

StarCruiser

*A roleplaying storygame of space
adventure and panic fear*

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1 Overview

TACHYON NETWORK BULLETIN
2352.104.02.18-0648

SENDER: Territorial Control Group

In the light of recent events, civilian shipping should avoid sectors (9,4x), (9,4y) and (9,5x).

All shipping, including military vessels, should avoid sector (9,4y).

Yes, it has come back.

END OF BULLETIN

StarCruiser is a storygame of space adventure, character drama, and infrequent panic fear. The stories you will tell are about starships exploring the vastness of space, facing serious dangers, maybe building something. These stories tend to involve quite a lot of death and loss, a good number of alien worlds, and strange vistas that leave you feeling quite peculiar. They are stories that intermingle threat, uncertainty and hope. It is not a game for people who insist on being in control; nor is it a game for people who like to revel in suffering and nihilism.

The Setting

StarCruiser provides an evocative setting, but not a canonical one; it is designed to give you a feel, and some captivating ideas, but not to constrain you.

In summary, StarCruiser is set in a late 24th century in which some of the promises of fiction have come true. Some, but not all. There is disappointment as well.

There is interstellar travel, but a great many stars turn out to be surrounded by dead rocks. Many aren't even mineral-rich.

There are aliens, but they are almost without exception bizarre and hostile. They don't like us, and we certainly don't like them.

We've unlocked our latent psychic powers... but a good end to a psychic's career is confinement in a padded room. A lead-lined padded room.

We *can* terraform worlds, but after a century of mediocre results the dream is wearing thin.

Players and Characters

One player is the GM. They control the overall flow of the game, and makes a wide variety of judgements. Their judgements can be contested by

the group – if these contests make the game unfun, you have collectively failed and should feel shame.

The other players are the character players. Each controls three player-characters (PCs) – one a senior figure in the ship's command structure, the other two mid-ranking personnel. Over time these characters will change – indeed, we expect them to change, because casualty rates are not negligible – but each player always has 3 PCs, one of which is more senior than the others.

Sequence of Play

At the start of each arc, the players agree the type of story they want to play in: the fine detail of the region of space they will occupy, the nature of the ship and its crew, and the characters that they will (initially) play. This is a group activity, although it is followed by time when the GM works alone to flesh out some details.

At the start of each session the group recaps the previous session, in particular remember where it left off.

During a session, players take turns to frame scenes, starting with the GM and moving clockwise around the seating area. On the first turn of a session (only) the GM may give up their first scene and start the order with the player of their choice; following that, play proceeds clockwise from that player.

Typically, players use their scenes to pursue their characters' goals, to gather resources, and to help each other. Typically, the GM uses their scene to fuck up the PCs' goals and to introduce yet more opposition and problems.

2 Characters

TACHYON NETWORK BULLETIN
2352.104.03.29-1531

SENDER: Parapsychology Research Institute

BLACK BORDER

Ltnt John Soames, formerly a Psychology Officer serving with the Frontier Fleet, is wanted by the PRA for interview and possible containment.

Anyone with knowledge of his whereabouts should contact the PRA immediately. If encountered, he should not be approached, excepting that a clear shot opportunity should present itself.

UPDATE 29-1921: With reference to 'shot opportunity', above, conventional weaponry may not prove effective. Creativity is advised.

UPDATE 30-0435: For those of you who knew Soames personally, excessive thinking about him is not recommended. It may prove... dangerous.

END OF BULLETIN

A character is name and a Tier.

A *viable player character* is an index card with a name, a Tier, and at least one goal.

Tiers

A 1st Tier character has a position of power and responsibility, and the capabilities to match. A typical 1st Tier is in the top echelons of the ship, but they could also be a character who is powerful but outside the main structure e.g. union boss, alien ghetto leader, or a political prisoner with a strong popular following.

A 2nd Tier character has significant status (e.g. a mid-ranking officer or respected NCO) but is not part of the inner circle. They take orders more than they give them.

3rd Tier characters are everyone else. They are the rank and file personnel of the ship, the civilians of no particular note. Generally, they have few skills and no notable Talent. A 3rd Tier character is not a viable PC. Rather than having a dramatic scene, they mop the floor or drive a truck. They don't even do that particularly well.

Characters can have in-fiction status beyond their tier. A 2nd Tier could be the ship's Captain, for example, nominally outranking all others. They

probably won't be that effective, however, in such a high-status role.

Goals

Beyond their name, the most important thing about a character is their Goal or Goals. Goals define characters; characters are nothing without their goals. Without individual character goals, the ship's mission would be fairly straightforward; with individual goals, it's likely to be a screaming clusterfuck of suffering and shattered dreams.

Having individual character goals thus makes for a better game.

Goals in StarCruiser follow a standard format (hard brackets [] denote an optional part, the forward slash / denotes a choice:

"I will <arc-sized goal> [because <because reason>]; first/next I will <roughly session-sized goal>"

For example:

- *"I will kill Sawyer Blake because he killed my husband. First, I will convince the Captain that we are most needed on Blake's World."*
- *"I will establish a fair and just trading agreement between New Cyrus and Omicron I. First, I will show Lady Andromache that we are capable enforcers by bringing in a pirate crew."*

The template can be flexed, but only do so knowingly. Goals that don't fit the template are often hard to play to.

Beyond the template, the following properties tend to make for good goals:

- Are concrete, and could be practically within in the scope of a single arc
- Involve the owning PC with other PCs owned by other players
- Represent something that the *player* (not the character) wants to feature heavily in play
- Give you at least one idea of a scene you could frame to pursue them

Attributes

Although not as important as goals, Attributes also serve to distinguish characters from one another. The attributes are:

Physical

This covers any use of speed, power, coordination that doesn't fit under another category. So it would apply to:

- Flying a starship through an asteroid field
- A foot race
- Climbing a wall
- Lifting a heavy object
- Winning an arm-wrestle or tug-of-war
- Perceiving a subtle sound or movement
- Picking a pocket
- Sneaking past a guard

Martial

Martial covers most things in which the intent is to harm or incapacitate or capture.

- A fist fight
- A wrestling match where skill as well as brute force and speed mattered (if not, that would come under Physical)
- A gunfight
- Leading a platoon into battle
- Planning the logistics for a land war
- Running the weapons systems on a starship

Persona

Persona is your public face – the mask you wear most of the time. It covers most social interaction and influence, at least the public and visible kind. It includes an element of understanding large-scale social patterns. More subtle and genuine interpersonal interactions are mediated by Human instead.

- Understand the tensions and power structures in a community or organization
- Reorganize a ship's crew to be more efficient
- Rile a crowd into a mob with an inflammatory speech
- Lie convincingly
- Intimidate someone
- Seduce someone, without love

(NB this is the *large-scale* skill for building social capital, but to build a genuinely stable community you'll need multiple people doing small-scale Human rolls as well.)

Human

This is your real self – the person behind the mask (flawed and contradictory as it may be). This attribute is not just about conscious intent (*wanting* to be real, to be empathetic, to be trustworthy) – it covers empathy and the ability to be real. Insofar as Persona is the large (which is not *all* that it is), this is the small – the personal, the subtle the intimate.

- Heal psychological or emotional damage
- Stand out in a crowd of alien imposters
- Resist an attempt to persuade you to do selfish and something harmful to other humans

Work

Work covers anything that is everyday manual or technical work. It includes routine engineering and technical tasks, and managing and coordinating the same. It also covers disciplined, organised behaviour – being consistent, sticking to approved procedures.

- Running a home
- Flying a starship very efficiently for a week
- Keeping a ship's engines running
- Building a sealed environment on an uninhabitable world
- Upgrading a ship's drive with new thrusters
- Living off the land in a wilderness
- Heal ordinary physical wounds (not the most serious ones – that's under Knowledge)
- Remembering to close a security door behind you

Knowledge

This covers knowing obscure or specialist things. It takes over when Work fails – when the task becomes unusually obscure or creative.

- Heal very severe wounds (of any type)
- Know about how a given alien culture works
- Discover the function of an alien device
- Impress a learned crowd with your mastery of the philosophical canon

Roles

Beyond their attributes each character has at least one *Role* – a description of what the character is most skilled at. Roles are free text traits, and the range is nominally infinite – players propose, and the other players approve (or reject, or refine and tweak). Examples of roles include: Starship Captain, Starship Pilot, Marine Commander, Marine, Starship Engineer, Terraforming Engineer, Xenobotanist, Political Agitator, Confidence Trickster, Industrial Spy, Community Organiser, Preacher...

A good role is something that you do that gives you expertise – it's not just something unskilled (e.g. "idle layabout") or something that happens to you (e.g. "scientific test subject"). Although "make a career of it" roles are possible e.g. "professional stowaway".

At time of character creation, each Role should be agreed with the whole group so that everyone understands what each role entails, and has some idea of what it *doesn't* cover.

