

The SF 'universe'

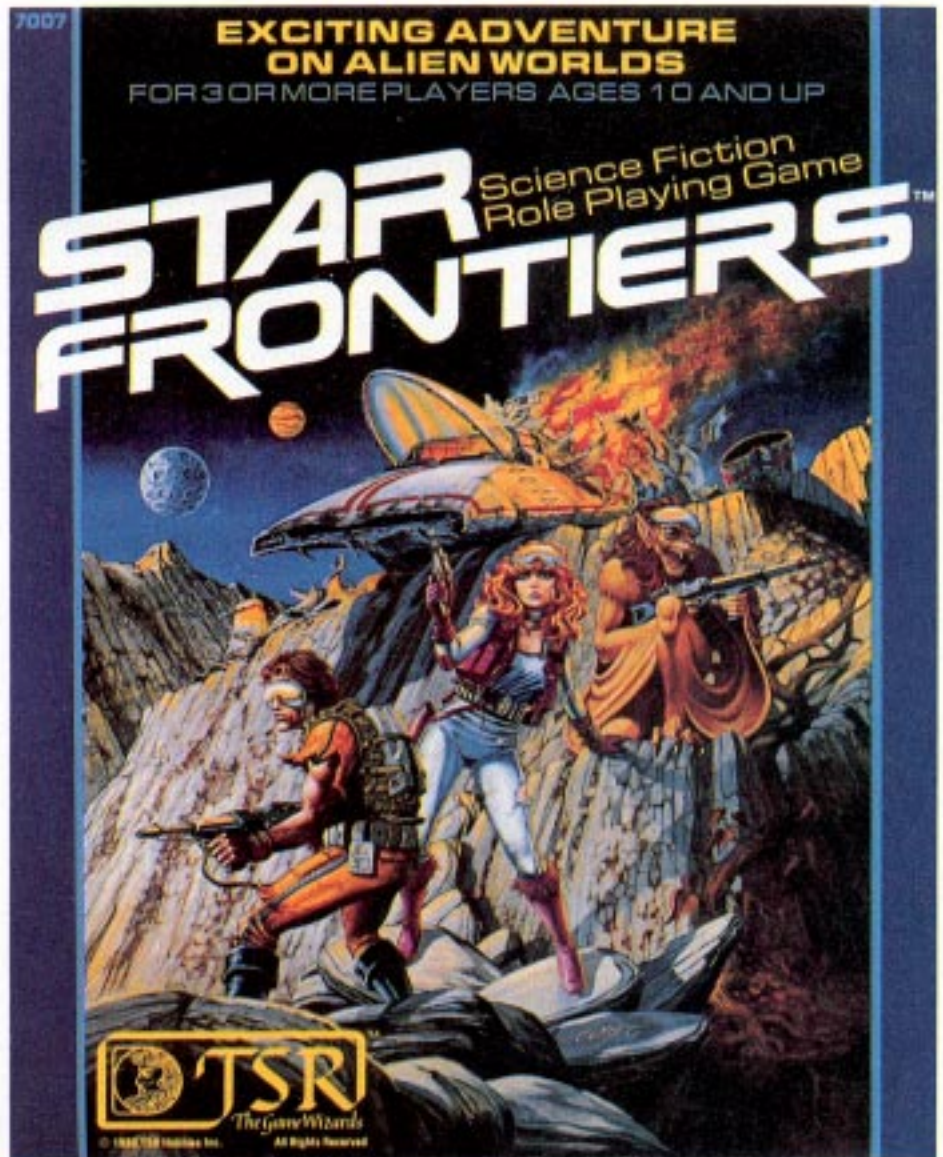
An in-depth examination of the STAR FRONTIERS™ game:

Rules and systems

The game 'world'

*Components
and more*

by Tony Watson



The entry of the STAR FRONTIERS™ game into the science-fiction RPG field is a lot like man's entry into interstellar travel: Maybe man wasn't the first race to go into space, but now that he's there, he intends to make his presence felt.

Likewise, the STAR FRONTIERS game certainly wasn't the first science-fiction role-playing game on the market, but in its first year of existence it has moved into a position of popularity alongside some of the older front-runners.

