

# SUNLESS SEAS

by Ben Wright

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# Introduction

*“Your first trip, lad? Here’s a tip: if  
you puke over the side, keep your eyes  
shut or you’ll only make it worse.”*

This is a role-playing game that throws together a number of different settings, each on its own ‘island’. Travel between them is through a mysterious aether that is forever in darkness. The character you portray could come from any kind of place, with any level of technology or magic. Unlike most people living in the game’s universe, this character of yours is one who feels compelled to keep travelling the dangerous Sunless Seas.

Some travellers want to get away from where they were, to start a new life in a different place. Some go with soldiers and weapons to find an island where they can install themselves as dictators. The less violent sometimes follow the same route back and forth, making money on the goods they transport. Your character is not like any of them. He is a career traveller, who may well die before he chooses to settle down.

Depending on where he grew up and what places he has visited he could have knowledge and skills in magic, spiritualism, firearms, mêlée weapons, unarmed combat, technology or something weirder. All such skills are considered ‘equal’, inasmuch that one is not inherently better than another by design.

Your character is not only travelling between islands in the game universe, but could also be transferred to a different group of players with minimal fuss. Everything about your character is written on a small deck of custom-written cards.

## Game Master

The Game Master is the master of ceremonies for the game, constructing the locations, people and problems that your character will discover. She has ultimate authority to say what happens and how the rules are interpreted, but should remain receptive to suggestions from other players. The Game Master is the person who puts the most work into preparing for the game, but she also has to think on her feet to deal with unexpected ideas and action from everybody else.

## *Introduction*

### **Materials**

You will need a number of blank cards. The simplest way to get cards of around the right size is to cut index cards or blank postcards in half. When you create your character, you will need up to 18 blank cards. As the game progresses cards will be added to or taken away from your deck, so a supply of additional blank cards is also required. The Game Master needs cards for her Destiny Deck, which she uses in a variety of ways during the game. A standard Destiny Deck consists of 16 cards, and could be photocopied from the templates in the back of this book. Because packs of index cards are seldom exactly the same size, it's convenient to keep your own set of blanks so no card sticks out a little. You'll need a pencil or pen; with pencil you can erase cards taken out of your deck if you're feeling frugal.

### **Buy In to the Concept**

The rules of this game are quite a bit different to those of most role-playing games. Many games introduce randomness with dice after you have decided what your character is doing, so each time he attempts something he has pretty much the same chance of succeeding. Often an important situation will play out over a series of dice rolls, using the law of averages to smooth out good or bad luck.

In this game part of the randomness lies in what cards you have in your hand, giving you some insight into how effectively your character can attempt an action before committing to it. Every task, even long, complicated ones, are resolved with a single check. You may find that you want your character to do one thing, but you don't have the right cards in hand to do it. That feeling that you're not in full control of your character is a potential sticking point. However, you can adapt the choices you make for your character to the hand of cards quite easily, and in this game failing at a task, even spectacularly, is not a tremendous set-back. Think of it as if you were given a hint as to how good your dice roll was going to be in advance. It's important that all of the players are prepared to accept this mode of play rather than gripe about how their decisions are shaped by the cards they draw.

The juxtaposition of wildly different setting elements often creates a 'gonzo' feeling to the game, and can make it hard to take seriously. There's nothing wrong with playing for laughs, and there's nothing wrong with scenes of taut drama or powerful emotion even if most of the game is light-hearted. What's important is that the players accept how the others want to play and that everyone gets a chance to participate in the kinds of scenes they want to.



## **A Journey on the Sunless Seas**

*Captain Duff went out to sea with the tide. The weather was rather poor, poor enough that many of the local fisherman had decided to wait it out rather than risk their trawlers. Duff respected the sea as much as they did, but as he didn't expect to be in these waters for long he believed the risk to be small. He kept the coast in sight at all times, triangulating his vessel's position and paying close attention to where his rutter told him the nexus lay.*

*I didn't notice the transition at first, even though I knew what to look for. Perhaps the poor light tricked me. The horizon was a dark blue, like the high sky just before the sun starts setting. As the captain held our course steady, despite the stiffening wind, the darkness crept closer. Soon, we lost sight of land. I can only imagine how terrifying it must be for those who blunder into a nexus by accident. Of course, it's difficult to stay with one unless you know what you're doing, so they would probably return home alive and with a warning to others to avoid those waters.*

*Which is just as well. Entering the sunless seas unprepared is usually a death sentence.*

*As the darkness closed around us, the crew lit the deck lamps. It was as if we were in a shrinking pocket of warmth and light. The overcast sky has vanished, to be replaced by blackness. This was the transition, the moment when we truly left the island behind. The sound of the waves striking the hull lessened and then... stopped.*

*The darkness started to take on a deep purple hue. A few points of light, like stars, became visible. I prefer the purple parts of the void to the cold blue or the threatening maroon. You understand that by the clocks of the port we had left, it was still mid-morning. The crew busied themselves with capstans, winching the port and starboard masts into position. Heavy iron bands were locked into place to hold them fast, then sails were run up them. I say 'up', but when a mast points out and downwards the word seems incorrect. The main sail was taken in a little, to keep all three in equal balance.*

*Once the crew had finished their work I scrambled up to the poop deck to see the island we had left. It hung behind us like a harvest moon, or a glass paperweight with an intricate diorama cast inside it. I was treated to a bird's eye view of the country, including the little port. The curve of the coast we had followed was recognisable. The cloudy sky did not obscure that view, somehow. The trees were waving in a breeze we*

## *Introduction*

*could no longer feel. It looked like I could reach out and touch its surface- an illusion that before now has had more than one traveller lean too far over the rail and fall into the void.*

*Soon, the sails picked up a current. The air always tasted strange in the void. Thinner than usual, certainly, but also somehow metallic.*

*The next fortnight was uneventful. The island behind us diminished. As it did so, other islands in this sea became visible. Tiny, like children's toys, they hung above, around and below us. Captain Duff had acquired a technological gizmo on his travels, one that let him steer through the void with confidence. Setting the wrong course could leave him and his ship somewhere entirely unfamiliar, with little chance he could find his way back to known waters. He didn't appear to entirely trust his prized device, though, as he double-checked its answers with his slide rule. I much preferred either approach to the divinations and sorcery I'd seen used on other ships. The island behind us was no larger than any of the others at the half-way point.*

*Another passenger, on only her second voyage through the void, fell ill from the strange air and the rocking of the boat. She told me she had made many trips on ordinary seas, and never been sick, even in the roughest of weather. I have always suspected that the lack of sunlight is one of the chief causes of such problems. I gave her a few of the tablets I keep with me to keep the nausea at bay, and she gave me a bottle of rare spices as thanks.*

*The island that was our destination grew larger over the coming days. Gleaming towers of steel and glass were strangely fore-shortened by the distortion of the bubble. As we got closer, the other islands all but disappeared from the sky around us. You never actually reached an island in the normal sense, of course - the transition was far subtler than that - and no sane captain of the void would trust anything as unreliable as Euclidean geometry when sailing the sunless seas.*

*The drop happened all of a sudden, which is unusual. A normal night sky, with a moon and ordinary stars, was immediately above us. The side masts were dragging in water, threatening to make the ship flounder. The crew didn't need the captain's barked orders to take in the sails and fold the masts back alongside the hull.*

*To the port, lit by a thousand neon candles, was a city. It had been built out over the water, so the docks were in its underbelly. Advertisements for products I had never heard of were scrolling across digital boards.*

*I will now start a fresh page in my journal, as I always do for each new place I visit.*

## Setting Glossary

- ◆ **Bubble** – What an island looks like from the sunless seas, an aerial view distorted as though through a fish-eye lens.
- ◆ **Drop** – To make the transition to an island from the sunless seas.
- ◆ **Island** – A self-contained world, one of many in the sunless seas. The seas themselves cannot be seen from an island.
- ◆ **Lift** – To make the transition to the sunless seas from an island.
- ◆ **Nexus** – A point in an island where it is possible to move into the sunless seas. Most islands have more than one nexus, some of which lead to completely different parts of the sunless seas.
- ◆ **Rutter** – A navigator's journal, detailing the precise locations of nexuses he knows and instructions for using them safely.
- ◆ **Sunless seas** – The mysterious space between islands, famous for its darkness and strange geometry.
- ◆ **Transition** – The act of moving between the sunless seas and an island.
- ◆ **Void** – Synonym for the sunless seas.
- ◆ **Void ship** – Any vessel that travels the sunless seas.
- ◆ **Voidhopper** – Slang for a permanent traveller on the sunless seas.

Although this section and the last provide some details as to what the sunless seas are like, and what travellers experience when sailing them, the seas are vast and varied. Neither you nor the Game Master need worry about 'describing it wrong', because just about any interpretation is valid somewhere, at some time.

# Character Cards

*“That’s a fancy piece, my man, totally  
kickin’. But there are some cats out there  
with ray guns ’n’ stuff. Watch your back.”*

The deck for your character consists of cards you or the Game Master have written. When the Game Master determines that your character faces a difficult challenge, you play cards in order to meet that challenge.

You have one special card in your deck– the Face card. It is not part of the deck proper. All it has on it is your character’s name, and a few details about him. When a character deck is stored, put the Face card on top so it’s easy to tell which character the deck is for. When playing, put the Face card on the table in front of you, pointing towards the other players, so they can glance at it to see your character’s name and any other information, such as a sketch, you feel like adding to it. You can write on both sides of your Face card, because the back doesn’t have to be blank.

Each card in your deck is of a specific type, as described later. The type is indicated by a simple symbol in the top left. Next to that, along the top, is the card’s name. This can be a quote, an object the character uses, a skill he possesses, or anything else that describes a suitable attribute for the card type. Exercise your imagination. Some cards then require some additional rules information. While these additional rules have symbols, it can be annoying to have to learn them, so write out the rule name or the rule in full instead if you prefer. The rest of the card is yours to use as you wish. Feel free to draw on it, keep a record of your character’s exploits or write down memorable quotes from play. Just make sure you don’t get so engrossed in doing that that you stop paying attention to the game itself. Remember to keep the back blank.

During the game, you have a hand of character cards that you keep secret from everyone else. You have a Draw pile, face down, and a Discard pile, face up. The Draw pile should have the cards in portrait orientation to you, as having it in landscape has a specific meaning, covered later.

When you play cards during a challenge, place them face up in front of you as you play them. At the end of the challenge, tidy any played cards onto the Discard pile.

## *Character Cards*

In many places these rules say 'if appropriate'. Usually this is a restriction on when a card can be played or whether a card gives a specific benefit when it is played. A card is 'appropriate' if its description is somehow apposite to the current scene in the game. Ultimately, it is the Game Master who decides whether or not a card is appropriate in this way, but she is encouraged to be generous. The cards serve the purposes of the story, not the other way around.

## Interpretation

The overall size of your deck can be thought of as broadly analogous to your character's stamina.

How concentrated the deck is towards a particular activity reflects how narrow the character's skill focus is.

The amount of cards in your Draw pile indicates how close to exhaustion your character is.

Your current hand of cards reflects how well prepared your character is to approach certain tasks. A lack of useful cards can indicate being off-balance, out of ammunition, or generally caught off-guard.

