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[Muse] Actual Play - Proxima b Generation Ship



Demiurge

September 2016

Hi all,

I've been hiding under the rock of new parenthood for too many years, and I finally got the chance to play some Muse with friends! I'm going to write up my experience here. If you're curious, the game can be downloaded for free here: <http://benn.ca/muse>

STORY SEED

The original premise (Story Seed in Muse parlance) was a generation ship on its way to colonize Proxima b, something like 150 years in the future. The story's action started as the ship arrived at Proxima b, where the colonists didn't quite know what to expect because the probes they had sent ahead had inexplicably stopped working. The colonists had left Earth because humans had managed to irrecoverably destroy the Earth's environment.

Here are some important Wikipedia facts pertinent to the story: Proxima b is a newly discovered Earth-like planet orbiting Proxima Centauri, the closest star to our Sun at a distance of 4.24 light years. Proxima Centauri is a "flare star", which means that it gives off occasional great bursts of x-rays, making for possibly very interesting wildlife on Proxima b. The planet itself would be a bit larger than Earth. Using a nuclear pulse powered ship (that is a ship powered by exploding nuclear bombs behind it) it would be possible to reach there in about 100 years.

We tried a new brainstorming rule that I'm experimenting with, and it helped us come up with a bunch of good ideas for the Story Sheet (which contains the main elements of the story). Here what we came up with:

STORY SHEET

Character: Jake Blacklock – an American sanitation engineer and microbiologist

Relationship: Secret member of the Gatekeepers of Eden, a cult that doesn't want humans destroying any more worlds

Goal: Stop colonization of Proxima b

Character: Su Yi Chen – Chinese, ship's captain, dual Olympic gold medalist in archery and biathlon, hobbyist beekeeper

Relationship: Dislikes Jake because he won't recycle humans in the waste disposal system (it's inefficient!)

Goal: Use Proxima b as a foothold to restore Earth

Character: Yivgeni Polotnik – Siberian Russian, proud multi-generational survivalist and gifted tech geek

Relationship: Has a crush on Jake, who is leading him on

Goal: Retrieve lost probes and solve the mystery of their disappearance.

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Threat: Proxima Centauri is about to start a flare

Threat: there is a nuclear bomb missing from the ship's propulsion arsenal

Scene: Probe crash site on Proxima b

Scene: Ship's bridge, a zero-g environment where crew insert a computer head-jack and experience an Augmented Reality computer interface

Scene: V-Site (Vegetation Site) on Proxima b, where a forest was detected in the middle of a wasteland

Crisis Question: Will Su Yi colonize Proxima b?

Subplot Question: Will Yivgeni convince Jake to choose him over his mission?

[ADDED DURING PLAY] Subplot Question: Will Jake convince Su Yi that the crash site represents hostile aliens?

[ADDED DURING PLAY] Subplot Question: Will Yivgeni defeat the Jake/Thing?

Comments



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ACTUAL PLAY

Play started with the colonists being thawed out aboard the ship as it approached Proxima b. Yivgeni awoke from his freeze cradle, and immediately got to work exploding some nukes to slow the ship down for its final entry into orbit of Proxima b. He called up Jake on his mobile and reminded him that they had agreed to go out for a beer. The captain summoned him to the bridge.

Meanwhile, Jake was busy shaving. He'd actually secretly not gone back to sleep a month ago when he was supposed to (the crew was regularly thawed and re-frozen so they could do occasional ship's duty during the 100 year trip), because he had been busy stealing one of the ship's nuclear bombs while everyone else was frozen. It was safely tucked away underneath his bed.

From the bridge, Su Yi and Yivgeni scanned Proxima b and discovered the probe crash site and V-Site. Su Yi ordered Yivgeni to go on an away mission to learn more from the probe. In spite of Yivgeni's objections, Su Yi said that she would lead the expedition ("If you think I'm going to miss the opportunity to be the first person on Proxima b, you're mistaken!"). Yivgeni convinced the captain to bring Jake on the trip. She wasn't thrilled about it, but couldn't argue with the necessity of having a microbiologist on the mission.

Yivgeni discovered that Proxima Centauri was starting to experience a solar flare. The crew wondered what effect this might have on the planet surface, and decided to try to execute the away mission as quickly as possible.

While preparations were underway for the away mission, Yivgeni and Jake had that promised beer at the food court. Jake was surprised and inspired by Yivgeni's zest for life and how thrilled he was by the prospect of scientific discovery. Jake felt tempted to abandon his secret mission to sabotage their efforts.

Su Yi, Yivgeni, Jack and a few security personnel (Nakamura and Smith) took a shuttle down to the surface of the planet. Meanwhile, the crew aboard ship started unfurling a space elevator, which when deployed would allow for easy coming and going to and from the planet's surface.

On the planet surface, once the rest of the crew started on the expedition, Jake sent out a small autonomous drone. Its payload was a small metal slab with faked alien writing on it. His hope was that by planting this fake evidence at the crash site he could convince the captain that an intelligent alien presence would make the planet unsuitable for colonization. Jake then hurried to catch up with the rest of the team.

