

# Jovian Despair

Two Page  
by TauCeti Deichmann

*Earth colonized the Moon, asteroids, and Mars-- but Mars won its independence. So, when it became possible to survive the hellish radiation around Jupiter, Earth ensured that the new colonies would never be self-sufficient.*

*Then the plague struck Earth. The last supply freighter ever will be arriving in six months.  
Survive.*

Players play the crew of a transport ship charged with moving goods and supplies between the Jovian lunar colonies. As the campaign progresses, interlunar politics and desperation make way for deteriorating technology, starvation, and social collapse.

## The Basics

Jovian Despair is a role playing game. Each player has two characters that they create and control. These characters are the main characters in a story of desperation, failure, and hope. A special kind of player, the GM (Game Master) controls everything else, including all of the other characters in the setting.

Unlike many traditional role playing games, in Jovian Despair the non-GM players control what happens when their characters fail at a task, describing the doom that befalls them. Further, the GM does not create the colonies in the setting; the other players do.

You'll need about ten six-sided dice (10d6), paper for notes, and pencils. Character and colony sheets are provided after the two pages, but aren't strictly necessary.

## Dice & Targets

Jovian uses a "reverse die pool" mechanic. The more dice you roll, the more likely you are to fail, and the worse the consequences will likely be. If no die comes up as a "1", you do not fail. Character skills are ranked by "rate". A 1<sup>st</sup> rate character rolls 1 die on challenging tests, while a 4<sup>th</sup> rate character rolls 4 dice. Sufficiently easy tests can result in you rolling no dice, in which case you can't fail. Characters with a 1st rate skill are very rare; there might be a handful around Jupiter.

The difficulty of a task modifies the number of dice you are rolling:

Trivial: -6    Easy: -4    Routine: -2    Challenging: +0  
Risky: +2    Dangerous: +4    Suicidal: +6

The system assumes that most conflicts are between characters and their environment. If you find that you need to roll against an NPC, the difficulty penalty is equal to four minus their rate. So a 1<sup>st</sup> rate NPC gives +3 dice difficulty.

## Tools & Weapons

Exceptional tools (such as a machine shop, medical bay, or an actual pistol from Earth) reduce the number of dice being rolled by 2.

In the rare case of combat, first the attacker rolls Shooting or Free Fall (as appropriate) to hit the defender. Then, if the attacker didn't miss, the defender makes a Dangerous Fitness test. Some weapons make the test harder. See "Failure" (to the right) for the consequences of this, and all, tests.

## Working Together

If there is time, characters can help each other perform tasks. Every assisting character makes a Challenging skill test. If an assisting character does not fail, reduce the die pool of the primary character by 1. Once players roll to assist, the primary character is committed to rolling the remaining dice, however many there are.

## Failure

If you fail a skill test, you (the player who rolled, not the GM) get to describe what happened and any consequences. The failure could have been your character's fault, or the fault of outside influences (such as a rubber gasket breaking or not having the right tools or enough propellant).

Each "1" rolled must be spent to make the results worse. First, choose the degree of the result, which limit what your character can do in the future:

- 1 - Minor: Either the specific thing you just tried is now impossible (ex: you are out of ammunition), or a set of things as broad as a single skill are at +2 difficulty (ex: the maneuvering thrusters are damaged; +2 piloting)
- 2 - Major: Either something as broad as a skill is impossible (ex: the maneuvering thrusters are destroyed), or all actions are at +2 difficulty (ex: your character is in pain).
- 3 - Catastrophic: All actions are impossible (ex: your character is unconscious).

You can spend (or refund) further "1"s as follows:

