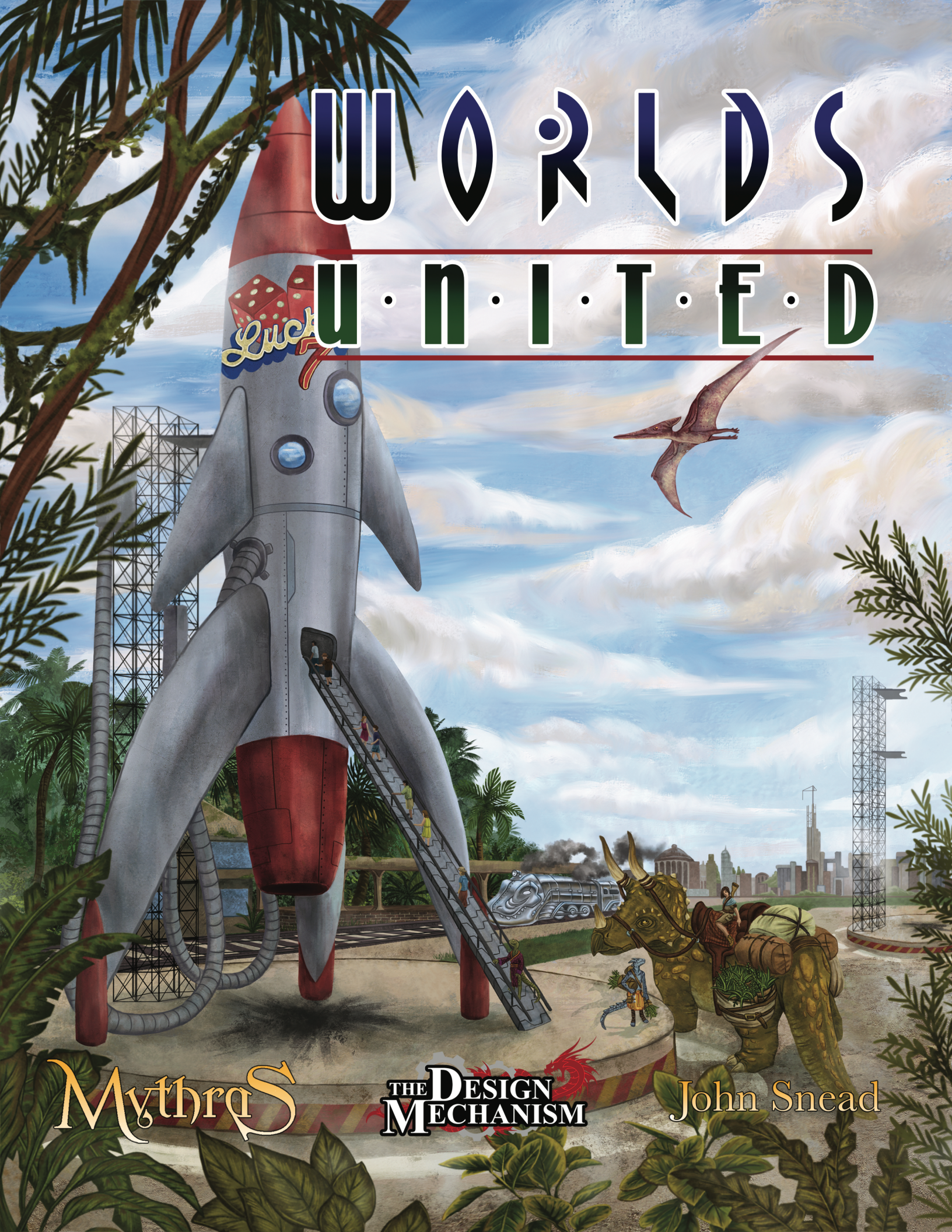



WORLDS U · n · I · T · E · D



Mythras

THE DESIGN
MECHANISM

John Snead



WORLDS

UNITED

Developed & Written by John Snead

CREDITS

Additional Material

Pete Nash, Lawrence Whitaker

Editing

Brian Pivik, Carol Johnson

Proof Reading

Carol Johnson, Rodney Leary

Cover Art

Lauren Covarrubius

Art

*Dan Barker, Tim Hibbetts, Eric Lofgren, Dan MacKinnon, Dean Spencer, Giovanni Valetta,
and Purple Duck Games*

Cartography

Colin Driver, Asa De Buck

Playtesters

AJ Luxton & Becca Newman

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INTRODUCTION

Planetary romance is a genre that was most popular between the 1910s and the 1970s, and its heyday was the 1930s to the 1950s. It is a sub-genre of science fiction where heroic protagonists have adventures on alien worlds that are either more primitive than modern Earth, or are mostly more primitive, but have an abundance of unusual and often mysteriously anachronistic technology. While some planetary romance stories are tales of gritty survival by grim-faced anti-heroes, most are part of the heroic pulp tradition of science fiction, where highly skilled and competent heroes can overcome seemingly overwhelming odds, and in some cases can effectively conquer or liberate the planet they are visiting.

