# Game Chief Secrets

## A Planet Mercenary Supplement

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Welcome to the Game Chief Secrets PDF.

This is a free supplement for use with Planet Mercenary RPG. This document aims to help players and Game Chiefs of Planet Mercenary RPG with further insights into how the game came into existence, give answers to frequently asked questions, and to provide some resources that Game Chiefs can use when designing adventures for their players. Please use the handy table of contents to jump right to the information which is most useful to you.

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# Planet Mercenary Origin Story

As told by Sandra Tayler

"I love Schlock Mercenary! You should make an RPG out of it." We heard variations on this statement starting in the first year of the comic's existence. It was one of the signs that Howard had created a rich and varied universe, fans wanted a chance to play inside it and tell their own stories. Being RPG players ourselves (sometimes regularly, sometimes with long hiatuses), the idea of a Schlock RPG appealed to us. Yet Howard felt cautious. He did not want to just stretch a Schlock Mercenary skin over an RPG framework. He knew that the very structure of the RPG needed to help players create an experience that felt like the comic. It meant a ground-up construction of an RPG which was …daunting. The project never moved beyond "nice idea" for over a decade.

Enter Alan Bahr. For Alan the idea of constructing an RPG is exciting rather than daunting. Thinking up new game systems is something he does on a weekly basis. Alan and Howard both spent time at a local comics and game shop, which is where the seeds of the $D6^3$ (or Mayhem) system began. The combination of three simple dice (d6) plus a set of humorous cards proved to be a powerful combination for getting players into the unlikely sorts of situations that happen in the Schlockiverse. Howard and Alan loved the idea and the ways they could fit the Schlockiverse around it, but they had an obstacle that could kill the project, they had to convince me.

I knew that Howard and Alan had been meeting to discuss a Schlock RPG. I knew that Howard was getting excited about it. However I also knew that if we did an RPG it would be a huge undertaking that would absorb massive amounts of creative energy for a full year. (I was wrong in my estimate, it was two years.) I was not certain I wanted to invest that much time and energy into an RPG. We had so many other projects already under way. So when Howard scheduled a meeting for me to meet Alan and to hear the proposal, I agreed reluctantly.

The meeting took place at our kitchen table. Alan sat at one end and described the D63 system to me. Then he and Howard together described the fun ways that Schlockiverse things would fit with that system. Most of all, they described the proposed business plan. The basics of our contract with Alan were outlined, along with a schedule of monthly meetings for a year leading up to a Kickstarter in the spring of 2015. The game structure was brilliant, the business plan was solid, Alan was sharp and focused. It was that meeting which brought me on board and got the project moving.

It was a slow pace, like an airplane taxiing toward a runway. Howard and Alan delved into particulars of the Schlockiverse, figuring how they would fit around the mechanical structure. Howard began brain dumping world building thoughts that would eventually become the locations section. We decided which sophont types would be playable as characters. The esspererin were created specifically for the game, though they were written into the comic a year or more before the book saw print. My job was mostly organizational. I was communicating with artists for preliminary art and paying for pieces as they came in. We knew we needed art as proof of concept for the Kickstarter. Otherwise fans might expect Howard to do all the drawing and we knew that wasn't physically possible with him also having to do most of the writing. Besides, Howard couldn't pass up the opportunity to see his universe through the eyes of other artists. He always saw the art first, and on multiple occasions called me into his office to admire the beautiful work.

We met monthly, and in every meeting one of us would say something like "we really need a name for this game." In January of 2015, we stepped up the pace of the meetings so that we were meeting bi-weekly as we prepared for the Kickstarter launch. It got to be February, only two months out from the launch, and we still didn't have a name. All three of us were at the same convention. Howard and Alan had lunch together while I was watching the booth. This is how Howard wrote up the story for an online feature called "My Favorite Bit."

*I was pretty sure it was a terrible idea.*

*For thirty seconds I thought it was brilliant, and then it seemed so dumb I actually felt embarrassment for having thought of it, and I hadn't even shared it with anyone yet.*

*I was at lunch with Alan Bahr, and we were trying to come up with a name for the role playing game set in the Schlock Mercenary universe. We were pretty late in the development cycle to not have a name, and we were getting desperate.*

*Schlock Mercenary readers have been requesting a role playing game since 2003. You'd think that would have given me enough time to dream up a name for it, but naming non-existent products didn't seem like a good use of my time. Then, in February of 2015, Sandra, Alan, and I were finally far enough along that we needed a name, and we needed one rather immediately. We could have called it the Schlock Mercenary RPG, but that felt lackluster, and everybody agreed that it would have limited our reach in the wider RPG space.*

*The idea, the terrible one, had been with me for a while, and I was afraid to share it with Alan. We were brainstorming in a hotel restaurant when I finally decided that bouncing one more dumb thing off of him couldn't possibly hurt THAT much. I shrugged aside my fear of looking stupid, and gave Alan the pitch.*

*"How about this: We call the game PLANET MERCENARY, naming it after an in-universe supplier of weapons and stuff."*

*Alan winced.*

*"There's more." I mimed opening a book and turning pages. "The book is an in-world artifact. The front page is a letter from the CEO."*

*"Okaaaay."*

*I adopted my Official Market-Speak Voice:*

*"Valued Planet Mercenary customer! Many of you have expressed concerns that the grunts in your companies are uneducated imbeciles, and you can't get them to read briefing materials, not even to literally save their lives. We have created this old-timey pencil-and-paper role playing book to solve your problem. Your grunts will think it is just a game, but they will actually be learning about the weapons they carry, the enemies they point those weapons at, and the places where, if they read carefully, they might just NOT breathe their last breath."*

*I stopped, and waited for Alan to say "Yup. That's ridiculous."*

*He did not say that.*

*His eyes lit up, his jaw dropped, and he began gushing about how awesome this was. He thought it was fantastic. I waited for thirty seconds, wondering if the idea would turn as dumb for him as it had for me.*

*It did not.*

*So I tried looking at my silly idea through his eyes, and I fell in love with it all over again.*

*We shared the in-world-artifact concept with a few others, and they reacted almost exactly like Alan had, loving it, and becoming quite excited to see the finished product. This energized me, and when I sat down to write some of the fluff in the book I adopted an in-universe voice, and the words flowed in that exhilarating way that tells writers they are geniuses and cannot be stopped.*

*(I should point out that this exhilaration never lasts long enough, and there's always a slog during which we wonder whether we're just too stupid to know how stupid we are, but imposter syndrome is a story for another day.)*

*Other ideas followed. In the margins on the front page there is an in-line comment from the CEO:*

*Who wrote this? I don't talk like that! Also, if I make notes in here, will they get cleaned out before we print?*

*One of the writers assures the CEO that in-line comments will be removed, and of course they are not. The comments in the margins become their own through-line, telling several stories across 200+ pages of RPG text.*

*I find it a little frightening to consider that this idea, which I was afraid to share with my collaborator, is now the theme that ties the entire project together. It is not just a title and a cool hook. It is the hook, the line, the sinker, the rod, the boat, and the compass.*

*It is also my favorite bit—not because it's important to the project, but because it will always serve as a reminder to me that some of the very best ideas look stupid, and I won't be able to figure out whether they're worthwhile without sharing them.*

All I remember is Howard coming to me very excited by his in-universe concept. In the long run that concept made some things easier and other things much harder. Imagine trying to explain to a graphic designer: we want it to look like a far-future, science-fictional company has tried to create a historically-accurate paper-and-pencil RPG. So think ahead to an imagined future, then imagine what they would get wrong as they were looking back to our recent past. But the concept and title carried us through our last run up to the Kickstarter.

