RUNNING THE BLEED

This chapter provides guidance for Ashen Stars Game Moderators. It shows you how to structure individual cases. A comprehensive list of episode premises gives you all the inspiration you need to get started. We review techniques for improvising your story, maintaining a consistent tone, and guiding players when they get stuck in debate mode. The chapter wraps up with a detailed example of play.

BUILDING CASES

Each episode in an Ashen Stars game takes the crew to a new location, where they face a central problem they can resolve only by gathering information. Working out what this problem is gives you the premise of your episode.

Choosing a Premise

The Lasers might literally be tasked to solve a mystery:

- Who tried to kill the agriculture minister?
- Is that spate of nanogon sightings legitimate?
- What's causing that outbreak of madness?
- How did that pirate escape from the penal station?

Alternately, they might be given a goal which requires an investigation to complete, whether this is apparent from the outset or not.

- Evacuate the personnel of Megara Base.
- Capture a piece of alien technology.
- Broker a peace deal between warring factions.
- Make contact with the inhabitants of an unknown ship scanned by a mapping buoy in the Charybdis Outzone.
- Scrub stolen super-weapon schematics from an enemy database.

Some premises deal directly with criminals and lawbreaking. These portray the characters as freelance space cops. However, to fully evoke the space opera feel, you'll also include more general troubleshooting storylines, with no perps to arrest or court cases to gather evidence for.

As your series goes on, you'll be increasingly constructing premises to engage specific player characters, through their Personal Arcs (p. 10). These premises also always present a mystery to solve, or a problem that requires investigation to complete.

When creating or developing a premise, look to the characters' Drives. By building premises to fit a Laser's Drive, you give the player a chance to establish or reinforce the character's key personality traits.

Your premise, along with the twist (below), inspires the world you'll create as the main setting for the episode. The world building process is covered in detail starting on p. 178.

The Contract

When devising your premise, decide whether the Lasers start with contract in hand or stumble into a mystery and then acquire the contract as a pickup (p. 170). Decide also if the contract is hardclaused (with precise fulfillment requirements) or a more generalized appropriate action contract.

Twist

Now devise your central twist—a surprise that the Lasers uncover that changes their understanding of the situation. It may be a complication of the problem the Lasers know they have, or the real problem that makes their apparent one seem insignificant. The twist may bring in the specifically science fiction element of the story.

Think of premise and twist as two parts of a sentence, linked by the word but.

The Lasers see that the base personnel went crazy and killed

each other but discover that they were mentally altered by an intelligent computer, which itself has gone insane. (This is the premise and twist of "Witness of My Worth," the introductory scenario appearing in the next chapter.)

The Lasers provide security at a royal wedding between violently feuding families but discover that the real danger comes from a deteriorating ancient weapon buried in the palace catacombs.

Asteroid miners ask for help dealing with an outbreak of hallucinations but don't realize that they're caused by their own children, granted uncontrolled psychic powers by the pollutants they've carelessly exposed them to.

The crew ships needed medical equipment to a remote colony but are marooned inside a quantum fissure where they confront evil alternate versions of themselves.

Backstory

Work out in broad detail what happened before the crew arrives. When you later break the episode down into likely scenes, you'll be preparing likely ways for the Lasers to uncover the information they need to reconstruct these prior events.

Complications

If not already implied by the premise, twist and backstory, decide who constitutes the primary opposition to the Lasers' efforts. As a change of pace, the complications they face might be entirely abstract and impersonal: the need to survive on a hostile planet, a wave of madness sweeping through the ship, the imminent explosion of an extra-dimensional sun. Most of the time, it's easier and more satisfying to add challenge and suspense by creating antagonist characters who try to stop the Lasers from completing their contract. When your premise and twist leave you with no obvious antagonists, review the chapter "The Bad, the Worse and the Alien,» and pick an enemy type whose agenda ties into your central idea. Non-alien opponents are your best bet.

Often you'll want to insert tangential opponents who might cause trouble for the Lasers only if they make certain choices. These can be avoided through clever action, or goaded into an entertaining if pointless dust-up when you need a sudden infusion of action. Red herring characters, who seem to be implicated in the problem but are actually innocent, are a perennial type of tangential opponent.

The settlers, arms merchants and mutant animals of "Witness Of My Worth" are all tangential opponents. The Hudd museum computer is the primary enemy.

Impersonal hazards work even better as secondary complications than as the main problem the Laser crew must resolve. When no obvious impersonal complications flow from your premise and twist, look at the list of general abilities and imagine situations that might challenge them.

Personal Arcs

Decide which player's personal arcs will come into play in this episode. Divide personal arc episodes evenly between the players without always repeating them in the same predictable order.

Key episodes can unfold without invoking personal arcs. Omit them from your introductory episode and any others in which all of the characters ought to equally share spotlight time. Series arc episodes (p. 227) might bring in a personal sub-plot but shouldn't, over their entire course, skew more toward one Laser than others.

Often the personal arc will add texture or contrast to an episode's central problem. In TV writing parlance, it becomes the B-story to the main premise's A-story. If so, start with your premise and see which of player-supplied arc ideas fits most neatly with it.

Sometimes a personal arc sparks an idea for a central problem. You can then dispense with the distinction between A- and B-story.

Episode Worksheet

Whether you'll be fleshing it out in more detail later or running the episode on the fly (p. 225), start by roughing out your ideas on the following worksheet (there is a printable version of this worksheet in the Appendices, see p. 289. Each entry corresponds to an element of the standard episode structure.

The Contract:

Twist:

Backstory:

Complication 1:

Complication 2:

[Complication 3]:

[Complication 4]:

Personal Arc:

The Choice:

Unlike the main story, which ends in a solution to the mystery, a personal B-story needn't resolve in a particular way. Craft scenes that present the character with a choice. By making the choice, the character reveals something about herself.

These must be scenes that can naturally take place during the investigation. They might occur during the characters' off time, or fit within the investigative scenes.

Like drives, personal arcs shouldn't make it harder to resolve the A-story. They could make it easier, though.

Using Drives

Drives should always help advance the plot by keeping the characters focused on the mission. In Ashen Stars drives function as a fallback motivating factor in those rare cases where the inexorable need for a payout fails.

They also provide character shading and add flavor to cases. Drives create a personal connection between the mission and the characters pursuing it. They may lead to interesting conflicts and discussions between Lasers with divergent individual goals and attitudes.

Avoid story turns that force a character to choose between completing the mission and obeying his drive. Apparent conflicts are all right, especially when gaining more information and solving a mystery allows the character to have his cake and eat it too. No-win situations where mission and drive are completely irreconcilable, unacceptably punish the player for following the rules. Don't use them.

While drives should never stop the PCs from completing the mission, they can and should be used to affect the way in which the PCs complete the mission. For example, Bleedist characters might discover that the perpetrators of a terrorist attack are themselves radical supporters of Bleed independence. They still bring the killers to justice, but may then try to frame the story of the arrest to lessen damage to the reputation of the movement as a whole.

The Choice

To a greater or lesser extent, each episode should pose a choice for the Lasers between altruism and self-interest. Any situation threatening their Reputation counts as a choice. This can be a minor one, as seen in the introductory scenario. Alternately, the resolution of the central problem can lead to a moral dilemma.

Seeing how oppressed their caste is, the crew comes to sympathize with the grievances, if not the tactics, of a local terror group.

A bomb might yield technological breakthroughs if disarmed intact, but attempting this increases the odds of a disastrous explosion.

A wealthy and concerned father offers the group a defensive array for their ship, if they "forget" to arrest his son, whose naivete made him a minor accomplice to the crimes they've been contracted to investigate.