Most older planetary romance is closely related to a more nebulous science fiction genre about a solar system inhabited by numerous intelligent species, which are native to various different planets, with each planet being home to a different species that is adapted to that world's unique conditions. For lack of a better term, this sub-genre is *inhabited solar system SF*. This type of science fiction also formed a major inspiration for this book.

Planetary romance and more generally inhabited solar system SF possesses a number of distinguishing characteristics, one of the most obvious of which is that the inhabitants of other worlds usually include either humans or exceptionally humanoid aliens that appear human except for one or two relatively minor differences, like green skin. These aliens also think and behave like humans, and some of them may become the protagonist's friends or lovers. However, other inhabitants of alien worlds may be radically non-humanoid, and while many of these creatures are horrific antagonists, some could be strange and often ambiguous allies.

Most early planetary romance stories were set in our solar system, using imagined versions of Mars and Venus that remained somewhat believable because of limited scientific knowledge in this era. Because no space probe had ever visited any of these worlds, no one could be certain that the clouds covering Venus did not conceal a prehistoric jungle or that Mars was not a dry but habitable world with canals built by an ancient civilisation.

Worlds United is a setting based on these ideas that also draws inspiration from the very first tale of interplanetary conflict, H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, and its associated short story, *The Crystal Egg*. However, *Worlds United* also draws inspiration from modern science fiction, using current ideas about science, where appropriate, while also imagining a setting where Earth has mostly moved beyond older prejudices based on race and gender. However, it also retains one other important element of earlier science fiction – psychic powers. From HG Wells' *The Crystal Egg*, to a variety of planetary romance fiction, psychic powers were an important part of science fiction for the first half of the 20th century, and they are also an important element of this setting.

The Two Worlds Wars

This setting is one where the events of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* occurred in 1897. After the octopoid Martian invaders died of Earthly diseases, humanity discovered that these creatures had brought humans with them from Mars as slaves and

food, and that some of these individuals survived. Suddenly, humanity had access to advanced Martian technology, including Martian psychic devices, as well as a small number of individuals who helped them learn to use these devices and powers. The

use of psychic powers, and particularly of Martian psychic devices, helped awaken psychic powers and other unusual physical and mental abilities in people. The frequency of these abilities, known as Gifts, continued to increase, as the increasing use

of psychic powers caused even more people to develop Gifts.

These Gifts, along with the recovered items of Martian technology, greatly sped up the pace of technological advancement, as did the looming threat of another invasion from Mars. By the early 1930s, Earth sent a nuclear-powered rocket to Venus and found a primitive world similar to Earth during the age of dinosaurs, but inhabited by three intelligent species, including yet another group of humans. These humans (like the humans from Mars), had been transported from Earth by unknown entities more than 100,000 years ago. Several nations from Earth established trade with one of the more advanced states on Venus, trading modern technology for advanced drugs and medicines created using unusual

Venusian plants. These drugs provided cures for most diseases, and even a method of slowing down ageing.

Then, in 1938, the octopoid Martians invaded again, and this time they were immune to Earthly diseases. However, Earth was ready for them, and a seven year-long war followed. The first portion of this war was fought on Earth, but then Earth took the war to Mars, where the human slaves had already rebelled against their octopoid Martian overlords and liberated most of Mars. The war ended in 1945, when the USSR dropped an atomic bomb on one of the few remaining Martian city-states controlled by the octopoid Martians. Some of the octopoid Martians surrendered, while most fled to underground caves they had already prepared as a retreat. Fourteen

years later, they are still there, waiting for an opportunity to retake their world and perhaps enslave Earth and Venus. Meanwhile, the free nations of Earth are in the midst of a Cold War with the brutally repressive USSR.

This is the setting of *Worlds United*. The year is 1959, atomic rockets regularly ply the spaceways between Earth, Mars, Venus, and occasionally the asteroid belt; psychic powers and psychic technology are in the process of transforming the three worlds, and individuals with various special abilities, known collectively as the *Gifted*, continue to change these worlds in a variety of ways. Your character is one of these Gifted, and these worlds are yours for adventure.

