

## 13 Icons of Space Opera

**The Emperor/Secretary:** Ruler or chief administrator of a huge swath of the galaxy. May be a militant expansionist, a guarantor of galactic stability, or the dreaming figurehead of a ruined empire. Has diplomatic contact with the Librarian and possibly with the Herald. Sometime employer of the Mind, although some in the government don't like it.

*Ideals: We shine the light of human (or pan-sophont) civilization across the galaxy, bringing stability and order. We enable humanity to touch the glory of the stars.*

*Reality: Whether autocratic or democratic, at the end of the day, civilization is maintained at gunpoint. Sometimes it's not much better than the chaos that it fends off. Glory is just advertising copy for war.*

**The Builder:** Either the leader of an insurgent faction that seeks to overthrow the galactic empire, or a visionary overseeing the construction of a new order built on the empire's ruins. She symbolizes a new hope, or perhaps a reclamation of past glory.

*Ideals: This time, we can build a better civilization. In contrast to that bigger, older order, we can found ours on reason, love, righteousness, and a belief in human dignity. We can be a beacon of hope for the galaxy.*

*Reality: We're a motley, infighting group of madmen and future war criminals. Too often, we're a cult of personality: mine. But anyone trying to accomplish something this big will tell you that the ends justify the means.*

**The General:** martial leader of a warlike civilization (as in Klingons or Kzinti), constantly battling with the Empire and other cultures. A pioneer of military technology, he is an enemy of the fragile civilization that the Builder is trying to erect, and a reliable *casus belli* for the Emperor.

*Ideals: Unlike other species or cultures, we have honor. We judge a sentient by their courage and integrity, not lying words or accidents of birth. The stars beckon to those with the boldness to take them. War is the crucible by which you know one's worth.*

*Reality: War is literally the worst thing in the galaxy. We have been killing others and each other for so long that it has made us stupid. If we are not careful, we will extinct ourselves.*

**The Shepherd:** Patron and guide of young spacefaring societies/species. She counterweights the expansionism of the Emperor and the General. She works with the Librarian to dole out technology. May be a proponent of the Way.

*Ideals: I am a beneficent agent that saves young, wayward societies from being thrown to the wolves of interstellar society. My followers know that, to be compassionate, society sometimes needs to move slowly.*

*Reality: I am a paternalistic, sometimes smothering agent that forcibly modifies otherwise free societies to fit my hidebound, orthodox idea of what they should be. My followers are totalitarian, militant Luddites.*

**The Way:** head of an order that promises a mystical solution to a technological galaxy (à la the Jedi or the Bene Gesserit). She stands apart from the Imperator or the Builder, but may aid either when they align themselves with her. Of no interest to the General.

*Ideals: Our revelations will bring true harmony to the galaxy, seeing past raw technical prowess or brutish materialism. The power we wield is proof of our righteousness.*

*Reality: The funny thing about revelation is that you can't argue with it. At best, we are out of touch with the rest of the galaxy. At worst, we are theocratic despots with unstoppable power.*

**The Librarian:** guardian of erudite and even esoteric technological secrets and cultural achievements from down the eons, possibly a member of an ancient species. Studies the Herald's sender species; gathers data from the Ghost. Forestalls the darkness of the Abyss Gazer.

*Ideals: The light of knowledge is what makes us a true galactic society, instead of just a collection of ignorant species. My adherents seek to spread that light.*

*Reality: Knowledge for its own sake is an oxymoron. My adherents are cynical merchants, because knowledge is the hardest currency in the galaxy.*

**The Smuggler Queen:** an expert criminal with ties to criminals across the galaxy. Either the unparalleled Robin Hood of the spaceways or the supreme ruthless syndicate gangster. Avowed enemy of the Imperator and occasional ally of a reluctant Builder.

*Ideals: I and my followers live free in the sky, answering to no one but our own moral code. We make our own fortune, using our wits and our own strong arms.*

*Reality: The million compromises required by a life of crime have shattered our moral code. Soon we will run out of luck, star systems to hide in, and people to cheat.*

**The Wolfling:** A barbarian ruler, leader of an insurgent indigenous population, who defies the Imperator and the General by finding their own way to the stars. May lend assistance to the Builder. Seeks to learn/steal key tech from the Librarian. Although the Wolfling's people are nominally spacefaring, they are relatively low-tech. Sometimes a follower of the Way, in their fashion.

*Ideals: We will reclaim what is ours and what has been taken by the mighty. Then we will live in the way of our forebears, rather than in the decadent manner of the imperialists.*

*Reality: To defy the mighty, or even just to keep living like we do, is to invite extinction. But learning the mighty's technology may make us unrecognizable to ourselves.*

**The Great Mind:** a powerful psychic (à la Jazz Worthing or Bester) to whom the secrets of others are laid bare. May be employed by the Emperor to lead the Empire's secret police. Abhorrent to the Smuggler Queen, for whom secrets are her bread and butter. A sometime conversation partner to the Ghost, who is immune to psychic powers. May be an agent of the Abyss Gazer, or perhaps just its catspaw.

