STARS WITHOUT NUMBER

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For Eden, who gave me a reason.

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Table Of Contents

Introduction 5

Character Creation 7

Psionics 25

Equipment 33

Systems 59

The History of Space 71

Game Master's Guide 78

World Generation 87

Factions 113

Adventure Creation 128

Alien Creation 138

Xenobestiary 148

Designer's Notes 158

Hydra Sector 164

Game Master Resources 180

Index 200

Record Sheets 202

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The year is 3200. Humanity is scattered like dust among the stars. The broken relics of a former day litter the sky and men and women struggle to rebuild the glory of humanity's lost golden age.

For almost a thousand years humanity had expanded from its ancient cradle to fill the sky with its worlds. At first the expansion came by way of the enigmatic "spike drives" that granted humans the ability to skip between stars. Countless nations, faiths, and ideologies sent colonists to the darkness above to find new homes where they could live free from the oppressive rule of Terra's calcified masters.

The spike drive touched on different worlds. It folded the tissue of space and time and pierced it to emerge at distant stars, but the space between touched in turn those who traveled it. Over the course of generations, this subtle influence shaped certain descendants of the starfarers. The condition that resulted was known as "Metadimensional Extroversion Syndrome". Most simply knew its victims as "MESses". Later, they were known as psychics.

MES inevitably killed or maddened its carriers when they began to use their powers. The surge of extradimensional energy either cooked their brains or burnt a pathway through their sanity. It was only through decades of research and the expenditure of countless lives that techniques were developed for harnessing this power safely.

The channeling of psionic energy began the second great expansion of humankind. Even though hardly more than one in ten thousand humans were touched by MES, it was still enough to reshape human civilization. Vast choirs of psychics were employed to develop new technology, advanced manufacturing capabilities, and huge jump gaates that could teleport whole freighters across interstellar distances. Spike drives were relegated to the frontier, to the distant star systems that could not yet afford to train the psychics or buy the components necessary to build their own jump gates.

This reliance planted the seed of the golden age's destruction. In 2665, a metadimensional pulse of unimaginable violence erupted from the Veil Nebula, washing over the whole of known space in seconds. Every psychic in human space was instantly killed or maddened by the surge, burnt out in what later became known as the Scream.

With the jump gates inoperable and all the psychic mentors insane or dead, the core worlds were suddenly cut off from the frontier. A few spike drive ships remaining in the core were able to make their way out, bringing tales of horror, starvation, and frantic warfare over shipyards and orbital factories. Most of the core worlds are thought to have perished, cut off from the worlds that supplied their enormous populations and fueled their vital technologies.

The centuries that followed were known as the Silence, as unnumbered human worlds fought to survive their sudden isolation. Some slid into barbarism or worse, their planets unable to support a starfaring civilization. Some worlds lacked metals, or fossil fuels, or any one of countless other vital ingredients for maintaining their industry. And all, of course, lacked the psionic mentors necessary to train a new generation of psychics.

Over the past six hundred years, humanity has slowly, painfully begun to heal the wounds of the Scream. Not all worlds were incapable of independent survival, and these hardy planets have become the lynchpins of stellar nations and miniature empires. Trade routes have revived with time and the building of new spike drives. Expeditions are regularly mounted to the tomb worlds of the outer core to scavenge what can be reclaimed from the bones of the dead past.

Yet a pall hangs over these efforts. Great sacrifice has revived some of the old secrets of psychic training, but no world dares rely on psionic forces any longer. The nature of the Scream is still a mystery. For now, humanity strives to build a world that does not rely upon powers it cannot fully understand or completely control.

Human space is a vast canvas of mystery to most. Ancient nav charts are long out of date. Alien races have since moved into many formerly human-held sectors, and there remain ruins of races that long predate mankind. Warlords and petty tyrants scheme to expand their stellar domains, and brave souls struggle to recover lost secrets.

Stars without number await you.

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In *Stars Without Number* you play the role of an interstellar adventurer. Whether a grizzled astrotech, lostworlder warrior, or gifted psychic, you dare the currents of space for the sake of riches and glory.

Not everyone in the thirty-third century is cut out for such a life. The vast majority of humanity is content to live out their lives on their own worlds, making the best they can of what fate has given them. The dangers of the starfaring life claim legions of aspiring adventurers and precious few of them ever manage to die in bed. Still, humanity needs their courage, ingenuity, and reckless ambition if mankind is ever to recover its former glory.

New to Role Playing Games?

If you're unfamiliar with role playing games, this book may not make a lot of sense. It's not a coventional science fiction story and it seems to have a lot of rules and tables in it. In reality, you're probably more familiar with it than you might imagine.

A role playing game, or "RPG", is simply a game intended to allow you to take the role of a character in a fictional universe. You use your abilities and your natural wits to deal with the challenges of that world, working to attain your own goals and accomplish those ends that seem most fun and rewarding for you.

