



Hearts Blazing

A Note About Acting Like a Decent Human Being

Re: gender-bending, cultural “norms” and queer content. This is speculative fiction so you are free to define your character and your world as you see fit. If you are collaborating during the narrative do your best to be open to others ideas. Abusive and harassing play should not be tolerated (see “Cut & Brake” below), but differing opinions and attitudes should be embraced. Stories are better when we use them to explore the many facets of the human experience. Focus on what will be the most fun to play, what best reflects the personalities of the characters and what suits the tone of the story.

SETUP

Each player will need a few pieces of paper and a pen for worldbuilding notes, character information, and maps. Index cards are pretty useful, too. Place the Commercial Break card within easy reach of all players.

1.0 Assign Tropes

Before beginning Hearts Blazing, players should discuss the backdrop of the story they will be creating, such as the setting, history, technology, and the abilities of its people (it doesn't have to be sketched out in minute detail).

It is recommended that each player be responsible for one of the world's tropes and keeping track of the details and limitations of that trope. Example: one player might be the caretaker for the world's

history and guiding the group towards the creation of historical events that are appropriate for that world.

While each caretaker has final say on questions about their assigned trope, it is important for each caretaker to collaborate with the group when answering these questions.

Setting & History - Where and when is the story set? How did the crew get there and what is the state of the world at the time the game begins? A small rural town? The outer rim of the galaxy? Within a virtual reality? What kind of social and political structure exists? How did our society get to where we are now? What turn of events leads us into this story? What events have come before that may resonate with this story?

Cut & Brake

Players should establish a rating for their story (General Audience, Teen and Up, Mature). Sexual content is **not** required and shouldn't be included unless all players support it. Make sure you have a code for stopping if things get uncomfortable and discuss boundaries. If someone does something that pushes your boundaries a little too much, say "Brake." They should immediately tone it down, but continue playing. If you feel like things have gotten out of hand, or you feel scared or confused, say "Cut." All play stops immediately and the group should listen to whoever cut the game. Be supportive, find out what the problem is. Don't continue unless everyone feels safe and wants to go on.

Technology & Ability - The source and style of extraordinary technology and its abilities is a crucial component in defining the atmosphere and world of a sci-fi story. What makes us special/unique? What can we do that gives us the ability to fight and survive? Did we steal alien technology that unlocked hidden gifts? Can we build transformable jet fighters? Have we blended mysticism with technology? Do we use the ghosts of our ancestors to power our titanic warmachines?

Organization - No character is an island. Beyond the players there exists some formal or informal organization that they participate in. Whether the crew has a 'direct line to-' or a 'spiritual alignment with-' the organization is a context in which their unit operates. What, if any, is the central structure of that organization?

How does it relate to the “civilian” world around it? To whom do they answer and what are their responsibilities? Is it military? Revolutionary? Are we sleeper agents on an alien world or a slave gang escaping from post apocalyptic tyranny?

Supporting Cast - As critical as the players are to *Hearts Blazing* they would be nothing without a good supporting cast. There are a few supporting archetypes included in the deck that should be laid out on the table during play. As Supporting caretaker, try and utilize these characters to flesh out the world and provide opportunities for players to interact with the larger world. You don’t need to detail every person who crosses paths with the crew, but having a handful of recognizable figures is rewarding.

Guidelines vs. Rules

Aside from the aforementioned mentioned thoughts on sexual content and player comfort, everything in *Hearts Blazing* is more of a guideline than a rule. *Hearts Blazing* is designed to give players many angles of inspiration for their stories. The episode cards and archetype decks provide various plot threads, moments and supporting cast ideas — but you don’t have to use all or any of them. Think of them as a creative safety net to catch you when your imagination falters, or use them as seeds to germinate an idea. When in doubt shamelessly steal characters, themes, settings and set pieces from your favorite shows and books; I guarantee those writers were doing the same thing.

