

The Keys to Good SF

Some thoughts for novice science-fiction gamers

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It appears that science-fiction games have begun to replace some of the older fantasy games in popularity in the last year. With that replacement, some problems have emerged. Science-fiction games have entire galaxies in which to play — yet, too often, the game master falls back on the old fantasy standards of “damsel in distress” and “kill the monsters” for the evening’s adventure.

This is not always the fault of the game master nor that of the game designers. It may be a general expectation resulting from watching science-fiction movies filled with shoot-'em-up action and spectacular effects. We envision the average science-fiction character as a reluctant hero out to save his race from extinction and rescue the beautiful alien princess from the nasty Space Lord on his way through. A great movie, perhaps, but it lacks depth when it comes to role-playing game scenarios.

Role-playing is just that: playing out a role in a scenario set up by the game master. A player creates a character based on generic standards such as a merchant, soldier, scientist, or pirate for a science-fiction game campaign. Then, through various game scenarios, this character is built up and improved through his or her experiences, much as a real person grows and develops. Both game master and player must realize that even Han Solo and Luke Skywalker had a past, a background upon which they were based. A science-fiction game campaign must place emphasis on characters and not spectacular effects of intergalactic importance to stay alive. Everyday occurrences must be interesting, and they must attempt to build the character’s persona along the way. Scenarios should generally be based on people, not things. It is the human aspect that many science-fiction game adventures lack.

One can turn to the television series *Star Trek* for a good example of a sci-fi campaign. For “five years,” the starship *U.S.S. Enterprise* carried out her duty by patrolling space as an intergalactic policeman, diplomat, and military mega-force, as well as an explorer, detective, and goodwill

ambassador. The captain and crew were often called upon to make snap decisions, without the guidance of Star Fleet officers, when facing many strange forces and situations.

Looking back at the 79 episodes of that show, a game master can realize and utilize a very important lesson. The majority of the *Star Trek* shows dealt with humans and aliens who were very real and had distinct personalities. You felt for their cause, understood their motives, and believed in them. Even the crew members had little idiosyncrasies that made them very realistic. Many science-fiction shows have tried to follow in *Star Trek*’s footsteps, but most have failed, having stumbled only across part of the reason why *Star Trek* continues to survive after twenty years with a massive following of fans. *Star Trek* is the game master’s perfect campaign.

The recipe for a good campaign is relatively simple. First, add in believable, named, non-player characters. Next, sprinkle in alien flavor: the unexpected and the unknown. A little hardware goes a long way, so be careful not to overdo it. Last, interaction between player characters is very important. Mix and stir carefully. With a little help from references and other information sources, and you will have a great ongoing campaign.

Getting started

When setting up an adventure for the evening, one must first plot the scenario in which the characters will interact. For example, there might be an ambassador requesting help for a planet facing civil war, or a merchant whose ship has been attacked by pirates, placing him and his shipments in peril. Perhaps there is an alien who knows little of standard business practices, and has gotten involved with underworld figures and now needs help. With a little work, standard plots can be alien-ized for any game system.

Try to involve the player characters in new adventures in creative ways. Game masters can create and use misunderstandings, garbled messages that fall into the wrong hands, lies, and outright deceit

transmitted by third parties. Information may be lost, and non-player characters may misdirect and confuse the PCs. Situations are often hardly what they appear to be. Don’t forget the element of surprise; a misguided letter or stray transmission can create an entire scenario when the characters can’t help but open and read the secret message.

After the basic scenario is set, the information must be fleshed out, and the main figures in the plot developed. It is wise to keep the number of non-player characters down to a minimum to avoid confusion among the players. When too many names and complex personalities are introduced too quickly, this information can become jumbled and lost.

Alien flavoring: Worlds

Using Earthlike planets is fine, with humanoids and regular plants and animals and such, but in science fiction, space is full of oddities and unexplainable coincidences. Alien planets may range from the familiar to the downright unbelievable. Never forget the elements; rain, sleet, snow, and heat are a few of the fun things that can disturb a tricorder reading and create a real problem for the crew. Unidentified flying objects can liven up a dull night’s duty, as well as meteor showers, aurora displays, novas, and supernovas. Sub-space messages can be jumbled, sensor ghosts can stalk the ship, and drifting hulks of abandoned vessels can create mini-scenarios to fill time and give the game master a chance to create more detailed plotlines.

