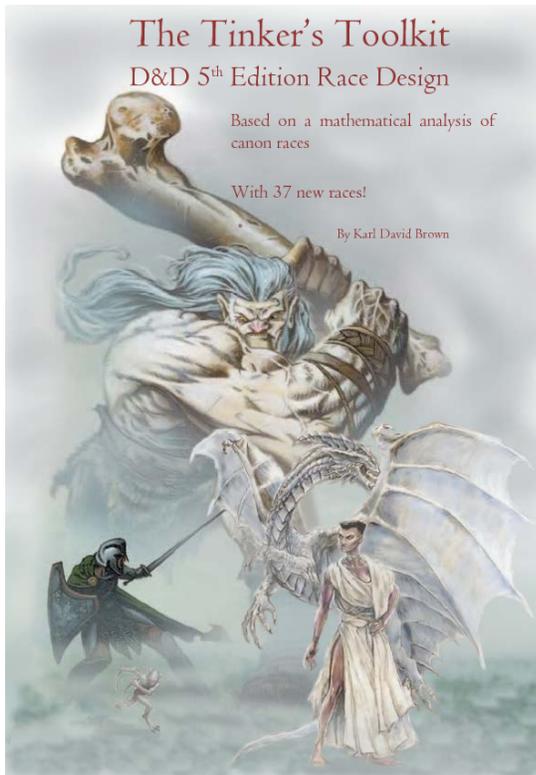
As an extended set campaign 'blog with additional elaborations, Simon Stainsby provides an excellent overview of idealised space opera with FATE Red Planet game notes. Plus there is a classic trope of the deserted space ship by Thomas Verrault, followed by some practical examples for Star Frontiers. The issue concludes with Andrew Moshos' regular movie review, and this time with Annihilation.

There was a justified reaction against the space opera in the 1980s and 1990s and beyond. Science fiction became very interested in what was on Earth, rather than in the far reaches and what was involved in the transformation of humans. Cyberpunk, biopunk, dilapidation - all seem to put the space opera aside for a while. But, as mentioned, genre boundaries are fluid. Iain M. Banks made this obviously so but taken the various aspects of justified of cultural criticism of the space opera and incorporating all this with the exploratory and very high technology motif in The Culture series - which is certainly worthy of an RPG campaign which curiously has remained absent.

On this note we may conclude - that there is not any genre out there (no, not even romances and especially not romances) that are innately trash, but rather it is specific elements. The fiction writer and the game designer alike should delve into genres and find out what is downright implausible, hackneyed, and infantile, and fix them. The genres themselves - well, the often appeal to a universal dream that is part of species: explore strange new worlds, and boldly go.

Lev Lafayette, lev@rpgreview.net

Cooperative News



Without a doubt the single most important item of news for the RPG Review Cooperative since the last journal issue is our second publication, "The Tinker's Toolkit", by Karl Brown, is a D&D 5th edition race design system based on a mathematical analysis of canon races. It makes use of the race and feat traits in the PHB, DMG, EEPC, VGM, and the TP, reverse engineers them, and creates a copy of the system Wizards of the Coast (WOTC) uses in-house to create PC races. In addition the Tinker's toolkit provides 37 new races using this system from Awakened Black Bears to Worgs.

For a mere \$4 USD this 72p supplement is available at the following URL:

<http://www.dmsguild.com/product/232813/The-Tinkers-Toolkit>

Of course, our previous publication, Papers & Paychecks, is still available as well. Remember that all proceeds from Papers & Paychecks go the non-profit RPG Review Cooperative, Inc.

<http://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/227291/Papers--Paychecks>

In addition we're contribution to the 200 Word RPG Challenge, building up for a RuneQuest Con DownUnder later in the year, preparing joint activities with Arcancon early next year. All of this, of course, is in addition to our usual gaming activities and movie nights. It is fair to say that we're a pretty busy Cooperative.

Letters

Letters: Lachlan Smith Memorial Wing

That's a beautiful tribute to Lachlan. Over the last few years, I had the pleasure of catching-up with Lachlan (often lunch prior to a movie or a cuppa post movie; usually both). The thing is, we always got around to talking about our current RPGs and favourite characters, and he loved to talk about what he was doing with 7th Sea or some high concept science-fiction character he'd crafted. Lachlan was a storyteller, and he loved to experiment for the sake of a good yarn. The breadth of material...

Damien Wise, Melbourne, Australia

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MEGATRAVELLER GAMING BLOGS

by Andrew Daborn

Megatraveller: Pirates of Drinax

By Andrew Daborn

"My name is William Kidd, as I sailed, as I sailed

My name is William Kidd, as I sailed

My name is William Kidd, God's laws I did forbid

And most wickedly I did, as I sailed, as I sailed..."

- Traditional

054-061:1117 Drinax

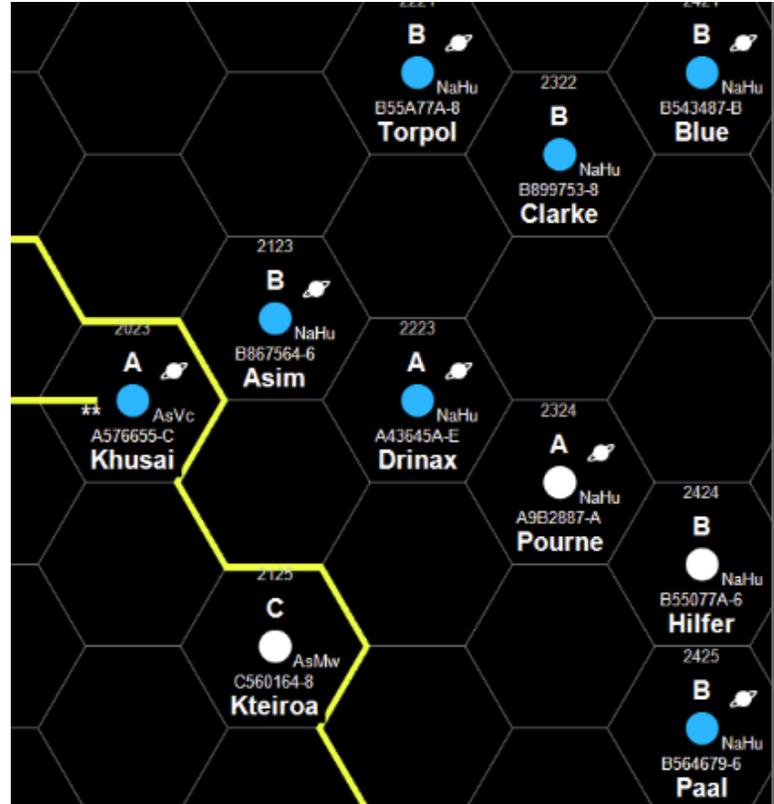
The Skopa harboured for the week in the Floating Palace of Drinax while the Lady Anja, Lord Piotr, Jacob & Vinny contemplated their next moves.

Lady Anja persuaded Prince Harrick to take up the mantle of High Psychopomp of Clarke. Messers Jacob & Vinny

acquired a selection of 'soft-kill' munitions from Rancharo. Lord Piotr and Grigor (a gentleman's 'gentleman') have completed their recruitment for the Skopa's crew. Grigor will continue to manage the businesses affairs from Drinax. The hold of the harrier is full of two huge bugblatter beasts and their handler, evidently armed with a towel. King Oleb has decreed that Lord Wrax, Commander of the Star Guard and Lady Hil will accompany Prince Harrick to his coronation on Clarke in the Star Guard's flagship 'Patience Lumumba' Chieftain Galx has donated six of her fiercest war-boyz to accompany the Skopa as a marine detachment.

After some deliberation and a fair amount of shopping a plan was formed. The Skopa's course is now set for Clarke, with the Patience Lumumba for the festivities, followed by Oghma and Borite. She will then track the pirate Ferrick Redthane down in that hive of scum and villiany, the Theeve system, deliver the beasts and collect her bounty!

Following intel that Regent Stoylis of Byrni, Lord Commander of the Antispin Star Guard wishes to join the rebirth of the Glorious Sindal Empire the crew of The Skopa plan to travel to the Byrni system afterwards to convince him of King Oleb's wisdom and benevolence! No mean feat.



"Give me some time to blow the man down.
I'm a deepwater sailor just come from Hong Kong.
Give me way, hey, blow the man down.
If you give me some whiskey I'll sing you a song.
Give me some time to blow the man down."
- Penny & Sheldon's Shanty

068-074:1117 Clarke

Well stocked, and with a boisterous cargo keen to get to the Theeve system our heroes jump to Clarke along side Prince Harrick's coronation flotilla. Clarke is gay with monochrome bunting and yards of drab trellises. Bunches of grey balloons cheerfully adorn the cyclopean mausoleums and the faces of The Saved within easy reach have been respectfully dusted. The ceremony is majestic and High Psychopomp Harrick is welcomed by his flock with raptures. His inaugural address seems to trail off towards the end with some daddy issues evident but is also well received. Lord Piotr has a brief word with Lord Wrax to convince him that a reasonably large contingent of guards should be left to ensure Harrick doesn't get any ideas that are too exciting before his next 'tune-up' at Tech World.

The after parties are an opportunity to glad-hand Clarke and Drinax business people. Sal Dancet, a smuggler from Vinny's past makes an appearance and does them a favour with a helpful shipment of 'tractor parts' with which to outfit the ship's armory.

A random conversation with a party-goer leads to a rumour of an underground psionic institute on Blue, much to Jacob's joy. Jacob immediately begins purchasing data on Blue to begin investigating these rumours. Lady Anja makes good use of the festivities and networks both Drinax and Clarke nobles for trade deals.

082-085:1117 Borite

A slightly longer than average jump to the Borite system is the most exciting thing that occurs here. The crew spy on an incoming far trader ship, thoughts of piracy, 'safe passage tax' and trade in their minds. Eventually, presuming it was a random encounter, the mighty commerce raider completes it's refueling and prepares for a leap of faith...

092-095:1117 A fuel depot.

After a nail biting jump the harrier arrives a few thousand km from a large hydrogen dump - a forest of balloons of gas, secured with nets and ropes, enough to fuel a small armada. The crew run the fuel through the processor to purify it and finish their last minute maintenance. Piotr runs last minute rifle drills with the marines. Jacob continues his research into Blue's secret history. Final preparations are made and the jump to Theeve initiates...

"Oh South Australia is me home
Heave away! Heave away!
South Australia is me home
An' we're bound for South Australia.

Heave away, heave away
Oh heave away, you rolling king,
We're bound for South Australia!" - Traditional

102:117 Theeve

Port Blacksand! Pirate capital! Never was there such a pit of good customer service and reliable policing...

On landing the crew are met by a Widow who as Vinniy finds out, is not available. Over enthusiastic ground crew begin offloading the blood-blatter beasts too early causing some chaos. Quick-thinking from Jacob and be-towled crew manage to fumble both hulks back into their containers.

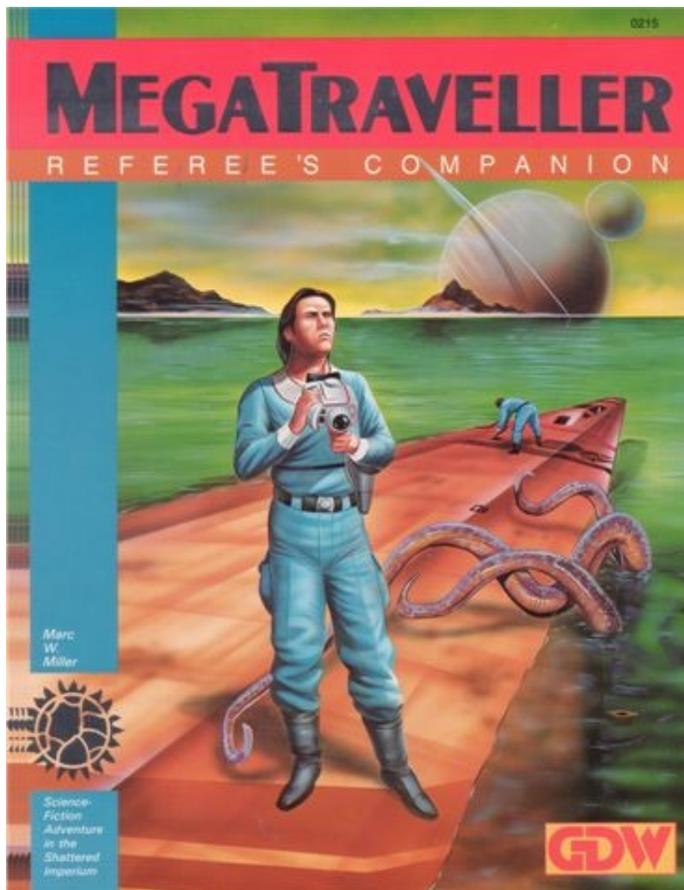
Jacob, with First Officer Elie and Engineer Katya, arrange for mechanics from the famous Kallos Shipyard, to get a quote on The Skopa's J-Drive and weapon systems tomorrow. Additionally the find out where the local antiquities dealers hall is, attempting to trace the Sindalian treasures stolen from Clarke by the pirates.

His Lordship and Her Ladyship decide to dine out at The Rose Pavilion, the swankiest of restaurants. They invite

Kasiyl with them, after a swift bout of shopping, and bribes in hand manage to find a table.

Knowing that it is the wait staff who actually have a grasp of what's going on the nobles bung a few servers and find out that Admiral Darokyn is due to attend for a late dinner at midnight, and for a few more creds might have a free table adjacent. With a few hours to kill before dessert, Anya and Pytor investigate Jacob's lead in the dealer's hall, tracking some newly sold Sindalian treasures to a salvage hauler berthed in the Skull's up-port.

Vinniy and Kyrsh don't waste their time and, after losing the juggalo-marines, swiftly become drinking buddies. Kyrsh states he knows a guy who might be able to locate Mira Silverhand, and the two end up doing shots in the back-room of a less than hygienic tattoo parlour. Kyrsh's buddy, Pal, takes their money and, after an agonizing wait, informs them that Mira has recently arrived in Port Blacksand. he can give them the rough location in the port's sprawling scrap-heap/slum.



Pyotr, Kasiyl and Anya return to the restaurant and subtly catch the eye of Admiral Darokyn. After much talk and booze they gain the trust of the Admiral and are truthful about their motivations for arriving on Theeve. Impressed by such honesty, and gold braid, Admiral Darokyn indicates that he would not mourn long if the dread pirate Redthane was never seen again, but suggests that a brief cooling off period of a year or so before The Skopa return to Theeve. After all, there are those here who might miss him somewhat more.

Armed with all this information the officers of the Skopa convene on Space-Hangouts. Pyotr proposes that Mira be apprehended and interrogated to give up the location of her commander and the codes to her ship, the salvage hauler Mercifuge!

Boney was a warrior,
Wey, hay, yah
A warrior, a tarrier,
John François
- Traditional Short-Haul Shantie

102:117 Theeve - later that same night...

Armed with Mira Silverhand's location Vinniy and Jacob put together a boarding party: Kyrsh, Kasiyl and Second Officer Chiara. The five head to the scrapheaps, gathering intel on Mira's crew and scouting out the area before the assault. Once Kasiyl broke the team into the wrecked Fat Trader, Jacob led the attack down a cramped hall into a hail of gunfire! Surprise and chemical weapons won the day as the team rushed the pirates, slaughtering Mira's guards leaving her to threaten their mutual destruction. Succinct negotiating convinced Mira to work with our heroes to secure Captain Redthayne's safety - at least for now.

Mira will give the crew a location. It is up to the to determine their approach. Time is against them, Redthayne will likely jump away if he suspects something but the shipyards of Theeve are a perfect place to repair their harrier. Mira does have another ship, the Mercifuge.

Update: The Travellers now have six ships under their command. The Mercifuge has been renamed the Anatoli Brugoski. Their current missions are as follows.

The Skopa (Скопа); Harrier - gunboat being repaired at Salif

George Gamow - rented out to technology company from Drinax working in Torpol

The Potemenkin plus Eisentsein boat - base yacht - (Drinax to Pourné to Clarke to Drinax)

The Flaming Lambourghini, plus boat Slippery Nipple - acquired yacht ship (Drinax and Torpol)

Kirov Ushakov - 300 tonne salvage hauler with guns (Khusai and Asim to Drinax to Pourné)

Anatoli Bugorski - Far Trader going to Blue for psionic institute

INTERVIEW WITH TERRY K. AMTHOR

with Terry K. Amthor

We originally planned to have this interview with Terry K. Amthor for the last issue of RPG Review, dedicated to gods, religion, and worlds. However, the scope of Terry's writing means that he is also an appropriate subject for this issue.

Terry is an American game designer and author, most famously for developing the fantasy and science fiction setting, Shadow World, originally for Rolemaster, writing the original regional modules, The Iron Wind, The Cloudlords of Tanara, and wider-campaign packs such as the Shadow World Master Atlas, Shadow World: Emer the Great Continent, Eidolon: City in the Sky, but also as the co-author of the Spacemaster RPG.

Terry made a number of significant contributions to the Rolemaster and Spacemaster systems, as a co-author of Spell Law and of Spacemaster 1st and second editions, as well as writing scenarios for the latter (Action on Akaisha Outstation, Lost Telepaths). In addition, Terry made significant contributions to ICE's Middle Earth setting, including the rare and acclaimed Court of Ardor in Southern Middle-earth, and the solo adventure A Spy in Isengard. In addition, Terry was the author of Thief's Challenge II: Beacon Point for AD&D, and as a founder of Metropolis Inc, and co-author of the English language edition of the religious-horror game, Kult.

Welcome to RPG Review, Terry!

Thanks for inviting me!

Our first question is how we usually begin these interviews; how did you first get involved in RPGs? As a founding member of Iron Crown Enterprises, could you elaborate on what it was like in those early days with that company?

Actually I got invited to join Pete Fenlon's RPG game at the University of VA by a friend when I was a freshman in college back in 1976. I'd read LotR several times, but to be honest, I thought the game sounded kind of silly. But as soon as I started playing I was hooked. Back then it was basically D&D with a few modifications. I think Coleman had begun working on the attack tables and Pete on criticals. We were basically playtesting.

ICE was founded in 1980, with basically one full-time employee; the rest of us had day jobs. After we came out with Arms Law and Iron Wind, though more people came on full time.

Some of your earliest publications were for the Loremaster series (The Iron Wind, Cloudlords of Tanara), which would provide the foundations for Shadow World. Was there a clear idea of that the Loremaster series would develop into Shadow World? How did Shadow World develop in your own mind?

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Absolutely not. The first few modules were designed to be kind of generic so a GM could plug them in anywhere. It was several years later that the ICE hive-mind decided that Rolemaster needed a world environment. Shadow World did emerge from those first modules though. I was fortunate enough to be assigned to design the world, so I started with a map including the Loremaster locations.



At the same time ICE had the license for Middle Earth, and you were responsible of The Court of Ardor, and then many other of the supplements. Was there ever consideration of linking Middle-Earth with Shadow World? One cannot help but notice tucked away on Peter C. Fenlon's Middle Earth map there is a bay that contains an island called "Mur Fostisyr" - which of course is the name of the islands from "The Iron Wind". Were these meant to a crossover? A gateway perhaps?

No we never considered linking them. I think putting the Mur Fostisyr on the giant continent map was a little joke on Pete's part, but that is just my opinion. And 'Court of Ardor' was kind of an aberration. ICE never did a module outside of known ME after that.

There were Middle Earth modules outside known space after Ardor; Shadow in the South..

Wow I have no memory of 'Shadow in the South' and I was still at ICE at the time. I wonder what was going on. I had handed over most production duties, and even some Art Direction so I could focus on Shadow World, but it is weird that I don't have any recollection. Oh well!

On a related matter, how sort of influence did the Middle Earth pantheon have on Shadow World? It would seem that the polytheistic Lords of Orhan are similar to the Valar (that is, more visceral and domain-specific rather than abstract and universal), where as the Unlife is more closely associated with forces such as Morgoth. Also, what about the Gods of Charon? Many of them seem more ambiguous in their moral content.