How do I describe running a Kickstarter to someone who hasn't done it? I guess it is a bit like taking off in an airplane. There is this pressure and sense of speed often accompanied by the feeling of a falling stomach. And in the moment of take off, the destination is no longer entirely

in your control. We were thrilled when people responded and the project funded. Then over funded. Then we had to make up new stretch goals. Creating new stretch goals mid-project is always tricky. It is hard to coldly calculate the cost of add-ons when your heart is overflowing with gratitude for your backers. I answered so much email that month responding to backer questions and excitement.

We went out to lunch after the Kickstarter closed, Howard, Alan, Alan's wife, and I. It was a moment of celebration. It was also a little bit somber, because the work had barely begun. We felt the weight of responsibility to our backers for the next two years. Particularly as we discovered that the amount of work we'd done prior to the Kickstarter was nothing compared to the work that came after.

Yet the collaboration was joyous. We all learned so much, perhaps me most of all. I gained confidence as an editor that I hadn't had before. We learned when to hand off work to people with far more experience than we had. When the three advance copies arrived in July of 2017, Howard and I called Alan. He came right over and the three of us sat at that same kitchen table where we'd sat three years before. Only this time we were holding (maybe hugging a bit) the book that was the result of those three years' work. Through the collaboration moving online, and involving additional creative input, all our project discussions had been taking place via skype, phone call, or email. On that day it was lovely to just sit there, the three of us, and admire what we had brought into existence.

# Design Principles for Planet Mercenary

When we originally started working on Planet Mercenary, we laid out three core design goals that we consulted whenever we made a decision about how the mechanics of the game or universe would function. These principles were ranked in order of importance.

1. The game mechanic should be easy to learn and teach.

2. The game mechanic should be able to be played quickly, and encourage fun, even when in-game circumstances for characters were disastrous.

3. The game mechanic should sit in the background and get out of the way when the game is underway rather than intruding into or interrupting story.

Note that these principles are slightly different than the player-facing instructions of picking funny first, story second, and rules third. Those instructions only work because the mechanical framework of the game is strong enough to carry the load. These design principles are how we made sure that the framework was strong.

They are also slightly different than the design principles that we had for the worldbuilding and descriptive elements, which became the surface (or skin) of the game that was stretched over the mechanical framework. The design principles for the skin were that, as much as possible, everything needed to match the tone and historical canon of the Schlock Mercenary comic. However, since an RPG and a comic are two different genres of entertainment, when there was a conflict between the design principles for the skin and the design principles for the mechanics, mechanics won out. There are a few exceptions to this, but ranking the layers of design principles guided our decisions when these layers conflicted with each other.

Our decision process relating to Resources and Supplies shows how these mechanical design principles forced us to evolve our in-game resource system into what it became for release:

We knew we needed a way to allow players to purchase items as part of their play experience. Getting to have cool stuff is an important part of our second game design principle: have fun. However, we also knew that economies are very complex, and we had to stick to our first and foremost game design principle: the game should be easy to learn and teach.

In order to be easy to learn and teach, the numbers had to be small and comprehensible, yet we also needed to be able to represent the astronomical amounts of money necessary to purchase and equip spaceships, while also representing an individual's ability to buy a shiny new weapon.

Howard has (deliberately) never locked down a galactic currency in the comic, so during the initial design phase (alpha), Alan created a "Resource" mechanic. It functioned as a generic representation of various amounts of currency. It served as a "threshold" representing purchasing power

for items that cost fractions. Here's a snippet of the alpha rules for Resources:

*"Characters start with a number of pieces of equipment per mission equal to the Charter's resource rating. All selected equipment must have a minimum Charter resources requirement less than the charter's currently available resources. All characters get a free sidearm or one-handed melee weapon on top of their selected equipment."*

The idea was that instead of each player having money, the company would have a resource stat which determined what the players could afford to purchase and what they couldn't. During playtesting it became quickly apparent that our attempt to make Resources less of a management tool, and more of a game stat, wasn't working. The idea of a "statistic" determining financial wealth was a hurdle many players struggled to get over, and the binary "yes/no" purchasing requirements (is the cost of X item under your Resources or not), made the game unfun, and rather limited. There was no fluidity to the way Resources mattered. This was one of the times where principle two made us re-examine how we were meeting principle one. We were certain we could create another easy-to-teach method that had more fun in it. Also this stat method didn't really meet principle one since it was a hurdle that players had to get over in order to play.

For our next adaptation, we created two levels of financial purchasing power: Resources and Requisition (which we renamed to Supplies, thank heavens — there were too many R words in the game). The intent was to separate quartermaster levels of purchasing from Company levels of purchasing.

Our goal was this:

Supplies would fluctuate between missions with a lot of variance.

Resources would increase or decrease slowly and in small amounts.

This seemed like the best approach to make our representation of a galactic economy match our three design principles. It allowed ease of teaching by having two tiers, both with small numbers. It empowered the players to purchase fun items, thus assisting in the creation of fun.

The challenge that remained was to decide how to assign numbers to represent currencies. We bounced a lot of numbers around and did a lot of math to determine what ratios might work (100 Supplies = 1 Resource, etc.). We spent more time working the math on the mechanics of this section than on any other game mechanic. We would come up with an option, run a playtest, then come up with another option, rinse, repeat.

We devised countless systems, and each one violated our core rules. Either they didn't play quickly, or they weren't easy to teach (simulating a galactic economy on a binary level is not easy), or they required book keeping that got in the way of play moving forward. So we pumped the brakes and asked what the easiest math was. Increments of 5 Supplies to 1 Resource was the place we ended up. Increments of 5 are simple. They come naturally to most people. They're easy to teach and track. This solution did leave us with a problem: some suits of armor cost more than some spaceships. That's not ideal.

That's why the rulebook has this text:

*Once you turn Resources into Supplies, you can't change your points back. The only way to earn more Resources is through play. On the other hand, the only way to get Supplies is to spend Resources, and Supplies are the only way to get gear.*

Supplies don't buy spaceships. Resources buy spaceships. Once you dissolve your capital for micro-transactions, it's hard to put it back together. It's a one-way swing.

Resources represent massive quantities, the sort of capital and purchasing power that companies use to make payroll, acquisitions, or similar levels of financial investment. Supplies represent individual pay levels, single purchase amounts, and smaller financial levels. When a Resource is turned into 5 Supplies a substantial amount of value is lost in the change over.