Planets should be distinctly alien in nature, with desert planets, water worlds, overgrown jungle planets, and ones totally covered with mountains or marred by volcanic activity. Not all planets the PCs encounter should be adaptable to human conditions; some might be methane-covered or have heavy gravities. The possibilities are endless. Develop different approaches to the classic scenario of landing, dealing with aliens that speak your language, and solving a problem quickly and efficiently. Nothing should be that easy!!

It is best to generalize when developing the planet, system, or race from which

each NPC hails. Unless the game is to be run on a certain planet, an adequate amount of information would be the world's location, local races, types of government, and special characteristics of the world or its people in general. On the other hand, if the adventure takes place on this planet, one should generate the planet's characteristics in detail.

Most game systems have rules, charts, and information on world generation, and it is worth taking time to complete this information. There is nothing worse for maintaining the flavor of a science-fiction game than to land continually on clones of Star Base 7 or Luna City. In the fantasy games, every valley, mountain, river, and stream has a name and several legends to go along with it. Legends can exist equally well in space and are worth taking time to develop.

Basic government structures should be established, such as dictatorships, kingdoms, and democratic or communist powers. If the planet is inhabited by aliens, try to create unusual governments. One could have a minor race rule a large number of other beings (similar to the Indian caste system) or even a ludicrous system in which all red-haired, three-armed males rule on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Sunday, and women with green-eyes and wings rule the rest of the days. Be creative — all planets were not created equal, and all cultures are not based on Earth's. Do not let characters anticipate scenario developments from their typical settings.

Keeping in mind your scenario design, develop and personalize a small section of your world on which your players may interact. Keeping these characters within this area can be difficult because of the speed with which characters can travel in high-tech cultures, yet there are subtle ways of manipulating the adventure to keep things running smoothly. If you present them with enough intrigue and information, player characters usually follow your lead. However, prepare a list of perhaps ten to twenty names worthy of your planet's geology on hand for those gaming emergencies that arise when your characters wander from the area that you have created in depth.

Alien flavoring Beings

After the planet and system are created and located, the race or races that populate it must be considered. It isn't necessary to create page after page of information on the eating, recreational, and breeding habits of every creature encountered, yet basic information is important, lest you have copies of humans everywhere. Most game systems offer a generation system for aliens which supply good creation guidelines, or you may choose to operate with already-created alien races. Either way, you should know

the following of any alien around which your scenarios are based: racial or species name, brief physical description, life span, sexes, age of maturity, family structure, psychology, and any other important traits or talents. A quick example of this format follows.

RACE: Talamany

DESCRIPTION: A large, light-boned, horselike creature capable of flight, resembling the mythical pegasus except for a set of humanoid arms at the base of its neck. Can speak languages known to common man. Coloration is light, usually white or gray (though pale blue and green are known). Range up to 7' tall at shoulders, but weigh only 500-600 lbs.

GENERAL STATISTICS:

Life span: 125 Earth years

Sexes: Three (male, female, and androgynous)

Age of maturity: 25 years

Family structure: Very closely knit, extended family/herd structure

PSYCHOLOGY: The Talamany are stable personalities, very dedicated to the family, truth, and justice for all. Excellent fighters when provoked, battling fiercely (though with ranged weapons, as they are less effective in close combat from their light build). Sometimes hired as guards or police on Royal Arcretion Star Liners. Generally distrust most humanoid races because of negative past dealings with them.

OTHER DATA: Certain Talamany have psionic abilities such as telepathy or empathy. Young Talamany are very frisky and mischievous, often cruelly tormenting humanoids.

This can be used as a format to follow for races either generated randomly or created from your imagination. More information can always be added, making the race more complete, but try not to waste valuable scenario time on the gardening habits of a race when the characters will be spending only ten minutes on their planet before moving on. There are many more pertinent plans you could be developing.

Creating the NPCs

After the planet and race are developed and defined, one should then turn to the non-player characters. A well-rounded NPC should be believable, realistic, and have a purpose in life, even if his purpose is to have no purpose — an intergalactic bum of sorts. If the character is an alien, make sure you bestow upon it an alien name. "Steve the Vulcan" is just not a valid alien title, nor is "Fred the Rejouni." But remember to keep alien names relatively short and uncomplicated. Tlsoinemiwoi is interesting on paper, but pronouncing it in the course of a game can seriously confuse your players as they attempt to communicate and interact with this fellow

A list of twenty or so alien names can help if players should like to know the name of the six-armed cabbie that escorted them off the starport base, and it makes you, as the game master, look very good.

