Their world is gone now, destroyed by their lone, unstable sun going supernova. They are the survivors, inhabitants of a massive colony ship carrying one million people, frozen and asleep, searching for a home. When the ship reaches a suitable star system, it awakens a small number of people to serve as crew and explore the planets in hope that one of them will prove a suitable home for the last remnants of their race.

The universe is not a hospitable place. There is vast space between the individual pockets of life, the hope of the silent millions aboard the ship.

It is a false hope. The universe does not want these survivors, and everywhere they go, there will be threats that would annihilate their. The crew visits the planets, each time hoping against hope that the next planet will be the one they can live on, their new homeworld. The rest of the time, they are adrift in the cosmos.

ADRIFT

by Cyrus Marriner

In *Adrift*, you play a small group of these survivors, the crew awakened to investigate the planets and face the threats of a hostile universe.

Some of them will die, and the rest will have to deal with the pain of their loss.

The Planet

Their world was Earth, for all intents and purposes. Perhaps it was not exactly like Earth, if you have some ideas that would make the game interesting. However, if you start with Earth as a reference point, you can use that base of knowledge to create character histories and define relationships. For example, if you have a black character and a white character, you have automatically have added some nuances to the relationship between those two characters, based on what we know about race relations on Earth.

However, if you want the planet to be something different, or if you want to create your own world and society that these survivors came from, feel free. Work on it with the whole group, and settle on something. The planet is mainly important during character creation, when you define the backgrounds and histories of the characters. If you come up with some weird alien society, that can flavor the interactions and relationships, and certainly make for a good roleplaying experience. However, when you define the society, make sure that it has an ingrained survival instinct. A society filled with good-of-the-many martyrs won't work for this game.

The Catastrophe

The catastrophe was a surprise to all. Scientists started noticing changes occurring on the face of the sun. Within five years, they had enough data to determine that their models of the sun had greatly underestimated its mass, and it was precipitously decreasing its output of fusion energy. Within fifty years, the sun would go supernova, killing all life in the solar system.

The government of the planet halted most of their hostilities, but not all, in light of this startling new information. Soon, an accord was reached, and the wealthiest nations in the world began working together on Exodus, a project to cryogenically freeze one million fertile adults, male and female, and send them on to ensure the survival of the species. A selection

committee was formed, and began the arduous process of screening over a billion applicants down to one million.

The selection process was not perfect. In fact, it was outright corrupt. For every person selected on the merits they submitted to the selection committee, there were two who bought their way on or slipped falsified information past the committee. The process was roundly criticized, but there was not enough time to double-check those approved. The deadline was set for the ship to leave in twenty years, to ensure that it escaped the system before the sun went supernova.

The Ship

The ship has no name beyond, simply, "the ship." It was not officially named until after ninety-nine percent of its passengers were in cryogenic stasis, and will likely be referred to differently by each different crew. For my purposes, "the ship" is enough.

The ship is huge, over a mile long. It was built in space, and is a feat of engineering. It holds a million survivors, all in the massive back portion of the ship, called by whatever particular name your group comes up with for it. I call it the Garden. When I visualize the Garden, I see a long, grated metal walkway, made of iron, with no railing, suspended in the center of a long cylinder about two hundred feet wide. Sticking out all around the inside of the cylinder are five-foot-wide round bumps. These are the individual cryogenic units, only revealing their round hemispheres that display the biological information of the occupant. The rest of the unit is buried beneath the surface, connected to a complicated series of tracks that allow the units to be moved to the resuscitation chamber at the front of the ship with a simple computer command. The Garden is only lit by auxiliary lighting, making it a dark and foreboding place.

There are nine of these cylinders, each holding thousands upon thousands of people, all held together in a square chassis. On each side of the chassis, there are no fewer than three massive engines that propel the ship through space, powered by both a fusion power generator and hundreds of solar cells that cover

the ship's massive surface. The ship accelerates to speeds of hundreds of miles a second, then shuts off and drifts the rest of the way while its inhabitants sleep. In theory, the ship should be able to maintain power for hundreds of thousands of years, give or take ten thousand based on how much sunlight it receives.

