STARS
WITHOUT NUMBER

SOLO ADVENTURES

Contents

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Stars Without Number Solo Rules

Introduction

Stars Without Number [SWN] is one of the most popular OSR role playing games ever released. While it is every similar to a lot of dungeons & dragons derived games it diverges when it comes to the skill system. Outside of combat SWN is mostly driven by 2d6 rather than the ever present d20 so common in other OSR games.

If you have never solo played an RPG before I will ease you into that as it is a different experience to any other form of role playing.

How This Book is Organised

All the rules in this book are at the front. You then get three useful record keeping pages which you may print multiple copies of for your own use. Finally, there are ten pages of 'game icons'. These you may also print off if you prefer to have them on paper.

What is a Role Playing Game?

- I recently read this definition:

- It's a game you play with friends in a social setting. …

- It's an exploration of intriguing or fanciful scenarios. …

- It's a chance to be someone you're not. …

- It's a celebration of sticky situations. …

- It's collaborative daydreaming. …

- It's exercise for your personal sense of drama. …

- It's a way to trick ourselves into creating interesting things. …

- It's something you've been doing all along.

What Is a Role-Playing Game? Ravachol, E., Dig a Thousand Holes Publishing, USA, 2013.

At first glance that seems to fit the bill quite nicely until you think about our modern lives. Today scheduling a regular game session is harder than it seems with work and family commitments. If you have moved from one town to another it may be easy enough to find D&D group but once you start to look for less popular games the groups dry up and are often unwilling to try new things.

If no one plays the game you want to play locally then a lot of people 'play by post' [PBP] where you submit a forum post with your actions and the DM or GM coordinates the game and replies. PBP post games tend to be fantastically detailed as you can describe your characters words, but also the intonation, mannerism, posture and expressions in far greater detail than you ever could sat around a table. You have lost the first point in the definition above, the game is no longer with friends and in a social setting. It could be with people you will never meet and sat at your computer.

More recently Discord and chat has been popular but it has the same issues with scheduling, you need to be awake when the GM wants to run the game and you need blocks of hours free to play the game.

Some people just cannot get either of these alternatives to work and they get their role play fix in computer games but that trades off depth of play with the convenience.

Then there is solo play.

Solo play has the convenience of the computer game, you can play when and where you like for as long or short as you like. It has the fantastic levels of detail of the PBP games. What you don't get is the social interaction.

If you play role playing games to meet new people and crave that social side then solo play is not for you.

If you play role playing games to have wild adventures and develop your player character then solo play could be exactly what you need.

Even if you have all the role playing friends you ever need solo play may still serve you well as a method of learning the rules of SWN. Characters you solo play up to a certain level may become the NPCs in a regular campaign. Solo play can also help you test drive an adventure idea before you set if loose on your players.

How Does Solo Play Work?

Solo play works through emulating the role played by the GM. When you need more information about the scene you ask the GM. In Solo play you will ask the rules instead. There are two mechanisms in these rules. The first is the closed question that acts like a magic 8 ball and gives you a variation of yes or no. The second is for open questions and it gives you two prompts as an answer. It falls on you to take; the story so far, the answer you just received and the sort of adventure you want to have and then decide what does that answer mean to my character? Solo role play will improve your improv. skills immeasurably!

If a solo game was just made up of yes and no answers things would get boring rather quickly. To stop that happening there is an option that throws a complication into your characters story. These can twist the story and take it into new directions. You will learn more about questions, answers and complications below.

For the most part these rules work just like the built in skills system in SWN. You want to try something you get a target number and roll 2d6. Here you want to know something you have a kind of target number and you roll 2d6. The point is to not interrupt your flow of play by bringing in completely different rules.
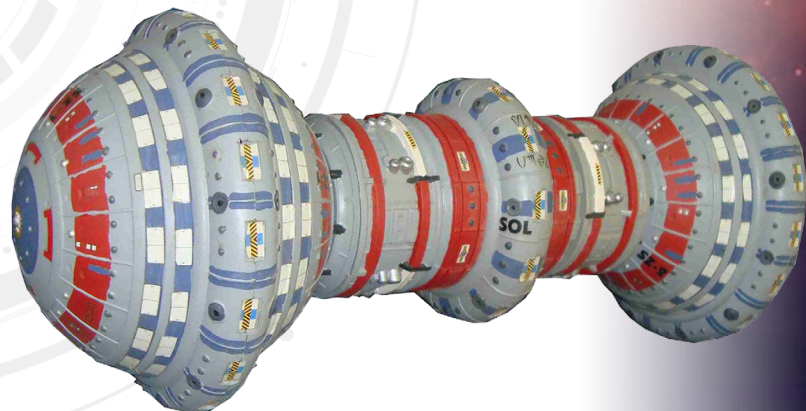
Clocks are not rules, clocks are a dynamic way of keeping track of events happening in your sandbox world. You will learn about clocks below and the clock theme will be repeated several times in these rules.

Closed Questions

A closed question has a yes or no answer. A door is locked or unlocked, a room is occupied or deserted and a grav-bike is left unattended or it isn't. The solo play jargon for the rules handling closed questions is an Oracle. When you ask a closed question you decide how likely it is to be yes or no. You then use that to set a modifier. The chances of their being marines outside a starship brig is very likely, the chances of a grav-bike being left unattended and powered up is highly unlikely. Both of these are closed questions. The marines are or are not there, the bike is powered up or not.