Heroism & Optimism

Two of the most important themes for planetary romance fiction, and for much science fiction written in the same era, are heroism and optimism. In these stories, heroes are often somewhat larger than life, and may even be impressive physical and mental specimens much like Doc Savage, The Shadow, or other similar pulp heroes. However, more important than their impressive physical and mental prowess is the fact that in this type of science fiction, heroes can make a difference. A single hero or heroine, often aided by a band of allies and sidekicks, can overthrow a vast empire's corrupt government or even conquer an entire planet. They can slay monsters no one else could harm, discover ancient secrets that have eluded all previous seekers, and otherwise make a vast impact.

One frequent difference between pure planetary romance and inhabited solar system SF, is that in the second genre, most of the protagonists were engineers who managed to save the day by creating wondrous inventions, repairing ancient alien spacecraft, or using simple tools and equipment to create devices that allow them to outwit their foes. Most of these heroic engineers are also pulp heroes, but ones who rely on their knowledge and their ability to create and understand technology rather than their skill with swords or ray guns.

Hand in hand with this focus on heroism is optimism. While a few planetary romance stories were grim and fatalistic, most were like the other science fiction of the era, filled with hope and optimism.

Good governments can replace evil and corrupt ones, the cause of the just and the right usually triumphs, and humanity and the other intelligent species they encounter can do more than just invent new ways to slay one another. Instead, people of all types can use technology and a belief in the freedom and dignity of all peoples to build a better and more peaceful world.

No one is going to stop you from running a *Worlds United* campaign that's filled with morally grey characters in a gritty and somewhat hopeless world. Some of the more famous planetary romance stories, like C. L. Moore's Northwest Smith stories (see below) are exactly like this, and owe much to film noir for their mood and tone. However, most planetary romance stories most are far more optimistic, and while the Storytelling chapter (p. 108) will contain suggestions for how to make *Worlds United* less heroic and grittier, the default assumption is that a campaign in this setting is both heroic and optimistic.

Lexicon

The following are some of the more common terms in the setting of *Worlds United*.

Artemis

The most powerful state on Venus. Space travellers from Earth landed in Artemis in 1932, and since that time, it has been rapidly industrialising. It is a matriarchal state that is home to Venusian humans, lizardmen, and ophidians, and is a close ally

of both the United States and the Bantu Confederacy.

The Bantu Confederacy

A central African nation composed of Zambia, as well as large portions of Namibia, Botswana, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It was founded in 1898, a year after Martian human rebels landed two Martian cylinders there after killing the octopoid Martians on board. By swiftly adopting Martian technology and making lucrative trade deals for diamonds and various rare metals found in this region, the Bantu Confederacy has become the wealthiest nation in Africa, and one of the major world powers.

Elders

The mysterious aliens who brought humans and several other hominids from Earth to Mars and Venus approximately 115,000 years ago.

The First Worlds War

This was the first war between Mars and Earth. It began when octopoid Martians landed in the United Kingdom, France, and the United States in 1897 and caused massive destruction and loss of life before succumbing to Earthly diseases less than six weeks after they landed. The defeated Martians left behind 35 Martian human slaves, who helped humanity understand Martian technology and psychic powers.

The Free World

An informal name for the prosperous, fully industrialised nations on Earth that promote freedom and democracy and that oppose the oppression of the USSR. The Free World consists of Australia, the Bantu Confederacy, Canada, the Empire of Japan, New Zealand, the United States, and the nations of Western Europe.

The Freedom War

The war for independence fought by Martian humans and some winged Martians against the octopoid Martians. This war lasted from 1905 to 1912, and ended liberating 80% of all Martian city-states, but when it ended several dozen remained under octopoid control. These last few city-states were only liberated during the Second Worlds War.

Gas Core Nuclear Rocket

The type of advanced rocket commonly used to travel between worlds. Gaseous uranium hexafluoride is contained in special quartz cylinders. This uranium gas reaches exceptionally high temperatures and heats hydrogen reaction mass that propels the rocket. Its exhaust velocity is almost 25 times that of the best chemical rocket.

The Home War

The only large war in the 20th century that was fought solely on Earth. From 1914-1917, United Kingdom, France, the Russian Empire, and eventually the United States battled Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. This was the first time both modern weapons like machine guns and Martian technologies like war tripods, heat rays, and black smoke were used by one European nation on another. The war's aftermath led to the creation of the League of Nations, and an overall resolution by most of the nations of Earth to avoid starting wars if at all possible.

Octopoid Martians

The large, psychically powerful but physically weak species that ruled Mars for tens of thousands of years. They kept Martian humans as slaves and fed on their blood. They started both the First and the Second Worlds Wars, and most surviving members of this species lurk in vast cavern complexes beneath the huge extinct Martian volcano Olympus Mons.

