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Welcome to the world amid ether and steam, in a time of progress and journeys to the stars!

It has already been 25 years since Space: 1889 was brought into existence. In 1988, the first American edition of this role-playing game was published. Numerous products such as tabletop roleplaying games, board games, computer games, audio dramas, e-books, and other products have been since published – proof if it was ever needed of the continuing interest in this unique game setting. The German edition published in 2012 was received with great enthusiasm, and the production of this English edition was realized thanks to the amazing support of fans and gamers!

With this core rulebook, Space: 1889 finally returns, ready to lead players into a world full of adventures, ancient secrets, and technical revolution.

Since 1870, mankind has been able to visit the inner planets of the Solar System by means of ether flyers. He has discovered the ancient civilization of Mars, set foot in the primeval jungles of Venus, and prospected Mercury for the many precious raw materials it offers. Yet there remain many places waiting to be explored, primarily the Asteroid Belt and Luna, the Earth’s moon, but also beyond the Asteroid Belt – if mankind can yet make the technological breakthrough to travel so far from the Sun. The Earth too, is an exciting place. There is adventure to be had under the gas lamps of the streets of London just as much as in the Academy of Sciences in Berlin or at the banks of the Amazon or the Nile.

On Mars, the archaeologist and thief alike explore ancient Martian palaces, but one searches for forgotten knowledge while the other hunts for forgotten treasure. During adventures start anew in the colothes of Venus or in the pioneering stations in the Twilight Zone of Mercury. Inventors have solved the problems of flying between the planets and are now trying to develop the device that will conquer the ice desert of Mercury or the jungles of Venus. Big-game hunters go after Venusian dinosaurs, while the ladies enjoy a cup of tea in a salon cooled by modern technology. While many explorers have turned toward other planets, other bold researchers range across the primeval forests of South America and the icy wastes of the Antarctic.

The world of Space: 1889 is the home of explorers and adventurers as it was told in the novels of Kipling, H. G. Wells, H. R. Haggard, Jules Verne, Arthur Conan Doyle, or films like 20,000 Leagues under the Sea, The Man Who Would Be King, Steamboy, The Lost World, or King Kong.

Space: 1889 is perfectly suited for classic adventure novels and science fiction adventures with a bizarre or nostalgic touch.

The term ‘steampunk’ is often associated with off-the-wall technology before the ages of Diesel and nuclear power. Space: 1889 has as many (or as little) steampunk elements as the stories of Jules Verne. Not all of the technological inventions that appear in this game are steam-powered, but many that are function in ways that are inexplicable or even completely crazy according to our understanding of technology and physics. Ether flyers push forward to alien planets, mole drills bore down into caves in the Earth’s interior, and mechanical men stand ready to do the work of ten men. Everything an inventor wants to invent is possible, be it radiotelephony, an energy weapon, or a time machine.

The laws of physics and nature may be bent or ignored if it makes for a good story. Nevertheless, the world of Space: 1889 has physical rules of its own which should be respected during the game. Occultism might be quite popular in 1889, however, ‘real’ magic or the supernatural are not part of the game. Still, supposedly supernatural events might turn out to be very real phenomena.

The end of the 19th century was a time of colonialism and imperialism, both of which caused many atrocities, but this was also a time when the view of the world was very different and such incidences were perceived very differently by many. Such views are very much part of the historical background for the game, which is why we chose not to make any judgment of any actual or fictional historical crimes. Every gaming group should decide on their own how they are going to deal with colonial crimes and the rights of suppressed minorities as well as how and if they are going to include these subjects into the game.

Space: 1889 is a roleplaying game in a more civilized time. Normally, each player will choose a gentleman as his character, bravely defying villains without kicking them while they’re down – and neither would the culprit, even as he lies on the floor swearing that he will return to take his revenge. Even so, this should be done in style, knowing that humankind is at the height of its culture and its work.

Have fun with this rather special journey to the stars!

Stefan Küppers,
Würselen, September of 2014
It was the brilliant mind of one man, or rather the deed of two men, that in 1870 was to change the world forever. With the invention of the ether propeller, genius Thomas Alva Edison succeeded in overcoming the distance between the planets. Accompanied by the adventurer Jack Armstrong, he eventually reached Mars and discovered the Martian civilization. For many millennia, this ancient people had fathomed out many a secret, and sadly forgot a good few of them as well. They crossed the skies with flying ships; built cities inhabited by thousands or even millions; and, in the Grand Canals, constructed a planet-wide feat of engineering that would save their civilization, all long before the Sumerians built their first cities on Earth using clay bricks. Yet by the time Edison and Armstrong reached Mars, the Martians’ knowledge about their ancestors’ technical relics was lost, and nobody today is capable of building those Grand Canals that the ancient Martians had once constructed.

Many daring adventurers followed in Edison’s footsteps and set out to explore the planets of the inner Solar System. Not everyone returned, though, for it takes more than thirst for adventure and action to withstand the dangers of space. However, every setback drives men ever onward, presenting a challenge to be overcome and so free explorers to once again venture into the unknown.