For added tension, relate these choices to the characters' Drives:

The crew, composed of Bleedist sympathizers, must decide whether to fully expose a plot by Bleedist extremists, which will set back the entire cause.

A supposed charity organization turns out to be a scam. The group's altruist must decide whether to take advantage of their help to solve the central problem, or risk the mission by taking them down.

You might dramatize the choice by pitting the Drives of two characters against one another:

When confronted by a seemingly barbaric culture, the Civilizer might want to reform them, while a devotee of Scientific Inquiry prefers to see their byways left intact for anthropological study.

An Avenger sees the bad guy as someone to defeat. The character seeking Atonement glimpses a chance to redeem him.

When in doubt, toss them a chance to make a dishonest buck, or give them reason to be angry at someone they really shouldn't be punching out.

Scenes

Having assembled your episode elements, it's time to arrange them into scenes. Each of these takes place in a different location or involves an interaction with a different supporting character—usually both. Scenes fall into the following types:

Intro

This is the first scene of the episode. If the Lasers have a contract in hand, this is where you describe it to them. Start the story as far into the action as you can, without making major tactical decisions for the players. A briefing scene where the group talks to a client on a screen, followed by a travel sequence, is less interesting than one where the heroes arrive on the scene, ready to start their investigation.

If they're stumbling into a situation which will eventually lead them to a pickup contract, find an interesting starting point. Invoke their Drives if necessary to explain why they're doing what they're doing. Work with players to find motivations that work for them. The easiest way to do this is to use a personal arc.

Don't let the mundane introductory matter of a pickup contract episode drag on without conflict or mystery for too long. Establish the situation, then introduce up the central problem as quickly as possible. Again, be sure that you're starting the action as late as reasonably possible.

Intro scenes might also introduce a hazard or other challenge to start the story on an exciting note.

You might start the story with the assignment ready to start, then flash back to show how the Lasers got themselves into this.

Core

Core scenes present at least one piece of information necessary to complete the investigation and get to the climactic scene.

Each core scene requires at least a single core clue.

A core clue typically points the group to another scene, often a core scene.

Avoid hard sequenced core clues, which can only lead to one another in a single order.

You're constructing one way to move through the story to another core clue, not the only way. In play, you may find yourself placing the core clue from one scene in another, improvised scene inspired by the logical actions undertaken by the players. (This is also true of published scenarios, by the way.)The scene structure guarantees that there's at least one way to navigate the story, but should not preclude other scene orders. By following the structure you also ensure that you're creating a branching narrative driven by player choices. This avoids the syndrome of the story driven by the actions of supporting characters, which the players observe more or less passively.

PLACING INFORMATION

A core scene typically includes many pieces of information in addition to its core clue. Facts may provide understanding and context. Or they may obscure the mystery, by focusing attention on irrelevant details. Creating a scene is about anticipating the questions the players will ask and figuring out which answers ought to be available to the investigative experts their characters happen to be.

Don't make all non-core clues spends. Add spends when:

- you think of facts that seem enjoyably arcane
- a piece of information is tangential or obscure
- Lasers might get information more quickly than they otherwise would
- they might secure some other practical advantage

If a spend doesn't make the character giving up his points seem more impressive, or confer some other advantage, it shouldn't be a spend.

Alternate

Alternate scenes provide information which may be of some use in understanding and solving the central mystery, but aren't strictly necessary to reach the conclusion. They often provide context and detail. Or they might provide the same information as core scenes, but in another way. As a third option, they might allow the group to eliminate a red herring possibility. These exculpatory facts are valuable; they let the Lasers narrow their search to the real answer, even though they don't, strictly speaking, lead to another core clue.

Antagonist Reaction

This is a scene of danger or trouble in which supporting characters opposed to the group's success take action to stop them or set them back. This might be a fight scene, but could just as easily be a political hassle, act of sabotage, or other less direct challenge. If it helps you keep track, you might note in brackets that the enemies faced are tangential rather than primary opponents.

Hazard

A hazard scene presents the crew with an impersonal obstacle to their safety or ability to continue the investigation. It must typically be overcome through tests or contests.

Sub-Plot

A sub-plot scene gives the characters an opportunity to wheel, deal, explore and interact without directly altering the course of the investigation. These may arise from personal arcs, side deals, public relations efforts, or simply the curiosity of one or more crew members. Where the central mystery provides structure and forward momentum, the sub-plot adds flavor and character. Sequences arising from it may be what the group remembers long after the mystery has been put to bed.

Conclusion

The conclusion brings the group to the end of its investigation and often confronts it with a moral dilemma, physical obstacle, or both. Functionally, it's a final hazard or antagonist reaction scene, although it may be initiated by the players busting in on the bad guys. The classic conclusion of an RPG mystery is a big fight. Your group may insist on a climactic scrap, or prefer to avoid it through quick talking and clever thinking. It's easy to make a fight or other action scene feel exciting and conclusive. Climactic scenes of character interaction may require emotional outbursts or overt signs of the heroes' success. In the introductory scenario, for example, the Lasers are expected to talk the opponent into self-destructing, but then get to run away from an explosion.

Hybrid Scenes

Some scenes double up, most often when a general challenge leads to an information opportunity. It's okay to give out a core clue as a reward for overcoming an obstacle only if that core clue is also available by other means. Otherwise you risk creating a situation where a core clue becomes unavailable, violating the central tenet of the GUMSHOE system.

SCENE DIAGRAMS

To check that player choice matters in your scenario, diagram its scenes. Connect them with arrows, checking to make sure that they can be unraveled in any order. It's acceptable to add unpredictability and variance with non-investigative scenes (antagonist reactions, hazards, and sub-plots), but better form when the players can connect the core and alternate scenes in more than one way.

Episode Premises

Here are some premises to get you started. To help you make episodes part of a character's personal arc, each entry includes a notation indicating the species and drives it most obviously relates to. Any seed, however, can be used for any Laser crew. In some cases you may need to alter the concept so that the plot revolves around a newly introduced supporting character instead of a PC.

Apple Of The Mind

Suitable for: Human; Programming, Scientific Inquiry, Social Engineer

Taking a contract directly from the Combine, the crew follows up on a distress beacon call emitted on an obscure and distant asteroid. The call bears the signature of a legendary Combine ship lost in the early days of the Mohilar War. Secreted away on the asteroid, the crew finds a colony of survivors and defendants, who have arranged themselves into a communal society of seemingly perfect harmony. The inhabitants of the ship's wreckage have no memory of human history and are unable to retain any facts about it even when presented with them. They've been stripped of their curiosity along with all aggressive impulses. Tracing the disappearance of the outcast who figured out and triggered the distress signal, the crew discovers that the castaways have, through a neurochemical emitted by mynatids (p. 202) been transformed into oblivious and unresistant prey. Does the crew leave the survivors in their state of blissful ignorance, or cast them out of their neurochemical Eden?

Arise, Black Vengeance

Suitable for: Avenger, Family Tradition, Pursued

The crew becomes enmeshed in a deadly feud spawned when synthculture goes too far on the faux-Scots planet of Numoor.

Black Mirror

Suitable for: Kch-thk

Deadly sabotage plagues a mining installation on the crystalline planet Talinus. As the investigation progresses, all clues, including DNA samples, point to the crew's kch-thk PC. The culprit is a violently deranged copy of the crew member, formed through a freak accident during the character's last consciousness migration. The doppelganger, unaware until now of its true origins, displays the PC's faults in concentrated form. His or her good qualities appear only in rudimentary form. Capturing the perpetrator leads the crew to a moral dilemma—do they attempt to awaken its buried potential, or seek to destroy him, as kch-thk custom decrees?