A role defines the domain in which a character's attributes can be most usefully be applied. Actions that require specialist knowledge or skills, but which are within the scope of the role are conducted using the full normal value of the relevant attribute. Such specialist actions that are only tangentially related to the scope of the role are taken at -1D, and those out of its scope entirely are taken at -2D.

Many actions do not require specialist actions or skills – they are the kind of thing that most normal adult character (of a suitable culture and tech level) can do. Examples at TL2 include driving a car, using normal smartphone or computer apps, doing mathematics to high-school level, and growing simple plants. These actions should not, generally, involve penalties for being out of role.

Characters get one role for free; the 2nd and later roles must be bought as talents.

Talents

Talents describe very specialised skills and abilities within and beyond the general abilities captured by attributes and the broad competencies captured by roles. Talents vary in their potency – this is captured of a point value, which determines to cost to buy them (at character creation, or between sessions).

1 pt – enable general competency in specialist area

- Psychic Potential (requires further talents to become useful – see "Psychic Talents", below)
- General-purpose cybernetic link

2 pt – enable abilities beyond normal human capability

- Cybernetic merge with a powerful entity (e.g. to a combat vehicle or a ship's navigation and security system)
- (certain powerful psychic powers)

OR

- Add an additional role, so that an additional set of actions (potentially, as much again) now counts as in-role

3 pt – enable very powerful non-normal abilities

- Vacuum native – character is not (is no longer) organic in any sense, and does not rely on conventional life support (air, heat, food and water) to survive and function
- (certain very powerful psychic powers)

Negative Talents

What about "negative talents" i.e. things that are specialised disabilities (e.g. agoraphobia or having a mortal enemy)? These are not talents as such, and taking them does not gain your character any points. Where these are interesting then you'll naturally get screen time and better scenes in compensation for them; where they are not, they are better not taken.

To get points in compensation for generic disabilities (e.g. limited movement), reduce related Attributes (in that example, Physical and perhaps Martial).

Psychic Talents

Some special rules apply to Psychic Talents. To start with, the character must have the 1pt Talent "Psychic Potential". They must then buy further Talents to enable actual abilities, at a base cost of 1pt or as shown:

- Telepathy – communicate with others; perceive their hidden thoughts
- Psychic perception – perceive the state of the world that is hidden, including past events that have left little or no mundane trace
- Prescience – predict the future (predict deterministic events; gain bonus dice for uncertain ones)
- Telekinesis – move objects without touching them
- Transformation (2pt) – change, enhance or regenerate your own body
- Teleportation (3pt) – move your body through space

PCs may spend additional points to gain bonuses when using psychic talents – a talent at 1 above its base cost gives +1D on all rolls using it, a talent at 2 above gives +2D.

Important special rule: The 1 pt cost for Psychic Potential counts towards the character's point cap as usual, but the specific talents *do not* – psychics can indeed exceed normal human potential. This has side effects, however – Table 1 explains how a characters total points in psychic talents (including the 1 pt for Psychic Potential) leads to unpleasantness.

Table 1 - Psychic Side Effects

Total Points	Symptoms
0	None
1-3	Voices, strange sensations. +1D to resist psychic influences from human sources, -1D to resist psychic influence from alien sources.
4-5	Visual hallucinations. “Poltergeist” activity. Voices become discernibly attached to vaguely comprehensible entities which provide information (wanted or not) and make requests (reasonable or otherwise). Resistance modifiers from the previous level become +/- 2D All Human rolls for ordinary (non-psychic) interactions suffer a -1D penalty.
6-7	Psychic is perceptibly changed – anyone observing them knows that they are beyond human. Their speech has changed, their thought patterns are bizarre... just being near them <i>feels</i> strange. All Human rolls for ordinary (non-psychic) interactions suffer a -2D penalty; all Persona rolls for ordinary influence suffer -1D. Blackouts – between any two scenes (but not more than once per player-scene-cycle) the GM may have the character enact a scene’s worth of activities known only to them.
8+	Psychic leaves the human world. The player must set a goal that will take the PC out of play, and enact that goal successfully in the following game session ¹ . Otherwise, the PC becomes an NPC under GM control (and continues to pursue that goal).

Handling psychic blackouts: By default, the PC (and the players) only know that there was a blackout if it leaves evidence (e.g. the PC comes round on the planet’s surface rather than the ship, or finds that their hands are muddy and torn from where they’ve been digging something up). Otherwise, inferring that a blackout occurred is a Difficulty 2 Human roll.

Design Note Psychics are designed to burn brightly, and then burn out. They’re deliberately “built fragile” assuming the 3-character model.

¹ As XP can only be spent between sessions, this text assumes that the PC has crossed the “8+ points” threshold between sessions, so there is one whole session in which they can achieve this goal.

What are the entities that talk, demand and control? It’s not fully understood, but they seem to be localised in space to one or a few star systems.

Using Psychic Talents

Rolls to use psychic talents are based on the attribute that would be used had the task been attempted by mundane means – Physical to manipulate objects, Knowledge to learn information about an item.

Some specific cases:

- Detect that another character is has some psychic talent – opposed Human roll
- Infer the total number of psychic points that another character has – opposed Human roll with a +1D modifier for them
- Hold a conversation with a character telepathically, where that character has Telepathy themselves – automatic success
- Hold a conversation with a character telepathically, where that character *does not have* Telepathy themselves – Difficulty 2 Human roll
- Read the surface thoughts of an (unwilling) other – Persona vs Human, with a base +1D bonus to the target
- Manipulate an object by telekinesis – Physical roll at a -1D penalty compared to performing the equivalent task by hand; additional -1D if the object is of non-trivial mass (say, over a kilo)

Equipment

StarCruiser is not a game about tracking possessions. Anything unique and special to you is a Talent. (I’m thinking cybernetic implants here – something someone else can’t just take and use. At least something that is kept under lock and key. In your quarters.) Anything else is part of the ship. Establish who’s got it when you need it.

Design Note Characters in StarCruiser are meant to be simple – that’s what makes the it practical to have three PCs per player, and the ship as well. If PCs were as complex as those in Burning Wheel or D&D 3E, the game would be unmanageable for most players.

Money and Wealth

StarCruiser assumes a command economy, so control of resources falls under Persona (to get access to them) or Work (to know how to deploy them usefully).

Players with Multiple Characters in One Scene

A character may appear in scenes as and when appropriate. However, in any given scene each player has their focus on only *one* of their characters, even if more than one of them is present. Only the focus character may take game-mechanical actions, such as performing tests (see below) or helping others in tests.

Tests and Contests

The most basic mechanic is the “test” – a player rolls a number of dice equal to the value of their character’s most relevant attribute, counts each die as a success or failure, and compares the number of successes to a pre-set target number (“target”) or to the roll of an opposing character. The higher number is the winner.

On any die, 1-3 is a failure, 4-6 is a success. 6’s explode – they count as a success, then you roll an extra die, which may give you another success, or indeed explode again.

When I say “a character”, I might mean a person, I might mean a ship. Ships are people too, sort of, at least insofar as they use the same basic mechanics.

You don’t just make the roll, then work out what the attribute to be rolled is, and then say what it means. All parties involved (usually, one player and the GM) agree before the roll what attribute will be rolled and what the stakes are: what (in general terms) will be the consequence of failure and the consequence of success. No dice go down until those facts are agreed.

Design Note: In case you missed it, this is a stakes-setting game. Set stakes, every time, or it won’t work right.

Some actions will be opposed – one character versus another. Those are *contests* – the winner is the one with the highest total. As normal, the skills and consequences are agreed before either character rolls.

If a standard test roll exceeds the obstacle, then the character succeeds. If a standard test roll equals the obstacle, then the character succeeds but with a cost – the agreed success comes true, but so does part of the failure consequence.

If two characters in a contest roll the same, then it goes to a tiebreak – they roll a single die and the higher is the winner. If they tie again, re-roll again, ad nauseam if necessary. There are no ties in

StarCruiser – they are unseemly in the modern future.

NPCs never make unopposed rolls, and NPCs never dice against each other – no player, no roll. In all events that involve NPCs only, the GM decides the result. They should bear in mind a small amount of plausibility and a large amount of dramatic value. This is a heavy burden, true, but the alternatives are worse.

After a conflict is resolved, the result stands. Players of *Burning Wheel* may recognise this as *Let it Ride* – once a test or contest determines a result, no new roll can be made for it until circumstances radically change.

Example: Captain Stern leads an infantry assault on The Unbreachable Fortress of Stars. She fails. Under this rule, she cannot try a second time. Massive reinforcements, yes, an experimental and dangerous weapon, yes. Otherwise she must find another way around.

Play Advice: This rule may lead to odd situations, where you cannot explain why the character cannot “just try again”. It is intentionally dramatic, not realistic. It falls to the group to rationalise these cases.

Setting Difficulties

For unopposed tests, set a difficulty number based on how difficult the task is. As a general rule, a difficulty x task will require roughly $2x$ dice to have a 70% chance of succeeding, or $2x-1$ dice to have a 60% chance.