A starship that costs "1 Resource" is a nonspecific thing at its core. The cost represents not only the specific currency amount, but also talking the dealer down, competing prices, and the ongoing cost to run the ship. (Asking game groups to track fuel and maintenance costs definitely violates the design principles, so those are rolled into the Resource cost of acquiring the ship or item.) Supplies function the same way but on a personal scale.

It is not a perfect system. By definition an abstraction can't be perfect, and there is an inherent dissonance when it appears that a small spaceship costs less than an expensive suit of armor. We have a Q&A section addressing that. However, it was the best solution available to let us hold to our design principles.

A lot of mechanics in the game have similar levels of abstraction. Fireteams are an abstracted supplement to the characters that allow players to represent being in command of soldiers. Skill Ranks and their associated Skill Checks are an abstraction of how knowledge and

experience can affect the outcome of in-game actions. Mayhem rolls and their cards are an abstracted mechanism designed to create funny or disastrous twists that occur in all good stories.

Every time we were confronted with a question about how an action/item/event should work, we always went back to our core principles to help us choose what rules ended up in the book.

With those design principles in place, we were able to know which portions of the Schlockiverse could be ported straight into the Planet Mercenary system, and which would need to be altered or abstracted to fit. We had to do a lot of learning along the way and more than once we had to tear apart a mechanical section and re-build it when we discovered places where one pocket of rules or stats conflicted with another pocket of rules or stats. Then we'd have to make sure that the changes were reflected in all the locations of the text where that rule was mentioned.

Ultimately we finished with a game that we believe best matches our mechanical design principles and also matches our worldbuilding design principles, while still being the in-universe object that Howard and Alan conceived it to be.

# Designing Amorphs and AI Characters

## Amorphs

Since Sergeant Schlock is such a huge part of the Schlock Mercenary comic strip, we knew we had to allow amorphs as a playable sophont type. Unfortunately our first attempts at amorph characters showed that any rule set which put amorph characters into balance with other types of sophonts either made other sophonts stronger than they appeared in the comic, or nerfed the amorphs so that they couldn't do many of the things that Schlock does in the comic. This problem was one of several factors that led us to decide that it was okay for the mechanics of the playable sophonts to not be perfectly balanced against each other. This means that if a player wants to make sure they always "win," then there are some sophonts who have a distinct numerical advantage. Our stated goal for the game is "have fun" or "fail gloriously in a way that you can tell stories about for years," and all sophont types are equally able to help players with those goals. Planet Mercenary is a game where a disastrous failure for the characters can be a big win for the players.

However, we also knew that fun would disappear if the sophonts were too far out of balance, so we pulled some of the specialized amorph skills into the GC section. Amorph characters can earn those skills through play, but do not have them at character creation. This matches the comic as Sergeant Schlock discovers new capabilities and hones his skill in the progress of the story. Pulling these skills into a "you can acquire these later" category was the best way to allow amorph characters to do all the things that sergeant Schlock does, without making amorphs completely overpowered as new characters.

## AIs

When we started discussing specific sophont types, Howard declared that making playable AI characters would require entirely new rulesets. In the comic AI are created, destroyed, adapted, and shifted as the various story lines needed. Trying to create rules that matched the *Planet Mercenary* mechanics on one end, and resembled the use of AI in the comic was bound to be complex, if not impossible. It was a can of worms that we thought was too complicated to tackle with the first release. We planned it for an expansion when we would have more time for play testing and working on it.

Then mid-Kickstarter, Alan was bored at work and made a set of rules for AI characters that matched the comic, matched our design rules, and made the capabilities of an AI character in the same ballpark as other sophont types. Howard loved them.

The key to making AI work was linking their skills to the company AI rating at the time of character generation and to create limits and advantages for AI depending on the type of chassis selected at generation. Essentially, we didn't create one playable sophont type, we created six playable AI types and a rule set that allows switching between the types but only with a risk of consequences. Linking points for skills to the company AI rating was a way to make sure that AI characters didn't have a huge skill point advantage or disadvantage, while also mirroring the way that the comic portrays companies acquiring AI.

Once Alan presented all of this and we could see how it easily slid into place with the other mechanical aspects of the game, we decided to release AI as playable characters in the core book.

# Extended Combat Example

Alan is the Game Chief
Steve is playing as Rike Mandahl (human)
Omar is playing as Samantha (Ursumari)
Angela is playing as Captain Tentoo (Ob'enn)
Maricella is playing as Bob (amorph)

Our encounter begins with Alan describing the space, as they enter the complex that they're infiltrating: "You're in a large warehouse space, with a guardroom off to one side. There are crates around you that you can use for cover as you sneak by, but since the stacks of crates are up against walls, you can't stay behind them the whole time. There is a large open area between the crates and the guardroom."

Steve botches a Stealth roll, and several guards notice the party.

"I shoot!" yells Omar, with audible groans emitting from the other players.

"No, take it back," says Angela. "We can still hide."

Alan grins, knowing that the "What you say is what you do" principle is in effect.

"Omar, roll your attack. What do you intend to do with your second action?"

Dice clatter.

"Uh, 21 to hit with my Shurikannon, and no Mayhem," says Omar. "For my second action, I'll duck behind cover with my fireteam."

"Sounds good, and that hits. Roll damage," says Alan.

Omar rolls damage, and Alan tallies it. The rest of the table looks around awkwardly for a second. Alan pauses to see if any of the players speak to take action. When they don't, he inserts the actions of the opponents.

"Okay, well, the guards shoot!" says Alan.

"Dang it, I shoulda jumped in," says Maricella.

Alan resolves the attacks from one of the three squads of guards. They hit Steve and Angela because the player-characters are still in the open. Maricella is also in the open, but the squad didn't aim at her this time. Alan pauses before rolling attacks for the remaining two squads and gives his players a chance to take their actions. He could have made all the squads attack, but it is still early in the game and he's teaching his players to make combat choices quickly, so he wants them to have opportunities to succeed. Later in the game, he'll be less forgiving, allowing players to experience full consequences.

"Okay, I shoot twice," says Steve. Dice rolls are had and attacks are resolved. (Note that Steve's fireteam is now doing nothing because Steve failed to give them orders.)

"I'll order my Fireteam to put down suppressing fire," says Maricella, "then I'll attack."

More dice are rolled.

"I duck behind cover and berate Omar for shooting so quickly," Angela says. "Also I'll fire once."

Alan says, "Okay, I can count ducking for cover and berating as a single action, but only because it's awesome. What does your character (Captain Tentoo) say to Omar's character (Samantha)?"

Angela says, "Samantha, you idiot! Take cover before firing next time!"

Alan smiles and tosses Angela a RiPP for acting in character, thus reminding players that acting in character earns rewards.

All the players have now taken their actions, so Alan has the remaining two squads take action. One of the squads throws a grenade. At the moment the grenade goes off, the following people have taken cover: Angela, Omar, Omar's fireteam (because he specifically ordered it), and Steve and Angela's fireteams (because it is assumed that those fireteams are hunkering down behind cover and are waiting for orders). The following people are out in the open: Steve, Maricella, and Maricella's fireteam.

The grenade is a frag grenade which does 4d6 + 6 damage. Alan rolls a 12 on the dice for a total of 18 damage.

