Star Hero

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The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

Star Hero is the second full genre book offered up in Fifth Edition. It extensively covers setting up and running a Science-Fiction campaign. From Space Opera to Hard-SF. The book covers a lot of ground like all of Hero's genre books.

Chapter One - The Genre. Before it gets into setting up a game the book goes over all the major sub-genres and meta-genres that can be used as a back drop and feeling of the game. Eleven genres have their major tropes, pitfalls and high points covered. The meta-genre types are more the feeling of the game, comedy or tragedy, horror or mystery; which feeling is this game to evoke, and how to move from one to the other to keep the campaign fresh and new ideas moving in all the time.

Chapter Two - Character Creation. This is how to use the Hero System Rules to make Characters. Starting with Package Deals as a method to create uniformity amongst various species, assist players with cultural norms through different worlds and unify just what major professions would know. Forty generic Package Deals are presented for a GM to use or modify as needed for their game. As presented they are an excellent starting point when beginning to set up a campaign.

Skills get a good bit of attention, six of the major genres from Chapter One have Everyman Skills listed in the side bars. With suggestions on how to expand (or not expand) skills for dramatic effect. As well as some guidelines on using Interaction Skills in relation to other species.

Talents and Perks both get a number of additions and expansions as they might relate to and be used in a Science-Fiction game. The Powers and Power Modifiers section goes over how to use various Powers to simulate any number of things in a Science-Fiction setting. Disadvantages rounds out the chapter going over how to use various Disadvantages in a campaign with a large scope - after all Hunted means something different if you can escape to another planet, and takes on new menace when an entire species wants your head.

Chapter Three - The Universe, Part One. Starting large, this chapter goes over creating entire galaxies and the stars they contain. It contains both scientific elements (Nebulae) and fictitious elements (space storms). Starting big allows you take the big picture with the campaign. How big do you want to really go? How much of a galaxy will the campaign take place in, and so on. Listed are the star types and how they are classified, along with some tables on randomly generating stars to populate your galaxy with.

Chapter Four - The Universe, Part Two. With the galaxy and stars out of the way now you need Planets. This is an extensive look at adding planets to a star system, how they interact and how a star system would work. Building planets is broken down into several steps, starting with it's mass and placement in the system. Atmosphere and climate are next. Life covers what, if any, life might evolve on the planet, both as we know it and as we don't. Surface is next going over what's on it, what things civilizations on the planet can take advantage of and how that might effect it's standing in a galactic society. Other Objects goes over anything in a system that isn't a planet. Asteroids, comets, space stations and other mega-structures (Dyson Spheres, Ring Worlds, etc.).

Chapter Five - The Universe, Part Three. This is a chapter on the Solar System, which serves as an example Star System to see just how things are put together. Strangely, Earth isn't covered at all so there's no readily available example of a life bearing planet, even if the information is easily looked up elsewhere. Also gone over are near system stars and a few major stars in the sky that we can see and how far away they are.

Chapter Six - Civilizations. Now that you have a galaxy, some stars and systems you need to populate them. First, there's a note in the side bar about running Star Hero without aliens, which is helpful. Future Worlds goes over the various types of civilizations that might populate a distant future. Six major tropes of how the future evolved are covered. The Post-Apocalypse Future World setting gets the most coverage as it goes over a number of ways things went from bad to worse.

Creating Alien Species, aliens are a staple of science fiction and the reason a number of gamers come to the table. Here we get a really good look at how to create an alien species that isn't just Humans In Latex (though there's a side bar that covers how to do that too). Starting with major archetypes for overall cultural leaning, then Alien Bodies, Alien Minds covers physical features of the alien to differentiate them from humans. Creating Player Character Species covers how to make a playable species - from both a Player point of view and a GM/Game point of view (or how not to break your game). The most useful bit is a guideline on how to put together a Package Deal with the Hero System so it is balanced, creates a unique alien, and doesn't take up so many points the Player can't customize them to be an individual. Alien Species as NPCs takes an interesting look at how to use an entire alien race as some form of adversary in the game. Not intended to be played, but interacted with in a specific situation or as a role in the game (the ever present Elder Race Of Immense Power is an example NPC Alien Race).

Alien Civilization isn't just about setting up an aliens civilization, it can be used to set up an interstellar civilization, such as a group of human civilizations that have split into distinct cultures. This covers technology levels, populations, economics (currency, goods, wealth distribution, terrestrial and space trade), Government (local and galactic and how they might interact), military, legal system, language, diversity, and culture (recreation, media, food, etc). Basically this covers what you need to at least jot down some notes for when creating a civilization be it alien, human or mixed.

Chapter Seven - Technology. This is part of what makes the genre - all those wonderful toys. Starting with setting technology levels and how to vary the tech paths (a race with regenerating abilities may lag in medicine for instance), and the interaction between old tech and new. And of course Alien Technology and how it might interact with Human technology. Prime Directives And Quarantines covers how space faring races might treat races that are more primitive. And a good section on how improvements work and what they generally do or aim for. Rubber Science (how to use or avoid it) finishes off the first part.

Weapons And Defenses is next, likely one of the sections of most interest to gamers. From melee weapons for mixing it up hand-to-hand to exotic futuristic weapons. They go from the real (Laser technology) to the completely unreal (generic Blasters found in a lot of sci-fi source material).

