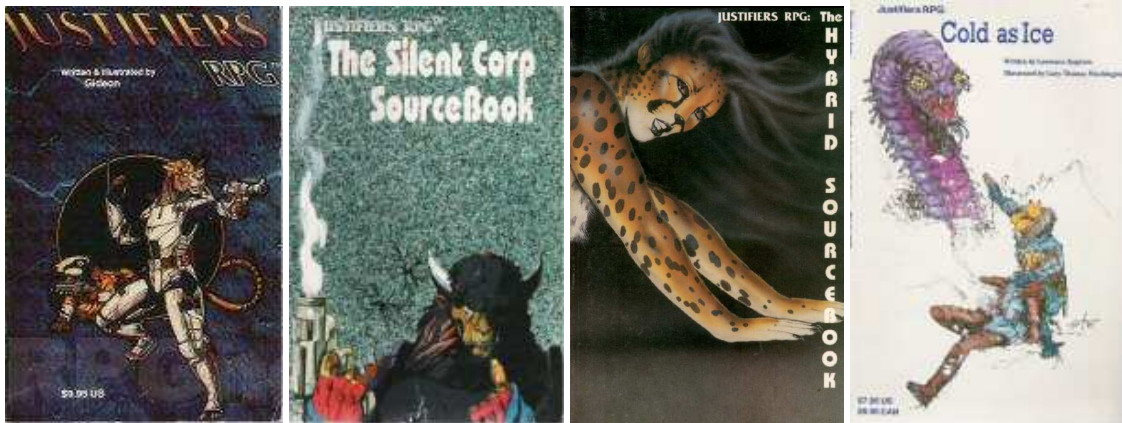


JUSTIFIERS

Clifford van Meter (“Gideon”), Starblaze Graphics

Beta is short for Beta Class Humanoid Construct, a non-human animal altered through select infusion of human DNA and certain induced developmental processes. They are humanoid in build and mental function. A beta’s default legal status is “semi-human,” the same as aboriginal peoples discovered on other planets. The only exceptions are those who have bought their freedom from the corporation who owns their contracts, and the children of free Betas.

Betas buy back their freedom through service to the parent corporation, specifically, *justifying* newly-discovered planets – identifying resources and threats, securing the former and if possible neutralizing the latter. Threats sometimes include rival Justifier teams and indigenous inhabitants. Every Beta has a designated Buyback value, which is ostensibly reachable through their paycheck, but is also increased by equipment deemed lost irresponsibly, or by missions which fail to recoup their costs. Therefore legally free Betas are practically unknown. Those who go AWOL find themselves hunted by cybernetically-augmented human Trackers.



The core book Beta species include albatross, armadillo, badger, bat, bear, bighorn sheep, bison, bloodhound, cheetah, falcon, fox, gazelle, gila monster, gorilla, hog, komodo dragon, mantis, monkey, otter, owl, panther, raccoon, rhino, sea lion, tiger/lion, turtle, and wolf. A few more were introduced in supplements: cat, rat, coyote, crocodile, polar bear, walrus, platypus, cardinal, pangolin, and (inevitably) wolverine.

About the game

It is unbelievably 80s, which only starts with characters’ hair: amazing mullets, mohawks, and skunk-do color jobs. Plus the wolverine character’s triple-forearm-claw weapons ... Economically, it’s a late-stage exemplar of original indie-RPG grit (and as such, doomed), and I’ve encountered rumors and comments regarding financial hassles. It reminds me of First Comics.

Credit where it’s due: it gets full marks for anthropomorphized animal characters who are not Furrries – even when they’re sexy!

In terms of creative agenda, the game provides one of the most provocative settings in RPG texts, right up there with Ruby or EABA: Neoterra. Redneck-ish cyborg-human trackers, house-Betas, military-industrial corp wars, colonial exploitation and insurgency, Premise-heavy scenarios, all

add up to a rich and fascinating willingness to tackle slavery, ethnocentrism, and neoliberalism. The authors could not possibly have done that by accident.