In regular group play the main loop in play is that the GM describes a scene, the players describe their actions the and the GM resolves the actions before returning to the top and describing the new current scene.

In solo play you imagine the scene. If you want any clarification you ask your questions and the oracle gives the answers. Once you know the scene and setting you play out the scene using the regular SWN rules until you have an unknown question. Then the solo rules come into play again. The oracle does not replace the rules. You can ask the oracle if there are marines but you would roll *Notice* to know if your character spots them. At the end of the scene you start the next scene and ask any questions that the scene throws up. That is the basic solo play loop.

The oracle is going to return one of three base answers; Yes, No or A Complication. The Yes and No may be modified with an and…, a but…, or because….

• Yes and… is more than you expected. It could be better than expected or worse. If you wanted to know if there were any marines on guard a yes and… result may say yes and there is a sergeant screaming at them for being slovenly and inattentive. Getting past them in the immediate future will be harder! If you were hoping for a grav-bike to make your escape on the yes and could mean not only there is a bike but it is powered up and the keys are in it.

• Yes is the standard answer. What you asked is what you get. Yes there are marines and yes there is a grav-bike.

• Yes but… this is not quite as good or bad as it could be. Yes there are marines but they are watching a sports game on the monitors. Yes there is a grav-bike but it is secured to a magnetic shackle.

• No because… gives a reason why the answer is a no and often you should aim for an explanation that the character could act upon to turn the no into a yes. No there aren't any marines as an alarm has just sounded and they are leaving. No there is no grav-bike as the rider has just returned and straddled the machine.

• No is the default negative answer. There simply are no marines and there is no grav-bike.

• No and… is the strongest negative. With the marines it is

No and an announcement sounds demanding all marine back to quarters or all marines to action stations. There are quite definitely no marines around here. With the grav-bike there is no grav-bike and you spot a sign saying Grav-bikes are banned from this street.

• A Complication changes the scene. Complications typically make the question you were about to ask irrelevant. Complications can be small things or massive things. It is more to do with what fits best with your game. An example of a small complication could be as you approach the starship brig your personal communicator starts to bleep. Who is trying to contact you and why? Do you really want to get a look at the marines with your communicator bleeping? A big complication could be you look to see if there is a grav-bike and you see a biker get off the machine, takes off the helmet and it is none other than your arch nemesis. How did they get there, are they looking for you what do you do next?

For each scene you should sketch a small circle and then depending on how long you anticipate the scene to be divide it into segments. For most scenes four segments are fine. This is the chaos clock. If you roll a No and… result fill in one segment of the clock. Once it has counted down all the segments the next question will automatically produce a complication. The reason for the chaos clock is that should you get a run of very poor dice rolls it can stop your story progressing. If you were trapped in a room and you ask if the door is unlocked and get a no and… it is likely to be locked and the lock is really high tech. You try the windows and get a no and… they are bullet proof glass, you look to see if there is a ventilation shaft, no and the room seems hermetically sealed. Finally, you ask if there is any kind of fire alarm trigger, no and…

You can see how a run of results that each make your situation worse prevents you from making progress. The automatic complication at least changes the situation, maybe a torturer with a case full of ugly implements is buzzed into the room. Now you have an open door, tools to work with, an NPC to talk to and a possible hostage. All that in place of dead ends.

The Oracle

2 or lower	No, and…
3-4	No
5-6	No, because…
7	A Complication
8-9	Yes, but…
10-13	Yes
14 or higher	Yes, and…

Highly unlikely	-4	Unlikely	-2
50/50	+/- 0		
Highly likely	+4	Likely	+2

Open Ended Questions

Open ended questions cannot be answered with a yes or a no. These are things like what people are talking about, the subjects of books, that is motivating people and so on.

In these rules we use game icons. Game icons are deliberately vague pictures which can be interpreted in many ways. When you start mixing the context of your game and the icons they should suggest a meaning. The same icon could present very different meanings in different situations.

A typical result may look something like this:

The first image has associations with me to the musical Little Shop of Horrors in which an alien that looks like a plant feeds on blood and then eventually people. So that says to me Alien, Plant but also Venus Fly Trap.

The second says present, gift, package, bow, box.

Imagine you character is spying on some gang thugs, you try and catch a snippet of their conversation and you get those two icons. My reaction is one is telling the other that they need to "plant the package", I can also imagine the first one handing over a small envelope. I instantly have a conspiracy with something being planted on an innocent person to frame them. It could be drugs it could be forged documents.

In a different situation is could have been read as alien and gift and the then we have a back story about aliens gifting advanced technology but what are their motivations?

The icons are arranged in a HUD or clock. You should use two counters and when you ask a question you move the counter around the number of places equal to a d6 roll. You roll 1d6 for each counter and move one clockwise and one counter clockwise.

Use can use one clock per session or one clock per die. You can also vary the clocks so the same icons do not repeat too often. It is your choice as to which icon goes first. If the icons above had been the other way around then my gut instinct would be for Package + Plant or "packaging plant" which sounds like some kind of factory unit and could have been the scene of a meeting or the cover for an operation.

Record Keeping

With so much of the action taking place purely in your imagination you are not going to be able to retain everything.

Most solo players keep a journal. How detailed it is depends entirely on your personal style. Some players imagine the scene, roll a few oracle questions to clarify a few things and then write out the entire scene as if it were a chapter of a book. You can even use these rules as a writing tool to write a book, one where you have no idea of the cast of characters, the plot or the ending before you get there.