Alan decides it is too early in the story to inflict piles of damage on the players. He declares that those behind cover don't get hit. This also rewards those players for their roleplay choice. Of the three out in the open, he decides to split the damage between them, but only if they get hit. He has Maricella and Steve both roll a d6. If they roll a 5 or 6, then they're hit with 6 points of damage. Maricella rolls a 3 and is safe. Steve rolls a 5 and thus takes damage. However, he's wearing excellent armor with a reduction of 5, so only 1 point of damage affects his HP. To determine the outcome for the exposed fireteam, Maricella rolls

the die and they're hit. She then rolls a d6 to determine which fireteam member was hit. (1–2 is member A, 3–4 is member B, 5–6 is member C.) It turns out that member C is hit. Maricella pauses for a moment to name the fireteam member Lucy, then flips a coin to see whether Lucy lives or dies. Lucy is lucky this time. Maricella marks down that Lucy has survived death and play continues.

**Note:** If Lucy had died, then Maricella would have had to remove Lucy's portion of the stats from her fireteam, thus making her team less effective for the remainder of combat. The team also instantly loses any qualities that it may have had. After combat is over, Maricella could add a probie member to her fireteam, thus incurring the Probie quality. Details on the Probie quality can be found on page 105 of the Planet Mercenary RPG sourcebook.

During the next round, Omar wants his fireteam to flank some of the guards, in order to provide covering fire. He explains his intent to Alan.

"Sure," says Alan. "However, they're going to need to make a Physical roll to avoid incoming fire and move from cover to cover. If they make it, they can do it this round, but it takes the whole round. If not, they only get halfway." Alan decides the Physical roll's Target Number (TN) is 18. He wants it to be challenging, but not impossible.

Omar rolls for his fireteam. With their successful roll of 20 after modifiers, they make it.

**Note:** Since Planet Mercenary doesn't concern itself with tactical positioning, but narrative movement, dice rolls like the one noted above are an excellent way to handle risky or failure-potential movements. Basically, you describe what you want to do, then roll a Physical skill to see how successful you are at it. The GC should set the TN based on how challenging the described motion would be.

After a couple of rounds of combat, only one guard remains. He begins to flee through a back door in the guard area. If he gets away, then he'll likely alert more guards.

Maricella (who has an amorph character) says, "I chase him."

"Okay," says Alan, "what is your Athletics skill?"

"Four, and I have the Pursuit specialty."

Alan doesn't have a specific Athletics skill written down for this particular guard, so on the spot, he decides to give this task a moderate difficulty, which means the TN is 15. (If this chase involved a fully-fleshed-out NPC, then Alan would roll an Athletics check for that NPC to determine the TN.)

Maricella rolls the dice. She gets 9, adds 4 for her Skill Ranks, but still only scores 13, which would fail. But since Maricella has an applicable specialty, she re-rolls one of the dice to bring her roll up to a 12, adds her 4 skill ranks, and scores a new total of 17, which is a success.

Alan says, "You leap over the crate and follow him through the back door, where you catch him. Now what do you do?"

"I hold him until everyone can catch up."

Alan says, "Congratulations, you've discovered an amorph Athletics specialty called Hold. I'll let you hold this guy, but if you want to do it again, you'll need to purchase the specialty as part of leveling up when this job is complete."

"Cool!"

# Questions and Answers

**There is a mechanic for an automatic failure, so why isn't there one for an automatic success?**

*If a GC has designed a task to be deliberately difficult with a high TN, then we don't want random luck to make the impossible into a success. However, we do want to provide a mechanism for success to be extra-surprising. This is the Upgraded Success, which first requires that you succeed and then takes that success over the top in an entertaining fashion. We did provide for automatic failure, because we wanted long-lived PCs (who have thus accrued amazing skill sets) to have some amount of risk associated with their rolls. (If a task is so easy that the PC shouldn't be able to fail at it, then don't roll the dice at all.)*

**Is there a general rule of thumb for how to apply the "becoming less effective" aspect of a mook squad? Do they do less damage, have lower attack scores, etc., and if so, to what extent does this rule apply?**

*To not require too much bookkeeping (because bookkeeping slows down play), we suggest that you reduce Damage by half when the mook squad is at half health. That's it. Keep it simple. If you want to be more granular, then you can use additional fractional increments.*

**I have a player who has found every single numerical advantage provided in the character and fireteam creation systems. How do I make sure encounters are still challenging?**

*If your players are too focused on combat optimization, start putting them into encounters and stories that require non-combat solutions (negotiations, stealth missions, etc.). You can also put them in situations that deliberately disadvantage their preferred combat method. Make them enter a location where weapon restrictions are enforced, or where they're not allowed to bring their fireteams. Put a personal cost on any collateral damage ("your pay will be docked for every crate that gets damaged"). You can also use the challenge point system on page 280 of Planet Mercenary RPG to tailor any combat encounters to your player's damage capabilities.*

*Additionally, you may want to sit down with the player and the design principles essay. Discuss with them how much more fun the game can be if their character has to be brave instead of being able to one-shot all the enemies.*

**The book says, "The GC will let you know when your weapon's license will cause a problem." I'm the GC. What should I tell my players?.**

*This comes down to personal preference. If you don't want to deal with the weapon licensing rules, ignore them and let your players carry whatever they want to carry anywhere they want to go. However, please do consider the possible story interest inherent in making players equip for the location you're in. This is particularly useful if you need to separate one over-enthusiastic player from his maxed-out shurikannon.*

*When deciding what weapons would have consequences, think about the world in which we live and what the consequences would be for carrying a military-grade rocket launcher in a big city vs. a rural area vs. a war zone. One situation would almost certainly result in arrest, one would earn a talking-to ("Earl, I know your rocket launcher is cool, but it's making folks nervous, so please leave it home"), and the third would likely just result in people staying out of your way.*

*The thing that is most important when dealing with weapon restrictions is to let your players know whether or not you'll be paying attention to those restrictions. It doesn't make for a good play session when the GC suddenly has players arrested for carrying weapons that they've carried without problems for weeks. Unless, of course, the arrest is actually because the local crime boss is irritated, and he paid his plants in the local police department to pick up the PCs on a weapons charge so that he can have words with them.*

**Can we get more detail about how medical gear works, and the healing time required for different items?**

*For an RPG, items that heal or repair turn out to be as big a can of worms as weapons that destroy. We knew we needed to include some of the iconic medical items mentioned in the comic, but for the most part, the ability to heal isn't that relevant to gameplay because of how deadly most of the weapons are. We balanced this with the "promotion from grunt" mechanic rather than trying to provide piles of items to help players keep their primary character alive. If you're mid-combat, then you won't have time to use much beyond a slapstick. If you're between sessions, then we figure you can bring back your old character if you want or continue*

*forward with your new one. However, we know it would be useful for storytelling to have the stats and uses of medical gear explained more fully. This is on the list of things we may explore in future expansions/releases when we have time to crunch the numbers and playtest the mechanics necessary to make sure that the medical gear doesn't break the game.*

