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SPACE BOUNTY BLUES

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A PLANET-HOPPING NEO-NOIR RPG
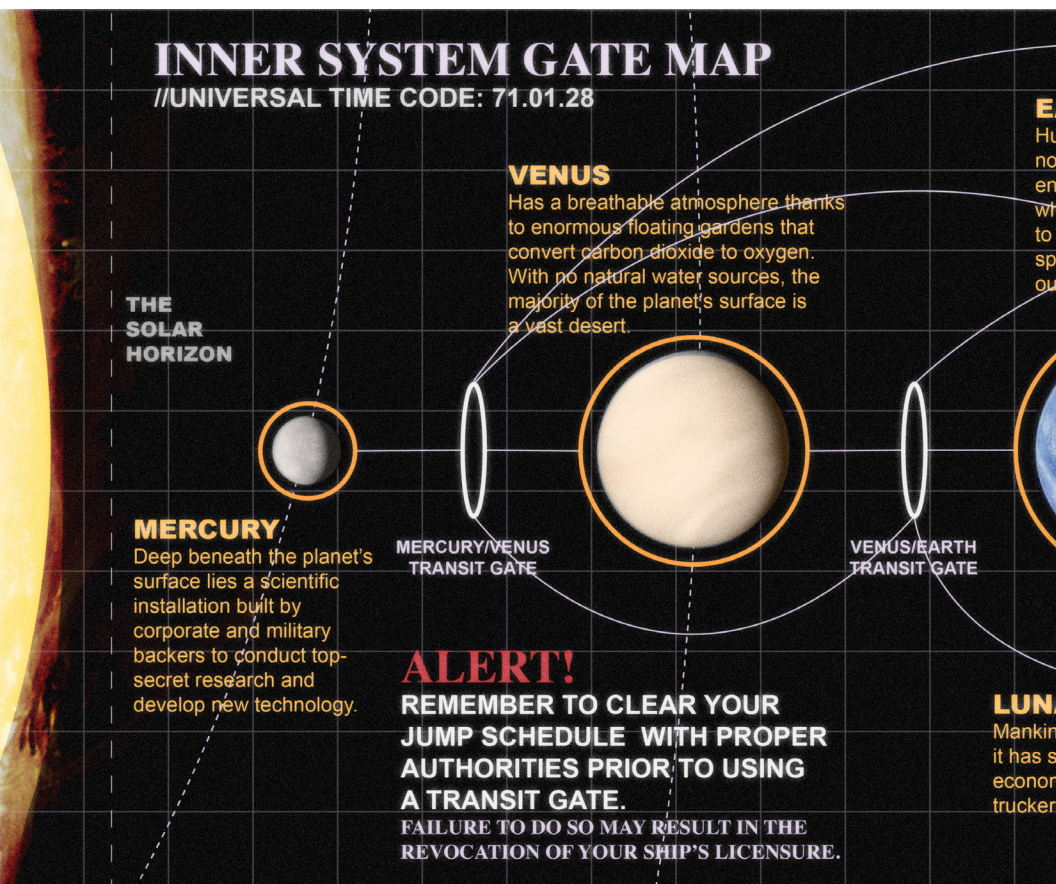
BY @ NERDYPAPERGAMES

SPACE BOUNTY BLUES

by Rob Hebert

A GM-less, planet-hopping, neo-noir RPG for 3-6 people
inspired by the greatest sci-fi bounty hunter anime
of all time

It's the turn of the 25th century, and humanity has spread
throughout the Inner System, a network of colony clusters
connected by Transit Gates that make faster-than-light space
travel possible.

Of course, anywhere people go, crime goes with 'em. And when
you can blow jurisdictions at the punch of a hyperdrive, The
Man just can't keep pace.

INNER SYSTEM GATE MAP
//UNIVERSAL TIME CODE: 71.01.28

THE SOLAR HORIZON

VENUS
Has a breathable atmosphere thanks
to enormous floating gardens that
convert carbon dioxide to oxygen.
With no natural water sources, the
majority of the planet's surface is
a vast desert.

