

MARS COLONY DESIGN NOTES

From Ashcan to Final Release

I sold 25 handmade copies of *Mars Colony* at Gen Con 2009 (one of which I actually kept for myself). The 2009 version of the game was an Ashcan release, an “almost ready” game. The idea was to solicit feedback from playtesters I didn’t know, and, hopefully, to iron out the kinks that appear in many first edition roleplaying games. Thankfully, I can say that the ashcan process was a success. *Mars Colony* benefited quite a bit from the lengthier (and dispersed) playtesting process.

For those of you who purchased the Ashcan version of *Mars Colony*, first of all, thank you. Second, I thought you might like to know exactly what I changed in the final version of the game. I know that for some of you these changes may seem like a bad idea. I can only ask for your patience with the new rules. I wrestled with each, and firmly believe that the changes were for the better. I hope that after trying out the new game, you will agree with me, but of course if you hate the changes, you can always keep playing the Ashcan.

Preparation

The creation of Fear Cards used to be the last step in the Preparation phase. It is now the first. This may seem like a minor change, but in practice, forcing the players to think about their own government leaders early makes a big difference in establishing the correct mindset for political science fiction. I found that when the Fear Cards were created last, the players tended to think of them as simple add-ons. Now card creation acts as a brainstorming exercise that helps to guide the players’ decisions in every subsequent step of Preparation.

Doubles

In the Ashcan, whenever a player rolled doubles during a Progress Scene, he counted double the total. So a roll of double 4s would count as 16 points instead of 8. This is no longer the case. Doubles (except for double 1s) count as any other roll.

While I enjoyed the excitement of rolling doubles under the original rules, they also put too much emphasis on luck. Yes, I want *Mars Colony* to be about pushing your

luck, but double doubles created too many wild swings. The game is now more of a slog for everybody, not just the unlucky.

One side effect of the new doubles rule is that Health Markers are more difficult to stabilize. The average roll with the double doubles rule was 10. It is now 8 (remember that 1s only hurt you). The difference may seem small on paper, but in practice the effect is quite noticeable. Still, the additional difficulty seems appropriate given that the game is supposed to be about failure. Premature removal is now a real possibility. The players will also have additional opportunities to engage with the deception and scandal mechanics.

As a side note, if you miss the double doubles rule, or find the new rule too unforgiving, you may want to check out the suggested Variations listed on the Mars Colony Website.

Reputation

The biggest change by far is to the reputation rules. Under the Ashcan rules, Kelly had a separate reputation rating with each of the four organizations, plus a fifth measure representing her personal pride. The Savior would manipulate these reputation scores up and down after each success and failure. Whenever Kelly would make significant progress or stabilize a Health Marker, one of her reputations would move up a notch. A failure would have the opposite effect. All of that is now gone.

The new rules simplify the reputation rules into two main spheres: Admiration and Contempt. Deception is also included, and serves as a third, more insidious option. In addition, Kelly no longer increases her reputation by making significant progress. She must make it all the way to “stable.” When the Savior fails, he must always move a token out of Admiration and then choose between moving that token to Contempt or Deception. Finally, if there are ever five tokens in Contempt, the game ends early with Kelly’s forced removal.

The reasons for this rather large change are many, but, briefly, I can point to two problems with the Ashcan rules. First, the original reputation ratings did not fluctuate as much as I intended. The rules heavily favored reputation increases, and so the reputation tracks all tended to hover around their highest rating. As a result, I found

that the mechanics were often telling me that Kelly's reputation should be much higher than what made sense in the context of the story.

Second, the system was too cumbersome. There were five different reputations, with three different ratings each – and all of this was in addition to the myriad of source material already in the game. It was a lot of bookkeeping for a relatively small payoff.

Shortly after releasing the Ashcan, I came to the conclusion that the reputation rules needed to change, but I could not think of an adequate replacement. My problem was that I liked the idea behind the original system. It makes sense to me that Kelly's actions could negatively affect her reputation with one organization, but not another. I liked that Kelly could be friends with the News Network, but enemies with the Mayor's Office. I know that at least one of my playtesters shared this feeling.

In the end it was a tough decision. I tried at least three different rule sets, and didn't settle on the final rules until quite late in the development process. While the more complicated rules had their advantages, I had to face up to the fact that they just didn't work in practice. The new system is streamlined and more abstract. It is also fast, transparent, and better integrated with the deception mechanics. I definitely prefer the new reputation rules, but it was surprisingly difficult to let go of the old.

Scandals

The new scandal mechanics are slightly more severe than those in the Ashcan. The change, however, is really more of a correction than an alteration. Under the Ashcan rules, when you rolled a Scandal, you simply moved a number of Reputation Tokens into Contempt equal to the number of Deception Tokens accumulated. There was no penalty for the failure that actually triggered the Scandal. Under the new rules, you still move your Deception Tokens into Contempt, but, additionally, you move one token from Admiration into Contempt. The old rules basically gave you a failure for free. The new rules correct this oversight.

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