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Tales from the Vasty Deep  
A Role Playing Game of Human Expansion

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Glendower:

I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

Hotspur:

Why, so can I, or so can any man;

But will they come when you do call for them?

Henry The Fourth, Part I Act 3, scene 1, 52-54

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## Humans in Space

Humanity, after wrecking its home planet, began moving into the depths of space. At first, it was small stations in space and research bases on Luna and Mars. Then the stations began getting larger and full-blown colonies erupted on moons of the outer planets. Eventually, humans spread out from Sol System into neighboring space, after the development of craft that would make relatively short work of the vast distances required to travel between star systems.

Throughout all of this, humans continued on as humans had for the millennia prior. Most simply pursued modest goals of having enough to provide a modicum of security for themselves and their families. Some pursued grandiose goals of changing the course of history in some way for the better. And then there were those who acted out of base desires and without regard for other people.

There are, in the vast, sprawling collection of human habitations, those whose hearts are black and twisted. There are simple thugs and con artists, trying to wrest from others using force or guile. There are corrupt politicians mismanaging affairs for personal gain. There are company managers cutting corners, trying to increase profits at the expense of

employees and customers alike. There are organized crime groups trying to leverage power where they can. And there are the corporate overlords, with their hooks solidly set in political circles and crime circles and business circles, twisting things to their advantage with no concern for the masses.

There exists, however, a government agency that is largely invisible, unknown to almost everybody, with the mission to root out corruption wherever it can be found. The agency is funded privately, maintaining a bevy of corporations it uses for cover and moneymaking. It can draw on governmental resources in a limited, roundabout fashion when needed. Mostly, however, it acts on its own and its agents are given wide latitude in dealing with problems.

This game is about the stories of those agents, those people who, spirit-like, can be summoned from the depths of space to help.

#### Characters:

The characters in the game are those troubleshooters who venture forth into the vasty deep of space to where humans have wandered, charged with helping provide law and order where governmental reach is limited. Part secret agents, part wild west sheriffs, part cavalry to the rescue, the PCs are often the only hope for good people in lawless reaches of space.

And they have no badges.

These protagonists, or Protagonist Characters, should be created with an eye on creating stories. They should have strengths and weaknesses in both abilities and personality. These rules have been created with that in mind. Characters will be rated as to basic abilities, then as to what skills they possess. The players will then have to provide the basics of the characters' personalities and what makes them tick.

There are four steps in creating a Protagonist Character.

## Step One:

First, a player must decide what sort of career a character is pursuing. The Bureau has use for a variety of job skills, so there is no one skill set for its agents. PCs can come from military or law enforcement or industry or management or service sector or...well, from most any line of work. The player must write a paragraph about the character's work background.

## Step Two:

Second, the player has to describe the character's abilities, in broad, general terms and in terms of more specific skills. This description includes ratings that are used in the story resolution process. PCs may be rated (4) Mediocre, (5) Fair, (6) Good, or (7) Great at the outset.

The first measure of ability involves Talent Fields. These measure abilities at the broadest level. The four Talent Fields include Technical Talent, Academic Talent, Interpersonal Talent, and Physical Talent. An average rating is (5) Fair. The player has 22 "points" to distribute among the Talent Fields, with the number of points assigned corresponding to the numbers associated with the ratings: assigning four points to a Talent Field garners a (4) Mediocre rating, for example.

In addition to Talent Fields, PCs are possessed of specific abilities or skills. Each skill or ability is tied to one of the Talent Fields, which governs the ratings for the skills and abilities associated with it. The player will assign the character eight abilities or skills, with at least one such in each Talent Field.

## List of sample skills:

### Technical skills—

astrogation

piloting

demolition

system operations

system repair  
first aid

Academic skills—

administration  
science  
language  
culture  
gambling  
medicine

Interpersonal skills—

bureacracy  
etiquette  
disguise/deception  
diplomacy  
negotiation/persuasion

Physical skills—

acrobatics/tumbling/parkour  
forgery  
brawling  
weapons  
stealth  
sport

Step Three:

Next, the player has to decide on the motivations that drive the character, those things that led to the character become an agent for the Bureau and take up a life of instellar troubleshooter. The player should decide on a Prime motivation, then one or two other motivations. These motivations should not be so broad as to make them applicable to most any action the character takes (e.g., “make the world a better place”);

each should be fairly limited so as to apply to specific circumstances that crop up with some regularity.

These motivations allow for a player to “bump” up the effort involved in a specific test or contest. The PC is assumed to be highly impassioned about the specific effort being made, intensely focused and, yes, motivated, so that the effort made exceeds normal expectations and capabilities.

#### Step Four:

Lastly, the character should write a paragraph describing the character’s personality. It’s important that the description not only provide the player with a snapshot of the Pc’s personality, but that it conveys a good understanding to the other players.

This, too, can have some effect during play. First, PCs can encounter other characters that take a strong liking to a character based on similar personality traits or quirks. That makes them more likely to assist the PC in some fashion. Next, other players can acknowledge good play of a PC personality and award a Grace Point that can be used to gain a benefit in the narrative at a later point; all of the other players and the GM have to agree on the award of the point. Grace points are powerful, so should be awarded sparingly.

#### Example of Character Creation:

Jonathon “Jack” Thorne is a pilot. He spent some time in a small, corporate security force where he learned to pilot small craft, taking pride in being able to jockey any new type of craft that the company sent his way. He even learned how to help fix things when they went bad.