The reasons for this popularity, and some thoughts on why the game's popularity isn't as high as it might be, are outlined in the text that follows.

Background

TSR had previously published SF-oriented role-playing games, most notably the GAMMA WORLD® game and the METAMORPHOSIS ALPHA game, but these two games are post-apocalyptic visions of the future. GW is set in the

United States after a holocaust. MA takes place on a gigantic colony starship in which the technical and social order has broken down.

While they are certainly interesting, and undoubtedly SF in nature, neither of these games fully realizes the potential of a science-fiction setting. A star-spanning civilization, interstellar spacecraft, strange aliens, and adventures on a myriad of bizarre and challenging new worlds are the elements of a classic SF

framework. The possibilities for adventure in such a "universe" are nearly limitless. The STAR FRONTIERS game, unlike its predecessor SF titles from TSR, is able to appreciate these possibilities.

A variety of science fiction RPGs have appeared over the last half dozen years or so. Comparisons between all of them and the STAR FRONTIERS system are inevitable. And on a comparative basis, it's fair to expect good things from STAR FRONTIERS. The game's late entry into the "outer space race" should entitle gamers to expect a more polished and tighter design than exhibited in some games that have come before. TSR had a fairly long time to mull over its product, at the same time giving other games the opportunity to go first, blaze the trail, and have the first chance at tripping up. As things turned out, some of the earlier SF role-playing games didn't trip up too badly, TRAVELLER® being the most obvious example of success, and the STAR FRONTIERS game will have to acquire and maintain a good reputation among the game-playing public to have a shot at edging out some of the firmly entrenched old-timers.

The setting

It has always been this reviewer's opinion that the setting of a role-playing game is just as important as the design itself. An effective combat system and an

intelligent character creation and development process lose their utility if coupled with a poorly thought out or inadequately described background. The mechanics of a role-playing game are of course very important, but they are, in the final analysis, just ways for the players and the gamemaster/referee to explore, confront, and challenge the dangers and opportunities posited by the game's setting. The fictional framework of any RPG is what attracts the players and latches on to their imaginations; game mechanics are merely modes of inquiry into the game's possibilities.

An enterprising and imaginative referee can get by with a minimum of background material, relying instead on his own hard work, but every set of game rules needs some sort of conceptual skeleton. At the very least, the background can provide some useful parameters for the rules: What is possible and what is not. A fantasy game, for example, is very likely to have some element of magic and the supernatural present; what that power can do is as much a part of the background as the actual limitations placed upon the power by the rules. If the designer sets his fantasy RPG in a world where magic commonly manifests itself, wizards and magical artifacts will abound, and the rules will (or should) reflect this. At its best, an interesting background will give the players a real sense of the imaginary world the designer has created, as well as suggest possibilities for adventures and the style of role-playing and refereeing the participants should employ.

The STAR FRONTIERS game is set in another galaxy than our own, one where the stars are closer together. Despite this non-Terran "future history," a race of Humans, nearly identical to ourselves, serve as the focal point in the game. Sometime before the time frame of the game, these people were able to contact three other starfaring races: Vrusk, large, ten-limbed insectoids; Yazirians, a race of somewhat ape-like humanoids with large, wing-like membranes; and Dralasilites, amorphous creatures something like large amoebas, capable of forming variable numbers of limbs and changing shape.

The four races first met in a region of space known as the Frontier, and there formed a multi-cultural civilization. The needs of the society were met by a large interstellar corporation, the Pan-Galactic Corporation, an entity not unlike some of the charter companies active in colonial areas during the age of exploration in North America.

The four races formed a political body, the United Planetary Federation, when they encountered the worm-like Sathar, who seemed intent on destroying the civilization that had grown up in the Frontier sector. The Sathar are the heavies in the STAR FRONTIERS universe. Unable to defeat the UPF in a straight

military confrontation, they have resorted to the employment of agents from the other races to disrupt commerce and harmony in the Frontier. The Sathar are a good bet to be behind any major plots against the UPF, and thus a fine rationale for any number of scenarios.