If the doppelganger survives this episode, it might recur throughout the series as part of the kch-thk PC's personal arc.

The Cosmic Chalice

Suitable for: Vas Mal; Altruism, Reevolution, Faith, Pursued

Unscrupulous bounty hunters (who might at first seem to be coming for a Pursued PC) try to kidnap a vas mal PC or contact. Following them to their destination, the crew discovers a nufaith cult intent on achieving godhood by killing vas mal and draining their residual cosmic powers.

Cry Wolf

Suitable for: Altruism, Derring-Do, Professionalism

As shuttle craft evacuate terrified settlers from the remote colony of Sakuntala, the crew is tasked to investigate sightings of phyllax, a Class-K species, on the planet's pitted surface. The phyllax turn out to be a hoax by unscrupulous miners hoping to scare away the competition—but as fear takes hold of a child afflicted with wild psychic powers, terrifying manifestations of the creatures appear to begin killing victims on the evac ship.

Displacement

Suitable for: Civilizer, Scientific Inquiry, Tech Hound

On the planet Surena, supposedly unintelligent alien lifeforms are attacking and destroying atmosphere exchangers needed to render the air breathable by its settlers. Underlying the mystery is the conflict between the planet's original settlers and a new influx of refugees evacuated from a Combine core world after its atmosphere was poisoned by the Mohilar. Hoping to force the newcomer's relocation, a scientist belonging to the original faction has been using a device of his own creation to command the native animals.

The Fog and Filthy Air

Suitable for: Balla; Justice-Seeker

A series of murders at a polluted salvage colony is attributed to a mutant creature spawned from its bioweapon-contaminated shipyards. Is the real killer its balla overseer, who has stopped using his mor sohn and succumbed to hallucinatory madness?

The Good Divine

Suitable for: Comradeship, Exploration, Faith,

A Nufaith responsible for the regeneration of a ravaged world turns out to depend on regular sacrifices to a hungry ancient alien.

Greenfeast

Suitable for: Kch-thk; Altruism, Exploration, Scientific Inquiry

The crew members track a party of human vigilantes after they kidnap the kch-thk entrepreneur Jk-Trp and announce his imminent execution unless he and his company leave their planet. Jk-Trp has purchased from the planet's aboriginal inhabitants the right to a Great Eating. A fleet of passenger vessels, loaded down with hungry Kch-thk warriors is already on the way to the planet. When they arrive, they will fall on its lush forests and devour them utterly. The natives will use the money to relocate to a more hospitable planet. The vigilantes want to preserve both the many plant and animal species of the forest, and the aboriginal way of life its adherents are eager to abandon. Does the crew save a hostage and doom an ecosystem?

Memory Leak

Suitable for: character with headdisk, Bleedism, Combinism, Sexual Adventure

A crew member wakes up in a dingy spaceport hotel room, with no memory of the past seventy-two hours and a dead rent boy/girl in bed beside him. An unknown computer program fills his headdisk. It turns out to be an attack routine designed to invade the computer that chooses Combine Councillors. Can the Lasers find out what happened to their crew member, stop the subversion plot—and find a way to earn a payout?

A Palpable Hit

Suitable for: Tavak; Derring-Do, Hotshot, Something To Prove

The group's tavak PC is invited, perhaps under duress, to take part in a combat competition against Vanat, a tavak political leader he defeated in a long-ago match. In order to gain the position he seeks, Vanat must overturn his past loss by overcoming the PC. Meanwhile, assassins working for a rival faction plot to murder Vanat during the competition, making it look as if the PC killed him in the ring.

Pillar Of Wisdom

Suitable for: Tavak; Altruism, Civilizer, Entrepreneur

A tavak dojo hires the crew to track the renegade monk who lit off with their greatest treasure, a set of scrolls written by their legendary founder, laying out the foundation of their ancient martial art. The monk intends to sell it to a wealthy collector. Do the Lasers stick to their guns when they discover that the monk intends to use the proceeds to save the lives of a starving people?

Redundancy

Suitable for: Entrepreneur, Justice-Seeker, Professionalism

In an episode highlighting the strains of post-war economic collapse, the crew investigates a series of mysterious fatal accidents on a remote mining asteroid. They turn out to be the work of the installation's managers, who have learned that it's cheaper to kill excess personnel than to pay for transport back home.

The Rod Of Heaven

Suitable for: Durugh; Avenger, Combinism, Family Tradition

A hoaxed contract leads the crew to an abandoned planet, once heavily settled by the durugh and destroyed during a conflict with the Combine. There the crew is pursued by Meadegk, a vengeance-seeking durugh who bears a grudge against one of the PCs. If you can't find a way to tie this to a backstory element or personal arc, the grudge is against a PCs' ancestor. By picking a fight with the crew, Meadegk hopes to inspire his people to return to their destined role as the Combine's sworn foes.

Security

Suitable for: Durugh; Exploration, Phase Rider, Tech Hound

A self-configuring robotic vault designed to keep out dimension-phasing durugh burglars goes amok during the testing phase. With its eccentric designer trapped and comatose inside, the crew must figure out how to get past its formidable array of weaponry, disable the machine, and rescue the technicians trapped inside.

Siren Rock

Suitable for: Exploration, Footloose, Sexual Adventure

A crazed ex-hero attempts to hijack the crew's ship, hoping to take it back to an uncharted asteroid. Under questioning, he describes it as a lush sanctuary from want and care, whose beautiful inhabitants while away their days in orgiastic pleasure. Recognizing it as matching the terms of an open exploratory contract, the crew ventures to the asteroid, only to find it a place of wrecked shuttles. Corpses of would-be libertines litter its barren landscape. They were lured here to their dooms—but to what end, and by who?

That Which Slumbers

Suitable for: Vas Mal; Chronicler, Reevolution, Scientific Inquiry

Madness-inducing hallucinations plaguing the residents of a refugee camp turn out to be a side-effect of an ancient vas kra artifact. It was used to banish the notorious vas kra renegade D'jellar into a distant reality. Once the artifact is found, the vas mal PC realizes that it might be possible to initiate the reevolutionary process by rescuing D'jellar from his extra-dimensional prison. Is this goal, no matter how devoutly desired, worth the risks of unleashing the malign entity back into this universe?

The Trebulon Gambit

Suitable for: Chronicler, Exploration, Nowhere Else to Go

A local leader fakes a Mohilar sighting in a bid to accrue tyrannical power.

Turnabout

Suitable for: Avenger, Civilizer, Justice-Seeker

A gang of escaped lipovores seek vengeance on a string of Combine officials responsible for their imprisonment on a hell planet. (This might be a PC, in accordance with a personal arc.) After capturing their targets, they subject them to a process robbing them of empathy, thus technically qualifying them as only quasi-sentient. They then attempt to provoke their victims to commit crimes. Their object is not to get them condemned to a hell planet, which they know is unlikely, but to make an uncomfortable political point in favor of quasi-sentient self-determination.

Two Wrongs

Suitable for: Balla; Civilizer

The crew tracks the kidnappers of a renowned team of medical researchers to a balla outpost on ion-swept Oncor-3. Their captors are a human husband and his very pregnant balla wife. They want the researchers to perform a risky procedure to ensure the live birth of her child, who without sophisticated intervention will be stillborn. The research team members are xenophobes, opposed to cross-species interbreeding. Does the crew force them to perform the operation before returning them home?

Undercover Kevins

Suitable for: Entrepreneurial, Justice-Seeker, Professionalism

Suspecting that one of the supposedly loyal escort crews has been betraying her freighters to a pirate cartel, a shipping company magnate hires the Lasers to pose as privsecs on her next convoy.

