

INSPACE

an InSpectres supplement by Ben Robbins

Beyond man's small blue world a vast cosmos awaits. What wonders of the universe are yet to be discovered? Is space more grand or terrible than we even imagine? Are we alone?

This supplement for InSpectres let's you explore the mysteries of space and play games in the style of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Solaris*, *Contact*, *Ringworld*, or *Forbidden Planet*. It is not necessarily a humorous or even action-packed escape—it can be a thoughtful and serious examination of the mysteries of the universe and humanity's place in it.

How InSpectres Works: A Quick Recap

GM: The moon those energy waves was coming from looks like a barren rock orbiting Telos-3. A classic moon.

Player 1: I'm taking a survey team in space suits to explore the surface. We're going to search the caves pocking the moon's crust.

GM: Spelunking? Sounds like an Athletics check to me.

Player 1: [rolls a 6 on his highest die] Heh! Commander Stark leads his team deep into a cavern, where they find, ummm... a massive glowing crystal! It's a spiny mound, clearly nothing like the natural rock of the moon, shedding a ghostly luminance that lights up the cave. Oh, and a science officer takes a reading and says the strange waves are clearly originating from it.

Player 2: Alien crystal thingy!

GM: Crystal thingy indeed. Alien? At this point we don't know. You got a good roll and shouldn't have any mishaps, but I'm throwing some Stress at you. Remember the moon monolith scene from 2001? As your team is busy bombarding with crystal with x-rays, radio waves—whatever—to analyze it, it emits a powerful signal back! Your whole team's helmets are flooded with piercing static. Your team claws at their suits trying to cover their ears, and are driven to their knees with the inescapable pain. Roll!

— Mission to Telos-3, an InSpace adventure

InSpectres is unlike a lot of other games because when the characters use their skills it not only determines if they succeed or fail it also lets the players decide what reality was in the first place. The GM establishes the initial mystery, but it's the players who decide what the answer to the mystery was all along.

This "investigation determines reality" system can work great for any kind of normal detective work / investigation setting, but it also works great for exploring the cosmic unknowns from classic science fiction. What's the strange signal coming from the heart of the dead moon? Who left these strange markings carved on the face of an asteroid?

Why is Jupiter getting closer? The trappings and tone are very different, but the basic structure is the same: there is an explicit mystery or unexplained phenomenon at the start of the game and the players decide how to investigate it.

Because the GM does not have to know the answer, he or she is free to just throw out an idea and then see what happens. That means you can sit down and play a game of InSpace with very little preparation.

Translating InSpectres To Space

The easiest set up for an InSpace game is to make the characters the crew of a space ship tasked with exploring space and seeking out the mysteries of the cosmos.

Make the Franchise

The franchise represents the ship and NPC crew. Unlike normal InSpectres, make the franchise first and then create the characters.

First of all name your ship. The kind of name you pick says a lot about the ship and its mission. A really good ship name is critical for a good InSpace game. The ship has the same resources as a normal franchise, but the names are changed to match the setting:

Academics (Library Card)	➤	Databanks
Athletics (Gym Card)	➤	Life Support
Technology (Credit Card)	➤	Labs & Engineering
Bank	➤	Auxiliary Power

Your ship can be crewed by just the player characters (either because it is a small ship or because technology allows just a few people to operate a massive vessel), or you can assume there is an entire NPC crew on board as well. A large crew of NPCs can help give the game a big science feel, since it lets the characters do large scale things like send out survey teams or build whole outposts.

Make the Characters

InSpace characters are built the same as normal InSpectres agents: they have the same Academics, Athletics, Technology and Contact skills and single Talent.

You can make characters to fill classic ship roles (Captain, Medical Officer, Engineer, etc.) but if you want to keep things more flexible you can keep jobs more vague.

A traditional command structure can provide strong roles for characters, but the downside is that it can focus the game too much on the captain. After all, if push comes to shove, the captain usually gets to decide what to do. Even if the captain character doesn't enforce her authority other players may become passive and wait for orders. If you are lucky it can provide tension, but if you are not it can undermine player initiative.

You can balance this by setting up conflicting authority: the captain is in charge of the ship, but in scientific matters the Chief Scientist has the final say, while a diplomat might butt in if there was a chance of alien contact or colonial policy. There is no mechanical effect, but it establishes the idea that one character is not the boss.