## Actions

Terminology to remember:

- ◆ **Draw** - take the top card from your Draw pile and add it to your hand. If your Draw pile is then empty, shuffle your Discard pile and turn it into a new Draw pile, placed landscape, to indicate that your character is '**Exhausted**'.
- ◆ **Discard** - put a card from your hand onto the Discard pile.
- ◆ **Exert** - put the top card of your Draw pile onto the Discard pile. If the Draw pile is then empty, shuffle your Discard pile and make a new Draw pile, placed landscape, to indicate **Exhaustion**.
- ◆ **Receive** - A new card is written by you or the Game Master, and placed onto your Discard pile.
- ◆ **Take** - A new card is written by you or the Game Master, and put in your hand.
- ◆ **Burn** - A card is taken out of your deck permanently, from your hand or from cards you have played.
- ◆ **Exhausted** - When your Draw pile is sideways.

## *Character Cards*

- ◆ **Take a Breather** – You may **Discard** a card if you wish. Then you must **Draw** until you have 6 cards in hand. If you are **Exhausted**, you may only draw until you have 3 cards in hand. If you become **Exhausted** while drawing, only continue drawing until you have 3 or more cards in hand.
- ◆ **Rest Up** – Keep a maximum of 3 cards in hand, then shuffle all of the rest of your cards together to make a new Draw pile. Then **Draw** until you have a hand of 6.
- ◆ **Improve** – Modify your deck to improve it, in one of a number of ways described in the ‘Other Rules’ chapter.

The Game Master will usually tell you to **Take a Breather** after a challenge. She will tell you to **Rest Up** when there’s a long period of rest in the story, for example a good night’s sleep.

## Card Types

There are 5 card types that a starting character has in his deck. Most cards are an advantage in some situations, but an obstacle in others.

- ◆ ☆ **Goal** – Something the character wants to achieve as a personal short- or long-term goal. It confers an advantage in tasks that bring him closer to this goal, but is of no use for other tasks. If the current challenge is in some way appropriate to this goal, play this to **Draw** twice. After doing so, if the challenge is successful, the Game Master might give you an opportunity to **Improve** twice after **Burning** this card.
- ◆ + **Expertise** – An ability or object related to the character’s main proficiency. Play when using expertise on a task. Most Expertise cards carry an additional bonus when played, as described later.
- ◆ ○ **Competence** – An ability not related to the character’s main proficiency. Play when using competence on a task. The first time during a challenge that you play a Competence card appropriate to it, **Draw**.
- ◆ ☯ **Wisdom** – A way the character can help others, through advice or action. Wisdom can be played at any time but only ever helps other characters. There is a list of possible effects for Wisdom given later. Wisdom cards can be played when you are not in a challenge, and are put straight on the Discard pile afterwards.
- ◆ — **Flaw** – A major disadvantage the character has, in ability or in personality. An appropriate flaw can be played during any task to guarantee failure, but in a way that minimises the consequences of failure.

## *Character Cards*

There are two further cards types that a character can receive during the game.














- ◆ **△ Obligation** - A way that the character owes a debt to someone else, possibly even another player's character. If this Obligation is in some way appropriate to a challenge that has just been completed successfully, you can show the Game Master you have this card in hand and she might give you an opportunity to **Burn** this card in order to **Improve**.
- ◆ **! Condition** - A semi-permanent problem for your character. It could be a serious injury, a poor reputation or something else that inhibits his ability to act as he normally would. It cannot be used for anything.

Although these are the basic card types, the Game Master is at liberty to introduce new types to the game. Here are some examples of the type of card she could introduce:

- ◆ **☉ Addiction** - A dependence the character has on something, be it alcohol, performance-enhancing nanomachines or dark magic. If appropriate it can be played as either an Expertise or Competence, but after doing so **Exert**. If the card turned over is another Addiction, play it from the Discard pile. This causes another **Exertion**, and possibly another play. If you ever end a challenge with more than 2 Addiction cards in play, **Receive** a Condition for each Addiction card beyond the second. If you end a challenge with 1 or 2 Addiction cards in play, **Receive** another Addiction card.
- ◆ **⊗ Karma** - Simple good fortune. It can be played as an Expertise or Competence, but at the end of the challenge you must **Burn** it and pass it to the player on your right, who **Receives** it.
- ◆ **\$ Wealth** - Small, easily portable trade goods such as gems, spices or data files. If appropriate, play it to automatically succeed at a challenge, but immediately **Burn** this card.

## Expertise Abilities

Most Expertise cards have an additional effect when they are played.

























- ◆  **Careful** - Exert. Draw 2 cards if the card turned over was a Competence card.
- ◆  **Comprehensive** - If the challenge is a success, you succeed in a more significant way than usual.
- ◆  **Discard** - Discard up to 2 cards.
- ◆  **Draw** - Draw.
- ◆  **Flawed** - Can also be played as a Flaw.
- ◆  **Honest** - Obligations can be played as Expertise for the rest of this challenge.
- ◆  **Momentum** - Return this card to your hand if the challenge is a success.
- ◆  **Protective** - Avoid **Taking** any Conditions at the end of this challenge.
- ◆  **Recovery** - Burn a Condition in hand if the challenge is a success.
- ◆  **Resilient** - Return this card to your hand if the challenge is a failure.
- ◆  **Risky** - Turn over the top card of the Destiny deck. If that card is a 0, this card does not count towards the challenge. Otherwise, this card counts double towards completing the challenge.
- ◆  **Versatile** - Can also be played as Competence.
- ◆  **Wise** - Any other player who plays a Wisdom card for the rest of this challenge gets to **Draw**.

If you have an idea for a different ability, consult with the Game Master. Do not try to make an ability that is strictly better than an existing one, or substantially better on average.



## Wisdom Abilities

Every Wisdom card has an ability that helps another player. You can never play a Wisdom card on yourself.

- ◆   **Forewarned** - Peek at the top card of an ally's Draw pile, then he can **Exert** if he wishes.
- ◆   **Healing** - An ally **Exerts**. If a Condition was revealed, **Burn** it instead of putting it on the Discard pile and put this card back in your hand.
- ◆   **Lucky** - Discard a Destiny card the Game Master has played and replace it with the top card of the Destiny deck.
- ◆    **Noble** - An ally **Exerts**. If a Goal was revealed, he may put it in his hand and then he may **Draw**.
- ◆  **3 Planning** - Reveal the top 3 cards of an ally's Draw pile, then put them back in the same order.
- ◆   **Prophetic** - Peek at the top card of the Destiny deck, or at the Game Master's hand.
- ◆   **Resourceful** - An ally **Draws** 2 times.
- ◆     **Sacrifice** - You **Exert**, then an ally **Draws** 3 times.
- ◆  **Teamwork** - All allies **Draw**.
- ◆   **Trickery** - Put the top card of an ally's Discard Pile back on his Draw pile. Put this card on the bottom of your Draw deck.
- ◆    **Unburden** - An ally may **Discard** up to 3 times.

As with Expertise, consult with the Game Master if you want to invent an ability.

## Character Cards

### Example Cards

<p><b>Carson McGraw</b> The Red Valley Deadeye</p> <p>+ Gunslinger</p> <p>Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Avoiding resorting to gunplay</li> <li>- Find dad's gun</li> <li>- Track down Torrence Bros.</li> </ul>	<p>★ Track Down the Last of the Torrence Brothers</p> <p>Two died at Hobbes' Creek, one hanged himself in prison, two are still at large.</p>	<p>+ Lead in the Lungs</p> <p>✓! Recovery</p> <p>"Sometimes I think that if I take another bullet it'll ricochet off the ones already in there."</p>
<p>○ One Mean Chef</p> <p>Onions Paprika Potatoes Tinned steak Celery Cayenne pepper</p>	<p>☯ Eyes in the Back of the Head</p> <p>👁️ Forewarned</p> <p>Ambushes avoided: III</p>	<p>! Wanted: Dead or Alive</p> <p>Ran afoul of the Queen of Aladza.</p> <p>Bounty: 3000 crowns</p>
<p><b>Antheron</b></p> <p>Runaway apprentice</p> <p>+ Fire magic</p> <p>Fleeing from the Order. Carries the Staff of Coergon. Young and nervous.</p>	<p>+ Fire Shield</p> <p>🛡️ Protective</p> <p>Leaping flames eight foot high, surrounding a person or forming a straight barrier.</p>	<p>— "I Just Blurted That Out, Didn't I?"</p>

# Character Creation

*“Sometimes I just like to stand on deck  
and try to remember my home. Always I  
come up with the same realisation: the  
void is my home now.”*

Your character can come from any kind of island, as any kind of island can be found somewhere in the sunless seas. It helps to have a strong idea for his background, at least as far as it relates to his abilities. There are some suggestions on how to create interesting islands in the ‘Setting’ chapter – they are perfectly applicable for creating your character’s home. Write the name of your character on the Face card, along with where he comes from and any other simple bits of information.

One possibility is to create an ‘expy’ of a character you’ve played in a different game, or a character from fiction. In those cases, however, it’s better to make your Sunless Seas character a pastiche of his inspiration rather than attempting to slavishly recreate his every ability in the source material.

## Field of Expertise

An important aspect of the character is his area of expertise, and that is one thing that is written on his Face card. This is not just description, because it determines under which circumstances he can use his Expertise cards. You should consult with the Game Master to make sure this area is neither too broad nor too narrow. You can pick a simply described area of skill – such as gunplay, martial arts, persuasion or stealth. Alternatively you can pick a broader, less clearly defined area, as long as it’s application is easily understood. For example, ‘Temporary Fixes’ could be an area of expertise. Broader than most technical or engineering-based skills, but limited in application.

If your character is one that uses magic, then special consideration needs to be given to his expertise focus – ‘magic’, being potentially applicable to anything, is not a suitable field to pick. Narrower fields of magic, such as ‘fire magic’, ‘necromancy’ and ‘healing’ are sensible. Note that this does not limit the character’s magical abilities to this field of expertise, it just says that he is not an ‘expert’ in other fields. He can be assumed to be using lesser spells when playing Competence cards, if you describe it that way.

## Character Creation

An overly-broad field of expertise is not, as you might think, an advantage. In most cases it will make your character less effective. Roughly half of the task challenges your character faces will be ones he can tackle using his field of expertise. The remainder he has to solve through other means.

Example Non-Trivial Fields of Expertise:

Certified Technician

Preacher

Athlete

Master Detective

Avenging Wallflower

Unstoppable Behemoth

Duplicitous Bastard

Inspiring Leader

## Where He Comes From

Some of the cards in your character's deck are determined by where your character was born or raised. There are five broad possibilities given below. Use the one that most closely matches your idea. Usually this will reflect the island he came from, but some islands have areas that are a different category to the rest.

- ◆ **Primitive:** This island has yet to come to terms with gunpowder, industrialisation or other hallmarks of progress. It could be a typical low-magic fantasy world or a historical milieu reminiscent of ancient or mediaeval Earth. Your deck starts with **I Goal, 3 Expertise and I Competence**.
- ◆ **Refined:** This island has begun scientific advancement but has yet to reach such wonders as information technology or nuclear weaponry. It might have colonial ambitions. Culture, rather than wealth or power, is probably valued highly, but the island is seldom as enlightened as it thinks it is. Your deck starts with **I Goal, 2 Expertise and 2 Competence**.
- ◆ **Advanced:** This island has reached the highest echelons of technology: lasers, computers, genetic engineering or some other wondrous discoveries. It bears the scars that come when science marches faster than people can adapt to it. Your deck starts with **I Goal, 3 Expertise and I Wisdom**.
- ◆ **Enchanted:** Magic is an important part of this island's culture. Magic might be commonly-used or restricted to the privileged, but in either case society has been moulded by it. The island can be at any level of scientific development, but magical worlds tend to the primitive in that respect. Your deck starts with **I Goal, 2 Expertise, I Competence and I Wisdom**.
- ◆ **Harsh:** This island is superficially any other kind, but its defining characteristic is how hard it is to survive there. Whether a natural desert, a nuclear wasteland or a place populated with the worst monsters magic can create, merely surviving is an achievement. The struggle shows in the brusque nature of its people. Your deck starts with **I Goal and 3 Expertise**.