EA
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MERCURY
Deep beneath the planet's
surface lies a scientific
installation built by
corporate and military
backers to conduct top-
secret research and
develop new technology.

**MERCURY/VENUS
TRANSIT GATE**

**VENUS/EARTH
TRANSIT GATE**

ALERT!
**REMEMBER TO CLEAR YOUR
JUMP SCHEDULE WITH PROPER
AUTHORITIES PRIOR TO USING
A TRANSIT GATE.**
FAILURE TO DO SO MAY RESULT IN THE
REVOCATION OF YOUR SHIP'S LICENSURE.
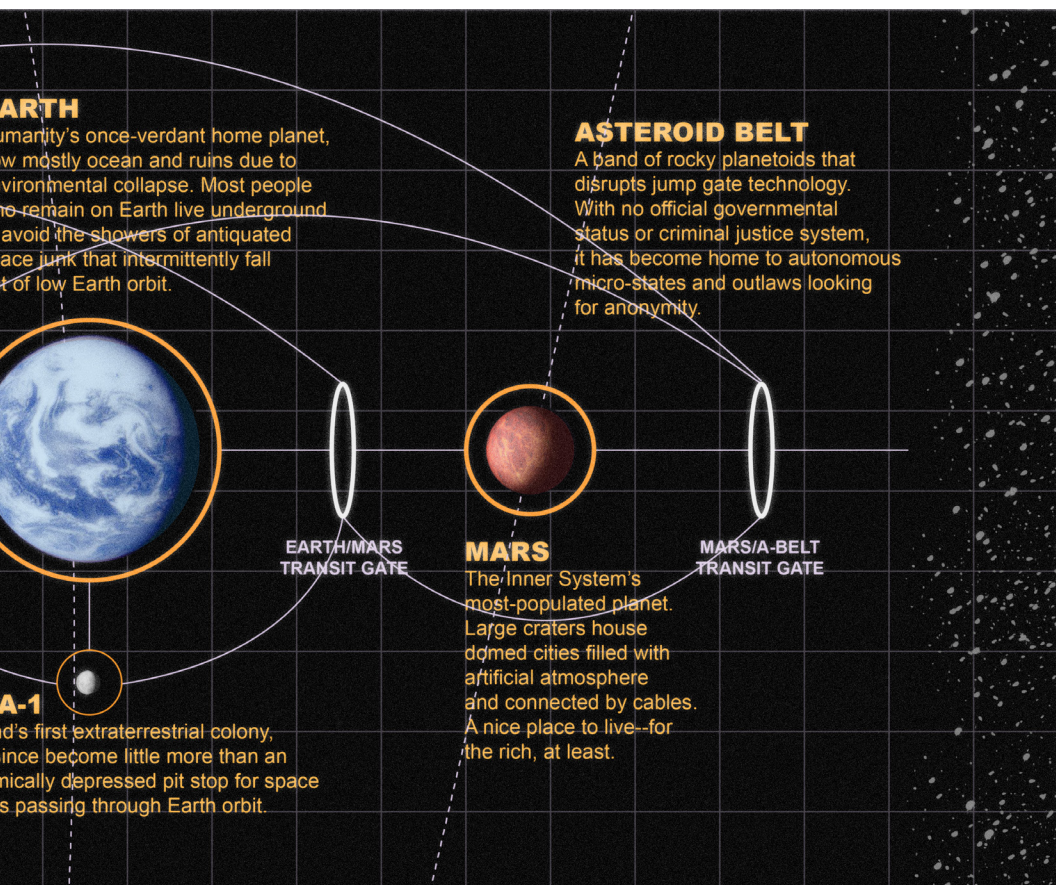
LUNA
Mankin
it has s
econom
trucker

That's where bounty hunters like you and the rest of your crew come in, with a license to run down and arrest the System's Most Wanted throughout all six colony clusters.

