

RPG REVIEW

Issue #16, June 2012



***Science Fiction Special ... Marc Miller
Interview ... Eclipse Phase ... Dark Heresy
... Ringworld ... Savage Worlds Jorune ...
Traveller ... Thousand Suns ... A | State ...
Industry News ... Computer Games ...
Prometheus Review***

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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EDITORIAL

Many years ago I recall reading an article – I think it was in *Different Worlds* – that referred to science fiction RPGs as a graveyard, arguing that although there had been many attempts, most had died out fairly quickly. The author was

trying to suggest that whilst science fiction and fantasy have a degree of equality in literature, in RPGs the dominance of the former was notable. Of course, this was in the early 1980s, and there was a degree of truth in what they said – from the “big three” of the day – D&D, Traveller, and RuneQuest – two were fantasy based settings. Outside of that . group there would have been several close runners nipping at their heels of the third place, such as Call of Cthulhu (yes, the same company), Rolemaster, Tunnels & Trolls, DragonQuest, The Fantasy Trip, Bushido.... OK, you get the point. Yes there was some non-fantasy games out there as well with more than a modicum of popularity – Champions and Aftermath for example. But really, if you were in the SF world, it was a case of pushing the proverbial uphill.

Now one may justly respond that two of the top three sellers these days (according to ICv2) are fantasy-based as well; typically D&D and Pathfinder, with Dark Heresy taking third place. What is interesting however is what happens outside of those three; Dragon Age, Marvel Heroic, Shadowrun, Mutants & Masterminds, Warhammer Fantasy, One Ring, World of Darkness, Song of Ice and Fire. The market is more diverse, it is flatter. Further, I would be prepared to argue, that science fiction RPGs are longer-lasting in their publishing history and customer loyalty. Certainly fantasy is still dominant, but in the post-cyberpunk science fiction world, with games like Eclipse Phase and Blue Planet (for example), the use of the future as a mythology of the present (see Darko Suvin for more discussion on this idea) has been reinvigorated reminds me more than a little of Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*. It is asking the very big question – what is the future of humanity.

Which does lead to the situation where there now have been two issues of RPG Review dedicated to science fiction RPGs and neither of them engage in a systematic review of two of the biggest sf settings of all time which sold quite well as RPG supplements as well; specifically *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, of which there has been “a couple” of different RPG games for both. *Aliens* could be thrown in the mix there as well, although the rules for that system could be a little challenging (yes, I have run it). You know, I haven't seen any articles of the *Babylon 5* setting and their games either. To fans of these games and their settings, my apologies – science fiction RPGs are victims of their own success! Of course, if someone wants to write articles for such games, you know where to find me.

In this issue however, we do have an one of the most remarkable people in the RPG world, Marc W. Miller, the author of Traveller and co-founder of Game Designer's Workshop. We really are quite blessed at RPG Review for the people who dedicate a little bit of time for our reviews, and Marc is no exception in this regard. He also has raised “a little” bit of money through Kickstarter for a new edition of Traveller. Other articles includes a very comprehensive implementation of Mass Effect to the Thousand Suns roleplaying game, reviews of Dark Heresy, a Traveller supplement, a retrospective review of Space Opera, reviews and characters for Eclipse Phase and A | State, converting Skyrealms of Jorune to Savage Worlds, expanding the root/branch skill system of Ringworld for other BRP games, computer game reviews, industry news, and of course, a review of the movie Prometheus.

One of the biggest contributions to science fiction gaming however is completely absent from this issue; and that is GURPS. Whether it is the excellent work in Space, the technological elaborations in Ultra-Tech, Biotech, or the various setting books for Transhuman Space, the Third Imperium for Traveller, or the various science fiction author settings such as Lensmen, New Sun, Uplift, Terradyne, or Planet Krishna, GURPS has made an outstanding contribution. Although not all these books will be covered, I can state that the next issue of RPG Review will be a GURPS special. The toughest question will be how to reduce the possibilities that fit within a single 64 page issue!

Anyway, that's for three month's time. For now, enjoy RPG Review #16!

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Lev Lafayette

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HOT GOSSIP : INDUSTRY NEWS

Hosei bo, Mr. Lev,

You really like science fiction, lah? Happy like bird with another issue again, suka-suka? Maybe you should notice that Shadowrun 2050 release now by Catalyst Game Labs, use original setting with 4th edition rules, combination good, lah? Also, you like Shadowrun: Sprawl Sites: North America, colour maps for game? Shadowrun make me think of home, would make best setting. Home even have evil corporate gahmen, and dragon running the big show.

Of course even much big news is Marc Miller receive lots of happy money from round globe for new Traveller with Kickstarter. Mr. Miller, yang-or, you the best, boh beh chow. Maybe Mr. Lev do Kickstart for RPG Review and pay industry sleuths like Mingshi for special secrets? Also Mongoose release new supplement for Traveller 2300 with pentapod Biotech Vehicles. Always my favourite, Pentapods. Their toys so squishy!

New company Design Mechanism now release grandfudder game RuneQuest, edition number six, now there are more edition than Mingshi has adventure, something sala there. Also, don't forget Legend, the RuneQuest number five by Mongoose, they now have two new supplement, Pirates of Legend, all about pirates in the Caribbean, but Mingshi know, lots of pirates in her part of the world too, bu everyone forget, lah? There also new setting for 1800s in Europe, but with smart animals going to war called "Historica Rodentia", but Mingshi think big mouse chew up history book, chiak buay liao.