The ship is much longer than it is wide, with the Garden itself being over ten times as long as it is wide. There are lots of maintenance corridors in the chassis of the Garden, but they are small and cramped, and designed not so much as an access point to the inner workings of the garden as an afterthought that if something goes wrong, there should at least be the illusion that somebody can fix it.

At the head of the ship are the three decks, which are small and cramped. They're dank, dark, and metal, built by engineers concerned with function far over form. The ship has no gravity, but there are magnetic boots included as part of the crew's clothes, allowing them to walk on any surface of the ship. The rooms on each deck are arranged radially around a square central core that connects all three decks.

The top deck is simply two rooms. At the front of the ship is the control center, where the ship can be piloted and incoming data read. A metal blast shield can be opened, providing a view of the cosmos through a large, thick plastic window. In the back of the top deck is the main processing room, where the crew can look at all the data the ship has collected during its journey, and the status of the sleeping passengers and mechanical systems of the ship. They also have control from this room to wake up passengers as they might need, and access to every passenger's information from the selection process.

The middle deck is crew quarters; two doors on the hub open into a square hallway that has doors to twenty different rooms for crew to sleep in, the number of crew awakened when the computer encounters an emergency. The floor of the hall is metal grating, and pipes and conduits can be seen running underneath. Individual quarters are cramped, with a cushion with straps mounted on the wall for each crewmember to sleep

in zero gravity. There is also a single group bathroom on this level, which can deal with three crewmembers at a time.

The lowest deck is dedicated to living comforts, and slightly more hospitable than the other decks. The four rooms there are arrayed in a radial pattern around a small central hub. There is a zero-gravity gym on board for the crew, and they are expected to work out in it to avoid muscle atrophy. Also arrayed around the hub are a small lounge; a recreation room with an extensive library of movies, books, and games; and a dining room.

Attached to the dining room is a massive store of freeze-dried and preserved foods; this "pantry" is also where the water reclamation and recycling is kept. The ship has plenty of water, but careful water conservation is important should the ship be adrift for a long time.

These decks are connected to the Garden via a huge room, with handholds all along the walls, and hatches that provide entry to each subsection of the Garden. This room also connects to the docking bay, which is kind of slung under the connection between the crew decks and the Garden. In it are the six shuttles and five hundred sensor probes that can be launched down to the surface of a planet to gather information about the planet. Each shuttle holds about six crew members comfortably, and is approximately the same size as a large private jet. They're aerodynamic, sleek looking shuttles—think of SpaceShipOne, the ship that won the Ansari X Prize. (Google it.) They have vertical take-off and landing ability, but operate optimally with a runway to ride down. Lift-off can be done in one minute, but it's a lot safer to go through the recommended ten-minute process. The ship carries enough fuel for over 1000 shuttle trips to the surface of a planet.

Also connected to the underside of the ship are three colony pods, ready-made self-sustaining tiny cities that also contain terraforming equipment that can work within certain environments. The idea is that the ship finds a planet with ranges within all the acceptable parameters, drops a colony pod, and awaken a small portion of the passengers to begin the terraforming project. If it doesn't go well, you bring the people

back up to the ship, leave the colony pod, and you've got two more chances. If it works, you drop the other two colony pods and restart civilization.

The Crew

Each occupant of the ship is supposed to have gone through a rigorous ten-year training process that began once they were admitted by the selection committee. Encompassed within it was instruction on how to pilot the ship and its shuttles, operate the computers, apply first aid, and make their way through the ship itself easily and quickly. Needless to say, those who made it onto the ship by less than honest means often only received the bare bones of this training. Still, there are many who already had prior training, and have extra skills not covered in the training process.

The crew has access to the two hundred environment suits stored in the armory of the ship, which is a large room that is an offshoot of the docking bay. These suits are skin-tight and vacuum-sealed, with a large helmet that can both filter air and connect to a contained air source if the environment is currently too poisonous to filter.