Well, the Lords of Orhan are also very similar to the Greco-Roman god pantheon. I wanted the ultimate evil on SW to be amorphous. not some single being. The Dark Gods are (relatively) more of an annoyance. But obviously ME was a big influence, with elves and trolls, etc.

Following the matter of crossovers, Shadow World has a decidedly science fiction element to it as well. It is explicitly described as being "on the threshold of a radically different universe... just outside of a gateway to a plane of existence which has physical laws we cannot begin to understand". Shadow World atlas' provide scientific deliberations on the planet's place within the solar system, and geological effects that caused the formation of particular continents and island groups. How important are such aspects to world design? How would you compare this to deliberately mythic approaches, such as Greg Stafford's Glorantha?

I admit I am not familiar with Glorantha. And while it does have SF elements (the planet is located inside the Space Master universe, and Space Master characters are spying on it), I think that SW is mainly fantasy. Or you can always use the Clarke Law: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

On this matter, could you elaborate a bit on the design of Spacemaster, and in particular the setting? In general it has a feudal political structure with various houses in competition, along with a capitalistic economic system. This is very similar to other science fiction games of the period (e.g., Traveller, Space Opera, Star Wars). Was there much consideration of alternative political-economies? How was the technological level selected?

Kevin Barrett mailed us a proposal for SF weapons tables based on Arms Law. Coleman and I loved it and it kind of blew up. That was a very fun project. And as far as the setting... Kevin and I were fans of Dune, and I think we were hoping to get that license. When that didn't happen, we built our own feudal space empire. I never read Traveller game books, but I was familiar with CJ Cherryh and loved her books that tied a feudalistic space with some fantasy planets.

Could you elaborate on your feelings on working on Kult and the differences in morality between that game system and Shadow World? The standard characters in Kult are far from heroic. Also, the fundamental premise of Kult is that madness is a path to seeing reality "as it truly is", which of course is not a feature of many traditional RPGs.

Kult was a trip, and to be honest I had trouble getting into that space. Everything is an illusion, and people around you are actually these creatures. There's some other SF that does this I think. It's very dark, even darker than CoC. ICE refused to do it. It was an interesting project though.

The publication of Kult of course co-incided with the founding of Metropolis in 1992 and your departure from Iron Crown Enterprises, but also with the establishment of Eidolon Studio for Shadow World material. Can you elaborate on the publishing relationship you have with the 21st century version of the company?

My departure from the old ICE was very amicable. I wanted to move to the 'big city.'

As for the 21st century, I assume you mean with the new ICE? We have an excellent relationship. It is currently operated by a few people in the UK. I am the only remaining member of the old ICE associated with the current

ICE. Basically I write SW for them. There is talk of a new SPAM edition. The Manager/Editor of ICE and I am in constant contact.

A couple of more personal questions: In 1994, you wrote an article for White Wolf magazine, "Queer as a Three-Sided Die", which is now a regular panel at GenCon. Could you comment on how you perceive the treatment of gay people in RPGs has changed over the decades? Also, on a completely different tangent, you're a graduate in architectural, with a particular focus on architectural history. Has that had much influence on the your art direction in RPGs?

Well I think we were invisible back then. That article was partly me coming out (aside from my friends at ICE). Before then I knew only one other gay guy in the industry, who was also closeted. I think things have changed tremendously. I mean there is a panel! I'd be flattered if it was named after my article. I might be going to GenCon this year...

As far as my degree, I'm sure it has had a tremendous effect. My degree was in design, but yes I took several classes in Greek and Egyptian Architecture, as well as Mayan and Aztec cultures and architecture. They definitely influenced me.

Finally, what's planned for the coming year in Shadow World, or other RPG publications from you?

We have ambitious plans for three SW books this year. I also hope to work on my novel sequel. Fingers crossed!



THE JANUS METAMORPHOSES: A TRAGIC CAMPAIGN FOR SPACEMASTER

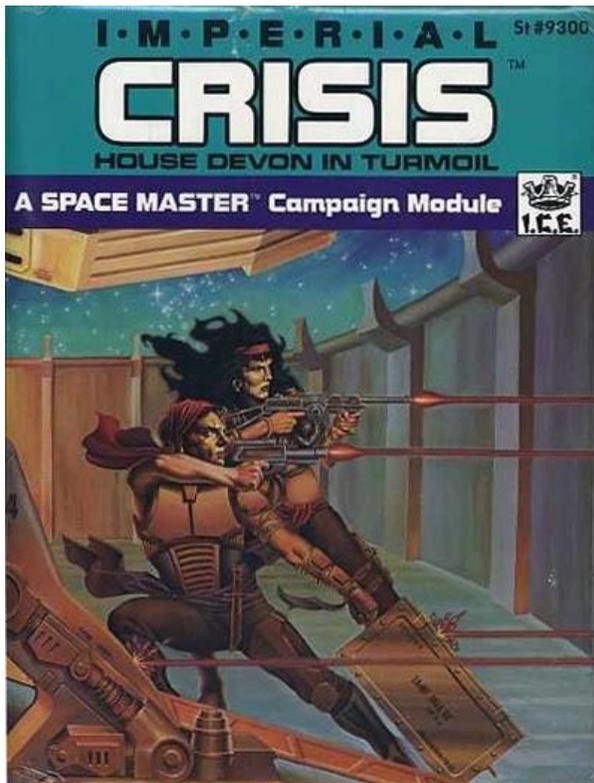
by *Lev Lafayette*

Background

Terry K. Amthor's Shadow World is, from most experiences, a fantasy setting and most popularly used with the Rolemaster system, usually with the first and second ("classic") editions of the game. However, in addition to the usual aspects of elves, dwarves, dragons, and magic in the Shadow World there is a degree of physical realism applied as well. According to the Shadow World Master Atlas (2nd edition, 1992, pp13), the Shadow World is also known as Kulthea, and is described as existing "on the threshold of a radically different universe. The planet stands just outside the gateway to a plane of existence which has physical laws we can begin to understand ... We have access to energies flowing through this invisible and intangible corridor which we have no explanation ... A few of us can even channel this power".

Kulthea is the seventh planet of a fifteen orbit system, 98 million miles from a G-type star, a large planet but with a high oceanic content, a lack of heavy metals, and scattered and broken land chains. The planet has a range of unique elements, presumably with an atomic structure altered the presence of primal essence flows throughout and across the planet and which provides the magical force. It is curious, to say the least that in addition to the many and varied magical flora and fauna that can be found on Kulthea, there is also a great number of species which are positively

mundane from an earth perspective, including all manner of herd animals (deer, cows, elephants, llamas, sheep), carnivores (bears, lions, wolves) and so forth. Even marsupials are found on Kulthea, and no less exotic than the platypus (p49). The presence of sheep (*Ovis aries*) is particularly surprising, given that it is species derived by domestication of the wild sheep (*ovis orientalis*) on Earth around 10,000BCE. Kulthea is also home of several sapient species including humans, elves, dwarves, goblins, giants etc which feature in ancient Terra mythology.



The history and timeline of Kulthea (*ibid*, pp128) correlates that of the Imperial time in Spacemaster with history recorded with the founding of the Second Age (12,400 PreImperial, roughly around 0CE according the old Terra calendar. Kulthea is known and located in the Spacemaster Empire as Ceril VII with the starmap coordinates of 35X, 20Y, 80Z, placing it under the jurisdiction of the House of Devon (*ibid*, pp182). This is particularly developed in the first Spacemaster campaign book, "Imperial Crisis, House Devon in Turmoil" (Kevin Barrett, ICE, 1985) where it is described as being first discovered by a Devon Electronic scouting vessel which disappeared without trace (pp26) and that "[s]ubsequent rescue and exploration attempts were woefully unsuccessful, apparently due to the activities of the low tech xenohumans and which were found to populate the

planet. Careful not to trigger an all-out genocidal attack on the the leaders of Devon through the painstakingly opened

the lines of communications to these apparently powerful xenophobes. The sources of power at the command of the natives, which have been capable of thwarting Devonian technology, remain unidentified at this time". The text continues, providing the totality of what a Spacemaster PC could be reasonably expected to know of the situation at best:

"Next to nothing is known of Cerilite but it is suspected that these have been influenced by the Sianetic Harbinger groups of ages past. No devices beyond iron age technology are believed to exist on the planetary surface.

OPERATIONS: No bases have as of yet been established on the surface. A small orbital station has been constructed to service the abnormally large spacing naval presence kept in the vicinity. Only emergency supply acquisition is available from the and that is Hard Luxury item merchandising on the station is Very Hard (-20), but it is the only market for these Devonian garrison troops."

This campaign makes use of existing Spacemaster and Rolemaster campaign modules (Imperial Crisis, Jaiman, The Iron Wind) for an unexpected journey. Terry K. Amthor is the editor of "Imperial Crisis: House Devon in Turmoil" (the author was Kevin Barrett), the author of "Jaiman: Land of Twilight", and co-author and editor of "The Iron Wind". Whilst scenario summaries are provided here it is thoroughly recommended that the products themselves are obtained.

Imperial Crisis, House Devon in Turmoil

The first scenarios - of several sessions to help generate the setting - should be based directly as a normal Spacemaster campaign. Due to the location of Kulthea, it would be ideal to make use of a campaign pack like "Imperial Crisis, House Devon in Turmoil". In this particular setting, Yama Pythagor III, Lord Devon, is dealing with "domestic insurgents, foreign agents[,] and religious fanatics", which he responds with "Yung Ninja, Hyperion crime-lords, Telepathic security teams, and several gunship squadrons" (Imperial Crisis, p17). Four multisession adventure outlines are provided in that campaign book that make use of that general theme, however only three are initially used (as the fourth becomes the next section). The following provides a brief outline of the three scenarios if GMs do not have an access to that book; specific statistics should be applied according to the party's strength.

The first scenario, "Gunrunning to Alexie Prime", is a good beginner's scenario which involves a modest reward for characters with underground connections, which pretty much screams low-level characters with no social standing. The "Amazonian" Baburnite and Benkan cultures have a strong independence movement with terrorist paramilitaries, with arms provided by the Gilliam Clan who props up their poor economy with such sales. The PCs are contacted by a Baburnite Clan group who wish to arrange a new shipment of energy rifles (1,000) and power sources (5,000) and microfusion (50), to a small spacefaring port. The trip will involve Devonian base personnel, a patrol force, and finally an anti-terrorist group waiting for them at their arrival. The actual reason for the latter is not particularly well-explained in the scenario description itself, so the opportunity to insert a direct reason is extremely tempting - e.g., an agent within the transport vessel, a corrupt head of internal security who wants to make their own money on the side etc. Payment is 5000 Monits in advance and a further 25,000 on delivery - assuming they successfully deliver.

The second scenario, "Fundamentalists of Kepler II" involves an impoverished world, Kepler II (aka Tjokjad) which has a dominant cultural and religious fundamentalist group which places the planet in nominal control at best. However not everyone is fundamentalist of course, and group of important Devonian loyalists have found themselves captured and incarcerated in the fundamentalist's citadel. Members of the loyalist family reach out to make contact with the PCs to arrange a rescue mission. Usually a fool's errand at the best of times, as the citadel has significant armed forces and is very well protected by mountainous terrain and electronic security. However, the fundamentalists are launching a insurgent attack on Devonian installations and the presence of physical guards will be significantly reduced. The actual scenario posits several loyalists, and with a reward of only 3,000 monits each. Increasing both the number and repayment is recommended, especially given the relative difficulty.

The third scenario (and fourth in the book), Involves the difficulty of signing up the Rahayna system to their sphere of influence due to various bureaucratic wranglings and diplomatic caution. Whilst not necessarily overly wealthy, the system is strategically located and recently has become noted as a site Sianetic Harbinger archeology, just as the Devonians are close to signing up the system. Colosians have supplied the indigenous cannibalistic population, the Bja Bja, advanced weapons technology and have managed to illegally introduced elite combat troops. The Devonians, both by law and inclination, are seeking to prove their competence in non-military administration and can only supply mercenary forces down for self defense to the Devonian outputs. The head of the Colosians, who has some telepathic ability, is attempting to find an artifact known as the the Box of Traichus which will greatly enhance such abilities (x4 PP enhancer) and is found on Rahayna. Working for Devonian archeological team, the PCs discover an ancient map which leads to the location of the Box. To make the scenario more challenging than what is provided, a member of the team is actually a Colosian spy (being a spy pays much better than being an archeologist), and the PCs will see their team attacked by Bja Bja and by the Colosians as they attempt to get the item to a secure facility.

As writ, the scenario for Cerilseven is interesting but requires a lot of modification for this campaign - in fact, outright abandonment. Assuming a stunning victory over the Colosians, the party will attract the attention of Devonian parapsychologists etc, who are aware of how some the iron-age communities of Cerilseven seem to have access to advanced psionic powers, or at least that's why they think. With an appropriate crew - a combination of military, anthropological, diplomatic, and even psionic - a research ship is sent to the system for further investigation. The ship travels without incident until it passes the third moon of Kulthea, Charon, were it is set upon by various Demons of the Pale under the instruction of Andaras, who sees some amusement in destroying an Imperium ship. To make the scenario fascinating as well as terrifying, the Demons will intercept the Cerilseven scout ship in space itself, ripping open its sides and entering the ship. As all is lost and the ship hurtles towards the Kulthea atmosphere for what is certainly going to be the death of those present, the ship is rescued by the messenger of the Lords of Orhan, Teris - and the party will witness a non-corporeal projection of the deity as he uses his powers to gently lower the ship to the surface of the planet.

Jaiman Land of Twilight, Mur Fostisyr, and Beyond

Landing in Jaiman on Kulthea, the PCs will of course have a great deal of trouble integrating with the local communities. It may be opportune here to introduce them to the independent scenarios provided in the "Jaiman: Land of Twilight" campaign book - of which at least one ("The Curse of Andaras") provides a logical link with their recent experiences. Noting that the "powers above" have earthly connections below will provide a sense of continuity as well as concern. However the main campaign story is the linked series of adventures, "Legacy of the Sea Drake". Here, the PCs first must meet with the youthful Kier Ianis, Prince of Helyssa. An obvious means to do so is to have the Prince meet the PCs after their ship crashes on Kulthea - obviously such strange ships falling from the sky are a matter of princely concern and it is from there that a rapport can be established.

The four scenarios are Eye of the Dragon, The Tomb of Andraax, the Dragon's Claw, and the Hand of the Smith. As a whole, the PCs are encouraged to join the Prince in acquiring a number of magical items that can empower and

strengthen his capabilities as the fledgling kingdom of Helyssa can stand against invading forces. The first scenario involves a commando raid to a religious cult tower to recover The Pendant of the Sea-Drake. The second involves travel to the tomb of the Loremaster Andraax for the recovery of the Sea-Drake Sword. Of particular excitement to the PCs in this scenario is the presence of several high-technology suites, including a matter-energy transmitter. Excited conversation will encourage Kier Ianis to believe that these starfarers are indeed the right choice of ally. The third scenario involves acquiring the Sea Drake Crown from the Dragonlord. The problem being, once donned (as Kier Ianis will do), they become an automaton, dedicated to the single cause of protecting the realm. The PCs will discover through their Kulthean allies that this will prove the Princes's undoing, and the power of the Crown has to be destroyed - to do that they must travel to where they were originally forged and release the Prince from its bondage.

Once released, Prince Kier will explain an option available to the PCs that may return them home. The Navigators have the capability to teleport characters around Kulthea, usually at a price. However, they are particularly concerned about one Tharg Jironak, a Navigator who has retired to Mur Fostisyr and has not returned his Compass, as is required by the Guild. In reality, Tharg has reneged on his Guild obligations and has taken control of an ancient tower that he now controls with his allies. Acquiring the compass from this citadel will win the favour of the Navigator's Guild who will direct the PCs to a local portal (on the regional map there is only a Navigator summoning obelisk; adding a portal as well is required).

Alas for the Navigator's this is one time they will get it wrong. Transporting characters throughout Kulthea is one thing, but attempting transports to the stars is something way out of their jurisdiction and capability. Instead of returning the PCs home, it will transport them from Mur Fostisyr, Kulthea, to Mur Fostisyr, Middle Earth: "Located north and east of the Barl Synnac, western branch of the Iron Mountains, Mur Fostisyr was a collection of rugged Isles and peninsulas. Covered with tundra (in the north) or taiga (in the south), they served as the home for scattered bands of Mornerin-speaking nomads. These hunters and fishermen often ranged well out onto the adjoining Gulf of Ûtum"

(http://merp.wikia.com/wiki/Mur_Fostisyr). In particular it is the home of the Syrkakar, an identical people to that of Mur Fostisyr, Kulthea. A multitude of further adventures await for them in this strange place - and who knows, maybe even then they will somehow return to Terra if they do great and heroic things and are allowed to take an Elven boat to Valinor. Although what year do you think it will be?



FATE RED PLANET EXPERIENCES

by Simon Stainsby

Tweaking FATE Red Planet for a Conservative Player

The game supplement Red Planet (<http://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/199932/Red-Planet-o-A-World-of-Adventure-for-Fate-Core>">) by Jess Nevins provides a pulp science fiction setting with a utopian socialist twist for the FATE Core table top role playing game (<http://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/114903/Fate-Core-System>). Both the base rules and the supplement are available for .pdf download at Drive Thru RPG on a 'Pay what what you want' basis. Go download them, play within them and tell me what you think.

I ran a session of Red Planet as my first taste of the FATE role playing system and as a return to Games Mastering after a very a long break. It was buckets of fun. I spent far too long writing background material. Players being players went in different directions to the ones I prepared for. This blog shares some of that material with you in the hope that you are inspired to run your own game, use my ideas and tell me how it went.

The elephant in the room - the Red Planet setting is fantasy communism.

Red Planet provides utopian science fiction roleplay in a 'retro-futurist' setting. It's a refreshing alternative all the dystopian storytelling out there, but it draws heavily on 1950s era communist propoganda tropes. The fantasy of a society based on collective action can be a fun place to explore, but doing it uncritically can easily cross the line into tankie, becoming an apologist for Stalin, Mao and the rest.

The source material is sensitive to this criticism, saying "*Red Planet is a roleplaying game. It is a fantasy based on the idea that an idealized fictional philosophy similar to communism ... could appeal enough to people's better natures to make them willingly and joyfully belong to a communist civilization... But let no one reading Red Planet be under the slightest illusion: communism, in the real world, killed millions of people.*"

I wasn't satisfied simply acknowledging that the fantasy communism is different to the reality of communism before diving into the fantasy. Idealised visions of the future can inform our actions in the present. I needed an in-game mechanism to draw attention to the fact we playing in a propoganda fantasy. I did this by including the aspect: "*This show is educational*"

In my game, our story is being broadcast by a 1960s era state run broadcasting commission in an educational TV programming time slot.

Mechanically players invoke this aspect to 'declare story detail' based on a scientific principle or Marxist social theory.

This aspect could also be compelled a Galaxy Quest style meta-commentary of the show and the setting.

I'd grant a free invoke if players acknowledged the fourth wall by explaining the principle in character, but as if they were explaining it to a child.

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It worked better than expected. In addition to providing a way to play with utopian themes without the story becoming uncomfortably tankie, it provided a way to manage the amount of science we included in our science fantasy. In the source material the native Venusians are described as 'frog-like'. The players took that idea and ran with it, invoking the *"This show is educational"* aspect to turn elements of real life frog reproductive biology into a major plot point of the story.

Responding to a problematic setting with creative story telling

Another response to the propaganda aspects of Red Planet would be to create a Matryoshka doll (or FATE fractal) of related stories focused around "Red Planet: the TV show" with each layer reflecting a different view of socialism.

The rest of this post is a 'after the-game reflection'. If you end up using this story framing device into your game please let me know how well it worked.

Layer 1: Tune in next week tovarishch for the next thrilling chapter of Red Planet

This is the propaganda story of progressive materialism where the people of Mars are inspired to work together, be the best they can be, help people with the aid of zap guns, dirigibles, space ships. Bountiful fields of wheat fill the plains of Mars, and Venus is a steaming jungle, with dinosaurs and frog peasants toiling under feudal overlords.