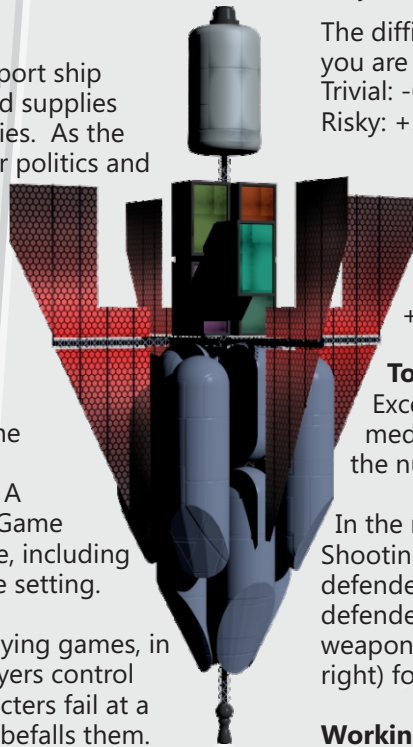
- 1 - Delayed: There is enough time to do something about this before the worst hits.
- +1 - Everyone: Instead of just affecting your character, the consequences affect everyone on the ship. Skill tests on behalf of the ship (piloting) do this automatically, without using an additional "1".
- +1 - Plot: The problem is nearly permanent. Skill rolls alone can never solve it. At best, it may become fixable with substantial outside help, or by dedicating an entire gaming session to it.

## Example Failures

- 1 - (major, delayed) Your bunk is shorted; you get shocked repeatedly. You're not going to get much sleep. Each day, get an accumulating +1 difficulty to everything.
- 2 - (major) While on spacewalk, you drop your tools. +2 difficulty to all repairs during the spacewalk.
- 3 - (major, plot) When trying to fix the electrical short, you accidentally electrocute your hand, destroying it. +2 difficulty to all tasks that need two hands.

Note:

**Four "1"s kills your character** (catastrophic, plot).  
**Five "1"s kills the entire crew, ending the campaign** (catastrophic, plot, everyone).



**Jupiter**  
(Diagram to scale)  
100,000 km

**Io:** mineral rich, volcanic, radioactive, hellish

**Europa:** glacial, moonquakes, good source of propellant

**Ganymede:** large, mixed rock and ice

**Callisto:** large, heavily cratered, in-system freighter rendezvous point

● — Earth-Moon system to the same scale

## Setting Creation

Before the first session, the players (not the GM) must create the setting. Each player creates one or more colonies. Every colony has a purpose, a moon, a location at that moon, and two descriptors. There are four moons to choose from: Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto. See the diagram at the top of this page. Colonies can be orbiting their moon (vulnerable to meteors and radiation), underground (costs more propellant to land and take off), or on the surface (worst of both worlds). The purpose of the colony gives you its starting population:

**Prestige Outpost** (built to make their founding nation look good): 2d6 people

**Research Outpost** (study Jupiter or Europa's underground ocean): 20+3d6 people

**Food Production** (hydroponics or aquaculture): 30+3×(4d6) people

**Industrial Colony** (mining & smelting or manufacturing): 35+5×(4d6) people

**Micronation** (slightly crazy people trying to settle a moon): 10×(10d6) people

The GM and players should determine the colony's rate in its three "skills": Unity (how well its people work together), Technical (how well maintained the colony is), and Desperation (what the colony is willing to do to survive). Colonies average at 2<sup>nd</sup> rate Unity and Technical and 6<sup>th</sup> rate (very low) Desperation.

## Colony Descriptors

Descriptors can be anything. Examples include: corrupt leader, excellent commander, brilliant engineer, built on a budget, heavily automated, physically divided, mobile, doing forbidden research, democratic, new owners (leadership is different from workers), and rotates (artificial gravity; orbital only).

Every character from a colony gets bonuses to their skills for their common environment. For each descriptor, the GM should choose one skill to give 2xp and a different one to give 1xp.

## Character Creation

After the setting is populated with colonies, each player creates two characters. Ships have two 12-hour shifts, so each of a player's characters should be on a different shift. Each character is associated with a colony (and gets the skill bonuses from it). Then, the player spends 10xp on further skills. Untrained skills are at 6th rate. It costs 1xp to bring a skill to 5th rate, 2xp to go from 5th rate to 4th, 3xp for the next rate, and so on (increasing by 1 more each rate). Xp is stored by skill, not overall.

## Skill List

The skills are Piloting, Engineering, Research, Medicine, Leadership, Talking, Perception, Shooting, Free Fall, and Fitness. Free Fall covers all agility tests, as well as maneuvering in a space suit. Fitness covers all strength, endurance, and resistance tests.

## Character Growth

After each session, each character gains 1xp that can go anywhere, and 1xp that can only go into a skill that another character on the ship is better at. This represents crosstraining.