In addition to the suits, a wide array of weapons is available in the armory. All the guns are pretty much at the modern day level of advancement—think of assault rifles, pistols, shotguns, and submachine guns when trying to get an idea of the sort of weaponry the passengers have access to. There are also grenades, knives, and body armor in the armory, and nearly enough to start a small war.

The Mission

The standard procedure for exploring a planet is this: Send down a probe. If it gets readings that suggest the planet could be terraformed, send down a reconnaissance team to fully investigate the situation and take more detailed samples for analysis. If the reconnaissance team says everything is okay, and the samples turn up good, drop a colony pod and get to work.

Three to six crew members are generally assigned to the reconnaissance team, with one crew member remaining aboard the ship in case things go poorly. The reconnaissance team all wears radios with the channel open at all time. The ship receives the feed in a transmission from the shuttle, which relays the communications back to the ship. Certain weather or atmospheric conditions could interrupt the feed, but in all other cases the ship hears exactly what every member of the reconnaissance team says.

The reconnaissance team is expected to be actively looking for reasons not to settle on the planet. They don't want to use one of their three colony pods if it would be immediately overrun with murderous aliens. Because of this, the reconnaissance team typically spends three days on the planet's surface, looking for any signs that the situation is potentially deadly.

It usually is.

Character Creation

For character creation, you need to decide on the number of characters awakened from sleep. Anything in a range from nine to twelve is usually good; a general rule of thumb is to let each player create the same number of characters, and have enough characters that you can play a good number of sessions until you're down to having one survivor for each player. So, for three players, you might create nine characters, which would give you about six sessions before you're down to your final three, and for six players you might create twelve characters, giving you about six sessions before you're down to your final six.

For each character, try to write a couple of paragraphs to give you a decent outline to work with during play. What was their life like back on the planet? Why were they approved for Exodus? Did they have to leave any family behind, and if so, do they feel guilty? What sort of practical skills do they have? Do they have any family who were approved along with them: a brother, a wife, or a parent? Did any of their family awaken with them? Try to answer all of these questions, even if the answer is "no." If they didn't leave any family behind or didn't feel guilty, that says a lot about the character, so think of the ramifications of that.

Mechanically, each character consists of two aspects: a singular **survival** trait, which measures your character's will to live and overall survival ability, and several **relationship** traits, which are just a measurement of your relationship with other characters. Survival starts at 5, and goes up as play progresses, while your relationship traits are integers ranging from -5 (murderous hatred towards the character) to 5 (in love with the character). So, for you character sheet, write down survival, and put down the starting value of 5, then list all the other characters' names, and rate them from -5 to 5. The total value of all your relationships should equal zero.

When assigning relationships, don't assume that, unless you were family or friends with your fellow awakened, your relationships should be tabula rasa. Remember, the colony

ship awakens a crew when it approaches a proper class of star, but there's still plenty of time floating before they reach the first planet of the system. The ship is fast, but space is vast, so the crew has, at least, probably a month to get to know each other before they make the first landfall. Think about how they might interact with the other crew during that time, based on the outline you've given your character so far.

Don't think that all the relationships should be reflexive, either! People will fall in love with people who don't care about them, and an object of hatred might be completely oblivious to your feelings. Remember, love and hatred are rare, so extreme ratings of -5 and 5 should generally be saved for people who have relationships that predate their awakening.

Once you've got your relationships rated, you're ready to get into play, and start dealing with threats and challenges.

Threats and Challenges

In the game, your Survival trait is used to face **threats**. Threats are various forces, malevolent or otherwise, that threaten your character during the course of play. They might be a strain of alien bacteria, a vicious hive-mind of predatory aliens, or a massive weather anomaly. It's an inhospitable universe out there. Whenever you face a threat, every character facing the threat rolls a number of d6's equal to their Survival rating. These dice will be used to **meet** the GM's **challenges**. Challenges are complications that arise while you're trying to escape the threat—your containment suit becomes ripped, you trip while running from the alien, or the path you took through the jungle has become washed out during the freak electrical storm.