Proxima Centauri's solar flare began.

On the way to the crash site, Nakamura and Smith struggled to cross a strange patch of ground. Weird green plant

tentacles were stretching forth from the ground and were grabbing at their boots. Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, one of the tentacles managed to touch Nakamura's skin and subtly infect him.

Speeding ahead to the crash site, Jake's drone was overwhelmed by the native plant life. The plants somehow interfaced with and merged with the electronics, taking over the drone. It dropped its payload far from the crash site and sped its way back to the shuttle.

Once they reached the crash site, the crew discovered that the crashed probe had merged with the local plant life in a really strange way, although the result was inert. Jake wondered where his drone had gotten to. He took samples of the plant life and the crashed probe, to be analyzed in the lab aboard ship.

The crew returned to the shuttle, flew it to the space elevator and used the elevator to return to the ship. Unbeknownst to the crew, they had a hitchhiker with them, in the form of the corrupted drone.

Once back aboard the bridge, the Yivgeni gasped when he saw readouts from the planet surface. The ongoing solar flare, which was just beginning to ramp up in power, had caused the entire planet's surface to go from mostly barren to being full of plant life. Captain Chen said "There's an old Chinese saying, 'May you live in interesting times'", to which Yivgeni replied, "You've been waiting 100 years to say that, haven't you Captain?"

The computer systems started going on the fritz. Yivgeni determined that the bridge computer was being tampered with--from somewhere on the bridge! Looking around, Smith spotted the corrupted drone and grabbed it. Green tentacles from the drone latched onto his hands and corrupted Smith, turning him greenish-purple with black eyes. Captain Chen threw a throwing knife into Smith's head--killing him instantly. She threw a second knife into the drone, pinning it to the bridge floor.

Jake tried to convince Captain Chen that the planet was dangerous and that they should abort the mission. Angry, she refused absolutely [Jake had failed in his bid to convince her to recognize the hostile alien threat]. However, she was starting to sound unreasonable to the crew. Jake carefully took the drone in a sample jar, and brought it to the lab.



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At the lab, Jake analyzed the plant life and found it to be intelligent and incredibly adaptable. He knew for sure that it was a huge threat to the crew.

Jake stopped by his bunk and checked on his stolen nuke--it was missing! He broke into a cold sweat. Who could have taken it? He took out his second (and last) drone and sent it on a mission to find the missing nuke.

On the way back to the lab, Yivgeni caught up with Jake and they argued. Yivgeni could see that Jake was experiencing a great internal conflict. Yivgeni appealed to Jake, suggesting that they could get to know each other better, and that he could convince Jake that life was worthwhile. Jake refused to be swayed from his mission, and went to the lab [Yivgeni had failed to convince Jake to abandon his mission]. Yivgeni followed Jake in secret. Once at the lab, Jake deliberately infected himself with the alien plant. With his nuke gone, he saw this as his only chance to stop the colonization. Shocked by what he had seen, Yivgeni rushed to the conference room where the Captain was planning with other officers.

Yivgeni received a communication from Jake, and Su Yi asked him to send the comms to the big screen in the conference room. There, Jake, obviously transformed with green-purple skin and black eyes, announced that he'd armed a nuclear bomb and would blow up the ship in 5 minutes. Yivgeni tried unsuccessfully to convince Jake to stop what he was doing. Yivgeni came up with a plan to vent air from the ship and kill the Jake/Thing. Su Yi executed the plan, and then they all went to the lab. There, they discovered that Jake had outmanoeuvred them--he had faked his location and wasn't there at all. There was no nuke either. [Yivgeni had failed to stop Jake]

In fact, Jake's drone had found the missing nuke for him. It was in Nakamura's locker. During all the confusion, Nakamura had made his way back to his locker. Nakamura had been infected by the plants, and it had affected his thinking. He was actually aligned with Jake in wanting to stop the colonization. Jake, not knowing Nakamura's motives and not caring, killed Nakamura with his bare hands. He armed the bomb himself.

This time, with a real nuke armed, the ship's navigation computer announced a yellow alert, and told the crew to brace themselves for thrust. Su Yi and Yivgeni cursed themselves for fools, for not having realized sooner that the earlier bomb threat had been faked. This time, though, it was real. And they had no way of knowing where the nuke was in the huge ship.

Having failed to stop Jake, Captain Su Yi Chen ordered the crew to abandon ship. She gave an impassioned speech to the whole crew, about how she would have to go down with the ship, but the rest of the crew would have to try to merge with the aliens on Proxima b, and hopefully this was a good enough life. Some crew members reluctantly agreed, while others refused to go to the surface. When crew members boarded the space elevator and started leaving the ship, Su Yi trained the ship's lasers on the elevator car and destroyed it. Her speech had been a ruse to eliminate any alien sympathizers!