But remember: this ain't some license to kill; you only get paid if you hand over a bounty that's still breathing.

By the way, this game has a **playlist**! Go to **https://spoti.fi/2V3f97D** or **search Spotify** for "Space Bounty Blues" to find it. Then set it to **shuffle** and get in the groove!
*Pro Tip: If you ever need a **name** for a person, place, or thing, just pull one from the playlist at random!*

ARTH
umanity's once-verdant home planet,
w mostly ocean and ruins due to
vironmental collapse. Most people
o remain on Earth live underground
avoid the showers of antiquated
ace junk that intermittently fall
t of low Earth orbit.

ASTEROID BELT
A band of rocky planetoids that
disrupts jump gate technology.
With no official governmental
status or criminal justice system,
it has become home to autonomous
micro-states and outlaws looking
for anonymity.

EARTH/MARS TRANSIT GATE

MARS
The Inner System's
most-populated planet.
Large craters house
domed cities filled with
artificial atmosphere
and connected by cables.
A nice place to live--for
the rich, at least.

MARS/A-BELT TRANSIT GATE

A-1
d's first extraterrestrial colony,
ince become little more than an
nically depressed pit stop for space
s passing through Earth orbit.

CHARACTER CREATION

In *Space Bounty Blues,* everyone shares GM duties, and everyone plays a member of the crew. You can create your crewmember privately before your first session or together at the table.

Your character stats can fit on the back of a napkin or the inside of a matchbook, so grab something to write with and--

3... 2... 1... Let's jam:

Your bounty hunter has the same **FIRST NAME** as your favorite writer and the same **LAST NAME** as your favorite artist. Don't think too hard about this, just go with whatever pops into your head first.

Choose an **ALIAS** or **NICKNAME** if you want one, then choose your **PRONOUNS**.

Choose or roll for your **LOOK**:
1. COOL
2. HOT
3. FUNKY
4. MYSTERIOUS
5. STYLISH
6. WILD

Then describe your character's most memorable or unique **FEATURE**.
1. WICKED SCAR/TATTOO
2. SIGNATURE WEAPON, TOOL, OR VEHICLE
3. SARTORIAL AFFECTATION
4. VOCAL IDIOSYNCRACY OR UNIQUE CATCHPHRASE
5. SPECIAL PET
6. UNCOMMON PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTE

Need an online character keeper?
Go to **tinyurl.com/sbbcharkeep**
and copy the spreadsheet there!
(Special thanks to Gene!)

EDGES

Choose or roll your **EDGE**.

This is your job on the crew; it gives you **+1 to all relevant rolls.**

1. ENFORCER
You're an army of one elevating violence to an art. You can size up an opponent with a glance or make 'em crumble with a glare, move like a butterfly and sting like a bee.

2. GEARHEAD
You're a grease monkey with a knack for machinery; you can design, build, operate, break, and repair pretty much anything with an engine.

3. GRIFTER
You're a fast-talker, a master of disguise, a con artist. You use charm, seduction, and deception to get what you want, leaving a trail of empty wallets and broken hearts in your wake.

4. HACKER
You're a real code jockey; you can work wonders with computers and technology, no matter how advanced, experimental, or top secret it happens to be.

5. MASTERMIND
You're a leader, a planner, a tactical genius with an eidetic memory. You're adept at hatching a plan and making it happen, of putting the pieces together or moving them into place.

6. OPERATOR
You've got the skills to pay the bills. An expert in stealth, tracking, sleight of hand, freerunning, negotiation, and gunplay, there's almost no situation you can't slip into or out of.

TRAITS

Your character has three **TRAITS**: **HARD**, **SHARP**, and **SMOOTH**.

HARD is used to...
> **Harm** *with fist, foot, or weapon*
> **Resist** *force or fatigue*
> **Threaten** *with violence*

SHARP is used to...
> **Read** *a person or a situation*
> **Notice** *an important detail or potential clue*
> **Reason** *with someone or through a problem*

SMOOTH is used to...
> **Avoid** *harm or detection*
> **Manipulate** *with charm or dexterous coordination*
> **Maneuver** *a vehicle or around obstacles*

Give yourself *+1 in your best one, -1 in your worst one, and +0 in the last one*.

