

TO THE STARS:

science fiction for fifth edition



By Kiel Chenier

AN agile ranger effortlessly weaves through zero-gravity, tracking her robot quarry through an asteroid field. A burly fighter grits his teeth, his view obscured by his space helmet's visor as he tries to line up the perfect shot with his laser rifle. A lunar wizard casts her nanofiber cloak aside; she needs her arms free to repel the advances of a deadly necro-borg. Starships and lasers and space, oh my!

Here is a collection of simple new rules and hacks that will help you get the most sci-fi action out of your fifth edition game.

NEW BACKGROUNDS: ENGINEER AND SPACER

While most of the fifth-edition backgrounds transition easily to a sci-fi setting, these two new ones describe characters unique to science fiction.

Engineer

Engineers are masters of all things technological. Their job is all about getting their hands dirty, whether it's in a hangar bay or on a Martian battlefield. Some engineers prefer the quiet intensity of cracking an elven computer virus, while others would rather repair a starship's warp drive in the middle of a space battle.

Skill Proficiencies: Investigation, Sleight of Hand

Languages: Computer Code

Tool Proficiencies: Thieves' tools

Equipment: Thieves' tools, a certification of engineering skills OR a well-worn spanner (1d4 bludgeoning damage if used as a weapon) handed down from a mentor, a large tool belt, an engineering uniform, a small collection of engine schematics, and 6 gp.

Suggested Characteristics: While engineers spend a number of years learning their trade in colleges or academies, they are happiest when they're applying their skills in the field. An engineer's life is often grimy and dirty, but it's a life they're well-suited to.

Feature: Technical Knack

You intuitively know how machines and mechanical systems work. When faced with a computer, a ship, a hostile robot, or a similar mechanical challenge, you can gain some kind of insight into how it works and operates. The GM must give you one useful piece of information about the challenge that you can use to your advantage. This Knack can only be used once per interaction with that specific challenge.

Spacer

A spacer is a person who grew up in space and zero-gravity, able to live and work in it in ways no terrestrial person could. Spacers are frequently

raised on starships, and understand the value of being part of a crew. They are also often physically different from others even of the same race. Growing up in zero-gravity, exposed to faster-than-light engines and cosmic radiation, often causes spacers to physically mature quicker than others of their race, as well as grow up tall and lean, with pale, almost blue skin.

Skill Proficiencies: Acrobatics, Survival

Languages: One of your choice

Tool Proficiencies: Vehicles (space)

Equipment: A personalized space suit with 2 hours of oxygen, a keepsake from your birth ship, a set of common clothes, a zero-g sleeping hammock, and 10gp

Suggested Characteristics: Spacers are often strange to people born on planets. They can be incredibly patient, and relish the challenges of life with enthusiasm and an almost childlike sense of wonder.

Feature: Zero-G Training

You have no difficulty navigating through an absence of gravity. Your speed while moving through zero-g is increased by 10 feet.

Variant Feature: High Spatial Awareness Score

If you are using the additional ability score 'Spatial Awareness,' detailed later in this article, you may choose to change your SPA score of 15, regardless of what your original score was. This represents the Spacer's ability to move through zero gravity with ease.

shields of the future

Energy shielding is a hallmark of space operas and science fantasy. “Shields up!” is just as iconic a phrase as “Roll initiative!” And while Armor Class is a fine way to measure physical armor, it lacks a certain mechanical complexity that energy shields seem to demand. Here are some quick and easy additions and alternatives.

Energy Shield Emitter: This pocket sized contraption attaches to a belt or spacesuit, creating a thin barrier of subatomic particles that react to energy weapons or similarly fast and extreme forces. The shield protects its wearer when under fire, but does not impede movement or precise work, making it the perfect defense for wizards and rogues. You can activate an energy shield emitter as a bonus action. When active, an energy shield grants you the following benefits:

- AC increases by 1.
- Resistance to all damage from the next four ranged weapon and spell attacks. Each resisted attack is represented by a ‘charge’. The energy shield emitter regains 1 charge per day, up to a total of 4.
- When hit with a spell attack of 3rd level or lower, you can sacrifice the energy shield emitter as a reaction. The spell is instantly countered, as *counterspell*, leaving you unharmed, but destroying the shield beyond repair.
- Average Terrestrial Cost: 200gp

Ablative Armor: Normal armor can withstand the blows of arrows and short swords, but would melt away or disintegrate when shot with energy weapons. That’s where ablative armor comes in: a reinforced carbon shell that’s covered in layers of resistant polymers that are designed to absorb the impact of energy weapons and

shear away. This armor is ideal for front line combatants like fighters and paladins.

- Armor with the ablative property provides AC like normal armor, but also acts as a second layer of hit points, called *armor points*, taking the damage from attacks instead of the PC wearing it. You can choose whether an attack damages your armor points or your hit points.
- Ablative armor is only available as medium or heavy armor. Medium ablative armor (hide, scale mail) grants 30 armor points, and heavy ablative armor (chainmail, plate) grants 40 armor points.
- Suits of ablative armor can regain 1d6 armor points during a short rest, and 1d10+5 armor points during a long rest.
- When its armor points are reduced to zero, the ablative armor is destroyed, leaving the wearer unarmored.
- Average Terrestrial Cost: The ablative property adds 100gp to the cost of a suit of armor.

new Ability score: spatial Awareness

One of the bigger challenges of sci-fi games is handling zero gravity. Tactical combat can get busy and complicated enough without factoring in something like 3D positioning, but hand waving zero-g away leaves out one of the more novel experiences of playing a game in space. How can it be handled in a fun and crunchy mechanical way that isn’t too complicated or hard to describe at the table?

