

Starblazer Adventures

Rollenspiel Almanach Review

Review by Werner Hartmann, 21 March 2009 (translated by Sarah Newton)

Starblazer Adventures describes itself as “Rock & Roll Space Opera”, meaning an optimistic science fiction filled with cinematic heroes and villains, but lacking an emphasis on “hard” science. The genre has its roots in the era from the 1960s to the 1980s, although it can’t deny its “Pulp” forebears from the 1930s such as Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, the Lensmen, and Captain Future.

The *Starblazer Adventures* system is a variant on FATE 3.0, found in Evil Hat’s *Spirit of the Century* and which won’t be detailed here. Up until now the book has been only available in PDF format for \$30, but a print version has been announced for 2009.

The setting presented in *Starblazer Adventures* is based on a little-known British comic published by DC Thomson from 1979 to 1991, and not on the animated series *Starblazers* (also known as Space Battleship Yamato). This series contained works by various authors which established recurring elements in the shape of specific heroes, organizations, and villains, but which didn’t really form an integrated setting in the classic sense. *Starblazer Adventures* solves this problem by gathering up these various adventures and plot threads within the framework of a very broad “history of the future”, and dividing it into three thematically and stylistically self-contained sections: “Trailblazers”, an era when humanity is sending its first expeditions to the stars; “Empire”, an era of conflict between aliens and humanity’s first interstellar Imperium; and “Cosmopolitan”, when humanity is only one of thousands of intelligent species belonging to a great galactic civilization. However, the actual setting description only takes up a few dozen of the over 600 pages of *Starblazer Adventures*, although the book is packed with all kinds of excerpts and examples from the comics. This isn’t really a problem, as *Starblazer Adventures* is first and foremost a toolbox, a paintbrush and palette for players and gamemasters to work together to create their own science fiction campaign world. Nor is *Starblazer Adventures* stuffed with endless pages of stats sheets for weapons, tools, starships and other main ingredients of every SF setting. There is indeed a whole range of examples for everything from laser pistols to star cruisers, but critical here are the rules and guidelines for making all these toys yourself! In this, even more than *Spirit of the Century*, *Starblazer Adventures* follows the principle that EVERYTHING can be treated and described as a character. In *Starblazer Adventures* this is true even for whole planets and star systems, and works brilliantly.

Like in *Spirit of the Century*, a *Starblazer Adventures* character consists of Skills (which in FATE includes things that other systems would treat as attributes, such as Might, ie Strength), which have a numeric value such as +0 or +5, Stunts (particular modifications or expansions of the things you can do with Skills, such as the ability to carry more weight than the character's strength normally allows), and Aspects (describing the personality, history, and particular quirks of a character, such as "Trained by Colonel 'One Shot' Carter). This is rounded out by Stress scores, showing how much "Stress" characters can withstand, divided into both mental and physical Stress and with problems dealt with by so-called "Consequences" (such as a broken hand or a black eye). *Starblazer Adventures* treats Stress somewhat more drastically than *Spirit of the Century*, in that a hit which deals 3 points of Stress actually fills out 3 Stress boxes, and not only the third one from the left! *Starblazer Adventures* also expands this list of essential characteristics with a small but important factor: the "Scale" of a given character. What this means quickly becomes clear when you consider that in *Starblazer Adventures* interactions between characters can include a human being in a space suit on one side and a Vacuum Whale the size of Manhattan on the other! The important thing with Scale is that without special aids (such as a suitable Stunt), two opponents who differ in Scale by more than two points of magnitude can't really injure one another. Moreover, *Starblazer Adventures* introduces a very helpful "Time Increments" table, which allows you to clarify to what extent a successful Skill result allows you to influence the duration of actions or events.

When it comes to selecting appropriate Skills, Stunts, and Aspects for a desired character, *Starblazer Adventures* offers a whole list of example professions and character archetypes, each described with their typical qualities, but in no way intended as "Character Classes" or "Career Paths"; ultimately they serve just as inspiration, and to a certain extent to illustrate the implied settings.

In character generation, in contrast to *Spirit of the Century*, Skills are purchased with points, of which you have 15, 20, or 35, depending on the "grittiness" of the campaign and characters. It costs one point for each point of Skill you buy: so, one point for an Average (+1) Skill, four points for a Great (+4). As in *Spirit of the Century*, for the most part *Starblazer Adventures* determines results by totalling the numeric score of a Skill (perhaps modified by Stunts or Aspects) with a dice roll, and then comparing the result to values on the so-called "Ladder", or with the corresponding result rolled by an opponent. Unlike *Spirit of the Century* however *Starblazer Adventures* doesn't use FUDGE dice (these are four six-sided dice marked with +/-/0/+/-/0), but simply uses two D6 of different colours. The results of one are treated as negative, the other as positive, and the results just added together, giving a value between -5 to +5 - and not the -4 to +4 you get with FUDGE dice. This doesn't just increase the range of possible results, but also gives a flatter probability curve than you get with the ordinary 4dF. In practice this leads to more extreme, even more "dramatic", dice rolls, and also more clearly-defined high and low results, and less results around zero. Previously, the "tightness" of 4dF often worked badly for me and my players, as the narrower range coupled with a probability

curve which meant that 63% of throws came out between -1 and +1 took a great deal of excitement out of rolling the dice. Viewed in this way, this looks like a welcome solution to our little problem with the FATE engine!

I think it's definitely worth buying *Starblazer Adventures*, in the first place because of its rules expansions and modifications and their examples. By that I mean in particular the above-mentioned rules expansions for creating extraterrestrial characters, mutants (including psionic abilities), androids and robots, starships and other vehicles, monsters, planets, organizations, etc, which is done mostly by introducing a few additional or alternative Skills and Stunts, as well as some suggestions for suitable Aspects - and you're good to go! Optional rules include cooperative character generation (already known from *Spirit of the Century*), both for characters in the campaign you're going to play, and / or cooperative creation of the setting itself, so that players can work together to create the basics of the world in which they want to play. Indeed, for the gamemaster there's even the possibility of using the principles of Stress and Consequences in the management of his campaign, so that certain player actions entail so-called "Plot Stress", which then ultimately lead to various Plot Consequences. This attempt to transfer a core rules principle onto the meta-level of plot development strikes me as something desirable, and which may also prove helpful to many a gamemaster, and maybe even to beginners in the job.

While the actual setting of *Starblazer Adventures* isn't worth buying the book for, it is very colourful. All in all it provides a broad and well-grounded canvas on which a gamemaster can present his own creations without difficulty, without having to concern himself with deep background details. Perhaps more than for *Spirit of the Century* it's true that players who don't enjoy creating part of the campaign world themselves might be better served by a different RPG. *Starblazer Adventures* offers a cornucopia of ideas combined with a pleasantly simple and yet exceptionally versatile system. However, buy-in from both gamemaster AND players is essential if *Starblazer Adventures* is to achieve its full potential.

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Starblazer Adventures is written by Chris Birch, David Donachie, Stuart Newman and Douglas Nicol, published in 2008 by British RPG creators Cubicle7.