My journal is much more terse than that. I keep use little more than bullet points of the key facts, the questions I asked and the answers. It serves purely as a memory jogger for my own personal use and I do not share them as Actual Plays [AP], which is quite popular in solo gaming communities. How much or how little you write or type up is completely personal, but some form of journal is highly recommended.

In addition to your journal a few simple lists are recommended.

These are:

- **Scene List**: A note about the setting, the NPCs present and any significant actions. It helps to know if you trashed the bar that the next time you visit how the NPCs may react or the physical state of the place. The entry and exit points tell you point of the scene, what you wanted to achieve and how the scene ended.
- **NPC List**: I tend to even keep a note of nameless NPCs but only as a comment such as *a few bystanders*, For NPCs I give a name if any but also Class, Abilities and Skills. At the very least I leave room to fill them in as my story evolves. I also include where I met them. There is often a lot of cross over between the Scene and NPC list.
- **Loose Ends**: A list of all the potential side missions or quests that you don't follow up. This is the list that you will review once a session to see if there is a deep scenario happening in the world that you have only caught glimpses of. The individual entries need only be short but once you review and link them. I suggest using highlighter pens to make the linked threads obvious and then writing out the new Scenario in this list.

Clocks

These rules introduce clocks into your SWN game. A clock is a simple circle divided into four, six or eight segments. What it respresents is action or events happening off camera. What they are good for is keeping track of things happening in your game world during the session and between sessions.

Take for example the security forces at a starport. There is plenty of security cameras and patrols. It doesn't take a lot to alet them as they are on the ball. Your character wants to sneak into 'Autorised Personel Only' areas. You quickly sketch out a four segment clock. For each stealth failure you block out a segment. That could be a skill check but it could also be having to take down a member of staff. When you have counted down the clock security are alerted.

You can have as many clocks running down as you like. It could a locked personal communicator and every fail attempt to hack it moves it one step further towards it destroying itself. It could the progress that the villain is making to effect their escape.

You can choose to count down a clock by events or by time. You can think of them as discrete events such as:

1. Loading the passengers
2. Securing the hatches
3. Requesting clearance for take off
4. Opening the shuttle bay doors
5. Starting engines
6. Exiting the space station

This six segment clock started when the bad guys got to their shuttle and when it counted down they made their escape. That could have taken place over two or more game sessions.

You may not know how they escaped, you don't have a clear plan but that doesn't matter you can just have a clock and when it counts down they are gone. You could assume you will catch up but block out a segement every time you roll a complication that slows you down or blocks your progress.

Some clocks may take months to count down if they are measuring amassing an army or mounting an invasion.

If you have gone through your loose ends list and identified a potential parallel plot. You can then draw a clock as part of the plot outline. Next time oyou want to use that plot line for a complication it could advance the clock

A two segment clock

Four segment clock

Six segments

Eight segments
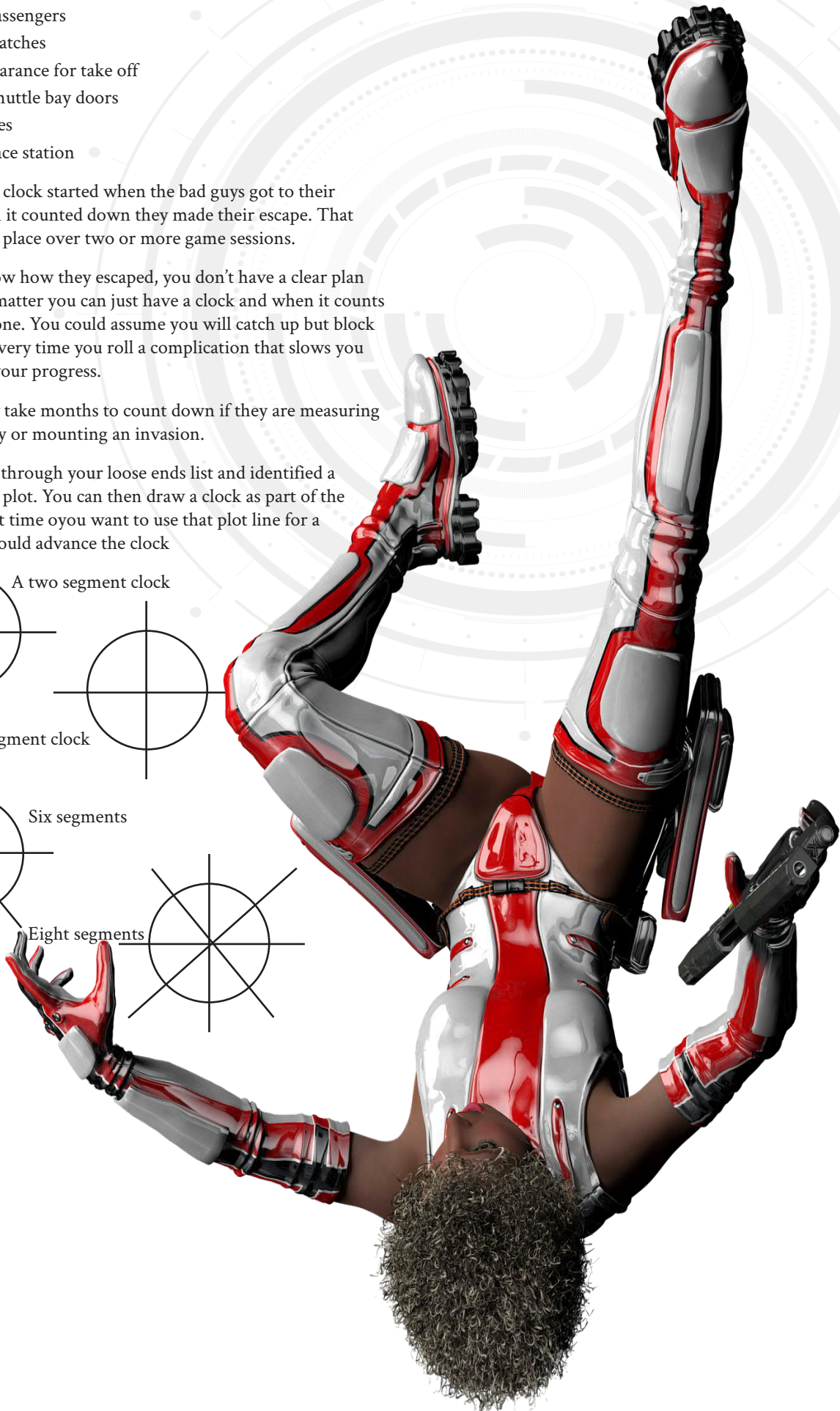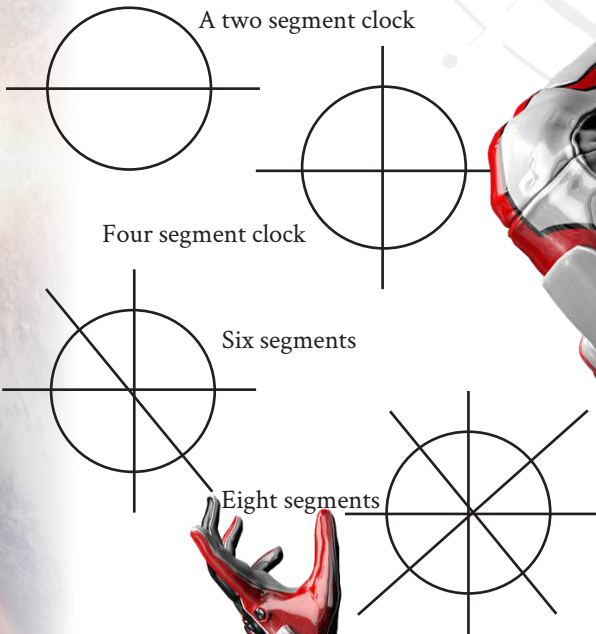
NPC Conversations

