

THE STAR TREK TRIP TO THE FRONTIERS

Role-playing in the Star Trek universe by Alex Stewart

'Space. The final frontier...'

A phrase that's become part of the language. Words with the power to enthral, even after twenty years, and sweep us into the twenty-third century.

Because *Star Trek* is unique. Nothing, except possibly *Lord of the Rings*, has ever fired the imagination of so many people around the world. And nothing else has continued to grow and develop for two decades, spilling over from television into books, films, magazines, comic strips, and, finally, one of the best role-playing games on the market.

The last, of course, being a purely subjective assessment. But I've yet to see anyone come to *Star Trek* from other science fiction RPGs without becoming an instant convert.

So what's so special about it? What's *Star Trek - The Role Playing Game* got to offer you?

Well it depends who you are, I suppose. If you're new to gaming and just want something to play with your friends, or an experienced game master (GM) looking for something a little bit different to run, or a *Star Trek* fan interested in the greater degree of involvement role-playing has to offer, different aspects of the game will appeal to you.

The most obvious advantage *Star Trek* has for anyone new to it, player or referee, is the familiarity of the background. Practically everyone's seen the television series so much of the jargon, equipment, and the general environment aboard a Federation starship can be taken for granted. The GM might have to explain a few things in detail when it comes to applying the rules to them, but in general the players will already know what a phaser looks like and what it does, how a tricorder works, what colour sweatshirts their characters are wearing, and so on. This means a game can start almost at once, without getting bogged down in esoteric trivia.

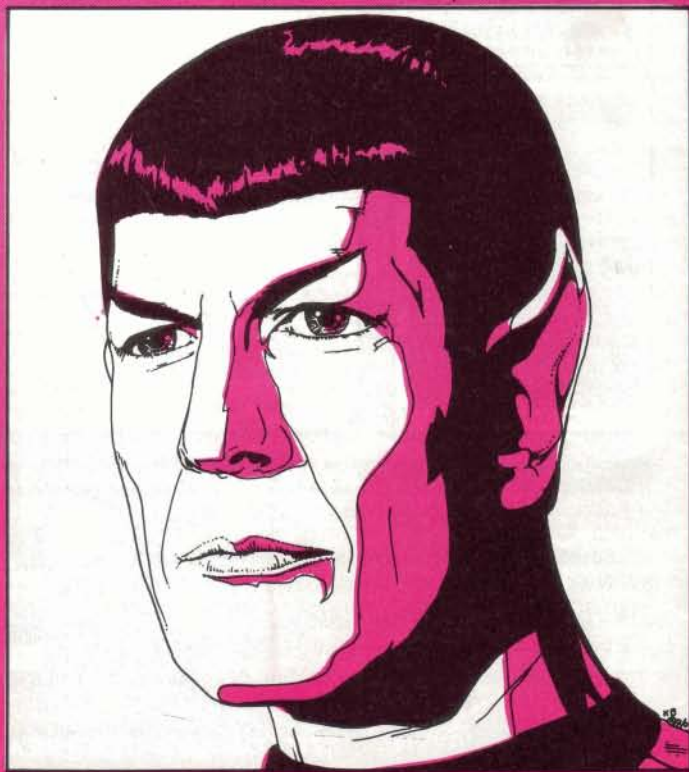
Another useful side-effect of the common awareness of the *Star Trek* mythos is that players tend to apply what they've seen on the screen to their characters' behaviour without any prodding from the GM. This can occur in anything from equipment use ('Phasers on stun') to standard bridge procedures ('I'm taking a sensor reading') to assessing the long-term consequences of their actions ('We can't risk a diplomatic incident over this'). Player awareness of the 'greater reality' of *Star Trek* and the Federation, against which their adventures occur, tends to encourage this kind of realistic assessment instead of reacting purely on the basis of short-term expediency. This makes the referee's job a lot easier, as he doesn't have to keep such a tight rein on the players' behaviour, and can get on with the job of developing the atmosphere of the scenes and fleshing out the NPCs. After all, if the GM isn't enjoying herself too there's no point in her running the game.