Your **TROUBLE** is the problem you just can't shake. Choose from or roll on the following list (or create your own):

1. **FUGITIVE:** Sometimes the hunter is also the hunted. Who's chasing you, and what do they want from you?
2. **RIVAL:** Another bounty hunter keeps biting your gigs. Why do you keep crossing paths, and why can't you keep them out of your business?
3. **CIVILIAN:** You have a normal life that requires constant attention: a family, a day job, a house in the country...what is it, and how does it make your main hustle harder?
4. **HABIT:** You got a monkey on your back. Drugs, gambling, sex, adrenaline... what's your poison, partner?
5. **DEBT:** You're in hock to the taxman, the megacorporations, or the crime syndicates. Maybe all three. Where'd the money go, and how does your light wallet weigh you down?
6. **GUILT:** Seems like a lifetime ago, but you did something bad that you just can't put in the past. What was it, and how does it scar or haunt you to this day?

Finally, *name your crew's* **SHIP** after the song playing on the playlist *right now*.

GAMEPLAY STRUCTURE

The gameplay structure of *Space Bounty Blues* is inspired by the structure of jazz compositions, which usually have five standard "sections" that leave plenty of room for improvisation.

The five sections of gameplay are:

INTRO
Sets the tone of the session, (re)introduces the main characters, and eases everyone into the story.

HEAD
Establishes the new bounty head and gives the crew a chance to coordinate the first leg of their investigation.

SOLOS
Gives each bounty hunter some time in the spotlight so they can move the investigation forward and close in on their target.

HEAD OUT
The crew converges on their target and determines whether they capture their quarry or walk away empty-handed.

TAG
We get a glimpse of everyone's "new normal" in the aftermath of the day's events and tie up any loose ends--or save them for another session. Then everyone celebrates the roleplaying of someone else at the table.

***

FLASHBACKS & FLASH POINTS
These are special scenes that *illuminate a character's past or personal motivations.* A player can choose to trigger and narrate a **FLASHBACK** whenever they have the spotlight. Whenever you narrate a **FLASHBACK**, you receive a **FLASH POINT**. You can spend a **FLASH POINT** to re-roll your dice or add +1 to a result. **You can also choose to automatically botch a roll in exchange for a FLASH POINT.** You can let someone use your **FLASH POINT** if they describe how your character helps.

HOLD
HOLD represents your whole crew's ability, as a group, to corner, capture, or control your bounty. Your crew starts with 0 **HOLD** and gains (or loses) more as the session progresses.

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THE INTRO

A jazz intro sets the tone, tempo, and vibe of the whole piece. In *Space Bounty Blues,* the **INTRO** shows us how the members of your crew spend their downtime between bounties.

Listen to the current song on your playlist for inspiration. It can be up-tempo, down-tempo, happy, sad, silly, somber, or anywhere in-between.

The **INTRO** could develop a short side story that involves the whole ship, or it could be a quick montage showing each crewmember handling errands, engaging with hobbies, or attending to their own personal problems.

Some ideas for **INTRO** scenes:
- *The ship's hot water is on the fritz, making close quarters uncomfortable*
- *Crafting creative culinary "experiments" from your paltry pantry*
- *Tending to your bonsai collection*
- *Repairing your light cruiser after your last bounty*
- *Blowing the last of your bread at the casino*
- *Checking in on your family back home*

Starting with whoever watched anime most recently, each player describes (1) where their crewmember is, (2) what they're doing, and (3) how it tells us something about their character, then throws to spotlight to someone else. Once you've checked in on every crewmember, move on to the **HEAD**.

THE HEAD

In the jazz world, the head lays out the main melody that the rest of a song is built around. In the bounty world, "head" is slang for the face on the wanted poster.