Antagonists - Good bad guys are essential to any conflict. Great antagonists motivate the conflict while they provide opportunity for insight and understanding. The goals and motives of a foe are often mysterious at the outset and grow in subtlety and complexity as the story unfolds. Who is our foe? Why do they threaten our way of life? What do they want and how do they hurt us to get it? Who are their leaders? How do they fight?

1.1 Choose an Archetype

Each player is randomly dealt (or chosen if the group prefers) one of five Character roles. The player places this card face up in front of them and takes the respective character deck.

The Ace is the best pilot in the fleet,

and they know it. They can fight circles around any antagonist threat and holds themselves above the rules because of their greatness. The Ace relies on their impressive skill to succeed. (*Val Kilmer as Iceman, Kara "Starbuck" Thrace, Roy Fokker, Striker Eureka, Han Solo, Bato and Trinity are all good examples of The Ace*)

The Leader is who the crew looks to for direction. Exceling at strategy, vision and long-term goals, they embody the mission itself. They are simultaneously beholden to the crew while retaining a some authority over it. The Leader possesses exceptional observational abilities or wisdom. (*Admiral Adama, James T. Kirk, Imperator Furiosa, Marshall Stacker Pentecost, Scott Bernard, Malcolm Reynolds, Morpheus are all good examples of The*

Leader)

The Rookie is chomping at the bit to take the fight back to the antagonist. What they lack in experience is often made up for with bravery, cunning or sheer grit. The Rookie is often the heart of a team, powered by passion and/or raw talent above all else. (*Rick Hunter, Luke Skywalker, Mako Mori, Ryuko Matoi, Carl Grimes, Neo and River Tam are all good examples of the Rookie*)

The Engineer is a front of useful information. Mechanics, scientists, navigators & strategists these are figures of crucial knowhow without which the crew would be unable to persevere. The Engineer brings an impressive intellect or expansive knowledge to the team. (*Miles O'Brien, Chief Tyrol, Mr. Spock, R2-D2, Jet Black*

& Edward, Rupert Giles, Kaylee Frye are all good examples of The Engineer)

The Veteran is the backbone of the team, The Veteran is an experienced warrior who is both comfortable in conflict and open to adaptation as the moment demands. The Veteran leans on their extensive experience to assist them. (*Daryl Dixon, Lee "Apollo" Adama, Chewbacca, Jayne Cobb, Goose, Zoe Washburne, Johnny Rico, Makoto Kusanagi are all good examples of The Veteran*)

1.2 Your Character Deck

Each character deck contain actions or elements related to that character's performance in the plot. For instance, it may be something small like an Engineer's flash of mechanical insight that saves the day

or a huge moment like the Ace flying their mecha into the heart of the mothership. The higher the drama of the moment, the higher the value of the bid card. Each deck also contains three negative-value cards called Frailty. These represent flaws or weaknesses of the character and are played as any other bid (see 2.1) but reduce the value of the collective bid instead of adding to it.

Negative bid cards focus on character depth and prompt you to flesh out your character

Also, holding Frailty cards at the Finale will result in a loss of collected keywords in accordance with the value of the card.

1.3 Motives

Each player is secretly* dealt one of 5 motives. After it has been examined the player places it face down underneath their

Role; a character's motive should be kept secret*. Your motive determines which keywords you will be attempting to collect. Collecting keywords allows you to narrate a more dramatic finale for your character and is, loosely, how you “win” as an individual.

Avenger - You have a personal vendetta against the antagonist. This conflict is your moment to make them pay once and for all. Given the chance, you may choose punish your foes instead of defending your friends.

Keywords: *Justice* and *Triumph*

Opportunist - You aren't a bad person, but this is a chance for you to really get ahead. A conflict is an opportunity for personal gain; that is what you are in it for.

* or not, whatever works for your group

If that means helping out, you don't see any problem with that; as long as you get yours.