## Why He Travels

Every character travels for a reason, and often a very personal one. Once you know why your character travels, work out which of these three categories it fits in best.

- ◆ **The Search:** Your character is looking for something. It could be a specific item, such as a stolen valuable. It could be something more nebulous, such as a perfect place to settle down. He doesn't have to have a clear idea of what he's looking for, but is confident that he'll know it when he sees it. Whenever he arrives in a new place, he will begin learning as much as he can about it immediately, for any clues as to his prize. His drive gives him focus in life. Your deck gets **1 Goal, 3 Expertise** and **1 Flaw** added to it.
- ◆ **The Journey:** Above everything else, your character wishes to travel. Part of that desire is in not being a passive tourist but in getting involved in the affairs of wherever he finds himself. Life is about the journey. He changes the places he visits, for good or for ill. The idea of ending his journey is, for now, anathema. His philosophical outlook leads him to a better understand of others. Your deck gets **1 Goal, 2 Expertise, 1 Wisdom** and **2 Flaws** added to it.
- ◆ **The Escape:** Your character is running away from something. He could be on the run from a powerful enemy or he could want to put his past and his personal demons behind him. Whatever the reason, he can't stop anywhere for long. The moment he arrives on a new island, he seeks to blend in, to make himself normal and unremarkable. He doesn't want to be found and he doesn't want to stick out so people ask him about his past. However hard he tries, the unpleasant parts of his personality always find a way to bubble to the surface. Your deck gets **1 Goal, 2 Expertise, 1 Competence** and **3 Flaws** added to it.

## His Travelling Experience

Those who have been sailing the Sunless Seas for some time get a certain look in their eyes. Mostly what they've gained from their travels is greater endurance, at the expense of focus. It's almost impossible to spend much time journeying between islands without broadening your horizons and learning to accept people for who they are.

- ◆ **Neophyte Traveller:** This need not be your character's first voyage through the void, but the experience is still novel for him. Whatever skills he has, he is nevertheless easily unsettled by the sheer variety of different places he visits. Your deck gets **1 Goal** and **2 Competence** added to it.
- ◆ **Experienced Traveller:** Your character has seen many things on his dozens of journeys, some completely alien to where he came from. He knows his way around a void ship and can help the crew out if needs be. The truly unusual still catches him off guard from time to time. Your deck gets **1 Goal, 2 Competence** and **1 Wisdom** added to it.

## *Character Creation*

- ◆ **Seasoned Traveller:** Your character has been travelling for years. Time spent in the void is second nature to him, and he's valued by any captain he sails with for his experience. The void seems like home to him. The scenery and inhabitants of even the strangest island will cause him to do little more than raise an eyebrow. Your deck gets **1 Goal, 2 Competence** and **2 Wisdom** added to it.

### *Variant Character Generation*

The Game Master can offer you different choices to the standard ones when creating your character, related to plans she has for the game or just for a little variety. For example:

- ◆ **Unwilling Traveller:** Your character did not have any choice in starting to travel. He might have been taken as a slave or press-ganged aboard a ship. He hates the void but it has become his life against his will. Even though he has long since gained his freedom, he is still a long way from home and there is no guarantee he will ever find it again. He has a deep suspicion of anyone who travels by choice, but his travails have at least left him with compassion for those who are not their own masters. Your deck gets **1 Goal, 1 Expertise, 1 Competence** and **1 Condition** added to it.

## **The Critical Details**

Now you know what cards make up your character's deck, you can write them. Having a smaller deck than average is not necessarily a disadvantage; your character may become Exhausted more easily but he probably has a tighter focus on his field of expertise. A smaller number of cards also means that Goals cycle through more frequently, giving him a greater impetus to spend time in pursuit of them.

### *Goals*

A goal is hard to express in one or two words, so don't feel compelled to be terse. Sometimes what makes a goal important is the detail- it's not just your sister you're searching for, but the little sister you brought up after your mother died. Leave the title short and elaborate on the rest of the card if you want to. Goal cards are an opportunity to write about the most important facets of your character, ones that might otherwise be specifically underlined on a character sheet for a non-card-based game.

Every Goal card should be written with an eye to its completion. Even if you write a goal with the intention that your character only ever pursues it, and never actually achieves it, the ways that it can be pursued should be straight-forward. A goal doesn't have to be an incredibly important, life-changing quest. Some goals work well as short-term targets, and writing one or two of these for your deck will help your character improve more quickly.

## *Character Creation*

Whatever the goal is, it's important that it has personal significance for your character. Even if the goal relates to a mission that's nominally done at someone else's behest, to be a Goal card it must have developed into a personal challenge.

If a task doesn't have this personal dimension, it should really be considered an Obligation card. Characters do not usually start with any Obligations.

### *Expertise*

Expertise card can reflect many aspects of your character's field of expertise. It can be a specific manoeuvre, an item of equipment or even a quip. When an Expertise card is played, the description of the scene does not have to directly reference what the Expertise card says. The title and any further description on the card serve to define the character's abilities. While they can be referenced in the scene narration, if the players wish, doing so every time they are played gets old quickly.

Every Expertise card must fall into the character's field of expertise in some way. Each Expertise card for a new character also has one of the Expertise abilities listed in the Character Card chapter.

### *Competence*

Every Competence card should name a narrow area of ability, something akin to a skill category in an ordinary role-playing game. Unlike the broad 'field of expertise' defined for your character, it should be specific and tightly defined. Like Expertise, it can be titled creatively based on equipment or quotes, but the specific task the card is referring to should be obvious. Like an Expertise card, its use in play does not have to relate to its title - although there is an advantage in playing an appropriate card towards a challenge.



## *Character Creation*

### *Flaws*

Some hapless characters keep getting into trouble, keep meeting with failure, but somehow always end up smelling of roses. Flaw cards are any personality trait or problem that can lead to that sort of situation. They can only be played when they are appropriate to the challenge. A character with 3 Flaw cards is likely to have one in hand, possibly more, most of the time. Not only do they provide a way of failing relatively gracefully (and with more of them in the deck, a hand without enough Expertise or Competence to succeed is more likely) but they can forestall Exhaustion. A Flaw should be phrased such that it can be either a major plot development or a minor aside. Flaws are likely to be played the same way many times during a game, so it's useful to be able to mould them to the situation, or skim over their precise application, to avoid the repetition becoming dull.

### *Wisdom*

Wisdom cards are the primary way your character interacts with other players' characters in terms of rules. A Wisdom card can be written as an obtuse Oriental aphorism, home-spun good sense, or an experience that the character can draw on to teach or lead others. How Wisdom cards are phrased has a large impact on how your character interacts with others, and how that interaction is described.

### *Obligations*

An obligation is similar to a goal, except that an obligation is not a personal agenda. Instead it is a favour or debt that has to be repaid somehow. Your character's reason for fulfilling the obligation is to remove the debt, not because he has any personal stake in it. Obligations enter your character's deck in play, usually in response to what he says or does. Although an obligation is usually associated with a particular character controlled



by the Game Master, you do not have to worry about leaving an island with an



## *Character Creation*

outstanding obligation. The Game Master will make opportunities for the obligation to be fulfilled, even if it involves many layer of indirection or having someone begin travelling purely so your character can bump into them again.

### *Conditions*

A Condition is a long-term problem for the character. Injuries, arrest warrants, curses and vendettas against him are all conditions. The description of conditions has no rules effect, but the description of your character's action can take into account a condition in hand and explain who it is currently hampering him. Conditions can be cured in many different ways and at many different times, so it is better to phrase them as problems that can suddenly be solved. 'Missing Leg' is probably a poor choice, unless magic or highly advanced technology is available. Of course, you could say that the 'cure' for a missing limb is learning to cope without it.

## Example: Carson McGraw

### *Carson McGraw - the Red Valley Deadeye*

Carson grew up on an island straight out of the wild West. He fell in and out of trouble for years, learning to shoot like a pro, and when he reached the sea he just kept on going. He feels that something is missing from his life, and once or twice he has felt like he has touched it. In all his years, though, he laments the fact that he has shed so much blood. He's starting to want to find other ways of dealing with problems.

Wild West counts as Refined, and he is on a Search. He's a Seasoned traveller so he has a total of 3 Goals, 5 Expertise, 4 Competence, 2 Wisdom and 1 Flaw.

### *Deck:*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ☆ Solve a big problem without gunplay.          | ✚ Fastest gun in a pinch – Draw             |
| ☆ Recover his father's gun.                     | ○ Back alley doctor                         |
| ☆ Track down the last of the Torrence brothers. | ○ A sympathetic ear                         |
| ✚ One in the chamber – Resilient                | ○ One mean chef                             |
| ✚ Cooler than ice – Momentum                    | ○ Hunker down and keep quiet                |
| ✚ Lead in the lungs – Recovery                  | 🌀 Eyes in the back of the head – Forewarned |
| ✚ Put him down for keeps – Comprehensive        | 🌀 Take a slug of this – Healing             |
|   | — “Don't call me chicken”                   |

### Example: Antheron

#### *Antheron – Runaway Apprentice*

Antheron screwed up big time. Now he's on the run from his own Order with a stolen magical staff. Fortunately, he'd heard about the void from his mother, before she went missing, so he knew where he could run to. Unluckily for him, the Order wants the artefact back so badly it's sent wizards after him. He tries to avoid being a conspicuous newbie, but somehow always manages to say the wrong thing.

Antheron's home was Enchanted, and he is definitely trying to Escape. As a Neophyte traveller, he has a total of 3 Goals, 4 Expertise, 4 Competence, 1 Wisdom and 3 Flaws.

#### *Deck:*

☆ Prove his usefulness

☆ Learn his mother's fate

☆ Escape the Order's clutches

+ Fire shield – Protective

+ Tide of flames – Draw

+ Firebat messenger – Versatile

+ The staff of Coergon – Risky

○ Eyes like a hawk

○ Walking encyclopaedia

○ Sprinting champion

○ A face you can trust

☯ “First, do no ill” – Sacrifice

— Kleptomaniac

— A coward at heart

— “I just blurted that out, didn't I?”

# Challenges

*“So there I was, five miles from the shuttle and dangerously low on O2...”*

When the Game Master decides that an action you describe for your character should have some chance of failure, or some risk, she calls for a Challenge. During a challenge you both play cards to determine how events unfold – challenges are the meat of this game. This chapter explains how a challenge is played out.

## Destiny Deck

The Destiny Deck is the set of cards that the Game Master plays from during the game. Each card has a Difficulty number, usually from 0 to 2. Some of them also have rules that come into effect when the Game Master plays the card. A standard Destiny Deck has 16 cards, copies of which can be found in the back of this book ready for printing or photocopying.

The Game Master maintains a hand of 4 cards. When a character faces a challenge, the cards the Game Master plays determine how difficult the task is, and any rules on them take effect. When the Destiny Deck runs out, she shuffles the discarded Destiny cards into a new draw pile.