Flaws or weaknesses add flavor to any character, and your NPCs should incorporate this rule. A physical or mental handicap can create interesting realism for a campaign, especially when this handicap isn't apparent to the eye. An Ergoan fish creature that is afraid of water or a deaf Vulcan can have interesting effects on your players as they must deal with these handicaps. Never present stereotypical characters *all* of the time. This can only hamper the campaign when the players anticipate your every move. Make sure that most characters have a hidden twist, a hairline crack in their personalities that may or may not appear. Every person you know has some little hidden facet of his or her personality that may take time to surface or may never be known. Style your non-player characters after people you know, and you may find them easier to portray. Don't be afraid to have the NPCs react emotionally or radically if the situation arises. Everyone has a pressure point.

Recurring non-player characters can provide a link to new adventures, such as the Empire official at some bureau who leaks information out to his favorite crew members, a rich old eccentric merchant who has his eye on a female crewmember and sends expensive (and possibly illegal) gifts every so often, or the love-sick barmaid (bored with her job and eager to take up a spacer's life) who calls on the captain whenever the ship is in port. This allows the players to get to know the NPCs and react to them as friends.

One of the most important non-player characters that you should have is the one the players love to hate — a nasty of some type who pops in and out of scenarios, fouling up missions and generally adding to the chaos. A rival merchant prince may have his eye on the PCs' vessel, or an intergalactic criminal with which one PC has accidentally crossed paths may now want revenge. This hated character, who may always seem to get away by the skin of his teeth, can unite the players to the single cause of vengeance!

Hardware wars

Be careful not to overdo the hardware aspect of the science-fiction game. It is very easy to get carried away with the behemoth Arecrin War Cruiser (with dual-mounted mega-laser turrets and twenty phased laser guns on each side) that can achieve warp 47 in 4.2 seconds and has phase, jump and every other type of drive system, including gasoline in an emergency. You can easily get over your head with hardware such as this, especially when arguments brew from: "You can't do

that! There isn't enough space for a megalaser under the cabin!"

It generally seems that science-fiction role-playing gamers are divided into two categories: those who understand and enjoy the hardware of science fiction, and those who don't. Don't alienate those who don't appreciate the beauty of a space craft by dealing too heavily with things they may not understand. Keep the doses of hardware limited, and you will most certainly entertain those interested in hardware and keep those who aren't.

Player interaction

Most important of all, player interaction is what people will remember most about a memorable game. "Remember the time Arcturus went and blew up half the planet with that alien ray gun?" Yes, we all remember that. Not the fact that the rest of the world was sent into an ice age, nor the fact that millions of people were killed — no, people remember what happened to Arcturus when the gun tossed him twenty feet into a bulkhead and he had amnesia for a bit.

If your players don't interact a great deal, draw them into situations in which group participation is required. Kidnapings of player characters may occur, or their starship may be forced down in a storm on an alien planet. Though players

cooperate with each other to some extent, it often helps to give players a little nudge towards the goal of group interaction.

In a scenario, you could have an alien take interest in a player character who generally remains in the background. Interactions like these can help bring that player into the game action. Sickness or injury can build bonds between characters. Promote romantic feelings between characters; after all, it is realistic to say that people who are involved in long periods of space travel may get a little lonely. Encourage the development of characters that involve themselves in hobbies or collections. This not only promotes player interaction, but also builds realistic characters. Occasionally slip a player a note and explain that his or her character is feeling crabby today or perhaps a bit depressed. We all feel this way one time or another; shouldn't a player character experience this? A player whose character has an accent or a strange speech pattern can be encouraged to speak as the character would while role-playing. In short, encourage people to delve into their characters and play these people as they see fit. It will only benefit your campaign in the end.

End notes

Gather and use as much reference material for making snap decisions and to

satisfy information requests. Before a game, prepare lists of names and places that the characters may ask for. Good sources are phone books, or any kind of yearbook or manual with lists of employee names or places. In your public library, you can find reference materials such as co-op source directories, corporation listings, and industrial directories that will give you bundles of information on companies that, with a little twist, can easily be turned into intergalactic corporations. A complete atlas can give you thousands of little foreign towns that sound relatively alien to you or I. Create a notebook of non-player characters that you can use quickly when the need arises. One afternoon at the library and a roll of dimes for copies can satisfy your reference needs for many good games.

Novice SF gamers who follow these suggestions can improve their campaigns and make them more realistic and interesting. It is best to slowly work a few ideas at a time into your existing games, so as not to shock unsuspecting players. But, sooner or later, your campaign should shape up and run like the fantasy campaign that you have been running for the last few years. Science fiction is not so different from fantasy: both deal with possibilities and alternatives to our present-day life, and with a bit of effort the two games run with equal ease.

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