So, a difficulty 1 task is fairly easy. Most generally-competent people (2nd tiers and up) will succeed most of the time.

A difficulty 2 task is challenging. An expert in that area (attribute value 4) will succeed most of the time, but others will often fail.

A difficulty 3 task is hard. Only a skill 5 character will succeed most of the time without a net positive modifier.

Table 2 gives probabilities of success for common combinations of dice and difficulty. (‘-’ means less than 1%).

Table 2 - Test Probabilities

Diff ►	1	2	3	4	5
Dice ▼					
1	50	8	1	-	-
2	75	33	9	2	-
3	88	56	25	8	2
4	94	73	43	20	7
5	97	84	60	34	16
6	99	91	73	50	28
7	99	95	83	63	41

Impossible Tests

Characters may not attempt tests under the following circumstances:

- They do not have the tools that are absolutely required for the job
 - E.g. repairing a TL2+ vehicle engine using only a combat knife
- The task is very specialized, and they do not have even the basic training and experience that is required
 - E.g. a non-engineer trying to repair a TL3+ spacecraft engine (even with books etc)

The GM is the primary arbiter of when these circumstances hold. It is, of course, expected that the group will comment on and judge this. And, in line with their principles (“Ask questions, use the answers?”), the GM should often ask players if their PC has relevant history (“So, Johan, ever tried to steer anything like this before?”)

Assigning Modifiers

While difficulties capture how hard the task is for *anyone*, modifiers can capture how hard the task is for *this guy, right now*. Modifiers change the number of dice rolled – they are added to the attribute value before you pick up the dice. Modifiers are assigned by the GM, using their judgement, from the standard modifier set as follows:

- +1D if the situation is particularly advantageous (a head start, a long time to

think, a distraction for the people you’re trying to fool)

- -1D if the task is specialised and tangential to the character’s role(s) (e.g. a shuttle pilot takes the helm of a capital ship)
- -2D if the task is specialised and well outside the character’s role(s)
- +1D for unusually good equipment (but not for equipment that is needed to attempt the task at all)
- -1D for marginal, inadequate equipment
- +1D or +2D if the player spends Fate Points on this test (see later)
- +1D if the character has Help from another (see later)

In an opposed roll, the following also applies:

- +1D if the contest depends heavily on equipment (weapons, vehicles, computers) and one character has equipment of a higher tech level than the other (this can be +2D if there is a two-or-more difference in equipment tech levels – manual irrigation versus terraforming)

As a general rule, a given test may involve bonuses from all of the categories, but only one bonus per category.

All of those modifiers can be reversed. If the situation is bad, -1D’s can be applied for the same reasons. Fate Points are the exception – they are always positive.

Help

One character may help another with a contest. To do this, they make a roll against an appropriate obstacle assigned by the GM. If they succeed, they give the helped character +1D, if they fail, they give -1D. The circumstances must be such that their help makes sense on the timescale of the main task – building a brick wall is not a sensible task to help with a fire, and air-dropping propaganda leaflets can’t help you *during* an argument.

A helping role is not quite a normal test – there are no stakes (except for the +1/-1 die result) and no fallout (see later) is applied.

<i>Physical</i>	<i>Mental</i>	<i>Social</i>
Normal 1 No lasting effect 2-5 Injury 6 Incapacitated	(as physical, but penalties apply in the mental domain, i.e. where a sharp, clear, steady mind is needed)	(as physical, but penalties apply in the social domain, i.e. where a good reputation or strong self-confidence is needed)
Lethal 1 Injury 2-3 Incapacitated 4-6 Killed (just like that. No save)	(as physical, with caveats as above)	(as physical, with caveats as above)

Table 3 - Effects of Fallout

A character may receive help (or hindrance, should the dice roll badly) from up to three characters per test.

Fallout – Suffering and Injury

Failed tests often hurt. This is part of the stakes – “if you fail, you will take fallout” This is the norm – certainly, most *contests* should involve fallout for the loser, although normally this will be of a non-lethal type – they are tired from fruitless exertion, confused and frustrated by their inability to crack that code, embarrassed and disheartened by the utter failure of the crowd to respond to them. The GM declares as part of the stakes whether and what fallout is on the cards (if they forget until after the dice go down, normal fallout should be applied).

If lethal force is involved (a gun, a devastating emotional blow (e.g. using your knowledge of a character’s guilty past), a campaign to smear someone as an alien sympathiser, then the loser always takes fallout and that fallout is of lethal type.

In opposed tests, fallout can be asymmetrical – with my fists against your gun, you’re risking normal fallout but I risk lethal.

Fallout comes in three domains (physical, mental and social) and two levels (normal, lethal). If the domain of fallout due from a conflict is not obvious (e.g. as it is in a gunfight or a smear campaign), it should be agreed explicitly before the dice are rolled.

The effects of fallout are determined by rolling a D6 against the appropriate box in Table 3. Yes, they are nasty. Space is a nasty place.

NPCs never take fallout – their fate is either part of the intent of a test (“If you succeed, she’ll lose all confidence in her ability to command.”) or adjudicated by the GM.

Penalties for fallout effects:

- Injured: -1D on all relevant tests
- Incapacitated: -3D on all relevant tests

Fallout applies its particular domain only. For example, physical fallout would impair jumping over a barrier but not solving a maths problem.

Fallout in two domains compounds – a physically injured character takes a mental injury, they are at -1D to all physical and mental tasks until they recover.

Fallout in the same domain *replaces* previous fallout, resetting any healing or recovery effects. E.g. if an injured character receives an incapacitation in the same domain, they are incapacitated. If a character who has an injury that’s been treated or healed (see later) suffers another injury in the same domain, then the treatment or healing effects are removed. The exception here is when a failed healing roll has made things worse – the injury remains at the worse level.

A physically killed character is literally dead. A mentally “killed” character is irredeemably insane or incompetent – they can no longer take meaningful actions towards intelligible goals. A socially “killed” character is an irredeemable pariah from here to Proxima Centauri – nobody cares about their achievements, purely because they’re *that asshole’s* achievements, and everyone hopes that they die.

Regardless of type, mechanically speaking death is death – that character can never again be under player control. Their character sheet goes in the graveyard, and the player must replace them.

Should circumstances allow some kind of bizarre resurrection or rehabilitation, then the character may reappear as a PC – but only under the control of a different player. Mechanically, such a returning character should be created from scratch using the normal rules.

Treating Fallout

Fallout is relatively easy to *treat* (remove or reduce the penalty) but more difficult to *heal* (remove the underlying damage).

Treating an injury is normally a difficulty 2 Work test (a specialised task for a medical doctor or equivalent in other domains). If successful, the injury penalty is removed; the injury nominally remains until healed, but this has no mechanical effect.

Treating an incapacitation is normally a difficulty 3 Knowledge test (specialist for a surgeon or equivalent – a more specialised role than for treating an injury). If successful, the penalty is reduced to -1D.

The consequence of failure on a treatment roll is always that the treatment fails, and no further treatment can succeed. No (further) fallout is ever caused by a treatment roll (on either party).

Healing Fallout

With basic medical care (or equivalent), an injury takes a week to heal; incapacitation takes six weeks to heal down to injured. Good medical care (or equivalent) will halve those times. This does not normally require a roll, but it does require appropriate facilities and personnel. With no medical care at all, injuries heal in *three* weeks, incapacitation does not heal at all.

Injuries in different domains heal in parallel, and require separate care to speed them up.

A character may attempt to accelerate the healing of another PC by attempting a relevant task (e.g. surgery for a physical injury). This can, at best, halve the recovery time. Failure always has the consequence of doubling the recovery time. Regardless of result, only one healing attempt can be made per character per injury. No (further) fallout is ever called by a healing roll (on either party).

As noted above, death cannot be recovered from.

Fate Points

Players have Fate Points (FP); characters do not. It is only characters, however, that can benefit from them. Prior to any roll, a player may spend one FP to give their character a +1D in that test or contest, or spend three FP to give their character +2D.

When FP are spent on a roll where negative modifiers are also applied, the minimum number of dice rolled is equal to the number of dice from FP, and the dice are always normal dice (succeed on 4+ rather than 6 only). For example, if the attribute rolled is 2, there is a -3D penalty and 1 FP is spent,

the player rolls 1 normal die. If then spent 3 FP, they would roll 2 normal dice.

At the start of an arc, every player has 2 FP. After that, FP are awarded at the end of each session – one to each who meets any of the following conditions (maximum one per condition per player, except as noted):

- *Progress* – They made significant progress towards one of their characters' goals, and that character survived the session (one allowed per *character*)
- *Good Trouble* – They pursued one of their characters goals in a way that caused exciting trouble and strife
- *And No-One Heard them Scream* – They had a character die in a way that the other players found poignant, funny or actually quite disturbing
- *Light in the Blackness* – They did something in-character that was genuinely moral, heroic or otherwise admirable (something that made the other players feel *elevated*)

In addition, *if there are three or more character players*, the whole group (including the GM) votes for the following awards, which are worth 1 FP each. (The GM cannot receive them, and you may not vote for yourself. You may vote for "nobody" i.e. vote that you don't think anyone has earned them this time)

- *Crewmember of the Session* – for the player who did most to develop the emerging story in an interesting way (this may or may not be contiguous with the ship's actual *mission*)
- *Method Actor* – for the player who best inhabited one of their characters, and made them (if only briefly) seem real

If there are only one or two character players, they receive 1 FP each unless they unanimously agree that they sucked this session in both the above respects.