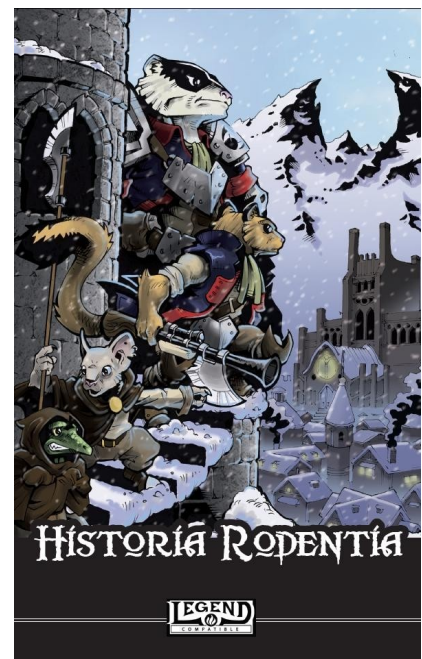
Also, you like mythology? Then look Yggdrasill for Viking stories, new game from Cubicle 7 with same team as Qin. Put on horny hat and sail long boat to fight trolls!

Final, Mingshi announce winner of Origins 2012... Ready, Mr. Lev? *Best Roleplaying Game*: Arcanis by Paradigm Concepts - Eric Wiener, Pedro Barrenechea, and Henry Lopez. Mingshi wonders if like Codex Arcanis by Team Paradigm in 2001? New edition? *Best Roleplaying Supplement*: Shadows over Scotland (Call of Cthulhu) by Cubicle 7 Entertainment - Stuart Boon. Which is silly because always shadows over Scotland, it rain lots! *Best Game Accessory*: Shadowrun Runner's Toolkit - Catalyst Game Labs. See I tell you, play more Shadowrun!

Until next quartering!

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INTERVIEW WITH MARC W. MILLER

with Marc W. Miller



Marc Miller is a well known figure in the history of role-playing games. As the author of the original Traveller, he established science fiction roleplaying games as a viable setting alternative and, for many years Traveller was considered one of the "big three" in the industry, along with Dungeons & Dragons and RuneQuest. Over seventy supplements followed from Marc, including numerous adventures and alien modules, the new edition of "Megatraveller", and various supplements for that game, scenarios for 2300AD and Space 1889, and then Traveller 4.

But there's a new project coming up, Traveller5. Marc has chosen the increasingly popular kickstarter.com method to raise the initial capital to fund the production of this edition - with the initial goal reached within a mere 24 hours and raising over \$290,000 in pledges. Let's start here; welcome to RPG Review Marc, I imagine you're

pretty pleased with the support shown through the Kickstarter project for Traveller5. What do you think is the secret of success there?

Jumping back to the start of it all, I understand that you have very interesting beginnings in game design; with the Illinois State University Games Club, and even some university funding for simulation research and design? Can you tell us a little about those early days, and, expanding a bit further, your first experiences of RPGs?

I was fortunate to meet the core of the Illinois State University Games Club: Rich Banner and Frank Chadwick, and even more fortunate that we became friends. At first, our activities were just about game playing. we enjoyed the Avalon-Hill and the SPI board wargames, often playing in the early morning hours. After all, we were students without any real responsibilities, and we could devote much of our time to just playing.

However, all three of us, with our diverse interests, were united by a common fascination with the design of games. I remember that soon after joining the club in 1972, I started designing game maps and counters and testing them out on other club members. Frank and Rich were extremely interested in the Eastern Front and its potential for a huge multi-board wargame. Most of all, I think that we were united in how much fun it all was.

Of course, after that you went on with Rich Banner, Loren Wiseman, and Frank Chadwick to form Game Designer's Workshop, a company that certainly achieved some level of success publishing a vast array of boardgames as well as some very well-known RPG lines such as Traveller, Twilight 2000, 2300AD, and Space 1889 - the company won some 26 major awards and put at least three of its designers in the Hall of Fame. Yet after almost a quarter of a century, it closed its doors. Can you tell us a little bit about what happened there?

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GDW was organized on June 22, 1973 and closed its doors on February 29, 1996. In that twenty-two years, the company produced an average of one new product every 22 days. Along the way, we developed game packaging from maps and counters in brown paper envelopes to zip-lock bags with facing sheets to true game boxes just like Avalon Hill. We saw the game industry mature from one company (Avalon Hill) selling to department stores to a multi-company industry that served game stores in every medium-size community. We saw our customer base expand from wargamers to role-players and even casual gamers.

But after 22 years without a break, we all needed to try some different things. I suppose you could call it burn-out. So we closed up the Workshop and went our separate ways.

OK, let's have a look at some of the evolution of Traveller. This was the first science fiction RPG to really make its mark on the industry. It's not as if there was some serious competitors at the time; Starfaring (1976),

Space Quest (1977), Space Patrol (1977), Starships & Spacemen (1978), Space Opera (1980), Ringworld (1984), FTL:2448 (1982), Star Trek RPG (1982), even well-funded projects like Star Frontiers (1982). But it was Traveller that survived and flourished, whereas the others did not. Why do you think that was the case?

