

STAR FLEET COMMAND

Philosophy & Attitudes Guide to Role-Playing **STAR TREK**



By Paul Montgomery Crabaugh

FASA has produced a marvelous game. It has a problem, though, a problem not an intrinsic fault of the game, but more a reflection of the faults of other games. Many people playing *Star Trek* have trouble adapting to what a friend of mine calls (not derogatorily), "a goody-two-shoes universe."

The average player has, perhaps, become accustomed to the premises of *Traveller*, where the average spacecraft is stolen and the average player-character is what can only be described as a terrorist, where laws extend no further than the atmosphere, if that far, and no further into a starport than the outer perimeter fence—a universe where every player-character is armed to the teeth with the most lethal weapons he can carry. Worse yet is the player whose experience is mainly a fantasy game—say, for example, *Dungeons & Dragons*. Such players suffer from three major disadvantages: they tend to be locked into a "kick-the-door-kill-the-monster-take-its-treasure-how-much-experience-do-we-get?" frame of mind; they tend to take combat somewhat frivolously—after all, they know they're tough and skilled—and they tend to take death somewhat lightly ("I'm at zero hit points again, where's the cleric?"). These last two become especially painfully inappropriate mind-sets when the typical personal weapon in a game has a "disintegrate" setting.

And so it occurred to me that it might be helpful to set down some of the philosophy and attitudes of the *Star Trek* universe. Some such discussion is included in the rules (and in the scenarios, especially the first); none of it should be anything new; but putting it in one place, labeled as background material for the game, may help the players of *Star Trek* to avoid getting court-martialled, starting wars, or dying.

"I will not provoke an attack."

This is touched upon in the tactical doctrine in the rules.

Starfleet stands ready to fight—but its mission is to not fight. Whenever there is a doubt about a situation, Starfleet officers are expected to err on the side of peace—even though it may place at risk, or even cost, their lives. Or their ships. Losing a starship and 432 trained personnel is a terrible loss, no matter how you look at it—but if it is a way to avoid war, it is an acceptable gamble.

So be hesitant to do anything that might touch off a paranoid-schizophrenic who might, just might, turn out to be a *potentially-friendly* paranoid-schizophrenic. Be reluctant to raise shields. Do not make powerful sensor scans unless they have made them first—and thus can be assumed that they know that a sensor scan is not an attack. Do not take reticence for hostility. Do not arm phasers or load torpedoes "just to be on the safe side"—if they detect you doing it, there will be no "safe side."

Bear in mind that a starship can absorb a considerable amount of damage without defending or striking back and still be an awesome force.

**"We'll see how they like havin'
a full starship come down their throats."**

This is what makes the above strategy—calculated vulnerability—viable. The Federation starships, the cruisers, are far and away the most powerful class of warships in the known galaxy. No other government lavishes so much effort on producing just a few superb ships. The pay-off is in ticklish situations. If a friend changes sides, or an unknown becomes violent, or a known enemy catches you by surprise, they still have to work awfully hard to put a starship out of commission. This gives you a margin of error that can be used to defuse crises.

The other side of the coin is that if you are the one to initiate hostilities for some reason (it'd better be good), most opponents will back down or back out rather than face the wrath of a starship.

"Set your phasers on stun."

Do not forget to set your phasers on stun. Landing parties should adopt the same shoot-last-if-at-all attitude that starships in space do. Here is where things get dicey; unlike a Constitution-class starship, characters on a planet are no more difficult to take out than anyone else. Landing parties therefore tend to get in more fights. But let's keep it under control, please.

One major factor working for you in tense planetside encounters is everyone's friend, the phaser. It is probably the best weapon ever devised, just based on its flexibility. Armed with phaser-II's, or even phaser-I's, you should almost never have to opt for killing force. Precious few even roughly human-sized creatures are going to be able to shrug off the effects of a stun; even if they remain standing, another shot—or a right to the jaw—should topple them easily. If you suspect in advance that you are dealing with someone tougher than usual, you can always set for heavy stun.

If you find that you cannot stun your target, the disrupt setting is a nice compromise between subdual and death, harming the opposition while still leaving them the option to quit the party if they so desire. If even that fails to deter an attacker—and only then—you can set for disintegrate. Pretty much everyone and everything calls it quits at that point.