Design Note The FP award rules matter because they're the only way to get FP, yes, but they also matter because they implicitly make the group ask "*This session, did we do what we're meant to be doing in this game?*".

If you want to hack StarCruiser to have a different feel and tone, changing these will probably help with that.

Roleplaying Notes

There's a box on each character card labelled "Roleplaying". That's for a few notes, keywords really, for when you forget who Ltnt Craves actually is. (It turns out he's "*Taciturn, bitter, calls injustice*")

when he sees it'.) They have no mechanical significance.

This is especially useful when a player is missing and you have to act for his 2nd-tier whom you can't remember much about and never liked anyway.

Experience and Change

In general, StarCruiser characters do not improve. 1st Tier characters are at the top of their game, and 2nd Tier characters are competent for their level and role. The exception is when a 1st Tier dies and a 2nd Tier is promoted in their stead – the 2nd Tier will slowly grow to 2nd Tier status.

Change and growth are achieved by experience points (XP), which are given out at a fixed rate of 1 to each player at the end of each session.

XP can be spent to increase the attributes of a character who is 1st Tier but has an attribute total of less than 20. 1 XP per attribute point; the attribute may not end up over 5.

XP can also be used to change characters – they can be spent to move attribute points – 1 XP per point moved.

XP can be spent to buy talents – 1 XP per talent point. As with attributes, this may not take the character over the point limit for their tier (with one exception – psychic talents, other than the basic Psychic Potential talent, do not count towards the limit).

Design Note 1st Tiers are, mechanically, pretty static – their stats change over time, but they don't improve as such. 2nd Tiers can literally improve, but only by dead man's shoes.

Players may also spend XP to improve the ship and its crew. This may be a wise choice, as ships tend to last longer than characters do. See the *Ships* chapter.

People Die

Characters die. It's not that uncommon. They are shot up by things, eaten by things, and forcibly incorporated into things. Characters also go mad, go off on their own to look for unrelated things, or go off into things and are never seen again.

If a 1st Tier character is removed from play, the player promotes a 2nd to take their place. This must be one of their own current pair.

If a 2nd Tier character is removed from play, or is promoted to 1st, the player creates a new one to take their place **or** accepts one from another player (who then creates a new 2nd Tier).

Design Note PC death comes easier in StarCruiser than many games. This is viable because players have multiple PCs, because players are encouraged to link their PCs to common goals, and because the ship provides a context and mission that ties the surviving PCs together. Characters die, but the ship rolls on.

A corollary of the above: don't get obsessed with your 1st Tier. Give your 2nd Tiers some earnest attention, and they may blossom in ways that surprise you.

Play Advice Make yourself a little graveyard or shrine for the character cards of the dead. I recommend an airtight food storage box, as it provides a kind of gruesome hygiene. At the end of the arc, have a little ceremony for them. Maybe light a candle and recite their names. It's what they would have wanted.

If you're playing multiple linked arcs, you might want to have sections in the graveyard. "Dead", "Gone Away", "Not a Person Any More". That kind of thing, anyway; it jogs the memory.

When a Player is Missing

When a player is missing, other players may act for their characters. There are limitations, however, which should be generally heeded:

1. A -1D penalty applies to all their tests.
2. That player may not earn FP for any reason.
3. The player receives no XP for the session
4. That player may not be referred to by name.

It is possible that as a result of such a session-sans-owner a character may end up dead, mauled, or permanently weird. Such is life; the player has two more PCs, no?

Design Note Limitation 4 is there to diminish the salience of the missing player (who, after all, is not there and does not need the attention), thereby keeping your attention on the characters and the world.

3 Ships

TACHYON NETWORK BULLETIN 2352.104.02.12-1937

SENDER: Federation Naval Yards (Mars Orbit)

We have a reconditioned T-Class that is surplus to current security requirements. Got some permanent structural damage, (very) old-fashioned core ducting, and a hydroponic garden in place of the third plasma battery, but otherwise good to go.

Bids, please.

END OF BULLETIN

Ship Goals

The most important feature of a ship is its goal. The goal defines the shared mission and that unites the PCs, for better or worse.

A ship has only a single goal, but given its importance in the long term it's worth splitting it into two parts. The first part gives the long-term goal; the second part gives the next step towards that. Examples:

- *"We will find Earth; first, we will find the lion-shaped nebula."*
- *"We will shut down the pirate operations in this sector; first, we will track the Explicit Lyrics back to its home port."*
- *"We will discover what the aliens want with us; first, we will find out who among the crew is one of them."*

Ship Ratings & Features

Ships have "ratings" rather than attributes. Mechanically, they fulfil a similar role to character attributes, but are different in that they are never rolled – they merely modify character rolls.

Similarly to Ratings, ships have "Features" which are analogous to Talents.

Ratings

All ships have a value (which may be anything from 0 to 5) in each of several Ratings. In most cases, a rating of 0 does not mean "no capability in that area", but it *does* mean negligible capability, a bare minimum. A ship with 0-rated crew has a skeleton staff of minimally-skilled and barely-motivated people. A ship with 0-rated cargo probably has some storage space, but not enough to trade any bulk good in financially-interesting volumes.

For standard (unopposed) tests which rely heavily on ship capabilities or performance, the following typical modifiers should be applied:

1	-1D
2	0
3-4	+1D
5	+2D <i>if it's going to be a really big feature of what you're trying to do (otherwise still only +1D)</i>

For versus tests, a ship with 1 or 2 points better than the other grants +1D and a ship with 3 or more points better grants +2D.

The Ratings are as follows:

Speed

This covers manoeuvrability, straight-line thrust and general power-to-mass ratio.

Stealth

This represents the ability of the ship not to be seen – low EM signature, passive rather than active sensors, and perhaps a little hardware to disrupt active sensor pings.

Cargo

This is mostly cargo *capacity*, but it also broadly covers the provision of specialist storage facilities – temperature-controlled, radiation sealed, or high-security.

Sensors

Sensors are the eyes and ears of the ship. This captures power and accuracy under normal conditions; the ability to sense without in turn being sensed (i.e. the ratio of passive to active sensing) falls under Stealth.

Science

Science labs, on-board research databases (even when you're in T-band contact, the bandwidth is far too low to support even the 20th-century internet), and scientists on the crew. All helps when there are things to be identified, things to be understood, things to be modified.

Engineering

When things go wrong, when there's a fire, when the ship needs to be jury-rigged for a special purpose, you need to good engineering teams, spare parts, and the right equipment. This covers that.

Firepower

The power to deal damage - number of guns, size of guns, number and quality of fire directors, capacity of battle computers.

Resilience

There are no shields to raise (not at TL4, anyway), but there can be thick armour, redundant layers of armour, point defence guns, and a superstructure that can hold the ship together under strain.

Crew

This combines the size and quality of the crew.

Features

Features make ships unique in the same way that Talents make characters unique. For example, "Marines" might be a feature that gives a Crew bonus when the crew is being used to fight. As with Talents and Skills, Features are generally narrower in scope than Ratings.

The most basic form of a feature is like the Marines example above – it provides a +1 rating bonus in a given narrow situation.

1 pt – enable competency in specialist area...

- Orbital assault (land marines on a planet from orbit against TL2+ antiaircraft fire²)

(NB the inclusion of a specialist area in the list above implies that ships are not generally well-equipped for that. Without that feature, ships attempting tasks in that area suffer a penalty of -2D.)

...or provide a +2D bonus under a restricted set of situations...

- Spinal mount weapon - +2D firepower against a target that has an effective Speed rating lower than you³
- Ample leisure facilities - +2D when using leave and leisure time as a means to resolve crew issues
- Extensive family quarters (most of the crew have family with them - the ship is a large village in space) - +2D on social actions that appeal to a sense of community

2 pt – enable abilities that normal ships cannot attempt at all

² This is a typical tech-mediated situation – you need TL2 to meaningfully oppose an orbital assault, but if that's all you've got then a TL4 attacker would get a +2D tech bonus that would compensate for the lack of this Feature.

³ Which, of course, includes all space stations.

- Colony ship – you have the supplies and equipment to found an immediately viable colony on a broadly habitable world, or a marginal colony on an airless world

3 pt – enable very powerful non-normal abilities

- Alien stardrive – you are not slaved to jump points, only to distance (10-15 LY per jump)

Relating Ship Ratings to Real-World Measures

The ratings system is intentionally abstract, and I've never made a serious attempt to relate it systematically real-world properties. This is possible, of course. E.g. I've landed on a convention that a Crew 3 ship probably has about 200 crew.