RPGs like this one date back to the 1970s, and were the fundamental inspiration behind today's enormously popular massively multiplayer online role playing games. Millions of people play RPGs on a daily basis, though usually in the form of a computer-moderated online game. A "pen-and-paper RPG" like this one cuts out the server and puts a human in its place. This human is the game master, or GM. He or she designs the situations the adventurers might find themselves in and judges the actions they take to deal with these circumstances.

If you've ever been playing an MMORPG and wished you could do more in the world than hit your cooldown buttons and work on your boss strats, pen and paper RPGs might appeal. Your characters are limited only by their natural abilities and your imagination, and you can interact with the environment and other characters in ways that no computer could ever handle.

An Old-School Grognard?

If you've been playing RPGs long enough, you'll readily recognize much of this book. It draws a great deal of its inspiration from a slightly streamlined take on several 1970s-era RPGs. Which ones will be clear to most old-school readers, and this game would not be possible without the admirable example those games provided.

This game is compatible with several early-edition RPGs, even those intended for use in fantasy settings. Characters and game material can be easily ported back and forth from these games. The largest deviation is in the skill system provided in this game, though the Systems section of the book covers ways to reduce or eliminate the role of skills. A *Stars Without Number* character can usually be dropped into most old-school content without more than a cosmetic tweak of their saving throw category names.

In addition to the usual elements expected of a retro-inspired game, *Stars Without Number* also includes mechanics for developing player-controlled factions and domains and creating sandbox-friendly worlds for PCs to discover. A grognard interested in seeing where this particular game differs from other offerings currently available should skim through the the GM's Guide chapter to get an overview of sector creation, and then look in particular at World Generation and the Adventure chapters. The Resources section might prove useful for other games and settings, as much of the content there is system-neutral.

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Gaming Terminology

#d#	Dice. "3d6" means, "roll a six-sided die three times and add it together". Also seen as "2d12+2", meaning "roll the twelve-sided die twice, total it, and then add two to the total".
GM	Game Master; the person responsible for running the game and responding to player choices.
NPC	Non-Player Character; a character played by the GM, whether an antagonist or otherwise.
PC	Player Character; a character played by one of the game's players. The PCs are the protagonists of the game.

CHAPTER ONE

CHARACTER CREATION

Before you can begin playing *Stars Without Number*, you need to roll up a character. While the game can theoretically work with just a single player and a GM, things work best with 2-5 friends in addition to the GM. A lone adventurer can get in a lot of trouble out there, and a small group can find it hard to include all the different skills and talents that are often required to survive a sticky situation.

With that in mind, you and the others in your gaming group should give a little thought to making characters that work well together. Grim loners make good book protagonists, but they don't survive well when there's no author around to bail them out.

When making a character, some players like to simply throw the dice and see where they lead. Others prefer to know a little more about the game world and like to have more detail provided beforehand about the worlds and themes of the game. For those who'd prefer a more detailed discussion of the world of *Stars Without Number*, you can skip ahead to chapter five and read up on it there. For the rest of you...

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What Players Need To Know

Your character is an adventurer in the year 3200, a dweller among the scattered worlds of a once-great human diaspora. For whatever reason, he or she has decided to leave their old life behind and take up a starfaring existence, traveling from world to world in search of glory and riches.

Many worlds have recovered from the darkness of the centuries-long Silence, and can now manufacture spacecraft and other items of advanced technology. Other worlds are "lost worlds", cut off from interstellar trade and forced to make do with the resources of their own planet alone. Lostworlders are often counted primitive or barbaric by more technologically advanced worlds.

Tramp freighters, small merchant ships, and scout craft serve most worlds, even the most backward. If your character comes from a primitive or isolated culture, it's probable that he or she hitched a ride aboard such a ship to travel to a more cosmopolitan life. It might even have been a voluntary choice.

In actual play, your character should be motivated to *act*, and to act as part of a group. The game does not deal well with hostile loners, apathetic brooders, or other characters that have to be coaxed into engaging with the world and cooperating with the rest of the group. The world of *Stars Without Number* is dangerous, and a character that cringes from peril or insists on facing it alone will find only boredom or an early grave.

Every character should have a goal from the very start. This might be something as simple as "become wealthy beyond my fondest dreams of avarice" or "be known as the greatest pilot in the sector". It might be as elaborate as "engineer the downfall of the interstellar empire that conquered my world". Whatever it is, it should give your character an immediate reason to go out and *do* something.

This will to act is especially crucial in *Stars Without Number*, because this game is designed to support a "sandbox" style of gaming. Unlike many other games that encourage the development of a particular story or the playing out of a specific plot line, *Stars Without Number* presents an entire interstellar sector to your characters and invites you to choose for yourself how to experience it. Stories will arise based on what your characters do and how they respond to the adventure situations provided by the GM.

As a player, you need to cooperate with your GM. This doesn't necessarily mean following every lead and hook you're given without demurral, but it does mean that you need to respond to the situations and possibilities that are given to you.

You also need to keep in mind that your adventurers exist in a very large world that is not scaled to your characters' abilities. If you insist on throwing your characters into situations or challenges that seem overwhelming, the odds are that they *will* overwhelm you. Scouting, reconnaissance, and careful intelligence gathering will help you recognize no-win situations before you push ahead into them. By the same token, don't hesitate to flee if your party appears to be facing certain doom. A keen sense of when to decamp the field is often an experienced adventurer's most valuable asset.