From a contributor to the game: *Two players in particular really set the feel of the game. Dave Hughes ran a crazy Coyote-Beta who had decided that since it would be impossible for him to ever buy himself back from the company, he was going to run his bill up to infinity. Ask him some day about how he flooded and froze the entire penthouse level of a hotel just so he could play nude ice hockey with a dozen beta females using hockey sticks and a bunch of oranges. On the other side of the world was the sanity and strength of Erik Jones' Ram-Beta. He signified the strength and defiance that many Betas had towards the system they were born to. He continued to strive for his buy-back (and he would have got there if the game had not ended) and eventual release where he had strong intentions of joining or creating a rebellion against the corporations. (These characters can be found in the supplements.)*

Supplements also deepened the slavery issue. *Alpha* refers to the original animal constructs, utilized in the First Inter-corporate War. They were given humanoid mental functions with cybernetics and surgery. *Gamma* refers to the offspring of Betas with humans. A *Mutt* is born to two Beta parents. As the timeline progressed, a number of aboriginal peoples were introduced as more planets were colonized. Alien-species Betas appeared, specifically built from creatures which Justifiers themselves had fought and captured for the corporation's control of the planet, and an ancient Alpha became a Beta rights guerrilla leader.

In case anyone really didn't get it, one supplement introduced House-Betas, personal servants made from less aggressive animals: gopher, greater panda, lesser panda, squirrel, and rabbit. If House-Betas become disobedient or economically inconvenient, they may find themselves tasked to Justifier teams, effectively sentenced to death.

The problem is everything else, and I do mean everything. The author clearly believes that no one else would tune into the thematic conflicts as a focus for play, and the setting is often overwhelmed by canned fights and predetermined plotlines. Play is marred by whiffy percentile resolution, stilted and over-lethal combat, unplayably-low starting effectiveness, badly-constructed character improvement, astonishing railroading in the scenarios, a supplement-driven ongoing metaplot, too many moments of silliness, way too much added psi and magic and cybertech and mutant powers ... It's a classic example of gamer-ness overwhelming the science fiction vision. I've tried to play it as written, even with a couple of tweaks to avoid (for instance) TPK at beginning level. It can't seriously be done.

Justifiers remains one of gaming culture's frustrations, as the setting won't let the imagination go. People used GURPS a lot to play it; there's a Savage Worlds conversion on-line; and for a little bit it seemed that Jason Blair was going to revive it officially with license and all, but I don't know what happened with that.

Setting knowledge and starting points

Transmatt technology is basically interstellar teleportation. It's limited by the size of the portal (20 feet square) and distance (6 light years), and does not permit communication. Colonizing a planet begins with blind-beaming a team of specialists into orbit, then waiting for them to construct a transmatt on-site, which permits two-way, organized exchange. The team is also expected to identify key resources for exploitation (especially Ancient artifacts), to identify and if possible to neutralize primary threats such as dangerous fauna and natives controlling these resources, and to keep damage to their employers' property to a minimum.

The jargon term for the team's mission is Justifying. It is a high-risk, dirty job.

Timeline from the core book:

| | |
|------|---|
| 1999 | Earth governments fail for good; TTA consolidates Earth corporations |
| 2010 | Transmatt technology makes space travel possible |
| 2025 | First colony (TTA) on Tau Ceti |
| 2077 | Cetan rebellion, founding of TCP; first Ancient artifacts discovered |
| 2155 | Further hostile takeovers and mergers; GWA consolidates Earth's trade unions |
| 2165 | GWA absorbs colonial unions; Alpha-humanoids introduced |
| 2201 | 1 st InterCorporate War, including use of Alpha-humanoids; all non-TTMS transmatt capabilities are destroyed; TTA renamed TTMS |
| 2203 | TTMS becomes primary corporate power; "peace" ensues |
| 2281 | Beta technology; replacement of human Justifiers by Beta-humanoids |
| 2305 | 2 nd InterCorporate War, including the development of Augmented Humans |
| 2308 | Betas and some aboriginal tribes gain "semi-human" rights; Buyback established |
| 2311 | Today. |

Terran Transmatt Specialties Inc is the big one, the clear winner of the corporate wars and still the controller of transmatt tech. The only other corporations that Justify colonies are Tau Ceti Prime, Enclave LTD, United Industries, STPD Engineering, and B'Hazard Mining; and as they all rely on TTMS for transmatt technology, are subordinated to them in terms of law and policy.