Ultimately, others will have to decide why Traveller flourished. But I have some opinions. First, I remember even today the design process that I followed for Traveller. First, over the course of some twenty years, I read every science-fiction story and novel I could find. Then, beginning in 1975, we at GDW played a large scale interstellar economic wargame we called Imperium. We explored new star systems, fought major battles between intelligent species, colonized worlds, developed new technologies, and generally enjoyed a very high level strategic game system. At about the same time, we encountered and embraced Dungeons & Dragons. In fact, we had to ban playing D&D during work hours because we were getting no work done.

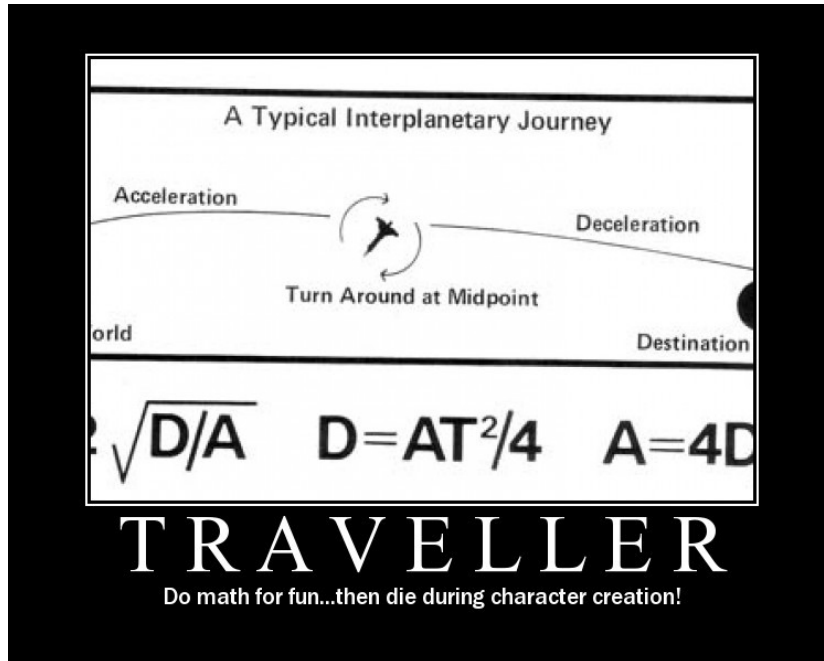
Based on that foundation, I sat down in mid-1976 and started writing Traveller. I circulated drafts to the other people at GDW and everyone made their suggestions and constructive criticisms, much of which I tried to incorporate in the game.

Looking back to that time now, I can see there were things I did not know how to design, and concepts I did not know how to present, so I skipped them. I didn't know how to handle fantastic tech levels (beyond TL 15 or so). I didn't know how to realistically handle robots, or aliens. I didn't fully understand how to handle non-combat interactions, or artificial intelligence.

But I am also proud that some of the concepts that we included survive today nearly unchanged. World generation. World Mapping. Animal Encounters. Characters.

As a little aside on what is now called classic Traveller, I felt it was a somewhat harsh universe. Over 40% loss of scouts per term of service, almost 30% of stowaways were 'spaced', over 15% death rate for low passage... Although that said, the chance of a character dying from a single shot from even a laser rifle was pretty low...

I called that "realism".



The first edition of Traveller had only a slight amount of setting information in the core rules; most of the events in the Imperium and the relationship of Humanity to the alien species was reserved for setting books.

I originally intended Traveller to be a generic system by which any player could set his adventures in some science-fictional universe of his own choosing. Asimov's Foundation. Niven's Known Space. Heinlein's Juveniles, or his Starship Troopers.

But an early review was enlightening to me. The reviewer said he "wouldn't play a game that didn't provide background and adventures."

His editor inserted that he "wouldn't play a game that did." I realized that I could not please everyone, and that I had science-fiction stories to tell with Traveller. So I started writing adventures. Once we started that, Traveller naturally started having a more defined background.

But in the new edition, MegaTraveller, the setting became very prominent in the core rulebooks - something which would also be the case, albeit quite differently, in Traveller: The New Era and Marc Miller's Traveller as well. Can you give us some insight in how you developed the history of the Imperium through its different stages? I don't recall much in the way of democratic governments... Also, Traveller: The New Era was considered by many to be a radical departure, both in times of setting and system. But it also won the Origins Award for roleplaying game of the year in 1993.

There are some setting features and related themes which are very common in contemporary science fiction games, but are largely absent in various editions of Traveller. I am thinking of genetic engineering, cybernetic, artificial intelligences, and so forth. Sure, there are examples like the uplifted Vargr, or a massive plot device such as The Virus. But this is background in comparison to the way that such issues are dealt with in GURPS:Transhuman Space, or Eclipse Phase. Were these choices deliberate on your part, or is it because science fiction has changed?

I answered a question recently about Transhumanism in Traveller. First, I think that transhumanism takes players too far away from being what they understand and want to play; the demand is just less and so we address it less. That said, Traveller5 addresses transhumanism and includes it realistically for those who care to go there. It's not an emphasis, but it is a possibility.

Which is a constant in Traveller5. The system tries to address, logically and usefully, the full spectrum of science fiction. It turns out that I didn't (and don't) call it transhumanism, but it's there.

You raise some other concepts that Traveller did not address: cybernetics, geneering, artificial intelligence and intelligence computers. You also missed some: an alien generation system, truly useful robots, a reasonable use for computers, a reasonable system for non-combat conflict resolution, and more. All of which are in Traveller5. The original Classic Traveller was the equivalent of about 72 pages; the new one is some 600 pages, and it has very little fluff.