In the **HEAD** section of *Space Bounty Blues*, your crew learns who their next target is, along with whatever information might lead to their trail.

Choosing a Bounty

Automatically generate bounties at **perchance.org/spacebountyblues** or create your own by jotting down a name, age, alias, crime, identifier, danger, last known location, and reward.

For instance:
- » **NAME:** ROCCO VALJEAN
- » **AGE:** 46
- » **ALIAS:** Swordfish
- » **WANTED FOR:** Terrorism
- » **IDENTIFIERS:** Pet raven
- » **LAST SEEN:** Highwater Towers in the Martian Republic
- » **WARNING:** Known to use StimPacks to increase physical abilities
- » **REWARD:** $47,000,000

After they **designate their target**, the whole crew gets together (either onboard the ship or over comms) and discusses their **plan of action**.

Making Plans & Declaring Details

Starting with the crewmember *most closely connected to the bounty head*, each player establishes one fact about the bounty's identity, their crimes, or the resources they might have at their disposal, then explains how their character plans to exploit that fact to further the investigation:

- *hacking into government files*
- *sweeping the crime scene for clues*
- *staking out one of the bounty's regular haunts*
- *sneaking into the gang's hideout*
- *breaking some fingers in a seedy dive on the far edge of town*
- *or whatever makes sense for the target or your character's skill set*

In this stage of the game, you make things true just by saying them–no rolling necessary. Who did they murder? What exactly does their terror organization hope to accomplish? Where's their base of operations?

Anyone can ask another player/character clarifying questions (in or out of character). After each player states their character's expected contribution to the investigation, they pass the spotlight to someone else. When everyone's gone, the session proceeds to the **SOLOS** section.

THE SOLOS

During the solo section of a jazz performance, the spotlight swings from musician to musician, giving each soloist a chance to prove their chops while the rest of the band keeps the rhythm.

In *Space Bounty Blues*, the **SOLOS** section plays out much the same way: the fiction focuses on one character after another, while everyone else keeps the world humming around them with colorful depictions of characters and locations.

That doesn't mean that two (or more) player-characters can't be in the same scene together, just that the fiction focuses on one at a time while the others play supporting roles.

This part of the game concerns **the meat of the crew's investigation**: they need to find out where the bounty is, how to corner and capture them, and what sorts of defenses or dangers the crew will have to face along the way.

Start by spotlighting the character whose contribution to the investigation would likely come first--perhaps because it's a prerequisite for others' contributions or simply because their destination is close by.

PLAYING A SOLO

When it's your turn to solo, you take the **LEAD** and choose someone to **FOLLOW**. Everyone else becomes the **BACKING BAND**.

The role of the **FOLLOW** is to play NPCs and jam up the **LEAD** while the **BACKING BAND** asks questions and offers ideas to help the **LEAD** flesh out the scene. *Note: If your group prefers, you can play without a **Follow**; in that case, everyone but the **Lead** forms the **Backing Band** and shares the **Follow's** duties.*

> The **BANDLEADER** is an **optional role** where one person takes charge of all the traditional GM duties during the **SOLOS** and the **HEAD OUT**: roleplaying NPCs, creating environments, inventing obstacles, calling for rolls, and weaving the players' narrative threads into a cohesive story. Some groups may prefer this mode of play, especially if they have less experience playing GM-less games.
>
> If you're having trouble grokking the style and pacing of Space Bounty Blues, you can find a free "replay" document at *nerdypapergames.itch.io/sbb*

Every **SOLO** has three parts: **Opening**, **Tension**, and **Release**.

Opening

To start a **SOLO**, the **LEAD** establishes a **location** and shares **three key details** about it, such as:

- What **time of day** is it? How's the **weather**?
- What **kind of a place** is this, and **how do we know**?
- **Who else** is here, and how do they **react** to the PC?
- What **sights**, **scents**, or **sounds** evoke this place?
- What **opportunities** can be found here?
- What **threats** can be found here?

