

Lasers and Feelings with Advancement and other such
Jiggery Pokery
A Hard Sci-Fi RPG with Variable Crunch

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1 Introduction

Welcome to Lasers and Feelings with Advancement and other such Jiggery Pokery! LaFwA (for short) aims to provide a crunch-lite space adventure with a hard sci-fi background. Inspired by the works of authors like Robert Heinlein and Ursula K. Le Guin, LaFwA aims to give truly alien experiences without delving into space-fantasy or space-opera. We designed this system to keep things at least a little realistic, without bogging players down with excessive math or killyjoy-type limits on what you can do.

Almost completely devoid of combat, LaFwA instead focuses on role-playing and acquiring the skills necessary to traverse the universe. Skills are easy to acquire and level up, but take a lot of work to perfect.

We hope you enjoy playing, but remember: if you don't like something, change it, and ignore any rules that ruin your fun. If "fun" to you is always following all the charts and calculating orbital transfers and insertations, then stick to that. If it means skipping by all that and just spending some fuel, then that's fine too. This is only a guide, after all. The most important part is the people at the table.

-Alexander Lowry

2 Sense and Tech

There is only one stat in LaFwA, and it's not *terribly* important. It's the Sense and Tech axis. It's pretty simple: the closer you are to sense, the better you are at interpersonal relationships, diplomacy, talking, etc., and the closer you are to tech, the better you are at using technology, navigating, piloting, and so on. But both are on the same axis, and your character keeps track of just *one* number. We'll call this your *gestalt number*.

Actions work like this: roll a twelve-sided die (a.k.a a *d12*). If you're rolling for a tech action, then you succeed if you roll your gestalt number or higher. But if you're rolling for a sense action, you succeed if you roll your gestalt number or *lower*. So the better you can roll on tech, the worse your ability to succeed on sense rolls, and vice-versa.

You're not locked in to a single gestalt number, though. Every time you take an action that requires a tech roll, your gestalt number goes down by one (down to a minimum of 2), making a future tech success more likely, and you gain one tech point. Every time you take an action that requires a sense roll, your gestalt number goes *up* by one (up to maximum of 11), making a sense success more likely, and you gain one sense point. So you may bounce back and forth along the Sense and Tech scale, depending on what actions you take. Up to 11 then down to 2 again. You'll get better and worse and different rolls over time. If you want to focus on one, you'll have to take both types of actions equally to keep your advantage at one end.

But here's what's important: you don't lose the modifiers that you acquire from spending your tech points and sense points whether that be +1 or +2 or -1 (remember, this isn't a bad thing for tech rolls) you might get on rolls while using *that* skill. So even though you, normally playing with tech, may move toward the sense side over time, making rolls harder, your specialized tech skills will still push your tech rolls toward success.

Note: Abilities are not affected by the player character's current gestalt number at all. You don't roll on abilities.

The other effect of this system is that it forces you to round out your abilities a little. Starting at an extreme of 2, you can only acquire nine tech points before you have to get at least one sense point, to acquire another tech point.

2.1 Failure

If you roll, and fail, then something goes wrong. It's up to the GM to determine what goes wrong. The GM should use their best judgement to determine the severity of what happens. If, for example, a shuttlecraft's instruments are out, a player may try to land by the seat of their pants, and choose to roll with a pilot skill aiding that roll. If their gestalt number is 4, and their pilot skill is 2, but they roll a 1, they get a total of 3 and they fail. However, it might be cruel to TPK (*total-party kill; killing every player's character*) and end the game right then.

Instead, the GM may choose some consequences. Perhaps the shuttle lands far off-course, and has its landing gear damaged on touchdown, preventing the players from taking off until they repair it. Perhaps they crash-land in someone's barn, making the locals upset. Depending on the severity of the failure, and how much pity the GM wants to take on their hapless players, the consequences could be lesser or greater.

Be sure not to let a failure halt all action; that kills the pacing of the story and morale of your players. Players *do* enjoy a challenge when they're forced to fight harder. Making success impossible will force them to give up and disengage with the game.

3 Character Creation

3.1 Fiction First, then Mechanics

It can be tempting to create a spreadsheet of skills and slap on a face later. This can help with the numbers of your character, but you will have a hard time interacting with other players or non-player characters if you don't know *who* your character is.

It's better to come up with an interesting character, full of story and life, then choose the skills and abilities that fit that character. Since you will be changing your skills and abilities frequently, you shouldn't define your character by those things alone.

uhh....