To combat the Sathar, the UPF has created a law-enforcement arm, the Star Law Rangers. This is where player characters come into the action, as Star Law Rangers. Playing the roles of Rangers insures that the players' characters will always be in the thick of an adventure situation, and this aspect of the setting aids the referee greatly in setting up scenarios and rationalizing player involvement.

Components

"Everything you need is in this box," says the text on the back of the STAR FRONTIERS package. Statements like this are often suspect, but it's not hype this time. STAR FRONTIERS is complete, including everything necessary to begin play. The amount of material is especially surprising considering the cost; at \$12, the game is a bargain, and compares favorably with other games of this ilk in this regard. The components, briefly described, are these:

Basic game rules — A 16-page, 8½" by 10¾" rule book containing introductory material, the basic game rules, and several beginning adventures. The back cover doubles as a character record sheet and must be photocopied for game use.

Expanded game rules — This 60-page book, of the same page size as the basic rules, contains material on the four character races and the Sathar, a listing of skills and their uses, and guidelines for character development plus extensive advanced combat rules, rules for vehicles, guidelines for the creation and use of creatures, and listings of weapons and equipment. In addition, the book includes brief sections on Frontier societies, how to referee, and the design of adventures.

Game map — This attractive item is one of the nicest features of the game. The 23" by 36" sheet is double-sided for maximum utility, printed in full color throughout. One side shows the downtown environs of Port Loren, a star-city on an unnamed UPF planet in the Frontier Sector. The map has a truly extensive display of buildings of various sorts, park areas, monorail tracks and stations, and so forth. The reverse side is a composite of seven different maps of various types of terrain: craters, mountains, forest, ruins, desert, a fort, and a large-scale map of a town. The wide selection of terrain types should insure that one will be suitable for any given encounter. All maps are overlaid with a half-inch grid to facilitate the use of the combat rules.

Counters — The STAR FRONTIERS game includes 408 counters for use with

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the encounter and combat rules. The countermix breaks down into five broad categories: 1) the four character races and NPCs; 2) aliens; 3) creatures and animals; 4) robots; and 5) vehicles. Counter varieties are easily differentiated by color background; each counter also bears an identification number and a drawing (not a silhouette) of the being, creature, or machine represented. I am particularly pleased with the latter feature, since the drawings add considerably to the tactical feeling of encounters, in much the same manner as miniatures do.

Introductory Module SF-0, "Crash on Volturnus" — Beginning players can immediately get involved with the STAR FRONTIERS game in campaign form through the inclusion of this introductory module. The booklet is 30 pages long, surrounded by a stiff "cover" that is actually a double-sided, full-color foldout map. One side depicts the bridge and surrounding cargo bays and staterooms of the starship *Serena's Dawn*, and the other is a detailed hexgrid of a large land area of the planet Volturnus. The module includes encounter materials, descriptions, rules, and a 12-page pullout section of creatures and background information on Volturnus.

Dice — Last but not least are a pair of ten-sided percentile dice, in different colors, and a crayon for filling in the numbers. Since the game uses only these

dice (a commendable choice, given the ease with which odds for endeavor attempts and occurrences can be rendered in percentages), the purchaser is ready to play the game right away and does not need to buy more special dice.

Artwork

In the last analysis, artwork in a game has only aesthetic value. An ugly game can be a good game, but it's much nicer if it's pretty. The artwork and graphics used in a game help to set the tone for play and jump-start imaginations into picturing the scene and the action.

Graphics and illustrations used on the STAR FRONTIERS maps and counters are well done and entirely in keeping with the mood of the game. Colorful and illustrative, they are both attractive and functional. The game rules are profusely illustrated. Many of the drawings are purposeful as well as decorative, such as the diagrams of each of the main races and the pictures of creatures.

Since several artists contributed to the work, the styles and quality vary. Most of the interior work is adequate, though Timothy Truman's all-too-few pictures seem a cut above the rest. Also noteworthy is Larry Elmore's contribution, especially the box cover. The depiction of two humans and a Yazirian defending themselves before their wrecked vehicle on some barren world superbly catches

the tone the game is trying to set: flashy, colorful, and action-oriented.