## *The Oracle*

The Destiny cards have some additional information on them which can be used as an 'oracle' of sorts. If the Game Master finds herself without an interesting idea when she needs one, she can turn over the top card of the Destiny deck and use this extra information as inspiration. The Destiny cards also have numbers on them that allow them to be used in place of dice, from four-sided dice up to eight-sided dice. The shape around the number shows the dice it can be used in place of.

## *Custom Destiny*

In the same way that the Game Master can introduce new card types to the player character decks, she can write new Destiny cards for her deck, to reflect the current island. Such cards are added to the Destiny Deck, or removed from it as the Game Master sees fit. They provide a way of introducing mechanical differences for unusual or unique islands in the sunless seas.

## Challenges

### *Examples of Custom Destiny Cards:*



## Introducing a Challenge

Most actions a character undertakes do not require any card play. Even quite complicated or nominally difficult tasks can be achieved with ease if it moves the story along in an interesting way. The Game Master should only call for card play if both success and failure have intriguing possibilities. If a character wants to hop a fence into an abandoned facility, failure to stick the jump is not very interesting. When trying to pick a complicated lock inside the facility, failure could trigger a long-forgotten security system and hence the situation is interesting enough to merit card play.

When a group of characters faces a challenge, one of them steps up to take on the brunt of the action and the brunt of the risk. The others characters are not idle while he does so, but he takes the lead. 'Exerting to assist', described in the next chapter, in one way they can contribute mechanically. Wisdom cards are another. A long and complicated scene can break a challenge down into a number of sub-challenges, one for each of the characters present.

Managing the frequency of challenges is one way the Game Master can tailor the game to the tastes of the other players. This, and the Exhaustion mechanic, provide a way of balancing 'screen time' for the characters.

When a challenge is introduced, the GM must clearly state what is at stake.

### Character Response

The character responding to the challenge must then decide how he is going to tackle it. The player can choose to use either Expertise or Competence. He can only choose Expertise if his field of expertise is appropriate to what he is trying to do. He can only choose Competence if there's a way of dealing with the challenge that does not involve his field of expertise. Most challenges will be eligible for either approach.

If, rather than having a goal of his own, the character is merely attempting to block the action of a Game Master-controlled character, he can choose to play 'defensively'. Success will achieve nothing apart from preventing the foe's action, but both Expertise and Competence cards can be played.

The responding player must clearly state what his character is trying to achieve.

### Posturing

Once both the Game Master and the player have stated their intention, then they co-operatively describe how the scene plays out. Because the card play itself is usually brief, this stage ensures that there's ample opportunity to make the description of the challenge interesting.

A key factor is that both the Game Master and the player know what cards they have available to play in the next two steps, and can adjust their description to match the likely outcome. If a character's hand is short on useful cards, the player describe how he is caught by surprise, or is running low on bullets. If the GM is planning to play easy Destiny cards, she can narrate how the opposition is underwhelming or making a critical mistake the character can exploit.

Posturing can go as long as you want, provided it does not become dull for anyone to listen to.

### Game Master Play

The Game Master then plays 2 Destiny cards from hand. The sum of the difficulty numbers is the overall difficulty number of the challenge. Some Destiny cards have rules text that takes effect immediately. She does not have to play the combination of cards that makes the challenge the hardest, or the one that makes it the easiest. She chooses the cards that she thinks are most appropriate for the scene and the nominal difficulty of the task at hand. During Posturing she will probably have had an idea what she was going to play, but she is not bound to play those cards.

If the character was playing 'defensively', then the Game Master plays 3 cards instead of 2.

## *Challenges*

After playing cards, the Game Master draws from the Destiny Deck until she has 4 cards in hand.

### Character Play

The player plays as many Character cards as he wishes, provided that they are of a suitable type. Like the Game Master, he isn't obligated to play the cards he was considering playing during the Posturing phase. Each Expertise or Competence card played to meet the challenge counts as one point towards beating the difficulty. Cards that have other effects, such as Goals and Wisdom, can be played but they do not count towards this total. If the player is allowed to draw some cards, he can do so and then continue playing cards until he is satisfied. Some Expertise cards have effects that are triggered as they are played.

### Outcome

If the character's total is higher than the difficulty, then the character succeeds. The wider the margin, the more dramatic a success is described. If the total is less than or equal to the difficulty, then the character fails, with a similar interpretation of the margin. If the character played at least one Flaw card to the challenge, then the result is automatically a failure, but without severe consequences. A player can play some ordinary cards, to try to draw more useful cards, then in the end play a Flaw instead to avoid the consequences of failure.

After card play is finished, all cards played are put in the Discard pile.

The outcome should make it clear how the character succeeded or failed.

### *Description*

The Game Master and the player involved then narrate the outcome of the challenge, as it relates to their earlier posturing. Ultimately, the Game Master can over-rule the player, but this should be only done when the Game Master has a specific follow-up scene in mind that would be impossible with the player's version of events.

### *Card effects*

Some cards take effect at the end of the challenge. Follow their rules before discarding the cards played.

## *Challenges*

### *Taking Conditions*

If the challenge was failed with a margin of 2 or more, and no Flaw was played, then the character Takes a Condition card written by the Game Master. This Condition should reflect some semi-permanent obstacle that the failed challenge has caused for the character. Other card effects can force the character to Take a Condition, under the same terms - for example the Great Risk Destiny card.

### **Burning Obligations**

If the challenge ended in success, it was related to an outstanding Obligation, and the player has that Obligation in hand, then he can request an opportunity to Burn the Obligation. If the Game Master agrees, the Obligation can be fulfilled. The character can then Improve as a reward. The description of the challenge outcome should include some reference to the obligation being met.

### **Burning Goals**

More rarely, the challenge allow the character to achieve one of his all-important character goals. A Goal is only eligible to be Burned if it was played during the challenge. With the Game Master's blessing, the character can Burn the Goal and Improve twice. Because goals are important to the character, the Game Master should make sure that the achievement is fully explained, perhaps including references to what the player chose to Improve.

### **Breather**

The Game Master usually calls a breather after a challenge. She should postpone doing so if there are challenges for other characters happening in the same scene. The Breather is another tool to promote equal participation from the players. The discard part of the Breather is a good opportunity to discard any Conditions or Obligations a character has in hand that would otherwise hold him back.

### **Player Against Player**

Sometimes characters controlled by players may act against one another. In this case, the Game Master does not play Destiny cards. The players involved both play cards to meet the challenge, trying to get a higher total than their opponent. The outcome proceeds as normal, including the loser Taking a Condition if the margin was 2 or more.

These challenges should be rare - travelling companions have been known to argue bitterly, but the hostility of a challenge will probably hurt both of them in the long run.



## Example: Repel Boarders!

Carson McGraw is on board a void sloop that's attacked by technologically advanced pirates. The crew are scrambling to get their weapons, but the ambush has left them in disarray. Carson realises it's up to him to buy them some time by taking down the first attackers.

**Game Master:** Okay, so the enemy ship is a sleek, metal submarine thing. Their goal appears to be to take control of the ship, collateral damage no issue.

The Game Master has set what's at stake.

**Carson:** Right. It doesn't look there's a chance to talk them round, so I've got to reach for the shooting irons. I don't just want to defend our ship, I want to send them packing so we can continue in peace.

**Game Master:** By inflicting casualties on them?

Carson: I want to go for a mobility kill, if I can, on their ship or their jetpack guys, so they have to let us escape while they fix things up.

The player has set his goal, and chosen Expertise. Now they begin Posturing.

**Game Master:** Fine. The crew run about like insects, trying to take cover from the laser fire while the ship draws closer.

**Carson:** The hell with that. I'm gonna stand there on deck like it's nothing and draw my guns while laser bolts zip past me.

**Game Master:** Cool. The enemy sub's beam cannons open up, making you squint. One blast takes out the middle of the ship's mast, and the whole thing smashes down onto the deck. You're covered in rigging and stuff.

**Carson:** "Jesus aitch. If that left a lump I'm gonna make this person'l." I'll fight my way out from the ropes and start taking pot-shots at any available target.

**Game Master:** By the time you get out, several of the attackers have landed. Their lasers have started a couple of small fires, and you see at least two of the sloop's crew dead on the deck.

**Carson:** We don't have time to muck about. I'll put a few bullets in any obvious targets, but I'll wait for the sub to get its beam cannons ready again and try to get a shot down the barrel.

**Game Master:** That'll be quite a trick if you pull it off, but the sub has a pair of them. Even if you get one, the other still fire. It's dicey.

**Carson:** Don't see I've got much choice. I run across the deck, trying to keep the right angle for a down-the-barrel hail Mary.

**Game Master:** Okay, so – I'm playing 'Difficulty at the Beginning' and 'At What Cost?'.

## Challenges

The Game Master has played cards, for a total difficulty of 1. She draws 2 cards to replace them. She narrated the mast coming down to play into 'Difficulty at the Beginning', and steered Carson's trick shot towards a situation that fit 'At What Cost?'.

**Carson:** I have to discard 2, so that's a goal and a competence I'm getting rid of. Now I play 'Put him down for good' and 'Cooler than ice'.

Carson has a total of 2, enough to succeed. His trick shot was an attempt to make 'Put him down for good' fit the scene nicely, and standing on deck while under fire was an idea he had from looking at 'Cooler than ice'. He gets to take that card back because of its Momentum special ability, and 'Put him down for good' has the ability Comprehensive, so the outcome is more spectacular than usual. On the other hand, he has to Take a Condition from 'At What Cost?'.

**Game Master:** So, you pick your moment, wait for the iris on the beam cannon to open, and fire two quick shots straight down the barrel. Nothing happens at first, but then there's an explosion somewhere in the sub. The entire vessel lists to one side, then there are a couple of other explosions that blow huge holes in the hull.

**Carson:** Score. Is it crippled?

**Game Master:** Seems that way. The rest of the jetpack guys turn tail and head back to their vessel. Just as you feel like celebrating, one of the fires reaches a keg of gunpowder.

**Carson:** Uh-oh.

**Game Master:** You're totally exposed when it goes off. Some splinters of wood and fragment of iron banding go into your back, almost knocking you over the rail. Two sailors rush over to help. The condition is 'Back full of shrapnel'.

Carson Takes the Condition, adding it to his hand. The challenge is now over.

## Challenges

### Example: Just Let Her Go!

Straight after the previous example, the Game Master has a challenge for another player.

**Game Master:** Antheron, you took cover below decks when lasers started flying.

**Antheron:** Standard.

**Game Master:** You hear the sailors shouting that the fight is over, but they need help with the wounded, so you leave your cabin. Up on deck, you hear shouting behind a pile of barrels. Out of sight of most of the crew, you see the old monk you met earlier and his young ward being menaced by a man in a space suit with a laser pistol. As they're struggling, the corsair tries to grab her but only gets her necklace. You see the symbol of the Order on it as he throws it away.

**Antheron:** Crap. I wouldn't normally get involved, but something's going down here. If she's part of the Order, saving her get them off my back. If she's on the run too, we be able to help one another. I'm going over there.

**Game Master:** The man with the gun is clearly in a panic. His ship is leaving and he's alone. He's desperate enough that he do something rash- maybe even kill one of his hostages.

The Game Master sets what's at stake – the monk and his ward. She's deliberately not saying which of them get hurt or killed, so she has room to make up her mind later.

**Antheron:** Time to negotiate. I'll try to talk him into surrendering.

Antheron has chosen Competence, and set his goal. Posturing begins.

