

THE TE.N.S.E. SYSTEM

TELESCOPING NARRATIVE SPACE ENCOUNTERS

FANMADE "SHIP COMBAT HACK" FOR *THE EXPANSE RPG*



THIS IS A FREE FAN-CREATED STORY-FORWARD REWORKING OF THE EXPANSE
RPG SHIP COMBAT RULES INTENDED AS SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL.

*THE EXPANSE RPG IS THE PROPERTY OF GREEN RONIN PUBLISHING
BASED ON BOOKS BY JAMES SA COREY.*

INTRODUCTION

The TENSE system is built on the core concepts of space combat from The Expanse RPG, using the rules-as-written as its foundation. Its goal is not to replace those rules, but to offer an alternative that hits the same narrative beats while flowing faster at the table and keeping the focus on character-driven action. TENSE keeps what feels like The Expanse while trimming elements that can slow play or push combat too far into tactical simulation.

This isn't a "fix." The original rules aren't broken. They're carefully designed to reflect the hard science of the books. TENSE can be better described as a hack: a remix shaped by table experience and taste, created because a different rhythm of play can be just as valid and just as fun.

Where the rules-as-written prioritize realism and technical accuracy, TENSE prioritizes speed, clarity, and narrative impact. Some elements, like waiting multiple rounds for a torpedo to close, are true to the books, but can feel tedious in play. TENSE focuses on capturing the experience of high-stakes ship combat: chaos, immediacy, and pressure, as felt by the characters in the novels and the show.

On a player's turn, the GM "zooms in" to play the scene from that PC's perspective aboard the ship. Enemy vessels, by contrast, are "zoomed out" and treated as single entities with unified stat blocks. This keeps individual player choices meaningful without forcing the GM to simulate every NPC aboard opposing ships.

This structure also gives non-combat PCs meaningful things to do during battle: securing loose cargo, administering first aid, patching hull breaches, or tackling urgent side missions. Characters might launch a mid-combat rescue, raid nearby wreckage for spare parts, or handle crises while the fight rages on.

Fleet Combat follows the same philosophy. It pulls back to the full battlespace, allowing players to command skirmish wings, drone swarms, drop teams, and capital ships without heavy bookkeeping. Each vessel type functions like a class, giving fleets identity while keeping large engagements fast and manageable.

Above all, TENSE aims to deliver the kind of high-stakes, cinematic space combat that defines The Expanse: brutal burns, sudden impacts, tight-beam orders over failing systems, and crews who survive because they trust each other as much as the ship itself.

—Josh

PART I: MOVEMENT

THE BASICS

- Each Ship acts in a pre-determined initiative order.
 - This can be played according to the rules as written or the preferred method at your table.
- Each NPC Ship acts once per round using a single **Competency Score** determined by the GM, with 1 Movement and 1 Attack.
- Each round, PCs act individually, in initiative order on their ship's turn, using the standard Expanse structure, with 1 Major Action, 1 Minor Action each.
 - On their turn, they declare how they are contributing: flying, firing, repairing, launching torpedoes, coordinating crew, etc.
 - If your players are on separate ships, your players will take their turns during that Ship's Initiative.

Effectively, you are “zooming in” where your players are actively present and making decisions, and “zooming out” where the action is more abstracted.

RANGES

Tense uses relative zones, referred to as Ranges.

- **Close** – Defined as being in the same range as your target ship. Only distance for Grapplers, optimal distance for PDCs, and boarding
- **Medium** – Defined as 1 range away from your target ship. Optimal distance for Railguns and close pursuit
- **Long** – Defined as 2 or more ranges away from your target ship. Optimal distance for Torpedoes and long-range scans

Ships may move within their range without rolling, maneuvering, but maintaining distance from the target ship(s). To shift 1 range – either by pulling away, or moving closer – roll Opposed Piloting (DEX) vs the other ship. The winner can move one range in their desired direction. You can also opt to do a **Hard Burn**, moving 2 Ranges instead of 1, but your and your crew will suffer the effects of **High-G**. If moving closer or pulling away, this can activate the Chase Mechanics.