The Wound That Walks

Suitable for: Altruism, Atonement, Nowhere Else To Go

The psychic wounds suffered by an outcast people coalesce into deadly form.

Wrath of the NuGods

Suitable for: Balla; Entrepreneurial, Chronicler,

The Lasers are hired to restore control of a space station to its rightful owners. The hijackers turn out to be a well-concealed cadre of piratical, elderly balla, using their madness-inducing beauty to coerce its crew into obedience.

Building Cases On the Fly

Despite our courageous admission in the accompanying sidebar, it's still entirely possible to improvise your way through fun and exciting episodes you create as you go. If you're wired to think on your feet, you may find it easier to build a mystery this way. Improvised games require you only to keep the backstory in mind. The flow of investigative scenes arises from the actions undertaken by the players. You don't have to anticipate what the players will do. Instead, you wait for them to do it, and build scenes and dispense clues accordingly.

Roughing It Out

When first teaching yourself to improvise mystery scenarios, start by jotting down rough notes, using the episode worksheet seen earlier. Later you may prefer to keep everything in your head. The longer the interval between your rough plotting process and the actual game, the more likely you are to forget crucial details.

Not for the Faint of Heart

No matter what story form you're talking about, whether in roleplaying, prose fiction or TV drama, good mystery writing is hard. You have to plot in two directions, working out both the backstory the investigators will work to reconstruct, and the series of forward-going events in which they reconstruct it. Logical dilemmas you might hand-wave away in a more dramatic or action-oriented story stop the players from correctly working out the backstory. Logic errors are usually sins of omission and, by definition, easy to miss. When you're plotting a story, it always makes sense to you. Should your players find a hole in your logic, you'll have to react on the fly, adjusting the backstory to make sense. As you do so, you'll hope that your alterations fix the problem without introducing others.

This is why adventure books for mystery games sell better than adventures for other roleplaying games—because they're tougher to create.

Before you start, nail down your mission in detail, and create your introductory scene. You can then go on to create provisional ideas for the other entries in the worksheet. You can follow these as written, or set them aside in favor of more interesting possibilities that arise spontaneously in play. The first approach is easier to keep straight in your head and may be preferable for beginning improvisers. The second allows you to harness the spontaneous energy that flows from spur-of-the-moment group creativity.

Don't Panic!

First of all, don't sweat any uncertainty you may be feeling. It's common, and will go away once you plunge in. When in doubt, take a deep breath, break down your options, and ask yourself which one is the most interesting at the moment. Once you've made that choice and brought it out in play, you can then concern yourself with building on it to spur further interesting developments down the line.

Strong improvising is about reacting to input. Each choice you make builds on the previous ones. Soon your scenario will manifest a sense of momentum all its own.

Activating Players

A common complaint about investigative scenarios is that they "railroad" players into tightly following a slavishly predetermined story path. Although you rarely see the opposite complaint voiced, a significant number of groups flail in confusion when not steered in an obvious direction.

Let players weigh options for as long as the discussion seems lively and fun. If you see the group get frustrated and unable to make a collective choice, gently insert yourself into the discussion. Summarize the various suggestions made and direct the discussion toward a conclusion. Guide the players in eliminating choices without nudging them to a preferred answer. This detachment is easier to attain when you don't settle on one.

Remind the players that the only way forward in a mystery scenario is to gather more information. When things get static, refer to the characters' drives. Ask them which choices before them most suit their specific drives.

Be ready for moments where players feel overwhelmed, either because there are too many choices to choose between or, more likely, no obviously risk-free choice. Nudge them

onward by invoking their drives. Remind them that they're trained problem-solvers—along with their fellow Lasers, the only ones the Bleed has. Perhaps unlike the players, the characters are used to forming hypotheses, testing them by gathering information, and revising their theories, and moving forward. They respond to dilemmas by breaking them down into steps. With a little coaching, they'll quickly internalize this problem- solving methodology. Your players will learn to take the initiative, abandoning the "wait for clues" passivity trained into them as they were run through more predetermined scenarios.

Avoid Negation

When running a mystery scenario, it helps to think two or three scenes ahead of the players. It's often useful to have a possible climactic sequence in mind, too. That allows you to foreshadow enough to make the ending appear to be a logical outgrowth of the scenes that preceded it. (For more on this, see the next section.)

Don't let the possible plot forks you have in mind become too fixed in your imagination. Instead, keep them provisional, so that you can turn away from them and substitute new choices more in keeping with player input.

This is a long-winded way of restating the basic principle of improvisation used by stage actors: never negate. If, as a sketch unfolds, one performer identifies the other as his mother, the second performer must embrace and build on that choice. To simply swat down the choice and say, "I'm not your mother," is extremely poor form. It stops the story dead and punishes the other participant for attempting to advance it.

In a like vein, train yourself to respond to unexpected possibilities by embracing them and building them into the ongoing storyline. You may have decided that the bioscientist Elsa Hower is an innocent victim of quantum parasites. However, the players heavily invest themselves in seeing her as a villain, you might consider setting aside that planned revelation, so they can feel a sense of unmitigated triumph when they bring her to justice.

You don't have to accept every piece of player direction at face value. Keep the story surprising by building twists onto the elements you do incorporate. When in doubt, make the player half-right. Perhaps Elsa's parasite can be extracted and subjected to an emotionally satisfying comeuppance, allowing the team to both save an innocent and punish the guilty.

It's not necessary to turn the narrative on a dime with every piece of player input. The key is to avoid a scene in which nothing happens, or in which your scene is less interesting than the one suggested by the player. When a player says that the computer archive in the ruined citadel must have a holographic librarian, it's a disappointing to rule it out, or prevent the players from finding it because they haven't the right skill to spend from. Extracting useful information from a holo-character is more fun, and more plot-advancing, than not. This doesn't mean, however, that there the program shouldn't afterwards spring a nasty surprise on them.

Preparing a Fallback

Worksheeting a complete mystery, including solution, gives you a solid foundation to riff from. You might depart from it significantly as the story unfolds. Nonetheless, you've got it in your back pocket if everyone's inspiration suddenly flags.

Some groups may feel cheated if they think you're shifting the answer to the central problem on the fly. Others get annoyed if you don't. Get a read on your group's position on this sometimes divisive theoretical issue. To complicate matters, some of your players may sit on either side of the fence. In the end, it may be more important to appear as if you're catering to their taste than actually doing it.

Never fall in love with your fallback. Mentally separate what has actually been revealed in play from the background facts you believe, at the moment, to be true. If player interest suggests it, always be ready to abandon facts not yet introduced, however vivid they may seem to you.

Leading and Following

Improvising is a technique, not an ultimate goal. Occasionally you'll find that it's more entertaining for all involved if you seize the narrative reins and steer them in a particular direction. This will tend to happen more near the end of a scenario, when you're trying to wrap all of the threads together into a coherent and satisfying conclusion.

Again this is a matter of responding to the mood and attitude of the players. When they're actively engaged in the story and throwing out fun suggestions, follow their lead. When their creativity hits the wall, pick up the slack. Improvisation is an organic process of give and take.

Chaos and Order

Any mystery story—or any real-life investigation, for that matter—appears chaotic at first, and gradually resolves its way to order. As the investigators accumulate facts, the number of possible truths multiplies. Mystery stories proceed by elimination, methodically reducing the number of possibilities until only one remains.

Expect each story to sputter at first as the players sort through the various leads offered by their mission briefing and initial contacts. They'll toss out multiple theories without sufficient evidence. Debates over which clues to follow may bring out personality clashes between characters.

