Dragon®
MAGAZINE

Descent into Deepearth
RPGs in space ×3
A subterranean surprise

CONTENTS

COVER

Our cover is entitled: "What Geraldo Rivera wished he had found in Al Capone's vault," which just about says it all. This painting won an award at the 1987 Norwescon's Altercon convention, and is the combined work of two artists: Rodayne Esmay and David Kern. Rodayne says he and David are charter members of the Happy Valley Space Academy (a local artists' group). Thanks, guys!

Role-playing Reviews

BATTLETECH — A GAME OF ARMORED COMBAT

STAR WARS — The Roleplaying Game — WEST END GAMES

Tickets to the stars

©1988 **by Jim Bambra**

Looking for a science-fiction role-playing game? Well, what kind do you want? Science fiction is a vast genre: it has space, the final frontier, high-tech gadgetry, and faster-than-light spaceships — but are you after space opera, hard science fiction, or giant robots blasting each other into slag?

Space opera bears more than a passing resemblance to the ideals of heroic fantasy. Fans of swords and sorcery, where larger-than-life heroes deal with all comers in a suitably heroic fashion, feel right at home here. Just peel off your magic armor, throw away your +3 sword, and pick up a trusty blaster. Swap laser blasts with the best that the evil galactic empire can throw against you. Zip around the universe in your customized starship in search of adventure and epic battles.

Space opera is a genre where the heroes always escape from the jaws of death, and none of the opposition's megadeath-dealing machines ever seem to hit the good guys. The laws of science are cheerfully plundered to come up with impressive-looking gadgetry. If so-called scientific theory gets in the way of a good adventure, throw it out and come up with some suitably grand alternative.

But maybe you prefer a game where brains are more important than hardware; where everything that happens is based on sound, scientific facts; where the technology, although impressive, seems plausible — i.e., a hard science-fiction game.

Sure, Einstein always seems to be forgotten; you've got to have interstellar travel or else no one ever gets out of the Solar System. But the rest feels realistic, like a future projection of present-day technology with a few imaginative twists thrown in to spice things up. The aliens feel right too. No green, bug-eyed monsters here; aliens have realistic societies and cultures, and proper motivations to boot. They may not be very nice, but they tick in all the right ways.

In the hard science-fiction genre, you surrender if someone points a laser at you. In real life, you wouldn't expect to make a break for it and escape unscathed. The hard science-fiction genre oozes realism. To deal with the problems thrown at you by the uncaring universe, brains are needed more than blasters.

Then again, science-fiction games may conjure up visions of gigantic robots stalking the landscape, armed with such a vast array of lethal weapons that a modern-day armored division is as effective against them as a group of ants against a human. Hardened warriors encased in tons of protective armor stride across alien landscapes, blasting all they see with the impressive array of weapons at their command. This is an age where militarism is the norm, and the way of the warrior has transcended such weapons as swords in favor of huge, metallic constructs.

While closely related to space opera, the giant-robot genre also steals liberally from hard science fiction. The robot warriors are tough and efficient, but so is the opposition. Those robots don't run forever; they must be repaired and maintained. If a critical hit blows the robot to bits, there's a good chance the pilot is going to be smeared halfway across the planet.

STAR WARS®: The Roleplaying Game
Science-fiction role-playing game
West End Games $14.95
Design: Greg Costikyan
Editing: Eric Goldberg, Paul Murphy, Bill Slavicsek
Art direction: Stephen Crane
"Rebel Breakout" adventure: Curtis Smith
Solo adventure and adventure ideas: Ken Rolston

Who can forget the impact of the opening scenes of the movie *Star Wars:* a starship futilely trying to outrun and outgun a pursuing vessel that made its prey look like a one-man fighter? The pursuer was big — *real big!* It promised action on a big scale. Blasters zapped down the corridor as storm troopers broke their way into the ship. Then *he* appeared — tall, dark, and sinister. Darth Vader was larger than life and utterly ruthless, a megavillain who

made your average fantasy megalomaniac look like a wimp.