**What if I want to be able to replicate an event in the comic that the rules of the game make difficult or impossible?**

*The game is designed to allow people to play and tell their own stories in the Schlockiverse. In fact, we tried to build that into the structure of the game; however, a comic and an RPG are different media with different narrative and structural requirements. This means that some things that work great in the comic are made difficult by the structure of the game. We offer two solutions.*

*1. Keep to the structure of the game and let yourself be led into a different story than you anticipated.*

*2. Make some house rules that let you tell the story you want to tell.*

*If you choose the house rules option, then double-check your house rules with everyone in the party before using them in play. Be aware that once you institute a house rule, it may have extensive consequences for the game both mechanically and in the story. (There are reasons we had to opt to not allow some of the things that happen in the comic. You might discover why.) If you find that your house rules work really well, and you think others might also enjoy them, consider writing up a resource explaining them for other players to use. These player-generated resources can be uploaded to the "Shared Resources" page on www.planetmercenary.com.*

**How do I generate NPCs?**

*This answer depends on how important the NPC is to your story and how long you expect to have to deal with this particular NPC. If you're creating a shopkeeper for a brief haggling interaction, then all you really need for that NPC is their sophont type, a personality trait (greedy, friendly, helpful), and a target number for your player to hit while haggling. And truthfully you can skip the sophont type and personality trait if the interaction isn't roleplayed much.*

*However, if you're creating an NPC who is going to be a long-term antagonist, or who will have repeat appearances, or who will accompany your players, then you'll want to have more details. The amount of detail is up to you. You can fill out a full character sheet, fill out one of the NPC half sheets that are available at www.planetmercenary.com, or just jot down a few relevant stats on an index card. For the index card method, it is often simplest to use the same stat structure that is used for fireteams, having only a single stat each for Combat, Mental, Physical, Social, and Damage. The key is that for an NPC, you don't have to balance stats against anything. Simply give the NPC the skills or stats that you need them to have in order to accomplish their role in the story. Also, don't share those stats with players, so you can fudge them behind your screen in service of the story, should you need to. If you do fudge stats or dice rolls, make sure you do so in a way that makes the game more fun for your players.*

**I want to create a character with a background as a cook. How do I create a background or command package that isn't listed in the book?**

*The first thing to do is ask yourself what role is this package trying to fulfill that another package can't already fulfill if you simply change the name?*

*Once you've determined you really do need to create something new, start assigning skill bonuses.*

*For Command Packages, they get 8 new skill points, divided into sections of +2 to a skill (so 4 sets of +2 bonuses). You can provide binary options (choosing between two choices) for some of these skills. One of those options should always be a combat skill choice.*

*For Background packages, they get 6 new skill points, divided into sections of +2 to a skill (so 3 sets of +2 bonuses).*

*It is unusual to give specialties as part of one of these packages. If it is truly necessary, then they should only get a single point in the relevant skill plus the specialty.*

*For example, let's say we want to create a Data Analyst background package.*

*There are several types of data analyst, so let's say we want this background to fit two of them:*

*Intelligence*

*Economic*

*Obviously, we should start with the core skills: +2 Economics or +2 Insight. This represents the two sides of our coin here. Next we have some supplemental skills: +2 Computers or +2 History. This allows for the player to add some deeper focus. Lastly, we have +2 Research. We figure all data analysts need to know how to research.*

*This is a very Mental Skills-oriented Background, but it certainly gives us the right feel.*

**If I look at Resources and Supplies, some starships cost less than some suits of armor. Why don't players just use these starships instead?**

*You have correctly identified that from a straight numbers perspective this can be more cost-effective, mathematically. However, it breaks the story by being an illogical solution.*

*You might want to read the section of the Design Principles essay where we discuss the evolution of the Resources and Supplies system. You might also want to read the Q&A about a player who wants to stat-crunch into a munchkinned character. Maybe you even read both of those things to your players. In fact, they can read this entire GC secrets PDF.*

*Abstractions are (by definition) imperfect and inaccurate. The goal of the Resources and Supplies system is to simulate enough of an economy to allow for storytelling and fun to happen. If it seems like your group of players isn't able to have fun unless the Resources and Supplies system is a little more complicated, then hack the system. Make it 1 Resource to 10 Supplies. Keep in mind that your players will start with more gear at that point, and make sure you're prepared for that. Also be aware that going higher than a 10-to-1 ratio risks making the rewards for completing missions too good. Players will get outfitted in top-of-the-line gear far too easily.*

*If you think up other hacks for the Resources and Supplies system that you believe might help other game groups, feel free to write it up and submit it to the "Shared Resources" section of www.planetmercenary.com. That way, others who share your love of economic complexity can hack their own games.*

**What if my player doesn't have the right skill and wants to use a different one instead?**

*That is just fine, as long as the player can justify the use of the skill in the current situation. We call this using an adjacent skill rather than a primary skill. For example, if your player needs to remove glue from a surface, then the obvious, primary skill would be Chemistry. But the player could also use the adjacent skill of Experimental Sciences, and try scraping or pouring liquids on the glue to see what will work. Alternately, they could use the Medicine skill if they manage to convince everyone that this particular glue is used in surgeries, so therefore, their medical knowledge should include knowledge of how to remove this glue. We encourage allowing players to use adjacent skills. It gives them more options for success and often promotes creative storytelling. Don't forget to award RiPPs where they've been earned.*

# Elements of Storytelling

Planet Mercenary is, at its core, a game of cooperative storytelling. All of the mechanics, dice, stats, characters, and cards exist to assist in the telling of this story. The Game Chief functions as the conductor for that story, the person who has a plan ahead of time, and who has to adapt when the players go off script. The GC's job becomes a bit easier when the GC has a comprehension of some of the basic elements that go into making stories, so we offer this primer in storytelling terminology and concepts. We'll be using "The Damaxuri Deception" as our example text because it is found on pages 333–340 in the Planet Mercenary sourcebook, and thus is likely to be a text that you have available to you. However, you will likely be able to find these storytelling elements in almost any story you read or watch. Further resource recommendations can be found in the closing paragraph of this section.

## Adding Humor

We invite you to re-read the "Making Jokes" section of the Planet Mercenary RPG sourcebook. It begins on page 275.

## Disaster

A disaster, in story terms, is a setback event that forces the characters to react. Often it's a type of twist, but it might also serve as an inciting incident. It can be a "fail" step in the try/fail cycle, an unexpected equipment malfunction, or even just bad weather. When a story seems stalled, throw down a disaster. Blow something up. Usually stories stall when the players are bored or confused, and are not acting to move the story forward. A disaster forces them to react, and might be all you need to get them moving again.

## Heist

A heist story is one in which an ensemble of characters (as opposed to a lone protagonist) must execute some very unlikely bit of derring-do, and their plan will usually be one that showcases the skill sets of various characters. For game purposes, heists should have twists that force the players to improvise and adapt. Heist games are easier to run when there is a trusted NPC shepherding the players along an interesting, plausible path. The players need to come up with the plan, but the NPC can help them craft a plan that does not break the story, or force non-trivial levels of improvisational worldbuilding on the part of the Game Chief. Heists can consist of anything from bank robberies to rescue missions. Often a heist is part of a larger story structure or campaign. "The Damaxuri Deception" doesn't have a heist built in, but there might be a mini-heist if the players structure their search for information in the heist format.

