

There's Only One Universe ...and How It Came to Be That Way by Gerry Klug

My first assignment upon being hired by SPI was to assist in the development of the science fiction role-playing game, *Universe*. Being a veteran of role-playing, I was intrigued with the possibility of being in a position to "fix" all the ill written and illogical rules I felt had been perpetrated on the science fiction role-playing community beforehand. When I started on the project, John Butterfield, the game's designer, had done much of the preliminary work already and what I saw excited me. Here was a science fiction role-playing game which seemed to solve the problems its predecessors had created.

John and I discussed what we felt the game should do and contain, and we came up with a number of items which we knew should be specifically addressed: 1) the rules should be tightly written so even a non-role-player could attempt to play the game without the need for a consultation every other page, 2) the game should be playable shortly after purchase, so it had to have an adventure included, and 3) everything the rules implied could be done with a skill or in a situation should be defined and delineated so as to make life easy for the GM. We feel we've succeeded and have created a game which is at least possible for a novice GM to pick up and referee, and at the same time, designed a game which stands up to comparison with any other in its field.

What should the veteran role-player look for when he purchases *Universe*? Among the many systems which the game features are two which stand out as unique: the Skills and World Generation systems. Both of these provide information and utilities not found anywhere else in role-playing game design.

When John was writing the Skills section, he was very concerned that the phrase, "up to the GM's discretion" did not become a catchall cop-out for us when we couldn't explain something. This concern led John to use a *task* system, whereby each skill has a set list of tasks which the skilled individual may attempt to perform and, if successful, yield specific results and/or information.

Each task is defined by a formula which figures the percentage chance a character has of performing it. The formula takes into account the proficiency of the character with the skill and any applicable characteristic of the character which may affect the outcome. Various modifiers may be applied also. Therefore, even characters with the same skill level may have a slightly different chance to succeed in the same task due to differing characteristics.

This task system allows the GM to rationalize any other situation which the player feels his character's skill should apply to. By comparing the unknown situation to the examples given, the GM may derive a chance of success (if any) which would apply in the situation and be fair. The GM is not left out in the dark attempting to define what a certain skill means (you don't have to have a degree in planetology to use the skill).

Also unique is the way in which skills are improved. Whenever a character uses a skill, percentile dice are rolled. Each skill has a range of several numbers indicated which add an experience point to the character's skill if one of those numbers appears on either die. These points are accumulated and cashed in later on to raise the skill by one level. In most cases, the numbers needed combine in such a manner that a successful use of the skill will, more often than not, gain an experience point whereas an unsuccessful use would not. Experience Points are not arbitrarily awarded in the game (unlike many other role-playing games) by the GM; the players themselves keep track of their advancement. There are guidelines for skills' use so none can be over-used in a manner designed to simply gain skill points.

The World Generation system is interesting enough to play as its own game. Science fiction role-playing has been crying out for a good, simple, complete and easy World (including both planets and moons) Generation system for a long time, and *Universe* may have the answer. In my experience as a *Traveller* referee, I always felt the need for an easy system for rapid star system generation. Often the players would travel in unexpected directions, and I would have to stop the games for long periods of time while I rolled dice. Needless to say, this was very boring for the players.

The *Universe* World Generation system is three tiered so that first, a cursory generation may be accomplished to give broad generalizations of the system and its worlds; second, a detailed look is then established for each world's geography and planetology; and third, specific details are given about settlements, resources, spaceports, law levels, etc. While the highly detailed examination of each world is lengthy, the cursory glance takes 5 minutes and gives both the GM and the players enough information to make such basic decisions as whether or not to stay and explore this system, what there is of interest, and so forth. This quick glance assumes all the players have done is hyper-jumped into the system and are examining it from the jump point with their scanners.

The World Generation system also details how to actually draw the worlds in a system. Rather than simply generating a series of numbers, the *Universe* system helps you portray the geographic features of the world on a *world log*. The world logs contain graphic layouts of the various size worlds as viewed from both the north and south poles. The GM generates the details of the world and draws in each *environ* (a space on the world which is a square 4000km across) the geographic type which exists there. As each *environ* is drawn in, the visual picture of the world begins to take form, and the GM mixes and matches *enviros* to form the kind of world picture he desires.