The GM, for his part, rolls the same number of dice as the players, plus ten for an average threat. The GM can add more or fewer dice based on how many of the characters he wants to kill. The GM should keep these dice hidden from the players, since he doesn't want them to start trying to stay three or four "moves" ahead of the GM. There's some element of strategy to the game, but it should come down more to making decisions

about each challenge as it appears, than trying to beat the GM at math.

Alright, so we've got the GM with a whole bunch of d6's, and each of the players with their own pools of d6's. The GM starts the threat by putting forth two dice, the first challenge, and declaring which character is affected by it. Then, it's that character's responsibility to meet the challenge by putting forward dice that equal or exceed the total of the two dice of the GM's challenge, and narrating how he overcomes the challenge. Then the GM creates another challenge, and puts forward two more dice. He can target any character with this challenge, even the character he just targeted. If a character ever doesn't put forth enough dice to meet the challenge, he dies. This means that if a player doesn't have any dice, and he gets targeted by a challenge, he's in trouble and needs help. The threat ends when the GM runs out of dice, or when he decides that enough characters have died.

So, you've got the GM with more dice, and he should be able to hit players over and over again until they die. That doesn't really make for an interesting game. That's where relationships come in. You can help out the other characters involved in the conflict, by contributing your dice to them when they meet the challenge. After a player puts forth dice to meet a challenge, if he doesn't put forward enough, the other players can contribute dice to help him meet the challenge, providing an accompanying narration of how they're helping. However, they cannot put forward more dice during any one threat than their rating in their relationship with that player.

There are also negative relationships, though. These work differently. If a character has a negative relationship with another character, he can take dice from that character's pool and use them to meet his challenges, but no more than his value in the trait. It's the "I don't need to run faster than the tiger, just faster than you," mentality—sacrifice someone you don't care for in order to ensure your survival. Don't be shy, describe what you're doing to screw over the other character—if you're going to be a bastard, do it right, and do it with some style.

Sometimes, the GM will put forth two challenges at the same time, targeting different players. In this case, use your discretion for the timing of meeting the challenges. Do what's dramatically appropriate. If one of the characters is holding on to a cliff over a river of lava with other characters is holding on to his leg, and the GM puts forth two "your grip slips" challenges, it's fine for the player holding on to the cliff to say, "I use my knife and cut his wrist to get him to let go of me," and grab one of that player's dice and use it to meet his challenge.

Keep track of how many dice you give and take to the other characters involved in the threat—it's important when you get back to the ship. Just put a mark down by the character's relationship whenever you give or take dice from them. A + or – should be a simple enough marker.

That's how the landing on any given planet will work. Get there, get in trouble, get away. Simple, right? It's supposed to be. Dealing with the fallout from what happens on the planet is where it gets complex.

Aftermath

So, you're back on the planet. Usually, at least one of the people who went down to the planet is dead. There might have been people who loved him, there might have been people who hated him, and there might have been people who didn't give a shit. How do those who loved him deal with the pain of loss? Do they blame those who failed to save him? To answer these questions, we go into the **aftermath**, a series of conflicts that determine how the crew responds to the loss of one of their own.

These conflicts are one-on-one, between one of the members of the reconnaissance team, called the **defender**, and any other character, called the **aggressor**. (Even another member of the team can be the aggressor in this conflict; the only requirement is that the aggressor is not the defender.) The dead character who you are conflicting over is the **deceased**. If more than one character died, the deceased is whoever the aggressor has

the highest rated relationship with, or the aggressor's choice if they're equal. One of the other players or the GM plays the aggressor. Players may play the roles of a few characters frequently, and co-opt the roles as their own, which is perfectly acceptable. If a player cares enough about a character that he wants to play it most of the time, let him. If this would have a conflict between two characters normally played by the same player, let another player or the GM play the aggressor, but be receptive to its normal player's suggestions. If he feels the need to break character and offer a suggestion, listen to it, agree, or argue a bit. If two players care enough about a character that the character's behavior merits discussion, that means you have a good character, one that players care about.

