



3 Months Till Altair

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It seems that science fiction games have begun to replace some of the older fantasy games in popularity in recent years. Along with this replacement, however, problems have emerged. Science fiction games have entire galaxies in which to meander and explore—yet too often the game master must fall back on the old fantasy standards of “damsel in distress” and “kill the monsters”.

This is not the fault of the game master nor that of the game designers but more a result of science fiction movies filled with shoot'em up action and spectacular effects. We envision the average “Star Wars” character as one out to save his race from extinction and rescue the beautiful woman from the nasty space lord on the way out. A great movie perhaps—but lacking when it comes to the role-playing game.

Role-playing is just that. Playing out a role in a scenario set by the game master. In the game sense, a lot of time is devoted to travel. It doesn't take one day to cross the galaxy like it does to cross a mountain side in a fantasy game. Often weeks or months must pass before the ship and her crew arrive at their destination. How many times you have heard your game master ask, “What are you going to do for three months?”

Three months! This is a long time to lump together in a few sentences. This “summarizing syndrome” gets worse as the game proceeds. Soon the players are not content to imagine what their character might be doing all that time and are waiting only for the next bit of action and zapping lasers. This is the making of shallow characters, not to mention the problem of creating more pressure on the game master to plan more spectacular scenarios.

Soon, the game master stumbles and steals an idea directly from another game or a book. Most of the players have read this one book and the game begins to stagnate. In the search for more action, the players have forced the game

master to burn out his creative resources. With this burnout, the players turn back to the fantasy game, knowing that in a tiny, controlled world, there are only so many things to do and the characters are content to explore and develop.

In the science fiction game, players and game masters must realize that people still exist. Games based on people will last, if properly run. Jumping from action to action isn't realistic, yet playing out every day in a 7 month journey will bore your players to death. You must make happenings interesting and try to build the character's persona along the way.

One way to entice the players to slow down is the old-fashioned fantasy game encounter. That's right, throw a wandering monster at the party. A haywire droid in the hydroponics lab can add a little fun to the night shift on a long journey, a “dear John” letter from home can shake up a good character just like a love letter that took 18 months to reach its destination. In the starport, make sure that the bar isn't the only place your group goes to. Bars can be interesting, but there is a multitude of other forms of entertainment and amusement available to the spacer on shoreleave.

Alien planets should range from familiar to downright unbelievable. Also, never forget the elements. Rain, sleet, snow and heat are a few of the fun weather conditions that can disturb a tricorder reading and create a real problem for the crew of an exploration vessel.

The following examples should help create interesting flavor for your game and give you, the game master, time to create and plan your main scenario smoothly. Chart rolls should be made whenever the game slows and the extra talking volume rises. If a rolled encounter doesn't suit the situation, then roll again. These charts are very flexible and useful.

Quick—the food processor is spewing ham sandwiches all over the rec room and the slarg's gorging himself!

On Board A Vessel

Unless the vehicle is a cruise liner with 200 support personnel, the majority of space vehicles are bound to have miscellaneous problems ranging from harmless and humorous to deadly serious. If a five month journey was completed without any mishaps of any nature, then you are indeed playing a fantasy game. Equipment is never fool-proof, accidents will happen and generally at the worst possible time. The following examples should get your ideas flowing.

01—DROID LOOSE IN HYDROPONICS LAB—Actually anywhere on the vessel is suitable. Causes could range from poorly done repairs or tune-ups, alien interference or some dark force controlling the little devils. Work droids would become active of free will, and begin their routines at top speeds. Some droids would be dangerous, others simply annoying.

02—LIGHTS OUT ON ONE OR ALL DECKS—Turn your own lights out and try to function (Imagine a 5 deck space vessel without any lighting systems operations.) Causes could be failed circuit or damage. Your players will learn to locate flashlights quickly.

03—LIFE SUPPORT FAILING—This can have very serious side effects, especially when total life support is gone. Death results without proper warning. Also, partial loss of gravity or atmosphere can be most annoying.

04—A BAD SMELL FROM THE FOOD PROCESSOR—Alien dishes programmed at the last space-dock tech check can create the most unusual smells and aromas to confuse and nauseate the characters.

05—COMPUTER ERROR/MALFUNCTION—Little problems can creep up, like extra sensor blips or failed data drives. Of course when this malfunction is recreated for the service tech or engineer, the system will operate perfectly.

06—FOOD PROCESSOR QUILTS—Equipment fails and a processor unit falls prey to a malfunction. Replacement equipment might not function, it may only have a limited number of selections to offer until the next starbase is reached. Imagine having to live off of oatmeal and liver for 4 months . . .