The movie moved at a scorching pace as the heroes took on impossible odds and won. TIE fighters screamed across the screen as rebel X-wings desperately attempted to hit the Death Star's vulnerable point. This was classic stuff indeed, and it didn't end there. In *The Empire Strikes Back* and *The Return of the Jedi,* the characters and plot developed until we all knew about the Jedi and the Force, the relationships between the characters, and the depth of George Lucas's vision.

Now, with STAR WARS: The Roleplaying Game, players can experience the thrill of battling the Empire. This game has it all: nifty rules, fast, heroic action, star-spanning conflicts, and lots of fun.

Background: Have you seen the movies? Then you already know the background. Bright images fly into the mind from each page of the rules. Characters and scenes from the movies come to life in game terms in a most effective and pleasing manner.

Presentation: STAR WARS: The RPG is a 144-page hardbound book, complete with neat color plates. All the essentials are included: character generation, combat systems, skills, space travel, the Force, hardware, game master's tips, and an introductory adventure. Of special note are the advertisements which appear throughout the book, offering a great career in the Imperial Navy or a four-week, grand-galactic tour. Maybe you want hardware: How about a handy R2 astromech droid or a T-65 "X-wing" fighter?

Character design: This is simple and fast. There are 24 character types to choose from, each one presented as a template to be customized by the player. The templates cover such diverse characters as smuggler, bounty hunter, failed Jedi, quixotic Jedi, the Kid, the armchair historian, the Wookie, and the Ewok. There are lots of nice stereotypes, and the ambitious can even design a droid to play.

Each character comes with a colorful background, personality, and an in-character quote. There are no problems here; simply grab your character type, read the background, and you're away. If you don't like the background, you can always change it.

This flexibility and color is apparent in the customization process. Each character is defined by six general skill areas, each represented by a number of dice showing how proficient the character is. By spending an additional seven dice, characters can increase specific skills. For example, the Smuggler has a Dexterity of 3d6 + 1. This means that when using any Dexterity-related skill, he rolls 3d6 and adds 1 to the score. By spending dice, the player can increase his blaster skill (a Dexterity skill) to 4d6 + 1 or 5d6 + 1. This is all very nice, but how does it work?

Game mechanics: To find out whether you can perform an action, you bounce your dice on the table and total the score. This is compared to the difficulty factor of the action — 5 for very easy actions and 30 for nearly impossible actions.

Ever wonder how the heroes in the *Star Wars* movies can climb up a line to an Imperial AT-AT walker, slice the hatch open, toss in a grenade, then scoot back down in one fluid motion? Or why the Imperial storm troopers can hit everything but those heroes? Most game systems can't handle these maneuvers. Characters are usually restricted to one action, or are expected to spend and keep track of action points in the process, interrupting the flow of the game. How can the heroes get around in STAR WARS: The RPG?

The answer is simple: The heroes are *heroes,* and heroes can do the truly heroic. The game system reflects this level of action neatly and convincingly; a character can carry out any number of actions a round. The only restriction is the number of dice available for the skills. The first action is carried out using the stated number of dice for the skill; the second action uses one fewer die; the third action uses two fewer dice, and so on. Sooner or later, you'll run out of dice and actions.

And if somebody shoots at you, you dodge. Roll your dodge skill and add it to the difficulty factor of the firer. This costs you one die from your next action, but it sure beats being blasted. What could be simpler?

Fast action without cumbersome calculations means the game moves at the pace of the movies. This system covers everything in the game, whether its a shootout in the space port, zapping the Death Star with your X-wing, or programming a computer.

During adventures, characters earn skill points that are spent to improve skills. The number of dice currently rolled for the skill equals the number of skill points required for an improvement. To take your blaster from 5d6 + 2 to 6d6 costs 5 points. The higher the skill, the more you have to pay. Given time, you can end up with a very fast-moving, fast-acting, and truly impressive character (without the complicated book-work offered by other systems).

