Bootleggers

Threeforged

Table of Contents

> It don't matter which planet ya' get to; there is always somethin' folks want that they ain't allowed to have. Or somethin' they ain't supposed to know about, or do, or sometimes even be.
>
> That's where my crew an' I come in.
>
> We bring folks what they ain't 'supposed' to be brought. Or get 'em outta where they ain't welcome. No judgment from us, as long as the payment is good.
>
> How can ya' pay? Well now... could be ya' got somethin' we can sell, or trade. Could be ya' got somethin' to upgrade or outfit our ship, or one of the crew for that matter. Could be we'll let ya' just owe us one, if it seems like we can trust ya'. Always good to have friends out here in the Big Ol' Black. Now, what is it you were after, exactly?

Introduction

Welcome to Bootleggers, a tabletop role-playing about making a living in the future of humankind. A free living, that is. Even though humanity is slowly expanding out through the galaxy, most people still live their whole lives on one lonely planet. A bunch of them are probably even satisfied with that. But that kind of life isn't for you and your crew. Not when you can get out there in the 'Big Ol' Black' and see all the crazy, dangerous, beautiful things which are out there.

How did we get here?

Well now, that's a deep question. You probably mean the history of the Big Ol' Black. Hmm. The best place to start is probably the 21st century by the Earth calendar.

First, somebody finally cracked fusion power. That gave folks a LOT more juice than they used to have. There were lots of things that fusion power let folks do, but the most important ones came one after the other.   First off, people made cheap, easy superconductors. Then it turns out if you run a current through a superconductor, you mess around with local gravity. Seems that's a big deal, because pretty soon some clever folks found a way to exploit that link between EM fields and gravity. Enough power, and you can make gravity bend around you — bent enough to get moving fast. Faster than light, as it happens.

No buzzing cities at 'warp 9' though. The tech doesn't work as well near a gravity well. It's something about 'a rubber sheet that's already stretched needing more juice to stretch it further'.   All that opened up exploring nearby stars and planets. Combine that with the emerging nanotech revolution happening at about the same time, and soon enough we had Terraforming. It's funny how only the

historians had any idea of what that meant for the future.

It had been a few generations since humanity had really had a frontier, see? A place where people could go and make a truly fresh start. No rules but the ones you make. No people except the ones you want to bring with you. Various groups started claiming planets as their own. There wasn't as much arguing and warring about this as you might expect. Space is BIG. You could always pick someplace further out to make your home. Launch your T-Form payload a few years ahead of your people-mover and the planet would be just about ready for you and yours by the time you got there.

A lot of national economies collapsed, back then. Not enough people were willing to stick around doing a boring nine-to-five job when a whole new start was waiting for them. Of course, a few nations started cracking down on emigration. Some were even pretty successful. Now those nations are the ones without many children out in the Big Ol' Black. That brings us close enough to the now.

What's out there now?

Short answer? Everything. Of course there were official colonies from the nations that could afford it. The bigger corporations made their own colonies too, though they usually didn't call 'em that at first. A few of those nations and corps claim whole systems and even regions of space as their own now.

Religious folks were what you might call 'early adopters', too. Heaven-on-Earth hadn't worked out for most of them, so they thought they'd try another planet. All manner of starry-eyed visionaries moved out with whoever they could convince. Communists, Objectivists, Anarchists, you-name-its. They've all got, or at least had, a colony of their own out there somewhere.

A surprising number of colonies were started by folks saying 'It'll be just like the place we're leaving, only you'll get to start over.' The siren of the Big Ol' Black sings many songs.

What can our technology do these days? Well, the answer to that is pretty complicated too. Research and experimentation hasn't slowed down out in the Big Ol' Black. It has fragmented though. Back on Earth, everybody had access more-or-less the same knowledge. It seems like every colony out here advanced that knowledge in a different direction. You'll have deep and meaningful conversations with intelligent machines. You'll get specially built or grown parts to upgrade your body. You'll see weapons that make you doubt we deserve to be called 'humanity'. You'll tap into a euphoric group-consciousness that makes you think about leaving notions like 'humanity' behind you. Any damn thing, really. This tech isn't shared too often or quickly either. We can move ships faster than light, but not our transmissions.