**Game Master:** So, he's got the girl by the arm and can't seem to make up his mind whether to point his gun at her, the monk or you.

**Antheron:** I'll put the staff on the floor and hold out my hands. "Hey, stay calm. The fight is over."

**Game Master:** "Look, we're just going to do this nice and slow. She's coming with me so I can get back to the Intrepid safely. She's the reason we came here, so everyone else will be safe."

**Antheron:** "You take someone, even a passenger, and the captain will shoot you before you get there. He hates pirates. If you go alone, he's got no brief for you. You're just a soldier, right, no sense putting your life at risk for the brass' agenda if you don't have to."

**Game Master:** "What's to stop your captain shooting me anyway? Talk sense, boy."

## Challenges

**Antheron:** "I not look it, but I've got some pull on this ship. If I tell the captain that you're going peaceably, when you could have kept shooting, he'll let you go. You can trust me."

**Game Master:** He looks hesitant.

**Antheron:** Can we play cards now?

**Game Master:** Sure. I'll play 'Great Risk' and a 2.

The difficulty is 3. She has an idea in mind for what the 'Great Risk' is, should it trigger.

**Antheron:** The Order is involved, right? So I can play the Goal 'Escape the Order's clutches' to draw 2-

**Carson:** Hey, can I butt in, here? I've got some wisdom for you.

**Game Master:** Sure.

**Carson:** From where I'm lying, I catch sight of this going down with 'Eyes in the back of the head'. The bosun is about to stumble onto them, so I call him over to me instead, buying Antheron some time.

**Game Master:** Go for it.

Carson plays the card, which has the Forewarned ability. Antheron looks at the top card of his draw pile, and finds one of his wisdom cards.

**Antheron:** I'll junk that.

Antheron Exerts, getting that card off his draw pile. He then draws 2 cards for playing his goal.

**Carson:** Did it help?

**Antheron:** Not really. Right, I'll play three Competence down, one short of success. One of cards is 'A face you can trust', so can I draw again?

**Game Master:** Go for your life.

Antheron draws for having an appropriate Competence card.

**Antheron:** Whelp, I'm screwed. I've got to bail on this one. I'll play the Flaw 'A coward at heart'.

**Game Master:** So, you keep watching that pistol waving back and forth as the attacker gets more and more agitated. You can't quite persuade him. Eventually, the girl stamps on his foot and makes a break for it, running past you. You could grab her and drag her to safety, or try to grab the gun, but instead you drop down onto the floor to save

## Challenges

yourself. The laser hits the girl in the back, and she tumbles onto the floor. The monk then shoulder charges him, and both of them go over the side into the void. The rest of the crew come running.

**Carson:** I fill them in on what I saw. Poor boy, looks like his bottle went.

**Game Master:** No-one on the crew blames you – many of them would have done the same in that split second. The ship's doctor looks the girl over and shakes his head sadly. He also finds papers on her that say she's the eldest daughter of the Order's Grand Magus, a very important person.

**Antheron:** Oh, boy.

**Game Master:** She and her guardian were travelling incognito, for some reason. The captain decides to throw her body over the side and pretend that they were never aboard. He doesn't want trouble from the Order.

Antheron would normally Take a Condition from 'Great Risk', but his Flaw protects him from it. He had a margin of 0, so he wouldn't have Taken another Condition for failing badly anyway.

**Game Master:** Right, take a Breather.

Carson keeps the 3 cards he has in hand, including the Condition, and draws 3.

Antheron has 5 cards in hand. He discards another of his Flaws and draws 2.

# Other Rules

*“Long have I chased thee, conjurer.”*

## Improvement

When you are given an opportunity to Improve, you can do one of the following:

- ◆ **Train:** Receive an Expertise card, without a special ability on it, that you write.
- ◆ **Hone:** Find an Expertise card without a special ability on it, as long as it is in your hand, just been played or is in the discard pile. Add a special ability to it. After this, you put the card into your hand. If you have a chance to Improve twice, you can Train and then immediately Hone that new card.
- ◆ **Forget:** Burn any card in hand, or one that has just been played.
- ◆ **Learn:** Receive a Competence card that you write.

## Exertion

You can Exert at any time to one of two things, if appropriate to the scene:

- ◆ **Introduce a new element to a scene.** If you have a suggestion for something to be added to the scene, you can make it and, if the Game Master accepts it, you must then Exert. This provides a way for players to participate in scenes where their characters are not present. After all, sometimes it takes someone not directly involved to come up with a really cool suggestion. One useful way of using this option is to introduce a story hook that makes a card in your hand ‘appropriate’ when it wasn’t before. The Game Master should only make you exert for suggestions that make a significant difference to the scene – small details you can suggest or add to your actions for free.
- ◆ **Introduce himself to the scene.** After the Exertion, the character appears in a scene he wasn’t participating in initially, assuming the Game Master agrees it is possible and appropriate. This is a way for one character to come to the assistance of another in the nick of time.

## *Other Rules*

- ◆ **Assist.** The character can explicitly assist another character's challenge by Exerting. The target character then gets to Draw. This is a sort of 'Wisdom light' for situation where a character is in a position to help another but no Wisdom card is available and appropriate. Once a character has Assisted another, he can't assist again until after the next Breather.

## Session End

At the end of a game session, put all of your cards into the discard pile. Then go through the following steps.

First, check for retirement. If there are no Goal cards left in your deck, then your character retires. This probably means he stops travelling, but it could be that he settles into a less adventurous form of travel. Whatever the explanation, you must create a new character for the next session. Each other player writes Receive a Wisdom card that reflects what their character learned from their time travelling with yours, then Receives it.

If your character didn't retire, pick one way that the character's travels have changed him:

- ◆ **Reflect:** Turn a Competence card into a Wisdom card. This means your character is growing older and wiser, at the expense of some of his skills. The name of the card change to reflect its new type. New Wisdom cards come with a special ability, unlike new Expertise cards.
- ◆ **Learn:** Receive a Competence card, written by the Game Master. This means the character is developing a wider range of skills on his journey.
- ◆ **Suffer:** Turn a Condition card into a Flaw card. This makes the Condition a permanent problem, but one that does at least have some mechanical use. You may rewrite the title of the card to reflect its altered role.
- ◆ **Aim:** Receive a Goal card, written by you. Your character has found a new purpose, one that will keep him travelling a little longer yet.

Next, you can rewrite the titles of any cards in your decks to reflect minor changes to your character.

The final step is to tidy all the cards into a pile with the Face card on top and wrap an elastic band around them until the next game.

## *Other Rules*

The rules for changing a deck through Improvement or at the end of a session and not there so you can make your character's deck more efficient. They are intended to be used to make sure the deck reflects your character's life and choices. Each card is a small reminder of some facet of his personality, so there is always inspiration in front of you. Writing cards to reference important events, good or bad, makes your character more rounded and more fun to play.

## Spectre of Death

If you have at least 3 Condition cards in hand and you Take another, then you may choose to have your character 'die' as part of the current scene. This does not have to be literal death, but must be a negative form of retirement, putting the character beyond play permanently. Apart from death this could be imprisonment, marooning, succumbing to debilitating illness or having his memories wiped. You must create a new character and wait for an opportunity for him to be introduced into the story.

Allowing your character to 'die', however, provides an advantage to the remaining characters. Until the end of the session all other characters can draw an extra 2 cards during a Breather, provided they are not Exhausted. If, in a session unusually awash with blood, more than one character dies, then this bonus stacks. It does not, however, apply to your new character.

Sometimes a character can have so many Conditions in his deck that he is difficult to play effectively. This mechanic provides an opportunity to retire the character from play in a suitably dramatic fashion. The bonus his allies get will help them honour his memory, or perhaps even avenge his death. In this way, a character receiving multiple Conditions and eventually dying is not a source of disappointment but rather a dramatic turn in the story.

## More on Conditions

Conditions are usually acquired during failed challenges with a large margin. Some Destiny cards - 'At What Cost?', 'Great Risk' and 'Difficulty at the End' - can force you to Take Conditions in other ways during a challenge. However, the Game Master can force a character to Take a Condition at any time if the circumstances warrant it. This be part of an ongoing story-line, or a response to a foolhardy in-character decision.

Apart from mechanics that explicitly allow a character to Burn a card, Conditions can also be Burned when the Game Master agrees that there's a chance to 'cure' them. For example, medical treatment in a scientifically advanced hospital is sufficient to remove Conditions related to most injuries, so you can Burn any such condition after receiving proper treatment. Similarly, being hunted by the police in a case of mistaken identity can be cleared up once the real culprit is apprehended.



## *Other Rules*

Other times, it take more effort to remove a Condition. In the wilderness, an injury can't be fixed so easily. If your case goes to trial, you have to successfully argue your innocence. In those cases, a successful challenge have to be met before you are given an opportunity to Burn it.

In both cases, you need to have the Condition in hand in order to Burn it. This means that you want to keep a Condition you Take at the end of a challenge rather than discarding it during the Breather, if you think there's a good chance you'll be given an opportunity to Burn it soon. In-world, this is the difference between nursing an injury until you get help and powering through it until it rears its ugly head later.

If you draw a Condition card, and you think that the problem it describes has already been solved, you can ask the Game Master for permission to Burn it right away. You don't get to draw a replacement card, if so.

## More on Obligations

Obligations can be thought of as half Goal, half Condition. The only strictly mechanical way a character can Receive an Obligation is the Destiny card - 'A Debt'. The Game Master can make a character Receive an Obligation any time the story warrants - and usually you create that circumstance by having your character take on a debt or make a promise as dramatically appropriate.

Obligations can be burned in a similar way to Goals, but as they are not as significant as Goals the Game Master should be more generous with opportunities to do so.

Obligations do not help you succeed at a challenge, but fulfilling Obligations allows you to Improve at a faster rate than if you relied on Goals alone.

Note that Obligations are Received, and thus put on the discard pile, whereas Conditions are Taken and go into your hand. This means that Obligations will take some time to cycle back into your hand, giving the debt time to mature in story.

## More on Goals

A starting character has 3 Goals in his deck, and it is very likely that the hands you draw will have one or more of them. This is a deliberate step make sure you are given plenty of ideas as to how your character can get involved in the story straight away. This otherwise be difficult for a new character until he has found his feet. If the plethora of Goals is a nuisance, see to completing at least one of them as soon as possible. Because you only Burn or Receive Goals by choice, you have complete control as to how many your character has as the game progresses.

# The Game Master

*“Sail with the current, my friend, in all  
things sail with the current.”*

These next two chapters are written addressed to the Game Master, rather than the other players, but there is no information here that players should not see. Some of it may well be useful when creating a character.

## Basics

Your role is to facilitate the game. You need to balance out the fun as much as possible. Make sure no player is sidelined, and make sure no player is having fun at the expense of the others. Ask your players what they enjoy, and what they would like to see in the future. Above all, make sure that you don't forget to have fun for yourself!

Like being the Game Master in any game, there's a bit of a learning curve at first until you've absorbed the rules. Learning to read the other players, in terms of guessing where they want to story to go, is a useful skill, but remember you can always simply ask them what they'd like to see.

## Travelling Together

The players' characters are a group of independently-minded travellers. This is useful because it facilitates transferring characters from one play group to another, or a player keeping his character with him and playing it as and when opportunities arise. It can be something of an obstacle when you have a regular group with the same players. To keep them together, visiting the same islands, you need to supply them with a reason to travel as a group. Fortunately, there are a number of very practical reasons for them to do so.