For the conflict, the aggressor and the defender each have a dice pool determined by different factors. Both pools start at a base of five dice.

For the Aggressor

Add your relationship with the deceased to your dice pool. Then, subtract your relationship with the defender from your dice pool. Remember, these are mathematical operations, so don't forget if the relationship is negative or positive.

If the aggressor is one of the other members of the reconnaissance team, then use the number of dice the aggressor gave to the deceased instead of his relationship with the deceased. If he took dice from the deceased, subtract that number instead of adding his relationship with the deceased.

Aggressor Pool
5+(relationship with the deceased)-(relationship with defender)
OR
5+(dice given to the deceased)-(dice taken from the deceased)-(relationship with defender)

If the aggressor's dice pool is zero or negative, then the aggressor doesn't care enough about the deceased in

relation to the defender to justify the conflict. Ignore it and move on to the next conflict.

For the Defender

Add your relationship with the aggressor to your dice pool. Then, if you took dice from the deceased via a relationship, you subtract the number of dice you took from your pool. If you gave the deceased dice via a relationship, add those dice to your dice pool.

Defender Pool
5+(relationship with the aggressor)+(dice given to the deceased)-(dice taken from the deceased)

Once you have your pools, both the aggressor and defender roll the dice. Then, play proceeds much like it does during a threat, with the aggressor taking the role of the GM. The aggressor puts forth a challenge with two dice. ("How could you let him die?") The aggressor then has to meet this challenge like he would during a threat. ("It was me or him!") Then the aggressor puts forth another challenge, and so on and so forth until the aggressor runs out of dice, or the defender can no longer meet the aggressor's challenge.

If the defender manages to meet all of the aggressor's challenges, then the aggressor's relationship with the defender goes up by the number of dice the defender has remaining, to a maximum of 5. If the defender cannot meet a challenge, then the aggressor's relationship with the defender goes down by the number of dice the aggressor has remaining, to a minimum of -5.

Then, pick another character for your character to conflict with, and repeat the process, until you've gone through all the characters. That's a lot of conflicts, but it's where the meat of the roleplaying will come from.

Once the aftermath is done, the situation is brewing until the next planet they arrive at tests them again. Don't erase the relationships with any dead characters off your sheet; just put

some sort of symbol next to them to remind you that they're dead.

Once you've gone through the threat and the aftermath, it's downtime until you reach the next planet.

GMing

The most important thing that a GM can do in *Adrift* is kill characters. The system is designed for you to do that, and it depends on you doing that to get to the aftermath of the threat. That doesn't mean cheat, though. If the dice don't go your way and the players escape the conflict, just have a second planet ready and go into it immediately. And maybe roll a few more dice than normal this time. So, I take that back. Do cheat, but cheat within the leeway the rules give you as a GM. I made the number of dice you get for a threat intentionally vague, depending on your will as a GM.

You can have an aftermath conflict between characters on the reconnaissance team if they don't die. Just make the aggressor pool 5+(relationship with the defender)+(dice given to the defender)-(dice taken from the defender) and the defender pool 5+(relationship with the aggressor)+(dice given to the aggressor)-(dice taken from the aggressor), and see what the results of the characters helping, or not helping, one another are. Just get through that quickly and get to somewhere where you can kill some people.

Play up the horror when you GM, too. If they've read any of this, they know at least one of their characters is going to die, so narrate the situation methodically, and milk that fear for all it's worth. Give them a little diceless adventure to go on, and occasionally roll a bunch of dice behind your screen like you're starting a threat. ("The blast door squeaks on its rusty hinges as you pull it open," {dice roll} "there's a few crates in the room, but nothing special.") Keep them paying attention until you find the threat. Still, don't string them on along too long. If you see their interest waning, start the threat.