Of course, there's the Force. Every character starts with one Force point, and this can be spent to double the dice rating of all skills for one round (for example, raising a blaster rating from 5d6 to 10d6 and a dodge rating from 3d6 to 6d6). Force Points can be used for good or evil purposes, or to simply save your hide. Using the Force for evil earns a Dark Side point. This is bad news; too many of these and you go over to the Dark Side, becoming an NPC under the control of the game master (GM). On the other hand, using the Force in a heroic and dramatic way may earn you an extra Force point at the end of the adventure.

Jedi and other students of the Force have a wide range of Force powers. These are rated similarly to skills and function in the same manner. With these powers, it's possible to read minds, resist extremes of temperature, absorb incoming blaster bolts, and generally act like a Jedi or Darth Vader. However, you've got to be good, or else you slip over to the Dark Side.

GM's tips: STAR WARS: The RPG excels in providing GMs with suggestions on how to get the best out of the game. After reading this book, GMs should be able to present colorful and fast-moving adventures. Whether it's speaking in character, making funny noises, setting the scene, pacing the adventure, or simply handling the mechanics, it's all there. Lots of staging tips are given, and sample dialogues provide colorful examples of play.

The GM is encouraged to improvise in situations not covered by the rules and to shamelessly fudge the game's mechanics for dramatic effect. The emphasis is on keeping the action moving, not on getting bogged down in rules discussions. If the rules are about to ruin the adventure, ignore or alter them to keep the action flowing. The message is to have fun, and you are clearly shown how to do it.

Introductory adventure: A short solo adventure teaches the rules and gets across the feel of the game in a lively and entertaining manner. In the adventure for group play, a script read by the players and GM summarizes why the PCs are there and dumps them right into a fight with Imperial storm troopers. There is no way to back out of this situation and no problems with whining, recalcitrant players. ("But I don't want to go there." "Too late; you're in. What are you going to do?") The adventure is linear, although the GM is encouraged to expand it if desired. Still, since the scenario describes a chase through an abandoned mine, expansions aren't really going to alter its linear aspects. Even so, the scenario is a fun dungeon bash that moves at a rapid pace and contains some excellent staging.

Ten outlines for designing your own adventures round out the package. These provide plenty of hooks and enough staging tips to make it easy to turn them into fully fledged adventures.

Evaluation: STAR WARS: The RPG is an excellent action-oriented game which perfectly captures the flavor of the movies. Its colorful background and planet-busting Death Stars rank it as one of the greatest space operas of all time. While an emphasis on action may not be everyone's idea of science-fiction adventure, STAR WARS: The RPG certainly delivers in the thrills department. This is available from: West End Games, Inc., 251 West 30th Street, New York NY 10001, USA.

TRAVELLER: 2300™ game
Science-fiction role-playing game
Game Designers' Workshop $20.00
Design: Marc W. Miller, Frank Chadwick, Timothy B. Browne
Additional material: Loren Wiseman, Gary

Thomas, Joe Fugate, John Harshman, Matt Renner, Kevin Brown, Steve Venters, Bryan Gibson

Art director: Barbie Pratt

While STAR WARS: The RPG espouses swashbuckling space opera at its best, the TRAVELLER: 2300 game is firmly rooted in the school of hard science fiction, based on realistic, hard science rules, not the pseudoscience of pulp magazines.

Background: The TRAVELLER: 2300 game takes place in the 24th century. Earth has been shattered by the Third World War; nuclear warheads leveled large areas of the planet; governments collapsed; pestilence, famine, and anarchy took control. During the 21st century, the world began to rebuild, and France emerged as the major power on the globe.

National rivalries continue. Although political factions refrain from the use of nukes, minor wars are still fought on Earth. This rivalry extends into space and manifests itself in struggles for new worlds and resources. Early in the 22nd century, the star drive allowed humanity to reach out into the universe.

Presentation: Consisting of two 48-page booklets (Referee's and Player's Manuals), three B-page booklets (introductory adventure, a forms booklet, and a list of nearby stars), plus a large, full-color star map and dice, this game appears complete. Its layout is neat and effective. The books are ordered in a logical fashion, but suffer from a lack of examples. While everything is covered, it is sometimes difficult to understand the designers' intentions from a single reading.