Fallout for Ships

Like characters, ships have damage states, and these mirror the character ones pretty closely. They only have, however, one damage category, not three.

The damage states are:

- Healthy
- Damaged
- Crippled
- Hulked
- Destroyed

Penalties for fallout effects:

- Damaged: -1 on all ratings
- Crippled: -3 on all ratings
- Hulked: total loss of function, except perhaps localised emergency life support. The ship is dead in space.

Fallout from losing a potentially harmful conflict is determined by rolling a D6 on Table 4.

Table 4 - Fallout for Ships

Ship Fallout

Normal
1 No lasting effect
2-5 Damaged
6 Crippled
Lethal
1-3 Damaged
4 Crippled
5 Hulked
6 Destroyed

The Crew Survives

"The T-class don't explode, Sir. A fire might clean her out, like, but she won't explode."

The player's ship may be destroyed, but PCs always get a chance to evacuate, even when the circumstances are quite heavily set against this. Typically, this should involve a single difficulty 3 test per character. This could be reduced to difficulty 2 if they were already in an advantageous position (e.g. in a shuttle bay) or increased if e.g. they pre-committed to staying with the ship until the last minute in order to gain a bonus (e.g. while attempting a last ditch rescue or recovery).

The Ship is Tough

"The dual superstructure of the T-Class allows it to survive impacts that would split another ship in two..." - T-Class Engineering manual

The player's ship once-per-lifetime gets a special saving throw to avoid being Hulked. Roll a die – on a 3+, the ship is merely Damaged, not Hulked.

Once this throw is made, regardless of the result, the ship gains the permanent status "Permanent Structural Damage" (PSD).

If the saving throw fails, it is Hulked *and* gets the PSD tag.

Spending XP on Ships

Players may spend XP to improve the ship or its crew. Improving a rating costs XP equal to the new value. Ratings may not normally exceed 5. Buying new features costs their point value. No ship may exceed a total point value (ratings + features) of 40.

Players may pay XP towards an upgrade that they cannot afford the whole of yet (e.g. paying the 1 XP they have towards a 3pt feature). This has no game-mechanical effect, but acts as an indication of that players commitment to completing that upgrade, which may encourage other players to do the same.

Design Note Yes, those XP costs are very high. But this is ok, because all the players can contribute, and because (by design) the ship tends to last much longer than the individual characters that they could spend XP on instead.

Justifying Changes to Ratings and Features

One of the basic conceits of StarCruiser is that the T-class is modular – part of the reason for its ubiquity is the ease with which it can be adapted to a particular mission. Normally this takes place in drydock, but even in the blackness of space radical

work is sometimes possible. Any change to a ship Skill or Feature should be narrated in those terms – ideally, someone should keep a permanent record of what the does to warrant its values.

For example, an increase to Crew might represent better standard training, a new structure to the hierarchy, or increased confidence by the crew in the command staff. Alternatively, it could just represent additional crew quarters built from cargo containers and lashing onto the sides of the engineering deck.

Similarly, an increase in Science could be narrated by acquisition of better sensors, building more elaborate lab space, or (while in orbit of a civilised planet) persuading a Professor of Xenobiology to join the crew and bring their research team with them.

Generally, play fast and loose with these justifications. If the group wants to justify a Crew upgrade on the basis of a ship-wide training regime that they've been working on for months, and they can pay the XP for a crew increase, then that's fine.

Design Note The above paragraph reiterates a general theme of StarCruiser – the mechanics, especially the ship mechanics, are quite abstract. The mechanics give results (or values that will give rise to certain patterns of results), and it's then the job of the group to make sense of them in the fiction. If the first proposed explanation is completely implausible (e.g. a large crew expansion in the depths of space) then the group needs to play with it until it does make sense.

To a large extent, *this is the game*. StarCruiser is a game of telling stories using a dramatic engine. It is not a fiction-first roleplaying game.

What if We Upgrade the Ship In-Game, but Don't Pay the XP?

This is the flipside of the previous heading. If you upgrade the ship but have no XP to pay for the upgrade, the upgrade doesn't work yet. There are technical glitches, the new crewmembers don't gel and routines break down. When you finally pay the XP, everything comes together.

Getting a New Ship

In the rare case that the player's ship is destroyed, they can replace it. But this is rather like a 2nd Tier being promoted – the new ships starts off substandard, and only eventually grows to the glory of a full player ship.

A replacement ship must be found (built, bought or stolen) in-game, and once this has been achieved

the players may assign its ratings. This is done in the same way as creating the starting ship (points are split between the players, who then take it in turn...), but the pool is only 20 points.

4 Sequence of Play

TACHYON NETWORK BULLETIN
2352.104.04.05-0052

SENDER: Space Science Authority

Do not sample Red Oil. Repeat, do not sample Red Oil.

END OF BULLETIN

At the Beginning of an Arc

Follow the process described in the chapter “Starting a New Game”.

The Beginning of the Session

1. Recap the previous session
2. Establish where each PC was at the end of the session
3. The GM frames the first scene (or nominates a player to do so)

During the Session

As described earlier in the book, players (including the GM) take it in turn to frame scenes.

Framing Scenes

As noted in the introduction, players take it in turn to frame scenes, starting with the GM (who may give up their scene and nominate someone else) and then proceeding clockwise around the players.

While it's normally good for the GM to use their scene to introduce new problems and to bring up new opposition, this isn't a hard rule. Early in the arc, late in the arc, or after a major crisis they may want to take the pressure off a bit. They can even have a GM scene that introduces a new ally or some extra resources.

Design Note StarCruiser relies on the GM to set the tone, and make a lot of pacing decisions, via what they do with their scenes.

Normally, players should frame scenes that contain at least one of their own characters. They may, however, propose scenes that *do not* include any character of theirs. These are subject to the approval of the players controlling the characters who *are* in the scene.

Normally, scenes involve at least one player character. The GM can frame scenes with no PCs

in them, e.g. to illustrate the actions of an NPC which the PCs could not perceive. Players cannot frame scenes without at least one PC.

Players should feel free to frame scenes that are very brief, perhaps taking half a minute of real time, just to illustrate their character. This can be a good solution when the player in question doesn't have anything dramatic they want to do right now. Such scenes are commonly called “colour scenes”.

While framing a scene (describing the starting conditions) the framing player has narrative/directorial control. Once the scene starts, however, (i.e. any once any actions or dialog has happened), normal rules apply and only the GM has control of anything beyond PC actions.

Ending Scenes

It's the GM's job to keep an eye on the flow of scenes, and to prompt to cut them. Ending a scene at just the right time can be very powerful. Letting a scene drag on beyond its interestingness can be quite draining.

Ending the Session

The session ends when the players agree it does. We recommend that you keep sessions in the range of 2-3 hours. In StarCruiser, when played as designed, that will cover a large span of game time and a great many game events.

You should always keep back ten minutes after the end of the session proper to do the end of session activities. Failure to do this, or rushing this, may lead to a breakdown of the game's reward system (the way that fate points support players for doing things that make the game interesting) and the game's flag system (the way that character goals allow players to say what they want the game to be about).

End of the Session

1. Award FP based on the session's events
2. Award each player 1 XP
3. Allow players to spend XP to improve the ship
4. Allow players to spend XP to change and/or advance their character's stats
5. Allow players to change their characters goals (as they see fit)
6. Allow the players to collectively agree changes to the ship's goal

Between Sessions

This section describes what the GM is expected to do between sessions, in the form of explicit instructions for lightweight preparation.

Design Note This process is designed to take no more than an hour per session – often less. Taking longer than this is explicitly discouraged – it’s not the GM’s job to make the whole game work. A key skill in sustainable GMing is preparing only as much as is highly effective – no more. Developing this skill (and teaching it to others) is more valuable to the hobby than pouring your soul into endless prep work – no matter how good the results.

The process here uses the “Fronts” approach pioneered by Apocalypse World and refined by its various clones, in particular Dungeon World. Advice on making good fronts can be found in both of those texts; the latter is free online. The steps below spell out a specific order of between-session work, and give some advice specific to StarCruiser.

1. Prune fronts

Prune your fronts – remove spent ones (and spent threats within fronts).

2. If needed, make new fronts

Gather up things that threaten the PCs, or characters that the PCs care about, or characters and things that it is the duty of the PCs to safeguard (e.g. because they’re a Navy ship and Naval Command has tasked them to protect them). Capture those threats in fronts.

- Use the Future box to summarize what will happen eventually if the PCs don’t intervene (or do so ineffectually).
- Use the Stakes boxes to write down a few questions about what you, . Commit to only answering those questions through play (rather than in your prep).
- Use the Cast list to capture the main NPCs involved in the Front, and their stats (as advised in the “After the Arc is Defined” rules in Chapter 5. If they are important enough to constitute a threat, put their name and goal in a Threat box.
- Use the threat Counts to capture how the threats will progress their plans/impulses if the PCs don’t intervene.