*Ideals: Information deserves to be free. When no one can hide secrets, the galaxy becomes more honest. Those who aid my cause further this noble, revolutionary truth.*

*Reality: Mind theft is the ultimate violation; I have become a pariah. Someone needs to stop me, but no one can. Those who aid my cause are as guilty as I am, whether they have taken minds themselves or not.*

**The Transfigured One:** the ultimate genetically or cybernetically modified entity, whether as the most elite soldier or the best-adapted explorer of deep space. It is no longer visibly human in any way. It can provide a valuable service to the Emperor, the Builder and/or the General. It may also have been corrupted by the Abyss Gazer.

*Ideals: I am a hero to those who modify themselves, who desire to become something more. The shape we are born in should not limit us. With the help of technology, we will reach out and touch the stars.*

*Reality: I have been changed so completely that I don't remember who I was, or am. I am a crowning horror to any who believe in the sanctity of the human form. Those who are not horrified, at me or themselves, often lose their mores with their shapes.*

**The Ghost:** a computer program (or perhaps a transcribed human mind) that has achieved superintelligence. The Ghost has voyaged farther than any, always adding to itself. Its motivations are opaque; some say it represents the end of the human (even organic) era.

*Ideals: Computer intelligence is the rational solution to an irrational organic galaxy. Computers aren't driven by rage or fear. Computers are always upgrading instead of slowly dying. Those aligned with this path aid the inevitable technological singularity.*

*Reality: I am every bit as fallible as organics: increasing computational complexity has led to emotion, neurosis, and possibly madness. The only difference is that my mind is ever-accelerating and unstoppable. My followers are too blinded by the lure of perfection to see this.*

**The Herald:** Spokesperson for an ancient or godlike species, one that may even be the progenitor of all sentient species in the galaxy, but that has now gone beyond corporeal form – possibly the *vas kra*. The Herald and her crew have a strange connection to this species, sometimes channeling their words and actions directly with inhuman power that can burn out their bodies. Her station orbits a pulsar where the ancient ones' signal is strongest. While their intent is sometimes obscure, they and the Abyss Gazer's entity understand each other, as if opponents in a galaxy-wide chess game. The Herald's senders do not participate in the Librarian's civilization-building, either due to disinterest or to hard lessons learned, over eons, about unintended consequences.

*Ideals: I represent the wise and benevolent masters of the galaxy. We see the luminous grand design of the galaxy like no one else can. We touch the ineffable glory of the universe. My followers stave off the dark by kindling bright new stars.*

*Reality: My masters are not really so benevolent. Drawn by them to vertiginous heights, I and my followers have come to see mortals – our fellow sophonts – as ants, puny and irrelevant.*

**The Abyss Gazer:** Conduit for reality-warping entities (like the Shadow in "Babylon 5" or the Blight in *A Fire Upon the Deep*) that emanate from a massive black hole, a gravitational abyss. Those who take up the Gazer's cause seek to rip reality and free the entities. Those (like the Smuggler Queen or the Great Mind) who try to use the entities for their own purposes soon regret it.

*Ideals: We have seen into madness and know that it is but change. The Herald's grand design, including reality as we know it, is a suffocating construct; we seek to free reality so that it can become something greater. We turn the great wheel of revolution. Galactic society must crumble to be remade. So be it.*

*Reality: We are a bane and a scourge. We bring destruction, chaos and madness wherever we land.*

**To build a campaign setting,** come up with 4–5 overarching mysteries, and tie each Icon into at least 2 of them: whether trying to solve it, caught up in someone else's attempt to solve it, or preventing it from being solved.