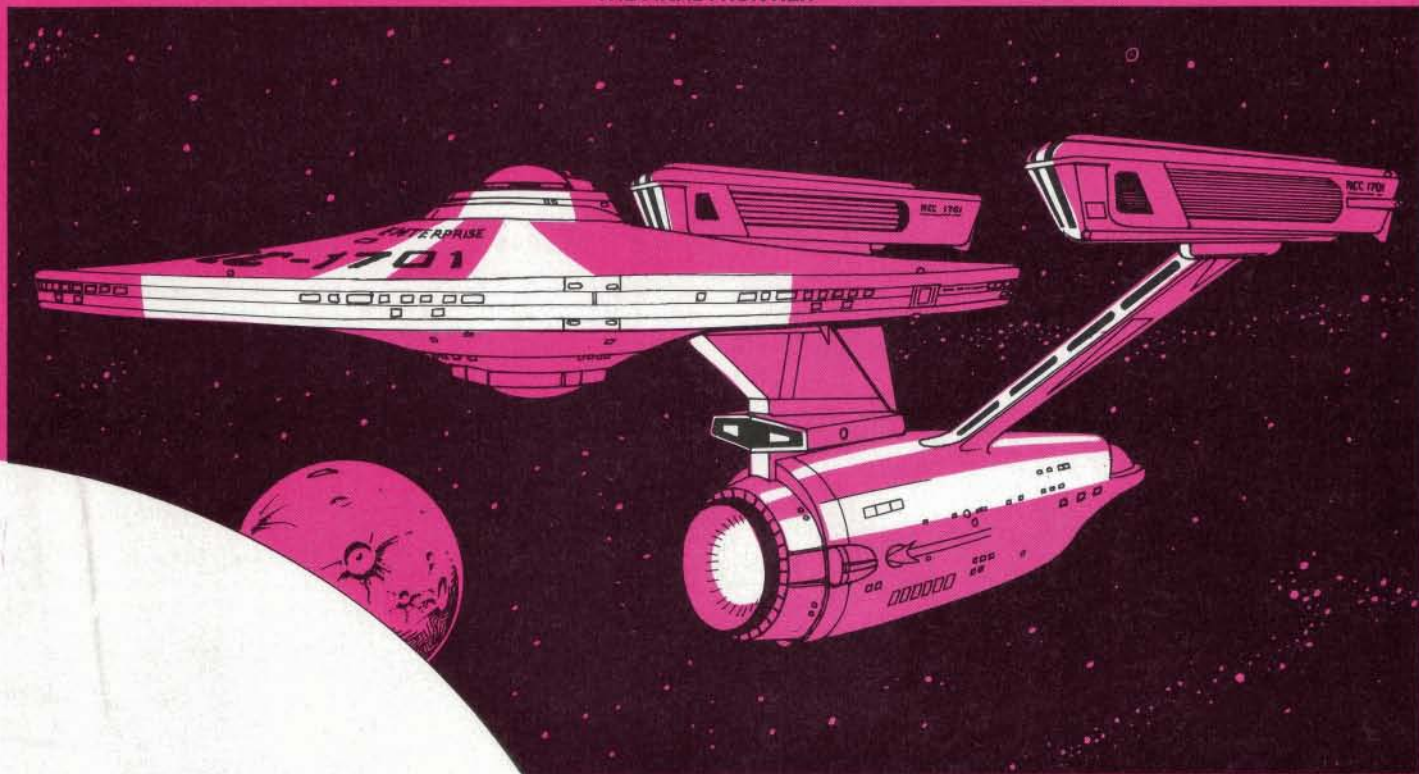
The flip side to all this, of course, is that you can easily find yourself running a game full of players with an encyclopaedic knowledge of *Star Trek* trivia. If this happens, it's no use com-

plaining the manual says nothing about using communicators as makeshift sonic disruptors; Kirk and Spock got away with it in *Friday's Child*, so the players should at least be allowed to make the attempt. Drawing on episodes in this way it is perfectly legitimate, but needs careful handling; even if the circumstances weren't exactly the same, they can be taken as a rough guide in determining the skill rolls needed for success. Ingenuity deserves to be rewarded, as with any game, but not at the expense of realism.