CHASE MECHANICS

Use chase rules when one ship is actively trying to flee or pursue another in open space or confined orbital zones.

This becomes your Pilot's Major Action for as many rounds as the chase lasts. It automatically triggers the effect of **High-G** for as long as the chase is active. All other crew continue acting normally on their turns.

CHASE FLOW

- Opposed Piloting Test
- Each round, both Pilots roll:
 - Piloting (DEX) + any bonuses
 - Use Stunt Points as normal, these can fuel maneuvers, gain positioning, or support allies.
- The margin of success can offer a narrative or tactical edge.

HIGH-G

High-G effects happen if a pilot initiates a **Hard Burn** to change ranges or the **Chase Mechanics** are activated. When in High-G, PCs must pass (CON or DEX) Tests each round to avoid penalties TN 11 or suffer -1 on all actions that round, failure with a 1 on the Drama die = 1 injury condition. TN 12 with a -2 for the following round, TN13 with a -3 the next, and so on for as long as the high-g burn persists.

NARRATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF HIGH-G

Regardless of how the mechanics play out, traveling at High-G will always have a physical effect on the bodies of the characters. In the books, any time you do a High-G maneuver, you risk stroking out. Players should be encouraged to roleplay discomfort during High-G movement, and some recovery after the fact, even if they dice say that no long-term damage was done.

This goes doubly so if the ship has the **bad juice** flaw.

RESULT

3 Consecutive Wins

3 Consecutive Losses

Mixed Results

EFFECT

You catch your quarry or successfully escape, depending on intent.

Your opponent achieves their goal.

Reset your streak to 0.

ROLES & SUGGESTED ACTIONS

PILOT

Evasive Maneuver, Change Range, Outmaneuver

GUNNER

Fire railguns, PDCs, or torpedoes

ENGINEER

Repair systems, vent reactor, reroute power

TECH

Sensor Lock, Electronic Warfare, Jam Systems

COMMANDER

Coordinate crew, grant SP, boost rolls

MEDIC

Bring Injured Crew to Autodoc, Perform First Aid (INT – Medicine), Stabilize Collateral Casualties

PASSENGER

Duck, pray, scream, vomit. You're still on the ship, and your narrative actions still matter. You can provide assists to active crew during combat (Communication, Engineering, or other relevant skill checks. For more See Passenger Missions later in this document).

PART II: ACTION

ATTACKING & DEFENDING

ATTACKING

- Attack Roll: Accuracy (PER) + Weapons Bonus vs TN 12
- Called Shots (specific systems): TN18

DEFENSE REACTIONS (ONE PER ATTACK)

- Evade – Roll Piloting (DEX) vs attacker's roll
- Shoot Down (vs torpedoes): Gunnery (PER) vs TN 11
- E-War Countermeasures: Tech (INT) vs TN (GM sets)

Success = attack negated
Failure = attacker rolls damage

TAKING DAMAGE

- Subtract the ship's (defensive value, like armor) from the total damage dealt.
- For every 2 points of damage remaining after Hull (rounded up), mark 1 Hit on the ship's damage counter.
 - Players and NPCs can spend Fortune equal to remaining damage to avoid taking a hit.
- System Losses are applied based on the current condition (Impaired = 1, Critical = +2). These can be randomly determined or assigned narratively by the GM.

HULL RATINGS

SHIP SIZE

HULL RATING

Tiny

1

Small

2 (1d3)

Medium

3 (1d6)

Large

5 (2d6)

Huge

10 (3d6)

Gigantic

15 (4d6)

Colossal

20 (5d6)

Titanic

25 (6d6)

SHIP IMPROVEMENTS

GMs will frequently hand out ship improvements as rewards. These will typically be a bonus +1 to +3 to their Hull Ratings or Sensor Scores. There's no reason to think they won't scale the same under this system as they do in Rules As Written. That said, if your PCs have stacked up a number of these advantages, be sure to add some to the enemies' ships as well or give them some other improvements to even out the battle and make it at least a little challenging for your heroes.