What Game Masters Need To Know

As the GM, you have the lion's share of preparatory work. Making a sandbox game setting is a great deal of labor, but the end result is a setting that can accommodate a vast number of adventures and diversions. Sandbox gaming rewards those players and GMs who enjoy a steady supply of variety in their gaming and the sense of a world that actually moves and changes in response to their actions.

As a GM, you need to read the rules here in chapter one in order to understand how characters are created. You should glance over the psionics and equipment chapters to get a general idea of the psychic powers that exist in this world and the kind of hardware the PCs might conceivably be carrying or facing. You need to pay particular attention to the systems chapter, however, because you'll be using the rules given therein on a regular basis. Still, it's less than a dozen pages, and the rules on starship combat and navigation can probably be skipped as irrelevant to the first few sessions.

Once you've gotten a general idea of the game's mechanics, you should read the setting history chapter and the GM guide. The guide will lay out a process for creating an interstellar sector and populating it with interesting worlds, factions, aliens, and adventures. While it may seem like a great deal of work, *Stars Without Number* is designed to support and simplify the task, and the work you do in each stage helps create the content you need for the next.

In play, you need to be able to respond to potentially unpredictable party choices. You need to be ready to make spot decisions about outcomes and NPC actions, and you need to be ready to remember these details when the players later come back to build on what they've already accomplished. The Sector File sheets in the back of the book are useful for tracking this information.

You also need to be able and willing to put aside plot lines and NPCs that particularly interest you when the party decides to turn their attention to some other corner of the sector. It can be tempting to let events force a party to remain on a world or in a plot line that you find especially enjoyable to GM, but that kind of coercion isn't a proper part of a sandbox game. It's likely the characters will be back sooner or later, and in the meanwhile your NPCs will doubtless be making their own plans and advancing their own schemes.

This isn't to say that your role as GM is simply to be the joyless facilitator of the party's entertainment. Both players and GMs need to cooperate to make a sandbox game work, and there's nothing wrong with participants finding some adventures and worlds more fun than others. But as the GM, you have the entire sector to play in. If there are particular themes or elements you want to involve in your game, you can make sure they appear. Players haven't got that kind of control. All they can do is control their own characters' actions, so you should be especially careful not to compromise that liberty.

Now that the responsibilities of both the players and the GM have been described, let's move on to creating your first characters.

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Character Creation Summary

Roll your character's six attributes.

Roll 3d6 six times, and assign the totals in order to Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity, Constitution, and Charisma. Record the attribute modifier for each ability. Note that "roll 3d6" means "roll a six-sided die three times, and add it together". You may move points between scores, lowering abilities above 13 and raising abilities below 8 to even out your scores. No such modifications can lower a high score below 13 or raise a low one above 8.

Choose a class.

Warriors are survivors proficient in fighting and combat of all varieties. Psychics are gifted with unique mental powers. Experts have expertise in a wide range of useful skills. You may replace one Prime Requisite attribute of your chosen class with a score of 14 if you so wish. Note down your class' special ability.

Pick a background package.

Select an option to reflect your character's early training and origins and record the skills the package grants on your character sheet. Some packages have skills labeled "Tech/Any" or "Profession/Any"; this means you can select any one specialty from that skill type, such as "Tech/Postech" or "Profession/Sailor". Skills labeled "Culture/World" mean that the character has Culture skill specialized in their homeworld, whatever it may be. Background skills start at level 0.

Pick a training package from your class.

Each class offers eight different training packages to reflect common skills and education for a certain type of character. Choose one appropriate to your character concept and record the granted skills on your character sheet. For skills labeled "Any", any skill specialization may be chosen, but you may not double up on a skill already existing in the package. For example, a package granting "Combat/Any" and "Combat/Projectile" means you cannot choose "Combat/Projectile" twice. Training package skills start at level 0. If you already have a given skill from your background package, the skill starts at level 1 instead.

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Choose a homeworld.

Either pick one from a list provided by the GM or else make up the details of your own. Homeworlds that have exceptionally advanced technology or some other rare trait should be cleared with the GM.

Roll hit points for your character.

Psychics roll 1d4, Experts roll 1d6, and Warriors roll 1d8. Add your Constitution modifier to the roll to determine your maximum hit points. Even with a Constitution penalty, maximum hit points cannot be less than 1.

Choose languages.

Your character speaks English, your world's native tongue if that differs, and one more language per point of Intelligence modifier bonus.

Buy starting equipment.

Spend 400 plus 1d6 * 100 credits on equipment of Tech Level 4 or lower. Any money unspent can be retained for later purchases.

If your character belongs to the Psychic class, choose your psychic disciplines.

A psychic's primary discipline begins at level 1, and they have 1 more point to spend on a different discipline. Your character's initial psi power points are equal to 1 plus their highest attribute modifier between Wisdom and Charisma.