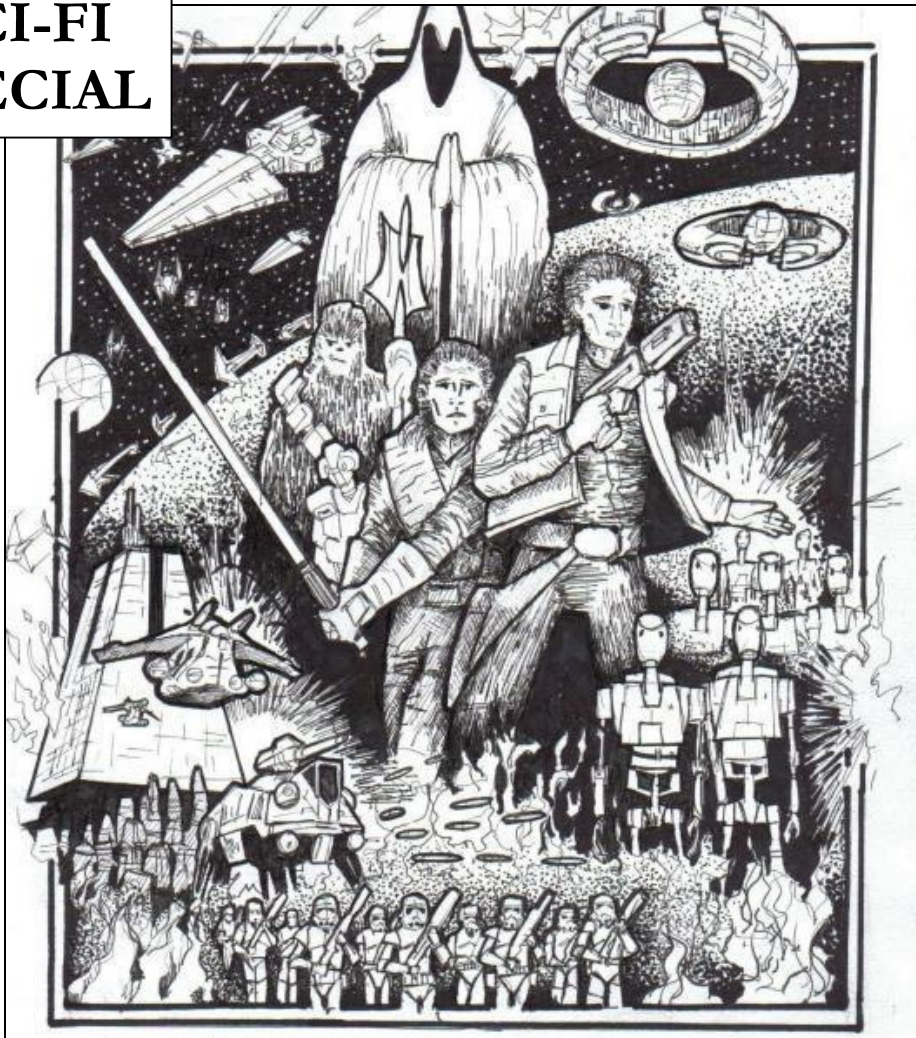# ODDS

The Tabletop Roleplaying E-Magazine

Issue 3 – December 2008

SCI-FI SPECIAL

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EDITORIAL

In space, no one can hear you scream… unless you roll a fumble, apparently.

Welcome to ODDS Emagazine issue 3. In this month's issue we've gone for a science fiction theme, with an article from guest writer Mark Newbold about the pitfalls of playing a roleplaying character that emulates an established official character: *Boba Fett - Portrait of a Serial Template Character* not only applies to the famous bounty hunter of Star Wars fame, but also to all those player characters that exist off the reputations of established figures.

Science fiction is generally thought of as the spin-off of fantasy roleplaying. It's true in some respects – the first ever RPG was *Dungeons and Dragons*, after all, and many games that have followed are of the fantasy genre. I believe this is because fantasy roleplaying games are much less complicated, not in mechanics but in design and creation. Fantasy games are generally set on a single world with medieval/renaissance trappings. Science fiction, by contrast, can be spread across dozens of worlds, all as unique and important as that single fantasy world. This kind of game can take a lot of work, which is why, I think, many games tend to stick to a single, simple world.

And who can blame them. Creating each world, race and area of space can be a headache (I know!) and then you have to adapt your GMing or playing style to that world when the players visit it. It can be a major pain in Uranus.

So this issue celebrates Science Fiction games – hopefully the articles within will help those GMs thinking of getting into sci-fi gaming and aid those who have already taken the plunge.

I'd like to welcome to this issue Eric Gibson, who was kind enough to answer some questions about the RPG hobby and West End Games. Thanks, Eric, for an excellent interview.

Issue 4 is the Christmas issue and I'm working on a couple of gifts for the readers of ODDS Emagazine, to thank you for your support. You'll have to check inside next month's issue to find out what they are…

Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Dave McAlister, the administrator of www.ukroleplayers.com for making ODDS Emagazine front-page news on his site last October. Nice one, Dave!

Keep on rollin'

JONATHAN HICKS
Editor

THE ERIC GIBSON INTERVIEW

Eric Gibson of West End Games kindly agreed to answer a
few questions about himself, WEG and roleplaying in general.

Eric – thanks for taking the time out to do this interview. First of all, lets find out a bit about you. Care to give a summary of the life of Eric Gibson up to now? A short biography?

Well, that's a long one, but I'll try to summarize a bit as is relevant to gaming.

I was born in Dearborn Michigan on April 15th, 1974. I moved a lot in my childhood, so rarely got a chance to put down roots. Michigan -- California-- back to Michigan and numerous towns in each. When I was 15, my family finally managed to setting down in Canton, Michigan. I was in an art class when I met a guy by the name of Scott Wilson. He was reading the Monstrous Compendium and I was intrigued. We struck up a conversation and he invited me to his group and from that point forward, I was a total gamer.

I was the West End Games guy.

Like most groups, we all had our individual personalities and places in the group. We each unintentionally tried to differentiate ourselves by the games be picked to run. It ended up that we picked companies and those games they produced became our individual turf, if you will. We had a TSR guy, a Palladium guy, numerous other companies. I was the West End Games guy. It happened that way because I was an enormous Star Wars geek and, as you know, West End Game produced the Star Wars RPG. It is not too long after that I discovered Torg. I was at once floored by Torg. It was a very deep game, with a complex storyline that didn't exist as an island unto itself. It was progressive and nobody knew - the players, the GMs, even the publisher to a degree - had no idea how exactly it would turn out. This was my first exposure to a metaplot and I was sucked in.

