

Valence

Science-Fiction Roleplaying

Sample file

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Valence was created on several generations of Macintosh computers, and assembled (in this version) using Adobe InDesign and Adobe Acrobat. Artwork was scaled and touched up with Adobe Photoshop. This book uses the font Optima. Valent Games can be found online at <http://www.valentgames.com/>

Credits

2nd Edition

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Writer's Notes

It started more than ten years ago, and when I look at all those old computer files I tend to cringe. So many things have changed since then, and they all needed changing, most of them *badly*... and yet the seeds were there.

Valence is a labor of love for all of us. Even though most of the original design team has fallen by the wayside, or moved on to other things, none of the old guard can say that they aren't still at least a *little* bit interested in what's going on with their old creation. I'm glad to keep the torch lit, to keep Valence up to date and keep improving it, and I hope they like what I've done.

For most of you, this is the first time you've seen the game, and all this nostalgia means nothing. So let's get on with it, right? What is this game about? Why play it? You've got your choice of dozens of science fiction games; what's going to make this one any better?

- Culture. This book doesn't assume that species and culture are the same thing. We have thousands of cultures here on Earth; why should aliens have just one apiece? Culture isn't just a miscellaneous piece of background information, either: it's an integral part of character creation. Ditto for character backstory.
- History, both in and out of game. In game, you've got a ten-million-year timeline to pull ideas from, historical details from all ten species and the present-day cultures, and plenty of "secrets from the past" hidden in the backstory. Out of game, we the writers have been continually updating and improving the game for years, and we like to think that it's gained a certain amount of polish because of it.
- Internal consistency. The world of Valence, like almost all science fiction worlds, has its own idiosyncrasies and oddities. It would hardly be science fiction without them. What's more important (in our view) is that the world hangs together properly. In a galaxy with expensive interstellar travel, you won't find starships that haul iron ore — it doesn't make enough money. Novel and innovative solutions to a problem don't disappear overnight once the problem is gone. When Earth was devastated, people didn't forget about it or leave it alone. There haven't

been technological dark ages in a galaxy where information transfer and storage is ubiquitous, and there are no “space barbarians.” People who shun technology and Lording end up marginalized. Planets don’t have universal climates, terrains, or even cultures. It makes the galaxy much more complex... and much more believable.

- An enormous setting. The galaxy has billions of planets, and not all of them are explored. The ones that are have hundreds of millions of individuals. Within the boundaries of the game’s technology and other such factors, almost every type of culture you could imagine exists. True, there are some huge cultures that span hundreds of thousands of star systems, but even they aren’t ubiquitous.
- Separated metaplot. The metaplot for Valence isn’t going to be interwoven through every book we publish — it’s going to be contained in a single volume, the Little Book of Metaplot. That way people can feel free to include or ignore it as they see fit. It’s a strong metaplot, but it’s not one that literally everyone has to deal with.

I’m not saying Valence is perfect for every kind of game. It doesn’t work so well for gritty noir cyberpunk, Buck Rogers style space opera, or “hard” science fiction (after all, there is a magic-like power in the game and FTL travel, and some cloaking devices — it’s difficult to play hard sci-fi without stripping these out first).

What Valence *does* handle well are stories about black ops teams, government and military operatives, culture clash, interstellar adventure, and changing the world. If those things sound like your cup of tea, you’ve come to the right place.

Inspirations

Of all the TV shows we watched, of all the ones we pulled interesting plot points and themes from, Babylon 5 would have to be the big one. Most of it’s hidden in the metaplot, but it’s there. Of course, science fiction would probably be nowhere without Star Trek and Star Wars, and everyone in the sci-fi market owes them at least a little. Firefly was too recent to have a major impact on the game; ironically Valence seems to be a good match to the show’s style.

Our favorite science fiction authors include Isaac Asimov, Orson Scott Card, Arthur C. Clarke, Diane Duane, Madeline L’Engle, Ursula K. LeGuin, Larry Niven, and David Weber. There are others, of course, but these provided a formative impact for Valence. If we ever publish a book to advance the timeline, look for high-tech stuff from Wil McCarthy, John C. Wright, Dan Simmons, and Charles Stross — all good authors, but their tech is a bit beyond what we use.

