

Terraforming Mars: The RPG Overview

Mars is a mirror, not a crystal.

—Ray Bradbury

Core Concepts

In *Terraforming Mars: The RPG*, you play through the terraformation and colonization of Mars, building and exploring the future. You won't play just one crew of player characters for the entire campaign. You play a succession of crews across decades or centuries, from the earliest landings to a Green Mars of the far future. Player characters are ephemeral—they might be around for only one Project—but they make a big impact on the setting. You create measurable change on Mars with every adventure. You shape the course of history, Project by Project.

This is a legacy RPG

After completing a Project with the first group of player characters, you may build a whole new team for a scenario set decades in the future, play your earlier characters' successors at their patron corporation, or even just continue playing with the same increasingly competent team as in most RPGs.

Each group somehow relates to the last one, either literally (you're playing the children or protégés of your previous characters) or causally (the last group flooded a crater; now you're playing smugglers on the new Martian great lake).

While many RPGs have influenced us in this design, *Pendragon* is our touchstone. Greg Stafford's masterpiece first showed how ambition and structure can shape a generational story, and we build our legacy RPG with its legacy and in its shadow.

Serial stories, driven by players

Players build a team of characters around the Project they attempt. The characters' work on this Project is the climax—professional, scientific, emotional—of their lives. This creates drama, as their personal baggage combusts under pressure.

This isn't a storygame, but it shares some elements with the storygame ethos. We want to enable players to come up with their own unexpected approaches to completing Projects, as opposed to just following our pre-designed scenarios. Projects provide opportunities for player-driven drama, and we give the players tools for manipulating the game world.

One-shot drama, continuing stories

As groups of player characters are 'disposable', you can push towards the sort of dramatic endings more usually associated with one-shots. In a given project adventure, everyone can die, one character can betray the rest, things can end in disaster—and then your next group of characters plays with the aftermath.

The Project is our dungeon

The dungeon is a staggeringly brilliant piece of game design. It gives clear choices to the players, but constrains those choices. It's flexible, not necessarily tied to a particular location or story. Even a one-page dungeon can pack a lot of juicy game play into a very tight package. Our goal is to replicate this game technology with the Project: a compact, modular challenge that takes one or two sessions to complete. Whether it's genetically engineering Martian fish or deploying a solar mirror, the Project is the story.

Most Projects consist of two pages: one player-facing, one GM-facing. The player-facing page lists the requirements for the Project, briefs the characters on what's needed, and gives context. The GM-facing page gives obstacles, complications, opponents and other ways to throw a spanner in the works. While we can have longer, scripted adventures, the basic unit of play is the Project.

Modular components

As well as Projects, we have sheets for Corporations and Eras. This makes the various elements as reusable as possible. You can plug a different Corporation and different Era together with a Project and have a different experience. We push as much material as possible onto the players' side of the screen, and provide plenty of guidance for complications and hazards, such as dust storms or freezing cold, that come up across multiple Projects and multiple Eras of Mars.

Science is central

Terraforming Mars: The RPG aims at "hard SF" scientific accuracy—no aliens, no magic technology, no psionics—while still allowing for interesting adventures and characters who can make a difference. We outline a (mostly) positive future for humanity, where science and development can build wonders in a desert—but only if the players can navigate the perils of Mars and of human nature.

Unlike most RPGs, the "core activity" of this game is engineering: building something better. Players don't have to be engineers, any more than ***D&D*** players have to be sword-fighters, but they should feel like scientists and engineers in play. No group should stop in the middle of play to look up the rotational speed of Phobos, but the game should feel like the characters have those data at their fingertips and have already allowed for Phobos' angle of approach.

Just as *Ars Magica* replicates the feel of magical research, or *Call of Cthulhu* replicates the feel of occult investigation, we replicate the feel of solving an engineering challenge. We give players lots of levers to pull and buttons to press; you bring together unexpected factors and work as a crew to solve problems.

Default *TMRPG* Game Play Cycle Summary

Pick an Era

When are you playing? This determines which Era Sheet the GM uses: the Era Sheet describes the conditions on Mars, the generic problems that every project in that era faces. In the early Pioneer era, most of these are environmental—Mars is still an uninhabitable, hostile, dead world. In later eras, as Mars is terraformed, political and corporate intrigue become more important.

The factors on the Era Sheet each have Friction dice pools that the GM and players can draw upon as appropriate. The GM might invoke the cold conditions on Mars to make it even harder for a character to traverse a canyon; the player might invoke the radiation bombarding the planet surface to get a bonus die when trying to avoid detection.

Projects can alter the factors on Era Sheets. Dropping an asteroid on Mars raises the temperature, reducing the “cold” factor on the sheet; building a new city adds that city as a factor. The sheets track the changing face of Mars.

Pick a Corporation

The players pick one of the corporations; this determines what specialties are available to your characters and the starting corporation’s factors. Then, as part of brainstorming phase for each generation, talk about both theme and that corporation’s goals on Mars; theme informs character arcs.

In later generations, you won’t necessarily be playing employees of that corporation, or indeed of any corporation. You might be playing:

- Ordinary Martian settlers
- Criminals
- Terraforming Authority investigators
- Radicals
- Mercenaries

- Earth spies

However, the default assumption is that you're working for a corporation. Other factions mechanically work like corps, usually with fewer resources.

Each corporation has a Corporation Sheet, using the same mechanics as the Era Sheet. The players can draw on the Corporation's resources, the GM can invoke the corporation's needs as complications, and projects can alter these factors. Dropping an asteroid might increase one Corporation's terraforming rating, but give the corporation a bad reputation.

Pick a Project

Pick what your characters are trying to accomplish. Each Corporation has a list of possible Projects, the challenges the player character crew needs to overcome, and the desired results. We also have a list of generic Projects, and rules for creating your own.

Each project includes two pages - one player-facing, one GM-facing.

Player-Facing Page

The player-facing section comprises

- A description of that project
- The requirements for completing it
- A map of the project, in the form of a 3x3 hexmap. Depending on the project, this might be a literal map of part of the Martian surface, or an abstract minigame, such as factions that need to be connected to assemble a political coalition, or possible outcomes of research and development.

GM-Facing Page

- A list of obstacles and opponents to that project, which work in the same way as the Era/Corporate sheets
- Advice and suggestions for scenes and plot twists.

Build characters around that Project

Create your crew of characters around that project and its challenges. For example, for a scientific conference Project, you'd need a few scientists, a diplomat, some corporate security people. The project is, for professional/personal/dramatic reasons, a pivotal moment in the lives of these characters.

Ambition and Baggage rules create mini-dramas within each crew.

Execute that Project

A challenge may be resolved with a single roll, or take up a game session, or multiple game sessions. The players need to work together, building task chains to support the milestone rolls, taking actions to change the situation on the ground, or working around obstacles.

As they build rolls and successes, they change the map of the Project, moving toward its completion.

Crew members can take on added stress to get bonus dice—but too much stress can lead to bad outcomes and burnout.

Explore Ramifications

After completing the Project, players and GM discuss the ramifications of their crew's actions—both positive and negative.

Play out Sequels, if Any

These ramifications may spark another adventure, either to fix an unforeseen consequence or to take advantage of an unforeseen opportunity. Or you may just really like these characters and want to continue their adventures in an organic fashion, with a logical next Project assignment tailored to their strengths. If so, pick another Project.

The Next Generation

The next generation doesn't have to literally be the next generation, but there should be a time skip and a switch of perspective as you ramp up to the new crew and their new Project.