Picking up Torg also meant that I dropped Star Wars as my go-to game. I still ran it from time to time, along with numerous other WEG games -- Paranoia, Shatterzone, Indy, etc. -- but Torg is what I always came back to and, as I moved around afterward, I eagerly introduced people to Torg wherever I could find a group.

After High School I joined the U.S. Navy were I spent roughly 5 years of my early adult life. I continued to game, picking up wargames and additional RPGs. When I was patrolling the Adriatic Sea during the Bosnian War, I was working or standing watch (Electronics Warfare) for as much as 18 hours a day, but I still managed to get as much gaming as possible in. Most nights of the week, you could head down to a classroom and find a great game of Cyberpunk, WoD, Shadowrun or numerous other games going. I was fortunate as well to have served with the greatest GM I've ever known, to this day. He was a Nuclear Engineer, by the name of Will Burrell. I was a long time RPG gamer, but it wasn't until playing with Will that I really understood the power and excitement and roleplaying game could have.

After the Navy, I did a couple odd jobs here and there before deciding to take the computer knowledge I had gained in the Navy, added to it with schooling, and started a couple of computer businesses. I didn't do much

gaming at that time. I had moved on to different things, but in 2002 or so, I started to get back to it. I learned of the hard times West End Games was having and was eager to help bring my old favorite - Torg - back. I contacted WEG's then owner, Humanoids Publishing, and ask to buy Torg. They said Torg was not for sale separately, but they would sell all of West End Games, as it existed at the time, minus those properties - such as Metabarons - that were Humanoids properties.

Long story slightly less long, I bought WEG in 2003 and tried to breathe life back into it. Of course, I've made many mistakes along the way and learned a lot. If I had it to do over again, I believe I could have done things much differently and taken WEG in more successful directions, but hindsight is always 20/20, as they say.

What got you into roleplaying, and what is it about roleplaying you like?

Well, even as a youth, I played fantastic "pretend" games. Roleplaying has been compared to "playing pretend, but with rules." The truth is, even pretend has extensive rules. Whether dressing up in a cape, or playing with action figures, your imagination was always tempered by what could realistically be done by the character your were playing (with). My brother was two years younger than I, and we were pretty close, so playing for me was always fairly social. Likewise, I was a big fan of fantasy and high action adventure fiction. When exposed to roleplaying the first time, it was a no-brainer.

There is really no substitute for taking a simple premise, and having a group of people get together to produce a rich and unique story. Dice and other forms of randomization inject a great

deal of uncertainty into the equation and that increases drama.

It's obvious you have a soft spot for the West End Games systems, but what other games really do it for you? What's out there on the market at the moment you really like?

Like most people, I got my start in D&D (AD&D actually), so I've always have a soft spot for that -- even though I think I've generally moved beyond the style of play to which D&D is geared for. World of Darkness games were great because they were more focused on narrative play, which I gravitate towards, and the socio-politics which that game world was focused on were very unique in those early 90's.

I'd be of fan of any game that encapsulates my favorite RPG traits: A simple, unified resolution system, strong social mechanics, heroic/dramatic game play (PC death only when thematically appropriate), Open ended -- meaning the rules encourage modification and creativity, rather that rigidly defining archetypes, and an engaging setting or plot.

> *I'd be of fan of any game that encapsulates my favorite RPG traits…*

Do you still play RPGs much?

No as much as I would like. Between finding the time to play, and finding a group that wants to do something other than tactical simulation RPGs, it's almost too much work. Few of us local to South East Pennsylvania have recently put together a group and we are working to coordinate times, so - cross fingers - I should have a group together shortly.

Getting hold of West End Games must have been an amazing feeling – how did that come about?

Like I said previously, I was lamenting the fate of Torg and wanted to bring it back to life. I tried to discuss buying just that property, but Humanoids would not discuss that option. I was told that, to save Torg, I'd need to buy all of West End Games. This was not an issue for me, since I was always a big fan of WEG. The D6 system was a great system that had so much potential and the WEG name itself carried enough weight that getting into distribution and retail outlets would be far easier than trying to create a game company from scratch - or so I thought.

…far easier than trying to create a game company from scratch - or so I thought.

The situation with the cancellation of Septimus last March and now the sale of West End Games has had a lot of tongues wagging and opinions flying. However, I've never been able to put my finger on exactly what happened. Why was Septimus cancelled, and why did you finally decide to part with WEG?

There have been a lot of explanations for Septimus' cancellation and I don't think anyone of them gives the fans a clear view of what happened. Septimus started as an idea from Bill Coffin. He wanted to do one or more games using the D6 System. The first project we decided on was Septimus. It was the one he had done the most prep work on. This was in very early 2007. I had envisioned a very ambitious book. Unlike material we had produced in the last few years, I wanted Septimus to be complete in itself. Of course we were looking to support the line, but I didn't want people buying the book and

unhappy it was incomplete and unplayable. I had asked for a certain sized manuscript, but it quickly ballooned in size. What was to be 200+ pages, soon doubled. I asked for the manuscript in time for GenCon, but that turned out to be impossible without sacrificing quality, which no one wanted. I got the completed manuscript and sent it to edit. The editing was to be completed in 3 weeks... that turned into 2+ months. At this point, everything is growing rapidly. With the increased size of the book, the art budget was annihilated. I had been investing heavily on POD equipment to attempt to print the book in-house, but it became obvious too late that was would not be possible. The size of the book, in full color, hardcover, etc. meant that to print the book in-house, It would cost me the entirety of what I was selling the book for in preorder. Selling to the retail chain, for which I make only 32% of MSRP, was impossible. Traditional printing was going to have to be done, but the reality was, that cost tens of thousands of dollars that was tied up in another infrastructure investment. A great deal of money was spent on plan 1, so switching to plan 2 was going to take longer than expected.