Character design: Character design is complete and relatively straightforward. It involves a large amount of player decision, but also uses dice to determine the results. Characters are first defined by the type of world they come from, considering factors such as whether they come from Core or Frontier worlds, and what sort of gravity was present there. These considerations affect the type of body a character possesses: mesomorphic (muscular and husky), ectomorphic (tall and slender), endomorphic (short and stocky), or normal. Each provides certain benefits and affects the rest of the character generation process.

As in most RPGs, attributes are randomly generated. These are then adjusted according to the character's background and body type. A career is then chosen, and skill points from initial training are spent. Careers come from seven basic areas: military, exploratory, academic, colonial, government and civilian, ship crew, and extralegal (e.g., pirates). The process turns out well-rounded characters; a combination of luck and player decision makes it more than an exercise in random dice rolling, giving players some control over their PCs' destinies.

Game mechanics: The core rules revolve around an elegant task-resolution system. To succeed at a task, whether it's shooting a gun or breaking a computer's security, the referee assesses the difficulty of the task by giving it a rating between Simple (3+) and Impossible (19+). From this, he determines which skills, attributes, and tools are required. Success is determined by rolling 1d10 and adding applicable modifiers. If the number is achieved, the task is successfully completed. If the result is a failure, a table is checked to see the extent of failure. Failure is measured by degree, ranging from wasting time to doing something seriously wrong. I like this system; it's neat, expandable, and flexible. Any situation is easily handled by the rules, which generate a feeling of realism without delving into the realms of unfathomable complication.

However, the TRAVELLER: 2300 rules lack any kind of character experience system. A character can survive for years in this game, but he doesn't improve with age or experience; he stays the same forever. Sure, the PC can get more hardware, more influence, and so on, but he never gets any better at solving tasks. To many players, character improvement is essential: It shows you're winning, doesn't it? Why go on adventures if you're not going to get better as a person? In TRAVELLER: 2300 games, adventuring is its own reward — but is this satisfactory? Rather than letting a PC chug along at the same level, he could be awarded skill points at the end of each adventure. This would allow the character gradual improvement and would satisfy the player's desire for that character to become better at what he does. The skill system present could handle it with no bother, making its absence very strange, indeed.

The universe of the future is not a kind place for the would-be gunslinger. Those who live by the gun also die by it (unless they are equipped with the latest in high-tech armor). Even then, these characters are not likely to come out of gunplay unscathed. The combat system is relatively fast-paced, but lacks the swashbuckling elements of STAR WARS: The RPG. The TRAVELLER: 2300 game covers all the usual tactical options and is complete in its handling of vehicle combats, missiles, and explosives, allowing all manner of military engagements to be conducted.

Space combat is rooted in board-game design. Ships and missiles are maneuvered on a hexagonal grid which regulates movement and firing. The system has little role-playing feel to it, and I cringe at the thought of PCs being randomly killed when a shot hits a spaceship.

While characters do get to perform tasks, these are mechanical actions frequently found in board games. ("Okay,

your engines have been hit; make a roll to see if you can repair them.") Here, the task system has not been used to its best effect. By allowing PCs to influence piloting and have more options in combat, this could have been a much better system.

GM's tips: Apart from an interesting and effective NPC characterization system, the TRAVELLER: 2300 game is very light in the GM-guidance department. The motivations of NPCs are viewed, but few hints are given on how to effectively stage their actions. The system is clearly written for the experienced GM who has learned all he can about the GM's art and is simply after a set of rules. Unfortunately, I know no one who fits this category. Even the most seasoned GM can benefit from seeing how designers feel their games should be run. It also helps the GM in picking up new tricks with which to amuse the players. Unfortunately, GMs are on their own in this regard.