Aim to have, at the start of any given session (apart from the first), at least two, preferably three threats that are in position to impinge on the PCs in their current situation. After all, it’s to this that you will look when you need something new to hit the PCs with.

Don’t forget that the PC ship is a front. Every good game involves trouble “at home” as well as out there.

3. Advance existing fronts

Look at each front, and see if you can expand it. Have any of the counts progressed during play? Might some of them progressed offscreen, i.e. while the players have been ignoring them? Some hints:

- How have NPCs advanced their goals?
- How have NPCs changed their plans (e.g. after being thwarted by PC action)?
- Have any NPCs had a glimpse of some new opportunity or object that they could make their new goal to attain?
- Have any new NPCs appeared on the scene?
- Are any about to?
- Have any planets (or their populations) changed?
- How are they about to change?

Aim for each front to have at least one active threat (otherwise, it’s dormant).

It’s worth reviewing your stakes questions at this stage, too, to see if any have been answered. If so, think about asking some more.

4. Think of opportunities for the PCs

StarCruiser, by its nature, can get quite oppressive and one-sided – the ship is haunted, the crew have the plague, and Dr Cleve has turned the planet the ship was protecting into a factory world staffed by lobotomised slaves. It’s therefore worth keeping a few ideas on hand for how you could give the PCs a helping hand, either by something they could acquire or by something an NPC could do to help them.

The Opportunities box on the Session Prep sheet is for this.

5. Check each player has something in your prep

On the Session Prep sheet, list the PCs, grouping them by player. Summarise the current goal of each PC in the second column. Then, for each, check your prep to see if you have an interesting threat or opportunity for them. If you do, note it in the third column (or at least put a tick there).

You don’t need something for every PC, but I’d suggest you aim to satisfy at least two PCs per player.

At the End of an Arc

Suspend Animation – Write down, at least in note form, the final state of the ship, characters and wider setting. This will make it easier for you to have a sequel at a later date.

Also gather up the character and ship sheets and store them safely, alongside the above notes.

Say the names of the dead – take it in turns to take a random character from the graveyard and say their name, role on the ship, how they died, and what you (as a *player*) think of who they were.

Reflect on the game – hold a brief post-mortem for the game itself – what went well, what wasn't so good, and what the top three things are that you'd do differently next game around (be that StarCruiser or something else).

5 Starting a New Game

TACHYON NETWORK BULLETIN
2352.104.02.12-1937

SENDER: Federation Exploratory Control

The Meridian-Class Survey Cruiser *Elliptical Curve* left will shortly be leaving TNET coverage on a five-year mission to seek out new life and new civilisations.

We wish them the best of luck and a steady wind, and we look forward to the stories they'll have to tell if they return.

END OF BULLETIN

Defining an Arc

Starting an arc involves several things to be created, defined or agreed. There's no set order for this – most likely which can be carried out in several iterations as you collectively home in on the game you want to play.

The GM has a major role in all this, as it will define the game that they will be running, but it is designed to be a collective effort between all the players.

Play Advice: To help prompt players with new characters, gather a large set (dozens or hundreds) of genre-suitable character portraits, distributed by diversity characteristics you seek in the game (gender, ethnicity, age...). Whenever a player is about to create a character, have them pick three portraits sight unseen, then choose one from those and create the character based on that.

1 Agree an Arc Concept

If this is the first arc with this ship and crew, you'll need to decide what they're about. Who are you?

A survey mission? A raiding party? Refugees from a doomed world?

2 Sketch One Character Each

Each player should sketch one of the three characters that they will play in the game. They don't need to come up with many details, just a general concept.

Play Advice: Unlike most RPGs, every player has three characters. So if one character proves to be unpleasant, uncooperative, or otherwise a collective problem – the other PCs can deal with them. If they push them out of an airlock, that's

bad for them, but the owning player has two more characters.

3 Describe the ship

What is your ship (and what was it supposed to be)?

A colony ship? A capital warship? A bulk ore carrier?

4 Sketch another Character Each

While doing this, think briefly about 1st versus 2nd Tier, and about relationships between the characters.

5 Sketch the Play Area

Agree a geographical domain for the arc – the region of space in which the action will happen. Play *could* drift outside this area, but both GM and players should agree

We recommend a single map sector, containing 5-10 star systems, as the default. This is something manageable.

6 Who else is Out There?

Who are your (actual or potential) allies?

Who are your enemies?

As ever, the GM should ask follow on questions whenever they might be interesting or fruitful. (GM principle – “Ask questions, use the answers”)

7 Agree the Play Area and Draw a Cluster Map

Draw a map of the cluster on a single large sheet (avoid very large paper sizes unless you have a very big table). For each system:

- Give it a name
- Discuss its general features and role within the cluster, at least the publicly known version of it
- Capture the discussion results by writing three short free-text sheets for each system, ideally right there on the star map
- Mark its known jump connections to other systems
- Consider marking it an Amber Zone (travel not advised) or Red Zone (travel prohibited). Aim for one each per cluster.

Draw some jump links (or similar) out of the cluster, and mark on the shared map roughly

where they go (“populated space”, “fringe worlds”, etc)

8 Set the Ship Goal

The players should agree on the ship's goal.

9 Sketch a Third (and final) Character Each

10 Check each Player's Character Set

The set of three each player has at this stage must have the following properties:

- At least two genders
- At least two real-world ethnic groups
- At least two characters who are substantially different in age
- At least two characters are highly driven and will naturally do things in play that follow their individual goals
- At least one character whose goals fit awkwardly or not at all with the ship's goal

11 Fill in Stats and a Goal for All Characters

Follow the “Making a Character” process, below.

12 Have Each Player Swap One Character

Each player is allowed to create three characters, but they do not get to keep all of them. They must put one of their 2nd-tiers up for “adoption” by another randomly chosen player (the character is fully created before the receiving player is known).

Once each player has chosen what character they will give up, roll 1D. On a 4+ the abandoned characters go to the player on their creator's left; on a 3-, they go to the right.

Receiving players should clarify the character's goal, because it may have made sense (in terms of agreed facts about the game world) to the creating player, but not be obvious to the receiver. The receiver may find it useful to re-write the goal in their own words, but this should be to the satisfaction of the creating player – the character has been created and now they are real!

13 (Optional) Draw a Relationship Map Including all the PCs

14 Stat Up the Ship

See “Making a Ship”, later in this chapter.

15 Introduce the Characters

They take it in turns to briefly introduce their characters, their relationships with the other PCs and the ship.

Making a Ship

The Quick-Play Version

If you want to get started quickly, better to concentrate on the characters and just take a generic ship. A factory-spec T-Class has the following Ratings:

T-Class Starcruiser –

Factory Spec

Speed	3
Stealth	2
Cargo	2
Sensors	3
Science	2
Engineering	4
Firepower	4
Resilience	4
Crew	3

Designing a Ship

If you have more time, you can design the ship as a group. Ships start with a 0 rating in Firepower, Science and Cargo, and 1 in all the others.

The players then receive 21 points *between them* to split between the ratings – these are split between the players equally, with the player with the darkest eyes taking any leftover points.

e.g. if there are four players, the player with the darkest eyes receives 6 points, the other three 5 each.

The players take it in turn to spend single points on the ship until everyone has spent all their points. 1 point spent buys 1 point in a rating. No rating may end more than 5.

The Class Name

StarCruiser is written with the assumption of the T-Class Cruiser, and indeed this is printed on the default ship sheet. It's a modular design, often extensively customized, so almost any set of ratings can be justified.

That said, if the resulting set of ratings is a long way from the default T-Class described above, you might want to give your ship a different class name

that better captures the concept - perhaps an H-class Freighter (very high Cargo) or a Meridian-class Survey Ship (very high Science).

Making a Character

Can I Play an Alien or an AI?

By default, this is discouraged. But... with the whole group's permission, there is potential for both.

Play Advice: I would suggest a maximum of one non-human character PC at any time.

Attributes

For a 1st tier, split 20 points between the attributes. No attribute may be higher than 5, or lower than 1.

For a 2nd tier, split 16 points.

(For reference, a 3rd tier character would get 12 points, giving them an average of 2 in each attribute. This is the human norm.)

Role

Choose a role that can be described in 1-3 words, and discuss briefly with the rest of the group what the role entails (and perhaps what it doesn't cover). Be willing to change the words if others don't feel that they capture what you mean.

Talents

Talents cost points – the same points that attributes cost. Having one or more Talents will therefore reduce that character's attributes compared to their Talentless peers.

Goals

Choose one goal per character.

After the Arc is Defined

Once the above is completed, it's time for the GM to go away and make some preparations for the first actual play session.

Normally, this process should take around two hours. If this is inconvenient, in that the players want to run a normal session straight after arc definition, then the GM can do just the first few steps as marked, normally in around ten minutes.