Bill finally asked me what the delay was and I clued him into a few of the problems I was having. I discussed one option, which was to release Septimus initially as a PDF so that those revenues could help to cover the cost of printing. Bill was interested in making sure Septimus was a print book, not a PDF. I'm not sure it he felt I wouldn't get the book out or not, and perhaps he had concerns about losing control of his property (which was never an option). I guess neither one of us were being 100% forthcoming to each other. Ultimately, Bill pulled the plug on Septimus. He exercised his right to reclaim the IP. He certainly

did not do so in any negative of vindictive manner, and in doing so relieved me of the stress of coming up with a solution for the printing issues. But as a result, I was left with tens of thousands in losses and liabilities. I had bet "the farm", if you will, on Septimus and I was left with nothing but angry customers. I certainly never wanted Bill's reputation to be tarnished in any way - after all he did nothing wrong and only sought to protect himself and his property from publishing limbo - so after the announcement, I quickly let the fans know that the decision to kill Septimus was mine and was financially necessary. The truth is, the decision to kill Septimus was Bill's and, while there were financial concerns, killing it was not really "necessary." What would have been necessary would have been to print a full offset print run, and probably change the book from color to black and white. I never wanted to cancel Septimus and still don't. If Bill came to me today - which is about as unlikely as anything in this industry - and asked me to publish Septimus as the D6 game it was intended to be, I'd happily agree. Like I said, I would certain have to be a black and white interior, but I'd do it in a heartbeat.

The decision to sell WEG was a brash afterthought, only slightly related to Septimus itself.

There was an incident on www.rpg.net in the summer where you were pretty much hounded by forum posters, up to the point were you left an extremely angry post and had yourself banned from the forum. Bearing in mind that some of the posters did not have a stake in WEG or even a Septimus pre-order, do you think that they had a fair point in their criticism, or do you think it was a witchhunt?

After the Septimus ordeal went public, I was taking a lot of heat from a few sources. Most fans were simply and rightfully wondering about their preorders. A couple of others - one in particular - who had absolutely zero stake in the issue, took this controversy as a opportunity to reopen his long personal war against me. I was under pressure and, being an emotional person, attacked back. I was stressed and depressed about all of the attacks I was receiving. As I wrote, I started to question more and more what "benefit" I was getting out of publishing. At the time, I thought "very little." By the end of my post, I had "flamed out" quite heavily (which is ultimately what vicious trolls like my "nemesis" want) and decided to get out of the business. After saying I was looking to sell the company, I felt like I had a weight lifted from me.

For the posters that did have a stake in Septimus, their complaints and criticisms were absolutely founded. I was and continue to take advantage of their patience and courtesy with the money they entrusted to WEG. That said, those stakeholders that did post did not represent the majority or even a large portion of the preorder folks. Most of those who contacted me separately were very patient and appreciative of the financial burdens I was and continue to be under. They encouraged me to press on and ignore my attackers. It is the loud voices that become public, but it is the private minority that makes game publishing worth it - that gives you strength to push forward.

> *By the end of my post, I had "flamed out" quite heavily…*

What would you like to see happen with West End Games? Sold on as a whole or the properties divided and sold to other companies? The D6 System is one of my favourite gaming systems (my second biggest campaign was Star Wars D6) and I ask this because I think it'd be a shame to see it die.

This is a difficult question. To be fully honest, I don't even want to sell West End Games at all anymore. Even if I were to sell WEG, I think I'll still probably look to continue in the hobby game industry. Despite all the stresses, gamers are my people. I love putting out material that enriches their lives and I cannot imagine a life without that.

I'd love to see WEG maintained as a whole. There is still recognition to the name and there can be much more done with this imprint. As for D6, I still envision it as an important ingredient to the future of gaming and want nothing more than to release it as Open D6 as previously planned. This means D6 would be separate from West End, but West End would continue to be a maker of D6 material, but would be joined by numerous other publishers who see the value of the engines as a simple, powerful game system that is brilliant for dramatic, high energy gaming.

As you own your own roleplaying company you must have an insight into the industry as a whole. What do you see happening to the RPG industry in the future? With computer and console RPGs and other mediums, do you think it can survive in the current market?

There will continue to be a division between hobby gaming and computer gaming, but I see a future where there they may be less division between the companies supplying them. Just as many hobby game companies dip their pens into multiple pots (RPGs, board games, war games), you'll see these same companies entering the computer world. They'll likely remain small - producing more niche-based games - but occasionally a few will break into the mainstream.

Yes, games will continue to transition to a computer medium, but there will always be a place for paper games. Humans still desire the tactile ecstasy of moving models, drawing cards and chucking dice. They will still seek the free-form play that current computers cannot come close to reproducing and in the end most of us still long to eat pizza and drink beer or soda with friends in the same room.

What does the future hold for Eric Gibson? Do you intend to have another stab at the RPG industry?

Yes. I hope my future in gaming will be better spent as a more creative force. Though I am questioning whether I'll sell WEG at all, if I end up doing so I'll probably wait very little time to open a new company. I've too many ideas that I want to explore.

> *I am questioning whether I'll sell WEG at all…*

If I do so, I'll do things differently. First, I'll seek to keep better control of finances. I'll seek to bootstrap more. Successful companies are not successful because they throw many at problems. They are successful because they learn to solve problems without spending money. If plans change, they've lost little.

Second, I'll take things slowly. I'll treat it like it is - a hobby. I'll make no promises. I'll go public with a project when it is on its way to the printer, rather than when the writing is being started. I'll never take a dime for

product, until I have the product to deliver.

Third, I'll remember that the internet will always be a haven for faceless cowards who hide behind relative anonymity and the people that matter - the fans - are usually great folks who really appreciate the sacrifices you make to make their lives more enjoyable.
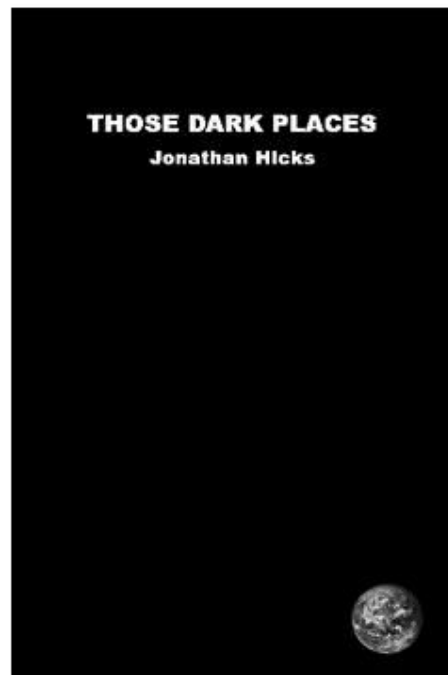
Eric, thank you very much for taking the time out to answer these questions. All the best.

Thank you for giving me this avenue to communicate my feelings.