The Spatial Awareness (SPA) score is a combination ability score and spendable resource that allows movement and action in zero gravity. The higher your SPA score, the more proficient you are at finding your center of gravity in a weightless environment, and then using it to keep yourself balanced while moving. This also includes intuitively knowing how to manipulate the personal thrusters or jets on a space suit. Ordinarily, trying to accomplish things in low or zero gravity without being properly braced against something is difficult. All rolls made in zero-g without using your SPA score are made at disadvantage.

Here’s how the Spatial Awareness score breaks down:

At character creation, the SPA score is rolled with all the other ability scores (however ability scores are rolled or determined in your game). It has a modifier just like the other scores too. However, it is written on a character sheet as a resource, like hit points. A SPA score of 14 is written down like so: "score 14/14, modifier +3".

When a Spatial Awareness check or save is called for by the GM, you add your modifier to rolls. When you spend SPA points from your score, your modifier is not reduced.

Being in zero-g requires spending SPA points from your score. These points return to maximum at the end of a long rest, you can regain 1d4 of them during a short rest (but only once per day).

Here are some example SPA point costs of actions in zero gravity. You spend SPA points as part of the Move or Action you spend them on.

- Moving up to your speed through zero-g = 2 points.
- Attacking in zero-g = 2 points.
- Casting a spell while not braced = 2 points + a number of points equal to the level of the spell casted.
- Floating above/below a target, granting advantage on your next attack roll against that target = 5 points.
- Completing mundane tasks = 1 point.
- Completing average tasks = 2 points.
- Completing difficult tasks = 4-6 points.

Ammo solution: The Thermal clip

Weapons like laser guns, blasters, and energy swords are one of the biggest draws of playing in a science fiction games. They're pure imaginative awesomeness. Being able to disintegrate your enemies in a hail of laser fire is a very specific joy; one that doesn't require the expertise of one specific class or race. Anyone can, and should, be able to pick up a ray gun and pull the trigger.

That said, sci-fi weapons have the drawback of being based on existing guns (pistols, revolvers, rifles, etc), which are reliant on ammunition. The closer something is to modern times, the more we expect it to be realistic. It's common to eschew the tracking of ammunition in a fantasy game setting,

(it gets boring really fast), and it's tempting to do so as well with sci-fi guns. Why bother?

It's partially to balance energy weapons' massive destructive potential, but also because doing so adds an extra layer of tension to the game. "Do we have enough ammo to take out this huge, tentacled space monster?" "If we run out, we'll be back to using magic and swords, I guess". Tracking sci-fi ammo keeps those fantastical weapons feeling special; their incredible power and versatility is now balanced by a sense of scarcity and resource management. Energy ammo is as precious a resource as +1 arrows in a typical fantasy game. Finding ammo in the wild and looting it from foes now provides the same thrill as finding treasure! But, how to keep something like that simple and easy to use?

That's where the thermal clip comes in. A thermal clip is a universal form of ammunition that works with any energy weapon. Each one is represented in play by a d6 (the classic d6s with dots instead of numbers work best). You track how many thermal clips your character has with actual, physical d6s. Whenever a group of enemies is defeated, the GM rolls a d6 to determine how many thermal clips they have left over for the party to claim.

Each weapon consumes thermal clips at a different rate. A laser pistol gets six shots out of a clip, while a laser revolver gets three, and a rocket launcher gets one. These shots are physically counted with the dice, turning the d6 in use to the number of shots left over in the thermal clip.

Here are some energy weapon examples, and how they use thermal clips. Like other ranged weapons, attack rolls made with energy

weapons are modified by your Dexterity modifier and Proficiency Bonus (it is assumed all sci-fi characters are proficient with such weapons):

- **Thermal Clip:** 10gp each.
- **Laser Pistol:** 50gp, 30/200 ft, 1d6 radiant damage, uses 1 dot per shot.
- **Hand Cannon:** 100gp, 60/400 ft, 2d10 radiant damage, uses 2 dots per shot. Reloading a clip takes an action.
- **Laser Rifle:** 75gp, 150/600 ft, 1d12 radiant damage, uses 1 dot per shot. Reloading a clip takes an action.
- **Plasma Shotgun:** 200gp, 25/60 ft, 6d6 necrotic damage, uses 3 dots per shot. Reloading takes an action.
- **Rocket Launcher:** 500gp or more, 200/800 ft, causes a high level spell effect (typically *fireball*), uses 6 dots per shot. Reloading takes 1d4 rounds.
- **Disintegrator Ray:** 1500gp or more, 200/800ft, causes a high level spell effect (typically *disintegrate*), uses 6 dots per shot. Reloading takes 1 minute.

And that's just the beginning. There are numerous little tweaks you can make to the fifth edition rules to accommodate a sci-fi setting. This article is just the tip of the iceberg... floating in space, among many others, forming the rings of Saturn.



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