The communism in this layer is idealistic, with story played for high camp silliness moving into satire of the excesses of propaganda.

Layer 2: The show must go on.

This is the story of the making of the TV show 'Red Planet'. Here the lead actor is a washed out no-hoper, the supporting actor is a tortured artiste, looking for a serious acting job, and the female lead is fending off the unwanted attentions of the producer. In this layer actors deal with embarrassingly low production values and a the writing team fighting among themselves to resulting in scripts that are one week parroting the party line, next week full of subversive 'under the radar' criticism. The production must deal with threats of cancellation and an overly zealous censor to keep the show on the air.

Example of linking layer 1 and 2

When the main story reaches a point where several Venusians have been converted, the revolution is at hand and the narrative is heading toward a towards mass combat, cut to the production story.

A new director has joined the show with a new vision he calls 'historical materialist' film making. His vision rejects traditional story telling as 'counter-revolutionary individualism'. Instead he attempts to represent social forces and trends in history representing small groups of actors as a single character.

Mechanically get the players to create several 'squads as characters' using the large scale combat rules in the FATE System Toolkit (<http://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/119385/Fate-System-Toolkit>, (p159)). Play this scene as dig at film auteurs such as Sergei Eisenstein

The communism of this layer is 'well meaning, underfunded and a little incompetent', Play this layer both as a tribute to cheesy BCC TV scifi of the 1970-80s and to community theatre productions. Play as an office comedy.

Layer 3: The lives of others (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0405094/>)

This is the story of the Stasi detail tasked with monitoring the actors and crew of the television show 'Red Planet'. In this layer we find the grim realities that the propaganda is attempting to cover up. Who's informing on who, Why have the writers introduced a new villain to story that resembles the trade minister?

If a player can't make a session incorporate this into the narrative. His actor has been 'Taken in for questioning' by the Stassi. The Red Planet' story goes on with another actor. This can be played for laughs in the 'show must go on layer' because they need to find a short notice and the only available actors look nothing like the continuing actor.

When our players returns to the next session, the atmosphere on the production is tense. Why was he taken away.... Did he crack under interrogation? ... Did he inform on his colleagues?

The communism in this layer is 'grim, oppressively bureaucratic and totalitarian'. Play this layer for a cynical 'Statler and Waldorf' style meta-commentary, as an espionage thriller and to acknowledge the grey reality of living under a 1950s era socialist state.

Red Planet Venusian Frogs

The Red Planet source book describes the native Venusians as: *"The Venusians are short, squat, frog-like creatures whose culture breaks down roughly into the same four classes as feudal Europe: peasants, artisans, warriors, and rulers."*

This post provides additional details about Venusian Frog society as developed by the RPG Review Cooperative FATE Red Planet games session held 2017-2018. Shared in the hope you can include them in your game. If you too please comment to tell me how it went.

Late feudal - early modern frogs

Our Venusian Frogs have an 'early modern' society analogous to C15th Europe. They are still feudal. Most people live as landlords and peasants, but specifying a late medieval / early modern setting rather than a 'fantasy feudal' we achieves two things:

Firstly it makes the Venusian Warriors a bit more challenging bad guys for a technological society with zap guns, wrist communicators and space ships. Our baddies have early black powder weapons and massed pike formations rather than sword and shield if it comes to fisticuffs. And in the battle for hearts and minds, the Venusians can counter Martian Union rhetoric with pamphlets denouncing the outsiders. Our heroes are going to need to recruit more locals before picking a fight with the big bad.

Secondly, the transition from late feudal to early modern creates a mess of factions we can use when telling a story about a revolution. Since 'this show is educational' our view of history will be a fairly orthodox Marxist historical materialism - meaning that in general our frog society comprises:

The unfree masses who create value in society and the ruling elite who both structure society for their benefit and tell the mythic stories that keep everyone in their place. When economic circumstances change tensions arise. In the late medieval - early modern period society is diversifying from a agricultural barter based economy to a society where trade, city and the money economy plays a bigger role. New forces are emerging looking for change. Tensions in our frog society include:

'Rural traditions, serfdom, and feudalism' vs 'city innovations, burgers and the power of wealth from trade'
'The traditional religion, the chain of being, and divine right of kings' vs 'the reformed religion, the equality of the individual before God, and the earthly authority of princes.

By specifying a late medieval, early modern period we get an active artisan sector and a whole bunch of plot hooks to work with,

Feudalism and Frogs - a biological limitation

In feudalism land is economic and political power - the 'means of production'. Land (and the unfree people bonded to that land) is allocated by the king to the nobles. When they die, the noble transfers the land to their oldest legitimate son using the laws of primogeniture. Primogeniture inheritance is a 'social superstructure' that keeps the elites in power and ensures that land remains in parcels large enough to produce an socially useful surplus.

Without a clear and legitimate inheritance rules feudalism breaks down. Questioning the parentage of a feudal lord is questioning their right to rule. This can be seen in the feudal era insult "bastard". If our Red Planet heroes can point out weaknesses of the Venusian Frog inheritance rules, the Venusian peasants are likely to question the whole feudal system.

Frogs spawn. They have a water based external reproduction. Group spawning happens. Frogs have many offspring with the expectation that most won't survive to adulthood. How does the reality of frog reproduction (my players invoked 'This show is educational' to make it an important story detail) fit with feudalism?

Sex and religion in the Venusian frog society

The sex lives of the peasantry (where inheritance isn't an issue) is very different from the ruling elite. Peasants are 'of the land'. Local ponds and streams are their mother and father. As adults they live lives of toil, but the annual spawning festival is a time of orgiastic release.

The barons, guild masters and anyone with inheritable property have a much more regulated sex life.

The church offers (for a small percentage of the inheritable goods) a sure way to identify the first born tadpole and verify its parentage. Within the 'holy of holies' of each frog temple there are a series of private spawning ponds. Each pond is watched over by a priest who have taken a vow of celibacy. They record the hatchings in order to identify the legitimate succession sequence. Parents are encouraged to swim with tadpoles to establish a parental bond.

Primogeniture is preserved by trying it directly to Church ritual. If the peasants are spiritually 'of the land', then the elites are 'of the church'. Church rituals inform the earliest memories of each of the frog nobility.

The church is facing a challenge from a reform movement. The tithe for access to the spawning pools is traditionally a donation of land to the church. This was justified theologically as a way making the spawning 'of the land'. The reformed church offers access to their spawning pools for a cash tithe (making them popular with city based frogs).

Needless to say, elites raised in the traditional church consider children of the reformed church 'bastards', and vice versa.

The traditional church provides blessings to the peasant spawning ritual even though it does not strictly accord with church teachings. The reformed church takes a hard line and considers folk spawning a sin. They offer a version of the spawning pond to the common folk as an alternative. This makes reformed church campaigners for land reform.

They've found yeoman farmers to be far more willing converts than serfs.

Fun frog facts for story detail

Frogs must keep their skin moist. This limits their range to places near water. The Venusian society have developed 'wet suits' to for exploration purposes, but much of the mountainous parts of Venus are inaccessible to frogs due to their dry, desiccating winds. This provides lots of spaces for the uplifted Venusian Gorillas to hide out from frog patrols and potentially desiccants (like salt) count be used as a weapon.

Amphibians can regrow severed limbs. The Soviets are active on Venus and are harvesting plant saps from the jungle,

They have imposed a quota system on the Venusian frog people in their sector. If frogs do not meet their quotas they cut off limbs.

Some frogs produce hallucinogenic poisons. The decadent elites of America will do anything for kicks, and if there's a buck in it you can be sure there will be a criminal syndicate looking to fill that need. If a few frog peasants go missing who's going to notice?

Gorilla uprising on Venus

For GMs, an introductory adventure.

Assumption: At least one player is playing a Venusian Uplifted Gorilla (ideally Gelina Yurkova)

Scene 1: On Mars (The Ordinary World)

After an awards ceremony at *Ascraeus Mons Base*, PCs are in a mess hall toasting each other taking turns to brag about their achievements for the Union.

After a few vodkas random drinking comrade 'Christov Polovtsev' yells "Coin Check". Everyone responds by pulling out a coin and tapping it on the table. Renown test at mediocre Difficulty

If a player fails the test they do not have their coin on them. They have to 'buy' a drink for everyone in the mess hall. In a post scarcity society that means next time the base or mess hall needs a unpleasant job that needs to get done, they are the ones who are 'volunteered' to do it.

Conversation turns to stories of how the coins were earned. Challenge coins are a reward for service.

The number of shifts on the renown test represents the importance of the job done to earn the coin. More important tasks, mean a rarer coin. The number of shifts determine the rarity of the coin and importance of the coin giver.

Flashback : Around the table, each player (except Galina) introduces their character with an anecdote on how they got their coin. Clever players will tell a self-deprecating story where do something dumb (compelled an aspect) that got into trouble but comrades looked after them and the group succeeded in the end.

The Call to Adventure

Uplifted Venusian Gorilla Galina isn't quite getting into the festivities. She's recently received bad news from her son, *Hamzo Mondo*, back home on Venus.

Back on Venus corrupt feudal barons, high tithes and the search for opportunity have driven *Venusian Peasants* to leave the agricultural rice growing lowlands and encroach on the jungle home of the *Venusian Gorillas*.

Some peasants are destroying the jungle using slash and burn farming. Some peasants are entering the jungle to collect *Rubium*, a valuable plant sap, far more frequently. Some peasants are running away from their masters to set up bandit encampments in the jungle.

Frog people incursions and habitat destruction threaten *Hamza Mondo's* jungle home. His troop have attempted to fight back but it's a losing battle and they need help.

Galina implores there are "*So Many Primates Yet to Be Freed*".

META: This is an Exposition scene - an opportunity for Galina's player to declare story details, and compel her "*True Believer—Just Ask Me*" aspect to create an tale of woe involving oppressed peasants, brutal sap collection quotas, unique forests wrecked and valiant but doomed ape counter attacks.

Scene Outcome

Players are inspired to head to Venus to help Hanzo, to volunteer as an 'International Brigade' to fight the good fight on Venus.

Scene 2: Mission Briefing with Yevdokia Bershanskaya and Abram Pushkin

Any rapport or renown checks to gain access to star ship, will eventually end up talking to Ascraeus Mons Base Commander Yevdokia Bershanskaya and *Abram Pushkin* the "*Silver-Tongued Missionary of Progressive Materialism*" recently returned from *Nikolay*, the Union cantonment on Venus.

News of increased *Rubium* harvesting raises security concerns for Yevdokia. Yevdokia notes this news suggests the *Venusian Peasants* are collecting more than would be used by a feudal society with a guild based craft economy. The scale of sap collection suggests they collecting it as a trade goods. This is a sure sign of external meddling from either the *USA* or the *USSR*. Rubium sap has many military applications.

Yevdokia Bershanskaya discourages an 'International Brigade' style intervention without more information about the extent of foreign military intervention. Instead she suggests a squad level reconnaissance mission (i.e a group of PCs) to advise local rebel groups while they determine levels of interplanetary interference in frog society.

Abram notes that *Nikolay* is monitored by Frog people who are looking for a reason to eject the foreigners. The cantonment is supported by a fortnightly supply transport. The transport flight path passes over mountains far away from frog settlements.

Yevdokia recommends a reconnaissance squad deployed into the mountains by 'High Altitude, Low Opening' parachute drop, with the squad making their way to a pick up point at *_Nikolay_* as the most effective way to assess conditions on Venus without arousing suspicion among either the Venusian Nobility, the Americans at *Mariner* or the Soviets at

Venera.

Yevdokia defines mission objectives. Find out what's going on, make contact with local resistance (if there is one), assist them if you can, but do not jeopardise the Union's long term efforts to create a progressive materialist uprising among Venusian peasants by getting caught meddling in Venusian affairs.

(Get in quiet. Raise hell. Get out. Don't get caught)

Tool up montage (as the transport is loaded and characters go through HiLo parachute drill). There's a disgusting job (eg cleaning the head) required to get the ship ready for anyone who failed the coin check. Use renown rolls (or Fate Points) to specify equipment to be included in the drop.

The Marxist 'Stages of History' theory provides our plot outline.

We find our heroes rattling around in the back of a space transport, checking and rechecking their equipment ahead of a terrifying HALO jump.

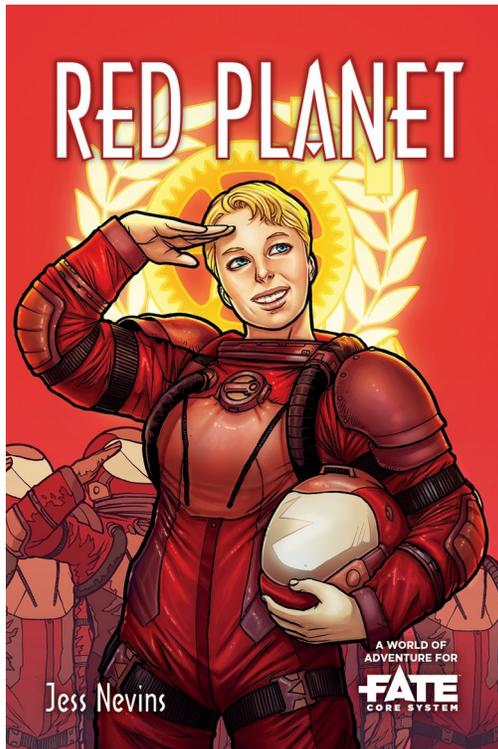
Play as a "Hurry up and Wait" war story scene. They are cargo, they need to kill time. Encourage a round of cards for 'duty roster' stakes. Play on character's fear or impatience related aspects to have a character 'freak out' and get the other players to use empathy or rapport to talk them down. Run through the Halo drill again (Revise the theory of a High Altitude Low Opening Jump to create advantage using Lore). Get players to embellish something from the character background into a 'On my first mission ...' story. Interrupt the story with the 'jump' light.

- The HALO jump is a challenge
- A Will test at Great difficulty (teamwork bonuses apply) to leap from the transport.
- An Athletics test at Great difficulty to deploy parachute. Interpret failed rolls as is 'succeed with significant cost' results (Costs being players get spread out and have to find each other, increased difficulties on landing).
- A Physique test at Fair difficulty (modified by shifts on the athletics roll) to handle the landing - this is effectively a 'Defend' roll.

The landing zone is a windy and snow covered mountain plateau.

From here on Venus is a "sandbox adventure" that uses the Marxist 'Stages of History' theory as a framing device. As our heroes descend down the mountain, through cloud forests, via jungle rivers, along swampy rice growing deltas and into the Venusian towns they will meet people and situations that represent each of stage in the Marxist theory of history. (See I told you 'this show is educational').

In the cloud forests they encounter a wild group of non-uplifted Venusian Gorillas, living as equals but always on the verge of starvation (representing primitive communism). Within this group there are uplifted gorillas, who do not seek to fight the oppressor but simply move out of their range. A raid by Venusian Tooth Beasts and some rousing speeches from our heroes and these uplifted gorillas will see the error of escapist plans. They will offer their services as guides



to

The deep jungle interior where gorillas and frogs harvest Rubium sap under slavery conditions. They work hard with a gun in their back for a bowl of rice a day. We explore the Heart of Darkness, incite a servile uprising (I am Sparticus) and follow the river until ...

The jungle meets the rice paddy and Frog Peasants toil under feudalism as share croppers and serfs to pay the tithes to the church and land rents to the barony. Peasants burn the jungle to create land they can claim title on and farm as yeomen (Kulaks). Bandits (dirty robbing hoods) and Gorillas lurk in the jungle fight against peasant encroachment. Our heroes bring together the oppressed Gorilla and peasant, so they can throw off the barons and priests by raiding

The city where the artisans use their money capital to challenging the traditional order of peasant, warrior-noble and priest in favour a society of political liberty, a money economy and a world of bosses and wage labour. Along with

economic change, the city folk are undertaking a protestant reformation of their frog religion - that rejects superstitious practices such as the regular blood sacrifices to the river monster god Beth-Dagon required for rice fertility. The city raids are successful leading to ...

Widespread confusion about the way forward. Religious reforms, establishment of a constitutional monarchy and other "counter-revolutionary" measures are proposed as ways to quell the uprisings by the poor. Many charismatic locals offer potential ways forward. Our heroes need to help one gain legitimacy as the 'dictator of the proletariat' to manage the chaos.

If they choose well order is restored, power is devolved to governing committee and Frog and Gorilla find ways to co-exist. Venus embraces the principles of progressive materialism and asks our players to leave so they can develop a distinctively Venusian version of Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism

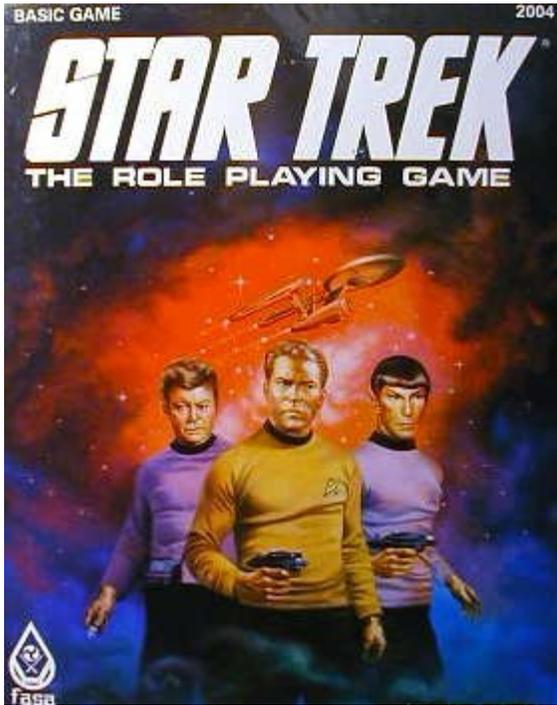
Originally from *Reflections of a FATE games master*
<http://fate-rpg-gm.blogspot.com.au/>

REVIEWS OF STARFARING RPGS

by Lev Lafayette, Karl Brown, and Andrew Daborn

Star Trek: The Roleplaying Game (Basic Game) (1983) Review

By Lev Lafayette



Introduction and Physical Description

Based on the original Star Trek TV series, animated series, and first movie, the acquisition of the license by FASA was certainly quite a coup. Credit is also due for their thorough independent design process; apparently no less than four proposals were rejected as they were too focussed on combat systems. The first edition of this game was published in 1982; the second in 1983. The boxed set has a fairly obvious colour cover with the canonical characters and contains three cardstock saddle-stapled books; a Cadet's Orientation Sourcebook (40p), a Game Operations Manual (48p), and a Star Fleet Officer's Manual (40p). Internal art is mostly greyscale stills from the TV and animated series and is mostly contextually appropriate. The text is two-column justified, sans-serif, and packed into the product. There is very little white-space, even when it could have helped (e.g., chapter headers), and the writing style is very formal and terse. Whilst a back-cover index would have helped as well, each book does

come with its own table of contents.

Cadet's Orientation Sourcebook

The Cadet's Orientation Sourcebook is setting information, equipment, and character examples. It begins with a timeline, including the Stardates of the TV series (noting that they were not always consistent), and the beginning of the game universe starting after the animated series. Then there's a terminology guide which includes some leading information for an RPG party (e.g., "Landing Party", "Exploration Team", "First Contact Team" etc). This is followed by a Starfaring "Races" guide, by which I hope they mean species. Most are available to PCs, but a handful are not recommended, with the note that Klingons and Romulans, will be available in future supplements. As much as this reviewer fondly recalls their seriously unlucky Caitan security guard, it's a pity that the opportunity to play a Tholian (the crystalline species) was written off, and, for that matter, the reptilian Gorn. Orions are also not available as starting PC species.

This is followed by a section on the geopolitics, centered on the Federation of course, with descriptions of the various

government types that have been encountered. Because the game assumes participation in The Federation (a fairly wide range of species, cultures, and governments in its own right), and the military at that, a fairly significant section is given to the organisation and operations of Star Fleet Command, which includes a fairly standard hierarchical organisational chart for people who are business majors. Of particular roleplaying importance is the relative independence of the Constitution class ships which, of course, includes the Enterprise. Rank and position are apparently extremely important in the Star Trek universe, and there is as much detail on that as there is on the command structure itself. Two pages of protocol (with italicised comments by James T. Kirk) are provided on dealing with encounters with friendly, neutral, and unfriendly vessels.