First and foremost, beggars can't be choosers when it comes to catching rides. If there are a limited number of ships to catch, perhaps only one, then they will end up on the same voyage whether they enjoy each other's company or not. Secondly, all such travellers share a kind of kinship. Those who travel the sunless seas out of necessity don't really understand people who choose to do so as a way of life. That understanding goes a long way for forging trust. It's also a relief to have someone to talk to who isn't

## *The Game Master*

caught up on whatever the local social mores are. Finally, time spent sailing or visiting islands together is time to grow to enjoy someone's company and wish to spend more time with them, however different you may be.

There will be times when player characters fall out, or have compelling reasons to go separate ways. You should not feel guilty about rail-roading matters just enough to keep them on the same island or the same vessel. It's a pragmatic necessity. Encourage them to play along and construct their own reasons for their characters to stick together. Ask then loaded questions such as: "Why are you getting on the same boat as him even though you despise him?"

## Description

As this a game that visits a lot of strange and exotic places, you are likely to spend a lot of time describing them. Make the most of that opportunity to make the islands as enthralling as possible. The 'bubble' for the island will be clearly visible each time a journey through the void nears its destination, and that is a superb opportunity to get some description in ahead of actual arrival. A lot of players are reluctant to listen to the Game Master describe the environment at length, so keep the description short but effective. Go for the jugular and ram home the unique and unusual parts of the scenery and the island's people. A useful short-cut is to make sure you are describing things to the players, rather than their characters. Don't talk about 'huge houses of steel and glass' when you can save time by calling them skyscrapers. In a similar vein, use points of reference from fiction where you can. Saying a city is 'like the one in Blade Runner, but built from bamboo' takes only a handful of words but plants ideas about the visuals, the atmosphere of the city and the kind of people to be found there.

As with most other elements of the game, invite the players to elaborate on what you give them. Once you've given them some idea of what the island is like, ask leading questions like 'what kind of bar do you end up walking into?' to get them to contribute their own ideas.

## Player Offers

Making a satisfying and entertaining game is a lot easier if you pay attention to what the players want out of it. Often they'll come right out and say what they would like to see in the game - either some specific opportunity someone wants his character to face or bringing up something that was on TV recently that they'd like to visit. Of course - you don't have to rely on your ability to read their minds. It's often fruitful to ask them what they'd like to see in the near future, and clue them in on possible directions you were thinking of so they can express a preference or add to your ideas.

## *The Game Master*

### *Character Decks*

Some 'offers' from players come before play even starts – the choices they make for their characters indicate what opportunities they want their characters to have. The fields of expertise they choose indicate what they want to see their characters do, so construct challenges that they can use their expertise on. Specific cards, such as Goals and Flaws, also give you material to work with. If you dangle things related to their Goals and Flaws in front of them, they not pick you up on it each time, but it creates a background that plays to their character and makes it less artificial when they do play one of those cards. Goals are particularly important – they are the most efficient way that characters can improve and usually of great importance to the character's motivation.

The choices a player makes when creating a character are not the final story, however: the player change his mind about some parts of his character in play, and after enough sessions the character may bear little resemblance to his original form. As with everything else, talking to the players and making sure you understand what they want is important.

### *In Play*

In a scene being played out, anyone at the table can make suggestions that other players pick up on. This doesn't have to be an explicit comment – "Wouldn't it be cool if the police burst in now?", for example – but can be an in-character comment or offhand out-of-character comment – "Did that kid ever get around to calling the cops?". The somewhat adversarial nature on some role-playing games can lead to reluctance amongst the players to throw suggestions like that in, as per 'Rule zero: Never give the Game Master ideas', but it makes your job a lot easier if there are suggestions like that to take up when you need to. The fact that characters in *Sunless Seas* are very difficult to kill takes the edge off the old, paranoid style of play.

Some players like to surprise the group, including the Game Master. While the pay-off of keeping his real objective secret until the last moment is cool, it tends to cause problems more often than it causes entertaining play. If you, as the Game Master, don't know what a player is planning, then you can't work with him in pulling it off. You even ruin his plan by accident. Sometimes, there's a good reason why the plan won't work, that the character would be able to notice, but because you don't know what the plan is you can't let the player know what critical detail scuppers it.

Encourage the players to open about this sort of thing, to trust that everybody else at the table won't abuse this out-of-character knowledge. Getting everyone working together to make a cool moment happen is much better than one player managing it alone.

## Scenes

A scene is an informal unit of the story, in one particular place, where a sequence of events happens. Sometimes the events or the location of the scene itself are driven by suggestions or requests from the players, other times you lead their description. Scenes exist to accommodate interesting story points, not to mark time in any particular way. If it looks like nothing terribly significant will happen for a few weeks of in-world time, possibly because the characters are travelling in the void, either introduce complications that create their own scenes during the lull or move straight to the next significant event. It's important that each scene has the potential to move a character's goal forwards.

To concentrate on the most interesting parts of the story, be prepared to be ruthless in bringing a scene to an end. If players want their characters to follow up on something in the scene, push them to bring it up in the next scene. If at all possible, start each scene 'in media res', with the action already underway.

### *Multi-Purpose*

When beginning a scene, it is best if you can plan so that more than one character gets something to do. Re-using the same non-player characters helps bind different story threads together. The characters controlled by players each have their own set of Goals, and likely will be pursuing them independently most of the time. Having them in the same scenes, interacting with the same people, keeps the story a coherent whole.

Multi-purpose scenes can also be used to promote inter-character banter. It's easier to get an entertaining conversation going about something that had just happened. Talking over a decision in character provides opportunity for the players to make their characters' motivations clear, whether the decision was good or bad.

### *Challenge Chains*

As a specific example of building up an interesting scene, consider a large, set-piece fight. You could ask one character to take the lead and let him grab all the glory in the fight, but the other players feel short-changed if they don't get to contribute in a concrete way. So, for a complicated scene that you want everyone to participate in, come up with a series of challenges related to the central problem and have each character take on one of them in turn.

If pirates are attacking the sloop the characters are travelling on, then decide what challenges that cause and which characters are most appropriate to deal with them. You begin with the gunslinger fighting off the first wave of attackers, then have the apprentice notice an attempted kidnapping, give the techie character a challenge involving stopping sabotage of the rudder before finally letting the assassin take on the pirate captain. Each challenge is a part of the scene, each is interesting, and each plays up to the character's strengths and role in the game.

At the end of such a chain, call a Breather to let the players know the emergency is over.

## *The Game Master*

### *Rest*

Choose when to rest with care. Resting resets the decks of all the characters. If the characters are all Exhausted, it will be very difficult for any of them to pass a challenge – such frustration is bad for the game. Resting too frequently, though, leave players without chances to play some of their best or favourite cards in their decks, because they keep getting shuffled to the bottom. Resting Up too often also means there is little purpose in players building up a strong hand for some later challenge because the chances are it will get reset.

So, although it seem natural to have the characters Rest Up frequently, you should aim have at least one character Exhausted before you do so. Save up interesting events so that you can launch them one after the other, with only Breathers between them. Compressing events into a smaller time frame also makes it more likely that story hooks with interact in unexpected and interesting ways.

## Your Characters

Whenever you introduce a significant or interesting character you control, consider writing him his own Face card. It's handy for you to have a reminder of his name and agenda, but you can also put it on the table whenever he appears in a scene, helping to jog the memories of the other players.

## Character Cards to Write

When you write cards for a character deck, you should not use it as an opportunity to punish the player or work against his character's established history or personality. Think of yourself as a guest in that player's deck, and act accordingly. Pull no punches, but try to make each card you write something the player thinks is a cool piece of his character's life.

### *Obligations*

When you write Obligations, they will generally be titled with a specific person or group. Extra detail as to the kind of debt of obligation is useful, particularly if the character moves to a different Game Master. If you can include an obvious clue as to how the Obligation can be fulfilled that's a great boon.

You don't have to worry about the character leaving an island with an Obligation left undone. You have the freedom to have the 'creditor' travel himself, or send agents acting on his behalf. There are even ways that an Obligation can be fulfilled without the character associated with it even being present. For example, if the Obligation relates to an promise to help a deposed prince recover his throne, meeting a strong warrior and sending him to help the prince is quite enough.

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### *Conditions*

Conditions are short-lived, but you should spend a little time making them interesting and relevant. In particular, finding interesting ways of expressing injury can bring scenes to life if a player uses a Condition card as inspiration for Posturing. After an explosion, the Condition be temporary deafness rather than a more obvious injury. Bad reputations, criminal records and less visceral Conditions can get the same treatment. Conditions are a universally bad thing for a player to have in his deck, so take the sting out of it by making it interesting.

## Using the Rules

Here is some advice on how to use the rules to run the game effectively.

### *Use the Tools*

The rules are written to provide a framework that the Game Master can build on. Cards are Taken or Received when something is added to a character; cards are Burned when some aspect is removed. When a situation crops up that isn't covered by the rules, but it's unsatisfying to have no mechanical representation of it, the Game Master can and should use whatever parts of the rules fit the situation. This lead to cards being Received or Burned in ways that aren't covered by the rules as written, or any other card manipulation that isn't usual.

The flip-side of that principle is that not everything that matters to the story needs to be reflected in the mechanics. You can weave player ideas and narration into challenge outcomes and descriptions without having to force some card manipulation to accompany it. As long as you make it clear that the story-based ideas are important – to how you describe events and how you decide what happens next – that's good enough.

### *Bend the Rules*

Even where the rules cover a situation, you are at liberty to ignore them if you choose. They are designed to fit the general case, and in some circumstances it be more entertaining to work in a different way. If a character gambles on the throw of a dice, it be more fitting to turn over a card from the Destiny deck than run a challenge. If a character is fighting blind, then you put two Destiny cards face-down, ignoring their text, and only reveal the total after the character has finished playing his cards. Make significant parts of the story memorable not just for what happened, but for how you use the tool-kit of rules you have available.

### *Keep Moving*

This is a game about people who are forever travelling. It's fitting that you keep the story moving. Move the game past long, boring planning sessions. Ask yourself- what's the next Big Thing that is due to happen, and can I go to it right after this scene? Engineer situations that offer the most compelling opportunities for characters to talk

## *The Game Master*

to each other, argue, or just chew the fat. Begin scenes in media res, that is, with the action already started, as often as you can get away with. If there's a mechanical reason why a player want a small scene before the important one, such as to try and get a Condition treated, either build an interesting scene around that attempt to let them get the treatment without having an entire scene for it.

Above all, remind the players that their characters are drifters. They are notorious for simply walking away from difficult situations and problems. If something is left incomplete, you can bring it back in later, sometimes much later, and look like a clever planner.

### *Custom Character Card Types*

Custom Character card types are best introduced to bring some interesting and unique aspect of an island front and centre. It's one thing to say that a location is a capitalist nirvana, it's another to give players cards that represent their material wealth, or lack of it. One potential pitfall is to introduce cards that the Character decks so much that challenges become unexpectedly difficult. If the extra cards have some use in a challenge, even if it is just discarding them to draw replacements, this prevents the new cards from bogging a deck down.

### *Custom Destiny Cards*

Custom Destiny cards are a second way you can emphasise the uniqueness of an island. Unlike Character cards, which you would have to explain to the players as you introduce them, a custom Destiny card can be slipped into the deck on the quiet, and only revealed when it actually becomes part of a challenge. This allows you to throw a curve-ball at the players, if you wish to.