This first stage of a story may feel like pushing a rock up a hill. But when you get it over the crest of that hill, and various plot possibilities are eliminated and the main thread settled upon, the rock picks up speed, rolling faster and faster until you reach the one conclusion that seems suddenly to fit. At which point you flood the spaceport with hyper-neutrinos, cue the disruptor duels, and fling the heroes into a final space battle.

Building Series

The planet-of-the-week convention allows you to create a series with no continuing plot elements whatsoever. In this model, each episode is completely self-contained. You may prefer this approach if:

- you are running the game intermittently, with long breaks between sessions
- you can't predict, on any given night, which of your players will show up
- you just finished an intense, continuity-heavy campaign and are looking for a change of pace

These considerations aside, most players like seeing their characters become more connected to the story over time, and enjoy sequels to particularly fun or exciting episodes.

The rest of this section provides tips for building your series into an engaging whole.

Series Arcs

As many modern genre TV shows do, you might treat some of your episodes as elements in a broader, unfolding narrative, called a story arc. They slowly introduce a threat which escalates over the course of multiple episodes, winding up in a climactic, high-stakes confrontation.

In an early episode, the threat is introduced or foreshadowed.

Later on, the heroes encounter the menace from a peripheral vantage point. Hints appear that the Lasers are somehow inextricably linked to the threat.

A follow-up episode places them in direct confrontation with the threat. The players learn for sure that they're somehow uniquely positioned to deal with the threat, or otherwise destined to face it again.

Additional episodes, if you can sustain them, may add details and ratchet up tension.

Finally comes the big finish, analogous to a TV show's two-part season finale. The threat fully manifests itself and comes at the heroes head on. Only the Laser crew can stop them. They see that if they lose, the Bleed, or their crew will suffer

big, irrevocable changes. The situation demands their best, but gives them ample room for victory. Ideally, they triumph over the threat. If not. . . well, the prospect of failure is the price roleplaying pays to create authentic suspense. Better luck next time, Lasers.

Arc Concepts

Although future supplements may include series arcs, neither this book nor its supplements will impose any continuity-altering events on your game. However, we have planted seeds you can grow into arcs of your own creation.

The one we've laid the greatest groundwork for is a solution to the Bogey Conundrum. We've left this open, so you can choose between various explanations. You'll need to figure out A) what actually happened and B) how the discovery represents or connects to an arc-worthy threat. The obvious answer to B might be a vengeful return of the Mohilar. Because it's obvious, you might want to throw the players a curveball by making the threat something else entirely:

- the forgotten Combine super-weapon used to destroy the Mohilar is now in the hands of its own enemies
- the Combine awakened an ancient enemy of the Mohilar, who have now come for them
- a conspiracy within the Combine, made up of the ruthless operators who destroyed the Mohilar, now scheme to topple the government and install themselves as its unaccountable rulers
- a new enemy species, knowing that no one remembers the Mohilar, destabilizes the Combine with their faked reappearance

The various Class-K quasi-sentient beings are all designed to be threats worthy of a series arc. The less interactive of them might best be partnered up with sentient bad guys the PCs can talk to, negotiate with, and learn to loathe.

Arcs and Small Groups

If you're running for three or fewer players, you may find that the characters' personal stories advance too quickly when every episode includes a personal arc. Fix this by adding arc-free episodes to your rotation.

This might not be a concern if your episodes tend to spread over multiple sessions.

Personal Arcs

TV series slightly shade and advance their ensemble characters without altering the core identities that make them compelling to the audience. By introducing the sub-plots players introduce through their personal arcs (p. 10), you give players the chance to develop their PCs in similar ways.

Work with players to ensure that their arcs build on each other, so that they develop over time. Encourage them to create secondary characters, like relatives, rivals, old friends, and enemies. Look for the emotional angle in each suggested arc. At first, some players may submit ideas that work better as general episode premises than as emotional stories that shed light on their characters' personalities. You might still use them as overall episodes, while collaborating with the players to dig deeper into their characters.

To implement personal arcs you can either choose the arc based on the premise or create the premise based on the arc.

From Premise to Arc

After arriving at your premise, go to your list of unused personal arcs, concentrating on players who are due to come up in the arc rotation. Pick the arc that best dovetails with your premise.

> *You've roughed out an episode in which the crew is hired to investigate a planet which has seemingly appeared from nowhere in the depths of the Scylla Outzone. The answer to the central mystery is that the planet is actually an experimental testing ground created by super-advanced aliens. They put the crew through a series of surreal events as they study the psychological effects of war on primitive sentients.*
>
> *Your list of personal arcs is as follows:*
>
> *Jered Kor (Fred): 1) discovers that he was adopted 2) learns something about his real father 3) meets his real father*
>
> *Gavag (Jewel) 1) strange visions awaken a suppressed memory 2) meets someone from the memory 3) relives the traumatic incident*
>
> *Elihu Gibbon (Mike) 1) experiences a moment of reevolution 2) is kidnapped and experimented on by renegade fellow vas mal 3) chases rumors of an experimental drug which he hopes will rekindle his reevolutionary spark*

Drev Solar (Doug) 1) meets his first love Mira Cross, now a grifter 2) gets dragged into a scheme by Mira 3) Mira is taken hostage by ex-accomplices, must rescue her

The encounter with alien technology so advanced that it makes its users seem god-like seems tailor-made for Mike's reevolution sub-plot. However, his character played out a personal arc just last week, "Confronts the depression caused by his mortal status." Fortunately, Jewel's recovered memory idea fits at least as well with the surreal environment of the experimentation planet. You decide that the mind-bending alien radiation will trigger this recovered memory.

From Arc to Premise

Decide which player is next in line for a personal arc. Pick the next arc suggestion, if they build on one another, or the one that most sparks your imagination, if they're separable. Use that arc as a springboard for an episode premise. Make sure, though, that the mission involves a separate, if related goal. That gives other players reason to engage with the main plot, whatever their personal storylines.

Let's say that you're working with the same list of arcs given above. You're running low on inspiration and so decide to choose an arc to use as a jumping-off point. Again in this example, Mike got the last personal arc, so you set his list aside for later. Knowing that Fred can't make it for the session you're preparing, you remove his arc from the running as well. Between the remaining two candidates, Doug was the last to get an arc. His arcs grow out of one another, so you'll be using his first one, building an episode around his encounter with Drev Solar's old flame, Mira. She's a grifter, so an episode featuring her will naturally revolve around fraud. Following a time-honored technique of space opera storytelling, you decide to recast current events in SF form. Your planet of the week will be roiled by social upheaval after the reckless lending of its banks triggers a financial meltdown. The Lasers are commissioned to mediate a hostage crisis after rebellious citizens storm a conference of their planet's top financiers. Among the rebel leaders, the group finds Mira—who is actually angling behind the scenes to access funds generated by a Ponzi scheme of her own.

Implementing Arcs

Envision your arc as one or more complication scenes. Where possible, think of the complication as unfolding in three scenes: a setup, an intensification, and a conclusion. This three-piece structure will probably go by the wayside when you run it and incorporate the results of player choices, but it helps to crystallize your thoughts at the outset.

The set-up establishes the complication. It may foreshadow a problem that will occur later, or present it as a problem right away.

The development either makes the situation into a problem for the PC (if it wasn't before) or adds a new twist or challenge to the ongoing problem.

The conclusion gives the PC the chance to solve the problem. If the personal arc features a recurring character, the sense of closure is temporary, allowing for his or her later return.