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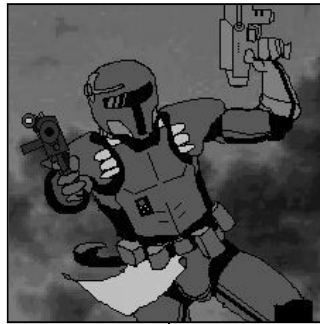# Boba Fett – Portrait of a Serial Template Character

By
Mark Newbold

He's the coolest baddie in the Star Wars Galaxy. Only Darth Maul comes near. And yet many roleplay scenarios have characters based upon, influenced by or starring the great bounty hunter himself. Mark Newbold scratches his head in confusion and poses the eternal question – *why?*

Now, before I start I don't want any of you Fett fans out there to get me wrong. I love Boba Fett. Not in the carnal sense of course (that helmet is WAY too intimidating) but in the character sense. Fett is the perfect amalgamation of every cool, baddass hard guy to grace screen, page or fable. **Harry Callahan** crossed with **Judge Dredd** crossed with **The Man with No Name**. An enigma within an enigma within a massive merchandising campaign. Bad to the bone from the first time we saw him (in the **Star Wars Holiday Special** of course) he's become synonymous with hard-edged mystique, ruthlessness and dogged determination. And to us *Star Wars* fans he's a symbol of cool that no other film, franchise or serial can hope to compete with…

Apart from **Star Trek Voyager's Seven of Nine**. Now *they're* cool. *Sorry*, sorry, THAT'S cool. *She's* cool. Whatever…

Anyway, back to Mister Fett. If Boba Fett were as ubiquitous as he appears to be within the **RPG** universe, popping up in games across tables all over the planet, then he'd be the richest hunter in history and would never have to raise arms again, apart from the fact that he'd probably do it just for the sheer hell of it. Let's face it; having **Jabba the Hutt** in a game is one thing. I mean, he doesn't exactly get out much so having a scene with him at his palace for five minutes isn't an unreasonable situation (unless unreasonable is standing on the grill over the Rancors pit). My character **Jan Lomona** has been there many times. But having a character like Fett appear in a game (and not just *Star Wars*, either – this applies to any major character in any game) does a number of things:

Totally and utterly unbalances the structure of a game. Since we know that Boba Fett almost always gets his man, unless you're playing one of the main heroic characters from the films (which is fairly unlikely) then you'd stand as much chance against him as a snowball in a Banthas armpit – i.e., not much. We *know* Fett is the main dude – you're previously cool character would stand no realistic chance against him, no matter what time period you play in or what surprise weapons you pull out of the bag. And don't kid yourself – the GM knows this.

Throw continuity out of the window. A sad gamer like me is a real stickler for stuff like this. Having compiled the **Setnin Sector** guides over at www.lightsabre.co.uk over the years I find it difficult to have to account for a character like Fett being in our region of the galaxy. True, in a few stories he has cropped up, but I would never presume to have him be a

major adversary, or a colleague or (GULP!) any kind of a friend. **Del Rey** and **Bantam** arrange who writes for the main characters – in a RPG session (and in my own humble opinion) I believe it's better to concentrate on your own characters. But that's just my opinion.

Makes him the total focal point of a scenario. How can other character stuff, plotlines and story threads hope to compete in the presence of the greatest bounty hunter who ever lived? Who, frankly, would give a toss what you do if Fett is around? Me, I'd be more concerned with not pissing him off than worrying about your port fees, or your six crates of **DL-8** spice you forgot to sign for back on **Abrogard**. Wake up buddy – Boba Fett's in town, and he's nobodies supporting player. If you want a cameo part get Jodo Kast. He's cheaper and doesn't expect 99% of the takings.

Pushes the game into the power player area. Okay, we've shown how Fett can unbalance a game by simply being there. And no gamer in his right mind would either take Fett on or be amazed at dying by his hand. He's pretty much untouchable. So, apart from the fact that it's pointless him even being there (you may as well introduce a Super Star Destroyer as a character) the testosterone levels present at the table are bound to rise. Fett isn't the empathy-seeking type. He can suss you out with a glance, so where's the need for conversation? Action is the only way forward, and with Fett around action usually follows.

Fett in a game has a similar effect on normal proceedings as a Death Star does to peaceful unarmed planets harbouring the seeds of rebellion. But having Fett in a game is one thing.

Having Fett-type characters in a game is something altogether trickier.

There are various types of gamer. The **story-influenced** gamer who wants to be involved in a good yarn. The **character-influenced** gamer (like me) who wants to progress his/her character through their life. The **dice-influenced** player who's just as interested in the rules and mechanics of the game as in the game itself and finally the **power-influenced** player. And this final example is what I am here to talk about today.

Power players love the hardware of the game. The bigger the gun, faster the ship, swifter the fast draw (my only *specialisation* vice, I admit) the more physical enhancements the better. Most gamers go through a period of power playing. Two GMs I know had a *very* long stint back in the early 1990s. Both had massive physical and bionic enhancements done to their characters and both…got really bored with it after a while because they lost sight of the characters and became cyborg versions of themselves. Some prefer this style of gaming, although I think they might deny that if asked face to face. Now, one player I know has a main character who wears black Mandalorian armour and who hunts with a bounty hunting licence. This character is the Boba Fett of our Setnin Sector. Cool stuff.

But whichever way you look at it, the player character built his reputation on the shoulders of the number one bounty hunter in the galaxy. People think that he *is* Fett. But I digress; this has nothing to do with an RPG. From a gaming point of view, the character is tough as nails, armed to the teeth and lives by a code of honour known only to him. Which makes him very much like Fett, only he's *not* Fett. Never will be, and the player probably never wants him to be (which is hardly surprising - those pesky Sarlaccs…)

The problem arises from the fact that in a combat sense he seems to be modelled closely on Fett, from the backpack to the technically superior ships to the manner in which he approaches his work. And as a consequence, he tries to stamp his authority on the game in a similar manner to Fett…

But he's *not* Fett.

So why's this a problem? Well, even a Fett-type character causes imbalance. Why? Well, if someone is playing a generic bounty hunter, let's say a Dengar-type - efficient, tough and knowing - then there's no problem. He can trip up and fall like the rest of us smugglers, traders, mercs, etc. But the Fett-types bring a whole other side to the game, like luggage. They expect to be first on the scene, first to draw a weapon, first to collect the bounty.

Why?

Because that's what Fett would do, and if by playing a character that's almost but *not quite* the man himself, then they expect the same prizes. And if they don't come their way then the belligerence starts. The confrontations, the arguments, the ego tripping…

Lord save us from Fett clones!