Along with Skills and World Generation, the rules for *Universe* detail Character Generation, Equipment, Robots, Character

Action, Space Travel, Creatures, NPC's and gives a full adventure to start the GM and the players right off, once they've invested their hard earned money in the game.

Included in the *Universe* package (both basic set and boxed version) is an Interstellar Display which details all stars located within a 30-light year radius of Sol (our sun). Each star is located using a Cartesian coordinate (X, Y, and Z) system, and its astronomical data is detailed. Various binary and trinary stars are also detailed with their configurations and data noted. All of the major stars' distances (in light years) are also given in a road-map style matrix (hm, let's see; the distance from Alpha Centuri to Sigma Draconis is...) for easy travel planning. All of *Universe* (for now) takes place within this sphere of stars and the GM generates the characteristics for each himself. Thus, while the map would remain the same from campaign to campaign, each GM's details of the stars would differ, creating interesting comparisons.

The Display itself is a work of art, being visually stunning as well as absolutely practical for play. We at SPI are wondering whether *any* map of its kind is really accessible to the public at this time, or do we have the only one? Many people have mentioned they would buy the map just for itself, gaining the information it contains. Alone it would be a valuable addition to a GM's science fiction source library.

Concern about the problems facing novice players or GM's when they picked up *Universe* for the first time was expressed often during the project, but especially in regards to the Adventure Guide. *Universe* has three rules booklets: the Gamesmaster's Guide (containing the rules), an Adventure Guide (containing creatures, non-player characters, and the adventure), and *DeltaVee* (the spaceship combat system). In the Adventure Guide we gave the fledgling GM as much guidance by example as we had room for. A crucial element for any beginning GM is the creation of other people with whom the characters interact. The list of 40 non-player characters provides the GM with examples of the myriad kinds of people to place in the characters' path. Some are deadly, some serious, some humorous, some inconsequential, but all interesting and, I hope, inspirational. GM's may use these NPC's straight out of the booklet as they are or change them to fit individual tastes. It is through the GM's non-player characters that the players most directly interact with the GM, which may be the single most enjoyable element of role-playing.

Also detailed in the Adventure Guide are various creatures. With the laws of probability being what they are, there is no way we could have listed every kind of alien creature explorers might find outside our solar system, and our list of 40 doesn't pretend to include all possibilities. What it does do, however, is set up an easily adapted system of mix-and-match powers which the GM can use to create creatures of his very own, and

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he is encouraged to do so. The creatures are very detailed; they are *not* broad generalizations which leave you with the feeling you've just read a text on basic zoology. We've gone in for visual and tactile descriptions rather than classifications, which will help the GM to referee them and the players to relate to them.

The rules were written with the beginning role-player in mind. No set of role-playing rules is easy; many people are intimidated by the "oh my god, it's as long as a book!" feeling they receive when they first pick it up. Our stated purpose, however, was to write rules that anyone could understand. Avoiding role-playing jargon as much as possible, we tried to say things in plain English (with the help of our editors), and say them as succinctly as possible.

The novice role-player who wants to try *Universe* should start out by leisurely reading

through the rules and examining the Interstellar Display and other aids provided. If he intends to GM, he should read the enclosed adventure, checking back to the rules whenever the descriptions of characters or situations therein raise questions. He should gather his group of players together for an evening before they actually play and let them see the Gamesmaster's Guide, showing them the sections on Character Action, Skills, and Character Generation in particular. Then they should use the personal combat rules and run a firefight with the characters provided in the adventure.

This approach will solve two problems: it will get them through a personal combat situation, which is often the hardest system to learn, and it will familiarize them with the characters they will play in the adventure. Each player should then choose a character from those provided and agree when to meet again. If they can procure a copy of the rules

to read before play begins, so much the better. The fledgling GM should spend any intervening time becoming conversant with the *encounter* systems (character vs. non-player character, character vs. creature), the story line of the adventure, and the world on which the adventure takes place.

When all meet again to play out the adventure, it should become clear what problems have arisen which should be discussed then, before any misunderstandings take place. The first play-through is going to be very rough and all concerned will undoubtedly miss rules, misinterpret rules, and forget about rules. These are all necessary happenings and the evening should not be billed as anything else except a fun time for all.

If the GM has succeeded in sparking a little interest in the players, he should have them back over to play out other scenarios in the star system the adventure provides while he starts creating his own *Universe*. ■ ■