WEAPON DAMAGE

WEAPON

RANGE

DMG

Grapplers

Close

N/A

PDCs

Close

2d6 + Gunner's PER

Rail Gun

Medium

3d6 + Gunner's PER

Torpedo

Long

4d6 + Gunner's PER

SYSTEM LOSS EFFECTS

System

Effect Until Repaired

Weapons

Cannot fire

Maneuverability

Cannot move or evade

Sensors

No E-War or sensor-based rolls

Collateral

PCs make a Constitution Roll. If they fail, they take 2d6 damage, effect remains until players can receive medical attention.

Hull Breach

Hull Rating halved until patched or repaired

A NOTE ABOUT COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Damage to a body is treated the same in this as it is in regular combat as laid out in the Core Rulebook or TUE. Toughness is still subtracted from the damage before players take any injury and they are allowed to spend Fortune to negate the remaining damage.

HITS TAKEN

CONDITION

EFFECT

1 to 2

Bruised

Cosmetic damage, sparks, narrative only

3 to 6

Impaired

–1 to all ship rolls, 1 System Loss (GM choice unless Called Shot)

7 to 9

Critical

–2 to all ship rolls, 2 additional Systems Losses

10+

Disabled

Ship is inoperable. Reactor, drive, and/or life support fail.

CALLED SHOTS

If a gunner successfully makes a called shot (TN 18), they may bypass the damage counter and directly deal a Loss to a system (e.g., Weapons, Maneuverability, Sensors). The enemy is considered **Impaired** if they were not already so, **Critical** if already **Impaired**, and **Disabled** if already **Critical**.

STUNTS

The stunts in the core rulebook and Ships of The Expanse should **MOSTLY** translate to this new system without tweaking. That said, there will be some hiccups, as I've discovered over the years. When you come across these, I suggests following the spirit of the original stunt but reinterpreting it to fit the new mechanics.

In general, I advocate for doing stunts on the fly if your table is comfortable with it. This is when the player describes what they are trying to accomplish and the GM will either find an equivalent stunt for them or set a Stunt Point cost based on the description alone. Running the combat this way prevents any major issues that could come from translating stunts between systems.

PART III: EMERGENCY

DAMAGE CONTROL

When systems go offline or your ship suffers serious damage, crew members can attempt to patch things up mid-combat. This is called Damage Control and it is a Major Action:

Roll Engineering (INT), or other relevant focus, vs TN 11–13

On a Successful Damage Control, use the Drama Die to determine the effect.

Drama Die Result	Effect
5–6	Full Repair: The system is fully restored, and the ship improves by 1 Condition Level (e.g., Critical → Impaired).
1–4	Temporary Fix: The system is brought back online, but the ship's overall Condition remains the same. This may result in a Cascade Failure later if the system takes more stress.

PASSENGER MISSIONS

Optional sidequests to keep all your players engaged. These are run as Advanced Tests that will take multiple rounds to succeed/fail, working a little bit like chases do for the pilots.

MISSION 1: SECURE CRITICAL AREA

- **Narrative:** Something is loose, unstable, or at risk of causing harm—be it cargo, gear, equipment, or an unstable reactor component.
- **Core Idea:** Tie down, isolate, or stabilize something under duress.
- **Test:** Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics/Engineering)
- **Threshold:** 9–12 (based on risk)
- **Failure Consequence:** Something breaks loose or explodes; ship or crew take damage, or hazard zone is created.
- **Examples:** Secure cargo crates, restrain panicked crew, stabilize reactor housing, keep fuel tanks from rupturing.

MISSION 2: REROUTE OR REBOOT SYSTEM

- **Narrative:** A critical system has gone dark. You need to reroute power, reset software, or manually restore access.
- **Core Idea:** Crawl into conduits or access panels to bring a system back online.
- **Test:** Intelligence (Tech or Engineering)
- **Threshold:** 10–15 (based on system complexity)
- **Failure Consequence:** System remains offline; ship suffers penalties to related actions.
- **Examples:** Fix comms, bypass damaged circuits, bring a turret or sensor suite back online, reboot life support.