Introductory adventure: The philosophy just described becomes apparent in the introductory adventure, "The Tricolor's Shadow." Although this adventure makes good use of its background, this is not a detailed adventure; it is merely an outline for the GM to flesh out. There are no tips on how to stage encounters, build atmosphere, or how to guide the PCs through adventures. The introductory

adventure provides no colorful NPCs or statistics for use during the game. The GM is even expected to prepare maps and encounters for the adventure, either beforehand or during game play. While the more experienced GMs will probably be able to do so, newcomers may find this adventure tricky to run. All in all, this adventure comes across as an underdeveloped scenario, reminiscent of the early days of RPG adventure design.

Evaluation: The TRAVELLER: 2300 game, with its excellent character generation and task resolution system, certainly has a realistic feel. To anyone looking for a science-fiction game, it provides a plausible background and opportunities to adventure in the dawn of humanity's stellar exploration. Experienced GMs will have few problems with the game's less-than-satisfactory handling of adventure staging and description, but novices should look elsewhere for their first science-fiction RPG. This is available from: Game Designers' Workshop, P.O. Box 1646, Bloomington IL 61702-1646, USA.

BATTLETECH® game

Science-fiction board game
FASA Corporation $20.00
Design: Jordan K. Weisman and L.R. "Butch" Leeper
Development: L.R. "Butch" Leeper, Forest

G. Brown, William John Wheeler, L. Ross Babcock III, Samuel B. Baker II, James R. Kellar
Background: Patrick Larkin, Hero Games
Production managers: Jordan K. Weisman, Karen Vander Mey
Art director: Dana Knutson

MECHWARRIOR® game book

Role-playing supplement for the BATTLE-TECH game
FASA Corporation $12.00
Design: Richard K. Meyer, Walter H. Hunt, Evan Jamieson, L. Ross Babcock III, Kevin Stein, Jordan K. Weisman, Patrick Larkin, William H. Keith Jr., David Boyle, D. Brad Frazee, Lisa M. Hunt
Editorial staff: L. Ross Babcock III, Donna Ippolito, Todd Huettel
Production managers: Jordan K. Weisman, Karen Vander Mey
Art director: Dana Knutson

Background: Huge BattleMechs tower above the battlefields of the future, dealing out death and destruction on a grand scale. Developed by Terran scientists more than 500 years ago (by campaign time), BattleMechs are big, mean, and deadly. Armed with lasers, particle beams, autocannons and missiles, BattleMechs are capable of destroying anything that stands in their path. But BattleMechs are not

simply high-powered, fully automated death machines; humans are required to pilot them. At the heart of every Battle-Mech sits a vulnerable creature of flesh and blood.

At first, this pilot was simply a two-dimensional character capable of actions resolved only through the BattleMech itself. The origins of the BattleMech pilot lay in the BATTLETECH® board game — a slick set of rules for pitting BattleMechs against each other. With the addition of MECHWARRIOR® game book, this pilot has now come to life and can function outside of his BattleMech. The MECHWARRIOR book is not a role-playing game in its own right but a supplement for the BATTLE-TECH board game. Thus, before looking at the MECHWARRIOR supplement, a quick examination of the board game is needed.

The BATTLETECH game is a brilliantly conceived and presented game of robotic combat set in the war-torn universe of the Successor States. The Golden Age of the Star League is over. Before its fall, a united humanity journeyed to the stars; now, five Successor States vie with each other for power and control in a new dark age. With the passing of the Star League went many of its greatest achievements; technology has regressed, states struggle to maintain their aging BattleMechs, and only a limited number of factories are capable of building new ones. It is the age of the MechWarrior, where battles are fought for the necessities of life and to bring glory to the victors.

Presentation: The BATTLETECH game box contains two full-color terrain maps, 48 colorful stand-up BattleMech counters, four sheets of playing markers, plastic counter stands, dice, and a rule book. The production of this game is of very high quality.

Starting with a simple training exercise, the rule book builds the game's complexity in a systematic and easy-to-absorb manner. By the end of the book, players are destroying both the terrain and enemy Battle-Mechs with ease. The BATTLETECH game system requires tactical thinking and detailed combat resolution, without becoming too mechanically complicated. Add in the background which appears in side-bars throughout the book, and you have a very good game rich in depth and technical information.