A good ten pages of the sourcebook deals with various types of personal and shipboard equipment, which includes all the classics such as communicators, tricorders, phasers and so forth in the former, deflector shields, transporters, and impulse engines in the latter. Only a page and half is dedicated to sidearms in the personal equipment section, and phasers and photon torpedoes make up less than half a page in the shipboard section. Following this are character statistics for the major characters of the Enterprise, including Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Scott, Sulu, Uhura, Chekov, and Chapel, plus others. The book concludes with a seven page biography of a sample character with page references to the Star Fleet Operations Manual for character creation. It is, especially in contrast to the rest of the game, far too long.

Star Fleet Officer's Manual

The Star Fleet Officer's Manual essentially consists of two major components; (a) character generation and development and (b) tactical combat and healing. It is in this book that the obligatory "what is roleplaying?" section is found, followed by character definition. Characters have 7 attributes with a score ranging from 01-100 across Strength (STR), Endurance (END), Intellect (INT), Dexterity (DEX), Charisma (CHA), Luck (LUC), and Psionic Potential (PSI). An average person is considered to have a value of 40 in these attributes. In addition there are skills, also rated from 01-100, with a score of 10 representing minimum proficiency, and 80 or more an expert rating. Over 50 skill areas are described, plus specific skills for broad groups (e.g., life sciences, planetary survival, trivia). Of note, especially for a game of this vintage, there are only a handful of combat skills. Each skill is provided on average a couple of paragraphs of description. Attribute or skill resolution is simply a d100 roll under for non-routine actions; routine skills require no skill roll unless the character has a skill of less than 10, in which case they can make a test against a d10. Sometimes an average of a skill and attribute is used for particular tasks.

Character attributes are determined on 3d10+40, except for LUC and PSI, which use a straight percentage roll. There are "racial" modifiers as well, e.g., Humans receiving -30 to PSI. Net modifiers are -30 for Humans, -25 for Andorians, -15 for Caitans, -40 for Edoans, -60 for Tellarites, and +0 for Vulcans. In addition characters may roll d100/2 and add that to any attributes (except PSI) as bonus points and with a limit of 30 per attribute. Derived END statistics include Maximum Operating Endurance, Current Operating Endurance, Inaction Save Level, Unconsciousness Threshold, Wound Healing Rate, and Fatigue Healing Rate. There is also ageing effects for STR, END, and DEX if a human character is aged 50 or more.

Initial background skills (educational and personal development) derived from their INT at a d10 rank. When they enter

Star Fleet Academy for core skills in academic, space science, and officer training skills, with some outside electives, then advanced study, branch school specialist curriculum, electives, and advanced training, then cadet cruise assignment, then department head school, command school, and post-academy experience which is determined by a tours system (a bit like Traveller and Space Opera). Whilst providing a character history structure, it is not necessarily a quick process.

The end of character generation also sees the generation of derived combat statistics, including Action Points (based on DEX), base to hit numbers (based on attribute and skill) for modern and hand-to-hand, and base unarmed damage (based on STR). Tactical grid maps are recommended for the game with 1.5m scale and a 10-second combat round. Initiative is determined by the Small Units Tactics skill, or DEX if neither party has a score in that. Action points do what they sound like; there's a chart of various point costs for a variety of maneuvers, and unspent points can be used for opportunity actions. Like other actions, attacks are carried out with a percentile roll-under with numerous modifiers for range, concealment etc. Damage can be a direct hit or graze with reduced damage. Energy weapons do static levels of damage, whereas melee and kinetic weapons have rolled damage. Armour can absorb some damage and the residual is applied to the character's END, which can be as permanent damage (e.g., bullets) or temporary (stunners). There are critical levels for unconsciousness saves, unconsciousness without a saving check, and death. The weapons, one hastens to add are very powerful indeed.

Game Operations Manual

The Game Operations Manual is the gamemaster's guide, and is immediately notable for its extra-small font table of contents. The book opens with suggestions for designing adventures, distinguishing between the classic linear and freeform adventures (terms used before "railroad" and "sandbox" were popular), and the combining of adventures into a common campaign, with the interesting suggestion of using different characters in each adventure in a common campaign. Planetside adventures are given special attention, especially for the design of "Class M" worlds (i.e., Earth-like) with a series of random rolls to determine quantity (at least 1 per system), position in system, satellites, gravity, planetary rotation, atmospheric density etc. Such planets are prone to having alien life, and as a result there's random generation charts for those as well, with differentiation of attributes between size and type (amphorous, insect, fish, amphibian, reptile, bird, mammal). There is a possibility of 'special' as well, the truly alien, and these have the highest chance 'sentience'. Sentience of course means new civilisations, which can include several levels of various technological, socio-political, and related development. From the macro to the micro-scale this is immediately followed by design of NPCs which includes a quick NPC generation system, and short collection of stock characters.

A few pages are dedicated to presenting the scenario which is all fairly sensible stuff about how the gamemaster should describe scenes to the players, specifically "vibrant descriptions", and keeping up a sense of excitement. There is additional attention to using play aids, such as scale maps and tactical displays, along with other props. A section is provided on judging character generation which includes determining the PC's ship, rank, and position. Along with a repetition of core tables from character generation, of particular note there are also attribute modifiers here for the NPC species, Romulans, Klingons etc. One also discovers the critical age threshold for other species here as well. Following this judging character action which includes saving throws against various attributes, an elaboration of the various skills, combat actions, and the use of various equipment. Again, significant portions are replicated from the Star Fleet

Officer's Manual. The book concludes with a very short and very hand-wavy starship combat system. The book concludes with useful charts and tables.

Evaluation

The Basic boxed set for the Star Trek: The Roleplaying Game is a rather impressive game that captures the spirit of the early Star Trek universe and provides a game that is relatively simple, easy to run, and which generates a satisfactory outcome. The presentation of the game is, of course, plain to the point of being stark, and could certainly with a little bit of glamour, and perhaps a more accessible index. The limitation of worlds to Earth-like planets is a little disappointing, and the starship combat system is next to useless, especially when too many pages were spent on the character story example. However these are fairly minor complaints compared the many good things of the game, its terse writing acting adding to the formality of the Star Trek universe. As a whole, this is a very well-suited introductory game that can serve for a great number of sessions in the Star Trek setting and even, if one is brave, to other science fiction universes as well.

Style: 1 + .4 (layout) + .5 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .5 (product) = 3.5

Substance: 1 + .6 (content) + .6 (text) + .6 (fun) + .5 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 3.8

Spacemaster 2nd Edition (1988)

By Lev Lafayette

Introduction and Physical Description

Spacemaster was Iron Crown Enterprise's foray into the mainstream science fiction genre of the time which, unsurprisingly, included a high level of compatibility with their fantasy game, Rolemaster. Whilst the first edition is an interesting side-piece of RPG history, the second edition was the one that came out with the widest range of supplements and was most often played. There were two main printings of the second edition; the first a boxed set, which is reviewed here, and a latter version released in 1992 which was a single book edition. The second edition Spacemaster boxed set consisted of an attractive high-tech SF combat scene by Walter Velez which contrasts strongly with the first edition cover by Gail McIntosh which had a particularly science fantasy appeal. The internal black-and-white line drawings are pretty uninspired; usually competent, often contextual (especially in the Tech Book), and a couple are even amusing.

The contents include a large star map, centered on Sol, and three books, colour-coded with cardstock covers and saddle-staples. The Player Book weighs in at hefty 128p which is a little too big for the binding and given its heavy use in the game has to be handed with additional care. At more acceptable sizes, the GM Book is at 80p and the Tech Book at 96p. Each book includes a brief, high-level, table of contents on the back cover. As for the layout it's three-column ragged-right with a sans-serif font, and minimal white space and, being an ICE-product, it includes "quite a few" tables. Each book has an extensive table of contents (but no index). The writing style tends towards the formal and is a little heavy on the descriptive.

Player Book

The Player Book consists of four main sections; Character Generation Rules, Personal Combat, General Activity Rules, and Telepathy Rules, along with some necessary charts and tables. Characters are broadly defined by characteristics, professions, and skills. There are ten Characteristics consisting of Constitution, Agility, Reasoning, Memory, Self-Discipline, Strength, Quickness, Presence, Intuition, and Empathy, and are differentiated between temporary and potential values. Each range from a rolled value of 1-100 (with two replaced by 90's) which generates "stat bonuses" (or penalties). These bonuses can also be affected by the character's "race". A selection of the characteristics also contribute to "development points" which are expended in developing a character's skills.

After determining the temporary characteristics, the next choice is determining the character's "race" which includes variants of Terran Humans, one of twelve variations of Transhumans, five types of replicants, androids, and a small selection of aliens, including the thoroughly nasty insectoid-reptilian Snee, the powerful but rare K'ta'viir, the protoplasmic Aoemarans, and the three-legged Trilopters, among others. After the "racial" selection, a profession is selected, from a selection of 17, differentiated the categories of astronauts (armsman, pilot, explorer), technicians (systems tech, electrical tech, arms tech), research scientists (researcher, physician, engineer), field scientists (criminologist, medic, planetologist), communicators (administrator, entertainer, theologian), and telepaths (telepath, semi-telepath).

Spacemaster, as in Rolemaster, is a class and level and experience points game system, with skills. The "classes" (i.e., professions) do not restrict skill selection but rather establish various levels of difficulty of learning skill ranks, according to development point costs. The expenditure of development points each level determines the skill ranks acquired, in addition to those acquired prior to first level as adolescent and apprenticeship skill development. Skill rank levels correlate to a percentage value of a declining rate (10 ranks provides +50, 20 ranks provides +70), with rank bonuses and stat bonuses, plus profession level bonuses in certain skill categories providing a total skill bonus which is added to d100 rolls for actions. There are eighty skills (about a third with a combat orientation), plus specialisations, plus psionic fields (like spells lists in Rolemaster).

Actions are broadly differentiated into personal combat and general activities. Personal combat is carried out in 10-second rounds with multiple phases (psions, fire, move, fire, melee, orientation). Attacks are based on a d100 roll "open-ended" (roll 96+, roll again and add), plus the attacker's offensive bonus, minus the defender's defensive bonus, with all the usual modifiers that one would expect. The result is cross-referenced on a table for each weapon class between the attack roll, and the armour type worn (or attached to) the defender. The result is either a miss, or a combination of "concussion hits" (which can result in character unconsciousness when reduced to zero, or dead at hits plus Constitution) and critical results which can mean bleeding, broken bones, etc and sometimes with colourful descriptions. As per Rolemaster, the deadliness of combat is a function of its randomness. Even the most incompetent fool pointing a pistol at you can end up in disaster.

General activities include moving maneuvers, vehicular maneuvers, and static maneuvers. These are chart-based but

again using a similar resolution method of roll d100, roll high, add modifiers. Elaborating these is the equipment usage section which quite ingeniously treats scanners as a type of ranged weapon with appropriate modifiers. In addition there are rules for the use of sensors, electronic warfare, and of course, a equipment fumble table. There is a whole chapter dedicated to vehicular maneuvers, which includes atmospheric, N-space, hyperspace, astrogation, and a combat system - of note because Spacemaster would go on to expand to include Star Strike, for space-based combat resolution, and Armored Assault for ground-based vehicular combat. Finally the Players Book deal with Psionics which, like Rolemaster are organised into lists of psions, differentiated by "field". Characters spent Psion Points, roll to successfully invoke the psionic effect, which can modify the target's resistance roll. Some 24 lists are provided which describe an increasingly powerful psionic effect according to psion point cost.

GM Book and Tech Book

Whilst typically not used a great deal in actual play the GM Book does provide a great deal of background and setting information for scenario development. It consists of "The Natural Laws", "The Imperial Laws", and a short adventure. The first section, as the name implies, is mostly brief material on the generation of star systems, planets, encounters, and, curiously, setting options. Most of it is fairly sensible, although heavily dependent on random rolls, and whilst not particularly elaborate it does cover all the basics, from star spectral class, satellites, orbital radius, gravity, temperature etc. as well as random generation of encounters. The second section is the default setting information, set some 10,000 years in the future (a quaint hypothesis), with an unimaginative a quasi-medieval capitalism, (not unlike Traveller), various illustrations of daily life - which various if one is an aristocrat, citizen, or slave, the imperial government and its provinces, major organisations (corporations, a major religion etc), renegade houses, including a democratic commonwealth, non-human "races", etc. The adventure is actually quite good; a great deal of multi-layered intrigue, a bit of surveillance, travel, probably some combat

At least equal to Player Book in use during play, if not more so, the Tech Book consists of three main sections. The first section is a catalogue of equipment, including a general statement of the technology level (Spacemaster does not have differentiated technology levels), personal weapons (the single largest section), computers, androids, biological constructs, vehicles, and a sample spacecraft. A common feature in the personal weapons and computers section is to allocate Mark numbers to the equipment, defining the maximum power or capability. A particularly memorable moment for your reviewer was the TPK achieved by one player whose character discovered that physically throwing an Enhanced Blast Mark 5 Plasma grenade could mean the entire party would be in the first blast radius.

The second section is fairly short, but does provide quite a strong system for the implementation of construction and repair of equipment, the building of machines, biological organisms, and cloning. The general principle is a difficulty level is established and a table-referenced die-roll determined the time taken for a portion of the project to complete, include the prospect for disaster. There are separate tables for construction and research, as well as malfunction and repair. The final section is over thirty pages of combat resolution charts and criticals, in the Rolemaster style, with a cross-reference of final die-rolls against armour types giving a "hits and crits" result, where armour generally protects against the latter in particular, but does result in more low-level damage. A particular feature is an extension of the table beyond the normal range to incorporate the capability of advanced weapons against the iron-age armour of Rolemaster - curiously results are also included for low armour types, even though the tables explicitly state that these are not

included.

Evaluation

Spacemaster is a rather successful implementation of the Rolemaster system to a science fiction setting, and does particularly well in the field of various scanning technologies, robotics and androids, and the opportunity for some especially “combat-wombat” enticements. The character generation system is certainly more complex than it needs to be. The game setting itself does try just a little too hard to be all things to all xenomorphs, sometimes coming across as a bit like Star Wars, sometimes as Star Trek, sometimes, as Traveller, even a little of Alien, but never really as Spacemaster itself.

There is plenty of opportunity for intrigue and conflict, and as a result one is best just suspending disbelief and rolling with the game, or rather, at least initially. As a campaign develops, the limitations of rather undeveloped setting will inevitably become more evident. As mentioned the three book system works reasonably well in actual play, although the size of the Player Book is a bit of a problem. The lack of an index can also make things a little difficult, as does the general layout. Despite these limitations, overall Spacemaster does work and works quite well, and is quite accessible game.

Style: 1 + .4 (layout) + .5 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .7 (product) = 3.7

Substance: 1 + .6 (content) + .5 (text) + .6 (fun) + .6 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 3.9

Star Wars: Roleplaying Game (Second Edition Revised and Expanded) (1996)

Review

By Lev Lafayette

Introduction and Physical Description

Part of me wonders why on earth this edition is given the title “second edition revised and expanded” when something as straight-forward as “third edition” clearly would have worked better. For that matter, it really is a third edition - there is a lot of elaboration and some revision from the second edition rules as well as re-organisation. Still, be it as it may, this was certainly a production high point for West End Games. The first edition (1987) was without a doubt a great example of simple yet satisfying design, even if to get really great value out of it you needed the Rules Companion. As the years went the second edition (1992) gave out a lot more detail in terms of the universe, and added additional complexity and specialisation to the rules.

The book is quite a piece of work. A solid hardback with very good binding, gloss pages with full-colour artwork throughout. The space combat scene on the cover is evocative, the movie stills are well chosen, and contextually appropriate. The cartoon-character interludes are not particularly well-executed, but they’re acceptable. The writing style far too verbose (just how many times does the core mechanic have to be mentioned), and is usually fairly informal. Contextual quotes from the films are applied, most of which are good, and some of which makes you think

the scriptwriters were being paid by the word. The text is two-column serif and justified, with highlighted section, and section headers on each page. The table of contents is brief and a little hard to read with the image in the background, but there is a three-page index to make up for it. The text itself has four main sections; Player Section (chargen, skill resolution), Gamemaster Section, Adventure Section, and Universe Section.

Player Section

At 62 pages, the Player Section is a short introduction to roleplaying, the game universe, and the game system. It begins with a sample character sheet and solo scenario which incorporates themes for the setting as well as providing an introduction to the core mechanic of the game - roll a handful of d6s based on attribute or skill and try to beat a target number, with character points providing an extra die. After that there's chargen proper; characters has six attributes (Dexterity, Knowledge, Mechanical, Perception, Strength, Technical) which are measured in d6 ratings. The core mechanic is expanded to include a "wild die" from the pool; on a roll of '1' it means a penalty (typically subtracting the highest die, or causing a complication), on a roll of '6' it becomes open-ended. For a game that already has a substantial range of results (an average skill of 4d6 generating results from 4-24, anywhere from "very easy" to "very difficult" target numbers), this really is an unnecessary complication and is a source of some disapproval among fans.

There's a handy selection of templates to choose from, or a character can be generated from scratch, allocating from pool to attributes according to species minimum, and even selecting "pips" instead of a full die. Characters can expand their base attributes with skills, and 7D are available for that to allocate to some 26 basic skills, plus there's specialisations and advanced skills, which have prerequisites from basic skills. Curiously, for purposes of character improvement after being initially specialisations are treated as separate skills and improvement in the base skill does not improve the specialisation. In addition to this there is a possibility that the character is "Force Sensitive", and may even start with a number of "Dark Side" points. Characters may start with Force skills (there's three of them) by reducing the attribute allocation. Starting equipment is handwaved as "reasonable", which is pretty poor effort for the third edition of a game.

In addition there is some excellent advice on introducing interactions between characters and the setting, although this is done in a non-systemic manner ("Hunted by Empire", won't give you any in-character compensations for example). Overall, character generation is a bit of a straight-jacket; apart from Force skills there's even no cost equivalence between attribute and skills (for example, an elderly character whom age has reduced many attributes, but their skills are broad and deep). Sadly, the best option for players and gamemasters, is to simply take characters the templates and run with it.

The largest chapter of the Player Section is dedicated to descriptive and systemic use of attributes and skills. Each attribute description includes generic rules that apply for relevant skills under that attribute, followed by the specific skills and their specialisations. As a result, skills descriptions themselves can be quite brief - a couple of paragraphs is usually sufficient. For example, the skills for archaic guns, blaster, bowcaster (Wookiee weapon), bows, firearms etc are quite brief as all the Dexterity description for "ranged weapons" applies appropriately. As far as game-system content is concerned, this chapter is absolutely packed with information.

Gamemaster and Adventure Sections

Combined the Gamemaster and Adventure sections make up about 115 pages, a very significant contribution to the overall page count. The opening two chapters of the Gamemaster section and the first two chapters of the Adventure section is full of advice for running the game, from scenarios to epic campaigns and use of the game system. Most of it is sensible and thematically appropriate, if often repetitive, but occasionally a little on the innovative side (e.g., cueing up movie scenes for particular encounters, use of collectible cards as scenic props). The sample adventure, “The Pirates of Prexiar” is a pretty straight-forward scenario that involves a rebel group that engages in a recovery operation for cargo and supplies that has been taken by pirates.

One of the more perhaps unexpected inclusions in the Gamemaster section are the chapters on combat and injuries and movement and chases. In a nutshell, Star Wars uses five second combat rounds with initiative determined by the Perception attribute with free and non-free actions. Free actions, for example, includes “cautious” (cruising) movement across easy terrain. The latter are differentiated whether or not they require a skill roll (e.g., reloading doesn't), and multiple actions may be undertaken by at a -1d per additional action. There are also “reaction skills” which can be invoked when appropriate, such as dodge and parry. Weapons have variant damage on a successful hit, and the sum of the weapon damage roll is compared in a contested roll against the target's Strength plus armour, a damage resistance check.