An Example Backstory *Maverick is a human from Terra. He grew up in the state of Iowa in the American Union. He is on the ship to be an envoy, with a specialization in cultural traditions. He hopes to find his uncle who went off with an interstellar mining guild fifteen years ago.*

This example includes a number of good elements. It includes a species and heritage, providing a cultural background. It also has a job you can build skills around. Finally, it has some abstract personal goal unrelated to the character's job.

3.2 Switching Characters

You may also switch characters frequently, so you don't have to be locked in to one forever. At the end of a session, you can switch to any character on your crew, or who is a (semi-)permanent resident of your ship. Be sure to work with other players so that your new character doesn't fulfill a need that another character already fills.

Before you come to the next session to dive into this new character, make it your own. You may know a few things about this character, or even quite a bit, depending on how much you interacted with them when they were an NPC. Try to keep them true to what you've learned so far, but also add backstory, beliefs, experiences, history, and motivation to them, so that you can play them fully. The GM may also choose to give you certain notes about this person to help you.

Note to GM: don't make a crew member NPC a critical piece to a plot, just in case a player switches to that NPC. If you must have a traitor or mole, make them either a temporary traveller joining the ship for a short time, or some other member of the faction that this ship is part of, to be transported or taken care of for a short time. This way, the critical NPC can play their role, but not get in the way of players.

3.3 The Crunch

Once you have a character in mind, it's time to get into the numbers, babey!

1. Choose a gestalt number.

The lower the number, the more likely a sense roll will succeed, and the higher the number, the more likely a tech roll will succeed.

2. Choose a skill to max out.

Presumably, your character is an expert at something! That's why they were chosen to be on this ship. Pick any skill, and give yourself the maximum level.

3. Choose two more skills at level one.

You have other skills and training. Choose two things to have a basic proficiency at.

Our Example from Earlier *Let's continue creating Maverick. Maverick now needs a gestalt number, skills, and abilities. Since he's an envoy, he should probably start with a low gestalt number, so he can roll better on sense rolls. Let's go with 4. We should also mostly give him sense-based skills. Let's give him Envoy as his maxed-out skill. Let's also give him Anthropologist at level 1, since that fits his mission well. It might be wise to also give him a tech skill, too. Let's pick User Interfacer (his second level-1) because it helps round him out, but also fits with his character as someone who figures out strange and alien civilizations.*

That's pretty much it for basic character creation. Add more backstory to taste.

4 Skills

Skills are specific areas of expertise that help you complete actions by giving a helpful bias to certain rolls. When you roll for an action, you can apply **one** of your skills to that roll,

as long as the GM agrees that your skill is relevant to the action you're trying to do.

Whenever your roll, you get one point. You can acquire a skill by spending the point amount required to get it. For each skill, it costs 1 point for level 1, an additional 2 points for level 2, and finally 3 more points to finish it off with the third level. You can do this at any time, during the game, before or after the session, or sitting at home in between sessions. The types of situations a skill can be used are written by the skill's name. Also, the amount of the modifier is listed.

You can also 'level up' skills. The cost of additional levels is listed in that skill's description. Leveling up skills means it biases your roll more strongly. A skill can be upgraded twice, meaning that it can be as high as level 3. Check the skill's description, though, since level 3 doesn't necessarily mean that it gives a +3 or -3 bias.

Remember, the bias given by the skill's modifier does not change based on your gestalt number. If you are heavily towards a sense direction, a tech skill modifier is just as strong. Your overall odds of success on a tech roll is still low, but for certain skills it may still be higher than it would be without the skill.

4.1 Abilities

Abilities are like skills, in that they cost point but instead of aiding a roll, they allow you to do something you could not before. Abilities cost 5 point per level, across the board. Skills are about increasing the chances of success for things you already know how to do, but abilities are about doing new types of things.

5 Session Zero

So you're ready to play. Your characters need to get to know each other (and maybe your players, too). The GM should block out an hour or so for everyone to get on the same page. Start by introducing the world, the ship, and what kinds of missions or goals your organization has. What are the "given circumstances"? What is the recent history of this world? What's the organization you're part of like? Try to give a sense of the vastness of this universe, and the strangeness of its inhabitants.