The basic game rules

Unlike most role-playing games, STAR FRONTIERS has a set of basic rules. Apparently, TSR is aiming the game toward newcomers to RPGs or people coming over from D&D® game playing, and the company has decided that a set of simple rules will serve to get the players involved quickly. The rules are simple enough that the game could be played as soon as an hour after the gamebox is opened. The term "basic rules" is no misnomer: They are *very* simple, but this is good; players will be able to get into the swing of things right away.

The rules begin with a storyboard-style recounting of a brief adventure, and then get into the meat of the matter with a section on character creation. Like nearly all other role-playing games, the STAR FRONTIERS system uses dice rolls to determine characteristics and abilities. The eight qualities possessed by player characters are grouped into the four "ability pairs" of Strength/Stamina, Dexterity/Reaction Speed, Intuition/Logic, and Personality/Leadership. The abilities in a pair have a clear relationship to one another — the second being a derivative of the first, which is more of a characteristic, or quality.

The character's score in each category

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is determined by rolling the dice and consulting a table. Scores run from 30 through 70 in increments of five; the average is 45, and 50% of the results will be either 40, 45 or 50. Unfortunately, a sentence in the early part of this section gives the impression that the range can run from 1 to 100. This is clearly not the case; although the upper limit of 100 can be obtained through character development (and it would take quite a while), there's no way a player character could be so unlucky as to have a score of 1.

Ability values for aliens (as in the D&D® and AD&D™ games, humans are the norm) are adjusted for certain characteristics. Yazirians, for example, tend to be bright and dextrous, but are lacking in strength and stamina. The differences between races are not radical, but sufficient to establish certain tendencies.

Tactical movement and combat are the topics of the rules section following character creation. At this point in its "development," the game is very much like a simple, man-to-man, tactical combat game. Movement and range are governed by the maps' square grids. In each turn, a character may move and fire, reload, or do nothing; each turn represents only six seconds of game time.

Movement is very simple: Each race may move a given number of squares per turn, either walking or running. Curiously, diagonal movement is at the same rate as horizontal or vertical, a distortion attendant to the use of a square grid. Buildings, skimmers (hovercars) and the monorail track (on the Port Loren map) all have an effect on movement.

The combat procedure is equally simplistic: Fire combat is straightforward, and hand-to-hand and melee weapons are ignored. Fire combat is a function of the type of weapon used, the range and the firer's dexterity. A character's dexterity is his base percentage chance of hitting a target at point-blank range. Decreasing chances of success at longer ranges are accounted for by subtractions from this base score, depending on weapon type.

If a hit is scored, the weapon does a certain number of dice worth of damage, which is subtracted from the target's stamina, an ability which functions as hit points in this regard. Unfortunately for the play of the basic game, the weapons do a surprisingly small amount of damage, no more, than one or two dice. Figuring the average of 1d10 as 5.5 and the average stamina as 45, characters will have to be hit about four to eight times (depending on weapon strength) to be knocked unconscious — and this without benefit of defensive armor! Because of this relationship between weak weapons and strong characters, firefights can get a bit monotonous and drag on and on. Not only is this somewhat "unrealistic," but it slows the game down precisely when it should be at its most fast-paced and exciting. The combat section also covers

incidental but important topics such as grenades, ammunition reloads, and cover.

The amount of equipment available to characters in the basic game is small. Four types of firearms (gyrojet, laser and needler pistols, and laser rifles) are available, all illustrated. Some simple items such as communicators, coveralls, pocket tools, rations, and a first aid kit are mentioned. A cost table for all items, including the prices for hospital stays and transportation, is included.

To aid in the understanding of these simple rules, and get the players going right away, the basic rule book has several brief adventures. The first (and longest) of these, "Pan-Galactic Security Breach," is a programmed adventure; one player is chosen to take the part of the "reader," sort of a proto-referee, who will guide the others through the fourteen numbered paragraphs of the story. Each paragraph represents a juncture where the players must make a decision. There is usually a short descriptive passage to set the scene, a listing of any pertinent actions that take place or happen to the player characters, and a set of possible choices for the players to make. Depending on the action selected, a new paragraph is consulted, and so it goes until the adventure is complete.