Certain forces of dissent are at work as well, including the Galaxy Workers Alliance which established the ambiguous legal status of "semi-human" and a budding Free Press news agency. The scars of the 2nd InterCorporate War are fresh as well.

It's worth noting that at the start of play, at least if we stay with the conceit that the core book publication sets the in-game time, Betas have existed for only thirty years, and that their rights (such as they are) and the possibility of Buyback have existed for only three. This is a society suddenly subjected to a profound destabilizing element.

How I'm gonna play it

Given Premise-based material of this kind, the danger is that we have little to say. Surely we can do better than, "Gee, military-industrial colonial corporations really suck and ethnocentric slavery does too."

It seems to me that the game will fly best if it's centered on genuine danger and with-any-luck exciting situational action, so that the social and political decisions of the characters are grounded very thoroughly in their experiences, and are therefore capable of nuance.

I think seeing content in play like the quoted material above can't be forced. If there's a genuine but untrustworthy possibility of Buyback, in combination with blood-freezing danger, then I think I'm best off providing absolutely no thematic input beyond the basics. That way the Premise won't be answered before it's begun.

Choosing a system

Question 1: We've got Steal Away Jordan now – what can science fiction *add* to what we're doing? Despite a certain awe at the idea of SAJ-Justifiers, I'm inclined to stay more traditional.

Question 2: If not SAJ, should Premise be in the mechanics or not?

I want to playtest Levi Kornelsen's The Exchange, version 2.0, which is best described as The Pool with a neat damage system and a hierarchy of Traits' importance, 1 through 4. A higher

rating does not mean a more powerful Trait, but rather affects the order in which Traits may be brought into a conflict. (A 3.0 version exists but it's very weak in my opinion.)

Character creation

This can be modified a touch. As written, you begin with ten Traits: four at 1, three at 2, two at 3, and one at 4. The convention for naming Traits is an adjective and a noun.

In our case, use your Justifier's animal species (one word) as *two* traits with the same name, assigned where you see fit at different levels. Your trained role as Justifier is a Trait as well, assigned to level 1 or 2. You can assign associated stuff and specialized skills from the Justifiers book as other Traits if you want to be really good at them, but as I see it, simply naming the training is enough for anything associated with that role. Also, all Justifier training includes basic combat, basic survival skills, and basic equipment use both on the ship and in the field. I'd hope to see psychology, specific professional skills, areas of talent, hobbies, and physical attributes to comprise the majority of Traits that you name yourself.

The Justifier's trained role is a big deal, as the company has done its level best to optimize the character's profitability (and of course the cost of the training went straight into Buyback). Pick one of the nine.

| | | | |
|---|--|---|---------------------|
| Field Scientist | Field Engineer | Field Operative | Field Doctor |
| Life sciences Social sciences Planetary sciences | Electrical Mechanical | Security Scout Pilot | |

I've struggled a little bit with the key concepts of Buyback and Rank, and eventually came up with the idea that both are Traits – but they're treated as injuries, called in by one's opponent in a conflict against the character's interests, when relevant. This is a bit of front-loading Premise into the mechanics, but I think it works. It might be interesting to let the player decide their starting ratings – again, which should not be construed in 1:1 quantitative fashion to their in-fiction values. Until I understand that better through play, maybe starting at 1 is the best idea.

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Scouts and security | Pilots and engineers | Field doctors and field scientists |
| Private Private 1 st Class Lance Corporal Corporal Sergeant Staff Sergeant Chief Master Sergeant Sergeant Major | Warrant Officer 3 rd class Warrant Officer 2 nd class Warrant Officer 1 st class Chief Warrant Officer | 2 nd Lieutenant 1 st Lieutenant Captain Major Lieutenant Colonel Colonel Brigadier (max) |

Note that the bottom of each of the first two columns promotes to the top of the third, and all Warrant Officers outrank the categories in the first column.