Some characters can also be outsiders who aren't regular members of the crew, such as specialist scientists that have come onboard for particular experiments or a complete fish-out-of-water like a bureaucrat who is just along for the ride (so long as they are still motivated to solve mysteries).

If you want aliens, androids, or telepaths use the Weird Agent rules.

Confessionals

Confessionals are replaced by personal log entries. It's considered good form to start an entry by saying "personal log..." and ending by stating your name and position on the ship ("Walsh, acting Navigator of the Carthage, signing off"). Let the computer figure out the date.

Remember, even if the whole ship gets sucked into a black hole, the logs are ejected and can be picked up eventually. Your confessional is guaranteed to be heard by future generations.

Who's the Client?

Space explorers don't need clients to ask them to investigate. If the ship is on a mission to discover strange new things and unlock the secrets of the cosmos than the mere presence of an anomaly should be reason enough to take a closer look. Some missions may involve the ship getting called for help or alerted to a phenomenon that someone else discovered, but it's still up to the explorers to motivate themselves to investigate.

By removing the external pressure to investigate you make the game about the characters' personal motivations instead. Space exploration is not a job, it's a calling.

Define Your Universe

A game about space exploration can mean a lot of different things. If you need to bring your setting into sharper relief, have everyone brainstorm answers to these questions about the setting you want to play:

- Is space travel a new and daring thing or is it commonplace? Are the characters using rocket propulsion or warp drive? Vac suits, shuttles or teleporters?
- Has humanity made contact with aliens? Is finding intelligent life one of the Holy Grails of exploration?
- How is Earth doing? Is it a bright shining beacon of progress or a rundown tired old world that desperately needs whatever help the explorers can find (harnessable energy sources, colonizable planets, etc.).
- Is space lonely or populated? Are there colonies and space stations or just a great inky void?
- Is there a central "space government" or is everyone on their own?

Big Space Mysteries

Space is big. Really, really big. A good space mystery should not hesitate to go just as big. Whether you're a player revealing clues or a GM setting up the mystery, don't be afraid to go for big ideas:

- a rogue planet hurtles through the lightless void of space
- an unknown mass sits just beneath the surface of the sun, where no known material should be able to survive

- vast catacombs riddle the crust of an entire world, left by who knows who or what

A mystery on the grand scale encourages the players to step up and propose grand answers.

Meaning In The Void

“Don’t you see? These signals aren’t random. They’re mathematical patterns woven into the molecular structure of the cloud. It’s a message, a message someone put here long before life on Earth even dragged itself out of the oceans.”

–the Ruby Aurora, an InSpace adventure

In any InSpace scenario the obvious question the explorers try to answer is “what is happening?” but that’s actually a red herring. The real question of a good InSpace game is “why does what’s happening matter?” What are the larger implications of what is going on? How does it change what we think of the universe? That’s big fish science fiction.

When the explorers encounter a comet that changes course unexpectedly, that’s interesting but not clearly important yet. When the players decide that the comet might be an alien spaceship, proving that other intelligent life really could exist in the universe, then it’s important. Suddenly the situation has far reaching implications.

Instead of just two parts, a mystery and a solution, you can think of an InSpace game as having three stages: a phenomenon, an implication, and an answer.

phenomenon ➤ implication ➤ answer

The phenomenon is what’s happening, usually as laid out in the GM’s introduction. The implication is why it matters, what the big impact could be, and then the answer decides what is going on and whether what was implied is the case.

Just as the GM shouldn’t establish the answer, the GM shouldn’t establish the implication: that’s up to the players.

The Temptation of Star Trek

“Space, the final frontier...”

On the surface Star Trek looks like a really good model for InSpace: flying around in a ship, exploring the far corners of the universe. Sounds exactly right doesn’t it? The problem is that Star Trek has a some bad habits that may water down your InSpace game if you unintentionally imitate them.

Back to where you started—Because Star Trek is episodic television things rarely change: each episode brings us back to where we started. That is the direct opposite of big science fiction, where ideally you reveal secrets of the universe that change Man’s understanding of the cosmos.

