Designing Your "Home Base" Starship

By Wes.

The starship is an ideal "home base" for a plot because of its mobility. It offers a reusable, familiar setting for roleplay as well as a place for characters to live and to store their belongings and mission-essential equipment. I've written this guide to inspire Star Army's ship designers and potential designers, and to serve as the basis for a panel hosted at the online science fiction roleplaying convention SciWorld. As more ideas come up during discussion, I intend to add them to the guide. Your insight and suggestions are welcome.

Home Base vs Other Starships

It's your plot and your ship. You don't want to be just another mass-produced "cookie cutter" ship. I mean, hey, the PCs are on board, and they're (maybe) saviors of the universe! And by that virtue, command will probably let them have a little slack when it comes to customization, maybe not at first but especially as the plot goes on.

You want your home base to be:

- More detailed
- More unique

Player Involvement

I have seen some great ship designs out there that were designed by just one person and if you want to design the ship on your own that's okay, but consider getting your potential role players involved in the process as well. Starships are very complex because not only do our characters live on them, but we also fight using them so the details have lives depending on them. Many role-players (including you, since you're reading this) love to tinker with ship designs and details. You can get a lot of great ideas by getting them involved in the process. Ask their opinions and suggestions (even writeups), or if they're an artist, designs. Just make sure you establish a timeline/deadline. I have had a lot of players volunteer to create ship designs but not follow through. Designing a ship is fun but labor intensive so accept the fact that you may have to do it yourself if the designated designers don't dutifully deliver diligent designs. As an added bonus, players who got involved with designing the ship will feel more connected to it.

Ship Purpose

Your ship should be designed with at a least a vague idea of what it's for. Generally, you'll want to look at the types of missions you want your plot involved in (combat? exploration? cargo hauling?) and build your ship accordingly. A ship's purpose also determines its size and systems. Colony ships are huge, carriers are large and will have hangars and repair facilities for star fighters, and scout ships will be fast

and tricked out with sensors. If you want to give the ship more character, maybe you want to include the ship's original purpose and also its current/actual purpose (example: an old cargo ship converted to be a battlefield salvager).

Ship Size

You have basically three general options when designing a starship: you can either build your ship small, large, or huge. In this case, I mean not so much a measure of physical size as the size of the crew. Crew size and ship size also vary with how automated the ship is.

Small Ships

Small ships will have a crew primarily composed of a handful of player characters, perhaps with a sprinkling of NPCs for non-plot-involved positions (cooks and such). On a small ship, everyone knows each other and nobody blends into the background. This is the most important thing to note because it has some important implications for a game master: it means that the PCs will be almost always the ones doing the work and new characters have to be introduced by having them board. Because each character is vital to the small crew, one inactive PC can throw a wrench in the plot's gears so a GM has to be vigilant with posting requirements and should not be afraid to post for the missing character. A small ship will also return fairly often to spaceports for repairs and supplies (and shore leave) and can usually fit inside larger ships and stations and may be able to land planetside. A good example of a "Small Starship" in popular media is the Millenium Falcon.

Here's some general guidelines when designing small starships for PCs:

- Can be piloted by one person like a jet
- Minimum crew of 1 or 2 (pilot and engineer)
- Maximum crew of 10?
- Carries at least 1 large SSCC (recommendation: towing mechanism)
- 25-60 meters long
- Moderately armed with room for upgrades
- Comfortable accommodations for crew and a few passengers
- Loading ramp and room for a truck
- Common area for chilling, briefings
- Inexpensive
- Easy to maintain

Large Ships

Large ships will usually have player characters each in charge of a department within the crew. More player characters can be supported because there are more facilities and job positions to man on a larger vessel. Big ships have the perk that crew members, shuttles, and such are more expendable. You have a lot of NPCs to work with and bringing new PCs onto the stage is easier: you can just say "he was one of

the many crew members already aboard." A big ship can also be a damage sponge compared to small ships where every bit of hull is stuffed with critical systems. Large ships may or may not be able to find docks they can fit in, and might not be able to land on a planet. A good example of a "large starship" everybody knows is the 🔊Starship Enterprise.

Huge Ships, Space Stations, and Planets

Huge ships or space stations are like large ships, with with a key difference - rather than having your ship come to the action, the action comes to you. Think 🔊Deep Space Nine or 🔊Babylon 5. Your giant vessel can serve as a hub for visiting starships, colonists, fleet command activities, commerce, shipbuilding, and more. Most large fleets have only one of these types of plots because they are a little more difficult to GM and recruit for (starbases aren't as glamorous). A huge ship/station typically sends out starships to do its work rather than getting into any (offensive) combat or specific missions. Huge ships make great hubs for deep space exploration plots. Planet-based plots can also be considered to be "huge ships" for plot purposes as a planet is essentially a natural space station.