Once you get into the threat, push the players into situations where they'll have to help each other to survive. You want them to start making choices about how much they value ensuring their survival later over helping their teammate now. After all, if a GM uses two dice to kill a diceless character, that's two fewer dice the GM has to attack you.

Also, don't give away how many dice you have left. Don't use all your high dice first, because that means when you get to the low dice, the players know that you don't have that many challenges left, and might start playing the system instead of the game. Mix it up, not just during the course of one threat, but from threat to threat. Don't use any one strategy constantly, and don't let the players know how many dice you have left.

For aftermath conflicts, let the players do their own thing. They shouldn't need a GM, unless you're playing a character at the players' request.

Planets

Planets are made up of three parts: setting, threat, and challenges. You want to know the first two for sure before you start running a planet, and have some ideas for the challenges.

Setting is the first thing you want to come up with for the planet. Is it immediately habitable, or will it require major terraforming in order to live on it? That's the first, and most important part of your setting. Everything goes from there. If it's immediately habitable, then start to consider what sort of environment the players will be in. Just think of the sorts of environments we have here on earth: jungle, forest, desert, mountains, glaciers, etc. Use the typical science fiction trope of making the entire planet one type of ecosystem, too. That way, the players will be more receptive to the idea that the threat covers the whole planet, and it isn't something they could escape by, say, settling on a different continent.

If it isn't immediately inhabitable, think about the other planets in our solar system, like Venus. Think of the other sorts of landscapes you could create, when you're not constrained to make it immediately habitable. Pretty much, you want to include water and an atmosphere in order to get some characters down to the planet to investigate. Then have them hit the dark side of the cloudy, barren planet, and bam! Torrential rain and monstrous lightning strikes obliterating the landscape.

That leads me into threats. You have to decide on the threat the crew will face on the planet. Remember two things: it has to be deadly, and it has to be planet-wide. A race of angry alien savages is a fine threat, but they have to have spread across the planet in a perpetual war with themselves, and you want them to have either huge numbers on the players, or some sort of weapon that poses an immediate threat to them. Just remember deadly and widespread, and you'll be fine. If the characters try a few more landings on the planet, keep hitting them with the threat and killing them off until you've made your point. Some players might not need the threat to be widespread to get them to leave, but it's still wise to have that in case they try landing on the same planet more than once.

Once you've come up with a threat, come up with what you want your introductory challenge to be, and then brainstorm a few other ideas for the challenges they could face and have them ready for when you start the threat. For the alien savages, you might have an initial challenge of a crude arrow flying at a character from the woods, followed by a host of screaming aliens running out of the underbrush towards the characters. For the thunderstorm, you might have a lightning strike damaging the shuttle. Then, think of a few more, that you might want to use as the threat continues.

Once you've got your planet just the way you want it, you should be set, but here's one last tip for GMs, and GMs only:

You know how I alluded to ending the campaign when enough characters are dead that there's only one for each player? Here's why: the last threat isn't on the planet. It's on the ship, and your characters brought it back on one of their landings. Then hit them with all you've got, and see how well they work together to save the ship, especially if there are a few negative relationships between them.

Designer's Notes

This is my first attempt at any RPG Design, so it follows that this is my first attempt at a 24 Hour RPG. I got the idea when I read about the Ronnies a few hours after finishing my first session of Vincent Baker's *Dogs in the Vineyard.* I would imagine this shows a bit in the system of meeting challenges, which is a variance on the system of raises and sees in that game. Another influence would be the only other indie RPG I've played, which would be *Schauermärchen* by John Wick. *Schauermärchen* was mainly an influence in the mood of the work, and now that I think about it, the two-trait system of that game was an influence on my use of a basic "Survival" trait for the players to roll.

As a 24 Hour RPG, (maybe more like 26, but I did start working two hours before a playoff game, in my defense) I haven't done any playtesting beyond a couple of test dice rolls. I like the system, but I'm sure it needs some work, particularly with the relationships. I think it constrains the players a little too much, but I have a few ideas. The time's up, though, so I'll let it out the way it is right now.

-Cyrus Marriner
October 10, 2005