Just flip a switch—Want to break out of the strange energy field? Just flip a switch and reverse the ion flow. Quick and easy solutions trivialize the scope of the mystery: how can the mystery be a big deal, a gateway to the secrets of the universe, if all you have to do is turn a dial or flip a switch to solve it?

Making A Space Mystery

Preparing a game of InSpace is easy. You don't need to design a whole scenario—all you need is a starting point and the players come up with the rest.

1) Start with One Unusual Thing

To create a mystery, start with one thing that is unusual or inexplicable. Consider these categories:

a) **Broken Science**—Take any normal phenomenon, think of what is expected by science, and then have the opposite or some alternative happen instead. For example:

- planets have gravity: this one doesn't
- stars shine: this one periodically stops emitting light
- comets don't suddenly change course: this one does

b) **New Phenomenon**—Describe something never seen before. Is it unique or is this just the first time anyone has seen one? Is it natural or created by something (or someone) else? What does it mean for known science? That's all up to the players.

- a strange cloud of blue fluid drifting within a planet's rings
- invisible lines of energy linking moons
- twinkling "starbursts" that congregate in the dead of space, forming strange patterns and then dispersing

c) **Artifacts**—Describe something that looks like it was left by someone else. It may be advanced technology (space ships, ringworlds), primitive construction (standing stones, ancient carvings), or even the remains of unknown creatures.

- weathered pyramids on a dead and dusty world
- a semi-material ghost ship drifting through space
- titanic bones embedded in an asteroid

Remember, no matter how it is described in the introduction—no matter how much you imply the strange ship is an alien vessel or the bones are from a dead space monster—it is up to the players to say what the artifact really is.

d) **Strange Events**—This is the catch-all for unexplained occurrences. Something odd is happening but there's no clear phenomenon causing it.

- ships are vanishing and then reappearing light years away without their crews
- colonists are waking up with memories from other colonists
- radio signals from 20th century Earth, except the people on the other end talk back...

Some ideas could fit in different categories—that's okay. The idea isn't to make rigid categories but to spark ideas. As soon as the explorers start investigating they will discover things that change the whole premise anyway.

2) Frame the Mystery

Once you have your core idea, decide the answer to these questions:

Does the ship discover the mystery or does someone else tell them about it?

Do concerned colonists, a survey team, or the EarthGov ask the explorers to come and investigate?

Does the situation involve other people?

Is there another ship near the phenomenon, an observation post, a colony—or is it just the explorer ship alone in the middle of space? Players can always narrate other parties into existence as they win skill checks so long as they don't contradict established facts (they can discover a hidden lab, a lost survey team or have another ship fly up, but can't say they knew there was a colony there all along when the intro says there wasn't one).

Is the mystery clearly a big deal, or is it just a curiosity on the surface?

It is perfectly legitimate to have a mystery that starts off looking trivial. That leaves it up to the players to decide what amazing things the mystery really indicates. The GM just says there's a planet that's unusually dense—interesting but not important—but the players narrate that this added mass turns out to be a vast alien machine buried at the heart of the world...

Remember, you don't have to motivate the explorers to investigate. So long as there is something unexplained to start with—no matter how minor—and you set the franchise dice for the mission, it is up to the players to find something incredible.

3) Add a Little Detail

Now that you have your concept and key points down, add a little detail for flavor. What's the name of the star system? Is anything nearby? Are there other planets? Are they barren icy rocks or looming gas giants? Are there moons, glittering rings, luminous nebulae?

Three solid details is about all you need to paint a clear picture. Space should be pretty, so try to paint mental pictures of sharp contrast: navigating a crackling ion storm should look different than orbiting the soft glow of a gas giant.

4) And Then... Stop!

Quit before you make up too much information about the mystery. Leave room for the players to make stuff up too. Less is definitely more.

If you find yourself saying *anything* in the introduction that hints an answer to the mystery, you're saying too much. Don't even toss out likely possibilities, even if you think they are just red herrings: the players will do that for themselves. Don't even *think* about what the answer might be.

Remember: the GM does not get to decide the answer, so the best mystery is the one where you do not even have any idea what the answer might be.

GM Tips for InSpace

Name the Mission

Once you have introduced the mystery, brainstorm a name for the mission. A good mission title should a) not foreshadow the answer to the mystery and b) should be a name the characters could use in-game.