After Mars had begun to be explored, men set their sights on Venus, but when several expeditions sent out to Venus failed to return, Mercury became the new focus of attention. Closest to the Sun, this planet is a world of extremes, one face boiling hot, the other frozen solid. Its plentiful resources would tempt many a venturesome engineer and scientist, but the daunting challenges that Mercury presents means that even thirteen years after the first expedition, attempts to exploit the planet are still at an early stage.

Ultimately, an expedition returned from Venus to tell of a misty jungle world whose dangers had sealed the fate of the first three expeditions. Prehistoric monsters, great dinosaurs, strode through the jungle, tribes of spear wielding lizards lurked in the swamps, and the very air seemed to rot everything that man brought with him, but none of this has been enough to dissuade the intrepid from travelling to Venus. Not only will dinosaur hunters find their prey here, precious resources attract businessmen, industrialists, and settlers just as well. Cultivation of this inhospitable planet began ten years ago. Yet it takes the Terran colonists a great effort to slowly wrest some ground from this tropical planet in order to build plantations and settlements. The planet’s many dangers still remain though and so just like Mercury, Venus also remains widely unexplored.

Nineteen years after humans first set foot on the red sand of Mars, Earthmen are expanding their influence on the planet: The Earth powers have established colonies and other political structures through which they struggle for power with the Martians as well as with each other. Such conflicts are mainly about economic interests, sometimes about military interests, but one interest on Mars has been the cause of conflict between the Earth powers more than any other. Right after his landing, Edison made another discovery – liftwood, cut from a Martian tree, has for millennia provided the Martians with the resource that enabled their cloudships to take to the air. The Earthmen soon came to understand the strategic importance of liftwood, and are now all striving for dominance over as many of its sources as they can. While the Earth powers are fighting over the best slice of the ‘colonial cake’, honorable canal princes vigorously cling to their territories lest they fall into the hands of the Earthmen or are lost under the encroaching sands of Mars, and as merchants from Earth work to enrich themselves from Mars’ resources, aerial pirates seek to make a profit in their own way as well.

On Earth, tradition and modernity stand side by side. In 1889, Britain and the German empire are constitutional monarchies; the U.S.A. is a stable republic, France an unstable one; Russia is ruled by an autocratic, hereditary monarchy, and the Japanese society is shifting between progress and old traditions. However, all of them strive for dominion, and by the year 1889, this is over interplanetary colonies and trade, as well as liftwood. Only Belgium, or rather the King of the Belgians, flies in the face of this drive for dominion. Known for his aggressive and exploitative actions in the Congo as well as on Mars, King Leopold II contributes more to the destabilization of these regions than any other colonial power – all executed by his private enterprise, as neither his people nor his government share his colonial visions. Unnoticed by the public, the king’s mercenaries are looting their way through his two territories, the African Congo basin and the Martian Coprates.

Even though the year 1889 might seem long ago, there are many famous people from the period that have since become legends. Authors like Jules Verne, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, Karl May, and H.G. Wells tell stories, realistic and fantastic alike, which sometimes are overtaken by reality.

Besides various crowned heads, the characters could encountercarry Buffalo Bill, zoo owner Carl Hagenbeck, freedom fighter Sitting Bull, or Wild West legend Wyatt Earp. They could also go on adventures with explorers and venturers such as Cecil Rhodes, Emin Pasha, Fridtjof Nansen, Henry Morton Stanley, or Charles Gordon; they could share thoughts with Sigmund Freud, Robert Koch, or Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche; they could compete with engineers, scientists, and artists like Thomas Edison, Werner von Siemens, Nikola Tesla, Alfred Nobel, Otto Lilienthal, Gustave Eiffel, Heinrich Schliemann, Paul Gaugin, or Claude Monet. It could also be quite interesting to encounter Winston Churchill or Albert Einstein in their early years before they found fame.

Today, in the year 1889 and 19 years after Edison and Armstrong’s historical flight, archeologists and linguists conduct investigations into the ancient high culture of Mars while venturers dig for gemstones in old vaults. Engineers are trying to build transport routes throughout the Venusian swamps as British gentlemen hunt for steppe tigers on Mars and tyrannosaurs on Venus. Inventors work to improve or develop new ship designs to take account of the miraculous substance that is liftwood while adventurers race their cloudships through the skies above the red steppes of Mars chasing down aerial pirates aboard their sky galleons. Anthropologists work to decipher the mythology of the Venusian Lizard-men as diplomats negotiate new settlements for the hundreds of colonists that arrive every year on the ‘new’ worlds. Mercenaries find work in Africa as on Mars, either with imperialist or native masters, while merchants expand their empires from the Earth to Mars or Venus.
Yet while Martian priests and warriors are confronted with the seemingly strange rites of the Earthmen, proud and confident Martian women make human gentlemen blush, while Martian merchants cheat tradesmen from Earth by selling them faked spices.