## Inciting Incident

This is where most stories really start, and they typically telegraph what kind of story you and the players will be telling. When an old friend from your dark past shows up and asks for help with one last job, you might be beginning a heist. You might also be setting the players up for a story with a double-cross in which the friend is actually putting the Company in a position to be attacked by an old rival. Good examples of inciting incidents are distress calls, surprise attacks, and simply approaching a potential employer and asking about work. In "The Damaxuri Deception," the inciting incident happens when you're attending the keynote, and the bounty for Kostavi is discovered.

## Introductory Scene

This is a short portion of story that allows the player to orient themselves in time and location. In "The Damaxuri Deception," it is most of Scene 1 at MercCon. It gives your players a chance to get into character and have some fun interactions. An introductory scene often poses a problem or challenge that turns out not to be all that important once we reach the inciting incident.

## Romp

This is that bit at the beginning of some stories where everybody does get to be awesome. The threat level seems high, but is actually pretty low. The romp helps define the players' characters to each other, and is often a great way to lay the foundation for an inciting incident. In film and television, the romp is typically in medias res, where the audience arrives in the middle of the action. For game purposes, this is unwieldy. A good game romp is a short "milk run" mission in which everything goes well (for "did you see the size of that explosion?" values of "well"). "The

Damaxuri Deception" does not have a built-in romp, but your players might experience one while interacting with vendors at MercCon.

## Time Bomb

A time-bomb plot is one in which the players are racing a clock of some sort. It might be orbital mechanics, it might be a set of events put in motion by their adversaries, or it might be an actual timer on an actual time bomb (as in "The Damaxuri Deception"). The key to making this sort of story work is the time element. Don't let the players talk ad nauseam about their next step. Let them see the timer, whether it's the setting sun, or yet another anti-aircraft battery falling silent.

## Try/Fail Cycle

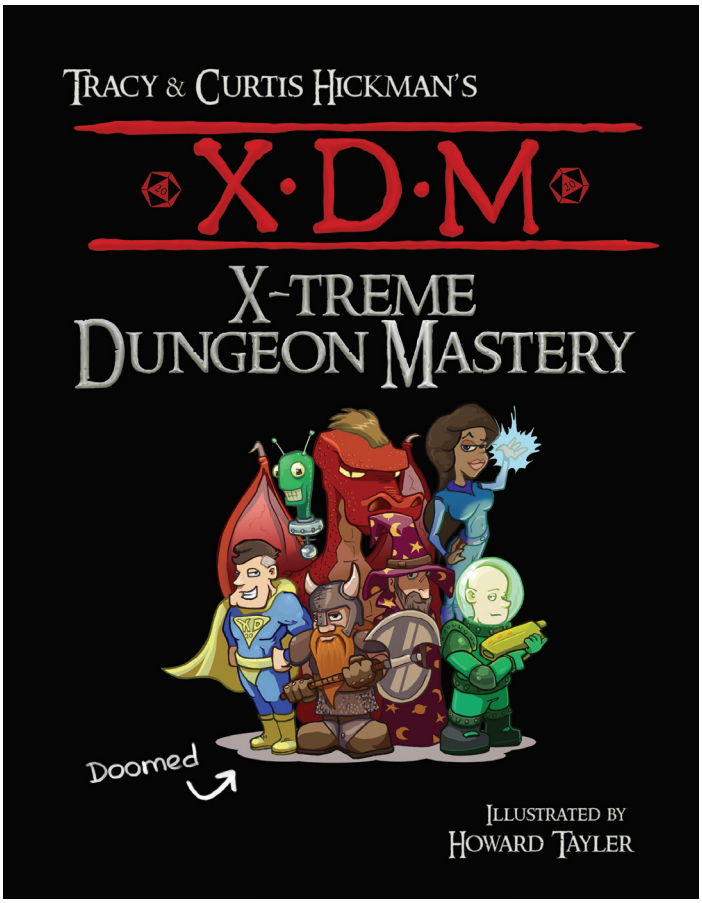
As much as your players might want to be awesome and successful and heroic and cool straight off the character sheet, they'll enjoy those moments more if you make them earn them. A try/fail cycle is a story structure in which the characters fail repeatedly, but not so badly as to be unable to try again. If you let the dice make all the decisions about success or failure, then you're unlikely to get a good try/fail cycle. It's usually better (and definitely more predictable) to place twists, double-crosses, and disasters at key points in the story. Introducing these just after crucial die rolls is a great way to make things look random, which is helpful because the game may run aground if the players decide you really do have it in for them, regardless of what the dice say.

Players should be encouraged to own their failures. Some of the best moments in games come from epic failures, followed by mad scrambles to avoid death, and the subsequent assignment of new nicknames to the characters who botched their rolls.