Then there is even more. The old Fire Fusion & Steel construction systems are replaced by a series of useful, easy-to-use Makers: GunMaker, ArmorMaker, VehicleMaker, SophontMaker, even Thingmaker. We add QREBS (you really have to read the chapter to understand it) which assigns quality, reliability, safety, and other characteristics to Things. You can get a Rifle that is Easy-To-Use but prone to misfires; or a Radio that is prone to breakage at just the wrong time. We add Tech Stages so you can find (and buy or acquire) a TL-13 Thing at TL-10, but it's probably bulky and hard-to-use. Then again, you may absolutely need that particular Thing and you'll gladly put up with its drawbacks because it's the only Thing that can get you off the planet.

But to get back to your question. Traveller was designed at the dawn of the role-playing era; D&D (1974) was barely three years old when Traveller was published. I think it did an extremely good job at what it was trying to accomplish. But SF was less about AI and geneering then; Traveller could ignore those ideas (and others) and concentrate on space combat and future combat and merchant trading. Traveller5 still does, but it also makes much (most) of the other concepts possible, if only because SF people are more aware of them now.

Now, Traveller has also led to some other editions not directly under your control, such as GURPS Traveller, GURPS Interstellar Wars, Traveller D20, Traveller Hero, and Mongoose Traveller. What are your opinions of these alternative editions? Have they been faithful to the Traveller setting and mechanics? Do you have a favourite among them?

Traveller has two identities: a rules set and a background. Some players want the stories and don't want to learn a new rules-set. It is for them. the HERO players, the D20 players, the GURPS players that the various alternative systems were created. They could enjoy the elaborate Traveller universe without abandoning their particular favorite game rules system.

Now I think that the upcoming Traveller5 rules comprehensively handles many situations that previous rules sets don't or can't. But we don't insist that players change rules-sets. We plan adventures that will specifically be Rules-Independent, making it possible for players to join us in exploring the new revelations of the Traveller5 universe without changing rules sets.

In addition to these, you have also been a contributor to 2300AD, and the historical game For the Love of Justice. Can you give us some idea of your contributions to those games and what you think of the final product?

I am very proud of 2300 AD; it looks at the future through the Twilight: 2000 lens and allows players to encounter and address situations that the Imperium doesn't handle very well. It's not better; it's not worse; it's only different.

As for FTLOJ, the title was an early test-bed for some of the concepts we were developing for adventure formats in

Traveller. We had some positive feedback and some constructive reactions that helped us improve our structures for Traveller5.

Finally, what do you think is the future of science fiction RPGs? What is their promise, and where do you think the vision of the future is heading?

I am focused very specifically on Traveller rather than on RPGs in general or even SFRPG. But I feel strongly on a few points.

First, both print and electronic texts have their place. Readers, tablets, and eBooks are not yet fully capable of handling tables and charts, and the printed format is superior to the electronic. On the other hand, Apps, widgets and spreadsheets are superior to print for some functions. But until one process gains a distinct advantage, we're going to see both for role-playing games. And we're working on both for Traveller5.



Second, I don't think that we (I as a role-playing game designer) fully understood the power of RPGs when we started out so long ago. Then, it was about playing the games and enjoying them. Fast forward to today, and we see fathers playing RPGs with their daughters and sons; grandfathers with their grandchildren. RPGs are a standard "type" of game and they are not going to go away in the foreseeable future.

In fact, one of the titles we want to produce for Traveller5 is Traveller8 (for 8-year-olds): the concept requires some powerful changes in the system, but we're working on.

We think that the concept is a great early introduction to role playing for the younger player. It's one they can handle of properly presented, and can lay the foundations for a lifetime of role-playing enjoyment.

Third, we may see changes in structure, even subject matter, over time, but the idea of friends sitting around a table and using their minds to adventure to the ends of the universe and back is just about the perfect game format.

Thanks for your time Marc Miller!

ECLIPSE PHASE REVIEW AND CHARACTER

by Lev Lafayette (Review) and Stew Wilson (Character)

Released under a Creative Commons license, Eclipse Phase is freely available as an official electronic version and as a hardback that is not as sturdy as it should be. Weighing in at over 400 pages, the game is colourful, diverse in its overall layout and presentation, but with the text being presented in mostly two-column justified with a serif font with rather too much whitespace (or "bluespace" in this case). There is a good table of contents, and each chapter is introduced with a page summarising the critical subsections and page references. There is an excellent index and a collection of GM aids and source material. The artwork is creative and with a consistent style, a sort of high-technology water colour, with typically above average technical execution. The writing style is appropriately formal, albeit verbose at times, but with plenty of informal out-takes in the sidebars with some great narrative moments. This is a great combination which is highly recommended for other game authors. The general setting is near-future science fiction, with a transhumanist society (which includes the uplifted) spread across the solar system and with recent alien encounters, with strong post-apocalyptic, conspiracy, and horror genre influences. So, if you think the liberal eugenics of transhumanism exciting, let's just temper that, with the game's title definition.