MISSION 3: PROTECT OR EXTRACT PERSONNEL

- **Narrative:** Someone is in danger—injured, trapped, or panicking. You're the closest to help.
- **Core Idea:** Perform a rescue or stabilize a crewmember during chaos.
- **Test:** Intelligence (Medicine), Dexterity (Acrobatics), or Strength (Athletics)
- **Threshold:** 9–12
- **Failure Consequence:** Injured party worsens or becomes incapacitated; morale or functionality suffers.
- **Example:** Drag someone to the autodoc, carry an unconscious tech off the sensor deck, keep someone from opening an airlock in panic.

MISSION 4: HOLD THE LINE

- **Narrative:** A location is failing—airlock breach, door malfunction, bulkhead about to collapse. You must hold or brace it until help arrives or pressure stabilizes.
- **Core Idea:** Maintain control of a failing barrier or zone.
- **Test:** Strength (Athletics), Dexterity (Mechanics), or Constitution (Endurance)
- **Threshold:** 9–12
- **Failure Consequence:** Breach or breakdown; results in injury, depressurization, or exposure to vacuum/fire.
- **Examples:** Brace an airlock, hold a door against pressure, seal a failing containment field.

MISSION 5: CALM THE CHAOS

- **Narrative:** The ship is falling apart—not physically, but socially. You need to keep others focused, functional, and not freaking out.
- **Core Idea:** Rally crew or restore order during a crisis. This is really good for NPC companions.
- **Test:** Communication (Leadership, Persuasion)
- **Threshold:** 9–12
- **Failure Consequence:** Loss of crew efficiency; morale drop or one crew member acts irrationally or flees station.
- **Examples:** Talk down a panicking tech, reestablish chain of command, keep volunteers from becoming liabilities.

PART IV: SCALING UP

WHEN TO USE THESE RULES

In cases of 2–5 ships in a Fleet, use the rules above and let players control the ally ships with their own stats instead of Competency Scores. For battles with a larger amount of components, these more abstracted Fleet rules might serve you better. When not explicitly stated otherwise, all the above rules apply.

FLEET COMBAT

For Fleet Combat, the NPC ship statblocks will be further abstracted into types that each reflect an element of regular ship combat, and each has a set of special moves that make it useful in battle. Each ship has a Population Score. This represents the people alive on board each vessel. A ship can use Population like Fortune to avoid taking conditions. Collateral hits directly affect the Population score. Once ship hits a Population Score of 0, or 2 or more systems are disabled, they are out of the combat. They cannot be brought back (or else this would drag on for days.)

COMMAND VESSEL

#: 1 | Hull: 5 | Population: 10

- Command: Leadership 3d6+2 vs TN 11. Allows you to generate a floating SP Pool equal to stunt die (usable by ANY allied ship this round).
- Mark: You can tag an enemy. Allies get +1d6 to hit them until end of the round.
- Attack: Railgun (3d6, Long Range)

SOLDIER VESSELS

#: 3 | Hull: 3 | Population: 15

- Assault: In a single round, Attack enemy ship at Long range, if Successful do 4d6 damage, or enemy ship at Medium Range for 2d6 if successful.
- Each Soldier Ship contains 1 Drop Ship, which can only be deployed at close range.

SKIRMISH VESSELS

#: 2. | Hull: 3 | Population: 15

- Move: Can move an additional band on a Hard Burn.
- Harass: Piloting (3d6+2) vs TN11, success pushes enemy 1 range band in the direction of your choice.
- Attack: PDC attack (2d6.)