There are types of NPC conversations. The first is when they are in full conversation and you can hear exactly what is being said. The other is when someone is using comms or you cannot hear the words but you could read the body language.

In some situations both may apply where you can clearly hear only half the conversation.

To deal with the content you will use the open question rules, you roll one die twice and move the counters around the icon clocks. This gives you a prompt for the topic of conversation.

To define the characters attitudes in the conversation then this table gives a position.

Roll	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Roll
1	Strongly Disagrees with…	Strongly agrees with …	1
2	Disagrees with…	Agrees with…	2
3	Has news	Is shocked by…	3
4	Needs to know…	Doesn't care	4
5	Agrees with…	Disagrees with…	5
6	Strongly agrees with…	Strongly disagrees with…	6

NPC List

Game:

Name	Location	Class, Abilities & Skills	Notes

NPC List

Name	Location	Class, Abilities & Skills	Notes
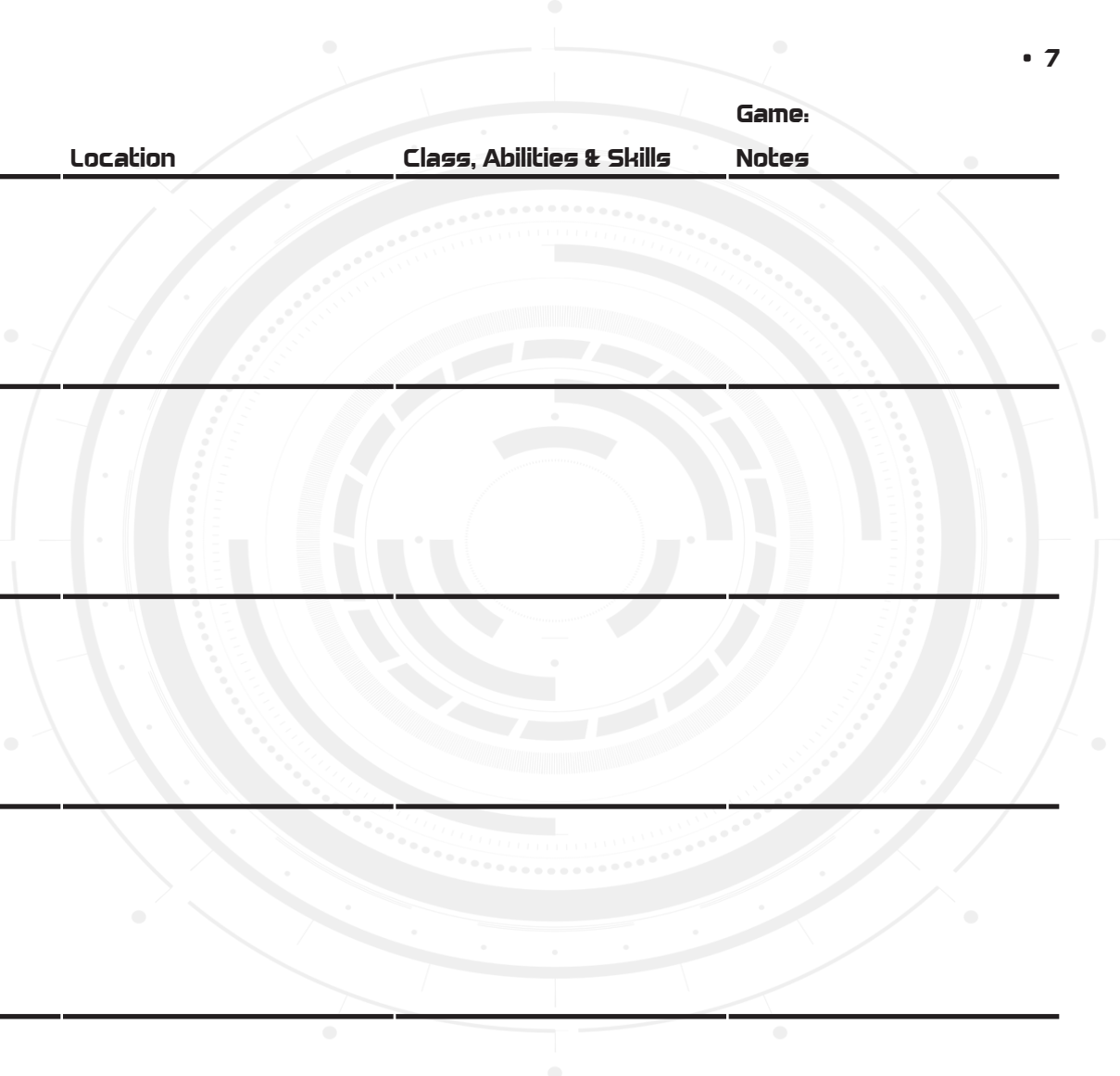
Scene List