However, a cautious approach to such a problem does frequently allow an opponent to get close enough to hurt you while you are still putting him/her/it down. For this reason, all Starfleet personnel should take advantage of the opportunity to build up a good hand-to-hand rating. The higher your hand-to-hand rating, the more feasible it is for you to let an attacker close. As in starship encounters, use that extra time to try to talk your way out. Starfleet sometimes gives awards for mere victories, but they would rather give awards for avoiding fights.

Since the phaser can be set to subdue, harm or kill as desired, and can be used even at point-blank range, there is, incidentally, no good reason for a player-character to carry hand-to-hand weaponry.

"Maybe you're a soldier so often you forget you're also a diplomat."

Remember that no matter how violent a situation gets, no matter how thoroughly it has been reduced to a struggle of power, your duty to Starfleet and the Federation is always to find another way. As Lazurus Long said, "Always remember that your enemy is never evil in his eyes. This may leave room for a compromise."

The ideals of the Federation demand that there is no such thing as a "just" or "honorable" war. This sets the Federation apart from the other empires of the galaxy, which tend to look upon it as the largest open asylum in history. History itself will judge—soon enough—whether the Federation's obsession with peace is a valid way of surviving. In the meantime, do not expect Starfleet to applaud if you start, or even merely fail to stop, a war—no matter how good your reasons.

"We won't kill today. It's that simple."

Of course, Starfleet—and the Federation—have to deal with hard reality. The upshot is that Starfleet personnel

are expected to act as close to the lofty ideals of peace as is practical at the time.

So do the best that can be done. If you cannot prevent a war, stop it. If you cannot stop it, arrange a truce. If you cannot arrange a truce, settle for a cease-fire. If all else fails, confine the conflict.

The Federation's attitude towards war is that it is a disease which spreads. Starfleet is therefore expected to do some meddling in areas where it really has no business, if it will tend to eliminate the disease before it spreads to the Federation itself.

"Scotty, execute General Order 24."

When all else fails, remember that behind the open hand and the velvet glove, never mentioned but always present, is Starfleet's iron fist. If you cannot find any other way out, then fight—but Starfleet plays hardball; it is the Federation's reputation for unexpectedly turning from milk-sops into berserkers that does the most to maintain the balance of power.

Again, the key are the starships. Nothing short of a squadron—a large squadron—can contain a starship. And while bringing such a squadron to bear, the enemy has to contend with the certainty of fearsome casualties.

General Order 24 requires the officer it is issued to to bring the ship's artillery to bear on a target planet. No sane planetary government will fail to yield to such a threat; the starship will, at the very least, blast the entire civilization to the hunter-gatherer stage of cultural development. In extreme cases, the planet can be rendered totally lifeless. In very extreme cases, the very structural integrity of the world can be disrupted, leaving asteroidal debris.

Actually carrying out such an order carries with it a high risk of permanently breaking the careers of the officer who issued the order, and probably the officer who executed it, and possibly the latter's executive officer for failing to relieve him. Then there are such things as imprisonment and extradition (if the planet survived) to deal with as well.

But if it is really necessary, that firepower is available to the starship captain.

"There is no correct resolution. It is a test of character."

Starfleet seems almost obsessed with the need to allow no one access to the power of a starship who might use it without cause. Starfleet Academy is laden with opportunities to drop out, tests to fail. The player-characters are the cadets who did not fail the tests. They therefore should be played as they are: the most level-headed, least-likely-to-panic, least-xenophobic people Starfleet can find.

Oddly enough, there is a cloud behind the silver lining of reason and non-xenophobia—too much fondness for other cultures and races can be a seductive lure—admittedly a trap few player-characters are likely to fall into. For more on this problem, see Admiral Kirk's forward to the novelization of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" (With no perceptible pause) "Granted."

In the face of such rigorous selection—after all, scores,

perhaps hundreds, of worlds are being searched for a paltry few thousand officers to crew the starships—all the personnel of a starship can be expected to be smart, skilled and independent-minded. This means, especially, the non-player characters comprising most of the crew. They are not cannon fodder, and in the absence of senior instruction, they will not simply wait for things to happen—they may well take matters into their own hands.