The degree that the weapon damage exceeds the damage resistance check is the degree that they are wounded and the effects, ranging from stunned, wounded, incapacitated, mortally wounded, and dead. By way of comparison, a blaster does 4d damage, and the average character will have 2d strength which typically would be a wounded result, resulting in the character falling (why?), losing any other actions for the round, and being at -1d after that until healed. Contrary to the game's claims combat is not particularly lethal and an average character should be able to take at least few hits before becoming incapacitated. Healing rules cover natural healing, medpacs, and bacta tanks.

There are chapters dedicated to space travel, space combat, and large scale battles. The former includes matters of obtaining ships, astrogation and use of sublight and hyperdrive systems, various space-based encounters, the use of starship shields and weapons, and the results of damage. In contrast, large scale battles are largely determined from a narrative approach with the key concerns being the initial set-up and course of the battle, with specific scenes and encounters that the player characters can interact with. Some of these, at least, should be “critical moments” where the PCs have the opportunity to influence the course of the battle as a whole.

There is also, of course, a chapter on The Force. There is substantial material throughout the book that emphasises The Force as a sort of moral code to the universe. Most characters start the game with 1 Force Point, which can be used to double attribute and skill rolls in a single round, or a continuous action in a scene. Depending on how it is used (dramatic, heroic etc) it will be recovered at the end of the adventure. A character who uses their Force Point for unheroic, non-dramatic actions will lose their Force Point; a character who uses it for evil actions will also lose it but gain a Dark Side point and each time one is acquired a 1d6 (roll under) test is made to see if they turn to the Dark Side.

A character with 0 Force Points may gain one at the end of an adventure for particularly heroic action. Each Force skill (control, sense, alter) governs the ability of several Force powers which are like spells in another genre (e.g., hibernation trance, remain conscious, telekinesis, projective telepathy, etc), each of which come with a difficulty, requisite powers, time to use, and effect. There's close to 30 powers in total, each with a couple of paragraphs of description. Powers are learnt or taught, and there is a great deal of information on the the various ways that these two paths can be taken. Jedi, it must be mentioned, get a metric tonne of Force Points and a gamemaster must be extremely firm on the descriptive rules of when they can use them. Indeed, as has been accurately described the design does suffer from a "linear fighters, quadratic wizards" problem; Force sensitive characters start off weak, but quickly become the most powerful characters in the game. Whilst this does suit the genre, in actual play the progression of characters in Force powers can be too quick - halving the training speed, for example, would generate the sense of dedication appropriate for this path.

Universe Section

The Universe section is some 80 pages of background history, setting information, and equipment; after this is some 20 pages of charts and character templates to conclude the book. The background history for the Star Wars universe is pretty trite and the pages spent here to not alleviate that concern. The Galactic Republic was thousands of generations of peace of a capitalist democracy ruled by a representative senate with moral guidance by the Jedi Knights. Then because it was too successful a supposedly mediocre but downright cunning Senator became President, who maneuvers himself to become emperor and all that follows. Thankfully, more detail is given to the well-known first trilogy and with a modicum of information on the events of the New Republic, along with some general descriptive material on technological development, the known galaxy, and the culture.

There are few chapters that would constitute NPC resources, all of which are thoroughly useful but is too brief. This includes a chapter on Gamemaster Characters, which only really has a dozen imperial troopers and pilots, a couple of bounty hunters etc, a chapter on Aliens, which includes statistical templates for Eworks, Mon Calamari, Rodians, Wookies, and a few more, plus a chapter on Creatures which has several of the most well known animals, who include a statistic for "Orneriness", representing the relative difficulty to ride. Curiously absent are classics such as Womp Rats and Exogorth.

This is followed by a personal equipment guide of some 40 or so items, of which easily half are directly related to combat situations. A chapter on Droids explains the five different types ("degrees") of droid, a few roleplaying, and then provides statistics for six different models. A vehicle chapter offers a small selection of personal vehicles, plus walkers which honestly are a remarkably silly design - a 15m tall walking tank and APC? Of course you take out its legs. The starship chapter has several starfighters including of course the X-wing and tie fighter, five capital ships, such as a star destroyer, and a couple of transports and scout ships, including statistics for the Millenium Falcon. A short final chapter covers planet construction which, in the Star Wars style, is far more descriptive than even remotely scientific or integrated.

Evaluation

The physical and aesthetic presentation of the Star Wars Roleplaying Game "third edition" is generally quite

impressive, with the exception of the writing style which really needed an angry editor with a big red pen. The game does cover all bases in terms of an actual supplement, system, and rulebook. There is a complete set of rules which has simple core principles, easy extensions, and quite workable with a few necessary tweaks - throw that wild die out, link skills and specialisations, be very strict on the Force rules, and double the training time for Force powers. Dealt with the hand of the corny Star Wars universe the authors have done a good job at emphasising the narrative strengths more than the setting, and especially the thematic components of the space opera, rather than just Star Wars as such. As a result, the final product is interesting, useful, and appropriate and - it must be mentioned - gives honour to the rather innovative brilliance started with Greg Costikyan way back in the first edition.

Style: 1 + .5 (layout) + .6 (art) + .7 (coolness) + .3 (readability) + .8 (product) = 3.9

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .5 (text) + .7 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 3.9

Traveller (2008)

By Lev Lafayette

Introduction and Physical Product

Traveller is, of course, the classic space opera science fiction RPG from the dawn of the hobby. It has undergone many iterations, from the original publication in 1977, the expansion in the Imperium setting and rules known as MegaTraveller in 1987, a new ruleset and post-apocalyptic setting Traveller: The New Era in 1993, T4: Marc Miller's Traveller in 1996, GURPS Traveller in 1998, Traveller20 in 2002, Traveller Hero in 2006, and Traveller5 in 2013. The Mongoose edition, in brief, is a return to the original edition in the style, rules, and setting. The book immediately reminiscent in size and style of the original Traveller hardback, with the stark black cover and red lettering, and nothing else in the way of cover art. Contrary to so many epic tomes of recent years, has taken the principle that a slimmer book is better than a fatter book, and it is one which I immediately and intuitively agree with assuming an equality of content. Certainly one can have no complaint with the tight binding.

The internal black-and-white line drawings is competent, usually contextual, has a certain tough style to it (rather different to the smart space operatic style of the original), but does give a sense that many pieces are fillers. With one and two-column justified text and grey-scale highlights, it has a certain clean starkness about it, with page numbers and chapter titles provide on each page. The table of contents is too brief, but there's a very good index. The writing style is both clear and to the point. In a nutshell the book covers character generation, skills and tasks, combat, encounters and dangers, equipment, starcraft design, common spacecraft, spacecraft operations, space combat, psionics, trade, and world creation - and it does all this in under 200 pages.

Characters and System

The introduction to "this is roleplaying" and "this is Traveller" is wonderfully short, and includes a nice description of play which involves our old friend, Free Trader Beowulf, along with brief descriptions of overall technology levels for different societies. Character creation is very much like the classic rules based on 2d6 allocated rolls for Strength, Dexterity, Endurance, Intelligence, Education, and Social Standing. These provide dice modifiers (DMs) from -2 to +2

in a semi-linear fashion, with options to go up down to 0 and go as high as 15, both of which, show incomplete workmanship; the rating of 0 actually has a DM, and the rating of 15 is expressed a limited cap, contraindicated by the chapter on generating animals where one has to imply the function increase.

Characters receive background skills (1-5, depending on Edu) based on the character's homeworld, plus the results of formal education. After that they go through a number of 4-years terms of service, with qualification tests, improvements in skill and training, survival and mishap checks, events, and in some cases commission. There are twelve careers (Agent, Army, Citizen, Drifter, Entertainer, Marine, Merchant, Navy, Nobility, Rogue, Scholar, and Scout), each with three specialisation (e.g., a Scout could be Courier, Survey, and Exploration). When you leave a career you receive mustering out benefits, which still can vary from something as trivial as a blade to your own ship. In addition to this, the character generation rules cover the effects of aging (many characters are middle-aged or older), and alternative character generation rules, including a point-buy system.

Also included in character generation are alien species which are provided ability titles to give a summary of significant differences from the human norm (e.g., aquatic, flyer, no fine manipulators, psionic etc). Six specific examples are listed as being found in the Third Imperium and therefore available for play as PCs or NPCs. These include the Aslan (lion people), Droyne (small insect people), Hiver (land-based starfish-cum-octopus people), K'ree (centaur people), Vargr (dog people), and Zhodani (alternative humans with a psionic ruling class). The biggest complaint, even with the notion of ancient progenitors, is that the aliens aren't very alien.

The core mechanic is 2d6 plus modifiers versus a target number of 8. This is applied to characteristic tests (against Strength, for example) and skill tests (against Carouse for example). Task difficulty ratings provide DMs from +6 to -6. Six degrees of success and failure are determined by the final result. A chart provides the time-frame for carrying out a task and with DMs for fast or slow attempts. Multiple actions are allowed, but generate a negative DM. Opposed check are also allowed, as is aid. Some forty skills are described, plus specialisation. Each is described in a short paragraph with a couple of task examples. Jack-of-all-trades is a particular exception, which reduces the usual modifier for untrained skills.

The combat system follows the core mechanic and, in a nutshell, it has a pretty standard sequence of rounds, roll for initiative, roll to hit, roll for damage sequence. Round are six seconds each, and initiative is determined on 2d6+Dex DM, and is retained for the combat. Each round a character may make one significant action (e.g., attack), one minor action (e.g., movement, drawing, reloading, aiming), as many reactions as desired (e.g., dodge, parry), and a reasonable number of free actions (e.g., shout a warning, press a button). There are several special considerations such as automatic weapons (single shot, burst, full automatic), DMs for cover, grappling, range modifications. Weapon damage is measured in d6s (armour reduces) and is subtracted initially from End but when that is reduced to 0, then Str or Dex - if either Str or Dex is reduced to 0, the character is unconscious and if all three characteristics are 0, the character is killed.. There is a significant section of vehicular combat and the effects of those weapons, maneuvers, collisions), armour, and damage (damage to Hull first, then Structure, plus onboard damage).

Much later in the book, but still part of character and systems conceptually, is the chapter on Psionics. Characters can start with a Psionic Strength value, typically by attending an institute, of 2d6-terms of service - so get in early if you can. The specific Psionic talents that can be learned included Telepathy, Clairvoyance, Telekinesis, Awareness, and Teleportation, all of which are treated like skills. Each of the abilities have certain implementations that have a cost in points, a time period, difficult, and range. For example, the Telepathy skill includes the ability to engage in Life Detection. This is an Easy (DM+4) action, and costs 1 Psi + range modifier. If a character uses up their Psi points they take End as damage instead. There is over twenty different implementations of the abilities, and in addition, there are several items of Psionic technologies on offer. An alternative career, Psions, is also offered for those who wish to concentrate on developing these talents.

Setting

The first chapter that falls under 'Setting' information is "Encounters and Dangers". This is a bestiary, of sorts, and more of a creature design system which makes sense when one considers the vast options available in all the planetary systems of Imperium space and beyond. The system does generate some really quirky creatures, but within Earth-like criteria rather than being really too alien. Thus one generates (to use an example) a "carnivorous pouncer" rather than a leopard. For animals, an Instinct characteristic replaces Education. Overall it's a short and simple system which provides lots of opportunity for elaboration. But the option for really exotic aliens should have been included.

Various environmental dangers (disease, poison, heat, cold, weather, falling, fatigue) are provided with both brevity and sufficient detail, all of which leads in to healing with options for natural healing, first aid, surgery, medical care, and loss of mental characteristics (not quite a sanity system however). Non-player characters are also included in this chapter, with the most interesting addition being their random traits and connections. Patrons are, of course, very important in any Traveller game and several examples are provided generating adventure seeds in their own right. A small selection of random tables (encounters, dangers etc) and an NPC table concludes the chapter.

Another setting chapter is Equipment, with categories provided in alphabetical order. This starts with the use of the Credit as the universal currency and standard of living costs. Several types of armour is provided, from leather jackets (1 point protection) through to powered battle dress (18 point protection). Several options (e.g., magnetic grapples, self-cleaning smart fabric) extend these further for armour and normal clothing. Several items of cybernetics (e.g., subdermal amour) is described, along with a handful of communication devices, computers (very abstract and not at all realistic), various medical items and drugs, several robots and drones, sensor systems, survival gear, and toolkits, are also provided. Unsurprisingly there are also weapons; about a dozen melee weapons, slightly more kinetic weapons, a few energy weapons, four types of grenade, five heavy weapons, a few explosives, plus options for extending weapons from their core characteristics. Finally, about a half-dozen vehicles, described with basic characteristics and options (e.g., autopilot), and rules for encumbrance.. Overall, the equipment list works on providing a short list across many categories.

One special item of equipment receives a chapter of its own right, and that's starships. A design system is provided that takes up an entire chapter of hull, armour, tonnage, FTL jump range, power plant, fuel requirements, bridge, computer

system, sensor system, berths, weapon systems, screens, and optional extras. The classic jump drive is extended to include options such as warp drives, teleport drives, and a hyperspace drive, the use of fission or antimatter fuel drives, . As one can tell it's a pretty detailed process, but that be expected as ships are certainly the most expensive single items in the game. In addition to all this several sample ships are thankfully offered - a scout ship, a mining ships, two trader ships (free trader and far trader), a merchant ship (fat trader), a laboratory ship, an escort, a heavy freighter, a yacht, mercenary cruiser, a corsair raider, a police cutter, and several small craft and fighters.

A chapter is dedicated to both ship operations and space combat. By operations what is meant is “what are the sort of things that a spacecraft needs to do”, and thus includes topics for the management of airlocks, the ability to operate in an atmosphere, boarding, docking, and landing procedures, the financial costs for upkeep and fuel, what happens if you try to skip your starship mortgage, some random encounters for space (which should be very rare outside of core areas), the various implementations of those random encounters (e.g., distress signal, “This is Free Trader Beowulf”), the preparation and engagement of jump travel, the management of life support, type of passage (low passage is still astoundingly dangerous), repair costs, sensor operations, spacecraft security systems, and transit times. Like much of this book, it covers a lot of ground and does so with great brevity. Of course, one of the great operations is space combat and that gets a chapter of its own right. It begins with range determination, position of crew, and initiative with an advantage to the ship with the higher thrust. There is then a manoeuvre phase to change range increments, and then fire with beam weapons, missile launching, or boarding manoeuvres, the latter of which has an abstract resolution system. There are ships reactions as well, including dodging (evasive action), point defense, or sandasters. At the ship action phases there is the option to repair damaged systems, engage in electronic warfare, improve initiative through leadership and change crew positions. Damage is to hull and structure points, with armour reducing damage, and with location charts. The general rule should be “don't get hit”.

Trade has always been a big part of the Traveller game system, and this edition is no exception. Passengers and freight are the cash cow approaches, with the price of the former highly dependent on class and less on distance, and the latter more on tonnage and less on distance. Greater profits and greater risk however is to be made on speculative trade, where one selects a particular type of good from one place to another with assumptions of high surplus to high need. Smuggling contraband will undoubtedly, produce ever higher profits and higher risks. In these more speculative trades it goes without saying that on average and unskilled character will lose money, whereas skilled characters who pick the right trade routes can do very well indeed. And because trade in this environment occurs between worlds, it is necessary for a chapter on world creation, from star mapping, starports, existence of military bases, gas giants, the political system, communication systems, and existing trade routes for the system as a whole, and for the worlds, their size, gravity, atmosphere, temperature, hydrographics, population, government, law, and culture - all of which has a high degree of random generation. It doesn't engage in a high degree of astrophysics, or even sociology for that matter, but it does provide charts to generate gameworld locations with ease.

Evaluation

A tightly produced book in terms of the actual physical product, textual density, and scope, this iteration of Traveller is extremely well-produced in all accounts. It's really a no-nonsense core rulebook that is deliberately designed a thoughtful and clean game system and with the barest minimum of an imposed game setting (unlike, say, Megatraveller

or Traveller: The New Era, where the setting is integral). Overall this is a very solid piece of work, especially in terms of the writing style and the physical product, and the scope and density of the text.

Style: 1 + .5 (layout) + .5 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .8 (product) = 4.1

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .9 (text) + .6 (fun) + .5 (workmanship) + .5 (system) = 4.4

Star Wars - Force and Destiny Roleplaying Game (2013)

By Andrew Daborn

Force and Destiny is one of three roleplay games from Fantasy Flight Games using the narrative dice system set in the Star Wars universe. In it the players take roles of force sensitive people as they grow in knowledge about the mystical power of Star Wars! As I review this book I will explore whether it provides a gaming experience comparable to the Star Wars films, books and other media.

The Book Itself

"Oh, read them, have you? Page turners they were not." - Yoda.

Force and Destiny core rulebook is a hefty 448 page hardback weighing in at nearly 2kgs. It certainly has good coffee table potential with many full page and full colour pictures of our favourite characters from the films. The inside cover art of Old Ben standing guard over a certain moisture farm is rather beautiful. The spine did unfortunately crack the moment I opened my copy up, so I suggest some care when handling it.

I find the pages to be densely packed with information but laid out clearly. I have rarely had difficulty following the explanation of rules. References to other sections and examples are highlighted in sidebars through the book. Roleplay rules books often find themselves balancing between being teaching material and reference books. Teaching the rules systematically with no ambiguity so readers can pick up novel concepts quickly involves careful wording and clear layout. A reference book needs a clear breakdown of rules using matrices and bullet points with simple layout that does not distract from the text. Surrounding rules in narratives, examples of play and plenty of relevant pictures makes absorbing and retaining them easier in that 30 minutes you have before your group arrives. The same aspects give less visual cues for the clause that clarifies the rule query you what to find mid chase scene. This book has been easier to learn from by reading whole chapters at a time. It is not the type of book in which you can swiftly find a specific reference by only using the contents and index. I've spent too much time thumbing through it repeatedly trying to find the critical hits table (note to self - page 250) in the middle of combat.

There is a chapter on combat, injuries and recovery - including limb loss naturally. This is the most complicated section of the rules but it tries hard to reduce the burden on everyone once again emphasising the narrative and cinematic nature of the game. A good example of this is the explicit lack of grappling rules which it neatly sidesteps. It would hardly be space opera without a chapter on space ships and other vehicles. This covers speeders, star destroyers and everything you need to play in between. The rules expand slightly on the core ones but basically vehicles are

treated as characters without skills who are bigger, tougher and move faster.

There are three large chapters on the Star Wars universe including the main groups, information about travel and daily life, the Force and a good selection of planets. This coupled with cursory knowledge of the films and access to Wookieepedia is enough background to set up and play with others whatever their exposure to the franchise is. There is plenty of background without the rulebook really covering the older Legends material.

The GMs section goes into more detail about playing a narrative style game, create encounters and how to set up campaigns. It gives rules options and good advice on how to run sessions and also how to tie this game in with the other two in the series, for that one player who wants to play the wookiee.

The book ends with a short adventure, Lessons of the Past, which is designed to run into another scenario written in the Game Master's Kit set. I won't dwell on the adventure in case you play it other than to say that it is short, well laid out and clearly explains the mechanics needed to play.

How to Play the Game

The suggested game structure is that the PCs are all 'force-sensitive' people, human or otherwise, during the time of the Galactic Empire after the fall of the Jedi. They have recently banded together for mutual survival and to gain knowledge from each other in the Force. What they do then is up to the group but there are plenty of opportunities to help those oppressed by the Empire, search for lost artefacts of power, aid the Resistance or just go pod-racing.