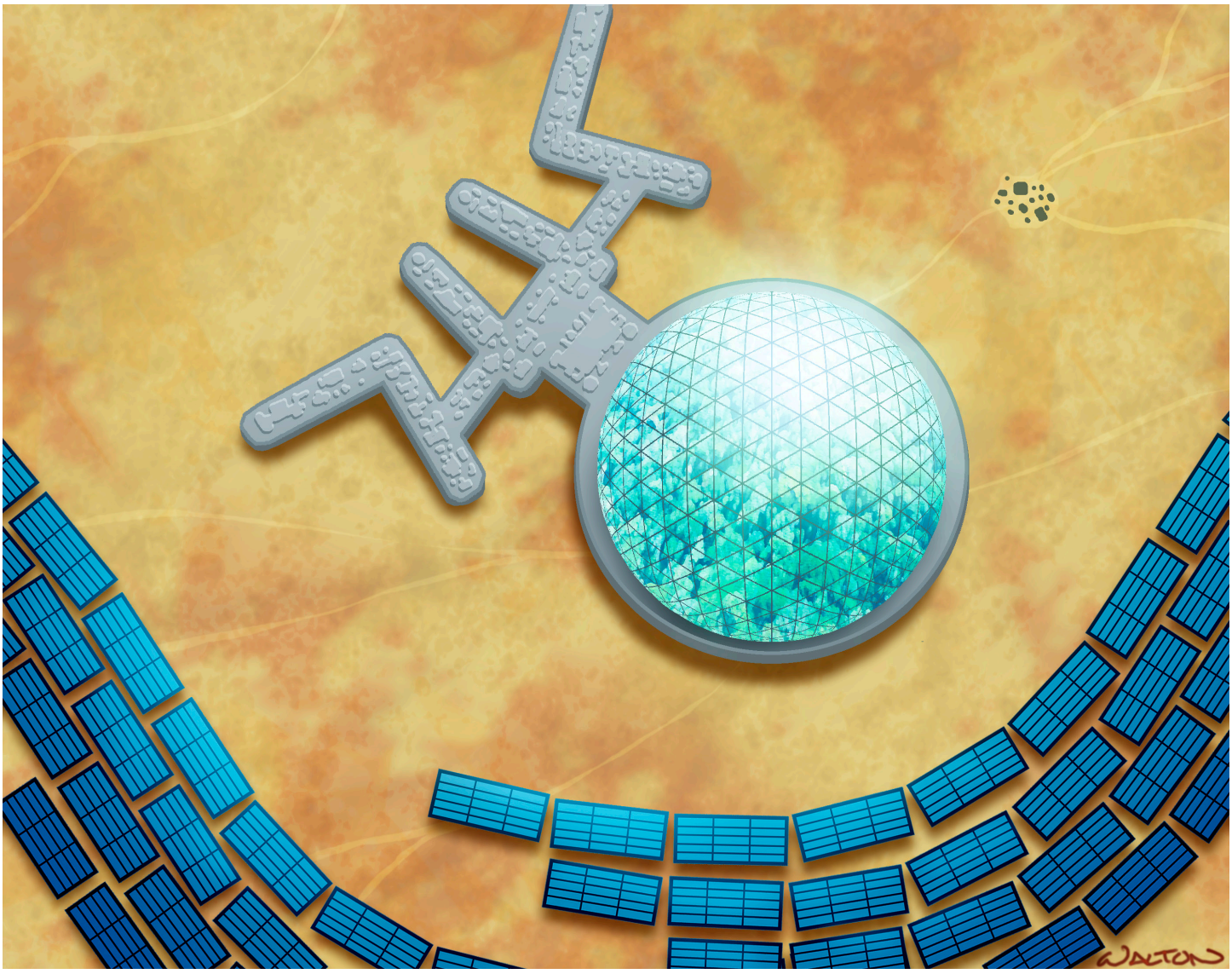
## Twist

A twist is, in its simplest form, an event that changes the story in some significant way. A double-cross is a good example, but twists can be very straightforward. The discovery of the killer's second victim is a common murder mystery twist, because it forces the detectives to discard one set of theories, and create a number of others. Be warned: players will often create their own twists by doing something unexpected, like turning on their employer, or making a straightforward job into a heist, an escape, or any number of other things. "The Damaxuri Deception" offers several twists, the most notable being the discovery that Kostavi herself was the one who created the bounty, because she wants to fake her own death.

Naturally, there are more possible story elements than those we have just listed. If you really want to increase your storytelling skills, then we recommend picking up a book or two on screenwriting or genre writing (Sandra's favorite is Save the Cat by Blake Snyder). Alternately, you could pick up a copy of Tracy Hickman's *X-Treme Dungeon Mastery*, which is Alan's go-to recommendation for Game Masters who want to learn how to put together an amazing game. (Full disclosure: XDM is also illustrated by Howard Tayler and published by the same press as *Planet Mercenary*. So we might be a little biased.)




The three maps that follow were created by Schlock Mercenary colorist Travis Walton, and through a mishap, they failed to be included in the core book. We thought you might like them, and they're really pretty, so we've included them here.

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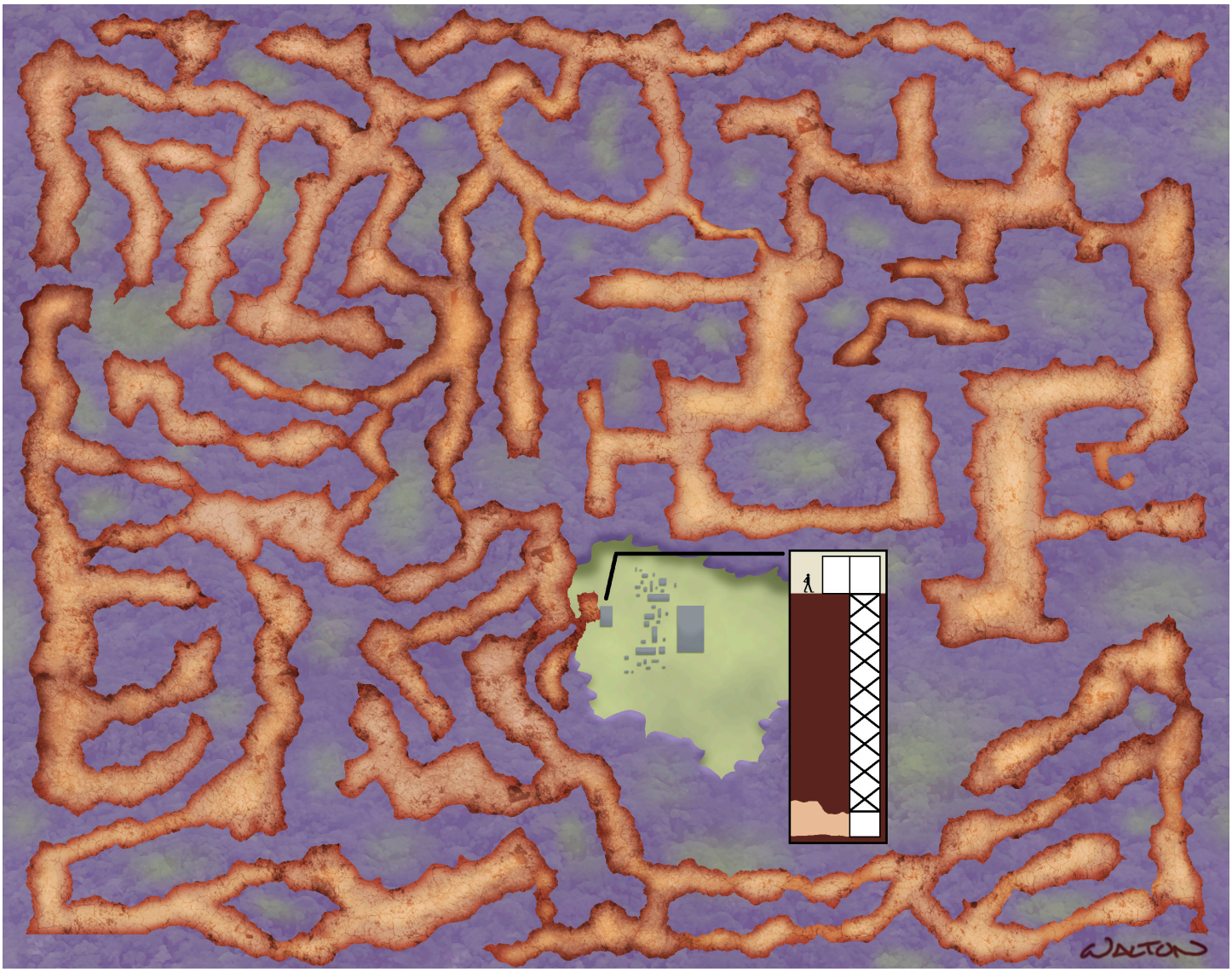