The MECHWARRIOR supplement builds on the BATTLETECH system, transforming it from a set of combat rules into a role-playing game. This is one of the supplement's strengths — and one of its weaknesses. Caught smack dab in the middle of the BATTLETECH game set-up, the MECHWARRIOR supplement must accommodate combat-heavy board-game features not usually found in a role-playing game.

The MECHWARRIOR supplement comes as 144-page softback book. The layout is more utilitarian than striking. This is offset by 16 color plates which graphically

portray the badges, uniforms, and equipment of the Successor States. The BATTLE-TECH game sidebars have been replaced with more traditional background sections that are useful for finding information during game, but not as easily digestible as sidebars. Nevertheless, these chapters add flesh to the bare bones of BATTLETECH games. Lacking in explicit staging tips, the background is aimed more at providing a detailed insight into the motivations and actions of the powers of the future.

Character design: This element of the MECHWARRIOR supplement is firmly rooted in the BATTLETECH game; working within this limitation, the designers have done a good job. Characters are created by spending a set number of points on attributes, skills, and BattleMechs. The main thrust of the design process is aimed at the MechWarriors, but it does include design sequences for techs (general repairmen), aerospace pilots, and scouts (information gatherers and forward observers). The system creates characters with a wide range of skills, ranging from BattleMech gunnery to diplomacy. MECHWARRIOR rules mesh directly with BATTLETECH rules, allowing the characters to be used without modifications between systems.

The size of your BattleMech depends partially on how many points you are prepared to spend on it; it doesn't guarantee a big BattleMech, but it helps. Consequently, characters in the big BattleMechs don't have the high attributes or skill levels that the pilots of the smaller machines have. While obviously a device for game balance, its use in campaign terms is hard to justify.

This design consideration has also influenced the shape of the game. In most RPGs, players take on the role of one character; in MECHWARRIOR games, players have to play at least two characters and sometimes more. The reason is simple: A BattleMech unit requires support staff, as well as warriors. While the warriors are fighting, the support staff sits around behind the scenes (a sure recipe for boredom).

Once characters have been created, it's time to get the BattleMech unit together. These units vary in size from a lance (four mechs) up to a company (12 mechs). As it is possible for two players to end up running a company between them (plus its support staff in the form of techs, etc.), this can lead to the situation in which players are either running two or three MechWarriors or the GM has to handle a large number of NPCs — not a bad thing in itself, but it does cut down on individual characterization. An easy-to-use system to generate personalities would go a long way toward overcoming this problem.

Game mechanics: As can be expected, the game mechanics center on the problems of keeping a BattleMech unit functional and the kinds of rewards and obstacles likely to be encountered by a BattleMech unit. In this regard, the game

mechanics are complete and fairly simple to handle. The mechanics are rather weak in the nonviolent interactions between PCs and NPCs. Here, some examples would have been useful to show how MechWarriors can deal with life without gunplay.

For the BattleMech combat system, the BATTLETECH game is essential. MECH-WARRIOR rules do contain amendments and additions to this system but are incomplete in themselves. The small-arms system uses a variation of the BattleMech combat system, relying on hex grids and movement points to regulate the action.

Experience points earned by player characters during adventures are spent to increase skills and abilities. The more proficient you are at a skill, the more it costs to improve it. The system is not as fluid as STAR WARS: The RPG, but it does its job. Experience points can also be spent to create abstract contacts and purchase titles (another case of game balance gaining precedence over role-playing).

GM's tips: The MECHWARRIOR book's greatest strength is in allowing BATTLE-TECH campaigns to be set up and run. With MECHWARRIOR rules, players can design and run their own characters in battle after battle. Tables are provided for generating typical assignments and for detailing events, either on a local, day-to-day basis or on a larger scale. By using these tables, a GM can easily keep the MechWarriors occupied. Whether scavenging enemy BattleMechs for spare parts or dealing with a guerilla raid by a bounty hunter, the system covers it all.