Location	Action	NPCs	Entrance/Exit
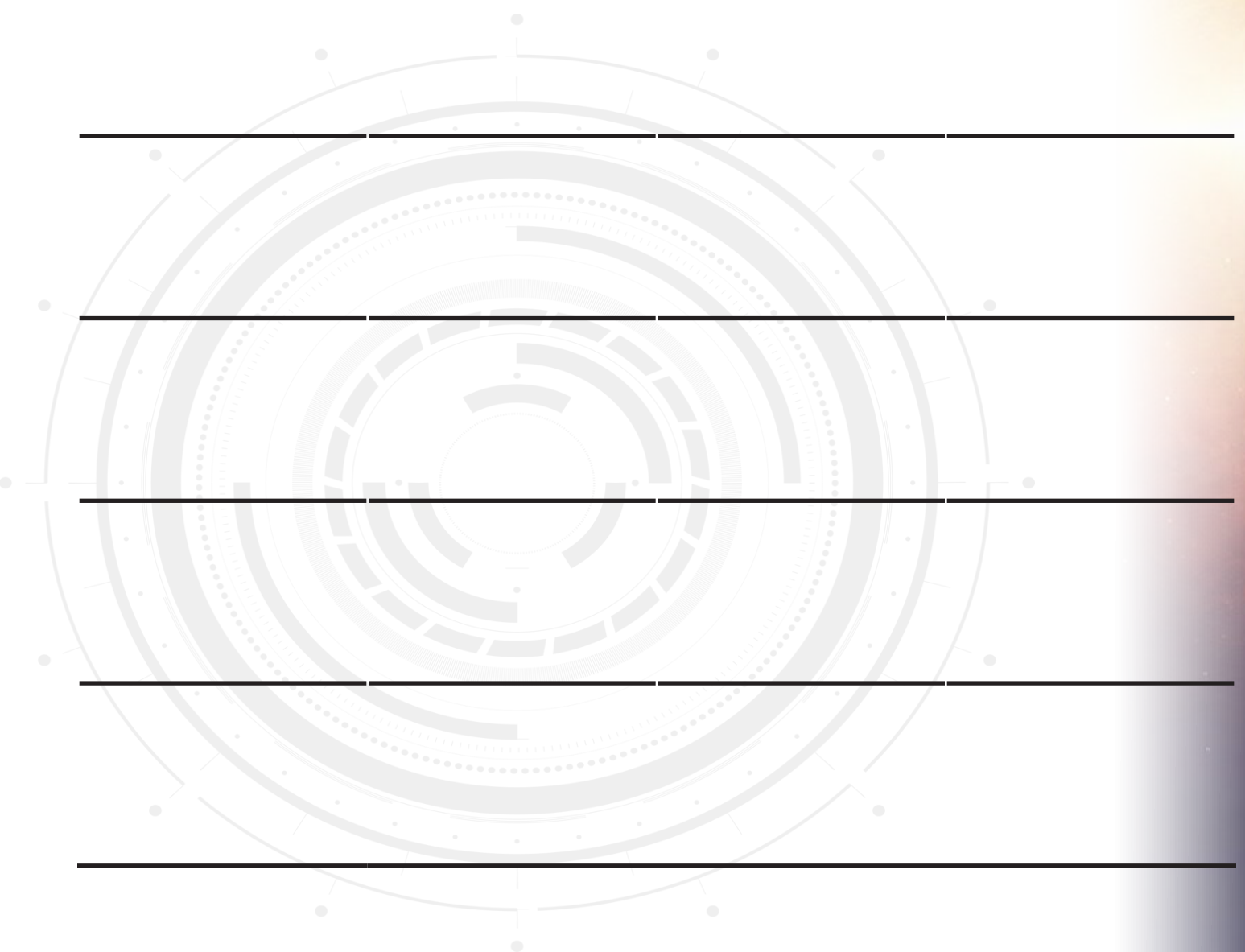
Loose End List

Who?	What?	Where?	Connections?