Since you do not (by definition) know what the mystery is going to turn out to be about, you should not give the mission a name that says too much or biases the end result. "Mission to Telos-3" is a good name, because it frames the situation but says almost nothing about what is happening or why. "Plague at Prospect Station" says more, but if the starting point of the mystery is that there appears to be a plague, that works even if we later find out that the "plague" was a red herring.

Good mission titles should also be ones the characters would use when talking to each other or making entries in the log. Compare that to dramatic titles like "Doorways in the Mind" or "Terror at Telos-3." They make good television episode names but they aren't names the characters could use to talk among themselves.

Start With No Action

Resist the temptation to have a dramatic start. If you start the game with no action, with the ship just observing a phenomenon (maybe even having been sitting there for a few days), you put the players in the driver's seat more than if you "attack" them with the phenomenon and force them to react.

Don't Always Endanger the Ship

There's also a temptation to make a mystery that endangers the ship, because that forces the players to be involved if they want to save their own skins. It's a crutch that can undermine the point of the story—saving the ship becomes the goal instead of finding an answer to the mystery. You wind up distracting the players and turning it into a pure action game.

Same thing with endangering other people and having the explorers rescue them. If the explorers have to save the colonists, that becomes more pressing than revealing the secrets of the phenomenon that it is about to destroy the colony.

Remember, your explorers should not need motivation to explore. You don't have to threaten them to make them interested. Voluntary hazards are far better. The explorers see the danger and say "hey, let's go in there—it may be dangerous but it's worth the risk to find the truth."

Tyranny of Science Skills

In a game about science and space exploration it's easy to let everything be an Academics or Technology check. To keep things balanced you have to make sure to work in Contact and Athletics skills:

Contact—Any time a player has the crew do something instead of doing it directly you could make it a Contact check. The scientist examines the sample with the help of his team of assistants: Academics. The captain orders the med staff to examine the sample: Contact.

Athletics—Bringing in Athletics usually requires getting the crew off the ship (space walks, crawling through the tunnels of an alien ruin, hiking across an unexplored world) or some kind of emergency (struggling against turbulence, fighting to pilot the ship through ten gravities, enduring the feverish temperatures as a sun's rays bake the ship)—situations that would usually involve Stress checks. You can do both, require a Stress check and permit characters to make Athletics checks if they want.

Player Tips for InSpace

Create Crew Conflicts

It goes without saying that teams are more interesting when they have interpersonal conflict. Solving the mystery is more juicy when the characters have relationships with each other that get in the way at the same time.

Because InSpace is about big ideas it's particularly appropriate for interpersonal conflicts to be conflicts of ideals. The seeker who wants to reach out to the stars and embrace the unknown versus the explorer who wants to push back the unknown to make a larger home for humanity. The scientist who is willing to risk his life (or the whole ship) for knowledge versus the devoted commander who wants to protect his crew. Poet versus scientist. Idealist versus settler.

Solving the mystery becomes a stage for the characters to argue their beliefs.

Use Time

Time is a good way to emphasize scope. It's perfectly valid for a player to say that one skill check takes days or weeks and then narrate the whole thing. Sending survey teams to spend weeks building observation posts on the far corners of a planet adds more gravitas than walking over to the control panel and making a sensor sweep.

There is no mechanical difference, but it makes a better story that discovering something monumental takes time and work. The secrets of the universe should be hard to find.

Get Off the Ship

Don't spend the whole game sitting on the bridge doing sensor sweeps. Get off the ship. Take a survey team down to the planet's surface and poke around. Put on a vac suit and go get a close look at that alien derelict.

That doesn't sound safe does it? That's the idea. Putting yourself in risky situations makes the adventure that much more intrepid.

Even if you don't get off the ship, at least get off the bridge. Instead of doing everything by flipping a switch at your control panel go down to engineering and do it the hard and slow way.

Leave Some Mystery Behind

It's often better to answer the mystery but leave something to the imagination. You can reveal that the artifacts prove there are aliens ("we are not alone!") without having the aliens show up for lunch. We know more about the universe than we did before but we're still hungry for more.