Aliens? Nope. Of course there are rumors, but it's always 'a friend-of-a-friend saw something'. No one credible has ever claimed to be an eye witness to honest-to-god aliens or even their leftovers.

What does a bootlegger crew do?

They get by as best they can. That probably seems like a poor answer, but it's the only answer that is true for all of them. With nanotech fabrication and the resources of a virgin planet, the colonists don't

suffer much from scarcity. Most bootleggers make a profit from selling what people aren't allowed to have. Sometimes that's physical stuff. Sometimes it's info, or entertainment. Whatever the case, the bootleggers are likely to be criminals in most of the places they go. They deal with the powerful and the poor; the executive and the exile.

Why do they do it? Well, some say it's for the money. Some say they are running from problem or a threat. After a while though, most of them do it because they have seen just how much is out there in the Big Ol' Black and they can't imagine going back to being trapped on a planet.

Characters

So, we like to say we're the good guys, but you know that's not strictly the truth. We wouldn't be out here doing this shit just for funsies.

Most of us are here 'cuz we can't really be there: (Roll a six-sided die, or just choose one that sounds interesting.)

1	We don't like others.
2	Others don't like us.
3	We have issues.
4	Someone wants us dead.
5	We done some'in' pretty bad.
6	We're too good for the likes of them.

These are your reasons for being out in the Big Ol' Black: build a background and a goal which makes sense for the reason.

We don't like others

> The big black seems to have a whole lot of them running things. You don't like those sort of people for some reason. Who are they? Why don't you like them? What would it take to get them out of power?

Others don't like us

> Your people have been put down for generations and you are not going to take it any more. Who are your people? Why don't they like you? What would it take to get you into power?

We have issues

> Someone did something you think needs avenged. It was not necessarily against you, but you are fighting this wrong. What happened? Who do you blame? How do you avenge?

Someone wants us dead

> You have personally offended someone with the power to end your life. Who are they? What did

you do? How do you escape?

We done some'in' pretty bad

You have committed some breach of the peace somewhere bad enough that they are still looking for you. You can have a specific crime or just be a general criminal. Who's looking for you? What do they think you did? How do you fix it?

We're too good for the likes of them

You were ahead of your time in some way; and are not good at suffering fools gladly. What was the last straw for you? How do you regain respect?

When you like, take aim at this goal and make yourself a plan. The GM ain't gonna make it easy, though. It's not their responsibility to roll out the red carpet for ya.

Divide up the roles as you like — someone gotta be cap'n, but the others are up to you. One player should stand aside and play the GM; they're in charge of everything outside the ship. You'll need a bunch of six-siders; give a dozen to the Captain.

NOTE	Task resolution is Apocalypse World crossed with Blackjack. If you beat the GM without going over the limit, consider it a success. If you don't beat the GM, it's a miss. If you go over the limit, it's a partial. Effectively.

Captain

You're in charge of the ship.

To you go the spoils. The GM will give you six-siders when you collect payment.

When you negotiate with leverage, roll on your task: your upper bound is 13 instead of 7.

Weapons

You're in charge of the shootin'.

When you blast something, roll on your task: 1-3s explode (count them towards your total and roll again).

Helm

You're in charge of the sailin'.

When you bring the ship around for a better angle, roll on your task: if you succeed, make the GM re-roll any other task die.

Engineer

You're in charge of the engines.

When you push the ship past its limits, roll on your task: if you succeed, count one of your dice towards another task as well.

Comms

You're in charge of the listening.

When you shut down the comms traffic, roll on your task: if you succeed, reduce all the other task difficulties by one.

Session

So usually we find out about a job from people in a nearby system. We can usually justify this stuff to ourselves because we have to see it that way.

Have the Captain roll a few times to round up a few jobs; write 'em down, ya never know what people might need. Each job needs a name (who's askin'?), a bit of text (whatdya want?), and a location (whereya at?). To roll up a job, write down a name and place first — new names for each of these first jobs, new places too. Then roll. Have the GM keep track of the whos, wheres, and whats.

When the job wants you to name a place, pick somewhere else than where the job is. That keeps things interesting.