07—WATER SYSTEM FAILS—Complete failure could be deadly and would most certainly call for a rationing of precious supply until the unit is repaired. Partial failure might produce a foul colored liquid that is safe yet not enjoyable.

08—CARGO GETS JARRED LOOSE OR DAMAGED—Poorly packed cargo can spill, explode, fall, leak or collapse and create all kinds of problems. Clients might not always tell the shippers the exact contents of their cargo, either!

09—NPC CREWMAN GOES INSANE/GETS HURT/GETS SICK, ETC.—A Crewman NPC or a passenger, or even characters, can get sick, fall from a ladder, or any number of accidents. Sickness can spread; insanity can create other problems if the afflicted goes berserk and begins damaging equipment.

10—WRONG SUPPLY ORDER SHIPPED—If your players fail to physically check stock ordered from a base or supplier, mis-shipments may have occurred. 20,000 rolls of toilet paper could be an embarrassment when it should have been 2,000 tractor parts for a mining planet. Even if they do check and discover the error, getting it corrected could be difficult.

11—LAB ANIMALS LOOSE—White mice, rats, alien creatures . . . all can get loose in a medical lab and cause all types of havoc to wiring and equipment, not to mention scaring passengers or attacking crewmembers. A hunt can be organized or a shelat picked up at a nearby planet, but what can you feed the shelat after all the rats are gone?

12—TAPPING NOISE ANYWHERE ODD—Cars are notorious for unexplainable noises, taps and pings. Any equipment can experience the same phenomenon. And as soon as the crew is nearly in agreement over the location and cause, these variables should change. Always keep them guessing.



13—COMMON COLD ATTACKS SHIP FROM PORT OR PLANET—Actually any sickness can attack the ship and may be immune to standard shipboard immunization procedures. After all chicken pox may be unknown on Earth, how about Vulcan? Contagious diseases are most interesting and could quarantine a vessel at a port.

14—PRACTICAL JOKES—Whoopee cushions, prank calls, any number of happenings could begin a chain of pranks that may cripple relations among the characters or strengthen friendships. But beware: once the chain is begun, the jokes will be difficult to end, for everyone will want to get even, just once . . .

15—TURBO ELEVATOR FAILURE OR MALFUNCTION—It could be a simple problem, like the elevator decides Deck 4 is Deck 2 and Deck 2 is Deck 1 and confusing everyone. It could be much more serious and could result in injury or even death, thus making the use of these machines slightly risky.

16—RADIATION FOAM RELEASED BY ACCIDENT—Or any type of fire-extinguishing material could flood the decks and create havoc, not to mention ruining the carpeting.

17—ALARM GOES OFF FOR NO APPARENT REASON—This should generally occur about 2 AM on the graveyard shift. It could be the manufacturer's pre-programmed emergency drill that no one knew about or simply a malfunction. Anyway, it should create some excitement.

18—MINOR ACCIDENTS—Remember 75 of all accidents happen around the home or space craft. Some harmless, others dangerous, all creating some type of interactions between characters as they attempt to help.

19—UNKNOWN GREASE LEAK/HYDRAULIC FLUID ON THE FLOOR—A puddle of unknown fluid can cause quite a stir. Malfunctioning equipment or practical jokesters could be the cause.

20—UNRECOGNIZABLE FOOD FROM THE PROCESSOR—Someone might have ordered a turkey sandwich, but what they received is like something no man has ever seen before. A glitch in the programming, no doubt.

In Space

01—**DISTRESS SIGNAL FROM LUXURY LINER WITH ENGINE FAILURE**—Coming to the aid of a luxury liner could be interesting to any crew—some to help, some to take advantage of the situation. After all, there might be a reward, or movie stars on board, or any other number of special occurrences.

02—**DISTRESS SIGNAL FROM DRIFTING ROBOT ORE SHIP OFF COURSE**—Coming to the aid of a giant unmanned ore ship might not be as interesting as a cruise liner, but could be as profitable, if looting is an interest of your crew. Just remember, it may be off course but the security systems are sure to be active!

03—**FAKE DISTRESS SIGNALS FROM KIDS ON A STARBASE OR SHIP**—Those harmless little dickens . . .

04—**SENSOR GHOST/BLIP FOLLOWING SHIP**—It could be a ship or it could be a gas cloud or some other natural disturbance. It should make the crew nervous and wary; if not, add a battle fleet of blips.