This brings up a common problem in RPGs that emulate films. We can't all play Luke Skywalker and we don't want to endlessly recreate the same story as him. How does the game allow for different wannabe Jedi to run around with laser swords cutting their way through walls and chopping limbs to find the equally matched adversaries they need for a dramatic story without everyone fighting Darth Vader? Surely there are only two Sith anyway, Darth Vader and the Emperor. Aren't the player characters going to be overpowered against everyone else? Weren't the Jedi all wiped out anyway? The game discusses this in depth and suggests ways around this. The universe is big and full of all sorts of possibilities but also very dangerous, especially the Imperial sectors where force-sensitives are illegal and shunned by society. The book has a whole chapter on underworld bosses, droids, alien monsters and Imperial forces that are a match for the PCs. The secretive Inquisitorius are also portrayed as powerful rivals in the book. The inquisitors are the Emperor's force-using / lightsabre wielding secret police that track down, recruit or kill force-sensitives like the PCs and surviving Jedi from the Clone Wars.

The rules suggest clear discussions with all players before the game to ensure that everyone has a good understanding of what a Star Wars game does and doesn't look like. This is important as it is fundamentally up to the players to determine that, regardless of the rules.

The System

The game system that Force and Destiny, and the other Fantasy Flight Star Wars games are built on is the narrative dice system. Fantasy Flight recently released it as a generic roleplay system called Genesys. So does the system help you

play games that feel like Star Wars? For me Star Wars emphasises the dramatic conflicts within and between us. These things don't have to be built into game systems for them to be explored, however if they are an important theme then a good system can encourage them. Force and Destiny explicitly sets out to focus on building a story for the players. It states that the dice system exemplifies this with it's abstract degrees of success and failure and shifting narrative control.

There are two dice mechanics at work in the game. The Force dice, that govern the PCs relationship with the Force and how they express that power is about internal conflict. These dice drive the force powers of the character and can fuel their fall into the dark side. In game the Force is characterized primarily by a number of twelve sided dice with light and dark symbols that can power the PCs Force abilities. Each die is designed so that it is easier to roll dark side symbols, but the light side symbols are often more powerful.

The rest of the dice resolve external conflicts, fights, tests of knowledge, speeder chases, bribery and the like. The dice are a colour coded mix of d6s, d8s and d12s with the regular dots and numbers replaced with Star Wars inspired symbols. These symbols represent successes and failures; advantages and threats as well as triumph and despair. Positive symbols are found on 'boost', 'ability' and 'proficiency' dice while negative symbols are found on 'setback' 'difficulty' and 'challenge' dice. A pool is calculated based on the natural ability and skill of the PC and nature of the task at hand. After a roll the totals of all symbols are calculated, opposing symbols cancelling each other out e.g If two successes and one failure are rolled the total is one success. The rules for adding, removing or swapping out dice basically account for all other eventualities in the system e.g. a PC might have a talent (feat) that removes a 'setback' die or by aiming a weapon adds a 'boost' die to a pool.

There is some controversy around these dice, especially since playing the game initially meant buying at least one set of them, in addition to the book. The book does have a nifty matrix for translating your regular dice results into advantages and despairs but that is a lot of effort to go to every time you roll. There are now other electronic alternatives. Fantasy Flight released two dice roller apps on android and iPhone platforms for \$5.49 one with the Star Wars icons and another using Genesys icons, both 4.6 stars on Play Store. The app developer 'vistux' recently released a free with ads generic dice roller app with sets of Star Wars and Fate dice added, 4.4 stars on Play Store. Whether you like them or not it's great to see the humble d12 getting a substantial role in a system...

Are these dice worth the financial cost and outlay of time to learn how they work? What do they add to the game? The dice define the system and understanding how they work requires some patience and skill before the game can run smoothly. It's not intuitive how the dice compare to each other as sides of a die can share different symbols and overall the positive dice have a favourable spread of symbols to the negative ones.

The rules encourage the dice to be used to share narrative control, although the GM is there to arbitrate. The dice fall on the table and all players can help narrate the scene that unfolds. I have found that once everyone has a clear idea of what kind of success or failure the symbols indicate the dice give a great feeling of shared experience constructing the story together. Often there are dice results that are not immediately clear, such as a failure of the task but with some

significant advantage. e.g. Your Jedi slips when trying to climb the security wall but lands in a crate of stinking bantha hides making it hard for the now alerted stormtroopers to find him.

The Force and Destiny tokens are a simple transactional mechanic that helps add to the cinematic ebb and flow of the session. A random number of these light/dark sided tokens are generated each session and they used by either the GM or players to gain an advantage to their dice pools depending on which side is faced up. Light side tokens giving a sparks of hope while Dark side raise the tension! After being used the token flips allowing the other side to make use of it. I've found that in play this can easily be forgotten by everyone playing leaving the game lacking momentum. It definitely adds to the drama when used but is one more thing to remember when balancing on the edge of a sarlacc pit.

The final part of the system I want to explore is the conflict and morality rules. Morality is a scale of 1-100 that helps identify how far your character has drifted to the Light or Dark sides of the Force. Conflict points are gained through play by using the Dark side or succumbing to emotions such as fear, anger and disgust. The difference between a d10 roll at the end of a session and a characters conflict points for that session determine if their morality goes up or down. Far enough up and they become a paragon of the Light and far enough down they fall to the Dark side. Through this, decisions the player-character makes in game and the extent that they rely on the Dark side to power their force abilities slowly lead them down one route or another. It's never by a single action, but by many over a period of time.

In Sum

Like all RPG franchise spin-offs Star Wars Force and Destiny Roleplaying Game wants to be the game that allows you to re-enact old star Wars stories and make up your own in the same light. Well - you can duel with TIE Fighters like Luke, serve the Rebel Alliance like Leia, fight like Count Dooku and move rocks like Rey! You can visit exotic places like the city-planet Coruscant, or the force vergences of Dagobah and Dathomir. You can play as aliens like Kit Fisto or Asajj Ventress. You can explore dramatic internal struggles and rise to the Light side like Obi Wan Kenobi or fall to the Dark like Ben Solo.

I have had fun playing this game. The book is a good read, if it's size is intimidating at first. I would recommend it to anyone who doesn't want to have to wait for more films to have more Star Wars.

Starfinder Core Rulebook (2017)

By Lev Lafayette

Introduction and Physical Product

Following d20-styled precursors like *Stars without Number* (which should have been reviewed, if not for space and time considerations) Starfinder takes a familiar game system and publication style and puts it in a new setting. The book itself is quite sizable - over 500 hundred pages - and physically it's quite a work. Hardbound, gloss paper, and full-colour artwork throughout. The fairly attractive cover does give an idea of what sort of science fiction is being presented here - exotic humanoid aliens with a distinct science-fantasy orientation. The artwork ranges from comic-like

to epic battles, contextual and with acumen. The layout consists of two-column justified sans serif text, with obvious page and chapter references. Given its size, it is fortunate that there is a solid table of contents and index.

For content, there is an overview chapter followed by character creation with ability scores and levels, there is a chapter on “races” (read: “species”), another on classes, skills, feats, equipment, tactical rules, starships, magic and spells (yes, you read that right, this is space opera science fantasy), game mastering, the standard setting, and Pathfinder legacy along with appendices. While it does explain the content in a clear manner, it does so in a manner that is very verbose, in both the writing itself and the way the content is presented.



Characters

The game starts with an obligatory “what is roleplaying”, followed by the key terms for Starfinder including the core mechanic (d20, plus modifiers vs target number), and an example of play. Chargen involves concept, character race (humans, androids, insect-people, reptile-people, four-armed people, telepathic scholars, and space rats). After this you select the character’s theme which is sort of like a specialist character class but with a particular style. This includes Ace Pilot, Bounty Hunter, Icon, Mercenary, Outlaw, Priest, Scholar, Spacefarer, Xenseeker, and a “Themeless”. Then one chooses the characters class, from a selection of Envoy, Mechanic, Mystic, Operative (the Rogue-like character), Solarian (specialist warrior), Soldier, and Technomancer. After that determine (point buy, quick-pick, or random) and apply ability scores to the classic array and modifiers; Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence, Wisdom, Constitution, Charisma, apply class features, assign skill ranks and feats, purchase beginning equipment, and select alignment, religion, home

world, etc, as well as derived values such saving throws, Armor Class (kinetic and energy), and Resolve Points, a bonus pool. Hit Points represent a wound level, whereas Stamina Points represent readiness and energy. Stamina points can be recovered by spending Resolve or by a short rest.

Ability modifiers are linear (+ or -1 for every two points deviation from 10), the not-very alien races are balanced in their ability bonuses (+2 each overall), as are themes (+1 to ability). Whilst the themes aren’t particularly thematic, and the character classes are pretty appropriate and ability-orientated, although there are crossovers - there are two classes with charisma as key abilities, but none with constitution, for example. There is multiclassing, which would be particularly useful for those classes that have the same primary ability. Alignment is built across the traditional good-neutral-evil, law-neutral-chaos axes, and there is a Common language. The game is a class, level, and experience points system with a rather unusual progression, with ability increases gained every five levels and new feats every two levels, and a theme benefit every six (with a bonus at first level), with an option for mnemonic retraining. The game has class-

based skills with ranks determined by intelligence and level, along with weapon and armour proficiencies. Each class also has improvisations and talents (mini-feats, if you like) that are gained with level advances, along with alternative class features inappropriately called archetypes. Mystics and Technomancers receive spells per day allocated by spell level. As a whole, all of this is very familiar to anyone playing a d20-derived game system, but it has a few interesting additions tacked on.

System

Skill resolution is, unsurprisingly, 1d20+bonuses versus a difficulty class target number, with options for “Take 10” and “Take 20”, assistance bonuses, armour penalties etc. There’s only 20 skills in total plus required specialisations, although this said they are defined quite broadly - Athletics for example incorporates balance, fly, escape, tumble, climb, jump, and swim maneuvers, with each maneuver described with its own circumstantial modifiers and difficulty classes. What the game makes up for in lack of specific skills it makes up for in breadth of description in most action-oriented cases - knowledge skills are an exception in their brevity. In comparison to skills, feats represent unranked specialist talents which often have prerequisites based on certain skill ranks or other feats. Many are combat-orientated and includes weapon and armour proficiencies.

Combat is conducted in six-second rounds, with a standard initiative (d20+Dex, which is retained for the entire combat), roll to hit, roll for damage sequence. Initially awareness checks are used to determine whether surprise exists, after which character act in initiative order. When a character’s turn is reached in the initiative order they carry out the full round’s action, with exceptions for attacks of opportunity. In the first round, if one acts in a higher initiative order, a character can catch their opponent flat-footed where they cannot apply the Dexterity bonus to AC. In a round, a character can perform one standard action (e.g., attack, cast spell), one move action (e.g., move, reload), and one swift action (e.g., drop prone), or they can instead perform one full action (e.g., charge, full attack, withdraw). Bonus to attack is determined by the character’s base attack bonus, dexterity for ranged weapons, and strength for thrown and melee weapons. Damage is determined by weapon type, with bonuses from strength applied to both thrown and melee weapons. A character reduced to 0 hit points is unconscious and dying; if the remaining damage is greater than the character’s maximum hit points they die immediately, otherwise they have a round to be stabilised. There is rules elaborations on vehicular movement and combat, with special detail provided to vehicular chases.

Equipment

The currency of the setting is Credits, existing as digital and physical currency, with “credsticks” commonly used for convenience. Carrying capacity is measured in the “bulk” of items, rather like the traditional RuneQuest ENC, rather than an exact measurement of weight (roughly 5-10 lbs represents 1 bulk). A character can carry up to half their Strength in Bulk without trouble; after that they become encumbered, causing a reduction in speed, dexterity bonus, and certain skill checks. Items are also assigned a level; representing their relative scarcity and value, which does give a good rule of thumb of what characters should have.

The equipment list is heavily combat orientated; almost three hundred weapons and type of ammunition are described, along with special characteristics (e.g., automatic, archaic, blast, entangle, line, penetrating, powered etc) and critical

effects (e.g., arc, bleed, burn, corrode, deafen etc). A good number fit the category of science-fantasy - a number of “plasma swords” and similar for example. After that there’s around 60 types of armour, differentiated by Energy Armor Class bonus, and Kinetic Armor Class bonus, with heavier suits coming with a maximum dexterity bonus limit, skill check penalties, and speed adjustments. Some come with upgrade slots for magic and technological improvements, of which some 44 are described. Most armour also incorporates a high degree of environmental protections, including vacuum. In addition to this there is powered armour and 10 types of force fields. Other equipment includes some 30 types of augmentations (biological or mechanical bionics), 10 biotech items, and 10 tiers of computers with each tier providing additional capacity, complexity, and DC for hacking. The computer rules, unsurprisingly, are not particularly realistic. There is almost 30 general “technological” items, which is essentially the high-technology version of camping gear, a similar number of magic items, about 15 hybrid magical-technological items, a dozen sample vehicles, and finally about 50 personal items, including clothes, lodging, transport, and glue (not joking).

Starships, Magic, and Setting

Starships are sufficiently important items to warrant their own chapter, covering navigation and astrogation, and a starship build system which covers scales from a few tons to over eight thousand, and base frames for racers, fighters, transports, destroyers, cruisers, battleships etc. Again the detailed focus is on space combat systems, and this is reflected in the variety of starship-scaled weapons and shields offered. A good variety of sample ships from the different races in the game setting are given as examples, with the spaceships of the undead Eoxians warranting special attentions, as they do not require life support, airlocks, radiation reactor shielding etc and as a result end up having some very interesting designs. Space combat is carried out in rounds with multiple phases for various actions according to the ship’s role (i.e., engineer, helm, gunnery) with various actions permitted by characters in the respective phase. .

As a science fantasy game, the magic chapter is pretty much in the lineage of D&D3.x/D20. There are spell levels, a number of spell slots per day that a mystic or technomancer (each with their own selections of spells) can make use of, and sometimes saving throws depending on the type of spell. Spells are defined by name (along with school, including conjuration, divination, enchantment, illusion etc), casting time, area of effect, targets, duration, saving throw and description. Spell levels range from 0 to 6 for both mystics and technomancers, the former providing more mental-orientated magics, and the latter more elemental and alteration. Between the two lists there is around some 270 spells, although there is around 1 in 5 crossover.

A Gamemastering chapter covers the usual features of adventure building with an emphasis on encounter balance with average party level and challenge ratings, the latter being particular well developed and associated with experience point awards and financial awards. Fudging rolls is explicitly encouraged for story development. Environmental considerations are both descriptive and systemic (e.g., damage due to corrosive atmosphere, modifications to perception due to terrain etc); it covers a lot of ground (pun not intended), but does come across as being presented in a haphazard manner - it’s a list of effects rather than planetology design. It feeds well into the effects of the non-natural environment as well (e.g., traps), magical afflictions, and produced afflictions (e.g., poisons). A magical world with real gods, setting information is provided with starting with the plot device of history being absent, lost, or contradictory after a few centuries, referred to as “The Gap”. Concentrating on The Pact, a potted timeline of contacts, technological

developments, occasional wars, diseases etc is provided, with the notable point of a conclusion of hostilities between The Pact and Veskarium (reptile people) with the external threat of the Swarm's "mindless destruction". The Pact is given a broad "daily life" overview, along with the worlds of the system, with their particular specialisations, along with briefer descriptions of worlds outside the system, along with other planes of existence, various factions and organisations, and deities and religion. The book concludes with a chapter on converting and incorporating Pathfinder with Starfinder.

Evaluation

Whilst a very attractive and solid physical product with very good artwork, cleanly presented, and with thoroughly workable and developed game system with plenty of support material, Starfinder is a game that may appeal to many but will lack solid foundations. It is certainly not pitched at those who like their science fiction hard science, and despite a style that is much more like *Guardians of the Galaxy* rather than *Star Trek*, the game system is too crunchy to emulate the fast and furious action movie. The core concept of science fantasy is, of course, hardly new but this particular version lacks both the epic scope of something like Druillet's *Lone Sloane*, or a strongly integrated approach like *Warhammer 40K*.

Setting style aside, the fact that it comes as a massive book whose design is orientated towards lists and more lists is off-putting in terms of content - indeed it is the number one problem with the game as a whole.. Still it is a good game, a complete game, and will easily have appeal for those who want swords, sorcery, and lasers in a familiar game system environment. That alone will be sufficient for its success.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .8 (art) + .4 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .8 (product) = 4.2

Substance: 1 + .5 (content) + .2 (text) + .5 (fun) + .5 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 3.3

Hyperlanes (2017)

By Karl Brown

Hyperlanes re-skins the D&D 5thedition rules so you can play cinematic space opera adventures with them. Unlike other attempts to do this Hyperlanes does not incorporate any of the European fantasy tropes of D&D, but if you did want space elves then Hyperlanes is fully compatible with D&D. Also unlike other efforts, such as Ultramodern 5, it does not create a lot of additional rules and systems. Hyperlanes stays true to the streamlined design philosophy of D&D 5thedition. I have not played this game yet, at the time of my writing this review the game was released a few days ago. However, I have read through the book very carefully and have been playing and designing rpg material for 34 years. I am also the author of a very thorough analysis of the math behind D&D 5e's races. So what do I think of Hyperlanes? I love it!

The thing

The hardcover book is a print on demand from Drive Thru RPG. This is my first print on demand purchase and I am pleasantly surprised by the quality of the physical object. The illustrations are colour throughout, the pages matt but of a

descent weight and the cover sturdy. The book is perfect bound so I hope the glue is of sufficient quality to withstand years of abuse at the table, no problems yet. The book is 181 pages thick, not including the character sheet at the back. There is a good index. There are a few typos and editing errors, about one or two per chapter, better than many small company productions but really there should be none. The PDF has two layers of bookmarks.

These rules are NOT missing

If you have played almost any other science fiction game you might think that a few chapters are missing, this is not true. Hyperlanes just works very differently. There are no chapters for psychic powers, cybernetics, or computer hacking. Furthermore, most SF games devote many pages to great big lists of equipment to buy; Hyperlanes' section for equipment *to buy* with money is a mere six pages. The vehicle rules are elegant but like equipment seem thin and lacking options. Never fear! All these detailed and cool options are in the book, they are just dispersed through the class traits, feats, and especially 'Gambits'. Gambits represent special training, preparations before a mission, explosives and other consumable equipment, knacks etc. Mechanically, they work the way spells do in D&D. Some like 'Cover Fire' are 'Tricks' that can be used by PCs with appropriate training any number of times, like D&D's cantrips. Other Gambits require rest, restocking, or preparations and therefore only work a number of times before a break needs to be taken, just like D&D's spells. Gambits and other features are generally sparsely described so players can explain with a narrative that makes sense for the situation and the DM's universe.

Hyperlanes implicitly expects play to switch back and forth between tactical thinking and just narrating. An extreme example is the 9th level Outlaw feature 'Escape Plan' which is a literal 'get out of gaol free' ability. In terms of game mechanics it is effectively a teleport spell but instead of disappearing and reappearing in a safer place you should narrate your escape perhaps with a little ret-con. *"I must have swallowed some tools earlier because I vomit up a capsule containing a mini tool kit and use this to short out the force-field when the guard runs over I knock him out with his own stun baton and escape into the vents where I can catch my breath."* Note that like the teleport spell no actual dice are rolled to achieve all of that.

Let's take a quick look at how content from the 'missing chapters' is actually dispersed through the book.

The first chapter makes it clear that no rules for psychic powers are given instead suggesting that some class features could be described as psychic powers. There is a Psychic option when building your alien species though. Reading through it's pretty obvious that many Gambits could be described as psychic powers rather than say force of personality, gear, or whatever. For a universe where psionics is important, there is now a 29 page supplement called "Unfolding Starscapes".

Cybernetics is handled by treating this tech mechanically like D&D's magic items. For more heavily augmented individuals the game uses feats and a Cyborg 'race'. Unlike many science fiction games the equipment lists of things you can just buy are limited and very generic. The really cool equipment is not for sale. The 'good stuff' is treated like magic items in D&D or is an explanation for how some gambits work.

Vehicles, are not as simple as they first look, vehicles can be designed using the book's NPC/monster design rules and the combat rules are more complex than they first appear because many gambits can be used at the personal and vehicle

combat scale.