1	**Military:** Someone needs some shootin' done, maybe to take somethin', maybe to hold somethin', maybe they're just scared and need someone around. Pick a target and roll: odds ya gotta protect, evens ya gotta gun down.
2	**Criminal:** Gotta get somethin' into or outta somewhere it ain't supposed to be. Just keep it quiet, will ya? Pick a target and roll: odds ya gotta put it there, evens ya gotta take it out.
3	**Exploration:** Look, we ain't about to send anyone important into that thing to see where it goes. That's where you come in. Anything you find, you keep. Good luck. Roll: 1-2 it's a new way to get somewhere, 3-4 it's some fancy anomaly, 5-6 it's blocking the way.
4	**Trade:** Three shoes and a bag of grits for those rocks? Fine, sure, just get outta here. I got a bridge to sell ya, too. Roll to see what they want that they can't have: 1-2 it's a body, 3-4 it's a drug, 5-6 it's spiritual.
5	**Belief:** Some cult miss tells me you got a ship? And you're going into the black? Mind takin' a few believers wit' ya to spread the word? We'll go anywhere. Roll to see how many people want aboard.

6	Roll twice and mix to make something interesting.

> 1: Military. Let's see. Target'll be the Prince of Rigel IV, over here. Rolling,… odds. You'll have to protect him on the way to a conference, sounds like. The regent doesn't think he's taking the dangers seriously enough — she'll be the contact.

Plans

We're gonna zoom right to the action, because that's the fun part. Something goes wrong, and the GM should decide what. Then we get to see what the bootleggers do. These flaws aren't theirs — probably their contact, or the person they're dealing with.

1. Anger: blinded with rage, they make a simple mistake.
2. Envy: keeping up with their rival is a tricky matter.
3. Gluttony: more is never enough, and they go too far.
4. Greed: all of it, they want all of it.
5. Laziness: not a finger lifted to help.
6. Pride: can't believe they could possibly fail.

> Rolled a 2. Looks like the regent's flaw is envy? Hm. Perhaps she wants the throne for herself, and told the enemy about the flight plan. She obviously hired you to cover her tracks, so it wouldn't seem like she led the Prince into a trap.

Work it out as a group if the GM has trouble; reroll or just pick one if it's impossible or obvious, respectively. Then make a plan.

> Alright, we'll (1) shoot the regent, because they're compromised. I don't think we can take the attacking fleet, though; perhaps we can (2) pull the Prince aboard? Then we'll need to (3) escape and (4) jam their comms to hold off a pursuit.

Give the pieces of the plan to different characters; some characters just automatically take a task, but other tasks are loose enough that they can be given to anyone. (If you have more tasks than characters, you can give someone two, but they'll have to pick one to work on at a time.)

> Weapons obviously takes (1), and I think the Engineer shuold take (2). Looks like Helm has (3) and Comms has (4)? No problem. Here's some dice.

Once everyone has their part of the plan, the GM should roll six six-siders and give one to each part. This is the number to beat, without going over 7. If you don't beat the number, that part of the plan goes wrong — the GM describes how. If you beat the number and stay at 7 or less, the plan goes great — you describe how. If you break 7, you succeed, but the GM writes down some off-screen consequences.

Then the Captain gives out dice, and you roll (choose and roll for each part all at once, not one die at a time):

> The GM rolled a three for (1). Weapons rolls a four and re-rolls, getting a three: perfect! We won't be hearing from her again.
>
> The GM rolled a two for the engineer, who rolls a two themselves; shoot, we only gave her one die. Sounds like the Prince is going to be left behind. At least we can save our skins, right?
>
> Four for escaping, and Helm rolls two sixes; shoot. (See **GM** below.)
>
> Three for jamming, and Comms rolls a four. "Maybe the Prince can escape on his own, if they can't coordinate their actions!"

If you don't beat the GM's die, or if you overshoot 7, the dice you roll are lost, tough luck. Otherwise, hold onto them — don't give them back to the Captain.

If the group has lost all their dice in the plan, they're taken out or captured — the GM should describe it. Give an epilogue; what happens now that you're gone? Does someone rise up to take your place?

When you get some loot, take some six-siders from the GM. As a rule of thumb, four is a fair payment, eight is good, twelve is a jackpot. If you get more than you have dice for, just write down what you have.