As tempting as the distant planets are there are still many things left to discover on Earth. The Amazon Basin and the center of Africa have only been partially explored by the white man, and the newly discovered cloudship technology not only enables explorers to reach their darkest hearts, but even makes it possible to travel to the ice poles. Other ingenious machines of daring construction might solve the mystery of Oak Island or the treasure of the Nibelungs, while other adventurers might track down the lost treasure of the Knights Templar the old-fashioned way through extensive research in old libraries.

New technologies are not solely based upon discoveries on other planets though. In Essen, the steel company town of the Krupp dynasty, German engineers are working on the development of new materials and metals, such as Wilhelmium, which enable the design of innovative constructions. Such technological advancements arouse the interest of agents of foreign powers or rival companies wherever they are developed.

Meanwhile, the first voyage to Mars organized by Thomas Cook is expected to depart soon. It will offer paying guests the opportunity to see the wonders of Mars with their own eyes. Those unwilling to leave the Earth may find animals from foreign worlds in the big zoos quite soon.

The world is changing and the interesting days of 1889 offer many chances to shape and explore the Earth, Mars, and beyond...

Technological Progress

Space: 1889 follows in the steps of early Science Fiction (for more on this topic, see p. 11).

You can find any sort of invention that might have arisen from the tales of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Kurd Laßwitz, or Arthur Conan Doyle. Submersibles, time machines, invisibility elixirs, steam-powered space vessels, flying ships, all this and much more is possible in the universe of Space: 1889. Most of these inventions are actually intended as an inspiration for the Gamemaster—they are not commonly available in the Space: 1889 universe. Space and other vessels are expensive, tripods are used only in small numbers, land juggernauts are single experimental copies, and submersibles are just as rare—it is ultimately the Gamemaster’s decision as to which device he will allow in the game and which he will not. Nevertheless, the player characters may also own such a device, or even invent one, which would thus give them a unique Artifact (suggestions can be found on p. 235).

Science

The Victorian Age views the sciences with a mixture of excitement and concern. On the one hand, the blessings of modern medicine and engineering allows any reputable citizen to have a more prosperous and comfortable life. He believes in ‘progress’, as he can observe the progress of science all around him, not only with steamboats and telegraphs, but also in domestic matters such as electric light and reliable sanitary facilities.

On the other hand, scientific developments pose a threat to many things Victorians consider sacred. Darwin’s On the Origin of Species (1859) revealed the conflict between traditional Christian beliefs and the consequences of the latest discoveries. The upheaval caused by Darwin’s research is mirrored in the literature of this period. Many literary figures of that time went through a crisis of faith, as can be seen, for example, in Matthew Arnold’s (1822-1888) famous poem Dover Beach, which symbolically pictures a retreating “Sea of Faith”. Biologist T.H. Huxley (1825-1895), who led a crusade for the sciences in a series of debates with Bishop Wilberforce, is of the opinion that science has rendered religion virtually redundant. This is a frightening idea to devoted Anglicans, Methodists, or Catholics, who in no way feel the need to withdraw from either their religion or the blessings of science.

Another question that poses a threat to the established society is the question of the future of education, a battle fought under the heading “art versus usefulness”. Huxley, founder of the journal Nature, suggests in a number of articles written in opposition to Matthew Arnold, that poetry, the humanities, and the classical pattern of Greek verbs and Latin verses, which constituted the education of the landed gentry, would be swept aside. This revolution would be accomplished by the most dangerous weapon (from the aristocrats’ point of view) in the hands of non-noble engineers and industrialists—modern technology and the natural sciences. Thus for modern society, science is a double-edged sword—a blessing and a curse at the same time.

Although the debate is never fully concluded to either side’s satisfaction, the solution that follows is a typical Victorian compromise. Science becomes an accepted playing field for ‘talented amateurs’, gentlemen who tinker with their inventions or engage with unobjectionable theories, always anxious to protect society from any revolutionary discoveries or heresies that could undermine the status quo. A quite enthusiastic representative of this type would be Lord Salisbury. His experiments with hydroelectric energy (which lit up Hatfield House, frightening its visitors) could hardly compromise his pre-industrialization mentality.

Player characters are certainly likely to be more open-minded when it comes to their research and the application of their findings. They will probably accelerate the development and lead the world into a new future.

Energy

In 1804, the first mobile steam engine was invented, and with it a way to harness its mechanical force outside of a factory. It was a small step to use these snorting monstrosities for the transportation of goods and passengers. In the following years, steam engines not only lead to the development of a continuous railway system throughout Europe, but they also power diggers and construction vehicles, making it possible to erect buildings which dwarf even the pyramids at record speed. Pumps and irrigation systems ensure an explosive growth in agriculture, and thus a better supply for the population.

Electricity is widely known and utilized, but widespread residential electrification is still a long way off. In the larger cities, many houses are lit by gas lamps, and all appliances are hand-powered. Indoor-plumbing, on the other hand, is already widespread throughout the cities of the industrialized nations.

Industry is almost universally powered by coal-fired steam boilers. Oil-burning boilers are in use wherever oil is plentiful. In the mid-1880s, Gottlieb Daimler and Carl Benz developed