The scenario story is simple enough: The players are called upon to stop a party of raiders who have breached PGC's security. As the action unfolds, players will use all forms of movement and engage in several firefights.

A second scenario, "Alien Creature on the Loose," is not a programmed adventure. This story involves a gigantic monster rampaging through Port Loren. The scenario can be played several times, using rules for varying the monster's characteristics and powers. Following this mini-adventure is another page and a half of ideas and guidelines for creating new adventures.

A final bit of interesting information is carried on the inside back cover, where a surprisingly complete glossary appears. It defines important terms and often-used concepts, such as initiative modifier or range modifier. This is a handy list that will save some time for beginning players.

The STAR FRONTIERS basic game rules, while hardly a satisfying base to build a science-fiction role playing campaign on, serve admirably to introduce the rudimentary mechanics of the game. The game is simple enough to get even absolute novices involved in play with a minimum of effort and problems, which seems to be its purpose. At this purpose, it excels.

The expanded game rules

Again, the title is no misnomer. These rules are a considerable embellishment and expansion of the basic game. They provide the basis for conducting much

more involved and interesting adventures. One of the major changes is the greatly increased emphasis on the role of the referee. More now than just a simple reader of programmed paragraphs, the referee is expected to handle the myriad of administrative and scenario development tasks we have come to associate with the title. Secondly, the rules greatly elaborate on character abilities and development, combat, and equipment.

While ability scores are rolled up in the same manner as the basic game, players are allowed to shift up to 10 points between the two scores in an ability pair, offering a greater diversity among player characters and their capacities. The eight character abilities are treated in greater depth, and their use in the game is better explained.

The nature of the various races is also dealt with in greater detail. Each of the four player-character races, plus the Sathar, has an entire page devoted to its description. This includes a drawing of the being, with accompanying details of any special features, as well as sections on physical appearance and structure, senses, speech, society and customs, attitudes, and special abilities. The information is quite comprehensive and, taken as a whole, very intriguing. For instance, the Vrusk — despite their insectoid structure — have an internal skeleton. Their culture is based on independent corporations which serve a sort of clan role. The Vrusk get along well with the other three races, and are great lovers of art and beauty. In contrast to that are the shape-changing Dralasites, philosophical creatures with strange senses of humor. Smell is their most important sensory ability, and they breed by hermaphroditic budding.

Unique racial characteristics are translated into game terms via the section on special abilities. Because of their elastic body structure, Dralasites may form new limbs at will, while Yazirians may attempt limited glides using their wing-like membranes. The listings provide the necessary information (die rolls and the like) for implementing these abilities in game play. I found these five pages to be among the best in the rulebook. They flesh out the various races very nicely, imparting to the reader an understanding of the physical structures and capacities, as well as the cultural background, of each. Judicious adherence to the material should enable the players to "get into character" that much faster and enhance the referee's ability to run non-player characters.

In one major respect, the STAR FRONTIERS system follows in the tradition of games like TRAVELLER®, in which the acquired skills (as opposed to innate abilities) of a character are important parameters of what that character can accomplish. The game lists thirteen skills that player characters can learn, grouped into three primary skill areas

(PSAs). These are Military (including Beam Weapons, Demolitions, Gyrojet Weapons, Martial Arts, Melee Weapons, Projectile Weapons, and Thrown Weapons); Technological (Computer, Robotics, and Technician); and Biosocial (Environmental, Medical, and Psycho-social).

Each of the thirteen primary skills is further divided into subskills. The number of subskills within a primary skill varies; for example, the skill of Beam Weapons allows the possessor an advantage when firing certain types of weapons; the way the term "subskill" is used in the rules, each specific weapon within the Beam Weapons category is not a sub-skill. However, the Computer skill is divided into eight distinct subskills: operating computers, writing programs, defeating security, bypassing security, displaying information, manipulating programs, interfacing computers, and repairing computers. Similarly, the Technician skill involves tasks such as operating and repairing machinery; Medical skill covers diagnosis, surgery and the administering of drugs. In total, there are nearly 50 subskills covering a great variety of tasks the characters might attempt.