In the **Opening**, The **LEAD** has control of the narrative. They decide where the scene takes place, who's there, and what's happening.

Tension

The **LEAD** states their **goal**, and the **FOLLOW** describes, narrates, or roleplays whatever **obstacles or opponents** are in the way. The **BACKING BAND** asks questions and makes suggestions. The **Tension** builds as the **LEAD** and **FOLLOW** add details, complications, and compromises to the scene.

Release

When the action finally reaches the breaking point, the **LEAD** decides how to handle it and rolls **2D6 +TRAIT:**

>   If they use *force or threats,* they roll **+HARD**
>   If they use *perception or intelligence,* they roll **+SHARP**
>   If they use *charm or dexterity,* they roll **+SMOOTH**

EDGE BONUS: If your **EDGE** applies, you get +1 to your roll.
STYLE BONUS: If your description is *particularly **clever**, **stylish**, or **detailed*** you get another +1.

>   **On a 12+**, you succeed with a bonus! The crew gains 1 **HOLD** and you get a Flash Point.
>   **On a 10-11**, you succeed flat out, and the crew gains 1 **HOLD**.
>   **On a 7-9**, you succeed with a significant limitation or cost (like an injury or condition), and the crew gains 1 **HOLD**. If a character takes multiple injuries, they are **TAKEN OUT**.
>   **On a 6-**, things go real bad; you fail, and it costs you *dearly*. Describe how. The crew gains 0 **HOLD**.

You may end up rolling more than once in a single scene, depending on how the story develops, but once you determine how your **SOLO** ends (i.e., "Do you get what you want?" and "What does it cost you?"), swing the spotlight to another player so they can start theirs.

REMEMBER! When the spotlight is on someone else's character, throw lots of threats, obstacles, and complications at them.

Some good ones include:
- *An "old friend" turns out to be anything but friendly*
- *Past actions come back to bite them*
- *Their TROUBLE rears its ugly head*
- *The local authorities don't like somebody from out of town asking so many questions*
- *The bounty has the locals too scared to talk to you*
- *A rival crew wants the bounty for themselves, and they're willing to fight for it*
- *You pick up a witness or admirer who draws too much attention*
- *You become the victim of unexpected violence*
- *Unforeseen complications or just plain bad luck*

After every player's had their moment in the spotlight, the session moves into the **HEAD OUT** section, where the crew takes on their bounty directly.

THE HEAD OUT

In jazz, the head out is the section where the whole group returns to the melody first established in the head. In *Space Bounty Blues*, the **HEAD OUT** is where the crew converges on their quarry's location and determines whether they take them in or lose them for good.

The last soloist reminds everyone else how much **HOLD** the crew has, then decides where the showdown should take place and who should act first.

Once per session, if a crewmember ***introduces a cool twist*** or ***callback to a character's background*** during the **HEAD OUT**, your crew gains 1 **HOLD**.

The **HEAD OUT** always centers around a **major set piece**:
- *a chase across the rooftops of a Venusian favela*
- *a firefight in a crowded night market*
- *a race to the far end of a quickly closing hyperspace tunnel*
- *a tense standoff in an abandoned factory*
- *a game of roulette with life and death on the line*
- *or anything else high-risk and high-reward*

That set piece consists of two parts: **Build-Up** and **Moment of Truth**.

Build-Up

These are the **opening beats** of the **HEAD OUT**, the moments where you size up a duelist, maneuver to higher ground, drive your quarry into a trap, cut off an escape route, or do anything else that gives you more control or limits your bounty's options.

Describe your character's attempt and roll **2D6 +TRAIT**, plus your **EDGE BONUS** and **STYLE BONUS** (if applicable):
- **On a 10+:** You close in on your quarry or set up a crewmate for success; describe how (on a 12+, add 1 to your crew's **HOLD**).
- **On a 7–9:** You *spend* 1 **HOLD** to close in on your quarry or set up a crewmate for success; describe how.
- **On a 6–:** You *lose* 2 **HOLD** as your bounty pulls away or puts you in a bad spot; describe what happens.