Meanwhile, Yivgeni managed to track down Jake (although not the bomb, unfortunately) and shot him in the chest, apparently killing him. He was devastated by the whole chain of events, and didn't check to make sure that Jake was dead. Yivgeni, Su Yi, and the remaining crew that had stayed aboard, boarded the remaining shuttles and left the ship.

[The Crisis Question was answered with a No, meaning that Su Yi ultimately had failed to colonize the planet]

Jake, having survived the gunshot wound, disabled the nuke. He made his way to the bridge. There, he used the ship's lasers to destroy the shuttles and kill everyone else, including Yivgeni and Su Yi. He was the last remaining survivor of the trip to Proxima b (excluding crew still frozen or in gene banks). Jake then plotted a course back to Earth, saying, "Next destination: Earth. Another planet to colonize."



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GAME DESIGN NOTES

The game was played through pretty quickly. The setup took about 1 hour (including chatting), and we played through the story narration in 2 hours. There was plenty of story to tell, so we could have played for longer, but it was getting late. Hence, we decided to Bring on the Climax earlier than we might have.

We felt really satisfied at how the story turned out. There were some really neat plot twists at the end, and there was a lot of tension!

I'd like to talk for a moment about the rules changes I made in this playtest:

New Brainstorm Rule: we took 5 minutes for a creativity warm-up, where everyone tried to draw the generation ship. This was actually really neat, because it helped us visualize the setting better during the story. Next, we spent 15 minutes brainstorming, which seemed like more than enough. We filled several pages with neat ideas, and ended up using about half of them.

My take on this is that the brainstorming was worthwhile, although it definitely made the setup phase a bit longer. The extra time was worth it though. One piece of feedback I got was that the brainstorming had helped flesh out the story better in the other player's minds!

According to the rules, we were supposed to draw a doodle with every idea we were writing down, but this didn't work at all. At my workplace I'm used to having an hour and a half for brainstorming, and less stimulating topics. Hence, the brainstorming can be slow and there is plenty of time for drawing. However, with only 15 minutes to work with there wasn't time for drawing.

KISS Principle Rule: Introducing the Keep It Simple, Silly (KISS) principle, also known in improv as Be Obvious, I think also helped with narration. Players focused on the next obvious step in the story. We still had lots of fun plot twists, and nobody tried to figure out the whole chain of events by themselves. Combined with the brainstorming, KISS obviously made the narrations easier because there was very little umming or awing right at the beginning of the story

New Showdown Rule: I restored the rule where at a Showdown both sides of a Question discard down to the

lowest card. This seemed to work fine. In fact, I realized why the slightly broken rule that's currently in the rules was never really noticeable until recently, and it's because Turning the Tides is of pretty overwhelming importance to the result of the Showdown. I'm not sure if this is something that needs to be fixed, or how I would fix it.

Thanks for reading! Your feedback is welcome.

--Jonathan



Paul_T

September 2016

Jon,

Excellent stuff! The Story Sheet here is one of the strongest I've ever seen – excellent material! – and it sure seems to have paid off. You guys did a great job formulating the various elements in play, especially the Questions and Scenes.

Was there any structure to the brainstorming you did, or was it just "let's brainstorm for 15 minutes"? It sounds like it paid off, too.

I can see from your story write-up how you felt a little bit rushed going into the endgame: things are ramping up nicely and then it sounds like you guys all just went for the jugular at once. A little forced, perhaps, but it was probably fun enough at the table. 😊

You're entirely correct about the Showdown process. My feeling is that it doesn't need to be fixed; having people's played cards be more significant is fine. (It does kind of void the purpose of playing cards face-down from your hand in the first place, though – perhaps randomly drawn cards would work just as well in this instance?)

I do think you should resolve the issue of who can Turn the Tides (do you need to change a losing hand into a winning hand, play a higher card, or both? can you play multiple cards? etc); last time I read the rules it was still unclear. (My apologies if you've done so since then.)



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Hi Paul,

Thanks for reading through it. One of the things I love most about Muse is how well it does Tragedies! I've never found them so incredibly satisfying in any other game.

For the brainstorm we focused on trying to come up with Story Sheet elements (characters, scenes, goals, relationships, etc.) and also fleshing out the story background.

For the Showdown I think the rules work very well as-is and are abundantly clear. When you Turn the Tides to help the losing side, your card(s) need to beat what is on the winning side. Could you point me to the specific passage that you found confusing?

Also, you might be happy to know that during one particularly tense Showdown (Yivgeni's final plea to Jake to give up on his mission), one player and I actually argued back and forth as we put down our cards to Turn the Tides, each of us adding a line of dialogue to defend our new superior position--exactly the way you prefer to play. It just happened naturally and was really fun.

Later,

--Jonathan

Paul_T



September 2016

Jon,

Excellent! Sounds great. The part of Muse which leads to potential tragedies is straight from Musette, and I agree absolutely. It's a powerful thing to happen at the table.

Glad to hear the Showdowns are working well! Cheers. I hope the next game is one we get to play together!



Demiurge

October 2016

Same here, that would be nice. Come back to Montreal! That will help 😊

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