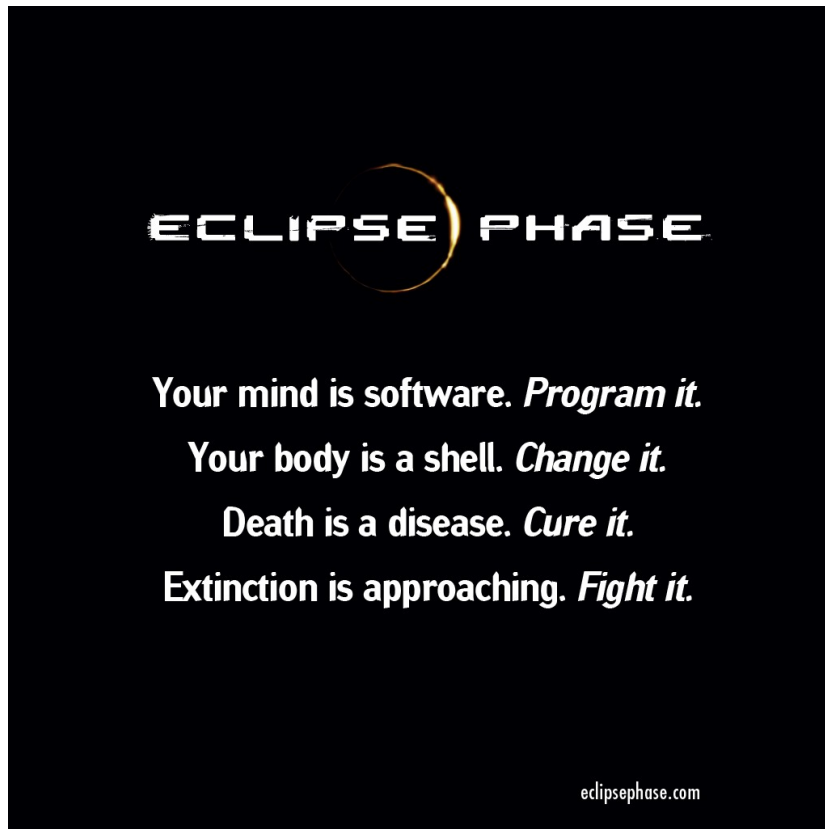
An "eclipse phase" is the period of time between when a cell is infected by a virus and when the virus appears within the cell and transforms it. During this period, the cell does not appear to be infected, but it is.

Eclipse Phase opens with a good working introduction to roleplaying wide sidebar discussions on transhumanism, and the "themes" of post-apocalyptic, conspiracy, and horror. There is also an introduction to the contents of the book, ten chapters being a history, game mechanics, character generation and advancement, skills, action and combat, psionics, the wireless mesh, advanced technology, equipment, and game information. The organisation is a little questionable; if one wants to actually play the game they have to be thoroughly immersed in the setting and mechanics before character generation. This does not seem to be the best method; in particular it reads very weirdly in the mechanics chapter being presented with specific examples of character resolution methods before these have been explained properly. The introduction also provides an exploration of the distinction between the "ego" (mind and personality) and morph (the temporary physical body), and a very handy - if necessary - terminology, along with an introduction to the "Firewall" default campaign, "an organization dedicated to protecting transhumanity from threats - both internal and external - to our continued existence as a species".

The timeline of Eclipse Phase starts with the destruction of Earth by a conspiracy led by artificial intelligences called TITANs (Total Information Tactical Awareness Network) that destroyed almost all life, following mass movements towards various space colonies as new habitats leading to the contact with alien life forms. Over time these develop into capitalistic cyberdemocracies in the inner system and libertarians (of various stripes, but particularly of the leftist varieties) in the outer system, with a strongly conservative even fascist regime around Jupiter. The economy has fundamentally changed with the introduction of cornucopia machines which can produce pretty much anything from raw resources. There are, of course, various factional groups such as commercial interests, religious, criminal, political, etc, as is the norm of any society. Also introduced as Pandora Gates, wormholes which allow instant transport to star systems. This summary does not really do justice to the staggering amount of detail that is provided in what is an extraordinary summary of the vast entirety of the setting.

The game mechanics of Eclipse Phase follow a time-honoured and flexible method derived from the Basic Roleplaying

line; percentile die rolls, roll under a modified target number for success. Because, at least among technical people, indices start at 0, a roll of 00 is always a success and a roll of 99 is always a failure. Criticals, whether success or failure, occur when doubles are rolled and an excellent success or severe failure occurs when the margin is 30 or more. Target numbers are derived primarily from skill levels, and linked attributes. Modifiers include generic situational levels, assistance from others, taking extra time, etc. Defaults, when allowed, are based on the attribute alone. Tests are differentiated into success tests and opposed tests. Standard success tests are obvious enough, but with opposed tests if all participants succeed the highest roll wins with criticals trumping normal successes. Core character statistics are differentiated by Ego (Initiative, Lucidity, Trauma, Insanity, and Moxie) and Morph (Speed, Durability, Wounds, Death, Damage). These can be derived from attributes, from each other, or by hardware. For example, a character's Wound Threshold is calculated by dividing Durability by 5, and their Death Rating is equal to $DUR \times 1.5$ for biomorphs and $DUR \times 2$ for synthmorphs. Lucidity, representing mental health, is based on $Willpower * 2$, whereas the Insanity Rating, where a character goes permanently insane, is $Lucidity * 2$.