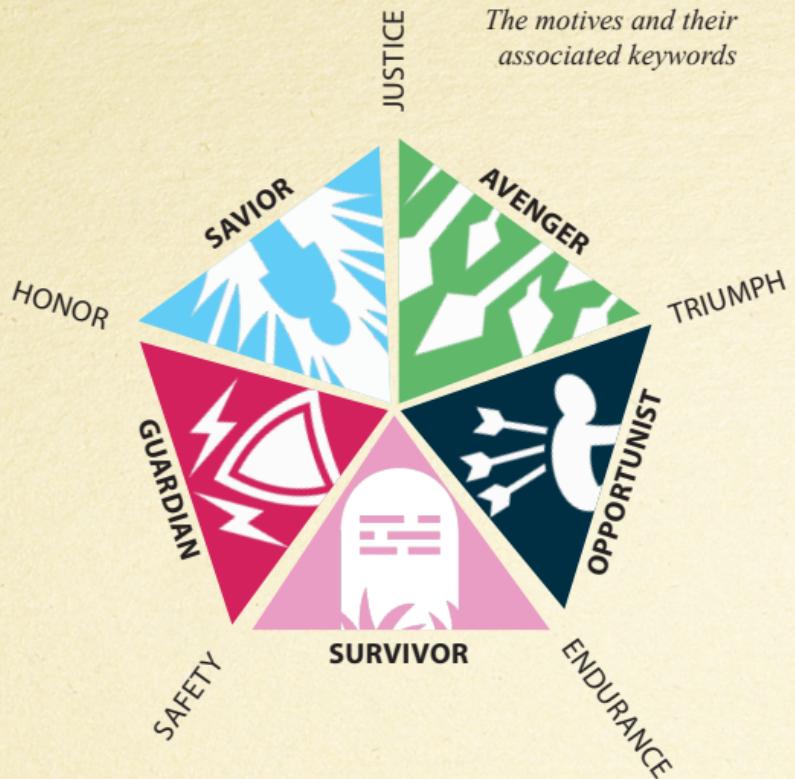
Keywords: *Triumph* and *Endurance*

Survivor - Your motive is simple; get through this conflict intact. Often that means being part of a strong team and you are happy to act the part. Sometimes you don't have to outrun the bear, you just have to outrun your friend.

Keywords: *Endurance* and *Safety*

Guardian - It's your duty to keep everybody

The motives and their associated keywords



alive and in one piece. Caretaker, knight, mother hen — these are all roles you embrace. Not everybody is fit to fight but you can stand in their place. The safety and integrity of the group comes first.

Keywords: *Safety* and *Honor*

Savior - It's not enough to simply get through this in one piece. This conflict is an opportunity to evolve and transcend, to fulfill a destiny. The people around you deserve better and you can provide that for them.

Keywords: *Honor* and *Justice*

1.3 Complete the look

Take a few minutes after you have selected/received your archetype and motive to loosely define your character. What is your name? Where are you from?

Age? Gender? Race? It can be helpful to describe your character as “resembling X.” Place a half-folded index card with your basic information in front of you for the other players to reference. Leave room (physically and mentally) for expounding on these choices as the story unfolds.

1.4 Build the Plotline Deck

Hearts Blazing uses a deck of cards, called Episodes, to guide players through the plot with 5 Pilot episodes, 30 Midseason episodes and 5 Finale episodes.

1. Separate the Finale, Midseason, and Pilot episode cards into separate decks.
2. Shuffle each plot deck individually.
3. Deal 2 Finale cards, facedown.
4. Deal 9 Midseason cards, facedown, on top of the Finale cards (for a 5 player

Narration, direction and etc

The meat of *Hearts Blazing* lies in the episodic narration. This can take many forms. A good approach is to imagine how you would recount the events of a beloved show or story to a friend who missed it, enthusiastically describing the setting, action, language and important moments to the rest of the players. Allow them to add to your tale and twist the scene to the delight of the group. Some players may engage in full-throated improvisation while others may be more comfortable narrating from a third-person or directorial perspective. There is no wrong way to add narration, as long as you are doing your best to build on the work of others. When questions arise, look to the caretakers to resolve disputes, make creative judgements, and try to move forward as quickly as possible. There will be dozens of scenes over the course of the game, so there are plenty of opportunities for players to get their ideas on the table. It is more important, and satisfying, to make space for the ideas and suggestions of others than to fight for every notion you have individually.