Defenses covers various ways one might counter all this weaponry; from ablative foam for anti-laster defense to battlesuits and force fields. Of course the art of war doesn't stop there, blowing up the enemy is easy. It's finding them without getting blown up in return that's hard, the last part of this section covers military level mobility and information warfare in the future.

Other Technology goes over pretty much everything else. Computers, Robots, Biotechnology, Nanotechnology (with a cool side bar on various nano-goos color coded for convenience), power sources, teleportation (the ultimate in rubber science by current knowledge), and some miscellaneous other bits like survival suits, tools and medical tech. I thought medical technology would get more coverage by itself, but parts are covered under other areas.

The very last section is Acquiring Equipment, a discussion on how the GM and Players can keep the cool toys from taking center stage and running over the campaign.

Chapter Eight - Starships & Space Stations. Spaceships - this is why most of us are here, we want to go places - some of them really far away. The first part is dedicated to setting up a design method for space travel in your game. Deciding on propulsion methods (how fast and far can ships go without resupplying), weapons, defenses, ship size, operating systems (computers, sensors and the like), and personal systems (life support, entertainment on long voyages). There is a good discussion on Realistic Acceleration vs Game Acceleration - and which direction you want to go, the latter is certainly simpler (you have this much movement and can move this far) while the former is good for Hard Science fans who want to keep space battles very realistic.

Terrestrial Vehicles and Mecha are covered next, focusing mainly on hovercraft and humanoid mecha. This section is very short, and doesn't provide too much in the way of guidelines for mecha. Though a good bit is given over to how hovercraft of various types might work. Spacestations And Starbases are covered after that, many of the guidelines for ships remain in place, though propulsion isn't. Both Starships and Spacestations sections have expanded size tables (Vehicles and Bases respectively) that are good for when things get to a really large scale (Generation Ships and Dyson Spheres).

Space Combat, because at some point someone will want to get into a fighter and shoot things. With guidelines on using realistic movement and dramatic movement (as outlined above under Spaceships), actions in combat and the effects of damage. One really nice touch is a discussion on combat for very large ships (where the crew act independently of the pilots), and handling space combat with a group of players - how to divide out the action so everyone is involved, not just the pilot and possible gunner.

The last part are some example vehicles, they aren't from any particular setting and are not all built with the same set of guidelines in place making them a good cross section of vehicles to look at when deciding just how to set up space travel. It includes three starships (merchant, small fighter, and warship), a mech, and two space stations (trade and military).

Chapter Nine - Time Travel. This is how to deal with Time Travel should you want to introduce it into your campaign. Going into consequences, paradoxes and the technical how you might use in a game. A section on Time Campaigns covers some ideas of the types of campaigns you can set up with Time Travel as a theme, from time cops to lost in time games. Alternate histories are also covered as a possible campaign theme.

Chapter Ten - Psionics. Powers of the mind, from low powered and vague to powerful and nearly superhuman. Mostly Space Opera style games have psionics, but other genres have them as well. From power level considerations, how it works (do psionics violate the laws of thermodynamics for instance), rarity, treatment in society and organizations that might exist if these powers were around

and documented. There is also a section on Rules considerations, going over how to use the Hero system to get the flavor you want from psionics. Psionic Campaigns finishes out this chapter, going over campaign types where psionics is a central theme (psi-cops, rebels, outlaws, etc). An example psionic system is given for the Terran Empire (Hero's Space Opera setting) as a way to set up how psionics work and interact with society at large, along with a number of example Psionic Powers.

Chapter Eleven - The GM. With all the details of the setup done we turn to the campaign itself. The theme of the campaign, any sub genres to include or avoid, and what type of game you want to play (dark, hard science), and how all the parts interact. A lot of the first part covers using Chapter One in conjunction with the rest of the book. Running The Game goes over how to set up story arcs, plots and individual sessions. This section is good advice for any game, but it addresses some science fiction issues directly, such as the info-dump where you have to hand over a large chunk of information about the campaign to get the PCs all up to speed on technology, terms and aliens.

Environment deal with various things players will encounter - from zero-gravity to explosive decompression (both realistic and cinematic), light and heavy gravity, vacuum and radiation all get some coverage here.

Villains And NPCs is a good long section on various personalities you can use in a campaign to interact with the players. Going into both Villain Archetypes and NPC Archetypes. Villains being opposition and NPCs simply being everyone else the Characters interact with.

Chapter Twelve - Characters. This chapter introduces ten characters, five can be used as PCs in a game, forming the crew of a small space explorer, the other five are villains of various levels. All of them are nominally set in the Terran Empire setting, but filing off the serial numbers is easy.

The Downside:

The book is, in a word, awesome. There are no glaring errors or omissions here that I noticed. Aside from not covering Earth in chapter five - or any examples of a fully habitable and inhabited planet. Which would make it one of the few planet types not given an example of, and probably the most important.

The Otherside:

For anyone looking to set up a Science Fiction game this book can prove to be an invaluable resource, the star and planet creation rules follow real science guidelines and have no bearing on Game System - making them universally useful. The coverage of setting up civilizations, star faring races and governments is almost all completely presented without System interference as well.

This is possibly my favorite Hero Genre book, it covers all the major bases extremely well, and clearly. This book is essential for any Star Hero game, from making galaxies from scratch to creating alien races, characters and space ships - it's all there and well organized.