But this isn't in any way a condemnation of these characters. In our Star Wars setting this character has a rich background and plenty of scope for story development. But narrow him down to the confines of the RPG universe and you have an altogether different character. In fiction a one-sided fight is pointless. A victor is only as good as his opponent. But in RPG you *expect* the Stormtrooper to fall after two hits. Different structures, different perspectives.

A generic Fett clone is a disruptive influence**.** But that's not to say that the efforts in integrating the character into a game isn't worth the rewards it might reap.

It's just not for every gamer…like me.

Mark Newbold is the Webmaster of acclaimed Star Wars fansite www.lightsabre.co.uk, and has been involved as a player in roleplaying games for at least twenty years.

Fourteen Elements of Starship Design
For Sci-Fi Gamers

Designing a starship that suits you, your gamers and your games.

Interstellar sci-fi games often revolve around one thing: starships. Many players of these types of games become quite passionate about starship design and starship capabilities and this can create various game related problems. Also, while most sci-fi roleplaying games have their own systems for starship design and implementation, the following tips might help further flesh out your game's starships and give them some added character.

1. Harness Player Passion

Players of the game, both GMs and attendees alike, love to tinker, modify, and list the abilities of their starships. The great space-battle type games cry out for such designs and players will want to ensure that if they get into any trouble they have the vessel to do the job. This can lead to all kinds of designs, even down to the smallest items, systems, and capabilities that the

designer can squeeze in to cater for every eventuality. This is all fair and good--nothing brings a more genuine smile than when the starship successfully does something it was designed to do.

To make your job of campaign preparation easier, try to harness the enthusiasm and passion the players have for starship design and let them tackle as much of this game aspect as possible. This will include players at a higher level of game involvement and will greatly increase their campaign satisfaction.

2. Ensure The Starship Design Serves The Game

Player driven, detailed ship design can make things a little problematic for the GM. If the ship has a system or gadget for every eventuality, then the game is going to be a little predictable and adventure challenges too easily solved. The GM should ensure that he/she isn't giving into Player Pressure or the Cool Factor and that the design of the ship suits the game.

'Player Pressure' is when the players either continually badger the GM to allow them just 'one more addition' to the ship, or they gang up on the GM with tables of rules, costs, and dice rolls to get their own way. Don't fall for it! If you cave in and allow the modifications, then the players will think they can always get away with it and maybe with other rulings as well. If they want a great ship part make them work for it. A high price, lack of availability, or even a series of adventures earning the right to have the part will make them think twice before pressuring you again.

'Cool Factor' is the GM falling into the trap where they themselves think that the fast, sleek, manoeuvrable ship

is a good idea and allows the modifications, but then regrets their decision later on. When the players get into trouble they easily get out of it, not once but many times, until the encounters become repetitive and predictable. It's easy to get caught up in the Cool Factor trap, but if you refrain from going overboard in your design then you'll appreciate the vessel later on in the game. It can make for a good game when the players get protective about their ship, even if it is a dilapidated old freighter, and it gives the vessel more character.

3. Vessel Purpose

What the vessel is designed for will decide many other factors of the design process. A simple hired transport will not be large and will have a limited crew and cargo capacity. A destroyer could be huge, with space for war machines and troops, serving a crew of hundreds. A survey vessel might be large and have a crew of varying scientific skills and abilities. Deciding what a vessel was originally built to do gives a sense of purpose and ability.

4. Size

Vessel size will determine the crew complement and capability and will influence many ship systems. A small freighter might have half a dozen crew with several different responsibilities divided between them. A great liner-type ship will have a crew of dozens, even hundreds, with whole teams of people dedicated to a single ship's operation, such as the engineering crew or attendees.

Size will also help determine where the ship can and cannot go. A smaller vessel could dock with a space station and land on a planet while a larger vessel might have to park next to a

station or planet and ferry crew across in shuttles. A small ship will be able to manoeuvre through an asteroid belt whereas a larger ship might be a sitting duck.

Size can also be an indicator of strength. A small ship might take two hits and be destroyed whereas a larger vessel might need to be hit a hundred times before the damage is regarded as severe.

5. Control Systems

The command area of the vessel is the nerve centre of the whole construction. As in the TV/Movie series Star Trek, the bridge is the single most important part of the starship, so you'll have to design what's required in the cockpit/on the bridge.

If it's a small trading vessel, it might just be a pilot and co-pilot taking care of business. A huge exploratory ship might have a dozen or more workstations scattered about the bridge with several personnel on duty taking care of tactical, navigation, or sensors. Consider also, how much control does the bridge have over the rest of the vessel? Decide what systems tie directly into the bridge/cockpit and what systems will have to be travelled to directly to operate or influence.

6. Power Systems

The heart of the vessel is its power core. The core's job is to supply energy throughout the vessel so it's important to determine:

a) What is the vessel's power source?
*b) How dangerous is it?*

Perhaps it's a new form of clean fusion that presents very little danger,

or maybe it's concentrated fusion that emits high levels of radiation that need to be heavily shielded to protect the crew.

The energy core, and the auxiliary systems in case things go wrong with the main power, should be designed with two things in mind:

a) What would happen to the ship if the core shut down?
b) What would happen if it leaked or got damaged?

Power is a requirement on starships, but the dangers of harnessing that power should be considered.
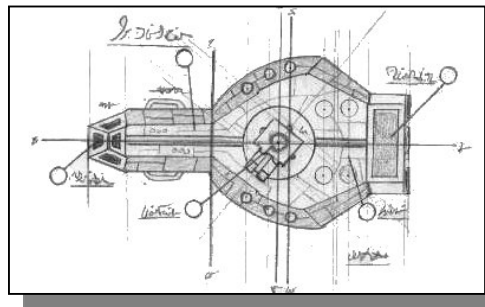
7. Life Support

Crew requirements need to be taken into consideration. Mainly, these requirements are the simple things in life, that of air to breath and an acceptable temperature to survive in. Gravity is also a necessity on long voyages to avoid muscle and bone degradation but may not be possible in your game's setting. Either way, the life support system will need to be considered to keep the crew alive.

Depending on the setting and on what species of crew you have on board, the life support ability may vary from one section of the ship to another. It's all fair and good taking on alien passengers, but if your atmosphere is

lethal to them it's not going to be a very long stay.

8. Sensors/Communications

It's all very well going off on deep space adventures, but it makes things difficult when you don't know what's around you or not being able to let other people know what's going on.