Episodes, scenes and commercial breaks

When bidding is complete players begin the episode. Episodes are broken into three scenes:

The Launch, a scene narrated/directed by the In Focus character

The Bridge, narrated/directed in collaboration by all players

The Wrap, narrated/directed by the High Bidder

A Commercial Break is the transition moment between each of these scenes

game*).

5. Deal 1 Pilot card on top of the Midseason cards.

These episodes will be drawn, revealed and bid on by the players. Each episode card contains a title, a story prompt, an In Focus character, suggested supporting cast and keywords for the 1st and 2nd place bidders.

PLAY

To begin play reveal the top episode from the Plotline deck, pass it around or read it out loud so every player can understand it. Place this card faceup in the center of the play area. Each episode enters play with a Threshold value equal to the total number episodes played or in play (**HUH?**).

2.1 Bidding on a scene

Once each player has had a chance to read the episode, bidding may be opened. Simultaneously, each player may place a card (or multiple cards) from their hand face down** in front of them (you do not have to bid on every episode). When bidding completes, reveal the cards, total their collective value and compare that to the Threshold value of the episode.

If the combined value of all played character cards meets or exceed the Threshold of the current episode then:

- keywords on the card may be claimed by the appropriate bidders

*In a four-player game use 7 Midseason cards and in a three-player game use 6 midseason cards.

- the team may narrate a successful conclusion to the episode.

If the combined value of all cards *does not meet* the episode Threshold then:

- no keywords may be claimed
- the team must narrate an unsuccessful conclusion to the episode

The player who bid the highest total value of cards gains the 1st place keywords listed on the card. The player who bid the 2nd most gains the 2nd place keywords. If two or more players tie for the highest bid both players receive the 1st and 2nd place keywords. Write down your collected keywords on your character notes.

The player who has the highest bid directs the Wrap (the concluding segment) of the episode. In the case of a tie, both players should closely collaborate on a

mutually satisfying Wrap to the episode. If there are no bids, then the Wrap is directed by the player to the left of the In Focus character.

2.2 The Launch

The In Focus character indicated on the card (or the player to the left of the high bidder if no matching archetype exists) begins the episode. Their job is to set the scene, describe the action and engage the other players in an improvisational narrative.

When a member of the group feels The Launch is sufficiently established and they have an idea of where they would like to direct the story, they may raise the Commercial Break card. Play is paused

and the episode transitions to next scene, or The Bridge.

2.3 The Bridge

During The Bridge, narrative/directorial control is shifted to the group as a whole. They work together to advance the story, bring supporting cast, and generally broaden the scope of the episode by narrating or improvising as appropriate. Generally, The Bridge should be the longest scene of the episode, allowing for all players to have input on the story and providing ample space for exploring and creating a rich world.

When a crucial point in the scene is reached (like the reactor begins to meltdown or the heroine is knocked off a balcony) and the High Bidder has an idea of where they want to take the episode, they

*** or face up, if that suits your group*

may raise the Commercial Break card. Play is paused and the episode transitions to the final scene.

2.4 The Wrap

The goal of The Wrap scene is to end the episode in a satisfying manner. This doesn't always mean that all story threads are tied up neatly. In truth, well-executed cliff-hangers, unresolved subplots and lingering mysteries are essential components to episodic narration and should be encouraged. The high bidder narrates/directs the Wrap, resolving (or pointedly not resolving) the questions or moments from the prior scenes and determining the status of their character in relation to the events that transpired.