## Building a Future

Player characters can work on long-term projects to improve the setting. For example, they could help a colony develop a method to produce anti-radiation drugs. When a project is proposed, the GM should create a sheet for it. Each project should have a list of two or three skills that go towards furthering it. Each skill should have a difficulty associated with it (generally Challenging or Risky) and a number of successes needed to finish that part of the project. After each session, players may contribute towards the projects. Each character can make one die roll towards a project, or assist another character make their roll. Any consequences of failure should be applied next session, at a time of the GM's choosing. Once every needed success is met, the results of the project change the setting.

A project that substantially helps the setting (such as the anti-radiation drugs) should require about twelve successes. A simple project that does not impact the setting much can require as few as four successes.

## Technology

Jovian Despair is in the early 2100s. Technology is similar to what we have, but better. Three systems are needed to keep people alive in Jupiter's hellish magnetosphere and its radiation: anti-radiation drugs (from Earth), radiation resistant armor, and magnetic shields (requires power). If any of these stops working, your ship will start to become irradiated. Ships use small nuclear thermal rockets; it takes between one and five days to get between moons, and the ships have 0.2Gs of thrust.

## Campaign Arc

The first casualty will be trust, as the colonies get increasingly desperate to hoard resources. As time passes, occasional disasters will rob the setting of vital equipment. Mid-campaign is about keeping people alive as their infrastructure fails around them. Should the crew survive to late campaign, depending on how well they do, it'll focus on the slow rebuilding as various necessities are met, or fleeing the setting (to Mars?), or the death of human civilization around Jupiter.

## GM Advice

Players should be more invested in the setting than their characters. This is why players must create the setting, and why you should avoid making colonies of your own.

Attack the setting, not the player's characters.

Let the dice attack the characters.

Have two things go wrong each session, preferably at the same time: one problem isn't bad enough.

Understated is better than overstated: have the smallest things start the biggest disasters.

## Resources

Winchel Chung's [Atomic Rocket](http://www.projectrho.com/public_html/rocket/) website is indispensable for anyone working with a hard science fiction setting.

The film [Gravity](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1454479/) is an excellent example of failures chaining into each other.



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Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Player \_\_\_\_\_  
Ship/Station \_\_\_\_\_  
Crew Position \_\_\_\_\_

Shift:  1<sup>st</sup>  2<sup>nd</sup>

**Skills**

Piloting \_\_\_\_\_  
Engineering \_\_\_\_\_  
Research \_\_\_\_\_  
Medicine \_\_\_\_\_  
Leadership \_\_\_\_\_  
Talking \_\_\_\_\_  
Perception \_\_\_\_\_  
Shooting \_\_\_\_\_  
Free Fall \_\_\_\_\_  
Fitness \_\_\_\_\_

Rate xp

Rate	xp
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**Injuries and Notes**

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Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Player \_\_\_\_\_  
Ship/Station \_\_\_\_\_  
Crew Position \_\_\_\_\_

Shift:  1<sup>st</sup>  2<sup>nd</sup>

**Skills**

Piloting \_\_\_\_\_  
Engineering \_\_\_\_\_  
Research \_\_\_\_\_  
Medicine \_\_\_\_\_  
Leadership \_\_\_\_\_  
Talking \_\_\_\_\_  
Perception \_\_\_\_\_  
Shooting \_\_\_\_\_  
Free Fall \_\_\_\_\_  
Fitness \_\_\_\_\_

Rate xp

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**Injuries and Notes**

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**Colony** \_\_\_\_\_  
Location \_\_\_\_\_  
Purpose \_\_\_\_\_

**Traits**

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\_\_\_\_\_

Current Population \_\_\_\_\_

Unity \_\_\_\_\_  
Technical \_\_\_\_\_  
Desperation \_\_\_\_\_

Rate

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**Notes**

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**Colony** \_\_\_\_\_  
Location \_\_\_\_\_  
Purpose \_\_\_\_\_

**Traits**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Current Population \_\_\_\_\_

Unity \_\_\_\_\_  
Technical \_\_\_\_\_  
Desperation \_\_\_\_\_

Rate

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**Notes**

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