05—**JUMBLED SUB-SPACE MESSAGE TO DE-CIPHER**—Some type of disturbance can affect an important message, changing some words and totally jumbling the context of the transmission. Give the players something to work on.

06—**SPACE GARBAGE**—Could be anything from an abandoned Volkswagen to an alien probe lost for millions of years.

07—**TIME CAPSULE FROM A DISTANT ALIEN RACE**—There should be lots of neat artifacts in this capsule, or perhaps a cryogenically frozen alien . . .

08—**FANCY AURORA DISPLAY**—Space can be beautiful, filled with colorful displays, novas, and star clusters. You can use your imagination to add color to the darkness of space. (Don't forget that sensors could be affected.)

09—**LONELY PILOT ON FREIGHTER SEARCHING THE RADIO FOR TALK**—Like CB'ers on Earth, Space is bound to get lonely and pilots and crewmembers are bound to fill the airwaves with chatter and news. These people are likely to be interested in knowing the ship's name and the destination, maybe any news of their home planet. And of course, these non-players might show up later on in the game to lend a helpful—or harmful—hand.

10—**SECRET CODE TRANSMISSION FROM PI-**

RATES—Intercepting a tight beam transmission by accident can toss the ship into an interesting dilemma.

11—**VERY DISTANT STAR GOES NOVA**—When the flash reaches the ship, the light could momentarily blind the crew or cause equipment failure.

12—**STATIC CLOUD OF GAS**—A gas cloud could affect instrumentation and/or the crew in weird and mysterious ways . . .

13—**ROBOT SHIP ATTEMPTS TO DOCK WITH VESSEL**—When a behemoth ore ship decides to dock with your crew's small ship, many problems may arise. Or perhaps it decides to follow the ship, causing all types of difficulties.

14—**DRIFTING EMPTY SHIP HULL**—Pirates, natural causes, war—many reasons can force people to abandon a ship. Exploring the vessel should be risky yet exciting, perhaps building to a full scenario.

15—**INTERSTELLAR POLICE STOP VESSEL**—Perhaps for speeding, or a system investigation or harboring dangerous space criminals—any number of reasons. If they cooperate, the reason should be pleasant and quick. If they complain, the ship should be slightly harassed.

16—**U.F.O.**—Believe it or not, anything can be an unidentified flying object. Especially in space, sensors might not pick up something that everyone sees with the view screen. Or perhaps only one character sees the U.F.O. and no one else believes them.

17—**METEOR SHOWER**—Depending on the severity of the shower, there could be possible damage to the ship.

18—**LOST VACATION VESSEL ASKS FOR DIRECTIONS**—Yes, a family in a space Winnebago is lost and needs directions.

19—**ALIEN SPACE GROWTH ON OUTSIDE HULL**—Some type of alien fungus is slowly encroaching over the outside ship's hull and it's growing . . .

20—**ALIENS MISTAKE VESSEL**—It could be a harmless confusion of similar names or the ship could have the same name as the ruthless space lord Geruit's battle cruiser . . .

On Planet Side

01—**MISTAKEN CREW—(GOOD)**—The crew is mistaken for important diplomatic party and is given royal treatment.

02—**MISTAKEN CREW—(BAD)**—The crew is mistaken for invading spies or other criminals, with very bad results.

03—**PLANETSIDE TECHNICIANS GIVE WRONG BEAM-DOWN COORDINATES**—This can have the crew beam down in a swamp, lake, mountain top or space. Space could be rather deadly. It might take the technicians several hours to locate the victims.

04—**WEATHER CONDITIONS**—Remember, it's not always a temperate climate, and even then, it could be raining. Remember that it snows, hails, sleet and rains in many places at any time. Not to mention the fact a drought or heat wave can be apparent.

05—**EXPLORATION CHARTS ARE WRONG**—It could be a small error all the way up to a totally wrong planet chart. After all, not all explorers are totally dedicated to their work; they could have been sitting in Yekou's Spacer Bar and creating these charts over a few brews!

06—**LIFE REPORTS INCORRECT**—The reports say the planet contains no sentient life, but perhaps they didn't research the possibilities closely because there is intelligent life on this world. It could be an unusual life form—intelligent rocks, etc.

07—**RAW MINERALS ABUNDANT**—All about, raw minerals are there for the taking. Incredible riches, if the right company could move in.

08—**"FOOLS GOLD" MINERALS ABUNDANT**—The crew is led to believe the raw minerals lying about are something very precious, yet their value is 1/8th that of the real material.

09—**THE NATIVES**—The natives shower the crew with



expensive gifts, mistaking them for gods.