1. Start a cluster sheet for the cluster. Fill in the names of the systems.
2. Come up with two or three secret traits for each system, things that are not generally known. Write them down on the cluster sheet.
3. Sketch one NPC per system (metaphorically, the "ambassador" for that system – work on the assumption that the players will think of this character first when they think of the people in

that system). Just give them a name and a role (e.g. "violent, sanctimonious dictator") at this stage.

For the short-prep version, stop here. Carry on after the first session. If you have longer, do the following steps as well.

4. Sketch one NPC per player (minimum of three) who are on board the player's ship – "target" at least one at each player.
 - a. The targeted NPCs could be rivals, enemies, or helpers. (This is a good opportunity to flesh out the roles players have sketched, e.g. the ship's Captain could have an NPC assistant who's pretty loyal)
5. Flesh out the NPCs you've developed
 - a. List all their attributes that aren't of value 2. Name their Role(s) and list their Talents (if any).
 - b. Sketch their appearance and mannerisms (the "X but Y" trick⁴ is useful here)
 - c. Give them a clear, concrete goal (preferably one that is relevant to at least one PC – this could be common ground or put them at loggerheads) (For ambassadors, particularly likely antagonists, don't be afraid to use 1st-tier or even higher-point builds. For ship crew or likely player allies, however, try to keep to 2nd-tier stats – more, and they risk overshadowing the PCs.)

By all means make a few more notes on ideas as you come up with them, but that should basically be it for your systematic prep. Any more risks lumbering you with prep that will get in the way of fluid response to the players. Spend any extra time or energy learning to improvise better, immersing yourself in the genre, or just getting out in the world (metaphorically or physically) so you've got a broader range of experiences to draw on in the flow of the game. Read fiction, watch fiction, play games. Read other related rpgs (and storygames, and their supplements). Or go online and discuss an idea you have for the game, or a problem you've been having with the rules.

What Makes a Good Arc Setup?

One word: *threat*. A good starting situation is either full of obvious threats to the player ship (and to things that matter to its goals), or is apparently safe but full of active *hidden* threats. Both kinds of threats should have well-defined agendas and goals; both kinds of threats should be powerful enough to be very dangerous (in one way, or another); both kinds of threats should be in a position such that if the players do nothing to stop

⁴ <http://bankuei.wordpress.com/2014/01/12/improvising-npcs-x-but-y/>

them they will achieve their aims, and in doing so substantially change the cluster for the worse (in the eyes of the ship's and the PC's goals).

A few things to check, after arc prep:

- If the PCs do nothing, will terrible things soon happen (from the perspective of their goals and the ship's goal)?
- If the PCs stick around but do nothing (or are careless and ineffective), will terrible things happen *to them*?

- If the PCs are proactive, are there plausible things that the PCs can do to change the overall outcome?
 - NB this doesn't have to mean "stop it from happening", merely move it significantly in the direction of their goals

In StarCruiser, jumping in here was *always* a bad idea. The PCs just don't, necessarily, know it yet.

6 The Role of the GM

TACHYON NETWORK MULTICAST

2352.104.05.03-1426-5a

SENDER: Zero Point Command

R-PATTERN: TCG, NVY, SSA-E

BLACK BORDER

All space combat units pull out of Capella. Repeat, all combat units withdraw from the Capella system. Rendezvous at Beta Aurigae, count your dead. You've all fucked up. Again.

Fortunately for you, we got this.

END OF MESSAGE

Unlike many other modern games, the GM's role in StarCruiser is fairly open-ended. They are constrained by the rules in many ways, including the scene economy, but within scenes they have substantial latitude and responsibility.

That said, the GM is *not* wholly responsible for the progress of the game, particularly its progress at the level of scene-to-scene and beyond. That is the responsibility of the whole group, with the expectation of significant help from these rules.

No Rule Zero

These rules don't assume that the GM has authority to arbitrarily change or ignore rules. The group as a whole has that authority (how could it not?) but if it hands it all over to one person, that's its choice and its problem; it is not the requirement or expectation of these rules.

Design Note The flipside of this: these rules are built to be followed, and to provide a viable game when they (all) are. As the author, this is how I play.

The GM's Agenda

While playing StarCruiser, the GM has the following agenda. They do not have any other (mandated) role.

- Portray a galaxy full of wonder and terror
- Fill the character's lives with trouble
- Play to find out what happens

Everything you say and do at the table (and away from the table, too) exists to accomplish these three goals and no others. Things that aren't on this list aren't your goals. You're not trying to beat the

players or test their ability to solve complex traps. You're not here to let the players explore your finely crafted setting. You're not trying to kill the players (though the Scourge of Betelgeuse might be). You're certainly not here to tell everyone a pre-planned story.

Your first agenda is to **portray a galaxy full of wonder and terror**. StarCruiser is all about voyages to unknown stars, conflict over goals, and humankind alone and mostly water against terrible things in the blackness of space that are mostly teeth and eyes and disembodied thoughts. It's about men and women who are some combination of brave, naïve and marginally-informed risking their lives and sanity for the hope of well, something. Show the players this universe, and encourage them to react to it.

Filling the characters' lives with trouble means working with the players to create a world that's engaging and dynamic. Present threats, present opportunity, and throw them at the players.

The most important part of the agenda is **play to find out what happens**. Your preparation for StarCruiser sessions should **never** presume player actions. If you do, the rules will fight you – the scene-framing alone will let the players wreak havoc on your plans.

A StarCruiser game is about a setting in motion – a place with entities great and small pursuing their own goals. You'll plan out, yes, what will happen if the PCs don't get involved – but once they do that plan is at the mercy of their choices. Your job is to honestly and creatively improvise how the setting and its entities responds to what the PCs do.

The GM's Principles

Whereas the GM's Agenda tells them what they should be doing, their Principles guide them in achieving that. They are pragmatic principles, rather than moral ones, although some of the GMs who violate them are indeed terrible people.

Show mysteries at every turn

Punctuate your descriptions of places, people and things with surprising features that suggest promise and threat beyond the immediate concerns and directions of the players. This steady stream of mystery and weirdness will colour the player's experience of the StarCruiser setting in a subtle but pervasive way.

Hold Your Assets Lightly

The game universe exists to support the game that plays out; it has no other purpose. The colonists in the asteroids, the theocracy on that verdant planet, even that entire star system with its intricate android-corrupted politics – they all exist solely to support the game. If it's exciting, interesting or simply dangerous for it to implode, explode, or change in an unsettling and ultimately destructive way, then make that happen.

Put another way – the PCs and their experiences matter; the imagined universe itself doesn't matter. After the arc ends, the players will remember what happened; the NPCs you created won't.

Give Every Entity a Goal

If it thinks, it wants something. If it feels, it "wants" something. What is it?

Ask Questions, Use the Answers

As GM, you don't need to know everything about the universe. If you don't know something or you don't have an idea, ask the players and use what they say.

The simplest question is "What do you do?" After you describe something happening, or finish an NPC speech, ask an affected player "What do you do?"

If you don't know who the Chair of the Space Science Foundation is, or what she's like, ask the player who controls the chief science officer.

If you don't know whether a given PC has ever met an alien before, ask their player. Be sure to follow up with "And how did that work out?"

Reward the characters' work, but not always, and be sure to complicate it

Let the PCs achieve things. Certainly don't stymie them at every turn. Let their schemes progress, but *complicate them*. Shooting kills cyborgs, but destabilises the reactor. Raising a mob lets them

storm the governor's office, but draws the wrath of the governor's alien manipulators. Patching in the experimental hyperdrive frees them from the tyranny of jump points, but now and again it takes them where *it* wants to go.

Now and then, have one of their actions succeed in a great and uncomplicated way. Particularly do this when it obviously steamrolls over what you, as the GM, have been assuming (or hoping) will happen. This will help the players realise that they can achieve things, and keep them believing that through tough times when nothing seems to be working out.

Care about the Characters

The PCs are the protagonists of the story. Think of them like the main characters in a TV drama; cheer for their victories and lament their defeats. You're not here to push them in any particular direction, merely to participate in fiction that features them and their actions. The whole rest of the universe, along with all the NPCs, is subordinate to that aim.

Maintain technology consistency, but let the players innovate

The technology model is meant as a creative constraint, and as something that establishes a baseline of what's possible within which PCs (and NPCs) can plan. Many of the TL5 technologies, which are *not* generally available, radically change what is possible and what actions make sense: teleportation is one of these. Some (most notably human-level AI) have such radical implications for human society that they would naturally dominate the game. Let the players work freely up to TL4, but keep TL5 on a shorter leash.

Think Off-screen Too

Often, PCs do things and the consequences are obvious. Other times, however, they should do things and see should happen. The GM may smile, and write something in their notes, but say nothing. That's fine.

7 The Role of the Players

TACHYON NETWORK BULLETIN
2352.104.04.05-1816

SENDER: Father Noah Landmarke, Mental Hygiene Foundation

In the darkness of space, you can feel very alone. And being cooped up in a little tin can in a great big vacuum doesn't necessarily bring you any closer together. So remember, folks, that you're going to need to work to get along. After all, the rest of the crew are people too.