Psychic Crystals

Psychic devices made from specially carved quartz crystals that can be used to awaken psychic powers and to allow psychics to perform feats they otherwise could not. Any psychic power that allows the psychic to manipulate or alter the physical worlds requires a psychic crystal. In addition, a few recent psychic crystals can be used by anyone, but require psychics to attune them to the user, or periodically recharge them.

Racialism

This setting's name for beliefs in the superiority or inferiority of specific races. In popular parlance, it also refers to prejudice based on gender and religion. All three prejudices are associated with both the octopoid Martians and the oppressive government of the USSR and have almost vanished outside of the USSR. Racist hate groups like the KKK remain, but meet in secret to avoid public outcry, and are viewed with great suspicion by most governments because of they are (widely assumed) to possess ties to the USSR, a suspicion that has repeatedly proven to be correct.

The Second Worlds War

Mars invaded Earth a second time in 1938, with a massive invasion that landed all across continental Western and Eastern Europe, from France to Russia. Martian cylinders also landed in Japan and the United States. The Martians who were part of this new invasion were all immune to Earthly diseases, but Earth's combined military might defeated the invasion by 1942, and in that same year, Earth launched an equally massive invasion of Mars, which eventually resulted in the total defeat of the octopoid Martians in 1945.

The Worlds United

The League of Nations was founded in 1920, and it both advanced the causes of peaceful trade and space explorations, and also served to help organise the nations of Earth to join forces against the octopoid Martians. In 1945, it was revised, becoming the modern *Worlds United*, an organisation that is open to all nations, regardless of which planet they are on or which species their inhabitants belong to.

The USSR

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. While founded by Vladimir Lenin as a communist state, Joseph Stalin transformed the USSR in the 1920s into a brutal and oppressive hyper-capitalist plutocracy. Support

for eugenics and a belief in the inherent superiority of the wealthy are now central tenets of the USSR. Joseph Stalin still rules the USSR, but recent rumours of his ill health have led many to wonder who will rule this nation once he's gone.

Contents

Chapter One: Earth

Detailed information about the two Worlds Wars and how interactions with both Mars and Venus shaped the first half of the 20th century, as well as an extended discussion of life in 1959.

Chapter Two: The Solar System

Covering Mars and Venus, as well as a section on asteroid mining and brief descriptions of the outer planets, including Titan and Pluto, which may have once been home to intelligent life, now long extinct.

Chapter Three: Characters

Creation of all of the types of characters found in *Worlds United*, as well as a discussion of campaign Power Levels, and Gifts. This chapter covers humans from Earth, Mars, and Venus, and lizardman and ophidian characters.

Chapter Four: Powers & Equipment

Contains a discussion of new abilities like Ophidian Chemistry, as well as information on the small modifications to standard *Mythras* Mysticism and Psychic Powers in this setting. It also contains information about the equipment, including spacecraft and other vehicles, and the various psychic devices in common use, as well as powerful ancient psychic devices that characters may discover.

Chapter Five: Alien Creatures

Details on a variety of inhuman aliens and alien creatures on Mars, Venus, and Titan, including both modifications to existing creatures as well as a selection of entirely new creatures.

Chapter Six: Storytelling

Is a detailed discussion of different ways to run *Worlds United* scenarios and campaigns, as well as general information about using this book to create and run different types of *Worlds United* settings.

Inspirational Reading

There are effectively two categories of planetary romance novels: older works written from the 1910s to (in a few cases) the 1970s, and a smaller number of recent works.

Older Works

Most of the earlier works are set on Mars or Venus, but by 1960, improved astronomy rapidly made these visions of these two worlds increasingly unlikely, and so planetary romance stories were increasingly set on worlds circling other stars.

Ashton Smith, Clark. *Tales of Science & Sorcery* (1953), among others. Best known for his *Sword & Sorcery* tales, Clark Ashton Smith nevertheless produced some fine Science Fiction tales that involved the exploration of the solar system (and beyond), and the terrible, bizarre hazards that lay in wait for unwary travellers.

Asimov, Isaac. *The Lucky Starr series* (1952-1958), Starting with *David Starr, Space Ranger* (1952), and continuing on for five additional books, with each book set on or on a moon of various planets, including Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, as well as one set in the asteroid belt. These are light, action-packed young adult (YA) science fiction based on the most accurate knowledge of the solar system available then.

Brackett, Leigh. *The Sword of Rhiannon* (1953), *People of the Talisman* (1964), *The Secret of Sinharat* (1964), *Sea-Kings of Mars and Otherworldly Stories* (2005). These are Leigh Brackett's classic stories of Mars and Venus; the first three are novels, the last is a recent collection of her short stories in the same setting.