Loose End List

Game:

Who?	What?	Where?	Connections?

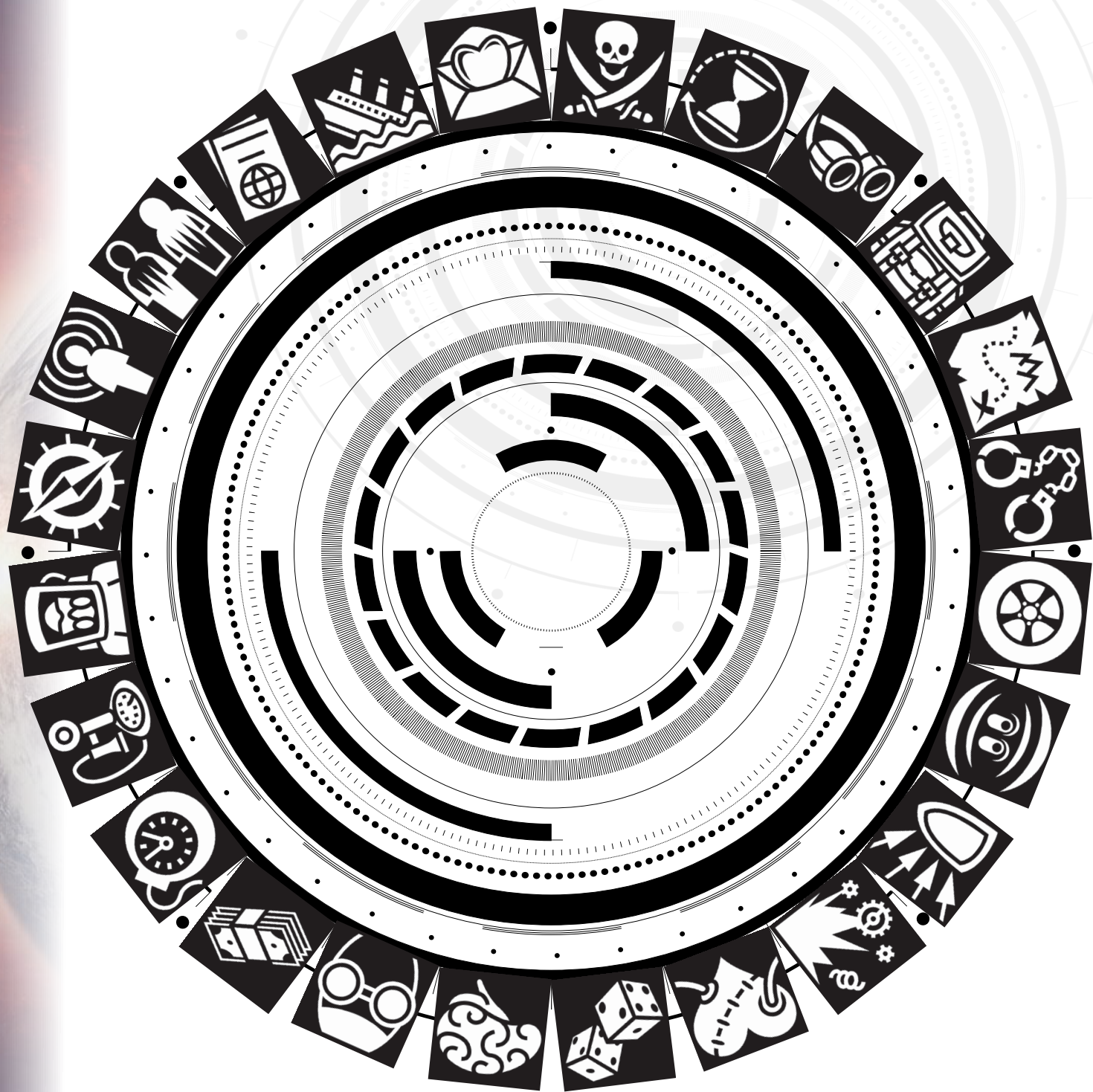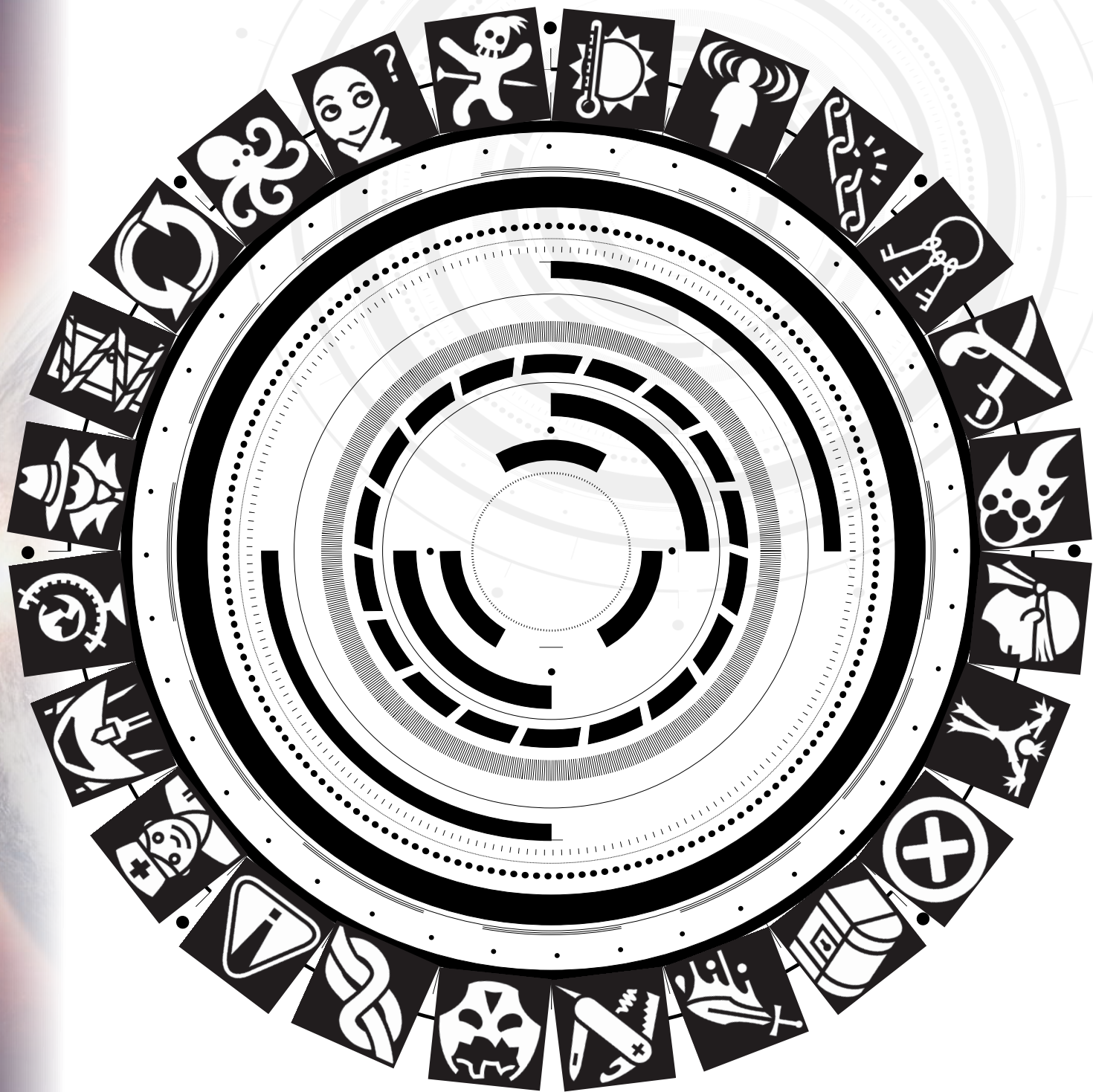## Sample Scene