10—THE NATIVES—They mistake the crew as local enemies' gods and attack with a religious fervor.

11—WILD ANIMALS—Wild animals track the party and attack out of fear or hunger.

12—LOCAL FESTIVAL—Unknown to the crew, a local festival is in full swing and everyone is having a great time.

13—NIGHT TIME—Perhaps the planet has unusual day and night rotations and this is not translated correctly by the ship board scanning equipment and the crew is beamed down (or lands) in pitch black darkness.

14—WAR BREAKS OUT—It need not be a full-fledged war, it could be a local skirmish, anything to totally disorient the crew. If the war is a major conflict, traffic off the planet may be restricted.

15—PLAGUE—Actually any contagious disease could be running rampant across the planet's surface. This is especially possible on a low-tech planet.

16—MONSOON SEASON—Torrential rainfall could seriously affect the party's actions on a planet. The season could last anywhere from one day to 4 months.

17—RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY—Unknown to the crew before they arrive, the planet or country is celebrating a strict religious or national holiday. This should cause some difficulties.

18—LEADER DIES—Before or during the crew's arrival, an important public official passes away and the people are in mourning.

19—LEADER ASSASSINATED—Problems could develop if the crew is near the assignation location, or involved in some minor way. The people could be wild with hatred over the killers or celebrating the end of a tyrant's rule. The crew is bound to be caught up in the emotions of the time.

20—LOTTERY—Lucky crew member wins planet or country lottery by chance. Instant celebrity, much confusion and ruined plans.

On A Starbase

01—BASE CLOSED—Closed because of horrible weather conditions. This should be a planet-side base.

02—BASE CLOSED—A terrible accident occurs or has recently occurred and has temporarily closed the base to incoming traffic. Little or no explanation of the actual tragedy will be released.

03—BASE UNDER ATTACK—It could be the local bad guys, or pirates having some fun, or outraged aliens. Anyways, this should prevent the ship from peacefully arriving. They may want to offer help or else may find themselves under attack.

04—BASE CELEBRATION—For some reason (holiday, festival, etc.) the entire base is celebrating. Check your game calendar—it could be Christmas.

05—NEW COMMANDER—And everyone hates him or her. And people are being quite verbal over this hatred. And it turns out that the new commander is a long time friend of the captain or any crew member.

06—SHIP QUARANTINED—By paper-work foul-up. It should take several hours and many headaches from conversing with fast-talking bureaucrats, to clear up.

07—SHIP QUARANTINED—This time it's for real due to outward damage, not meeting flight standards, incorrect destination permits, or any number of other reasons.

08—SALESMEN—Once on the starbase, the ship could be attacked by salesmen, selling everything from vacuum cleaners to tribbles.

09—COMMON COLD—Alien strains. Currently running wild through the entire base. It seems like everyone has it. The crew is next.

10—THEFT PROBLEM—Have the crew return and realize someone has broken into the ship! Depending on their luck, the place could be ransacked or something small disturbed.

11—ORPHANS/OLD LADIES/DOGS—Once aboard the base, the crew can be pestered by any of the former for food, money, or a good scratching . . .

12—CON MAN—This fellow can offer anything from drugs to knife sets to discount merchandise. Could be difficult to get rid of.

13—UPSET WOMAN—Names a crew member as the one who just attacked, raped or molested her and calls the authorities upon him.

14—DRUNK ENGINEER—Often trouble as these fellows enjoy insulting other's ships and will often initiate brawls.

15—ATTEMPTED MUGGING/SHOOTING/THEFT—Criminal activity should not be dismissed on a large starbase. Some underground activity may have nothing to do with the scenario, yet could lead the party astray.

16—MISTAKEN IDENTITY—This can get a crew member or the whole crew in a lot of trouble or fun, depending on who they are mistaken for. A criminal, an actor, a famous space tramp, or whatever.

17—FRIENDLY BASE PERSONNEL—This person could lend helpful information to favorite crewpersons.

18—RED TAPE—Do not forget that most civilizations thrive on governmental red tape. Licenses do expire, tickets are issued for malfunctioning equipment and authorities can be touchy.

19—SUGAR DADDY—A local base authority or important person could take a liking to a female (or male) crewmember and begin to shower that person with expensive gifts and dinner invitations.

20—LETTERS FROM HOME—Do not forget those letters and transmissions from loved ones, far away, or lawyers, officials giving important news. Actually writing out a letter and sealing it in an envelope can add excitement.

All in all, use these ideas for scenario starters or just as time fillers. They are guaranteed to liven up any dull situation and will give your players a chance to role-play and build character personas!