Brackett, Leigh. *The Skaith Trilogy* (1974-1976). One of the last old school planetary romance series, *The Ginger Star* (1974), *The Hounds of Skaith* (1974), and *The Reavers of Skaith* (1976) are the story of larger than life off-worlder Eric John Stark arriving on the world of Skaith and eventually assembling a diverse band of allies who overthrow the dying world's corrupt rulers. It has psychic powers, multiple types of non-humans, and is absolutely classic old school planetary romance, written by one of the queens of the genre.

Burroughs, Edgar Rice. *The John Carter of Mars series* (1912-1941). John Carter, a veteran of the US Civil War is transported to Mars, and has many adventures, over the

course of 10 novels by Burroughs. Carter is a larger than life hero on Mars both because he is an experienced soldier, and because the low gravity makes him superhumanly strong and agile compared to the locals. The first book is *A Princess of Mars* (1912) and is one of the major inspirations for all future planetary romance novels.

DeCamp, L. Sprague. *The Queen of Zamba* (1949). One of DeCamp's novels set on or partly on the medieval planet of Krishna, which is regularly visited by relativistic starships from Earth. It's an excellent example of planetary romance that uses relatively accurate science in its science fiction, while also being a whole lot of fun.

Moorcock, Michael. *Kane of Old Mars* (1965). A three novel series - *Warriors of Mars*, *Blades of Mars*, *Barbarian of Mars* - these are a deliberate pastiche of Edgar Rice Burroughs's John Carter series, Burroughs being a huge influence on Moorcock's early reading. Kane and Carter appear briefly together in *Alan Moore's* second volume of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

Moore, C. L. *Shambleu and Others* (1953), and *Northwest of Earth* (1954) are her two collections containing stories about hard drinking spaceman Northwest Smith, a cynical anti-hero who is quick with his ray gun and regularly visits both Venus and Mars. These stories are all essentially space westerns.

Piper, H. Beam. "Omnilingual" (1957). This short story is about archaeologists and other scientists from Earth exploring 50,000 year old Martian ruins. It is notable for the fact that the protagonist is a highly competent woman, and the story is largely devoid of the sexism that many people now associate with science fiction from this era.

Wells, H.G. *The War of the Worlds*, *The Crystal Egg* (both from 1897). These two works are central to *Worlds United*, and also to later visions of Mars as a dying planet with hostile aliens. *The Crystal Egg* is set before the Martian invasion, and includes a Martian psychic device.

Wollheim, Donald A. *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* (1959). A fun YA romp where the characters travel to each of the planets of the solar system, most of which are inhabited, in an effort to stop an alien plot to destroy the Sun.

Recent Planetary Romance

These recent stories are all excellent examples of modern SF with planetary romance settings. Many of them include the advancements of modern science in the same way that older stories made use of the science of their day.

Martin, George R.R., editor. *Old Mars* (2013); and *Old Venus* (2015). Modern short stories of a Mars with life and canals; and the jungle world Venus with dinosaurs and other strange and dangerous life forms.

Moore, Alan. *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Vol. 2* (2002). Alan Quartermain, Mina Harker, Captain Nemo, Mr Hyde, and the Invisible Man resist the original Martian invasion as described by HG Wells. This graphic novel is irreverent, violent, and often blackly funny.

Roberson, Chris. *Paragaia: A Planetary Romance*, 2006. This novel involves a 1960s Soviet cosmonaut accidentally ending up in a strange world of savage humans, cat people, and ancient technological wonders that beneath its gloriously pulpy surface is also a moderately hard SF novel. It's a wonderful example of exactly how to do modern planetary romance right.

Stirling, S.M. *The Sky People* (2006). US - Soviet tensions, a dangerous trek through thousands of miles of jungle to find a crashed spacecraft, and ancient alien secrets on a jungle-covered Venus home to dinosaurs, modern humans, and Neanderthals.

Stirling, S.M. *In the Court of the Crimson Kings* (2008). Modern day humans from Earth visit an ancient dying Mars based on biological technology and with strange ancient secrets. A glorious example of modern planetary romance.

Films

***Avatar* (2009)**. A beautiful film with one of the most stunning alien worlds ever seen on a large or small screen, it's far from a perfect film, but it's a good example of the genre, and is definitely fun.

***John Carter* (2012)**. A glorious film adaptation of the Edgar Rice Burroughs series. While it was poorly received, it is well done, fun, optimistic, heroic, and everything that good modern planetary romance should be.