2.5 Keywords

Each episode card contains 1st and 2nd place Keywords. Ostensibly, collecting these keywords through the bidding process is how an individual "wins" the game. The keywords are intended to represent,

A note about The Bridge

When your scene enters The Bridge it can be good for the In Focus character and/or the High Bid player to step back for a second. Particularly enthusiastic players have a tendency to dominate collaborative narration, especially during moments where key story elements are in the spotlight; try and spread the love.

broadly, themes that accompany the five Motives. Avengers are driven by revenge and justice, Guardians are concerned with notions of safety and honor, etc... Pragmatically though, they are another loose inspirational element for story development. Just because an episode includes Triumph and Honor on the card does not mean that the team is forced to incorporate those themes into the narrative.

2.6 Do I really need to fly into a black hole?

The cliches dictated throughout your character deck are guidelines and suggestions. You are free to alter their content as you see fit, but try and stick to the theme of the character and the intensity of the action. Low value cards represent small moments that can help define the identity

of your character. High value cards often represent critical actions by the character or even monumental sacrifice, but still, they are guidelines. Whatever you have your character do, try and maintain the spirit of the card. Additionally, if your character action simply doesn't fit smoothly into the narrative, don't try and jam it in, go with the flow of the story and have fun.

FIN

3.0 After the Finale

Players (if motives were hidden) reveal their character motive and tally their associated keywords. Players lose 1 keyword for each negative value card they are holding at the end of the game. Then, beginning with the player who collected the fewest keywords, players

narrate an epilogue scene for the story that reveals the fate of their character. Narrative control passes to the player with the next fewest keywords and end with the player who collected the most keywords. The final player gets to wrap up the entire series; this is a great opportunity for shocking reveals or ominous hints for the next game.

Successful vs. Non-successful episodes?

Characters may choose to, or inadvertently, underbid the Threshold of an episode. Regardless of the total bid number, narration continues noted as above (Launch is set by In Focus, Bridge is narrated by community and Wrap is narrated by the high-bidder/player to the left of the In Focus). Allowing an episode to resolve in this manner comes at a cost. It is important that the team be in a worse state than before this episode. Friends, family and resources should be lost. Hope should be drained and the situation, in general, should be more dire than ever before.

And then I flew into the black hole...

As discussed, the cards you use to bid from your character deck are not ironclad instructions of how your character must act. They are suggestions meant to inspire and facilitate your storytelling. When you choose to act upon the cards you used to bid on an episode, make it clear that you want to contribute. Holding up your card or pointedly pushing it towards the episode card can indicate to the other players “Hey, I’m doing this, let me have this moment please.”

Meg, Glenn, Dan, Rowan, and Danielle have begun a game of Hearts Blazing and they have agreed to these simple premises about the world they will be building together:

Our characters live in a world where mysterious glaciers have appeared in the sky and silently float around the world.

The world is several centuries into the future, but British Imperialism is still cool and everyone dresses like a they’re going on safari.

Our characters are a team of rebel scientists.

Player	Trope	Character	Motivation	Keywords
Meg	History	Ace	Opportunist	Triumph, endurance
Glenn	Organizations	Veteran	Guardian	Safety, honor
Dan	Technology	Engineer	Survivor	Endurance, safety
Rowan	Abilities	Leader	Avenger	Justice, triumph
Danielle	Antagonist(s)	Rookie	Savior	Honor, justice

World Trope Caretakers:

- Meg is responsible for the world's history.
- Glenn is responsible for the world's organizations.

- Dan is responsible for the world's technology.
- Rowan is responsible for the people's abilities.
- Danielle is responsible for the world's antagonist(s).

Each player has been dealt a face-up card with an archetype on it:

- Meg is the Ace.
- Glenn is the Veteran.
- Dan is the Engineer.
- Rowan is the Leader.
- Danielle is the Rookie.

They have taken their respective character decks, shuffled them, and placed the decks before themselves. They take a few moments to give their characters names and some general identity.