Because realism is the cornerstone of the *Star Trek* phenomenon. The films and the series convince us of their own 'reality', persuading us to suspend our disbelief, because a tremendous amount of effort went into keeping them internally consistent. It's all illusion and artifice, of course, a broad sketch rather than a detailed representation, but it's enough to evoke the fantastic complexity of a fully functioning interstellar society. So if a game's to capture the authentic *Star Trek* flavour the GM must respect that consistency.

The GM's most useful tools in this respect are the source-





books. There are two basic ones, as well as other supplements examining specific aspects of the *Star Trek* universe in greater detail. The one supplied with the basic game concerns itself with the background of the television series, while the update supplement covers the period of the movies. Quite apart from their value as game aids, these booklets are probably the definitive *Star Trek* reference material; they meticulously systematise everything consistent with the primary material – TV episodes, films, books, and other officially-approved sources – while ruthlessly discarding the rest (including my own pet hate, the in-joke ‘guest appearances’ of aliens from other SF stories in the animated series). The only problem they present is the constant temptation to browse while you’re trying to look something up.

Which brings us on to the serious question of what the game’s actually like to play.

Again, that all depends. Provided the GM takes the time to read the rules carefully, neither he nor the players should have any real trouble during a game session. Those with previous experience of percentage-based systems – *Call of Cthulhu* or *RuneQuest*, for instance – should find them quite easy to grasp. Newcomers to role-playing, on the other hand, or players used to six-sided dice based systems of some older games, may have to read them quite carefully before feeling confident enough to run a session. Even though they may seem a little daunting laid out in the manual, the rules are really quite simple and elegant in play.

In the basic set you’ll find a trio of booklets and a pair of percentile dice. Turning our attention to the booklets, we find a sourcebook (*Cadet’s Orientation*), a player handbook (*Officer’s Manual*) and a referee’s manual (*Game Operations*). They’re likely to take a bit of a battering over successive gaming sessions, so it’s a good idea to cover these with transparent plastic.

The sourcebook’s been mentioned already. It contains brief articles on Federation history, terminology, the structure of Star Fleet, and so on. Most useful during a game is a list of the equipment available to landing parties and other personnel, and the shipboard systems the characters may wish to use.

The player handbook concerns itself mainly with creating and running a character. It explains the skills available, leads a player step-by-step through the character generation process, and concludes with a brief section on movement and combat. Most useful to absolute beginners is a short introductory essay, which explains the basic principles of role-playing clearly and concisely, and a glossary of gaming terms.

The referee’s manual covers the actual running of a game, before going on to consider some of the wider aspects of GMing. Sections on various topics like world creation and scenario design are followed by another essay setting out the basic principles of running a game, for novice GMs, and some useful hints on playing technique.

Though it seems like an awful lot to assimilate, the time taken to get to grips with the material at this stage will pay off in spades when it comes to running a game later on.

The next thing to do, of course, is generate some characters. Any experienced gamer will tell you this is one of the best ways to get the feel of a system you’re not used to, and generating characters for *Star Trek* is a little more complicated than for some other games on the market. It does, however, produce fully rounded individuals instead of two-dimensional puppets with a handful of basic skills. Many regular *Star Trek* GMs prefer to save time by pre-generating the characters, rather than spend an hour or more in the process before a game can begin.

This isn’t quite as autocratic as it sounds. There are, after all, nine senior officers aboard a Star Fleet vessel, so the players still have a reasonable degree of choice. Anyone wanting to play a particular role – a Vulcan science officer, for instance – can easily be catered for if they consult the GM in advance, and the players can still personalise their characters by allocating Artistic, Trivia, and similar skills themselves. In any case, ‘unclaimed’ senior officers still have to be kept around as NPCs, so it’s often simpler for the GM to generate all nine and ensure a well-integrated crew. This also explains why so many *Star Trek* games are run as part of a continuing campaign, instead of one-off adventures.

Characters are generated in the usual way, rolling dice to create their basic attributes; strength, dexterity, intellect, and so on. Players can choose their characters from five alien races – Andorians, Caitians, Edoans, Tellarites, and Vulcans – as well as Humans, their attribute scores being varied accordingly. Additional rules for Klingon and Romulan player characters are available in the appropriate supplements, but fall outside the scope of an introductory article.