I've seen some Game Masters (and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*) get the best of both worlds by having a space station keep a starship assigned to it, which the main characters use whenever they need some small ship adventuring.

Size Guidelines by Class

These are the general guidelines for ships in the *Star Army* setting.

Type	Base SP	Min Length	Max Length
Small Escorts	10	30 meters	100 meters
Destroyers	20	100 meters	250 meters
Cruisers	30	250 meters	500 meters
Carriers, Heavy Cruisers	40	500 meters	1000 meters
Battleships	50	750 meters	1500 meters

Ship Appearance

Your ship's appearance goes a long way in determining your ship's feel. Is your ship a military vessel bristling with guns and sensors like a WWII battleship? A clunky, stained freighter with obvious modifications? Does it have exposed exterior systems or a smooth aerodynamic hull for atmospheric entry? Think about external features like running lights, windows, airlock hatches, torpedo launchers, communication masts, sensor arrays, hull markings, and nose art (if appropriate).

The best art to have is a 3-dimensional render that allows you to show the ship from various angles. For those who've never created anything 3D before, I recommend Google Sketchup or DOGA L3, as they are both easy to learn and use. The GIMP is an excellent free image editor for making hull skins and other 2D art. If you're not coming up with anything good, consider getting an artistically apt friend or RP community member to create a design. You could also pay a talented artist on DeviantArt, SciFi Meshes,

or a similar site to create your ship.

Ship appearance should make sense; for instance, thrusters and engines should be relativity centered to the ship's center of mass, that way the ship moves forward rather than rotating. Ship designs tend to work best when they're in familiar shapes; a ship might have the general form of a shark, a WW2 aircraft carrier, a cigar, or a platter. Phallic objects make a up a huge portion of ship designs, but try to avoid making your ship look too much like a penis. If it's a long shaft and two side engines, maybe you want to diversify the shape a bit!

It's also important to remember the 🔗Rule of Cool. Even if you ship doesn't need wings, if they make your design awesome, maybe you should use them anyway and label them radiators or something. We're in the space opera genre, not hard science…while striving to make things fairly realistic, it's more important for us to be consistent to our in-character universe than to be completely scientifically accurate. Roleplay is about making things fun for the players.

Interior

The interior of your starship should have a lot of description and detail. If the roleplay plot is your movie, then the ship is your set. Paint a picture with vivid and thorough descriptions of each major compartment, from the bridge/control room to the engine room and maintenance tunnels. Is there a room for decontamination? What type of toilets are there? Do crew members have there own rooms or do they share rooms or even bunks? Set up a wiki page for each compartment and link them. As the roleplay goes on, you may want to add notes and updates to each.

Interior layout should make sense. The cargo bay and medical center ought to be next to or connected by elevator to the shuttle bay (think about it). Crew cabins should be near recreational facilities. Engineering should probably be by the engines. Try to visualize how player characters will move through the ship in everyday and in battle situations.

Systems

It's important to list the ship's systems and capabilities so that everyone can be on the same page. The most important are power, propulsion, life support, sensors, communications, and weapons (if applicable).

Star Army ships should be compliant with the Starship Speed Standard and damage_rating_v2 system.

Embarked Craft

Because you don't always want to send the ship everywhere (like, say, to the local planet's semi-hostile spaceport) and for other reasons, it's prudent to carry some auxiliary craft for transport of crew, troops, and cargo or for ship repair or combat (starfighters). You may also want to carry ground vehicles and have some escape pods. In the worst case scenario, you're giving the players a chance to survive the

ship's destruction so the adventure can continue. Here's some types of craft your ship can be designed to carry:

- Gunships
- Medical evacuation shuttles
- Repair pods (for working on the ship's hull)
- Sensor Probes
- Starfighters
- Smaller Starships (if your ship is large or huge)
- Transport Shuttles
- Troop Dropships

Remember that designing a shuttle is basically designing a very small starship.

Quirks

For specific ships, you may want to add unique quirks for characterization purposes. A good example is how my ship smells of seawater on the lower decks from landing in the ocean while having a damaged hull (it flooded). The crew can't seem to get rid of it, nor the smoky odor in other parts of the ship caused by fires ignited by battle damage. Maybe your bridge/command center is customized to give the XO a special seat by the captain. Be special–this ship is the plot ship! It's full of unique PCs and should be unique and lovable too.