Subskills are translated into game action by the use of "success rate" formulas. These are based largely on the character's level in that skill (more on how levels are attained in a moment). An example: A character with Medical skill level 2 is attempting minor surgery on a wounded compatriot. The success rate is equal to $40\% + 10 \times \text{level}$ ($=20\%$), or 60%. In addition, if the surgery is taking place in a hospital, 20% is added. Thus, the medic's chance to succeed is either 60% or 80%, depending on the circumstances. This number, or lower, must be rolled on percentile dice for the surgery to produce the desired results.

All applications of skills work in a similar manner, although the base chance may vary from 10% to 100%, and the accompanying paragraph to a "success rate" formula may place special constraints on the application of the skill, such as the availability of tools or drugs. The system is clever in its simplicity; the difficulty of the task is combined with the level of expertise in a simple-to-use method of determining success. The list of skills is complete for the areas covered, though one can think of a number of areas that are ignored, such as most of the "soft" sciences and humanities, and anything to do with spacecraft.

A character's skills, and also his or her eight basic abilities, may be upgraded via the character improvement process. Experience points (XPs) are awarded by the referee after each adventure, or at the end of a session of play, but these points don't come in clumps of hundreds or thousands as in many other games. The rules recommend that the referee award no

more than *three* (3) XPs to a single character at the end of an adventure, and then only to a character who performed excellently and made a great contribution to the success of the mission. Characters who simply survive an adventure without doing anything outstanding are assured of receiving at least *one* (1) XP for the effort.

And this is why XPs are so few and far between, and so valuable: Experience points may be traded in for increased ability on a one-for-one basis; that is, an ability score can be raised one point by expending one XP. Alternately, XPs can be used to learn new skills or raise the character's level of competence in a skill already known. The level of knowledge of a skill can be raised to a maximum of 6, with increasing costs at higher levels.

The character development rules allow players to improve their characters by expanding their abilities and knowledge. While the characters are not locked into certain skills, branching out into different areas is done at relatively high expense, which seems to make sense. The number of points necessary to go up levels in skills is not so prohibitive as to prevent appreciable growth in a campaign game, nor is it so cheap as to encourage the rapid evolution of super-characters.

While the skill rules are among the most interesting in the game, they are certainly ill served by the character record

sheet printed on the outside back cover of the basic rule book. While spaces are provided for recording personal data, weapons and chances to hit, movement rates, racial abilities and current medical status, no provisions are made for registering skills and levels. Given that these are important aspects of a character's makeup, on a par with the ability scores, the suggestion to "record skills and equipment on reverse side" is hardly satisfying. The sheet could have easily been restructured to allow room to note skills and expertise.

The combat rules in the expanded game are considerably more complicated than those introduced in the basic book. Almost a quarter of the book's pages are devoted to combat and supplementary rules.

For the most part, the basic game combat rules are used as the foundation, and then built upon. Where the basic rules considered only a few factors in determining a character's chance to hit with a weapon, the expanded rules mix in such things as target size and movement, bursts and careful aim, skill levels, even using the wrong hand. Special situations such as opportunity fire, more than one shot a turn, and shooting at targets in crowds are addressed. The rules are complete enough to cover damage to structures. The procedure, is a bit ponderous, but players can speed things up as they get



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familiar with using it. On the plus side, the combat system is quite flexible and covers just about any situation that is likely to crop up.

Damage is handled in a much more acceptable manner than in the basic game rules. Because of increased rates of fire and the opportunity to change energy settings on beam weapons, characters can do considerable damage with their weapons in the expanded game, putting excitement and a real sense of danger into combat situations. In addition to damage taken against stamina, some weapons can cause unconsciousness. To help the characters out in this suddenly more dangerous environment, there are several types of defensive suits and screens that can absorb damage from certain types of attacks.