NOTE: Story permitting, you can choose to pay an appropriate cost (usually an injury or condition) to add +1 to your result. If this is your second injury, you're Taken Out of the action!

After your **Build-Up** action, swing the spotlight to someone else! When *everyone's* had their **Build-Up** action, it's time for the **Moment of Truth**.

Moment of Truth

In the **Moment of Truth**, your group launches its make-or-break maneuver: you quickdraw and fire, leap across the gap, put the pedal to the metal and try to slip between the blast doors just as they close, or do whatever it takes to bring your bounty down.

The **Moment of Truth** determines whether you capture your quarry, or they get away. The character closest to the bounty rolls **2D6 +HOLD** (no **TRAIT** modifier, **EDGE BONUS**, **STYLE BONUS** or **FLASH POINTS!**):

12+: You get your **bounty--and then some**! You haul in the rest of their gang, you get to keep the experimental tech that they were smuggling through the spaceport, or you save the hostage (who now owes you a favor).

10-11: You corner and capture your bounty–that **reward money** is yours!

7-9: You get your bounty, but use up so many resources or cause so much collateral damage that you wipe out any profit you were gonna make on the job. Or maybe someone snakes your payday. Either way, you **break even**.

6-: Your bounty gets away, or you accidentally kill them (meaning you don't get the reward money anyway). Describe **what goes wrong**.

A huge thanks to admutt, whose comments and ideas were integral to the development of the updated HOLD mechanic.

THE TAG

The tag is where jazz musicians bring their performance to a close, usually with a few bars that repeat the main melody (though sometimes in an altered form).

In a *Space Bounty Blues* **TAG**, the crew hands their bounty over to the authorities--assuming they didn't lose or kill them--and cashes in their reward. Then, as with the **INTRO**, we end on a quick montage or short ensemble scene that shows how the session's events affected the crew.

Starting with whoever rolled the **Moment of Truth**, each player describes (1) where their crewmember ends up, (2) what they're doing, and (3) how the session's events changed them, then throws the spotlight to someone else. Once everyone's gone, move on to **STARS & WISHES**.

STARS & WISHES

At the close of the session, go around the table and have each player give one **STAR** to a player, moment, or story element that they enjoyed. If you're playing a campaign, each player can also share a **WISH**: something they'd like to see in a future session.

SAFETY

Safety, consent, and content moderation are absolutely essential during a session. At our table, we rely heavily--though not exclusively--on John Stavropolous's X-Card (found here: *http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg*), but you should feel free to use whatever tools are appropriate for your group.

CAMPAIGN PLAY

If you decide to play a multi-session campaign of *Space Bounty Blues*, keep track of your crew's reward money in the form of **STASH**. Your crew starts with **0 STASH**. Whenever your crew rolls a **MOMENT OF TRUTH**, the result tells you whether to add or subtract from your **STASH**:

- 12+: **+2 STASH**
- 10–11: **+1 STASH**
- 7–9: **+0 STASH**
- 6–: **–1 STASH**

If your crew ever ends up with a **STASH** equal to twice the number of bounty hunters in it, you all get to retire with enough money to pay off your debts and live out a more or less peaceful life.

If you ever end up with a *negative* **STASH** equal to the number of bounty hunters in your crew, you all lose your license and have to disband to find real jobs.

In addition, keep track of your injuries with **SCARS**. When you suffer an injury or condition *twice on the same job,* you get **TAKEN OUT**. Describe how. You start the next job with a **SCAR** to remind you of the time you almost died. You can never get rid of **SCARS**. If you ever get a *third* **SCAR**, you die (or end up in a bad enough way that you wish you had). No more bounty hunting for you, kiddo.

Anyway, that's *Space Bounty Blues*. Hope you had fun.

Until next time–

SEE YOU SPACE COWBOY...