When you have an idea for a job of your own, describe it. This might bring you some cash (either through trade or theft) or head some off-screen badness off at the pass. Either way, the GM should decide what the biggest difficulty will be, and describe it — come up with a plan like a normal job.

When you're feeling safe after a job, the GM can bring something on-screen as previously establshed. Cut right to the chase, just like with a job.

Gamemaster (GM)

When you're acting off-screen, use the jobs sitting on the sidelines to guide your actions. Is someone looking for protection? Maybe things got hot for them. Is someone needing an explorer? Maybe something crazy came out of the black. Someone wants something in trade? Maybe they're getting desperate.

On the other hand, sometimes the plan leads to obvious off-screen action:

> Since Helm succeeded at escaping, you can't cause them to immediately get caught. Instead:
>
> "They did get a good look at your ship. Whoever came after the Prince will eventually need to close the loop and keep you from talking."
>
> That'll make an interesting time later.

Force the players to deal with the bridges they've burned to get where they are. As long as someone's out there who doesn't like them, they should be dealing with the side-effects of that. Use up their dice. No fair making up a bridge that was never burnt, though. Find a legitimate enemy to come after them.

If the characters manage to deal with their goal, end it. If you see that their plan will fix things for them (it has a "happily ever after" result), and they agree, raise the stakes: roll a dozen six-siders and increase the limit on each task to 11. If you do this, and they succeed at the key result, fade to black. Things are as good as they'll get for this crew. Write up an epilogue.

Of course, if they fail, it's all downhill. Fade to black anyway, the epilogue is just a bit more tragic.

Play should consist of nice three-part acts: what's the job? what's the plan? what happened?

What's the job?

If the characters want to go out and do something, that's the job. Otherwise, pull something from off-screen. If the characters aren't sure where to go, and you have nothing off-screen, pull in their background — who doesn't like them? They show up, guns blazing:

> When in doubt, [ninjas.] — Chandler's Law, via NaNoWriMo.

What's the plan?

Keep 'em moving. That's the problem with planning, generally: people get stuck. If they're stuck, make sure they have a focus — what's the specific goal? Do they need to shoot someone? Escape? Grab

something? Once they've listed the goals, you're halfway to a plan. Split things up if you think they're too big, and clump things together if they're too small.

If they have more than six tasks, you get additional dice to cover the overage, so a crazy plan full of minutia is generally just wasting their dice.

What happened?

Resolve the tasks first, then decide the overall result. If they aren't yet out of the fire, force 'em into a new job immediately (rinse and repeat). If something irrevocable happened (death, destruction), figure out if it has ramifications now or later — either way, write it down. If they should probably go get payment for something, or already got payment, make sure they don't miss out on the dice.

Try to once-over the result of the plan after the rolls are done; movies cheat because they've thought of everything before you sit down to watch, but games like this rely on the players coming up with everything. Once you know how the plan works out, describe it like an action sequence: cut between pieces of the plan, resolve them individually. This is good both for showcasing how awesome the characters are, but also getting everyone on the same page about what happened. At the end, you'll also have a clearer picture of what probably will happen next, if one of the characters doesn't force it.

Who's out there?

This isn't really part of the act structure, but a way of keeping track of what's going on. Give people names!

> I wanted to meet interesting and stimulating people of an ancient culture... and kill them. — Full Metal Jacket (1987)

As soon as someone's on-screen (and sometimes even before), they're an extra. Extras don't have names, really — just a place on the set. They'll react to stuff the characters do, but mainly be set dressing.

Once the characters take an interest, that's when they take a minor role. Make sure minor roles have a one-liner description (the Prince, Edna of the Sword, that one-eye'd merchant) so the others can reference them. Learn who they are. Play them the way the others expect — if they're supposed to be clever, play them clever. If they're greedy, play them greedy.

If they've become a recurring feature, start pushing them to major role status — give them a name, perhaps. Give them their own wants and needs, that they'll be attempting to deal with off-screen. Move them forward when you can. Make their life continue when the characters are doing stuff. Put them in charge of your stuff and see where they go.

Remember that the game isn't about your people, though, it's about the bootleggers. Everything exists in reflection to what they're doing. Don't force your people into places they shouldn't be, or out of

danger they should legitimately be in.