Cinematics

Science fiction is a difficult genre to do well, doubly so if you intend a generic rules set. The first page of Hyperlanes makes it clear what the authors were trying to achieve: adapting the D&D rules to the action-focused space opera sub-genre of science fiction. The first chapter is even called ‘Cinematics’. I’m happy to say Hyperlanes looks like it will ‘do what is says on the tin’ and do it well. Hyperlanes will find a place among referees who want to try science fiction but have player’s resistant to learning new rules. That said, the D&D rules are a good match for action-packed space opera making Hyperlanes an excellent choice for that genre even amongst experienced gamers who are open to other systems.

Hyperlanes is not a stand-alone game, you will need a copy of the D&D 5e rules to use it. Happily, WOTC gives away D&D rules in the ‘Basic Rules’ or SRD pdf’s for free. I would rather have everything needed in the one book and the authors could have lifted words right out of the SRD as needed. I would have paid extra to cover the cost of the extra pages. However, since most customers are going to be those who already love D&D 5e and have the books this is a very minor quibble.

What Hyperlanes does provide is PC options, equipment, vehicles, and NPCs for Space Opera games using the D&D 5e rules. As already explained the rules also allow for psychic powers, cybernetics, and hackers though class features and ‘Gambits’. The authors explain a lot of the thinking behind their design choices and this really aids to understanding the rules. Although I have yet to play Hyperlanes at the table the fact that the designers have for the most part re-purposed D&D’s tried and tested canon rules gives me confidence that the game will play well. This also means you can use fantasy races and classes from D&D with Hyperlanes if you want. I’m not a fan of mixing genres like this but if you like that you can do it. The whole thing is entertainingly written but is rules focused. Less than two pages are devoted to guiding you as you create your campaign setting.

Fiction

While Hyperlanes is not bound to a specific setting the three fictional pieces provide examples of the kinds of scenarios the rules could support and were enjoyable to read. The first piece feels like the opening scene of a adventurous space opera film. The second piece “Tonight” was excellent in it’s ability to evoke a mood, but that mood was too serious to match the genre Hyperlanes seeks to emulate.

Species

Hyperlanes approach to creating alien PCs is to select a culture, a physiology, and perhaps an optional random trait. This simple set of choosing from 2-3 lists is right on target for the flexibility needed for a generic rules set AND the ease of use preferred by the 5e fan-base. Perfect for cinematic and space opera aliens. It also enables players who know Hyperlanes to quickly describe the aliens in their homebrew settings, “The Faszet are Honourable Fungoids with poisonous blood”. However, a few small tweaks in wording would have give DM’s license to be even more creative. A couple of examples:

*Age: All the physiologies are given lifespans, not suggestions, definitive statements. Age has no effect on game mechanics so why not let DM’s describe their aliens as they like. Sure a referee can direct his players to ignore these statements but in a generic rules set she should not have too.

*Medium Size. Another case of less is more. A simple statement of 'All the given species are Medium' is all that was needed. Instead the current wording of the Size section is "You are the shape of a typical/bulky/ humanoid, making you Medium Size"; this indicates that all the species and robots are humanoid (have a head, torso, two arms, and two legs). However, I don't believe the intent was to exclude other body shapes IF they have capabilities equivalent to a humanoid; there illustration of a non-humanoid aquatic species, fungoids are described as non-humanoid, as are a couple of the example species. Additionally, why give descriptors like typical or bulky? Removing these implies permission for greater creativity and diversity. One can easily imagine a spindly 'daddy long legs' like arachnoid, a physiology described as bulky.

Similarly, a warning to players that a DM might not allow the 'Psychic' culture would also have been appreciated, not all settings have psionic powers.

There are some traits that could benefit from a little more definition. For example Dispersed Physiology enables you to re-grow limbs but we have no idea how long that takes What happens if you have the glide trait and leap out of a flying car a mile above the surface? Does slime trail leave a residue making you easier to track?

Another potential issue is an optional random trait Large Size. This optional trait does come with a warning that it may be overpowered. This is an understatement. A Large alien using Large size weapons that do double damage dice is way overpowered; at first level she does as much damage as a 5th level character and if in a class that does extra attacks then this problem only gets worse as the character gains levels. A simple solution is the character is Large but has Medium hands and therefore only uses regular Medium size weapons. Traveler's K'kree, T-rex, or Jabba the Hutt are all examples of the kinds of anatomies that have small hands.

Classes

Hyperlanes provides six classes (compared to D&D's 12). As in standard D&D each class can cover a lot of different character concepts and has numerous 'archetypes' (sub-classes) to help support that diversity. Each of these classes is closely modelled on a standard D&D class giving me confidence that they will probably work well in actual play. Here are some examples of well know characters who might be in each class.

Ambassador(Bard): Mantis, Obi Wan, Zaphod Beeblebrox, Inara Serra

Genius(Wizard): Rocket Raccoon, R2D2, Johnny Mnemonic, Admiral Ackbar

Muscle(Fighter): Drax, Gamora, Chewie, Klingons

Outlaw(Rogue): Louis Wu, Boba Fett, James Bond, Malcom Reynolds

Pilot(Sorcerer chassis but very differently flavored): Han Solo, Mechwarriors, Mad Max, 2000AD's Nemesis.

Soldier(Cleric, a mix of fighting and special effect from training): Judge Dredd, Starship Troopers, Robocop, 2000AD's Rogue Trooper

While based on the fantasy classes the Hyperlanes classes have numerous nice touches. The bounty hunter archetype of outlaw gets custom armour and weapons thereby mimicking bounty hunters from Star Wars, Battletech, and other genre sources. I would recommend that the pilot class tool proficiency be changed from 'Flying Vehicles' to 'choose any one type of vehicle'.

Backgrounds and Feats

The backgrounds are generally well done with interesting suggested personality traits, ideals, bonds, and flaws. The 10 backgrounds cover the staples of space opera origins: colonist, fringer, mercenary, military, noble, slave, spacer, spy, test subject, and underworld. Most of the Background Features have more mechanical effects and would be more useful during an adventure than those given in D&D, which are little more than roleplaying hooks for between encounters. That said none of the background features in Hyperlanes jump out as overpowered on reading through. There are a number of feats, mostly just conversions of D&D 5e feats that grant spells into Hyperlanes' substitute systems.

Equipment

Hyperlanes does not include an option for starting money by class, presumably PCs are expected to start with equipment choices given by class and background. This is a little limiting; those with more unusual character concepts could buy equipment to suit if the starting money option was included. Happily, one Hyperlanes' credit is worth about one gold piece. Using the starting funds for the equivalent class in the D&D PHB will probably work ok for those who want a starting money option.

Some of the backgrounds include the option of the DM granting a vehicle, even a spaceship. This I suppose is one solution to the problem that most parties in the genre have an expensive spaceship. It's streamlined and works, in line with the 5e approach. Personally though, I feel owning a ship should be a big deal and I would have like to have seen a system that gives the ship a back-story and drips with roleplaying hooks. Fortunately, the ships themselves don't disappoint, but more on that later.

The equipment lists are short and generic. For example all pistols are the same. Laser, gauss gun, chemical ballistic, same, same, same. The authors do note however that DM's can easily add flavourful setting specific weapons by switching the heat type damage for other kinds such as freeze rays doing cold damage or disintegrators doing necrotic damage. The rules for automatic weapons are simple enough to be accepted by much of the D&D 5e fan base. A machinegun that just lets you hit two adjacent targets, that's it; it doesn't seem very satisfying. However, this really only represents what someone with only basic training in the weapon can consistently achieve. Hidden in the Gambit chapter are rules for suppressive fire, cover fire, aimed shots and the like. Most of these are 'tricks', gambits that can be used an unlimited number of times if you know them.

Rather than magic items, Hyperlanes uses the term 'Super-science'. This is a little misleading; many of the items are unusual or rare but not what would normally be called super-science by SF fans. 'Rare-tech' might be more apt. For those who find the regular equipment for purchase lists too restrictive, the D&D 5e DMG buying magic items optional rule could be used at least up to a rarity rating set by the DM. The items that are actual super-science have a real 'Guardians of the Galaxy' or 2000AD feel about them but since they are treated like magic items it's easy enough for a referee to not use those which don't fit his setting. There is a lot of fun stuff here like the 'Drone Shotgun' that fires tiny insect-sized robots that swarm around the target shooting tiny lasers. Attunement, a D&D 5e mechanic to ensure a character has only a few powerful items is used but the explanation feels forced, invoking emulation of the genre might have been a better approach. In space opera films a hero generally will only have a few gimmick items at a time, that's just how it is.

Vehicles

I can't wait to try out the vehicle rules in play. In a lot of SF games vehicle combat is complicated and involves tracking a lot of numbers. In Hyperlanes vehicles are essentially built like monsters and vehicle combat is generally works much like personal combat, just on a bigger scale. There are only three pages needed to explain how Vehicle combat is different but these few tweaks make vehicles feel like vehicles not just big monsters. The momentum rule makes them move like vehicles, battle-stations give multiple PCs something to do, and the rules for damage states emulate systems sputtering or going down without the tedious need to track hits point for each system. Vehicle combat is rich but also as streamlined, as a D&D 5e rule should be. I also want to mention the 'Quirkiness' rule as a vehicle survive more conflicts the damage takes a toll even after repairs. Quirks like battered, humid, or leaky add some really nice roleplaying elements to a vehicle. A second hand ship or one the PCs have had a while starts to be another character, just as they often are in the films.

In many SF RPG's pilots and gunners are active in space combat and the other players don't have much to do. This is not the case in Hyperlanes, designers have created class features and gambits that function at both the personal and vehicle scales wherever they can. This is an elegant way of ensuring that everyone can contribute during starship combat rather than twiddling their thumbs while the pilot shows off. It's also good for pilots too because their class features also are useful at the personal scale. A nice selection of 45 vehicles and some giant space monsters for them to fight is included. If these aren't enough vehicles can be designed using the same system as monsters.

Gambits

In terms of game mechanics Gambits work the same as spells. However, they are not magic but instead represent competence, ret-coned preparations, and expendable resources (such as medical drugs). In more simulationist games like GURPS, Traveller, or Shadowrun players spend *realtime* planning, carefully make a list of everything to pack, and keep an inventory of all this stuff during the adventure. I actually enjoy doing this for gritty hard SF but for cinematic swashbuckling space opera you want something faster. Hyperlanes is nothing like that; it's truly cinematic. As players you know your characters have done all that dull planning stuff 'off-screen' during a long rest so you can make a plan but skip the details. Like a film you can just cut to the start of the action scenes relying on Gambits to regulate your ret-con preparations so they don't get out of hand.

The 'gambits known' section has only 3 spaces per gambit level, not enough for some classes.

Overall

Hyperlanes is a good game that achieves the design goals that the developers set for themselves; a version of the existing D&D 5th edition rules repurposed for cinematic science fiction. Hyperlanes does require a shift in mindset and approach compared to better know science fiction games such as Traveler, GURPS Space, and Shadow Run. Much depends on the player's ability to narrate class features in a manner fitting the situation or even retcon. Hyperlanes does not provide a setting for you to play in. I actually prefer generic games like this but some gamers want a setting. Hyperlanes does provide you with good tools for generating world, aliens and vehicles to fill out the setting you imagine or emulate your favorite universe from film or literature.

EXPLORING A DESERTED SPACESHIP

by Thomas Verreault

The proverbial deserted space ship, a staple of adventure in science fiction. Ever since seeing *Alien* as a kid I've always known that deserted space ships were where bad things happened and Red Shirts went to die. It's not entirely true in every case but the ghosts of the movie *Alien* clearly haunt me to this day.

Still with it being such a staple of science fiction it's only a matter of time before you'll encounter one in your campaign. The following list is some ideas to dress the ship and set the mood for adventure on such a ship.

1. Patches of fuzzy mold grow on the walls and floor of the ship's corridors and around air vents. Characters must step carefully to avoid slipping on the mold but anytime their focus is fixed elsewhere (like during combat) they cannot do this and 25% of the time they will suffer a -15% penalty to all ability and skill checks during combat due to slipping on the mold.
2. Bodies: mummified, skeletal or rotting. Cause of death can be violence, environmental, or unknown. If environmental the condition that lead to death can still exist and be a danger to the player characters.
3. Abandoned personal weapons left in odd places in corridors and rooms.
4. Signs of fire: either localized or systemic. If localized it's centered on one piece of equipment like the life support plant or power plant. If systemic the fire may have travelled through air vents or been intentionally lit with accelerant.
5. Wall panels removed to expose systems and equipment. It looks like slap dash style repairs and attempts at bypass wiring.
6. From within the walls and air vents comes the sound of vermin scurrying and chittering. Rats, vollosian spiders or Terledrom roaches.
7. The last coat of paint is chipping and underneath there seems to be a design or mural.
8. Creeping vines grow throughout the corridors and rooms holding doors open.
9. A bulkhead panel has been removed and behind it is an empty hidden storage niche.
10. A security robot stands with its head hanging by wires nearby is another security robot seemingly undamaged.
11. Splattered blood covers walls and floors. Surely somebody died here but where is the body?
12. The purser's safe has been cut into with a laser power torch which lays nearby. Papers and credit chits are strewn on the floor.
13. Dirty clothes, blankets and food wrappers litter the areas around work stations.
14. Noises and creeks seem to follow the player characters as they move about the ship. Shadows even seem to follow them.
15. Battle damage: the ship has sustained substantial damage. Damage control may or may not have occurred.
16. A floor plate shifts as a player character walks on it and drops him or her into the subfloor. Someone may have welded spikes beneath (1d10 damage, RS check to avoid). There could be evidence of someone living down there. OR there is something not someone living down there roll for initiative.
17. Graffiti is written all over the walls. It could be artistic, juvenile or crazy/religious/prophetic.
18. Initials and names of crew are etched into the walls.
19. A vicious creature prowls the ship.
20. There is an egg. Why does there have to be an egg? Ok who wants to examine it closely?

STAR FRONTIERS: OF LOST SHIPS, DERELICTS, AND FLYING DUTCHMEN

by Thomas Verreault

The legend of the Flying Dutchman is that of a ghost ship doomed to never make port and sail on through eternity. This could not be truer of starships that become lost and derelict out in the black of space sailing off into forever. The legend of the Flying Dutchman started when sailors saw their sister ship which had been lost in a storm appear during another storm sailing as if to run them down and the story spread like wildfire in the nautical community. Just as the legendary Dutchman made a secondary appearance, derelicts and Flying Dutchman starships may also make a secondary appearance, though this is usually by referee fiat in the latest adventure. The following article is a resource for game referees to generate a derelict ship.

Why Ships Get Lost

Poorly calculated void jumps certainly account for some missing ships and this reason is written directly into the Knight Hawk rules for starships. The chance is usually low unless an astrogator is “smoking the jump”. Should a captain or ship owner be counting on refueling at their destination, a miss jump can become a grave circumstance from which it could be impossible to recover. Inspiration: Star Wars; while we never see it happen, Han Solo states that poor calculations could bring the ship out in an asteroid field or too close to a supernova.

Piracy in the Frontier is affirmed a number of ways in the rules and modules. Space pirates play a significant role in 3 of the published modules and the grand pirate raid by the dread pirate Hatzk Naar is a major time line feature that was the cause of the First Common Muster. Pirates have a haven in the Dramune system and some pirate vessels are officially flagged as militia for the Outer Reach colony. Piracy still happens even in the modern Frontier and some vessels will disappear because of this activity. Naturally, pirates will desire to wring every credit out of a ship so many will be sold to a fence but many may be just left to float derelict because the ship might be too recognizable to sell anonymously. Movie inspiration: Ice Pirates (1984) and The Island (1980).

While piracy is defined as violence or robbery in space, hostile action covers aggression that is not piracy. In the setting, space travel is dangerous and many civilian ships are armed. There is an implacable alien foe, the Sathar, who refuses to negotiate, suicides rather than be captured, and attacks without pity. The Zuraquor are the pawns of the sathar and equally act with aggression. Other alien opponents are hinted at like the Klikk’s which could very well be hostile and aggressive. Vessels that encounter these species that lack the firepower to outshoot them will become drifting wrecks. Inspiration: Battlestar Gallactica and Star Trek (almost any iteration of either TV series depicted hostile action in space).

Hazards in space come in myriad shapes and forms. A common hazard, which all starship crews train for, is the “holing” of the ship by small bits of rock. Because of the speeds involved, a micro-meteor will go through a ship like a bullet. Radiation is another hazard that might well kill the crew and leave the ship to drift. Besides valid real-world

hazards, game referees may also invent hazards to harass the players. Well charted jump routes should be free of most outré hazards, aside from the occasional micro-meteor, and thus fairly safe. But ships far from home can encounter dangers that will cause it to never return. Inspiration: Isaac Asimov's "The Sands of Mars" depicts the holing of a space ship by micro-meteor.

Intentional activity like mutiny can lead to the ship disappearing as mutiny is considered a crime in the Frontier and the mutineers obviously don't want to be found. Mutiny is of itself a violent activity and could lead to damage of the ship or death of enough of the sapient beings on board such that the ship cannot be operated. In addition, personnel with legal access to a ship may simply decide to fly off with it. This could be an eccentric owner deciding to become a hermit somewhere, a religious group looking for an Eden, or simply a hired crew that is fleeing the law. Inspiration: Star Trek TNG "The Pegasus Incident", Star Trek TOS "The Way to Eden", and The Black Hole (1979)

Accidents or Acts of God are simply freak things that happen and result in the ship being left derelict. This would cover the takeover of the ship by a robotic or computer brain due to some glitch in the programming or even an encounter with biological organisms on a planet that leave the crew incapacitated or dead. These are by definition accidents and they just happen. Inspiration: Aliens (1979), Marooned (1969), and Gravity (2013).

If you wish to randomly determine why a ship has become derelict, roll on the table below.

Cause Of Derelict Table

Roll 1d6	Cause
1	Misjump*
2	Piracy
3	Hostile Action
4	Innate Hazard in Space
5	Intentional
6	Accident

A ship will become a derelict on a miss-jump only with some other complication. This complication could be as simple as running out of fuel and supplies or more dramatic like hostile alien action.

Which Ships Get Lost

Fighters

A fighter has a crew of one (or two) that relies on their vacuum suit for life support. They are not considered able to make a void jump despite the ability to accelerate to Void speeds. Military organizations may build into their fighter

craft a jump governor to prevent them from reaching Void speed as a security and safety measure. Most likely a derelict fighter will be due to hostile action or death of the pilot for some reason.

A fighter pilot that somehow overcame the life support issues and attempted a void jump would find that he has a biological governor and that the days spent attempting this feat would become unbearable being forced to remain in one spot and position unable to even scratch an itch. However, there is still a chance that this feat could be successful. Movies like *Enemy Mine* and *Six Days Seven Nights* underscore the romantic image of a lost fighter pilot surviving on a deserted island or planet and while perhaps a bit unrealistic, there is no reason a referee cannot use this motif.

Shuttles, Runabouts and Small Craft

This category would include small yachts. These ships have proper life support and just enough space to move around provided they are not crowded with passengers. They could be operated by one being with great difficulty or by a small crew (2-3). Because the ship is small, its disappearance might not generate any news. A rich individual on a pleasure cruise or an eccentric deciding to go hermit could take such a ship off the charted space lanes where hazards increase. The small size of the ship and limited crew makes it more likely that even simple hazards could overcome the crew or resources of the ship.

Exploration Vessels

Exploration vessels seek out the unknown and are the first to encounter new hazards in space. Their crews train for conceivable contingencies and the ship carries redundant assets for emergencies but some never return. Zebulon's Guide estimates that 10-20% of all exploration vessels disappear. This is quite a high number, but then space travel is dangerous in an RPG setting. There are an estimated 200 missing exploration vessels out there to be discovered but be careful that what ever happened to the exploration crew doesn't happen to you.

Pirate Vessels

Pirates need to stay below the radar of the military and local law enforcement, thus they have a habit of looking for a hide-away in uncharted space. For this reason, 10-20% of all pirate vessels will disappear simply because they are encountering some of the same hazards as exploration vessels on top of all the other complications (mutiny, hostile actions, poor maintenance and accidents).

Passenger Liners

Because of cost and liability issues these vessels stick to established and well charted space lanes. While you would expect that most hazards of space travel will be minimized for passenger liner, accidents do happen and encounters with pirates or hostile aliens would generate a public tragedy. Since safety would be a major concern of most cruise lines, we don't expect that there would be that many derelict or missing passenger liners out there.