Next, the characters should introduce themselves to each other. After giving a real-life name, switch into the character, talking as if you *are* that character. While not essential, a character voice helps differentiate your character's opinion and questions from your own. Before talking about what your character does, talk about who they are. Where are they from? What do they look like? What's their cultural background? What skills do they bring to this starship? Why did they want to become an astronaut? Highlight things that are important to the character.

An Example Introduction I'm Jane. My character's name is Natalie Cook. [Here, you can switch into your character.] *I'm a nuclear engineer from the South Pacific League. My parents worked on Earth's space elevator. I'm a woman who looks South Pacific and have short black hair that I keep in a bun. I usually wear the standard jumpsuits, even on*

shore leave. Since I grew up around the kids of other engineers, I know a English-Polynesian-German creole unique to the area around the project. I work on the ship's propulsion systems, and became an engineer specifically to join a starship crew. I became an astronaut because I want to discover how other planets and cultures solve engineering problems. I play board games in my free time and brought chess in my personal items. Hit me up for a match!

The astronauts (the whole crew of the ship) would have gone through several months of training with each other. They know each other well, trust each other, and are open with feelings and concerns. Maybe they don't know each other's personal lives in detail, but there should be no loners. After all, a starship is only so big. A broody or antisocial person would have been weeded out pretty early on. Have everyone discuss what friendships or friendly rivalries were developed during training and mission simulations. Then, have characters introduce and describe these relationships with each other.

An Example Relationship *Debola and I are the two main pilots on this ship. During training, we spent a lot of time competing for high evaluations on simulations. Sometimes we would play the same scenarios dozens of times to shave the smallest amounts of fuel off of docking or landing costs. We relentlessly mock each other's skills, but go out for a drink together once we're done for the day. Debola's probably my closest friend on the ship.*

Finally, the GM should introduce the players to the first mission. They'll be able to choose which missions to take on later, but a short, simple one to begin will help give a sense of how the game goes. Play through this in about an hour, ending on a cliff-hanger, like a distress call, a strange ship exiting lightspeed nearby, or a failure being discovered on the ship. A sense should be given that something is about to happen at the beginning of the next session.

6 List of Skills

6.1 Sense

Aldrin +2/level on piloting, orbital rendezvous, and docking *without instruments*.

Anthropologist +1/level understanding and learning a new culture.

Chameleon +1/level disguising as another species or culture.

Cook +2/level on making food.

Critter Wrangler +1/level on creature-related shenanigans.

Diplomat +1/level for persuading politicians, businesspeople, or leaders.

Envoy +2/level on first contact messages and interactions.

Haggler +1/level while negotiating a deal with a salesperson or trader.

Linguist +1/level learning any new language.

Mathemagician +1/level doing anything cool with math.

Trekker +1/level on figuring out where you're going on unfamiliar ground, with or without maps.

6.2 Tech

Botanist -1/level on identifying and finding plants.

Cartographer -1/level on making and reading maps.

Engineer -1/level on operating and repairing machines.

Firefighter -1/level on suppressing or preventing fires.

Historian -1/level on inferring or learning about local history.

Mechanic -2/level fixing devices you're familiar with.

Navigator -1/level on figuring out where you're going dirtside.

Pilot -2/level on operating a flying vehicle. Tricks encouraged.

Radio Operator -2/level on operating radios.

Radio Scanner -1/level on identifying objects on radar and long-distance imaging.

Schematisizer -1/level on reading unfamiliar schematics.

Surgeon -1/level for first aid, or large healing during resting times.

User Interfacer -1/level on figuring out an unfamiliar or alien control scheme or device, or discerning something's function.

7 List of Abilities

Astrogator Ability to navigate interstellar travel.

Dialectist Ability to learn a dialect of a language already known, in 7 days. At level 2, this is reduced to 3 days. At level 3, the player character can figure out the jist of the dialect in about 1 conversation's time.

Experimenter Ability to operate medically on alien physiology.

Star-Pilot The player character can pilot an interstellar vehicle.

8 The *Stone's Throw*

Stone's Throw is the basic ship for LaFwA. Other ships are outlined in the Book of Ships, but this is the basic player's ship.

8.1 Description

Stone's Throw is a Torch Ship. A "Torch" ship is any ship with an engine that is unreasonably powerful - that is, it can get around the solar system in a matter of weeks, at unreasonably low fuel cost.