Character generation begins with concept and background. Character background is the social situation the character was brought up, such as drifter, or space colonist, or isolate. Then they choose a faction, such as the brinkers, the extropian, Titanians (democratic socialists, not to be confused with the TITANs), or Venusians. Each of these provide particular skill advantages, disadvantages, and common morphs, which include flats (normal humans), splicers (genetically enhanced humans, various tailored variants, vat-grown pods, synthetic morphs, and infomorphs). Each character has 105 points to spend on aptitudes (core skills), followed by 1,000 customisation points. Skills are differentiated between aptitudes (which everyone has) and learned skills. The aptitudes are Cognition, Coordination, Intuition, Reflexes, Savvy, Somatics, and Willpower. Aptitudes are purchased in character creation and rate between 1 and 30,

with 10 being average for a baseline unmodified human. Learned skills are rated from 1 to 99, with the opportunity for specialisation providing a +10 bonus. Finally, there are Traits, both positive and negative, various specific advantages and limitations. Characters are also defined by motivations incorporated into the game system. Each character has three motivations of their own choosing and duration, and are used to regain Moxie points (luck and confidence that allow changing die results) and Rez Points (used to advance a character). Characters also have credit, an electronic monetary system, and reputation among the different factions. Some sixteen sample characters are also offered, followed by the skills chapter. There are over sixty learned skills, plus fields (required specialisations), plus optional specialisations, with each given a couple of descriptive paragraphs plus a listing of potential fields and specialisations, and their linked aptitude. Skills are distinguished between "active skills" and "knowledge skills".

Combat is carried out in action turns of three seconds each, the order determined by a 1d10 roll plus Initiative ((Intuition + Reflexes)/5). In each action phase, a character may carry out one quick action (e.g., movement, and one complex action (e.g., sprinting, reloading), with automatic actions "always on" (e.g., resistance, basic perception, defense). If they do not take a complex action, they are entitled to three quick actions. Multi-turn actions are considered task actions. Characters with a Speed greater than 1, thankfully unusual, can carry out multiple action phases. Combat is carried out as an opposed test, with a noted advantage to the attacker in ranged combat (the basic defense, Fray, is halved). Critical hits ignore armour, a special success increases damage, and armour reduces damage. Damage is rolled, and if the damage received is greater than the Wound Threshold, a wound also occurs. There are various modifiers for wounds, called shots, target size, range, etc. and spot rules for area effect weapons, layered armour, sweeping and concentrated fire, indirect fire, gravity, improvised weapons, vehicle combat, drowning and falling, etc. Also under the combat chapter is the mental health rules; Stress points are accumulated until the Lucidity rating is passed, at which point the character goes into shock. If accumulated stress reaches twice the Lucidity rating, the character goes permanently insane. If a character receives a number stress points greater than their Trauma rating they have a similar effect to Wounds, plus they can cause a range of derangements, or the more serious disorders if they character accumulates four traumas.

Psionics in Eclipse Phase are the result of a virus, acquired in game terms by the purchasing of the trait in character creation. The ability is retained even through morph or upload changes - exactly how is unknown ("entangled on a quantum level"). Psionics, whilst obviously having great ability, are suspect to mental stress, represented by a reduced Trauma Threshold, and a Mental Disorder. Psionics may be active or passive, of varying range and duration, sometimes resolved through opposed tests, sometimes confronting "mental armour", and sometimes causing strain - all depending on the individual "sleight" used, of which over fifty are described with a paragraph each with expected effects; enhanced senses, mental processing, mind links, and even physical damage. The chapter also includes a range of psychosurgery, including neural genetic modification and neuralware implementation, usually performed on a digital mind state. Such psychosurgery is carried out as an opposed test, with a cost in Stress according to the operation. There is about a dozen specific "edits", as they are called, specifically described.

As mentioned The Mesh is the Eclipse Phase equivalent of the 'net, accessed by a variety of devices and often implanted directly in the brain. The three protocols used to access and manipulate data are augmented reality (AR), an overlay to the user's sensory systems, a virtual reality where physical senses are overridden by a computer-generated environment, or an experience playback, a recording of activities. Haptic interfaces are slower and more prone to error, as the augmented systems operate according to thought. The Mesh itself is a highly decentralised network where there is extraordinary levels of data storage and bandwidth. Much less convincingly, there is a suggestion that clusters, parallel, and distributed systems are potential dangers in Eclipse Phase and are often banned due to the TITAN incident, along with any other form of artificial intelligence. More realistically, the game pays attention to the issue of communications limited to light-speed and slower, although there is the expensive option of quantum-entanglement communicators. As one would expect there are hacking rules, interested in spoofing or forging authentication, defeating firewall, and by-passing active defenses.

The Accelerate Future chapter covers some of the major life-changing circumstances that effect characters in the Eclipse Phase setting. The most obvious of these is the extensive personality backup system, allowing for the ego to be resleeved in case of death. Almost everyone is equipped with a cortical stack, a network of nanobots that take thousands of snapshots of the mind every day (critical issues in the mind-body problem are strongly avoided in this game). Other characters make extensive "off-site" backups as well. Resleeving requires an integration test which simulates how well the ego acclimatizes with its new body on a physical level, and an alienation test which tests the degree that the character associates with their new body. There is, also, issues with continuity for the ego as well which

can cause Stress, along with forking and merging of digital egos. The second major feature of the chapter is about life in space; including the various space habitats, such as colonies, cylinders, and so forth, along with space travel which is sometimes preferred to ego-casting, or even more commonly, resleeving, or even forking. The third major section is nanofabrication, with the combination of blueprints and raw material to make whatever is desired. The reputation and network fields return to discussion of specific tests and favours. Finally, there is discussion and examples of the various forms of Eclipse Phase security technology.