Commercial Civilian Ships

Freighters, mining ships, ag ships, and similar ships typically stick to the pursuit of their commercial interests but some captains might take chances to increase profits by “smoking the jump” (cutting short the time required to calculate a void jump) or looking for new untapped resources or markets. Freighters are the most likely to try “smoking the jump” and risk a miss jump. Mining ships might go exploring uncharted areas looking for new resources. Private commercial vessels are a high percentage of the total number of star ships in existence which will drive up the numbers of missing ships from this category. They are a prime target for piracy and their crews may be inadequate to handle exotic hazards.

Ag ships are a special case as there are just not that many of them out there. Growing crops on a planet is far easier and a colony that cannot grow its own would find it easier to ship in food on a freighter. Yet, ag ships do exist and are probably employed in specialized situations like new colony start-ups or as scientific research studying ecological issues in the controlled environment of a bio-dome. On the one hand there are not many of these ships out there but on the other their mission may require them to enter uncharted space so there is a chance of an ag ship being lost; it’s just small.

Military Vessels

The purpose of military and militia ships in the setting is to “stand into danger.” They explore, hunt pirates, seek out hostile action, and attempt rescue of civilian ships. Military vessels are very likely to encounter dangers and hazards in space. On the other hand, they have well-disciplined crews and are usually well maintained giving them better odds at handling accidents and emergencies. Still military vessels are going to be the highest percentage of missing and derelict vessels.

To randomly determine the type of derelict ship, roll on the following table.

Type Of Derelict Table

Roll D100	Ship Type
1-2	Fighter
3-12	Small Craft
13-33	Exploration Vessel
34-54	Pirate Vessel
55	Passenger Liner
56-66	Freighter

67-72	Mining Ship
73	Ag Ship
74-100	Military Vessels

Exploring a Derelict

To set up an adventure exploring a derelict, a referee will need a handy deck plan. There are numerous horizontal deck plans that can be located on the internet for settings like Traveller or Star Wars. Horizontal deck plans may actually be the most numerous available. Some of these are commercially available but there are many that are free. However, Star Frontiers does not posit the existence of artificial gravity and thus its ships have simulated gravity from the ship's thrust requiring vertical deck plans. At the end of the article is an appendix of ships and deck plans to aid a referee in setting up this sort of adventure.

Mysteries of a Derelict

You will need to have a good idea as to the "story" of why this particular ship is a derelict so that you can include appropriate clues as to what happened to it for the players to figure out this story. If a xeno-lifeform got on the ship and ran amok killing the crew then the evidence of this will be found and it will be different from a pirate shooting holes in the ship. You should ask yourself what happened to this ship? What did the crew do in response to the emergency they faced? Why did they not survive or succeed in saving their ship? Include clues that help the players answer those questions

Dangers of the Derelict

Role playing games thrive on conflicts and a derelict exploration will as well. By definition, a derelict is an empty ship so who will the player characters fight with? A lone and crazy crew member or passenger may lurk in the air ducts and believe the PCs are out to get them. A xeno-lifeform has managed to get loose on the ship and stalks the corridors. A pirate was betrayed and left behind by his crew and is looking to pass as a victim on the ship.

Robots are a common enough feature in the Frontier and the security and service robots will not recognize the PCs as authorized crewmembers on their ship. Security robots will focus on restraining and detaining the PCs. Service robots may have had additional programming for them to assist the crew in a hostile boarding. Robots can always be a default opposition.

Poor conditions will present hazards. In cases of extreme age, the derelict will be in poor condition. Space is a hostile environment. Even in cases of a few years drifting derelict, a ship will be in poor condition from exposure to radiation, having been holed by micro-meteors, and lack of regular maintenance. Some compartments may have vented their atmosphere to space. Getting the ship off of emergency power could be complicated and troublesome. Some equipment

is just not going to work right or not at all. What are the state of the engines? They could be out of fuel or on the brink of an overload.

Flying Dutchmen and derelict starships are pretty much the science fiction equivalent of the fantasy genre's troll cave. The players will know that you planned this encounter, that its possibly a bit of "rail-roading" game wise but they are will find it tough to resist the lure of exploring a derelict ship. The trick for the referee is to craft unique experiences so that it's not "another troll cave". Hopefully this article equips you to begin to do just that. If nothing else a derelict starship will be a great campaign filler for the time strapped referee or the plot hook to start a major story arc; the void is the limit.

Appendix 1

Module SF0 "Crash on Volturnus": the Serena Dawn (included for thoroughness but the Serena Dawn was pre Knight Hawks box set and doesn't conform well to the vertical deck layouts of Star Frontiers). Note: the Star Frontier's Referee's Screen had a second deck to go with the Serena Dawn deck.

Knight Hawks boxed set: large and small freighter and the vaunted assault scout

SFKH 1 "Dramune Run": the Gullwind

SFKH 2 "Mutiny on the Eleanor Moraes": the Eleanor Moraes

SFKH 3 "Face of the Enemy": a sathar scout ship and a sathar carrier

SFman #5 "Starflight: Fighters in Alpha Dawn": doesn't provide any deck plans but proposes a number of interesting fighter variants for the game.

SFman #6 "East Indiaman Class Freighter"

SFman #7 "UPF Fighters": again no deck plans but more interesting fight variants

SFman #8 "Starships": Explorer class heavy scoutship

SFman #9 "The Jump Tug": what's interesting about this ship as a derelict is that it could be "towing" another ship so you get two derelicts for the price of one

SFman #11 "The TSSS Dart"

SFman #13 "Volturnus Desert Encounter": the Thruster Class privateer (note this ship was given statistics in Dragon magazine #86 "Yachts and Privateers Return" and only in this magazine was a deck plan designed for it.

SFman #13 "TT-456 Container ship": a variant of the freighters in the Knight Hawks boxed set

SFman #13 "S200 Assault Shuttle"

SFman #13 "S4 Corsair"

SFman #13 "The Christianna Class Torpedo frigate": note there is a breakdown of what is on each deck but no map

SFman #14 "The Meteor Class Assault Shuttle": no map

SFman #17 "The Strel Raven Class corvette"

SFman #18 "The Rick and Ki'rick Salvage Company": Able Hand salvage ship with cross section but no map

SFman #18 "The Cloverdale Ag ship": cross section but no map

SFman #19 "The Liberation of Volturnus": E-1A Eorna Heavy Fighter & NME-16 Neo Mechanon Enhanced fighter- these have lots of details and illustrations but no map

SFman #20 "Starships": Razor and Star Hawk class assault scouts

SFman #21 "Starships": The Pacific Class freighter- a variant of the Gullwind

SFman #22 “Incident on the Sinca Maru”: the Sinca Maru
SFman #22 “Starship Leo”: a constellation class star liner
SFman #24 “Starships”: Embecker’s Dance- a luxury passenger liner
SFman #25 Freelance Exploration vessel; Wander
FE #1 “CSS Nightwind”
FE #2 “Sci-Cons 1 &2”: McCameron Shuttle
FE #3 “E-1A Eorna Heavy Fighter” first seen in SFman #19 but presented here with a deck plan map
FE #3 “Dawn Trader Class Merchant Ship”: the CFMS Venture
FE #4 “Talnor Class Communications Ship”: a frigate sized ship with details and stats but no map
FE #4 “Saurian Spacecraft”: statistics for various saurian ships but no maps
FE #5 “Assault Scout”: remastered assault scout deck plans
FE #7 “Rise of the Plague Wind”: details and stats on a sathar frigate no map
FE #8 “UPF Supply and Fast Combat Support Ship”: details and stats but no maps
FE #9 “NGT-1000 Container Ship”
FE #9 “Passenger Liner”: The Passenger Class system ship liner
FE #9 “Freedom Class Ships”: details and stats but no maps
FE #9 “Red Thunder”: HS 4 privateer vessel
FE#10 “Bounty Hunters”: Seeker Class bounty hunter ship
FE #10 “In the Shadow of the Prodigal Sun”: this is an adventure set on a derelict vessel using the Red Thunder Deck plans from FE #9
FE #11 “The Alpha Scout”: a small exploration vessel
FE #13 “The Trafalgar Trade Lines”: Fair Trader Class, Trafalgar Civilian Scout, CU-37 Courier, Kri-Kkaa heavy shuttle, Margo class freighter
FE #14 “Remus Shuttle & Romulus Runabout”: the Remus and & Romulus class of small vessels (same ship but different engines)
FE #18 “Ships of the Frontier”: SC-181 Courier
FE #18 “Atlantic Class Freighter”: a Gullwind variant
FE #18 “Atlas Manufacturing Corporation, Comet”: the Comet class research vessel
FE #18 “New Era Commercial Survey Module”
FE #21 “Assault Scout-Swift Class”: assault scout variant
FE #21 “Pelican Troop Transport”: a troop ship for Star Frontiers
FE #21 “UPFS Rescue Scout”: a medical ship styled on the classic assault scout concept
FE Presents The Sathar Destroyer Technical Manual: a whole manual on a sathar warship
FE Presents The Assault Scout Technical Manual: a whole manual dedicated to two versions of the assault scout.

MOVIE REVIEW: ANNIHILATION

by *Andrew Moshos*

dir: Alex Garland., 2018

Damn. Now that was an unsettling experience. *Annihilation* was not what I was expecting, and I'd already read a bunch of reviews referencing Andrei Tarkovsky's films, all of which I've seen / endured / survived. Mostly, *Solaris*, one of the most sleep inducing movies ever made, and *Stalker*, the other most sleep inducing movie ever made, are referenced. Everything's always just a collection of references, naturally, but these are two very specific, very necessary ones.

Rest assured, *Annihilation* is nowhere near as boring as any of those movies mentioned. It has too much forward momentum, too many evil crazy bears and alligators, and people confronting the unknown and being painfully fucked by the unknown to have too much in common with the films of the Russian master.

Annihilation, though, is not a cheap and easy flick cobbled together from the remnants of a thousand other sci-fi flicks. It is, like many of the other flicks Alex Garland has been associated with, a fairly unique experience. Yes, there are antecedents, but it stands alone, and mostly unloved, but it deserves at least a certain amount of respect.

He used to just write the screenplays before, but then he must have thought "fuck it, I can do at least as good a job as the shmucks directing my work" and for once he seems to be right. Virtually everyone who saw *Ex Machina* thought it was pretty good, if not great, and on the back of that somehow somehow Netflix coughed up a bunch of money to buy the flick after Paramount lost faith with the end product. Some people saw it in cinemas, but really, Netflix is the perfect venue for this. It's visually strong but it's not something that has to be seen on the big screen. Its virtues aren't purely visual, they're more conceptual, and that's fine for the home theatre.

It's an odd flick, that's for sure. It doesn't fit completely in either the science fiction genre or the horror genre, nor is it really an amalgam of the two. It does have a predominately female cast, but that doesn't really change the nature of the flick even if it changes its tenor, its tone.

It's an idea about life, the very nature of life, which is completely inimical to human life. I don't think it's inspired by the scene, but it did remind me of a scene from *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the fairly recent flick that probably had people in it but I don't care to say any of their names except for Hemsworth of course, but the scenes I'm talking about were set in a nature sanctuary called... Sanctuary I think, where life was protected from the evil queen and winter and stuff, and was somewhat morphed in strange and unusual ways by the purity of nature.

So you had natural nature scenes overflowing with strange creatures, like turtles with plants growing on them, plants with eyes in them, eyes with plants in them, birds that were raccoons and fairies that were really platypuses, that sort of thing. It was a bit freaky, and it was totally ripped off from Miyazaki's animated films (like *Princess Mononoke* especially) about how nature rules and humans suck, but it was meant to be awe-inspiring and comforting.



Annihilation is a bit awe-inspiring, but it's definitely not comforting. Far from it. It's a vision of nature that pretty much says people are the aberration for being stable, and the natural state of evolution (sped up, admittedly) is horrific flux and murderous change.

Something falls from the sky and hits a lighthouse somewhere on the southern-most part of the South, like maybe Texas, I'm thinking? Not remembering clearly (cocaine is a hell of a drug), but it doesn't really matter. The important thing is, around wherever this was has sprung up a phenomenon that people call the Shimmer, which is, as you might guess, a shimmering kind of bubble that distorts not only light but everything else you could possibly care about within it becomes horribly mutated. People go into the area and don't come out. It doesn't seem like a place kind to humans. Other forms of life seem to love it, and thrive, and twist into new and freaky forms. But not the peeps. It's oh so bad for the peeps.

A scientist called Lena (Natalie Portman) is in mourning because her husband, who was one of the military types sent into the Shimmer at some point a year ago, didn't come back. And then, after ages of mourning, he (Oscar Isaacs) appears out of nowhere, doesn't know anything, and is pretty freaky in the deal. Also, he's not doing so well, bleeding through his mouth into a glass of water, which is a far more disturbing visual that you would think.

When Lena asks tough questions, well, the military types aren't going to be very forthcoming, but eventually she ends up in the vicinity of the Shimmer, being told by a depressed Dr Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh) that stuff is really fucked up on the other side of the border between Shimmer and non-Shimmer. Naturally, Lena, Ventress and some other depressed women are going to venture forth into the great unknown.

The flick takes its time to get there, and provides a cursory level of reasons as to why these people end up on their fatalistic mission. Sure they have their reasons, but the situation they're facing, on the most part, is not one that is susceptible to reason or logic. I suspect that the ending might have been tampered with on some level (like with an executive or producer level set of notes strongly advising the director to make the ending make some kind of sense / closure, whose plaintive cries went unanswered) to make it more conventional. The path to that ending is not that straightforward, which is to the benefit of those of us who like watching something new or at least not so fucking banal all the time.

This zone is entirely hostile even when nothing's trying to kill the explorers. It's not logical, or kind, or reasonable, and within it the ladies are pretty much lost right from the start. Not only in space and time, but in terms of being at the mercy of seemingly chaotic natural forces. Whatever this phenomenon is, whether its radiation, some kind of biological entity or just Life Itself, it doesn't seem to give any consideration or precedence to human life just because it thinks it's at the top of the evolutionary ladder.

I don't think it's necessarily intentional, but it's pretty much an artful depiction of how evolution and natural selection don't really have the moral dimensions and meanings that we impute to them. If life in such an extreme form existed, it would wreck untold havoc upon us, not for any particular or specific reason, but just because that's what life does. It changes things, it adapts, it changes the environment around itself, and it either thrives or dies off.

The protagonists, if protagonists they be don't really have much say in what happens. Sure, they can protect themselves a bit from some of the crazier creatures that start attacking them because they have machine guns with them. But they're in a place where they don't have the choice as to whether they are going to change or not in the presence of this alien Shimmer stuff. Down to the cellular level, they are forever changed.

And in movies, especially a movie like this it means horror and bloodshed and death and suicide and more body horror and then confusion and some measure of wonder. The changes they face aren't going to give them powers or joy. A video taken by the chaps who preceded them shows a man's insides moving around independently for no earthly reason I could think of, and it's pretty fucking horrific.

It's a slow march for most of these characters to the inevitable Great Change in the Sky, and maybe that adds an interesting element to it, maybe not. When creatures attack, and these are freaky and horrible creatures of our world distorted enough to become even more horrific (I'm thinking mostly of the bear that screams with one of its previous victim's voices, which is just a horrifying, horrifying sound, for me almost as much as for the women), it's shocking. It's enjoyable to watch them fight back so professionally (at first, when they're still in relative 'control'), but eventually it all becomes too overwhelming, too alien, and we know that survival is neither guaranteed nor likely or possible.

The eventual end, the lighthouse, what is there, is pretty much at the end of all effort, at the end of all sense and meaning, which is also why at this time when a character, one of the last women standing, disassociates into a million glowing pieces I was hardly even surprised and it didn't bug me at all. Not understanding the mechanism by which something happens can be frustrating or off-putting, but in this context, I wouldn't say it made sense, but at least her ending up there made a kind of sense.

It's strange that that is one of the elements I 'enjoyed' about it so much, being the reasons why the women were there, made so much sense to me that all the phantasmagoria occurring around them and to them seemed more meaningful. Jennifer Jason Leigh especially, who's not a particularly sympathetic character, but to whom, having a death sentence placed on her well before she ever entered the Shimmer, whatever's to happen isn't as bad as what she was facing.

And Lena has her reasons too, even if it's just garden variety guilt, but it don't mean anything at the end anyway when she faces something that no-one could wrap their head around, in any context, for any reason. But she soldiers on anyway.

I couldn't tell you what the ending means, or what ultimately happened, but the feeling I got was that a) we're all doomed and b) there's nothing we could have done about it anyway so just enjoy the visuals and plan some grand dramatic gesture for the end because the end is coming, don't doubt it for a second.

Portman really is great in this role, and she's never going to get much credit for it because this will just be forgotten in the mix of things, but I really think this will linger in the minds of a lot of people that like stuff (read: freaky shit) that sometimes is a bit freaky just for the sake of being goddamn freaky for once. The perfect encapsulation of how the flick isn't here to hold our hand occurs at the end where Lena's responses to an array of questions addressed to her are like what we would say.

"So, what happened?"

- "I dunno."

"Why did it do what it did?"

- "It did what it did because that's what it does."

"Are you being cryptic for the sake of being cryptic?"

- "Dunno, maybe?"

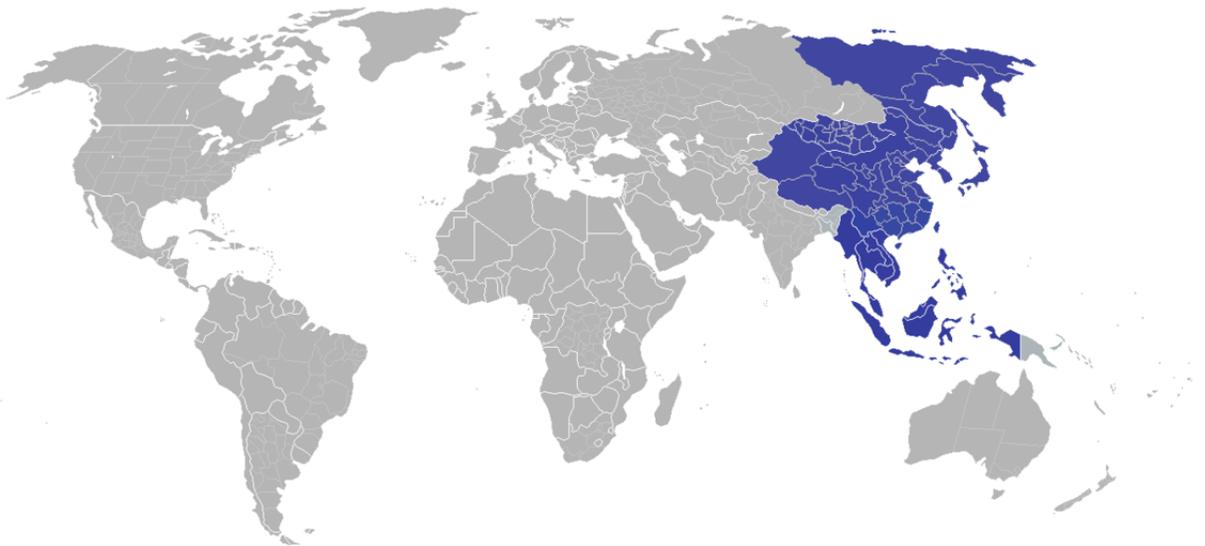
How frustrating does that sound... but I got a lot out of it, and even more so on the second viewing. It's the most enjoyment I've derived from watching a group of depressed women with guns wander around inside a hellish landscape in a long time, and I genuinely did enjoy it. I have no idea whether it could connect with other people that much, but it's not like it matters. Sometimes it's comforting / reassuring to watch something that doesn't make a lot of sense only because most other flicks seem to make a lazy kind of sense and, really, honestly, how much the better for it are we, really, when we're spoon fed so often and so completely?

8 times this flick is fun for the whole species until it goes from endangered to extinct in the space of 2 hours out of 10

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