An answer to the mystery can also be personally felt rather than scientifically proven. When the explorer touches the strange monolith and has a fleeting moment of contact with the alien intelligence, that provides an answer to the mystery even if none of the other characters believe it or experience it personally. The players know the answer even if their characters aren't sure.

By leaving a sense of mystery even when the answer is revealed, you let the characters maintain their sense of wonder and curiosity. You keep them motivated to keep exploring.

Tips for Playing Any Game of InSpectres

Half-time Huddle

One of the hazards of a spontaneous mutually created plot is that all the pieces won't come together. Players will create new clues without working in the existing clues, and soon you have a mystery that's going twelve ways at once with no clear answer in sight.

One good way to avoid that is the mid-game huddle: as soon as half of the mystery dice have been earned, frame a scene with all the characters back together in relative safety, comparing notes and discussing the situation.

Note this is an in-character discussion, not just free collaboration between the players. Even if the characters don't agree on the answer ("it's aliens!" / "no, it's not aliens!") the huddle will usually cement the question. Is it aliens or isn't it? Is the strange meteor causing hallucinations or actually communicating with the explorers? Players can vie until the last minute to decide which of the side of the coin comes up, but everyone is on the same page about what the big question actually is.

Make sure the everyone knows you are going to do the half-time huddle before the games starts, so they can pace where they are at as they approach the halfway point.

Write on the Table

A good mystery builds on the facts that have already been revealed, but as the game goes on it can be easy to lose track of the all details each player established. It's always sad to resolve your mystery and then realize that the solution didn't take into account some of the things that were revealed early in the game.

To keep the established facts front and center, try writing down everything established by skills rolls in big print on a piece of paper in the middle of the table where everyone can read them. If you have an erasable battle map even better. We've even taken it a step farther and written all characters, franchise dice—everything—all on the battle map so everyone can see each other's characters, the state of the ship, etc.

You can also put them up on a whiteboard or easel, but the downside is that players have to look away from the table to see it. The table is the center of attention, the wall isn't.

Don't Avoid the Mystery

Sometimes instead of using their skill checks to reveal facts that move towards solving the mystery the players establish facts that are completely unrelated. One warning sign is lots of facts that are just events, not information.

Usually this is because the players can't come to grips with the mystery—they have no idea what to do with it so they go on tangents and deal with side action instead. Then they get to the end and realize they haven't said anything about the actual mystery.

With some ingenuity even completely unrelated facts can be spun back in to say something about the mystery, but the longer the players avoid the mystery and weave unrelated plots the harder that becomes. Again, the half-time huddle is your friend. It forces the players to talk about what they think is going on before it is too late.

How Much Stress?

There are no guidelines in InSpectres for how much Stress the GM should dump on the players. It's totally up to you. But Stress is the direct counterpoint to the reward of franchise dice. Inflict too little Stress damage and the franchise winds up with a huge profit. Inflict too much Stress damage and the characters might not even be able to recover their skills, or even solve the mystery.

While it's fine to use your judgment to decide when to inflict Stress, it's very useful to keep track of how much Stress you have inflicted so you at least know how hard you are making things.

Our rule of thumb is to inflict as many Stress dice as there are dice in the mystery. Write them down as you go so you can keep track. You may also want to track how much Stress damage was actually taken from those dice, since that's what tells you how the risk/reward of the scenario is panning out.

Of course if the players keep putting themselves in obvious risk ("let's fly into the sun!"), or it just seems dramatically right to pound them, well just keep those Stress dice coming. Keeping track just lets you make informed decisions.

Other InSpace Settings

Instead of a ship you could set your InSpace game on a space station, a moon base or some other stationary setting. A stationary franchise works great for a one-shot mystery, but if you play multiple games you may have a harder time explaining why new mysteries keep popping up in the same place.

If you want a low-tech game, try the early days of the NASA space program, brave astronauts strapped into tiny capsules hurling themselves up into the unknown. What does a lone space walker do when eerie lights creep towards him out of the void? Houston... do you read me Houston?

You can even set your InSpace game entirely on Earth and make it a scientific investigation game, with strange signals picked up by radio telescopes or mysterious meteors falling into the oceans.

Kudos

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For more adventures of the DAUNTLESS in space, visit www.lamemage.com/blog.