Below is a very basic PC "Jesse" and the opening scene of a solo game. I start with a bit of world building using the Oracle. With just those few details and a basic character I start my story. The example covers just a single scene but uses the oracle, open questions and clocks.

Jesse

Str 11   +0
Dex 12,   +0
Con 14,   +1
Int 10,   +0
Wiz 9,   +0
Cha 7   -1

HP   6
Base Attack 0

Physical 14
Mental 15
Evasion 15

Background Academic
Class   Expert

25 credits

Skills

Know	+2	Connect	0
Admin	0	Fix	+1
Connect	0	Shoot	0

Specialist

Once per scene reroll a fail skill check

+1/level on non combat/psychic skills

Focus Tinker Maintenance x2 ship/gear mods cost half

Laser Pistol (1d6 damage), 2 type A cells, Armored Undersuit (AC 13), Backpack (TL0), Monoblade knife (1d6 damage), Compad, Climbing harness Metatool, Low-light goggles

Is this a High Tech world? 50/50(9) Yes, but... it is cut off from other worlds.

Are Psychics common? 50/50(9) Yes, but... they are state controlled and used for law enforcement

Does everyone live in the cities? 50/50(6) No, because the cities are controlled by the psychic security forces.[1]

Opening scene is a roof top chase, Jesse is chasing down an informer. When trying to 'borrow' books from a city school, for a village school.

What sort of person is the informer?

I can see a volcano and money. He is a hot-headed and volatile mercenary. I add him to the NPC list and will fill in more details as they emerge.[2]

Jesse races across the roof in pursuit leaping from roof to roof. (Mercenary Save 15 roll 15, makes the leap – Jesse Save 15 roll 19, all is good.)

I roll 3d6 to see find the Dex of the mercenary and it comes up 10. Jesse is a 12 so I make Jesse a little faster in a dead sprint.

Gaining a little as they race across the second roof top another parapet looms they have to leap this one as well. Merc Save 15, rolled 14, failed, Jesse Save 15, Roll 20. The mercenary barely fails

to make the jump and lands on the far ledge scrabbling for a hand grip. Jesse lands, rolls and comes up with pistol drawn.

"Why did you sell me out?" Jesse asks flicking the pistol off safety.

We know the mercenary's personality but now we want to why, his motivation. The result is:

Film and a book. Our mercenary explains that he had no choice they [security] already had Jesse on film.

I can now imagine both sides of this conversation.

The mercenary [Levi Ward] finally confesses that he has been leading Jesse into a Security trap.