Well, most of them are.

END OF BULLETIN

The Players' Agenda

Just like the GM, the players in StarCruiser have a defined role to play. You can mix in other things (you're freer than the GM in this respect), but the game is designed to do work when you do mostly the following:

- Make your characters vivid and real
- Put your characters in situations that test them
- Play to find out who your characters are

Making your characters vivid and real means giving them comprehensible motivations, plausible emotions, and above all a sense that there is a person there under the persona.

Putting your characters in situations that test them is best achieved by pursuing their goals in the face of adversity, and in the face of conflict between their goals, the goals of the other PCs, and the goal of the ship.

To **find out who your characters are**, don't plan a "plot arc" for your character, and don't have a fixed idea of how they'll develop. Just play them in the game, making the decisions that seem best, and they'll *show* you who they are.

The Players' Principles

Set clear goals and pursue them aggressively

... but respect the other players, as *players*

You can play rough with their individual characters, as long as you remember that those characters are their only way to interact with the game.

Learn the rules, work with the rules

The rules aren't complex (relative to other roleplaying games), but they're rigid for a reason – they're a balancing tool to help all players have a share of control. Learn them and respect them.

Do note problems, do propose solutions, but understand that when you're doing so you're doing game design (and that's hard to do well).

Frame the scenes that you want to see happen

Character goals are a way to say what you want the game to be about, on a per-session and longer basis; the scene framing mechanic is a way to say what you want the game to be about *right now*.

Learn the technology model, negotiate the boundaries of the model, work within the model

StarCruiser's fixed technology model is a necessary evil. When a question of technology comes up in fantasy, historical and modern-world games, you can lean on players' common knowledge about the real world. In a science fiction game, that's not sufficient – players need to know how technology has advanced since our time.

You should become broadly familiar with the tech levels described in Appendix A. You can certainly introduce new technology, particularly during arc setup but also in scene framing. If in doubt, do this by asking the GM is such-and-such is possible and if you have one – it's part of the GM's job to keep tech consistency.

React to what happens; don't plan too much

How much is "too much"? That's something you'll have to work out. It's a skill.

Take risks, both with your characters and with your creative contributions

Yes, this can be painful (the latter particularly). But the alternative is a dull game.

Advocate for your characters (fight their corner)

... but be prepared to see them fail – often badly, sometimes terminally

Build on other player's contributions

(and don't forget that the GM is a player, too)

Provide a foil for other player's characters

Characters don't mean much in a vacuum – they need contrast in order to be visible. Help the other players by having your PCs take contrasting roles – be the weak to their strong, the rigid to their flexible, and the confused to their resolute.

In particular - make sure you talk to the other players! Frame scenes (and take actions) such that your PCs interact with other's PCs, not just with your own.

Tell the other *players* everything, and listen to everything, firewall that knowledge from your characters...

Don't keep secrets – not between yourself and another player, not between yourself and the GM. Do everything out in the open.

... but use that knowledge for better play

Use things you know, but your PCs don't, to enhance drama. Walk them blindly into the trap that you know is there. Have them say things that show they don't understand quite how bad things are.

8 Design Notes and Hacking Advice

TACHYON NETWORK BULLETIN
2352.104.05.11-1102

SENDER: Mental Hygiene Foundation

No man is an island.

~ John Donne
(Earth, 16-17C)

END OF BULLETIN

Design Goals

When working on the rules and text for StarCruiser, I keep a set of goals in mind. These say that the game should:

- π Support space adventures where the PCs travel between worlds and encounter strange and terrible things (in the vein of media like Dr Who, Battlestar Galactica, and Event Horizon) in a frightening but *hopeful* universe
- π Support "play to find out what happens" on a player-driven basis, with the GM having lots of fun things to do and only a modest extra responsibility compared to the other players
- π Support players doing mature, adult and important things with organisations and communities and emotions. Capture the reality that human emotions, social currents and cultures matter, and are not easily changed but are at the same time are not wholly chaotic and unknowable.
- π Be compatible with adult life: it is easy to manage and learn, is well-suited to video conference play, and is optimally played in arcs of 4-10 three-hour sessions. It works well with GM + 2 players, optimally with GM + 3.

You'll have to be the judge of how well the game fulfils those goals.

9 New Player Setting Briefing

Where and When Are We?

It's 2352. Mankind have colonized space, met aliens, had wars. The universe is vast, but sparsely populated because there are few habitable worlds. Most places you could go are just rocks; at best, rocks with artificial habitats sheltering a few hundred people.

One day, we'll have terraformed all of this. Only we've been saying that for nearly two hundred years, and it's wearing a bit thin.

There are aliens, but they are almost without exception bizarre, hostile, and well, alien. They don't like us, and we certainly don't like them.

We've unlocked our latent psychic powers... but a good end to a psychic's career is accommodation in a (lead-lined) padded room.

Who Are We?

You are the crew of a T-Class star cruiser, charged to (or committed to) do whatever you agreed you would do.

What Does This Look Like?

See the pictures in the book (if you have the version with pictures, which only exists as a single printout), or look at my online Pinterest boards

(<http://www.pinterest.com/alexander1382/starcruise-r-mood-board/> and <http://www.pinterest.com/alexander1382/starcruiser-key-pictures/>).

If that's not enough: white plastic, big switches, flashing lights. Starship exteriors like 1970s book covers, computer screens like the mid-80s, clothes from the 90s, starship interiors like Peter Davison era Dr Who.

Ships fire lasers that you can see. There's a lot of rainbow-coloured glow around.

Questions & Answers

Is this a Hard Science Setting?

No (see the next few answers).

Explosions in Space?

Yes.

Faster Than Light Travel

Yes.

Faster Than Light Comms

Yes... but it's flakey – video comms might take you an hour to sync the channel, and then only be stable for two or three minutes. Email/text messaging is fairly reliable as long as you stay within a few LY of a tachyon relay.

Does the Ship Need Fuel?

Most power supply (include sub-light-speed flight if you're using Tech Level 3+ reactionless engines, which you are) is provided by fusion reactors which run on hydrogen and are incredibly efficient. Most large ships have around 3 months hydrogen endurance, and more can be scraped from the atmospheres of gas giants.

Jump travel requires more than that – to generate the enormous energy pulses requires antipositron annihilation. Antipositrons are expensive – manufacturing them requires vast (planetside) particle accelerators and enormous energy input. They're bulky, too, their tiny mass dwarfed by the bulky containment devices they require.

Typical starships carry antipositron cells for 3-6 jumps.

Sentient Aliens

Yes. But they're *nasty*, or at least hated.

Sentient Aliens Among Us?

You should hope not.

Sentient Computers and Androids

No. That didn't work out. Seems like minds are for meat, and meat alone. At least not until Tech Level 5, when a great deal changes.

Appendix A – Technology Levels

TL	Name	What do they have?
0	Primitive	(reference point Europe circa 1400) Horses, metalworking, bows, cannon, agriculture, medium-scale construction, sailing ships
1	Industrial	(reference point Western Europe circa 1900) Steam engines, aircraft, combustion engine, electricity, radio and telephone, efficient firearms (e.g. rifled barrels), indirect fire artillery, surgery, antiseptics, sewers, germ theory (that, paired with sewerage, enables useful public health measures), printing press, vaccination, calculus
2	Information	(reference point Western Europe circa 1988) Computers, miniaturized electronics, computer networks, orbital rockets, satellites, nuclear power and weapons, antibiotics, industrial-scale mechanised agriculture, organ transplants, jet aircraft, armoured fighting vehicles
3	Spacefaring	Fusion power, reactionless thrust, basic genetic engineering (enhance or reduce traits, eliminate many genetic diseases, clone lifeforms), directed energy weapons, animal-level AI, cryonic suspended animation, sealed colonies on airless or otherwise hostile worlds, crude nerve-computer interfaces, regenerative medicine (regrow lost limbs and organs), self-sufficient arcologies
4	Starfaring	Default level for player civilisation (and dominant civilisation, if different) Jump drive, gravity control (so artificial gravity aboard starships, and sustained acceleration safe beyond ~3G), advanced genetic engineering (design new species), terraforming (within strict constraints), (limited) technological editing of living minds, effective nerve-computer interfaces (feels like a part of you), psychic screening and training, plasma weapons, (low-bandwidth) tachyon comms
5	Hyperadvanced	One or more of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> π AI to human level (and beyond) π Bioarchitecture (create new lifeforms from non-carbon substrates) π Teleportation π (limited) time manipulation (e.g. stasis field) π Force fields π Jump point manipulation (creation, destruction) π Arbitrary terraforming π Planetary architecture (construct ringworld, Dyson Sphere etc) π Zero-point power and weapons π Manipulation of consciousness (e.g. transfer subjective consciousness into another body)
6	Transcendent	Everything from TL5, perfected, and all the (incomprehensible) implications of a perfect synthesis of all that