Equipment in Eclipse Phase is elaborated in the "Gear" chapter. A base price is assumed by category (from Trivial to Expensive) with modifiers according to legality or usage, with the added option of nanofabrication. There is an interesting sidebar on future materials, although these do not have a direct influence on play. A significant level of gear is powered and described by size; for example different types of radio technologies only have a range of 50 metres if "micro" sized, but 5,000 kilometres if "large". A significant section is personal augmentation (bioware, enhanced senses, cyberware, etc), followed by various types of armour, from second skin to battlesuit powered exoskeleton, with protective ratings for energy and kinetic damage. This is followed by communication systems, with neutrino communicators and quantum farcasters and quantum entangled communication making up particularly interesting technologies. There is a variety of convert and espionage technologies, a range of drugs and toxins which are classified as either chemical, biological, nano, or electronic. The rather large range is varied according to effect (obviously) and onset time, duration, addiction, and type of dependency.

There is a handful of "everyday technology" items, before moving to the serious matter of nanotechnologies, such as healing vats, detectors, fabricators, and the very dangerous and effective programmed swarms. Pets, scavenger tech, and services make up the next set of items, followed by software which, contrary to probable trends, is priced. Survival gear and a range of weapons follows, with the latter consisting of the high-tech versions of melee weapons, various kinetic weapons (i.e., guns), followed by beam weapons, grenades and seeker missiles, and spray weapons. As a whole weapon damage could probably be boosted somewhat. A small selection of robots and vehicles is also given for a variety of terrains, including spacecraft with various propulsion methods.

The final chapter is Game Information, with spoilers. Not much needs to be elaborated here, except to state the fairly obvious "not all is what it seems". There are, obviously alien intelligences that are taking an interest on what is occurring in the solar system, the disappearing TITANs and their collection of forcibly uplifted human egos are an obvious vector as well, and as for Firewall, the organisation which the PCs are most likely to be working for, are full of many subfactions and interest groups. With all the various drugs, viruses, and nanoswarms about, it would hardly be a surprise to discover that there may be extra, secret, versions of the same are about as well.

Eclipse Phase deserved its prize for Best Roleplaying game in Origins, certainly on accounts of an imaginative setting and a genuine exploration of the setting issues. Other features are, however, quite mixed. The layout has some excellent assisting features, but with some pretty average attention to spacing. The writing style has a good split between the formal and informal, but rambles. The game system has a relatively simple and popular mechanic that works well, but lacks details, especially in the learned skills, in favour of descriptives. But these criticisms are relatively minor, because the descriptive detail is quite significant throughout, especially in the equipment and setting information. It is an extraordinarily good game to actually play - and ultimately that's what gives it success.

The Game: Eclipse Phase

The Publisher: Posthuman Studios

Degree of Familiarity: None with the game itself, a lot with the genre

Books Required: Just the corebook

Eclipse Phase bills itself as the roleplaying game of transhuman conspiracy and horror. And, yeah. That's pretty accurate. Humanity has become transhumanity, but Earth has been decimated by the TITAN AIs and is thus off-limits. PCs work for Firewall, a clandestine conspiracy that hunts out "existential risks"—anything that threatens the on-going existence of transhumanity. With Earth a ravaged hellhole, 90%+ of the population only made it offworld by broadcasting their uploads. Now, these initially-bodyless infomorphs form a new underclass, frequently indentured to the corporations of the Planetary Consortium or the Jovian Republic in exchange for a physical body. Real death is rare, what with backups.

To be honest, I like the setting but I don't think it goes far enough. I was hoping for something as advanced as the second third of Accelorando, but I didn't get it. Forking is viewed as weird, infomorphs are a lower class, AIs have been limited wherever possible to prevent even weakly-superhuman processing out of fear of the TITANs, the only uplifted animals are birds, apes, and octopi, and throughout the setting is this idea that without a body you're somehow less of a person.

I don't like that. The infomorphs should be busy making use of immortality and subjective-time hacks to really enhance research and development, then chivvy people along towards deconstructing the inner system to make a matrioshka brain. Transhumanity has settled and even terraformed Mars, for fuck's sakes. What's so attractive about wasting away at the bottom of a gravity well? Once you're out of one, don't go to another.

Enough of the setting rankles me because I've read takes on the same thing that are just plain better, and don't artificially limit aspects of the setting just because people couldn't come up with a good system for it. Then again, looking at the system as written... ugh. It's generic flavourless percentile with about eleventy-billion individual skills. My hate of percentile systems should be obvious by now (Unknown Armies excepted, of course), and this doesn't introduce anything worth paying too much attention to.

To be fair, for a number of gamers, EP's setting is weird enough without trying to do anything interesting with the system, but even then, why not plump for something faster and looser? Cinematic Unisystem would be a good choice, or something about the same weight as Storytelling. The system as-is just turns me off.

It's a percentile system. It's not as offensive as BRP, but is still like eating bran. On the other hand, now I've got a decent macro-enabled character creator, this might just be tolerable after all.