Example character: Darcy

Beta Tiger 1, Frighteningly Calm 1, Imposing Build 1, Bookworm 1

Reliable Observer 2, Corporate Law 2, Security Field Operative 2

Fast Shooter 3, Beta Tiger 3

Naive Idealist 4

-- Sergeant Major 1, Buyback 1

Resolution: the Exchange

A conflict (defined via recognition during play, as in Sorcerer or Dogs in the Vineyard) is resolved by matching single dice-pool rolls. The exchange process is a matter of bringing in Traits, one die each, to build the pools, via stated actions or descriptions. The catch is that Traits may only be added through ascending order of their ratings, constrained by going ‘up’ the pyramid. So if you open with a 4 Trait, for instance, then you’re stuck with the single die for your pool. Therefore constructing your character is more about how he or she addresses conflicts than it is about which Trait is better than another.

After a roll, someone’s won based on highest-die, Sorcerer style, but the important mechanic is that they get to assign injurious Traits that may be called in by an opponent for his or her dice pool in later conflicts, or even the current one if it’s not over yet. There is apparently quite an art to deciding how to assign injury values. What’s even more interesting is that if a given injury is assigned a sequence of ranks (1-2-3, 4-5-6, whatever), then it becomes a kind of shadow character which can attack its “host” directly, or be attacked in turn.

Premise in the mechanics after all

Aside from the injury mechanic’s features in terms of physical injury or psychological influence, it couldn’t be better designed for dealing with Buyback. One’s Buyback rating is a disadvantage when dealing with one’s employer, and plenty of conflicts will have “increase your Buyback,” meaning adding another rating, as a goal against characters – which is to say, damaging equipment, mostly. “Healing” Buyback would be a matter of negotiating with the company, perhaps through the union or some individual deal to cut. “Killing” Buyback, i.e., getting freed, would be practically a whole adventure of its own, probably based on setting up for the conflict by revising and structuring one’s Traits very carefully over time (see below).

I don’t know if it’s too clunky, but I’m thinking that one’s current Buyback situation might play into what sort of missions one gets assigned to. This disrupts the team-play concept of the original game, but if we did it, it’d look like this, with Buyback trying to bump you downwards, and if you wanted, fighting it directly to move upwards.

- House Beta or cushy position like PR
- Planetside duty in some straightforward position like security or research
- Colony duty in something similarly straightforward
- Wetwork
- Justifying
- Suicide mission on a colony or in Justifying

Rank is a little trickier because its grading in the setting can’t be captured by the system. I think every player can set his or her Beta’s starting rank as desired, and I’ll round out the hierarchy of a given team with a couple of NPCs. The way I see it being used is always against a lower-ranked character, bringing it in as an injury against them during the course of a conflict about something else.

I’m debating about how to deal with changing rank. If we want it to be a matter for conflicts, then “injury as a Trait” can be utilized against a character to bust him or her down a rank, or attacked by the character to be promoted if that’s what the player wants. It can’t be used as a “knockout” conflict in this context, though. Alternately, we could let it be wholly player-driven for desired dramatic or Color purposes and simply permit changing rank names, up or down by one, through the ordinary improvement system.

Changes in the character

This is so important I'll reproduce it here. After an organic story or at least significant goal has been concluded, you may do any or all of the above, but only one each. The primary constraint is that you must preserve the pyramid, i.e., your number of Traits at a given rating must be less than the number of Traits at the rating just below it. Also, the reduction options don't apply to injuries, which in our case includes both Buyback and Rank.

- +1 to a Trait rating
- New Trait with rating of 1 (maximum number of Traits is 20)
- Alter the name of a Trait
- -1 to a Trait rating
- Remove a Trait

The maximum number of Traits a character may have is twenty.

Scope of play

Looking over all this, I'm seeing what I ran into in Apocrypha, and what seems to be an endemic problem with a lot of these high-setting SF games. How does "story" move along? It seems to be wholly under GM control: place, people, passage of time, issues involved, problems involved, opportunities, everything.

Therefore I'm thinking we should adopt a movie model, which at its most basic is the story of a mission. For the mission specifically, I'd be kind of a choo-choo-story driver, but we can also "shift out" to encompass before-and-after and larger-scope issues as well, based on characters' actions.