Introductory adventure: The absence of an introductory scenario shows how closely the supplement is tied to the BATTLETECH rules. The GM assigns the PCs a mission and generates the opposition. The outcome of the first conflict determines the next part of the campaign. For example, a defeat for the PCs or a costly victory might see them running for cover or being forced to adventure outside of their BattleMechs.
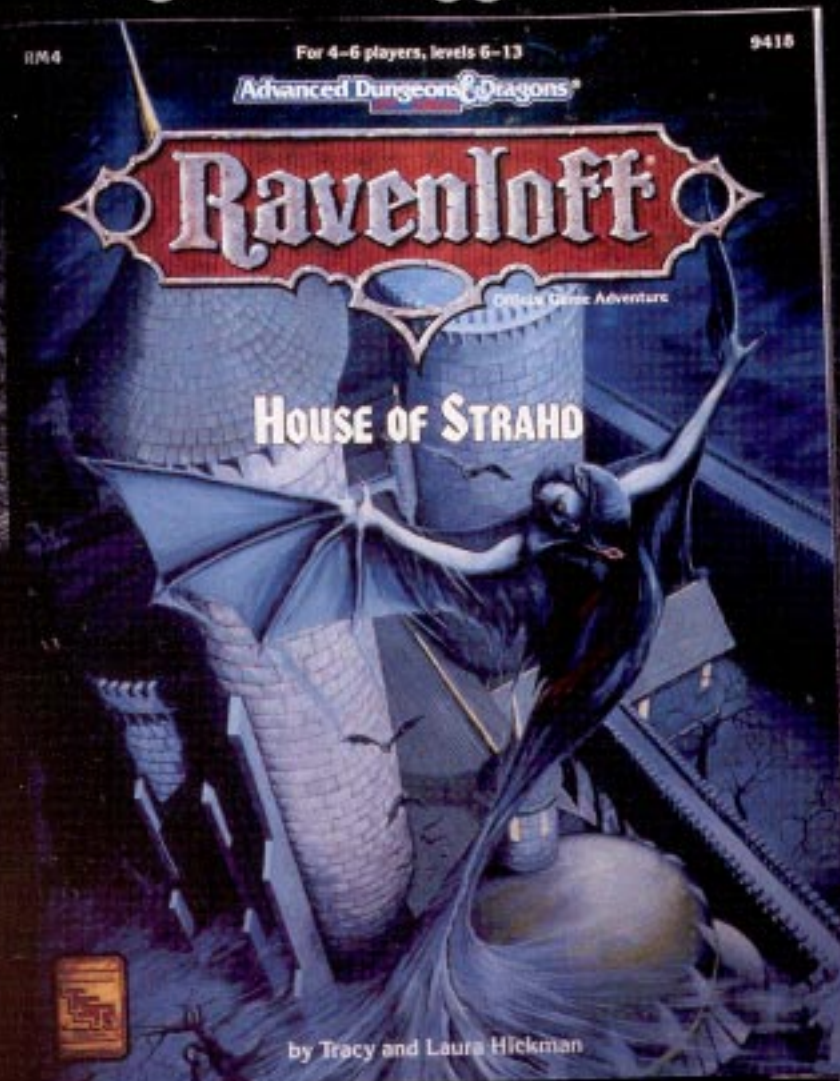
Evaluation: Not being a game in its own right puts the MECHWARRIOR supplement in a strange position. As an expansion to the BATTLETECH rules, it does a good job. The MECHWARRIOR system's abstract mechanics can either be taken as they are or simply ignored. No one is going to make you use them. For anyone without the BATTLETECH rules, MECH-WARRIOR cannot be recommended. I do suggest, however, that you do try the BATTLETECH game. If you like it, it might inspire you to form your own BattleMech unit and battle your way across the Successor States. These rules are available from: FASA Corporation, P.O. Box 6930, Chicago IL 60680, USA.

Short and sweet

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by Tracy and Laura Hickman

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