Are the security forces moving in [likely] Roll 8 + 2 = 10 Yes! Jesse rolls Notice (6 – 1 for unskilled) Failed, Jesse doesn't know they are coming. I decide that Security have sent a standard Soldier Bot to collect Jesse. I start a four sector Clock, when it runs down the bot arrives. I expect this to be a fast clock.

Feeling that Jesse has learned everything that Levi knows he gets hauled up to the roof.

<tick>▢

"Well, if this is a trap then you are in it with me. Let us get off this roof and somewhere less exposed."

"Right, let's get down amongst people, too much collateral damage to take us out on the street." Levi concurs.

Is there a fire escape down to the street? Likely +2 5+2 = 7 A Complication The bot arrives ahead of schedule and opens fire![3]

The Bot opens fire with a Rocket Launcher from several hundred meters out. It rolls a 4 to hit and the fire escape is destroyed into a tangle of twisted metal and that corner of the building collapses in as rubble is blasted down into the street.

The two characters open fire. The normal combat rules apply. The Soldier bot is armed with its rocket launcher for ranged attack batons for close quarters. The characters both have laser pistols which start at extreme range (-2 to hit). The Bot has AC15 and HP 8. What follows is a barrage of laser fire in which no one can hit at the longer ranges until the bot is right on top of them when both characters manage to hit and the bot crashes to the rooftop at their feet[4].

Scanning the skyline for more bots Jesse says, "Let's get off this roof."

"Good plan!"

At this point Levi, with surprise tries to shove Jesse off the roof. He had already confessed to selling Jesse out to the authorities and assisting in killing the soldier bot would not help his case. Rolling the opposed check Jesse is thrown from the roof. They are 1d6 storeys up (roll of 3 or 9m to fall). Luckily for Jesse the falling

damage is minimal (5HP damage and Jesse had 6HP leaving Jesse with 1HP). Jesse staggers up and behind cover.

Are more security forces come? Roll 9 + 2 for likely equals 11 and a Yes answer. Sirens wail as they approach.

Jesse looks around (Does Jesse know this street? Roll Connect, Success, Yes.) Limping away Jesse knows someone who will offer shelter.

End of Scene.

By the end of playing this scene I know a lot more about the world I am adventuring in. It has overtones of Fahrenheit 451. The cities are controlled by a psychic elite and normal, or non-psychic people are considered second class citizens. Like thousands of people Jesse has migrated out of the cities in a bid to live a free life. Jesse is a school teacher by day but at night Jesse enters the city looking for books and objects with a cultural significance to steal away with. At the start of the game Jesse has obviously overstepped the mark once too often and the security forces are on Jesses case.

On my record sheets I have added one NPC and one scene. I have also added a loose end as although Jesse needs to survive tonight's raid in the city Jesse also wants to exact revenge on Levi.

There is still one clock running and that will signify when the security forces hit the ground. That clock will continue into the next scene.

(Endnotes)

1   These first few questions are all I needed to start to imagine the world. At the start of this game I had done no prep, there was no universe.

2   Initially, it was just Levi's personality type that was meant to be mercenary but it actually fitted quite well. When fleshing Levi's details after the session I can roll using the random NPC rules from SWN but just keep the details that are already pinned down.

3   Every time I think the characters are 'wasting time' I am going to count down the clock.

4   Although I had started a four segment clock it was my gut instinct that the security trap would be the most obvious complication. As the attack misses then destroying the fire escape fulfils the idea that a complication renders the intended question unnecessary. In this case there was a fire escape but it is no more. I will keep the four segment clock running as the robot is still at a long range.

5   I used the standard SWN combat rules which involved a lot of failing to hit initially until the range shortened. Each round I counted down the clock. They killed the bot in the round that it would have arrived and entered melee. At the end of the combat I discard the Security bot's clock.

Solo Play Hints and Tips

• The golden rule is do not ask too many questions. Ask a question and possibly a follow up if you are still not sure but then just start to improvise.

• Do not ask game breaking questions. Don't ask if you wake up and find you are ruler of the galaxy or a plasma cannon at the end of the bed. If you need these things just add them to your character sheet. It is your game, no one will ever know!

• Playing as a solo hero in a game designed for parties of 6-8 heroes is hard. You may want to start at 2nd to 3rd level. This also adds more scope for skipping back into your characters past to play flashbacks.

• Don't start your first solo play sat in a cantina. Take a leaf from Hollywood and start right in the thick of the action, a roof top fight against soldier bots, in a runaway shuttle careering towards a crowd of people or surrounded by aliens at a crash site. You know the sort of adventure you want to have. Start there and start in the thick of it.

• The first time you solo play it will probably be slow and stilted as you don't know the rules or what to expect. Don't worry, this is normal and the more you play the faster and more fluid it all becomes.

• It is useful to have a stock of pre-generated NPCs. When you are learning a new game, it is useful to make a few characters to try and get an idea for how the rules work. Keep those characters and use them when you need an NPC. That saves breaking up your game to create an NPC at a crucial moment.

• Narrative Description is your friend. Have you ever had a character in a barroom brawl and asked the GM if there a bottle or chair at the table you can throw? Or maybe you asked is the chandelier secured by a rope, when you wanted to swing across the hall. In solo play the answer to all these questions is yes. It is your story, your adventure, you are star and director. The props will always be in the right place.

• Fail Forward. If something goes wrong and the adventure would end or there is no way out ask the oracle. In the movies the hero faces seemingly impossible situations all the time and somehow gets out of them. You are the hero, it is OK to save yourself.

• The questions you ask should be the ones best for the game and not what is best for your character.