Inexperienced players will probably prefer to stick to Human characters at first, although there’s no reason why someone sufficiently familiar with the *Star Trek* universe shouldn’t take on an alien if they wish.

The next stage is to determine the character’s skills and proficiency levels. Skills are measured simply in percentages, requiring a d100 roll of less than or equal to the rating held to be used successfully under critical circumstances. (‘Can you give us more power to the shields?’ ‘I don’t know, Captain; the dilithium crystals might not take the strain.’) Under normal conditions, however, a basic level of ten is sufficient to get the job done without any real difficulty.

A character’s skills develop throughout his career, building on whatever he’s learned before. Once he’s completed his basic education at Star Fleet academy, a cadet goes on to specialise in one of the seven branches of the service; Helm, Navigation, Engineering, Communications, Science, Medical, and Security. These, of course, correspond to the different

departments aboard a starship. Player characters will normally be department heads, like Scotty, Uhura, and Sulu, or command officers like Kirk and Spock.

Once qualified, a character receives a full service record, which a little imagination can flesh out into a complete life story. One point to look out for here is a misprint in both the GM's manual and the players' handbook, subsequently corrected in the sourcebook update; GMs should delete 'Star Fleet Academy Command' from the top row of the assignments table, and substitute 'Constitution class starship.'

All you have to do now is calculate the character's combat statistics – the work of a moment – and your alter ego is ready for a life of adventure on the final frontier.

Unfortunately, one thing missing from the basic game is an introductory scenario – a surprising omission, since one was included in the first edition rules. There's a wide range of scenario booklets available, however, most of them containing supplementary information of general use in a *Star Trek* campaign.

Ideas for *Star Trek* adventures can come from a variety of sources. Some of the official ones, for instance, are written as follow-ups to episodes of the television series. Other crews can easily become involved in the aftermath of a situation resolved by the *Enterprise*, or some aspect of a fleetingly glimpsed alien culture can be explored in greater detail. Other obvious sources of inspiration are the novels, comic strips, and the rest of the awesome array of officially sanctioned *Star Trek* material.

And then there are the unofficial sources. The number of *Star Trek* fanzines around defies computation; they breed faster than tribbles. Many of them are execrable, of course, especially the ones devoted to that queerest of sub-genres 'K/S stories.' But the better Trekzines print stories and background articles of a commendably high standard, and these can be a goldmine of potential scenario ideas.

To begin with, though, you're more likely to be using one of the official scenario booklets, so we'll take their structure and layout as typical of a *Star Trek* adventure. Most scenarios from other sources will tend to follow this pattern in any case, as it's easy to use and keeps things nice and simple for the referee.

In general, then, you'll find the scenario laid out in a series of scenes, like one of the television episodes. The storyline branches every time the players have to make a decision, or combat needs to be resolved, and the GM simply turns to the appropriate paragraph to continue the adventure. Thus *Star Trek* scenarios tend to combine the ease of use of a linear adventure with the unpredictability of a free-form one. Though fairly well structured, the actual flow of events depends entirely on the players.

One aspect of *Star Trek* players more used to other rolegames sometimes find surprising is the non-violent nature of the average adventure. The emphasis in *Star Trek* is firmly on problem-solving, with differences to be settled by diplomacy rather than the force of arms. Star Fleet officers resort to violence only in self-defence, and when there's no other option left open to them. Even when they've been forced to fight they'll offer to negotiate or compromise once they've gained the upper hand (look at *Arena*, *Balance of Terror*, and many others). Conflict will still occur, of course, but will arise naturally out of the course of events rather than being the main reason for them.

Similarly, ship-to-ship combat is relatively rare in the course of a *Star Trek* campaign. The rulebook therefore deals with it in a fairly cursory fashion, although the rules given are perfectly adequate for most purposes. Players wishing to resolve encounters with other vessels in greater detail can use the role playing rules included with the *Star Trek III Starship Combat Game*. For a tactically-minded group, using the *Starship Combat Game* in this way can provide a fascinating evening's entertainment.