DROP SHIPS

#: 1 /Soldier | Hull: 2 | Population: 5

- Boarding Party: Send in a group of soldiers onto an enemy ship 2 options:
 - Play the boarding out on PC's turn, zooming in to regular combat (use PC's stats or solder statblock from core rule book)
 - Abstract it out with a roll vs the enemy's Competency Score.
- Winning does 1d6 to the enemy ship's Population Score. Losing risks attacker taking 1d6-1 to the drop ship's Population score

REPAIR DRONE SWARM

#: 5 | Hull : 2 | Population: 0

- The Swarm has a low Hull Rating and is easily taken out. They can always reach the target in the same round they are deployed, unless blocked or destroyed. If the repair drones can reach a damaged ship, they can attempt to resolve damage from attacks that on the next turn with an engineering 3d6+2 vs TN 11
- Success Restores: 1 Condition Level or Population equal to the stunt die (GM chooses based on situation)

E-WAR VESSELS

#: 2 | Hull: 3 | Population: 10

- Targeted Bonus: Roll Hacking/Technology(Int) (Default 3d6+2) vs TN11, if successful apply a mark to one ships in Long range equal to the drama die to receive -2/+ Attack/Movement/Defense. These marks clear after one round.
- You can also grant a general Bonus: -/+ 2 Attack/Defense to 2 ships in close range. These marks clear after one round.
- Scramble sensors: Roll Sensors 3d6+2 vs TN13 against a single enemy ship at medium or close range. If successful, the enemy ship loses either its attack action or its movement on its next turn.
- Defensive E-War: You can try to stop an attack on your ship by rolling an Cryptography/Tech (Int) check. This becomes the TN for the enemy to beat in order to successfully do any of the above.

OPTIONAL: STEALTH VESSEL

#: 1 | Hull : 3 | Population: 10

- Torpedo: Long Range (4d6)
- PDCs: Close Range (2d6)
- Running Quiet: Can only be attempted if you it is the only thing the ship is doing that round.
 - Sensors vs TN 13
 - If successful, until next round:
 - Cannot be targeted at Long range
 - Medium-range attacks against it suffer -2
 - Gains +2 Defense vs Sensors/E-War
- Ambush: If attacking from Stealth:
 - Torpedo attack gains +2 to hit
 - Damage becomes 5d6
 - Defender cannot Evade
 - immediately gives away location

VISUALIZATION

For Fleet Combat, it is more important that you be able to visualize the play space since you are effectively turning combat into more of a chess game when you abstract it out to this level. There is a [VTT Map](#) on the Expanse RPG Community website that is very helpful for this. It can be used in regular ship combat as well. I wish I could credit it's original creator, but it's been so long since it was put in the Doors and Corners server that I can't remember who made it.

SHIP COMBAT TRACKER

SHIP NAME				SHIP NAME			
COMPETENCY (NPC)		HULL		COMPETENCY (NPC)		HULL	
FORTUNE		SENSORS		FORTUNE		SENSORS	
CONDITION		FLOATING SP		CONDITION		FLOATING SP	
LOSSES				LOSSES			
D6	SYSTEM	LOST?	RECOVERED	D6	SYSTEM	LOST?	RECOVERED
1	Weapons	_____	_____	1	Weapons	_____	_____
2	Maneuverability	_____	_____	2	Maneuverability	_____	_____
3	Sensors	_____	_____	3	Sensors	_____	_____
4	Collateral	_____	_____	4	Collateral	_____	_____
5	Hull Breach	_____	_____	5	Hull Breach	_____	_____
6	Reroll	_____	_____	6	Reroll	_____	_____

SHIP NAME				SHIP NAME			
COMPETENCY (NPC)		HULL		COMPETENCY (NPC)		HULL	
FORTUNE		SENSORS		FORTUNE		SENSORS	
CONDITION		FLOATING SP		CONDITION		FLOATING SP	
LOSSES				LOSSES			
D6	SYSTEM	LOST?	RECOVERED	D6	SYSTEM	LOST?	RECOVERED
1	Weapons	_____	_____	1	Weapons	_____	_____
2	Maneuverability	_____	_____	2	Maneuverability	_____	_____
3	Sensors	_____	_____	3	Sensors	_____	_____
4	Collateral	_____	_____	4	Collateral	_____	_____
5	Hull Breach	_____	_____	5	Hull Breach	_____	_____
6	Reroll	_____	_____	6	Reroll	_____	_____