Elihu Gibbon's fleeting re-evolution might break down into the following scenes:

1. ***Set-up:*** *Elihu starts feeling strange when he reaches the surface of the experimentation planet. This foreshadows a problem without becoming one. It encourages the player to portray Elihu's distress without giving him any penalties measurable by game mechanics.*
2. ***Intensification****: Elihu's condition worsens. He is now penalized as if hurt, but gets a chance to do something to end the penalty.*
3. ***Conclusion****: At a suitably dramatic moment (perhaps affecting the resolution of the main plotline) Elihu undergoes his transitory apotheosis, and just as quickly returns to mortal form. The hyper-advanced aliens may then provide a clue he can use in future episodes as he continues his quest for permanent re-evolution.*

Drev's reunion with his grifter ex could break down like this:

1. ***Set-up:*** *Drev meets Mira, who claims to have gone straight. She gives him the chance to rekindle old feelings.*
2. ***Intensification****: Drev discovers that Mira is up to her old tricks, but isn't yet in a position to stop her.*
3. ***Conclusion****: Drev gets the chance to stop Mira, and then must decide what to do with her.*

Complications other than personal arcs tend not to have 3-piece structures. Sub-plots warrant that degree of attention only when they add shading to a character or perhaps advance another ongoing plotline. Treat them instead as floating or one-time obstacles you can plug into the main situation to add challenge and interest as needed.

Recurring Characters

Recurring characters appear every so often as your series develops. They may tie to a single character or the entire group. Player-created recurring characters appear in personal arc sub-plots. GM-created characters relate to the series arc, if any. Occasionally a character created by the GM for a single episode might prove so interesting that it graduates to recurring status. You might make the character a returning enemy. If a player establishes a relationship between his PC and the character, he might weave his way into the Laser's personal arc.

Rivals

Rivals create complications for the Lasers while staying within the boundaries of the law. Lacking justification to arrest or kill them, they must outmaneuver them in subtler ways. Rivals might include:

- other Laser crews
- activists from opposing ideologies
- nufaith evangelists
- meddling experts
- competitive siblings

Relationships

A relationship character is one a PC feels an abiding emotional connection toward. These characters might be literal relatives, longtime friends, or lovers—current or former.

When the emotional bond is positive, you can use the relationship character to draw the PC into plots and sub-plots. Positive relationship characters ask favors or require rescue. They may briefly appear, perhaps by comm link, to provide information.

Negative relationships give the PCs a personal goal. They may interact with the supporting character in search of closure, forgiveness, validation, vengeance, victory, or any of the other myriad emotional concessions people seek from the troublesome figures in their lives.

Enemies and rivals, below, become more interesting if they're also relationship characters.

Enemies

Recurring enemies are either pursuing a longterm goal that the Lasers want to stop, or have a grudge against them and keep coming back for another shot at vengeance. An enemy might move from the first state to the second after the Lasers thwart his original goal.

GUMSHOEING YOUR FAVORITE SPACE OPERA SETTING

Ashen Stars's setting puts just enough of a spin on common space opera tropes to feel original to players, while keeping close enough to genre defaults to remain instantly accessible. In the process we've reengineered them to remove elements that translate poorly to the roleplaying experience. That's why, for example, Laser crews operate as consensus-driven cooperatives, eschewing the military-inspired command structures featured in many popular SF franchises. Clear lines of authority allow scriptwriters to move the narrative quickly forward and viewers to easily understand the unfolding action. In an RPG context, allowing one player to boss the others around quickly starts to chafe. Likewise, the conflict between justice-making and self-interest evoked by the Reputation system takes advantage of a standard tension in roleplaying that dates back to its dungeon-bashing roots.

That said, there's no reason you can't, in the privacy of your own home, set aside our setting and adapt your favorite preexisting SF property to the GUMSHOE rules.

As with any GUMSHOE hybrid, you might choose to satisfy crunch-hungry players by fusing the resolution system for your favorite RPG iteration of the setting you're adapting to GUMSHOE. Use the other system in the place of GUMSHOE's general ability system, while keeping the investigative abilities, clue allocation and spends for information-gathering sequences.

GUMSHOE TIPS

An investigative story in any medium is, by its very nature, highly structured. The Lasers learn of a mystery, then move through a series of scenes, each of which concludes in the acquisition of a clue which segues into the next scene. The story reaches its climax when the investigator discovers and reveals the answer to the mystery. It may or may not conclude, for extra punch, in a physical confrontation with the story's now revealed-antagonist.

Structure can be difficult to achieve in the roleplaying medium. Guide the players too little and they lose the thread, resulting in a loose and sloppy narrative that provides none of the neat, order-making pleasure the genre is meant to provide. Guide them too much and they feel that their freedom of action has been taken away from them, and that they're merely observers moving through a predetermined sequence of events. (As you probably know, this latter syndrome is known in roleplaying jargon as railroading.)

The trick to successfully running investigative scenarios is to strike the right balance between the two extremes. The exact balance is a matter of collective taste. Groups prone to flailing about may welcome a strong structure with clear goals, a straight narrative path and definite resolutions. Players who resolve questions of procedure with swift efficiency, or who prefer to focus on characterization over storyline, require a looser hand on the structural tiller.

Perception Is (Nearly) All

Some groups are hyper-sensitive to issues of railroading. These concerns, which are absolutely legitimate, may be based on past bad experiences with controlling GMs who forced them to enact essentially passive roles in unalterable, preset storylines. If members of the group are avid roleplaying theorists, they may respond out of a general ideological feeling that players ought to shape and drive the story, taking on responsibilities traditionally given to the GM.

The most important way to prevent players from feeling railroaded is to remain flexible and reactive to the choices the characters make. We'll discuss this a bit more in the next section.

However, nearly as crucial is avoiding the appearance of railroading.

Some players may feel that the GUMSHOE system's reliance on automatic successes inevitably leads to a railroaded result. In practice, this simply isn't so. The degree of narrative flexibility a GM exercises is entirely unrelated to the game's resolution mechanic (or relative lack of same). Flexibility remains up to the GM and your ability to improvise within the basic structure of the investigative story, as it does in nearly any set of roleplaying rules.

As proof of this, we cite a weird phenomenon that occurred during playtest. The groups that expressed the strongest misgivings about possible railroading were those whose GMs had done the most improvising.

This result can be partly attributed to variances in group tastes, but also suggests the enormous importance of maintaining the perception of free choice. When you're on a roll as a GM, you can create the perception of free choice even when players respond predictably to the scenario. On an off night, you can convey the impression of constricted options even you're improvising furiously to keep up with their completely unexpected choices.

Here are five ways to maintain the all-important perception of narrative freedom:

- When using a prewritten adventure, paraphrase as much as possible. Avoid reading right from the scenario. Even if it's well-written, your narration, no matter how halting and tentative, will seem more spontaneous than canned text. Some GMs read too much of the scenario out loud because they have trouble extracting the necessary nuggets from a pre-written text. Judicious use of a highlighting pen can work wonders to zero in on the best details, which you can then weave into your own extemporaneous sentences.
- During scenes of character interaction, listen carefully to player dialogue and respond accordingly. Riff with the players. This is more important than spewing the supporting characters' clues or talking points, even if that means altering the characterization from what you see on the page.
- Encourage players to flesh out minor details of the setting and situation. If they ask you what the weather is like, ask them what they want it to be. If they ask if such and such an item is present at a particular location, tell them that it is and ask them to describe it. On rare occasions the mystery plot will turn on these little details, and you'll have to pull back from this technique and stick to your clue trail. Otherwise, seek out opportunities for player input.
- Tailor characters and situations to the player characters. If a player portrays a sloppy, rumpled wrench, confront her with a neat-freak, tech-hating authority figure. A character known to fall for sexy labcoat types should meet successions of sexy labcoats, and so on.