The *Stone's Throw* is a truncated sphere, with its engines and landing gear on the flat underside. The sphere is 50 meters in diameter, and there's about 58,500 cubic meters of space encompassed by the sphere. About 12,000 cubic meters are taken up by the reactor and engine assembly, plus an additional 5,000 cubic meters for other structural elements, leaving about 41,000 cubic meters of space for everything else. This feels cramped for the 300-person crew compliment. The maximum capacity of the ship is 400 people.

8.2 Daily Life

Each person gets about 8 cubic meters of space to call their own. This seems uncomfortably tight for a bed and personal cabinets, but in null g every surface becomes a wall, a floor, *and* a ceiling.

8.3 Energy Source

8.4 Engines

8.5 FTL Engine

8.6 Structure and Hull

8.7 Armaments

8.8 Sensors

8.9 Ansible

8.10 Shuttles

Oxygen

Oxygen is generated via a hydroponic algae that feeds off the heat of the Torch reactor.

8.11 Other Ships

Here is a table of other ships based off the Stone's Throw. Fill in details, but here are their basic stats:

Size	Name	Other
big	Goofer	An example
small	Beeboo	Another one

9 Other Information

9.1 The Game

9.2 Inspiration and Further Reading / Playing

This game was inspired by several other games, as well as books.

Lasers and Feelings by John Harper (Twitter: @john_harper). This is a very lightweight RPG system that fits on a single page; its lasers and feelings axis inspired the creation of this game, after we played nearly an entire Apocalypse World campaign without rolling on about half our stats more than a couple times. When first under development, this game's name was even "Lasers and Feelings with Advancement".

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin. An envoy for humanity is sent to a planet known as Winter to establish first contact. He finds a strange species of human that is biologically androgynous, and free of gender, causing him to re-examine assumptions he has made about his culture and himself. This story inspired the strange types of humanoid aliens found in this game.

The Rolling Stones by Robert Heinlein. A set of genius twins decide to use the money they made from an invention to buy a ship and wander the solar system. Unfortunately for them, their family wants to tag along. Likely influenced the Star Trek episode *The Trouble with Tribbles*.

Space Cadet by Robert Heinlein. A boarding-school story set in space. A handful of space cadets find themselves on their own when asked to investigate some strange occurrences on Venus. Features a flight computer controlled by gears, where a cam must be cut for each planet according to its gravity and atmosphere, to correctly control automatic landing.

Citizen of the Galaxy by Robert Heinlein. A young slave boy is taken in by space traders after his adoptive father is executed for being a spy. He travels between many strange and incomprehensible cultures before arriving on the one which to him is strangest of all - Earth.

The Moon is a Harsh Mistress by Robert Heinlein. The moon, a former prison colony for Earth, grows restless at the poor treatment of 'loonies' by Earth. They start a rebellion, opting to lob rocks at Earth via an enormous railgun, which impact the surface like atom bombs thanks to the gravity well. Shows an enormous complex of computers becoming sentient emergently, who is probably the most interesting character in the book. Also features the sex-fantasties-disguised-as-culture endemic to Heinlein's adult novels, and even tries to defend them, though not graphically. At least it's not straight masturbatory material like *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

Star Trek: The Original Series One of the early science fiction television serials, Star Trek has both fun concepts and a healthy helping of ham. About half the episodes are watchable to a modern viewer without a literary background. The episodic format of unusual creature encounters, as well as the existence of space colonies from before the invention of lightspeed that were forgotten may have come to Lasers and Feelings with Advancement and other such Jiggery Pokery from this series.

The Forbidden Planet An early sci-fi movie which Gene Roddenberry credited for inspiring Star Trek. Features a totally invisible monster whose motivations are a classic sci-fi twist.

9.3 The Book

This book was written by Alexander Lowry and Samuel Olson. It is typeset in L^AT_EX.

9.4 Modifying the Book

Because Lasers and Feelings with Advancement and other such Jiggery Pokery is licensed under the GNU General Public License, you are free to modify, redistribute, and even sell (as silly as that would be) Lasers and Feelings with Advancement and other such Jiggery Pokery, with or without modifications, without asking for permission from the authors or paying any kind of licensing fee.

The authors ask that you would attribute credit to them, just as they have attributed credit to the works and systems that inspired the creation of this game.

The source L^AT_EX files can be found at zanderlowry.com/LaFwA and downloaded gratis, just like the rest of the game.

9.5 Licensing

This game and book are part of Lasers and Feelings with Advancement and other such Jiggery Pokery.

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