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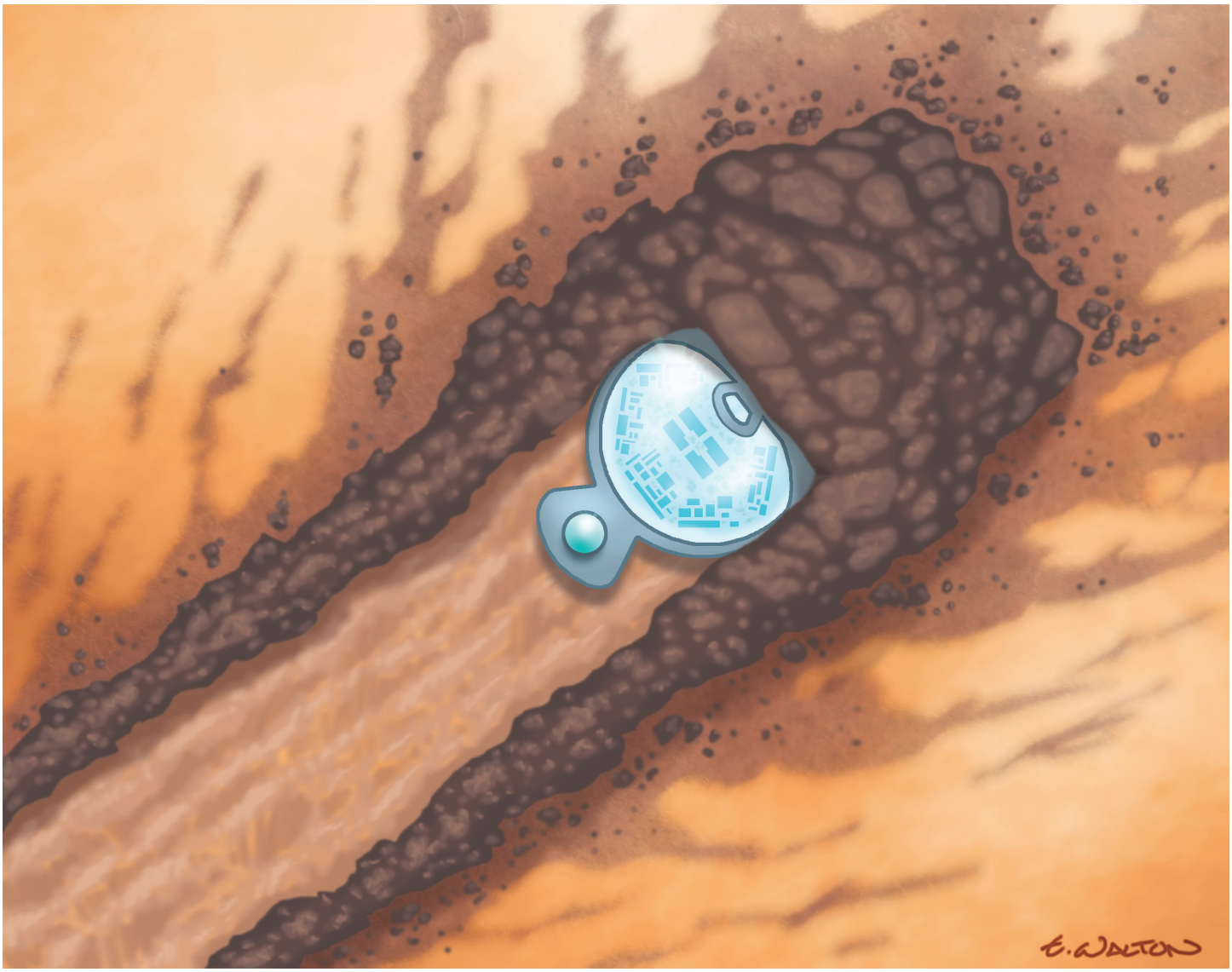


# Morgan's Brake

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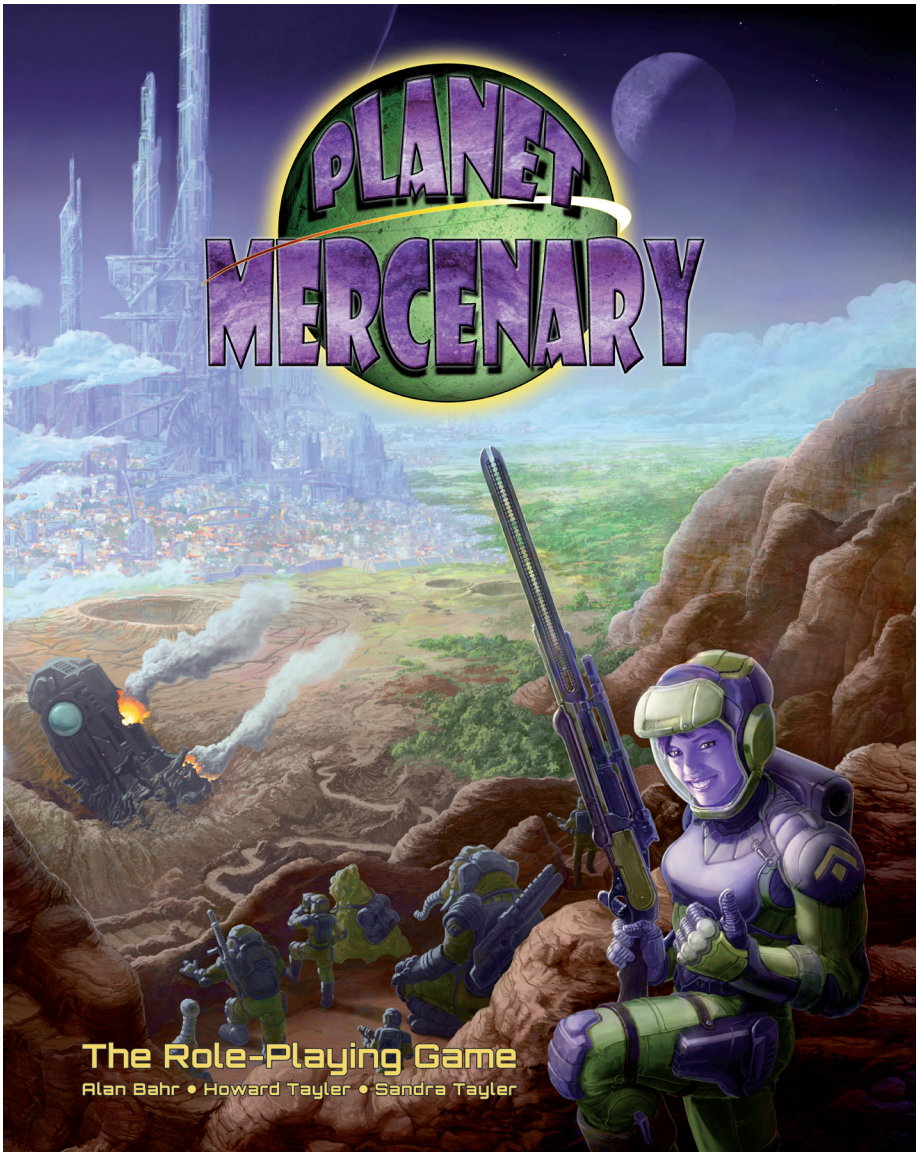
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