Sensors come in varying packages. Either they have a long range and give you full details of what's around you, or they have a limited range and simply pre-warn you of any approaching objects.

The sensor ability will depend on the vessel's purpose. A warship will have multiple sensors that will identify threats and targets, with tactical details of the targets being presented to the viewer. Research vessels may have a broad spectrum of sensors that may be able to track and probe life forms, minerals and atmospheres. A smaller vessel may have a simple proximity-warning sensor that bleeps when something comes too close.

Communications may vary also, depending on the technology level you're gaming in. The signals sent by a starship may take weeks to get to their intended target, meaning the vessel really is alone in space. Alternately, the signal might get to the target instantaneously, using subspace/light speed technology to relay the message.

Communications will help determine risk. If the players get into a dangerous situation and a distress call will take two weeks to reach a friendly location, is it worth it?

9. Sublight/Supralight Engines

Starship speed is an important game factor, especially during those exciting chase sequences, or cavalry type 'to the rescue' scenes. Speed takes two forms:

a) Sublight speed, which determines how fast a vessel can cover distances between planets within a solar system.
b) Supralight speed, which, if the vessel is capable of such a thing, determines how fast a vessel can travel between solar systems.

Sublight can take the form of thousands, even millions, of kilometres per hour depending on the capability of the ship. Smaller ships may get to certain places faster but have a limited fuel supply whereas larger vessels may have a longer range and a huge supply of energy to burn up.

Supralight is the speed that enables the vessel to get between stars. This can be any speed the GM wants, with a drive that enables the vessel to get to a star in weeks, or a drive that might enable the journey to be completed in days or even hours. There are also drives that could enable a vessel to instantly appear within a solar system, taking no time at all. It depends on the GM and what he/she thinks will work for their game. Long voyages can be adventures in themselves.

10. Crew Support

The crew can breathe and walk about your ship, but what do they eat? Where do they sleep? Is there anything for the crew to do to relax? Long journeys can be tiring, especially cooped up in a vessel, so the crew will want to be able to relax between shifts, especially if it's a large crew on a large ship.

A small ship may have a few music/video programs or games to keep the players entertained (like the holochess board on the Millennium Falcon in the original Star Wars movie), or entire decks may be put aside for rest and relaxation on larger vessels (as in the holodecks in the Star Trek TV/movie series).

Food is a concern, especially if more than one species is working on the ship. Does the vessel have a galley or do the crew quarters each have their own kitchen/dispenser? What do they eat? Concentrated food, tablets, or full meals from a stocked kitchen? When resupplying at a station you can top up fuel or get repairs, but food is also a necessity. Also decide how and where the crew has downtime for sleep and personal chores. They may all share dormitories, have their own quarters, or share with one or two other people. They may even be jammed in like sardines, like on a submarine.
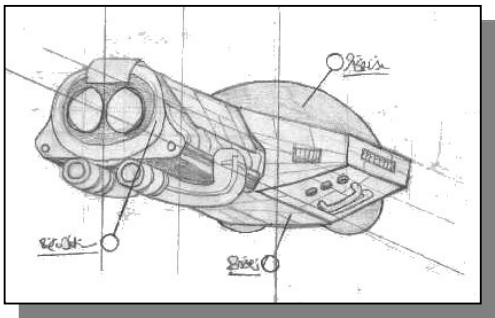
11. Extra Vehicular Support

Getting on and off the vessel is important in both duty and emergency. Duty involves the normal boarding/disembarking from a starship in various ways. Perhaps the crew is shuttled in on smaller vessels that are permanently stationed in a hanger in the starship on large vessels.

Shuttles and landing craft may be used to get to and from planets and stations, but perhaps the crew is 'beamed' to their destination by matter transporters instead.

What about an emergency? Does the vessel have enough lifepods or lifeboats to get everyone off? How long would it take? Smaller vessels may have one or two lifepods to cover the crew, whereas bigger vessels may utilise lifeboats so large that they are small starships in themselves. Decide on entry and exit points on your starship and what they are used for.

12. Offensive/Defensive Systems

So, the ship is flying about the cosmos when - *gasp!* - Pirates/Enemy Ships/unsociable aliens suddenly attack it. So, what is the starship you have designed capable of in a fight, and how well protected is it under fire?

Offensive weaponry can come in many forms, as in missiles and lasers, but what does your ship have to offer? Again, this goes back to the purpose of the vessel. Warships may be bristling with gun emplacements and torpedo tubes, a research ship may have a few weapons for defensive purposes, and a smaller trading vessel or a fighter may have one or two weapons suited to the kind of enemy it may encounter.

What can a ship do to protect itself? Does it have armour plating? Energy shields to block shots? Perhaps it can launch countermeasures to confuse targeting computers and missile guidance systems? It sometimes pays to think beyond what damage a ship can do and consider what damage a ship can take.

13. Ship History

To give the vessel some character, consider what other adventures and missions the vessel has been involved with before it appeared in your game. If the ship is brand new then this is not a consideration and the game itself will determine the ship's story.

Older vessels, either second-hand ones or ships the PCs have been stationed to, may have a long history however. Has there been many previous owners? What adventures has the original crew had in the ship?

The age and any modifications done to the ship since its launch date might be worth looking at as well. An old, dilapidated warship may be no match for a modern battleship, like matching a World War One frigate against a modern day aircraft carrier or destroyer. But the age of the ship, and what it's been involved in, makes for great character. If you give it the same kind of character history as you do for NPCs and PCs the ship takes on a life of its own.

14. Visual Design

Visual design can certainly vary, but take one thing into consideration - aerodynamics is not a problem! The vacuum of space means no friction, meaning any ship of any shape, no matter how outlandish, can travel the stars. Visuals can be determined by yourself (if you have artistic tendencies) or pictures can be utilised out of most science fiction books and even space science websites, such as www.nasa.com.