Jack’s Talent Fields and skills sort out as follows:

Technical Skills:       (7) Great  
    piloting  
    astrogation

systems op (small craft)  
systems repair (general systems)

Academic Skills: (4) Mediocre  
gambling

Interpersonal Skills: (5) Fair  
negotiation/persuasion

Physical Skills: (6) Good  
sport (low G handball)  
acrobatics

Jack decided to sign on with the Bureau when recruited because the corporation he was working for wasn't operating on the up and up and he felt frustrated that he was associated with it with few options to leave. He'd much rather be helping people than helping exploit them. His Prime Motivation is that of wanting to help people get a fair chance when dealing with the corporations that dominate society. He also wants to give a boost to those who have few resources in their struggles to build their lives. Plus, he wants to see bad corporate bosses get comeuppance.

Jack tends to run his mouth when he gets anxious. Tense situations often bring out rolling commentary from him. When all is relaxed, he's much more laid-back and speaks in a low-key manner. It takes quite a bit to get him riled, too. He's more likely to shrug off rude comments and other mild provocations than get upset.

Resolution Process:

Everything that happens in play results in a narrative. The resolution process is designed to help guide that narrative, with the strengths of the weaknesses of the PCs brought into play in a measured fashion. Everything a character does results in a bit of story—a snippet—being added to the ongoing tale of what's happening. Whether that snippet involves good news for a PC or a bit of hardship for the group, the details get worked out by the players directly for each snippet.

If a character wins a poker jackpot, it gets described in a snippet. If the character gets walloped by an evil henchman and knocked unconscious, it arrives as a snippet. When that character regains consciousness later with a headache, that's part of a snippet. If the character pilots a starship through an asteroid field, that also appears in a snippet (or several snippets). Everything in the game is designed around providing information for the story being created one snippet at a time.

The resolution process, at its simplest, compares the abilities the PCs can bring to bear on a challenge with the difficulty of the challenge as determined by the GM, and then, using the results of that comparison and input from the GM, the player of the PC involved gets to provide a description of how it played out. For example, a PC wanting to break into a locked storage container tries to hack into the computerized lock system. The PC's abilities with computer security systems would be opposed by the design of the locking system, with a variety of results possible based on that comparison.

The Scale and Descriptors:

There are nine ratings on the scale used in the game. A character's Talent Fields and skills/abilities use this rating ladder, as do the Challenge Difficulties set by the GM in play. Each step on the scale has a number and descriptor associated with it. The descriptors provide a measure of the rating at a glance.

- 1) Awful
- 2) Bad
- 3) Poor
- 4) Mediocre
- 5) Fair
- 6) Good
- 7) Great
- 8) Excellent
- 9) Amazing

All of the skills or abilities associated with a Talent Field are not

automatically possessed by a character. If a character attempts to use a skill or ability that the character doesn't have, the Talent Field rating is used in place of the skill rating, though at a reduced rating. Some skills can't be attempted without actual training. Others can be attempted with a one-, to-, or three-step reduction of the Talent Field rating.

The Basic Process:

1) The player decides what the PC is going to attempt and tells the GM. The GM asks questions to clarify the details, discusses the challenge as the PC would understand it, and then assesses the difficulty of the challenge.

2) The player then describes the effort of the PC in narrative terms, offering a snippet of prose. This should describe everything the PC is doing/using to increase the odds of success.

3) The GM then compares the efforts of the PC to the difficulty and reports how effective the PC's efforts are relative to the challenge.

4) The player then finishes the narrative for that effort, using the GM's assessment to guide it.

Effectiveness:

Just because a character attempts something doesn't mean the character will automatically succeed. After all, conflict and challenge is the stuff of drama and interest! The comparison of the character's effort and the difficulty presented by the situation helps to highlight what situations provide the most complications and drama. Here's how it plays out:

Character effort > Challenge Difficulty by 4 steps or more — unqualified success (Yes!)

Character effort > Challenge Difficulty by 1 to 3 steps — success with minor complication (Yes, but...)

Character effort = Challenge Difficulty or < Difficulty by 1 step — success with major complication (Yes, BUT...)

Character effort < Challenge Difficulty by 2 to 4 steps — failure (No)



Character effort < Challenge Difficulty by 4 or more steps — catastrophic failure (No, and furthermore...)

So, a character making a (5) Fair effort when confronted with a challenge that requires a (6) Good effect is a step below the Challenge Difficulty. The character is successful, though with a major complication cropping up (or a couple of minor complications).

#### Modifying Effort:

A lot of things can affect that comparison, however, to tilt the odds of success more in the PCs' favor.

A character can gain an assist from another character. If another character has an ability or skill that can provide aid in some fashion and is in a place to offer that aid, then the acting character can gain a bonus on the effort scale. This bonus can range from one to three steps. For example, if a PC is attempting to persuade a company executive to sign off on the release of some critical goods, the PC may have asked another executive to put in a good word on her behalf—and that could provide a bonus to the PC when the negotiations come to a close.

A character can try to do something to gain a bonus on the critical attempt. This also can garner one to three steps on the scale. Say a character alerted a guard when trying to break into a storage locker. The player figures the guard is going to be better in a fight than the PC, so works to lure the guard into a cluttered storeroom where the PC can ambush the guard—that can provide a bonus to the attack and provide the PC with an advantage.

A character can benefit from a Motivation. If the situation involves one of the PC's Motivations directly, then a bonus of one to three steps is possible. If it's the PC's Prime motivation, then two or three steps will be gained; if one of the other motivations, then one or two steps will be gained.

#### Saving Grace:

A character may also play a Grace point. Grace points are used to alter the results of an attempted action, if those results would be poor. The result, when a Grace point is played, is the same as if the character's effort matched the challenge exactly—success with major complication. The player has to narrate something extraordinary that saved the character from failing.

Add to the Narrative:

When the results of an effort are known, it's then up to the GM to figure out complications or catastrophes and tell the player. The player then is charged with offering the detailed narrative bits that flesh out the scene—how the character acted and what went well and what went awry. The players provide the snippets that star their PCs.