Lastly, their Motivation cards are dealt and placed underneath their Role cards:

- Meg is an opportunist.

- Glenn is a guardian.
- Dan is the survivor.
- Rowan is the Leader.
- Danielle is the Rookie.

Ready to Play

Meg draws the top card from the episode deck, it is “Milk Run”. The 1st place keywords on “Milk Run” are **Safety** and **Honor**; the 2nd Place keyword is **Revenge**. The card’s Threshold is 1 (because this is episode 1).

Glenn sees that the episode’s keywords match his Motivation perfectly and he bids two cards from his hand (facedown): **I’m Not Left Handed (2)** and **Shhh! Did You Hear That...(1)** for a total bid of 3.

Dan sees that one of the episodes keywords matches his motivation, but he’s not overly excited, so he bids one card from his hand, **Machine Empathy (2)**, for a total bid of 2.

Danielle also sees that one of the episode’s keywords match her Motivation and

she bids one card, **Oops (2)**, for a total bid of 2.

The episode's keywords don't match Rowan's Motivation at all, but he knows he should get the **Frailty** card out of his hand as soon as possible, and feels kind of emo anyway. So, he bids one card, Frailty (-1), for a total bid of -1.

Meg passes on bidding for this round.

Bids are revealed

Once everyone has decided on their bid, they simultaneously reveal their bids. Glenn has bid 3, Dan 2, Danielle 2, and Rowan -1, for a collective bid of 6. The episode Threshold is 1 meaning the group can narrate a successful end to this episode and Glenn will collect the 1st place keywords as he was the highest bidder.

Dan and Danielle tie for the 2nd Place keyword and can both score it, but it doesn't match either of their Motivations and won't help them at the end of the game.

The Launch Begins

The group as a community begins to narrate the scene. The In Focus character of “Milk Run” is the Ace (Meg) who starts off the episode.

MEG: *“Guys, hiking across the floating glaciers has been forbidden for years now, but our team has been taking core samples from the ice for several months suspecting the government knows something that the world doesn’t about the mysterious glaciers. We’re on a mission now to collect another routine core sample and something goes wrong.”*

DAN: *holds up the commercial break card and *The Bridge begins**

The Bridge begins:

ROWAN: *How do we get to the floating glaciers? Do we have helicopters? Rocket boots? Do we think happy thoughts (haha what are those)?*

GROUP: *Let’s ask Dan, the Caretaker of Technology!*

DAN (CoT): *looks up sagely* *Rocket boots, my children. We have rocket boots.*

Danielle: Okay, so, we have our rocket Uggs and there's a problem, right? The glacier begins to shift beneath our feet and begins falling out from under us.

Meg: Worse, the glacier is right above Indianapolis.

Glenn: *holds up Commercial Break card*

The Wrap begins:

Glenn was the highest bidder of this round, so he narrates the end of the episode.

Glenn: Fuck that town, but we gotta at least save these core samples, right? The glacier upends and begins to sink towards the city. Rowan's character, Elong Snarfgrad, tries to pack up the samples, but a falling ice boulder knocks the samples out of his hand sending them plummeting down the glacier as it begins to break up. Danielle's character, Killah T. Swift (*The Rookie*), rockets down the glacier after the samples.

But just as Swift lays hands on the samples with a triumphant "Yes!", a large chunk of ice strikes her head. She starts plunging towards the earth, unconscious. My character, Dirty Hanz, must make a decision: save the samples or Killah T. Swift.

DUH DUH DUH.... End of episode.

Players then draw back up to three cards from their character decks and a new episode card is drawn. Repeat.

Hearts Blazing

After generating a speculative fiction setting together, players take on the roles of dynamic but recognizable spec-fic archetypes. Drawing from a deck of “episodes” players create collaborative-narration scenes prompted by episode intros. By bidding on each episode you secure the keywords associated with your hidden motivation. The player with the most keywords will have final say in the story’s epilogue.

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