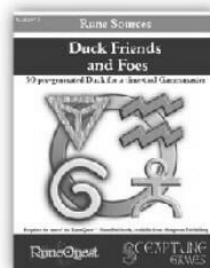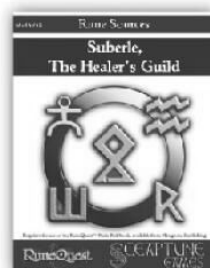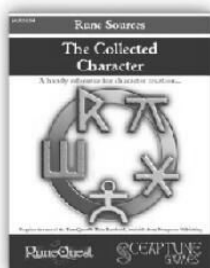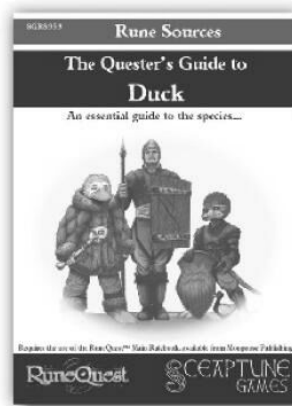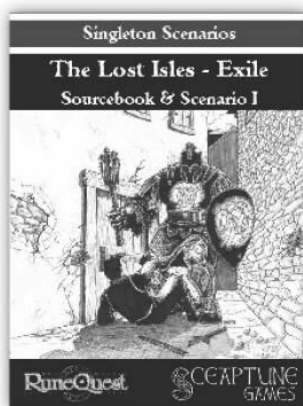Again, that's GM discretion. If you want to take a jumbo jet, knock off the wings, and slap a great big cannon on top of it, then there's a spaceship straight away.
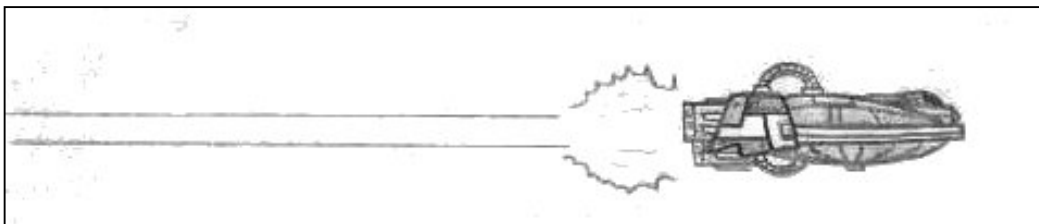
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CREATING A SCI-FI SETTING WITH DEPTH

Want to make your fantastic locations more memorable to the players?

When, at first, I played roleplaying games I wanted it to be like the movies - big, explosive, action-packed. But after saving planets and rescuing whole races in distress, blowing up super weapons and defeating new terrible threats, the galaxy into which my character had been born was growing stale. It was the same with many of the other players. The clatter of dice had lost its music.

One day a group of gamers (who shall remain nameless) sat down to do a game and the Gamesmaster really hadn't anything ready to run, just a few plot ideas he had and a couple of notes, so he just looked at his players and asked '*so, what are you going to do?*' The players were stunned; here they were, docked in a space station in the middle of nowhere with free reign to go where they wanted, and they didn't know what to do. Without Gamesmaster guidance they were stuck.

Until one of the players said '*do you remember that corporation boss whose daughter we rescued on that planet with those two asteroids as moons? Perhaps we could go and pay him a visit. He did say come back anytime'.*

It's decided. The players decide to head for the planet where the boss is. They know where it is - they've been there a few times. Or they could have gone and visited the tribesman whose people were saved from the renegade demolition crew. Or they could pop back to that bar they visited on the second moon of the last system, see what was going on. Call old NPC's they had befriended to see how they were, get a job and call other NPC's who owe them a favour who are skilled enough to help. Pay off old debts.

The players were able to travel the sector of space and decide where they would go. The sector was alive to them, it wasn't a painted black and white setting laid out by a Gamesmaster and helped along by action and explosions. They could *interact* with it. An entire new perspective was born within the galaxy.

If this kind of roleplaying appeals to you then read on - this little piece may help, or at least point you in the right direction.

CREATING THE REALITY

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to run a game set on a planet known within an official licensed movie roleplaying setting? If you run a game on Tatooine from Star Wars, say, in Mos Espa, then the players are going to be able to feel comfortable and part of the setting because they know the place. They know that there is Pod Racing there, that they can get parts from Watto's junkyard. If they go to Mos Eisley they can get a drink at the cantina from Wuher, that they can catch a ship to the other side of the galaxy, and if they've read the books or the source material then they can ask about for certain personalities that can aid them.

Wouldn't it be great if you could run a game set on your own worlds, your own locations filled with your own characters that the players can get used to, visualise and interact with as naturally as the ones in the films and books.

STARTING POINT

First of all, you've got to create a place that is going to be instantly recognisable by the players. If you're an artist, so much the better, but it's just as easy to put the visualisation into the players mind by graphically describing the location. Some people say that long-winded description is dull, but I believe that the GM can use that description to initially describe setting. Planet log sheets are good but they lack depth. The look of the place can be imprinted on the players and then brief

descriptions on return journeys are all that'll be needed in later games.

We'll use an example planet, which we'll call Nebrassa to illustrate my meaning. The examples will be in italics.

Now, the initial location must be communicated to the players. Instead of giving them a standard description of the planet, narrate the approach to the world, taking in any other spatial matter around the system. Make it good - if you're a GM then you've probably got a flair for the dramatic and can roll this kind of stuff off. For you're initial description, write it down. Spend a little time writing up a narrative to read to the players as they approach the world. It can be split up to include any roleplaying or action scenes that may occur.

For example, let's say that the players are approaching the world of Nebrassa where they are to meet a contact that will introduce them to a gunrunner. In orbit, the game dictates that they will be stopped by a navy warship, and, if they don't react sharpish, may even be boarded.

So you could start the first paragraph like this:

The hyperspace tunnel collapses, turning the stars from streaks into points of light. The planet of Nebrassa rolls into view. It is a muddy-brown world, with thick cloud cover over the equator and wide reflective oceans. The navigation computer tells you it is a swampy world, but you don't need a databank to tell you that. All you have to do is look at the world. Two large grey moons orbit closely at either pole, with several smaller bodies further out. A thin ring of dust encircles the planet, reflecting a rainbow of colours from it's crystalline content. Your ship approaches for orbital insertion.

It's at this point the players are allowed to interact with this, the first view of their planet. Extra notes about tiny details may be necessary just in case your players are exceptionally perceptive.

This is also where the players will get a feel for what kind of world they are over when the naval warship approaches. If the players are going to be coming here often it helps to make the initial NPC contact a memorable one. There are far too many instances where the players land, a custom officer says 'one hundred credits, please' and then walks off. That's it. Quite unremarkable. Generalising characters are fine for background painting, but make sure you've got several stock characters for the odd Joe Public off the street the players may ask for directions or advice from. For more information, see the chapter 'Creating Interesting NPCs'.

So, the players meet up with the customs frigate. If this is going to play a major part in the scenario then make sure the stats and personalities are laid out for the officer of the ship. It's through this character the players may learn a little of the planet.