Although I have only mentioned ranged weapons, the expanded rules treat melee attacks with equal thoroughness. Twenty types of melee weapons are listed, from chairs and bottles to sonicswords and vibroknives. The procedure for their use is much the same as that for ranged weapons.

Unlike those in many other role-playing games, the combat rules in STAR FRONTIERS are not abstract. Rather, they are nearly as precise and as detailed as those one would find in a boardgame. Given the emphasis the game's design places on combat, this is understandable.

Vehicles receive an equally detailed treatment. The problem of movement along the square grids of the maps (acceleration, deceleration, turning, special maneuvers and the like) require complete coverage. The problem is intensified at the same time it is being covered; in addition to the "normal" ground cars and hover transports, the rules deal with glijets, aircars and other forms of flying transportation. The role of vehicles of all types in combat situations is also covered.

One of the weak points in the rules is the sections dealing with creatures. Encounters with strange and alien animals are part and parcel of SF adventure, and I think the design of the STAR FRONTIERS game could have dealt with this topic in more depth.

My main criticisms are aimed at the results and examples of creatures provided, rather than the process itself. The randomness and silliness that would result from a system based on die rolls is rejected in favor of guidelines following an almost Socratic method. The referee asks himself a series of questions: What is the creature's purpose? Its size? Its speed? How does it attack and defend? Does it have special abilities? The referee then uses these guidelines to create his beastie, although finishing the creation still makes quite a demand on the referee's imagination.

Ten sample creatures, with all the necessary statistics, descriptions and illustrations, are offered in the rule book. The fantastic nature of some of these examples seems to fly in the face of any sort of biological rules, and some of them remind me of the sort of "homemade" creatures that might pop up in a DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® scenario. What's acceptable in a fantasy game can seem a bit odd in a science-fiction setting. But some could turn this argument around on the premise that strange, other-worldly environments could cause creatures stranger than these to evolve, so it's largely a matter of individual taste.

The next major section of the rules surveys the equipment available to adventurers. Two pages of tables list weapons, defenses, toolkits, robots, computers, power sources and miscellaneous equipment, along with their cost and mass. Seven pages of text and descriptions accompany them. Despite their simplicity, I found the rules for computers and robots to be useful and innovative.

The four-page section on Frontier societies raises some questions about completeness. This should be the text that fully fleshes out the Frontier Sector, but the information given is a bit sparse. One full page is a map of the sector. Sixteen systems are listed, coded for population, trade characteristics, and gravity. Curiously, the number of moons circling a planet is given, but a planet's atmosphere — certainly a critical aspect — is ignored. A few slender notes on some of

the planets accompany the data listing, but overall, the amount of information about the Frontier Worlds is rather skimpy. Perhaps a future supplement, devoting itself to a description of the sector, will rectify the situation.

The final parts of the rule book deal with a number of "how to" questions: how to referee, create an adventure, or deal with non-player characters. This sort of information is quite valuable, especially to referees just starting out who might find the task of creating and running an adventure rather formidable. The advice, while often obvious, is sound.

The back cover of the rule book contains one of the most important features of all: a complete index to the rules.

The introductory module

"Crash on Voltarnus" is a structured introductory module for use with the expanded game rules. It is intended to start a campaign off, as well as introduce all parties involved to procedures and the style of play. Everything is carefully explained for the referee, and by following these instructions his first attempt at running an adventure should go smoothly. "Crash on Voltarnus" also appears to have the secondary goal of providing an example for referees to emulate; it seems to be representative of the sort of adventures one can expect in a STAR FRONTIERS campaign.

Random encounters and planned encounters are joined by a pullout section on NPCs, creatures and special locales. A blank map to help the players keep track of their travels is provided, while the referee has his own full-color display of a large section of the planet Voltarnus.

The scenario plays smoothly, thanks to the care that the designers have taken with it, and problems are few. The emphasis is on action. The players will skip from one danger to another, and encounter strange creatures and aliens. They'll be forced to battle for their lives on numerous occasions, and the scenario is certainly tense.

"Crash on Voltarnus" seems to succeed on all counts, both as a learning process for players and referee and as an exciting adventure. While some players may balk at several of the premises (a surprising number of alien races dwell on Voltarnus, for example) a little willing suspension of disbelief should get everyone into the spirit of things.