If you yourself are still worried that GUMSHOE encourages or requires railroading, take heart from our playtest experiences. Whenever we send out a scenario for outside testing, each group reports a significantly different sequence of events and outcome. In each case the wide variances arise from disparate player choices. Just like it's supposed to.

Any Track Is the Right Track

Although it may be, oddly enough, more important to maintain apparent than actual narrative freedom, we should still endeavor to provide the real thing to the maximum extent possible.

Fortunately, it's easier to provide freedom than it is to seem like you're providing it. Simply ensure that any clue, especially any core clue, is available not only to players using the ability specified in the scenario, but to any player who provides a credible and entertaining alternate method of acquiring that clue. The scenario is a foundation to work from, which ensures that there is at least one way to move through the story. It should never be regarded as the only way to get to the resolution. A group of players will often come up with better ideas than the scenario writer ever could. Give yourself permission to go with them.

One slight exception: this advice pertains only to clues available in the current scene. Allow players to leapfrog scenes by acquiring information they're meant to get later only as pacing dictates. If you're early in a session when the leapfrogging possibility occurs, and you're not confident you can improvise enough new intervening scenes to make a full evening's entertainment, by all means create entertaining obstacles to slow the players' efforts. If you're zooming toward evening's end, leapfrogging is your friend — just be sure to squeeze in all of the necessary ancillary information the players might miss by skipping ahead.

Scenes in the middle of an investigation can often be juggled around with no ill effect to the storyline. When this is the case, it's always better to let the players dictate pacing than to force them back into the order of events envisioned by the scenario.

The scenario is only the blueprint. The building happens during play.

Calling On Abilities

The rules offer a number of ways to call on abilities, depending on the situation. Choosing the right way to call on an ability is crucial to the forward momentum of your investigative plot. Make this choice according to the consequences of failure.

If the consequence of failure is that a character fails to get a piece of crucial information, success should be automatic provided that the character has the ability in question, and the player thinks to ask for it. (Even at that, you may need to improvise during play if no player steps up to claim the needed clue, bending the details of the scenario so that the same information can be garnered with a different ability, possibly by another player.)

If you improvise a piece of information that offers a fun sidelight on the action but is not essential to move through the story, you can make this available with a 1- or 2-point spend. Choose the cost of the spend according to the entertainment value of the information, not the game-world difficulty of completing the task.

If an action's consequence of failure might be death or injury, by all means make it a test. If game world logic suggests that a supporting character will actively oppose the PC, make it a contest.

Compensating For Spotty Attendance

Older gamers most likely to enjoy an investigative campaign are sadly prone to scheduling disruptions. If your group is typical, you may not be able to rely on any particular player showing up on a given night. To compensate for this, give each player a pool of free-floating investigative points, which they can spend to gain a clue in investigative abilities they don't have. When this occurs, explain it as the character remembering a fact or technique taught to them by their absent teammates. Adjust the quantity of points as needed for your group's requirements.

Ending Scenes

In a novel or TV episode, writers can freely cut to the next scene when their characters have acquired all of the clues available in the current one. The characters might stick around for hours tying up loose ends and pursuing fruitless questions, but this doesn't happen on screen. We, the audience, are not forced to sit through such sequences.

This kind of concise editing isn't so easy in the roleplaying medium. Players don't know when they've got all the clues.

Imprisonment as Plot Device

Obstacles where the consequence of failure is imprisonment or other loss of freedom to maneuver should be introduced with caution. If the characters can gain information while captured, and will be presented with a fairly easy avenue of escape afterwards, by all means, include them. You can allow tests or contests to avoid such consequences.

However, plot turns in which characters are arrested by the authorities and cannot escape invariably bring game sessions to a screeching, thudding halt. Either allow the characters to avoid them with automatic successes on Interpersonal abilities, or build an escape hatch into your story.

Be wary of plot construction that demands characters accept captivity to gain crucial information. Many players would sooner have their characters disemboweled by jaggar than accept even a brief sojourn in comparatively cushy confinement. Unfortunately, with this player type, you won't get very far by pointing out that getting captured is a genre staple. Their attitude is rooted in a deep-seated desire to maintain emotional control, and is not typically susceptible to argument.

Here's a simple trick to gently steer them onwards, without unduly breaking the illusion of fictional reality. It requires the use of a laptop.

Before play, cue up a musical sting suitable to the space opera genre. As soon as the players have gleaned the core clue and most or all of the secondary clues in a scene, and the action begins to drag, play the cue. When the players see this, they know to move on. (Of course, you have to explain the cue to them before play begins.) Easy, efficient, yet somehow not nearly as disruptive or jarring as a verbal instruction.

There Will Be References

Even at the best of times, roleplaying gamers are pop culture referencing machines. Expect this tendency to appear in triplicate during a space opera game. Perhaps this occurs because it's the geek genre with the deepest history on television and in movies. It might be that SF has less of a single group of default setting assumptions built into it than elves 'n' orcs fantasy or modern horror. Whatever the cause, expect your players to make references to existing TV shows and movies. They'll be doing this not just for humorous purposes or to outdo one another on the trivia front, but as a form of shorthand. Accept this. Use their bank of mental images and plot tropes to quickly communicate setting details to them.

Ashen Stars is meant to seem like a gritty contemporary reboot of a classic SF TV show that never existed. Together with your players, you can mash together you favorite elements from your genre favorites. It doesn't even matter, really, if the players are all picturing a different mash-up, so long as each one of them is vividly picturing something they like.

When you do knowingly pay tribute to a famous scene or trope, make sure to put a new spin on it. Often simply combining this with the existing Ashen Stars setting will do the job. Find a way to tie in your black monolith or charming, fuzzy alien into its overarching themes, and you're golden.

EXAMPLE OF PLAY

You're running a game featuring the following characters:

- Hgh-prd (Caitlin), a Kch-Thk Security and Weapons officer
- Dom Keefe (Jerry), a human Operations Officer and pilot
- Ethan Richie (Paulo), a human Medical, Cultural and Communications officer
- Thirisia (Edel), a durugh Technical and Systems officer
- Epistem (Rainer), a cybe Survey Officer and Stratco

Together they are the crew of the star runner Clementine.

Assigned to investigate the sighting of a downed 22nd century human spacecraft, the crew has shuttled down to the surface of the planet Clarion.

Rainer: Okay, so we emerge from the craft. We need environmental suits, right?

You: The mission briefing had it right. Clarion has an atmosphere and temperature within livable norms, but the air's full of cyanide.

Edel: Before we open the hatch, I perform a physical check on all the suits. Cyanide leaves no room for error.

[You could ask her to test Systems Repair here, but you aren't planning on an accident with the suits. If you require a roll, she could pay pool points for nothing, which isn't fair. She'll have plenty of chances to spend those points later.]

You: Everything's in its usual tip-top shape.

[Here you're reinforcing the character's competence, turning what otherwise would be a null moment into a small emotional upbeat.]

Rainer: Weapons ready but not drawn, people.

Caitlin: Hey, look who thinks he's the boss of us. Again.

Jerry: That's stratcos for you.

Rainer: But nonetheless we have weapons ready but not drawn, right?

Caitlin: Right.

Jerry: Of course.

You: You're buffeted back. High winds scrape the surface of this barren, rocky world.

Rainer: Do we see the ship?

You: Heavy rain reduces visibility to a dozen yards or so. Dom's landing saved the shuttle from cracking up, but he had to bring you down somewhat off-course.

Paulo: So we have no idea where we are, in relation to the ship?

Edel: We're not even sure the ship really exists. A 22nd century vessel, this far out in the Charybdis Outzone? My bigcreds are on hallucination, or maybe a hologram.