'It's very simple,' says the customs officer, his bushy eyebrows constantly twitching, 'you can carry light weapons but nothing heavy. There are fines for infractions, set terms for major ones. There'll be zones on the surface marked red on your sensors - these are no-fly areas. If you stray into them you'll get shot down or arrested with no appeal, got it?? Landing costs 100 credits plus 50 every day after. Ask the Portmaster for rules and regs. Now, your ship's clean. Beat it'.

This little encounter, brief or long depending on what the players do, say or have in their hold, sets up what the planet will be like. The customs officer may have been polite, explaining the law of the world and handing out any data chips with maps and instructions. He could simply have boarded, searched, and sent them on their way. A world is usually governed by a simple attitude that is present in its denizens. If the world is oppressive then the inhabitants could be cynical and unfriendly. A world covered in clubs and nightspots might be friendly and warm, an industrial world would most likely be indifferent to the presence of the PC's (*'we get hundreds like you through here every*

day'). Setting the feel of a world is not done through a simple description of the globe. It's also done through the attitude of its inhabitants.

GOING DOWN

The next part of the introduction is getting the players down to the surface. If you have filled out a planet log then take the atmosphere into consideration. Is the world wet and damp? Then when they hit the atmosphere they'll be flying into thick cloud, maybe even a little lightning. Dry and warm? Then describe the land spiralling out before them, no cloud cover to obscure their vision. The details of the land become more defined as they approach the surface.

Nebrassa, it's clouds seemingly still, starts to grow in the window. As the ship starts to vibrate slightly during atmospheric entry you see that the clouds are actually heaving with activity. They roll and pulsate like something alive, the violent storms below them churning them up. Flashes of light streak through the moisture as lightning touches down on the surface. Then you're enveloped by the cloud, thick oppressive cloud that forces you to fly by instrumentation alone. Bursting out from beneath that cloud is almost a relief.

Give the planet character. Give it a sense of realism. Give it a quirk or a feature that defines its originality. Nebrassa appears to wear a belt of cloud whilst its poles are apparently clear. This is what makes a planet different from the rest.

SURFACE LOCATION

There will be a place on the surface where the players will first touch down, where the landing bays are, where the population resides. If the reason the players are there does not concern the main city (or cities) then fine - they can either hear about the city or do a fly-over, and then you can go into a separate

description of the other location. For now, though, lets concentrate on the one place.

Most cities are built the same. Sprawling urban areas surrounding a central 'hub' that enables the residents to congregate and trade. This usually consists of buildings of varying heights depending on function and ownership. Look at the world around you. No matter where you go this is the general layout of a city.

You have to make your city a distinct place that dominates the view. If the planet is covered in small settlements then fine - concentrate on what these little places look like but give them something that no other place has. In many cases, cities and towns are built to complement their surroundings, so the surface of the planet must be taken into consideration before anything else.

The capital city of Nebrassa, Nebro, is a strange sight to behold. The misty belt of the planet creates huge banks of fog and incredibly sodden ground, making direct surface dwellings difficult. Therefore, Nebro has been built on huge legs. As your ship approaches, you see that the city is a collection of several platforms of varying heights, rising from the fog below on thick, durable stilts. Each platform is covered in tall buildings that are rounded off at the top, some open like flower petals to serve as landing platforms. Walkways and speederlanes intersect each platform and wind around the buildings. All in all, you'd guess that the city was large enough to contain over two million citizens.

Why was Star Wars' Cloud City such a wonderful city? Was it wonderful because it mined Tibanna gas and had Lando Calrissian as an administrator? Of course not. You don't find out these details until after the characters touch down. Cloud city is wonderful because it floats among the clouds, because it is so huge and yet looks so delicate as it hovers in the sky. That is what amazes the characters when they first see it, which is what stays in their minds. That is what you have to create - a location that is remarkable and unforgettable.

INTERACTION

When the players walk down the ramp of their ship they'll want to see, hear and smell their surroundings. That first impression of the world they are going to explore is what will dominate their senses.

First of all, what will the characters see? Landing on a desert planet is simple - sand and more sand, or sandy walls if they touch down in a landing pit. On more temperate worlds they'd see rolling greenery, maybe covered in patchy swampland or deep pools. Make sure you have a visual worked out to describe to the players. Their first view of the new world will pretty much dictate how they view the rest of the planet or location they are in.

The landing platform hangs over the city's edge, allowing wisps of thick fog to creep over the edges. It is well worn and obviously used constantly - burn marks from retro thrusters and patches of grime denote frequent landings and take-offs. The streets and buildings at the edge of the platform are bustling with activity, with beings from all walks of life and dozens of different worlds go about their business. Thick pipes seem to protrude from every wall and several places in the ground, making it seem as though a network of tubes runs throughout the city. It makes it appear strangely organic. Dull grey metal stands proud on every building - the place was obviously built for practicality and not to serve any architect's whimsies.

Now come the sounds they will hear. Out of the way places with little to no activity will be sullen and quiet, with the odd *whoosh* of a starship and humming generator. Heavily populated planets will contain multitudes of sound, from screaming vehicles to the murmur of crowds to the blare of sirens and the cacophony of trade halls.

The city is strangely quiet as beings keep themselves to themselves. The sounds of the place are muted as the fog creeps silently over the view. Every now and then a travel tube roars as a pod shoots down it or there's a drone as a vehicle passes by. The main noise comes from the Aircars and starships criss-crossing the skies above - this far up in the city is where many of the landing pads are.

With a new location come new sights, sounds and lastly smells. The smell of location doesn't play a huge part in its description (after all, it's very difficult to imagine a smell) but nonetheless adds a little more depth.

The strange odours forced up your nose are peculiar to say the least. Like a mixture of rotting vegetation and grease. As you head into the crowds this is replaced by purified air as huge atmosphere regulators keep most of the fog at bay. This smells almost metallic, with false chemicals added to make the majority of beings comfortable, like chlorine and white spirit mixed.

DETAILS

After that, it's up to you, the GM, to add the little bits and bobs that will bring the setting to life. As stated before, take a look at the NPC creation tips on this part of the site. They'll help you create personalities that will inhabit the setting you've created. Its all well and good having the location laid out, but if there's buildings there's life (usually).

Remember the golden rule - *no two places are alike*. If the players touch down in a city that you haven't made any decent notes for, the chances are your description is going to be lame and uninspiring. This will mean the players will be at a location that won't stick in there minds.

If you want your players to visit your creations, then don't let that happen. The galaxy is alive if you say it is.