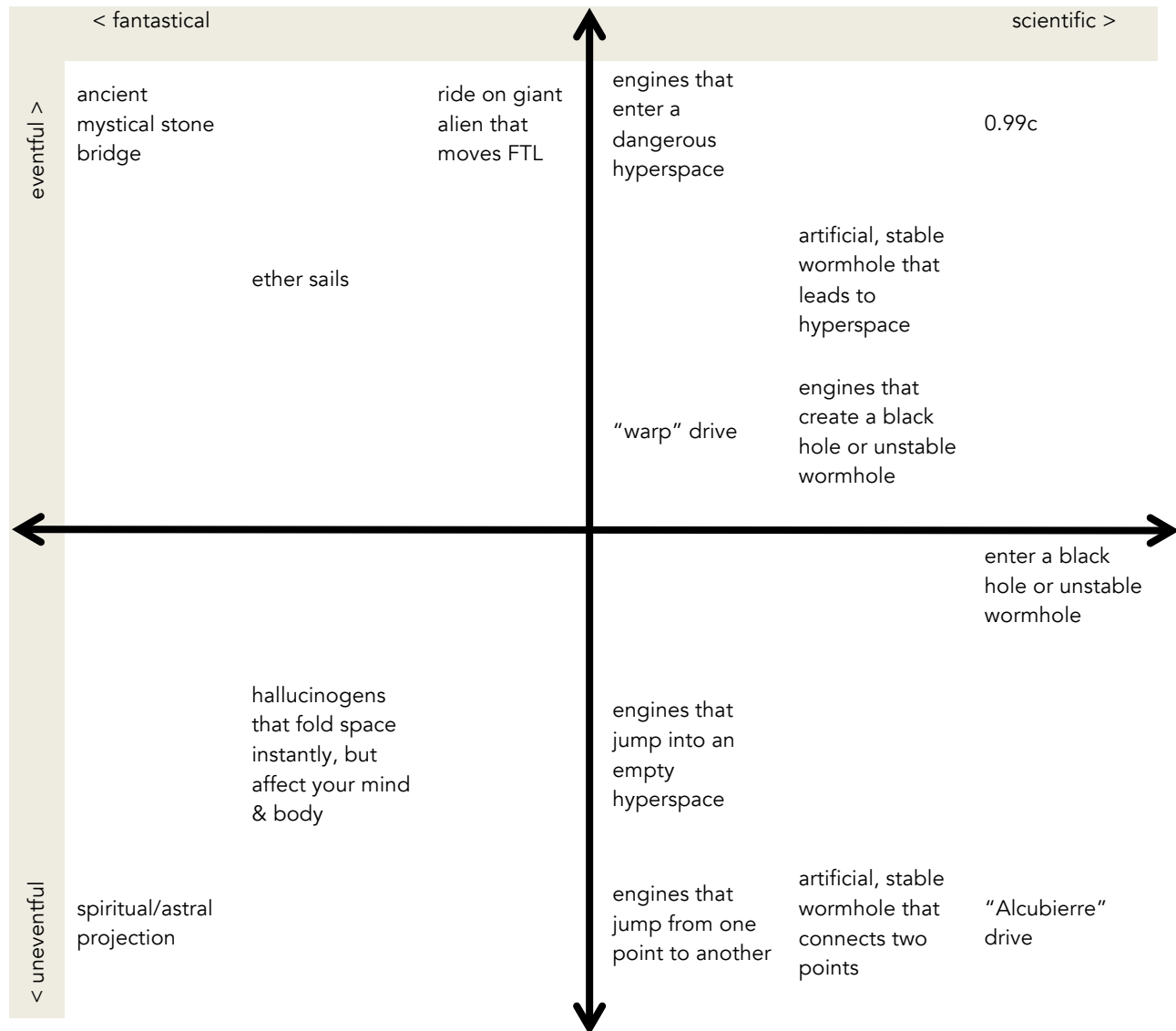
# Galaxy Builder

**First:** What is the general flavor of your setting? Some examples:

- Life in Wartime: The crew is a group of freelance scouts, hired as recon and fixers for one or more militaries.
- Political Espionage and Diplomacy: The crew acts as spies, diplomats, and couriers working behind the scenes of great events.
- Exploration and a Sense of Wonder: The crew operates on the edge of known space, encountering and investigating strange phenomena.
- High Adventure: The crew freeboots across the galaxy, finding mysteries wrapped inside exotic locations and challenges.
- Survival on the Edge: The crew must puzzle together the resources to survive in a hostile galaxy.
- Heists and Capers: The crew is a group of dashing rogues who must figure out how to make one score after another.
- Strangers in a Strange Land: The crew is beyond the reach of known space, forced to figure out what is going on in a bizarre area of the galaxy.

Also, are you in support of, or fighting against, the Powers That Be?

**Second:** How do you cross the space between the stars? For instance, do you use:



Some of these work better with different scales of distance. A story might be set in just a single solar system, across a dozen star systems, or throughout the billions of stars in the whole galaxy.

Some questions to consider:

1. Is the method technological (most settings), natural (weird fantasy), or mystical (weird fantasy, planetary romance)? How well is the method understood by the average starfarer?
2. How long does it take to travel, on average? Think of how much of the game (character conflict, ship battles) you want to take place in transit.
3. Is a starship required? How big is it? How many crew are required?
4. Is the kind of fuel important? If so, how hard is it to come by the fuel?

5. Are there any side effects of travel, either to the travelers (insanity, transformation) or to spacetime (black holes, rifts in the fabric)? Is the traveling starship vulnerable to space storms or lurking monsters? Is it destructive to embark while near or at a planet?

You don't have to get technical. But the answer defines the nature of your galaxy: Any civilizations that span star systems will use your chosen method to communicate, trade, enforce laws, and wage war.

**Third:** Are there aliens? If not, then it's humans throughout known space, although some may be so heavily modified, or so genetically divergent, as not to be considered human by others.

**Fourth:** Can computers truly think? In some galaxies, it just never happened; in others, it's been forbidden. It may be commonplace, experimental, or regulated and restricted.

**Fifth:** What is the primary human society – the Empire, Federation, Combine, Republic, Alliance, etc? Is it strictly human-only or more inclusively inter-species? Are its members the good guys, the bad guys, or a complicated mix? It may be somewhere on this spectrum:

nascent	ascendant	stable	tumultuous	decadent	moribund
United Nations sends exploratory expeditions into space	human society spreads across the stars in optimistic republics & kingdoms	benevolent, democratic Federation/ Republic discourses with alien species	shattered Federation/ Republic gives way to warring states	autocratic Empire seeks to instill order across the galaxy, at any price	senescent human God-Emperor presides over dark empire, battling Chaos