There have been few good sci-fi movies out there overall. Most of them cross into horror or fantasy or both, and the writing is generally unimpressive. Most of the better ones concentrate on themes that Valence isn’t concerned with. Here’s hoping some better ones come out soon.

In a somewhat related category, Macross and Robotech provide some inspiration for the space-related parts of the game. Valence does indeed have mecha, though you’ll have to wait for the rules.

Dungeons and Dragons was our first RPG, just like most gamers our age. Corner me at a convention and I’ll tell you an interesting story about the Budetug, Dwarves, and the early days of Valence. Strangely enough, they *aren’t* where we got our dice-rolling system... as for more recent games, the works of Dream Pod 9 (Jovian Chronicles), White Wolf (Trinity), and Biohazard Games (Blue Planet) all provided some amount of inspiration and guidance.

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What are Role-Playing Games?

So then, what *is* role-playing? Is it people with dice and books, playing out the adventures of characters in some long-forgotten world? Is it two kids with cards and counters, fighting for control of a fictitious island? Is it that high school play you were in where everyone was given characters and had to make up the story as they performed?

In essence, a role-playing game is one in which you and your friends sit down around a table and determine the fate of your own imaginary universe. RPGs have been compared to playing Cops and Robbers, to improvisational theater, and to interactive storytelling. All of these have some element of the truth, but they fail to capture the basic appeal of RPGs.

Role-playing games are appealing because your characters can do anything that *you wouldn't or can't*. You would never steal, run away across the world, or jump through a crowded room with guns blazing. You can't conquer the world, make a billion dollars on the stock market, or jump tall buildings in a single bound. Your character in a role-playing game can.

Is this a form of escapism? Certainly. Role-playing games are just as escapist as watching a movie once a week, or reading a book every night, or going to see a play. Each of these activities takes you away from the real world and drops you into a fantasy world. The differences are, first, that RPGs require you to be social and hang out with your friends, and second, that RPGs allow for a greater control of the story's events and feel. All you can do if a movie sucks is refuse to see it again (or, if you're really unimpressed, walk out in the middle). When a book takes a boring or nonsensical turn, you have two choices: wait it out in the hopes of better writing later, or stop reading.

If, on the other hand, your role-playing games aren't what you wanted or expected, you can change things. After all, that's the point: change a world, even if it's just an imaginary one.

RPGs are typically played by having one person act as the "Game Master" and the others act as "Players." The GM describes the world, and the players interact with it and each other. Each player cre-

ates a character for the story that they're in. There are some rules to describe when characters can or can't do things, and to add some extra flavor to the game. The rules provide a common framework that a group of people can get together and work from.

Valence is a game about the far future, roughly a thousand years from now. It takes a bit of creativity, imagination, and suspension of disbelief to role-play in a setting like that. You and your fellow players will probably have characters who look and act nothing like you. This is why gaming is often compared to improv theater: you need to play a certain role without much preparation. Gaming's advantage is that you create the character. You could play almost anything — a prince or a princess, a scientist or magician, a politician or a general. This breadth of possibility provides opportunities for expression that are unavailable in most other activities. How often does your Chemistry teacher let you pretend to be a six-foot-seven winged humanoid bent on revenge?

Single stories in Valence are called Adventures. These can cover one night of role-playing, or a few weeks. They typically focus on a single goal, and finish when that goal is achieved or some other end comes about. For example, if the adventure's goal is to locate a prince, and he dies before your group finds him, your goal was not met but the adventure will end anyway. Adventures can be part of a larger story, or can stand on their own.

A string of interrelated adventures is called an Epic. (Other games use the term "campaign.") Most epics keep the same characters through their entirety, and can last for many adventures. Within an epic a character and her friends could start as peasants, amass power and wealth through their adventures, and eventually rule as queens. Role-playing groups do not have to engage in epic play, but in our experience the most fun comes from developing a character and playing him or her in a lot of connected stories.

Now that you have an idea of what role-playing is, we encourage you to read ahead and explore the world we have created for you.

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