A good principle to follow when choosing between new Character cards and new Destiny cards is whether the new element changes the way that Characters interact with the island, or is some innate quality of the island itself. While the former can be usefully introduced with custom Character or Destiny cards, the latter is definitely better suited to Destiny cards.



## Destiny Cards in Detail

Half of the Destiny deck has cards with special rules; a little extra detail on them is given here.

### *At What Cost?*

This card can be harsh because it punishes the character for success. It's most appropriate when the story hits a moment of murky ethics or ruthless pragmatism. It forces the player to decide if success is worth harming the character, even if temporarily. In terms of description this card creates a moment where victory is soured by an unexpected problem, or a heroic effort to pull through despite danger and injury.

### *A Debt*

The Obligation this card force a character to Receive represents owing someone a favour for saving your bacon when things were about to go wrong. If the margin was 0 or 1, then a Condition was avoided only with the help of whoever came to rescue. This is a good way of forging relations between player characters and non-player characters. A player even choose to deliberately throw this challenge in order to get an Obligation in the deck that can be used to Improve later. If appropriate, the debt can be owed to another player character.

### *Difficulty at the Beginning*

This Destiny card can actually help characters get rid of cards they don't want in hand. Unless the character is Exhausted, the low number means he can probably make the challenge even after discarding. In terms of story, this card implies some obstacle for the character at the start of the action.

### *Difficulty at the End*

If the character doesn't have 2 cards in hand to discard at the end of the challenge, then he must Take the Condition unless he played a card that protects him from having to do so, such as a Flaw or a Protective Expertise card. For Exhausted characters, it will be almost impossible to avoid the Condition. Story-wise, this represents some surprise change of fortune just when the character thought everything was going well.

### *Great Opportunity*

The number on the card is low, but it's still challenging to meet the margin of 4 needed to earn an Improvement. You can dangle a story-related carrot in front of the character to represent the opportunity, even if it is then whisked away again.

## *The Game Master*

### *Great Risk*

The Condition Taken from this card is in addition to a Condition Taken for failing with a margin of 2 or more. A character who plays a Flaw or a Protective Expertise card can duck both. It's dramatically appropriate for a character to succumb to his flaws at moments of great crisis, and this card helps that to happen.

### *Resolve*

Like Great Opportunity, the only effect of this card is a positive one. This makes up a little for the Destiny cards that can saddle characters with Conditions by providing a chance to get rid of one. If the Condition is a physical one, the most natural interpretation is that the character pushes through his injury. For subtler Conditions, it represent them coming to terms with a problem in such a way that it doesn't hamper him any more, or making some conspicuous act that undoes damage to his reputation. If this is played in conjunction with At What Cost?, the player must resolve this card first, as immediately Burning a Condition after Taking it is a bit of a waste of time. That combination is particularly mean-spirited though, so you should deploy it with caution.

### *Temptation*

The character must play a Flaw card if he has one in hand, before the challenge is over. If he manages to discard all his Flaws during the challenge, then he is spared. If he has multiple Flaws in hand, he must play all of them, even though one would be enough to prevent having to Take a Condition. This card is an excellent opportunity for a player to load a scene with references to his Flaws.

# Setting Creation

*“I’ve seen things you wouldn’t believe.  
The dead rising, worlds burn, men  
changing reality with nothing but a  
thought. Only one thing is constant: people  
will make bad decisions.”*

There are two basic sorts of places the characters can find adventure – islands and the ships that sail between them. The former can be any of the vast variety of places that Sunless Seas supports. The Game Master can either create original islands to her own design or pay homage to worlds in works of fiction. Characters in this game are travelling almost all the time, and even if they had a particular destination in mind random chance and the currents of the void send them somewhere else entirely, giving the Game Master carte blanche to drop them into strange or dangerous places they would normally be at pains to avoid. Putting the characters on board a vessel can be an interesting way to constrain the environment and promote interaction between characters who don’t know each other very well.

The only option that should be approached with caution is using the home island of a character. The player not want his character to return to it, at least not right now, so you should check with the player first before committing to visiting it.

An essential part of creating a setting element is deciding what story is going to happen there. Connect the story to a character’s goal, if you can, but always have an idea as to how to kick-start it.

## Void Vessels

There are many different types of ship that can ease through transition nexuses and sail the sunless seas. Most vessels are built to the technological sophistication of the island that commissioned them, although ships that have travelled widely will almost certainly pick up one or two items exotic to their main design. No travel through the void is entirely safe or predictable, but an experienced captain seldom loses his way. Here is a selection of the more common, or the more distinctive, ships that are used in the void.

## *Setting Creation*

### *Airship*

Some islands are land-locked – typically islands with a desert climate. The nexus locations for those islands are in the sky. Fortunately, it's possible to spot islands of this type while still in the void, otherwise ships crashing to the ground would be a frequent phenomenon. Some of the more advanced vessels can handle sea and air travel with equal aplomb, but lower tech solutions also exist– namely dirigibles. As lighter-than-air craft, they tend to be large and cumbersome. The gas bag can be safely deflated in the void. Smaller airships use hot air, larger ones use helium or hydrogen. Most airships have a gondola with a boat-like bottom, so the craft can still visit islands with more traditional nexus points.

### *Catamaran*

Rocketry is an effective propulsion system in the void, and a catamaran is a fast, sleek vessel for the information age. The hull is designed for minimum contact with the sea, for speed, and the wider deck allows for greater cargo and passenger capacity. Sensible catamaran captains also have sails in storage in case of engine trouble or fuel shortages. They are perhaps the most luxurious means of travel through the void.

### *Citadel*

Open warfare between islands is rare. It is generally much more effective to land troops in numbers and conduct the battle from there. A Citadel, however, deserves the capital letter. Mere technology could not make a viable ship the size of a large town, so a Citadel relies on powerful magic to both hold itself together and to move. Such powerful magic is not cheap, and those who live and work on a Citadel are usually little more than serfs to some tyrannical political class.

### *Enchanted Bubbles*

Magic can be used to make small pockets that the wizard can direct around at will. They make cheap, if incredibly small and dangerous, void vessels. Their tiny size also means that provisions are an issue for all but the shortest trips.

### *LeereBoot*

Gravity engines allow a new type of craft – throwing weight considerations to the wind a LeereBoot is an enclosed, torpedo-shaped vessel. The gravity drive means it simply doesn't care about weather conditions, or indeed whether the nexus is in the sky or under the sea. They have a definite military air, and are typically armed with lasers or some local equivalent. Quarters are cramped at best, and LeereBooten seldom take public passengers. They can operate for months, even years, between resupply stops.

## *Setting Creation*

### *Lifeboat*

Some void ships have emergency boats in case of disaster. It is notoriously difficult to recover items lost in the void, and this includes lifeboats. The best chance for survival is to steer it towards the nearest island and hope for the best. Most lifeboats don't survive the transition into an island intact.

### *Void Ferry*

The ferry is a large, industrial-era, screw-driven cargo and passenger vessel. Some have additional fans or propellers for slightly better speed in the void itself. Slow and wallowing, they most often ply a route between two islands close to each other. Like their namesakes, they have shop kiosks and limited space to sleep in the lounge areas. They make travel on the sunless seas as routine as it ever can be.

### *Void Sloop*

Large sailing ships are generally too unwieldy to make the transition into the sunless sea, but sloops are of a convenient size and they have the advantage that their superb manoeuvrability is an asset in the void itself. Void sloops typically have additional masts than can be winched into position so they steer properly in the void. A great many of them are operated by independent owners rather than controlled by a government or business. This makes them a popular choice for travellers – at least those that can make themselves useful on the journey.

### *Voidplane*

Resembling a large seaplane, these industrial-tech craft travel just above the surface of the water in order to find nexuses. They carry significantly fewer passengers than a sloop, but are quite swift and can travel through the air overland. They can't operate if the seas are rough, as it's too dangerous to stay close enough to the surface of the water to make the transition. The small cargo space also limits their usefulness for transporting anything other than people. The requirement for suitable fuel means that their pilots seldom travel to anywhere other than well-known destinations where they can guarantee acquiring fuel.

### **Original Island**

Islands are self-contained worlds. If you want to create an island, you can give it its own people, laws, culture and technology without necessarily having to consider how any of those things affect other islands. Because the characters travel so frequently, you only need to have them stay on any particular island as long as it takes for you to use up the ideas you have based on it. There is nothing wrong with creating a 'throw-away' island centred around only one particular idea for an adventure.

The most important thing is to make sure that there is much an adventure to be had; no matter how compelling a setting idea is you have to make sure there is something significant for the characters to do. Letting them watch as character you control make all the moves is boring. Establishing a hook that drags at least one character into events is vital. This hook does not have to be against the wishes of the character, although that can be a handy method if you can't make your plot relevant to one or more character Goal cards.

The second most important thing is making the island memorable. Generic settings, with little to distinguish them from other similar settings, are a wasted opportunity. You need to ask yourself what it is about this island that makes it unique, and how you can use that uniqueness to catch the interest of the players and drive the adventure forwards. Science-fiction based ideas are ideal, particularly ones that are interesting but not necessarily able to support an entire campaign on their own.

### ***Keep it Small***

It's tempting to create a world as large as Earth, or larger, to provide a rich variety of places in one island. However, it's better to restrict each island to one idea and one main location. Given that the characters travel they are unlikely to travel far away from the coast they arrived on, so it's probably wasted effort to spend time creating vast continents and oceans. Interesting travel should be confined to the void itself, to keep the theme of the game strong and avoid a character ending up marooned far away from a nexus when the player moves to a different group of players or misses a couple of sessions. By keeping the island small, you can believably recycle characters on that island, allowing the player characters to build up relationships with them.

### ***Island Properties***

The categories in this section are suggestions for details to think about when creating an island. You can use the dice-like numbers on the Destiny cards to randomise your choices, or pick whatever you find interesting.

## *Setting Creation*

### *Type*

One of the five types of island as per 'Where He Comes From' in character creation. To randomise, drop whichever category matches the last island the group visited and choose randomly from the other four.

**Primitive - Refined - Advanced - Enchanted - Harsh**

### *Population*

The population of islands varies enormously, and not just based on the level of technology. Wars, plagues and famine often drive migration. These figures define the population within easy travel of the nexus, theoretically there could be many more further away, but as recommended above they can be left as background to the part of the island the action takes place on.

- ◆ 1 - Mostly unpopulated, apart from a few families of nomads.
- ◆ 2 - Around 5,000 citizens.
- ◆ 3 - Around 12,000 citizens.
- ◆ 4 - Around 30,000 citizens.
- ◆ 5 - Around 75,000 people.
- ◆ 6 - Around 200,000 people.
- ◆ 7 - Around 500,000 people.
- ◆ 8 - Over a 1,000,000 inhabitants.

### *Population Distribution*

The population of an island is not always distributed evenly across it. Within the locality of the nexus, the population can be concentrated into one or two places. The inland/coast dichotomy has a different interpretation for 'dry' islands, namely the distance of the settlement from the nexus.

- ◆ 1 - The inhabitants are spread out more-or-less evenly over the area.
- ◆ 2 - The inhabitants live in a number of different villages or towns, at least one of which is on the coast.
- ◆ 3 - About half of the population lives in a single settlement, some distance inland.
- ◆ 4 - About half of the population lives in a single, coastal settlement.
- ◆ 5 - Almost all of the population lives in a single town or city, some distance inland.
- ◆ 6 - Almost all of the population lives in a single coastal town or city.