Rainer: I use Energy Signatures to locate the ship.

You: It's about half a kilometer to the east.

Rainer: According to the tether, it exists.

Edel: As if there's not a thousand devices that could spoof our readings.

Paulo: You're still mad that you fell in love with that hologram back on Priene.

Edel: I keep telling you: that was no hologram.

Jerry: [Clears throat.] Drawing on my knowledge of Geology, what kind of terrain should we expect?

You: Rocky, with steep slopes and valleys. The rain will make it slippery.

Edel: Is there iron or other metallic elements in the rocks?

You: Do you have Geography or Geology?

Edel: [pointing to Jerry] No, but he does.

You: [addressing Jerry] You tell her that there probably are.

Edel: Okay, I attempt to heighten the magnetic grip factors on the soles of our suits. That's a new feature, so that would be Systems Design, right?

You: Makes sense to me.

[You hadn't considered this possibility, and see no reason why this should be especially hard. You mentally assign the task a Difficulty of 4.]

Edel: I spend 2 points. [She marks down the expenditure of 2 Systems Design points, reducing her pool from 8 to 6. Edel rolls a 4.] I got a 6.

You: A simple task for an engineer of your talents. The boots should grip the rocks tighter now.

[You've been planning Athletics tests to get safely across the rocks to the ship. As a reward for this success, you'll now reduce their Difficulty, from 4 to 3.]

Edel: And if there's a chance of somebody falling down, I'll have my puncture kit out and ready. I do have a puncture kit, right?

You: Make a Preparedness test.

Edel: Wouldn't that be standard equipment on a shuttle, if we're headed to a cyanide planet? I shouldn't have to test Preparedness for that.

You: You've convinced me. You've got the kit, no test required.

Caitlin: I take point and lead the group carefully over the rocks.

Jerry: I use my Geology knowledge to point us through the easiest route.

You: That's a benefit, not a clue. Do you want to make a spend?

Jerry: Sure. I only have 1 point in Geology, so I'll spend that.

[You decide that this will reduce the Athletics test Difficulty by another 1 point, to a very low 2. It's only fair that you tell the group about this, so they won't unnecessarily waste points and invalidate Edel's success and Jerry's expenditure.]

You: Between Thrisia's suit modifications and Dom's navigation, the once-daunting trek looks pretty easy. [Note that you're indicating the reduced Difficulty in narrative, not numerical terms.]Everyone make an Athletics test to arrive safely.

Caitlin: Pretty easy, huh?

You: Yep.

Caitlin: I spend 1. [Reduces her Athletics pool from 10 to 9. She rolls a 5.] A six!

You: You're good.

Jerry: I only have 4 Athletics, so I'm gonna take a chance and not spend anything.

Caitlin: I loan him 2 points. That costs me 3, right? [She reduces her pool from 9 to 6.]

You: Yeah. Describe what you're doing to help him.

Caitlin: Looming over him, ready to catch him if he falls.

Jerry: Whoops, I rolled a 6. Guess you didn't need to spend those points.

Caitlin: Better that than have our pilot bust his helmet and suffocate before we even get to the ship.

Paulo: I spend 1. [Reduces his Athletics from 6 to 5. Rolls a 3.] I got a four.

You: You're fine.

Edel: I'm also going to risk it and not spend anything.

Caitlin: No! We can't risk our engineer! Epistem, you help her.

Edel: Screw that. I'm rolling already.

Rainer: She's always been a Hotshot.

Edel: I get a 3.

You: You're fine.

Edel: See? Trust in my handy spanner, people.

Rainer: I spend 2. [Reduces his Athletics from 10 to 8. Rolls a 2.] I got a four. I'm all right, right?

You: Right. Trooping cautiously up and down the rocks, acid rain pelting against your faceplates—

Edel: Acid rain, you say?

You: Sure. It's raining. The atmosphere's full of cyanide. What did you expect?

Edel: I perform a diagnostic on suit integrity.

You: [After checking your Investigative Ability Worksheet to remind yourself that she has Forensic Engineering.] You've got another four hours of exposure to this rain before the suits start to pop.

Edel: Four hours. Why am I sure that we're going to have to spend more than four hours out here?

Caitlin: That's what I love about engineers. Always with the positive attitude.

Edel: If you're not anticipating the next thing to go wrong, you're not a wrench.

You: The dark shape of the ship looms in the distance. It looks like it plunged nose first into the side of a mountain.

Edel: Is the hull breached?

You: The outer hull is crumpled, but it looks, at least from this angle, like the inner hull held on impact.

Edel: Gotta love double-redundant 22nd century ship design. They didn't build 'em fast or pretty, but they sure built 'em sturdy.

[Edel is riffing from your description to make a reasonable extrapolation about the world. If her detail somehow contradicted a clue to the central mystery, you'd have to gently correct her. Since it doesn't, you happily let it stand, as a contribution of player creativity to the setting.]

Rainer: I scan for life signs.

[Rainer uses Bio Signatures so frequently that you no longer have to check the worksheet to ensure that he has the ability.]

You: You get an extremely faint reading.

Rainer: There's life in there?

[You nod.]

Rainer: How many life forms?

You: Hard to say from this range. The old-school double hull's interfering with your outbound-inbound wave placement. [You've made up this nice bit of technobabble on the spot.]

Rainer: I want to know before we go any further. How much do I have to spend to home in on the signal?

You: Each point you spend gets you more info.

Rainer: I'll spend all three of my points, then. If there's something to know, I want to know it. Something smells wrong about this.

Caitlin: You're just catching the engineer's heebie jeebies.

Rainer: This ship has been supposedly crashed her for three centuries, and there's life inside? I want to know more.

Paulo: Suspended animation. Could they be in animation pods?

[You could answer Paulo, but haven't dealt with Rainer's earlier request yet. So first you reply to him.]

You: [to Rainer] Modulating your scanning frequency to compensate for bounceback, you zero in on six life forms. [That's all the information he would have received if he'd only spent 1 point.] They're human. [That would have been the limit for a 2-point spend.] And yes, they're in suspended animation.

Paulo: And with my medical knowledge, or maybe human history, do I know if suspended animation pods would have been standard on a ship like this?

You: Not standard, but not unknown, either.

Paulo: So none of this is necessarily weird. The crew of this ancient ship got blown off course somehow—could have been one of any number of things: wormhole, a translight breach, a peeved-off god-like entity—and they wind up way in an Outzone of the Bleed, how many years ahead of schedule?

You: [Paulo has invoked his history ability and so is owed an answer. You didn't write this down but fortunately have the PDF of the game book on your laptop screen and are able to discreetly find the information without getting caught having to look it up.] This ship is from the earliest era of human interstellar travel, two hundred years before the Annexation period, when the Bleed was first explored.

Paulo: So they get snatched up by whatever, dropped off here, and they climb into the suspension chambers, awaiting rescue. There doesn't have to be anything weird going on here.

Edel: I hate that.

Paulo: What?

Edel: It's when nothing seems weird at first that it always gets really weird.

Paulo: We'll only know for sure when we go in there. There's people who need rescuing.

Jerry: A crew of Rip van Winkles.

Edel: Can we see the name of the vessel?

You: [Changing a detail to riff off Jerry's comment, and add to the entertaining atmosphere of dread the players have generated for themselves] Yeah. It's the Washington Irving.

Edel: It's a good thing my character is a durugh and doesn't get that cultural reference, because the player does, and it freaks her out.

Rainer: Enough jawing. We have a mission to put down. And the rain's eating our suits. Let's go in.

Edel: Engineer's supplemental log: I got a bad feeling about this.