On the other hand, a group more interested in role-playing the characters might resent the hiatus in the adventure as a whole. You'll just have to use your judgement. The only other disadvantage of using the *Starship Combat Game* is that it will inevitably mean a break in the session. The table has to be cleared for the hex sheet, the ship counters distributed, the panels and player counters handed out. All in all, a good moment for an astute GM to call a coffee break.

In considering the possible use of a supplementary product, we've taken our first step beyond the basic game. One of the essentials of a good RPG is that it should be capable of further

development; so as you and your players master one aspect of adventuring in the world it presents, you'll always be able to move on to fresh challenges.

An obvious second stage in *Star Trek* gaming is to move on to adventures set against the background of the films, either aging your regular characters accordingly or starting a new campaign. The sourcebook update lists all the major changes in Star Fleet and the Federation for both periods shown in the movie, five years after the return of the *Enterprise* (*The Motion Picture*), and five years after that (*The Wrath of Khan/Search for Spock*). It also fills in some of the events occurring off-screen in the interim, like the five year mission of the rebuilt *Enterprise* under Captain Spock.

GMs beginning to run a campaign set against either movie background will find certain provisions have already been made for them in the basic rules. The referee's manual already contains the firing charts for most of the uprated weapons, for instance, even though phaser Bs and disruptor Cs aren't available at the time of the television series. This saves a lot of flicking backwards and forwards between manuals, and makes the game flow much more easily.

One of the most useful features of the update supplement is a short scenario, ideal for a single-evening game, which serves as an excellent introduction to adventuring in the later *Star Trek* universe.

On the other hand, once you've mastered the basic game, you may prefer to explore some aspects of life in the Federation completely unconnected with Star Fleet. After all, there are an awful lot of merchant ships around too, and they have to be crewed by somebody.

The *Trader Captains and Merchant Princes* supplement contains a full set of rules for the generation of merchant crews, and all the background information needed to run a civilian campaign set in the *Star Trek* universe. Merchant characters are far quicker and easier to create than Star Fleet personnel; civilian training is much less intensive, and there are fewer skills available to be learned in any case.

Though a campaign for merchant characters will probably seem more familiar to players used to other science fiction rolegames, many of the basic assumptions are unique to *Star Trek*. In particular the rules tend to reflect the essentially peaceful nature of Federation society. Merchant characters are unlikely to develop any significant combat skills, for instance, apart from the occasional individual who drinks in the wrong bars too often. Furthermore, the private ownership of weapons is strictly controlled, if not completely prohibited, on most Federation worlds. Just as well, really, considering the awesome lethality of a phaser.

Independent traders will tend to operate in the frontier regions, however, beyond effective Star Fleet jurisdiction, so a certain amount of latitude may be appropriate in this respect. Nevertheless, the emphasis will be even more firmly on thinking your way out of trouble than it is in a Star Fleet campaign.

The booklet includes an introductory campaign background, a pre-generated region of space with plenty of opportunities for profit and adventure. There are sections on the interstellar economy – even a set of rules for speculating on the stock exchange – and rules for calculating profit and loss, covering everything from a one-man scout to an entire shipping line. Several different classes of vessel are dealt with in detail, including deck plans in a few cases.

Probably most useful in the course of a gaming session is the price list of goods and services, which, although it doesn't pretend to be exhaustive, is comprehensive enough to cover everything from a second-hand shuttlecraft to a round of drinks.

Of course you may want to mix merchant and Star Fleet personnel, either running two parallel campaigns against the same background, or involving two parties in the same adventure. The possibilities for creative role-playing this opens up are tremendous, especially if they start bickering among themselves, and the players are running a character from each group simultaneously.

Advanced players might want to go on to explore the murderous complexity of Klingon society, or the secretive autocracy of the Romulans. On the other hand you might prefer braving the hazards of unknown space, or fighting for political and economic power, or struggling to make a living with a ramshackle cargo ship. The opportunities are limitless.

Star Trek gaming is like *Star Trek* itself, a never-ending voyage of the imagination.

'To boldly go where no man has gone before ...'
Coming? □