## *Setting Creation*

### *Traffic*

Some islands see a lot more void ships visiting them than others. A lot depends on how active the inhabitants of the island are in building and sailing their own vessels, but some islands just happen to act as convenient way-points for long journeys between densely-populated islands. A character arriving at a seldom-visited island can be met with disbelief and distrust, not to mention a long wait for the next ship if the one he arrived with leaves without him. Career travellers often find the major hubs somewhat uninteresting, as they take some of the culture and mood of adjacent islands.

- ◆ **1** - No-one here even knows about the void.
- ◆ **2** - A handful of locals know the void to be fact, and visitors are just frequent enough for there to be stories about them.
- ◆ **3** - This island is something of a backwater, but void ships stop by on a semi-regular basis.
- ◆ **4** - Void ships arrive every couple of days or so. It's easy to get passage away if you're not too fussy about your destination.
- ◆ **5** - There is healthy traffic to and from this island, with more than one departure a day.
- ◆ **6** - Several ships leave each hour, and there are regular schedules to the most popular destinations.



## *Setting Creation*

### *Government*

Realistically, given enough time in such small places many governments would tend to either autocracy or some form of representation, but in order to help provide a wide range of different possibilities other kinds of rule are given undue emphasis here.

- ◆ **1** - This island lacks any sort of formal rulers. This be because the people look after themselves in small units such as families or farms, particularly in low-population places. Else it could represent a collapse of a previous formal government or an ongoing state of anarchy. In either case, often makes right and if you're wronged there's no recourse but to get violent or try to use public shame.
- ◆ **2** - This island is divided into a number of different tribes, noble houses or baronies, each fighting with the others for wealth and power. Justice extends only as far as the nearest border, and the individual rulers are likely to be very paranoid about spies and traitors.
- ◆ **3** - The island has a ruling class, perhaps even a monarchy. One becomes part of the elite purely by birth, not through endeavour, and equality is openly mocked as a concept. The divides may be along along ethnic, gender or language lines. How outsiders are treated depends a lot on how arrogantly they present themselves on arrival, and hence which class they most closely resemble.
- ◆ **4** - The rulers of this island come from an elite, but one that is at least nominally meritocratic. It is possible, although very hard, to rise in position through your own deeds. The criterion for acceptance be intellect, wealth, piety or adherence to a certain philosophy, but the injustice inherent in a class-based system is still clear to see.
- ◆ **5** - This island follows some sort of democracy. It be dogged by demagoguery and pandering to the lowest common denominator, but it does at least pay lip-service to acting in the interests of the people.
- ◆ **6** - Rule of this island is by some novel method - control by an artificial intelligence, a form of King of the Bean or something stranger than either. Merely learning the local ground rules is a challenge.

### *Odd Place Out*

As mentioned in the character creation section, not all islands are homogeneous. There be places on an island that are very different in one of the above categories to the rest. For example, an island with half its population in a single city be a technological paradise inside the fortified perimeter, but a lawless crapsack world outside it. If you do use random generation, use it only to generate ideas for you rather than slavishly adhering to a narrow interpretation of the result.

## *Setting Creation*

### *Inhumans*

Aliens and fantasy races are probably best introduced as having their own islands for a home, rather than embedding them in islands mostly occupied by humans. As for the attitude of human-only islanders to them, you can make that be whatever is most useful to you for the current plot. Where prejudice and open distrust would make the story interesting, you can use them, but you can equally well have island citizens do no more than bat an eyelid if you don't want to make the difference an important part of the current plot.

### **Homage Island**

If you've got a setting that allows nearly any kind of world to visit, you probably want to create an island that mimics an existing fictional or historical setting. Feel no shame in doing so as openly as you like.

### *Split up Large Worlds*

There are two ways you should reign yourself in when using another setting. The first is that islands are deliberately kept small. Any interesting travel should be through the void, not by a more mundane means. If the setting you want to use is a continent, or an entire world, then split it up into a number of different islands with regular travel between them. This keeps the feel of the small, tightly-defined islands that you make yourself. If any part of the world you want to use isn't terribly relevant to why you want it, throw it out. A narrow focus on the bits you really want to use will serve you well.

### *Replace Special Transport*

The second issue is with unusual transport. Many settings have some special means of travel, between different worlds in that setting or as a means of reaching secret places. Without exception, replace all of them with some form of void travel. Two distinct means of special travel lessen both. Whatever there was original setting can be adapted to make it a form of void travel. Perhaps special equipment or other preparations are required to reach these secret places, or to take short-cuts through the void that shave weeks of travel time.

### *Make it a Pastiche*

If you're using someone else's world, it's probably because there are one or two aspects that you want to use in particular. So make the island a pastiche of the source material, exaggerating what you want to use. That concentrates everyone's mind on those aspects, and hence how this island is different from others that have appeared in the game. There's also a lot of fun to be had in sending up a setting you and your players are familiar with.

## Localities

Islands that have regular or semi-regular traffic to their neighbours tends to have different characteristics to those that are isolated. People, ideas and technologies move between them. Island chains take on a joint character, even if each is nominally very different from the others. If you're borrowing a setting and breaking it up into separate islands they can still have links if they are part of the same locality.

### *Trade Routes*

There is not a great deal of trade between islands, at least of the kind that you expect. Few ships that travel through the void have much in the way of cargo capacity, and the danger inherent in void travel means few people are prepared to risk expensive cargoes. The commodities that do get traded in are those that are small and inexpensive at their point of origin. This tends to fall into one of two categories- novelties and information. Novelties are usually something commonplace on one island but unheard of on others - like unusual plants or fabrics. Their value increases the further they are taken away from their point of origin. The second category includes fiction and technological know-how. It's a useful trade commodity because information can be duplicated relatively cheaply. The drawback is that secrets of technology are little use without the right sort of industrial base to support them, and getting a good price on fiction not only depends on having the right technology to play it but on being the first to introduce that fiction to that market.

The upshot is that many captains take on only small quantities of any given cargo and travel more-or-less at random until they find a market for it. The lack of any common currency means that barter is preferred. Failing that captains use up all the currency they earn taking on new cargo, supplies and equipment.

### *Migration*

Apart from career travellers like the player characters, plenty of people choose to travel temporarily. Wanted criminals, disgraced public figures, ambitious young men and women looking for a chance to build a fortune; there are always plenty of people prepared to learn to live in a completely new place. Most naturalise in their new home and become almost indistinguishable from the natives. Travellers who make a good impression on them get useful information from them.

Occasionally, some natural disaster or war drives a large number of people to flee their homes. There are never enough capable void ships on hand to effect such an exodus, so inevitably a motley collection of vessels, poorly-equipped for the void at best, are overloaded with the desperate. Most vanish into the void, never to be seen again.

## *Setting Creation*

### ***Federations***

Some governments span more than one island. Usually this is because one island has sent colonists to tame uninhabited nearby islands. Sometimes these colonies are not exactly uninhabited, with all the tensions and exploitation you would expect. Travelling through the void is just hazardous enough to discourage most attempts at empire-building, but a few tenacious and ambitious governments overcome the difficulties and subjugate their neighbours. More frequently islands with regular traffic between them maintain informal relations and pass each other useful information regarding potential trouble-makers.

Of course, this only applies to islands that see significant travel through the sunless seas. Anywhere that has little or no regular void traffic really is isolated.

## Example: Lotterus

The characters have just left a technologically advanced island, and the Game Master wants to generate a new place to visit using the Destiny Deck.

The randomised elements she gets are:

- ◆ A 'Refined' island.
- ◆ The population is around 500,000.
- ◆ The population is spread out in a number of towns.
- ◆ It is ignorant of the void.
- ◆ It has a novel form of government.

The first four attributes are a near-perfect fit for some areas of Earth, so she decides to make the island superficially like part a modern country not near a large population centre. The last attribute, government, can be something weird and wacky in order to make the island a kind of parallel-dimension Earth. There are plenty of possibilities for that angle.

The Game Master thinks about the motif of travel, and decides that each town in the world has a mayor, but this mayor is selected by a random lottery of residents of other towns. This mayor does not have absolute power, but he chairs the meetings of the town council, can direct policy, and has a veto on any measure. Because he's from a different town, the chances are this new mayor knows nothing about his new job. The system was set up so the ruler could look at all problems with fresh eyes. He's likely to favour his old town, but this only helps forge business and social bonds between towns. In theory, anyway. In an achingly unsubtle reference to this practice, the island is called 'Lotterus'.

The Game Master decides that, because this island doesn't know anything about the void, that when the characters arrive they are assumed to have come from another town, and are required to 'register' in order to rent rooms to stay in.

The big plot element she's planning, of course, is that one of the characters ends up getting selected to be mayor of a town. The good news is that this puts him in an excellent position to direct research that reveal the existence of the sunless seas, and hence provide everyone with a way to leave the island when they want to.

## Example: Carthewasser

The Game Master decides to generate the next island randomly, too. This time the elements are:

- ◆ An 'Advanced' island.
- ◆ A population of over 1,000,000.
- ◆ Single inland city.
- ◆ Regular traffic, every couple of days.
- ◆ Run by a 'meritocratic' elite.

The Game Master imagines a great, domed city as the centre-piece of the island, filled with high-tech wonders including sentient robot servants. The residents of the city are controlled by a council, and the council is made up of prestigious individuals selected for being the best in their field. For most residents, life is fairly good. An insufficiently strong work ethic or a keen interest in a hobby or field of study not considered practical enough gets called 'moral turpitude' and luckless individuals can be fined or sent for re-education. The city is called Carthewasser.

She then decides that outside the dome, there's a completely different culture. Things are a lot more laid back, and people are generally very accepting of how people want to live their lives. They have the scavenge technology from whatever the city throws away, but they do regular business with void ships at the single coastal settlement. Selling on city technology means they can afford a lot of useful things from other islands. Naturally, they are considered beneath contempt by the inhabitants of the city, who couldn't care less about visitors from other worlds.

The Game Master decides that the story should revolve around a robot that somehow escaped from the city. What few people know is that it is not really an AI, but the personality of a council-member's daughter transplanted into a robot brain and body. She was young and suffering from a serious chronic illness when the procedure was performed, so she remembers nothing of her former life. The Game Master wants the characters to get mixed up in her life, protecting her from what appears to be an attempt to kidnap her by the city.

To kick off the story, the Game Master decides to start the action just as the city attacks the port settlement, forcing everyone there to scatter into the countryside. They end up with the robot, and carry on from there. She doesn't know whether the characters will simply try to escape by sneaking back to the port, or will try to find out what's so special about the robot, perhaps by sneaking into the city itself. Either way, there's plenty of potential.

# Author's Note

*“Put the pen down and step away from  
the desk...”*

Unlike many ‘generic’ role-playing games, Sunless Seas is not a square peg you’re expected to batter into whatever round hole of a setting you have in mind. It’s a whistle-stop tour of a number of settings, drawing on any genres you want to. It has a certain style of play that will shine through, whatever setting you are in. That said, there is nothing wrong with spending as long as you like on any particular island.

In the same vein, although it’s possible to transfer characters from group to group, there’s no necessity to do so. There are other ways of sharing ideas – passing on details of interesting islands, custom card types or just sharing tales of what happened and pictures of your deck.

I wrote this largely as an experiment in adding elements from currently popular card game to a role-playing game; but as it turned out one of the most interesting things about the game is not the raw mechanics of drawing, playing and discarding cards but how the cards you have in front of you affect your decisions and how you describe what’s going on.

I’d love to hear any comments about the game or play reports.

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