This is a warning to the gamemaster as well as to the players. The crew members should be given to expressing opinions, frequently in a manner that would be considered insubordinate by any military organization except Starfleet. They will sometimes interfere in the actions of the player-characters—if in the opinion of the non-player character (i.e., the gamemaster), the players are going off the deep end.

**"If it's me you want,
I'll have myself beamed over. Spare my crew!"**

In all role-playing games, there is a risk of death. However, if you fight hard and stay alert, you can generally survive, and you are almost never expected to do anything flagrantly suicidal.

That may not hold true in *Star Trek*. This is especially true if you are a senior officer, and most especially if you are the captain. There will eventually arise situations where the other players, or the ship, or even "just" a number of non-player characters can be saved only if a player walks quietly into the lion's mouth. There were, of course, two such incidents in the movie *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* alone—Captain Terrell and Captain Spock.

Starfleet does not require its officers to commit suicide. However, most such situations are such that failure to do anything is just as fatal as the action needed to save the rest of the party. In addition, while there may or may not be any official reprimand associated with a "Captain and department head first!" decision, an act of cowardice will almost certainly result in a command-fitness review—and probably denial; and even a merely uninspired effort to help your crew or ship, or any Federation citizens, or even any helpless sentients, might well be enough to wreck your career and confine you permanently to shore duty.

In other words, the player-characters are expected to act like heroes. Take chances. The gamemaster is watching, remember—there may not be a miraculous escape lurking around the corner, but on the other hand, there might be.

"I don't like to lose."

Speaking of miraculous escapes—a role-playing game, and especially *Star Trek*, is a classic example of god helping those who help themselves—or, at any rate, of the gamemaster helping them.

The only "hopeless" situation is one in which you have been disintegrated. Until then, a Starfleet officer should insist on playing the hand out. Always look for some way to acquire an advantage, no matter how slight. Psychological advantages are perhaps the most helpful of all, even though they have nothing to do with reality. The "diplomat" scenario provided with the game is a good example of never giving up (so is *The Wrath of Khan*, for that matter.)

A minor caveat to an earlier statement—a hopeless situation is also one in which the player-characters have given up trying for the win.

"Phasers? You've got 'em, sir.

I managed to recharge one bank."

"Scotty, You just earned your pay for the week."

Related to never giving up is looking for openings to do something superficially impossible or miraculous. Sometimes you can try something patently absurd—and find the obstacles melt away before you.

If it is not in the Starfleet regulations, it should be: "The difficult we do immediately. The impossible we also do immediately."

"Space . . . the final frontier."

"The human adventure is just beginning."

One of the most important things for both the players and the gamemaster to remember when playing *Star Trek* is one of the fundamental axioms of *Star Trek*: "Things are going to look up."

The future, while it will not be a paradise, will be a place where many of the problems we face today have been solved, where the rest are coming under control, and where none will have caused the destruction of the human race.

This affects the scenarios the gamemaster sets up. Even the Klingons do not necessarily shoot on sight, and are sometimes open to reason. Contrariwise, a scenario about slave-trading in the Federation is unreasonable; while slavery may exist on worlds not yet inducted into the Federation's civilization, the Federation itself has eradicated the vice.

It also affects the way the players run their characters. A Starfleet officer will take prisoners rather than kill in a fight. He will work to stamp out narcotics trading—not try to grab a piece of the action. Crews will operate in a civilized, harmonious fashion, even in the face of personal dislike—no knife-fights in the rec room.

"Did we just see the birth of a new life form?"

"My God, Carol, look at it."

"He has illusions and you have reality.

May you find your way as pleasant."

The final piece of advice is to remember that *Star Trek* offered more than an assurance that the future would be a place relatively free of race riots and pollution. It will also be a place of wonders.

It may be satisfying to outwit a Klingon captain in a duel; but the gamemaster should try from time to time to present a scenario that just leaves the players and their characters watching something beautiful or wonderful unfold.

Check out the books of astronomical art for ideas and images. There are plenty of such books out there, by Chesley Bonestell and his successors. There are also books—Carl Sagan's *The Cosmic Connection*, for example—which also dwell on the possibilities for exotic beauty and grace among the stars.

And keep in mind the word "transcendent." That work, perhaps more than any other, sums up everything *Star Trek* aspires to. □