Closing comments

Like any good role-playing game, STAR FRONTIERS has a lot about it to like, and a bit to dislike as well; just what will appeal to whom depends on individual preferences and ideas about what a role-playing game should be. The following constitutes this reviewer's general opinions of the STAR FRONTIERS game system.

One of the best aspects of the game is

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its approach to character creation and development. The choices made for abilities seem intelligent, and the question of skills is handled very well. Skills, because of the broad range of subskills and the easy method of their application, add considerably to the game without any real bother. Combine these features with the backgrounds and special abilities for aliens, and you have a system that easily lends itself to character differentiation and role-playing. The procedure for development and new skill acquisition seems fair and reasonable.

The STAR FRONTIERS combat system is extensive and complete. It is certainly one of the key aspects of the game; only character creation seems to be of equal importance. The emphasis on armed confrontation in the rules seems to be an accurate reflection of the design philosophy behind the rules. The STAR FRONTIERS game is very action/violence oriented, more so than most science-fiction role-playing games. One may come away from reading the rules with the impression that the rest of the game was built around the combat system; even so, many opportunities to ameliorate this tendency to "shoot 'em up" may present themselves to thoughtful referees.

On the other hand, the rules have one glaring omission that should strike any science-fiction gamer right away: the almost total absence of anything to do with spacecraft?

The rules devote a couple of paragraphs to space travel, consisting of guidelines on travel time, schedules, and passage costs aboard starliners. But no provisions are made for players owning starships, nor are there any rules for their design, movement, or use in combat.

The referee will have to either improvise, or accept space travel in the manner in which the game defines it: a simple means of getting from one world to another. True, most activity in a game campaign will take place on planets rather than between them. But other science-fiction role-playing games such as UNIVERSE™ and TRAVELLER have devoted lengthy sections of rules to starships, and to good effect. By ignoring this aspect of the science-fiction genre, the designers of the STAR FRONTIERS system have limited not only their fictional universe, but the possibilities open to the players as well. The hope is that this situation will be rectified soon.

Similarly, the material on the United Planetary Federation and the Frontier Worlds in particular is a bit skimpy. If one accepts the points contended earlier about the importance of setting and context, four pages (one of them a map) is too little to build a campaign upon. A supplement the size of the "Volturnus" module could quite nicely add the missing planetary maps, plus data and notes on society and economics, and would certainly be a worthwhile project.

The completeness of the sections on aliens, the expanded combat rules, and the equipment lists is certainly noteworthy. The physical quality of the game is quite good, and the maps and counters are attractive as well as useful.

The STAR FRONTIERS game certainly has a different feel from that evoked by TRAVELLER. Some of the weaker aspects of the TSR game, such as background and starships, are strengths of the TRAVELLER system. GDW's game seems a bit more solid and serious in its approach. Comparing the two is like comparing the movies *Star Wars* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*: both very good, but very different, facets of science fiction. The STAR FRONTIERS system, for its part, improves upon the concept of skills as important components of a character, and has a more versatile combat system than the TRAVELLER rules. The TSR game is the new kid on the block, while TRAVELLER has had five years to entrench itself as the front runner.

A final question remains: Is the STAR FRONTIERS game just a D&D game in space? The pedigree is evident, but I think TSR has managed to avoid trading magic for technology, swords for lasers, and orcs for aliens. The emphasis on action and some of the design philosophy belies the kinship of STAR FRONTIERS to the D&D game, but it is innovative and original in its own right. The similarities will make it easy for D&D players to shift over to STAR FRONTIERS as their first science-fiction role-playing game. This may be the largest single body of STAR FRONTIERS buyers. One very important advantage in the TSR connection is that players can count on the company to support the game with accessories, and TSR's wide distribution network should make these products easy to find.

The STAR FRONTIERS game is fast-paced, accessible, and playable. The design shows thought and imagination, and the product is quite a bargain. While not without its weaknesses, it's certainly a contender in a competitive market and probably a good choice for newcomers to this facet of role-playing. II

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