1. Define Character Concept

I like my transhumanism weird. For all that EP tries to hit those weird notes, they're all a bit bland for someone who has read more than one of Charlie Stross' SF books. So fuckit.

I'm going to make an anarcho-socialist octopus private investigator. Someone who has dealt with the fact that humanity has installed a whole shitload of homo-sapiens-centric memeware into every uplifted animal, rather than seeing what higher intelligence and reasoning would do on its own. He's decided to turn that around, and to really get into the heads of people who commit crimes. In doing so, he's set up as a freelance investigator/policeman in the Locus station. He's

fascinated with old crime drama shows, and spends ages watching Law & Order, Columbo, and Ashes to Ashes. His reading list is pretty much full of Chandler and Christie. Oddly for an uplift, he doesn't see any difference between transhumans, uplifts, and AIs—HomSap have already destroyed any chance of them developing unique cognitive processes, and each group has its share of bastards that it's down to him to find, just an octopus in a cheap equipment web, and his fedora.

He calls himself "Gene Briscoe". You would, really.

2. Choose Background

This much is easy enough. The only available background for my concept is Uplift. This nets me +10 Fray, +10 Perception, and +20 to two Knowledge skills. However, I have to choose an Uplift morph; in this case an Octomorph.

3. Choose Faction

As mentioned, he's heavy on the anarcho-socialism. He resides in the anarchist/argonaut focal point of Locus, in the Trojan asteroids hanging out at Jupiter's L5 point. He's had a lot of contact with the Titanian Commonwealth about setting up a study into variant and deviant memetics, but he prefers the more free-wheeling approach of the anarchists—at least for now. As an Anarchist, he gets +10 to a skill, and +30 Networking: Autonomists

4. Spend Free Points

"Free points" is EP's somewhat confusing term for pools of points for one specific porpoise, err, purpose. As opposed to Customisation Points. In effect, this is the main step of oWoD chargen, and "Customization Points" are freebies, only freebies are vastly more useful.

We start with 105 points for Aptitudes. That averages to 15 each. As an octopus, we want high Co-ordination, and as an investigator, high Intuition and Savvy. Briscoe's not as quick off the mark as other people, but he gets there in the end, so we drop Reflexes by 5, and increase Intuition to 20. Likewise, trade five points of Willpower to raise Savvy by five.

We also get a free language at 70 + Int. As the result of a Swedish uplift programme, Briscoe speaks fluent Swedish.

Characters also start with 1 Moxie, 5,000 credits, and 50 points of Rep. Rep is divided between different groups, with @-rep (anarchists and autonomists) and i-rep (Firewall) being the most useful to my concept. I'm dumping 30 points into Circle-A, fifteen into The Eye, and five points into rep with CivicNet: he can't stand the backwards-looking "transitional" economies, but sometimes you need friends in weird places to catch a bastard.

5. Spend Customization Points

These points are mostly useful for Skills, but can go on just about anything. Notably, I have to blow 400 points on Active skills, and 300 on Knowledge skills, with each point added to the linked Aptitude, and double-cost for raising a Skill above 60.

First of all, his Anarchist skill bonus goes to Investigation. The Knowledge skill bonuses go on Academics: Psychology and Academics: Memetics. Now, we can start spending skills. For the sake of my own sanity, I'm going to spend in 25-point blocks where possible. I should also note that I'm not taking this entirely seriously (as if you couldn't tell from the concept), but this is making chargen a lot more fun.

From Active skills, I want Climbing (he's an octopus), Deception (no point everyone knowing what you want), Exotic Melee (Beak, he's an octopus), Exotic Ranged (Ink, he's an octopus), Fray (he's an octopus), Infiltration (got to get to where the information is), Infosec (got to get the information out again), Intimidation (he's an octopus and a freelance policeman, that's some scary shit), Investigation (no shit, sherlock), Beam Weapons (every cop needs a gun), Networking (Criminals), Networking (Firewall), Perception (360° vision's a bitch), Persuasion (interviewing witnesses), and Unarmed combat (well, eight-armed combat).

For Knowledge Skills, I amp Academics: Memetics and Academics: Psychology, Language (English, with a heavy Swedish accent), Academics (Cryptography), Interest: Conspiracies, Interest: Detective Stories, Profession: Con Schemes, Profession: Smuggling Tricks, Profession: Security Ops. Even at 25 points a pop, that doesn't eat up the 300 point minimum. Bigger. Increase Crypto, Detective Stories to 45, up English to 30, and take 30 points in Russian. I may come back and boost some of those later.

CPs go on a lot of things, and notably, I need to go shopping. I'd not be as diligent were it not for the excellent spreadsheet that's got all of the options already in.

Specifically, I need a morph. I know I'm going with an Octomorph, which costs 50 CP as a basic model. It adds to Coordination, Intuition, and one more. I add the bonus +5 to Savvy. To the morph, I add a whole lot of shit: Direction Sense, Enhanced Vision, Circadian Regulation, Endocrine Control (so he can control his sleep patterns and emotional responses), Terahertz Radar (because "T-ray emitter" is a stupid name), a Hand (tentacle) Laser, light Bioweave Armor, and some nanotech: Medichines, Oracles, and Wrist (tentacle) Mounted Tools.

It's a lot of shit, and means it's a pricy bastard of a body, but Glen Briscoe believes it's much like the cars favored by so many detectives: after living in it for a while, you want the cup holder and eight-track player (whatever that is).

He also has access to smart dust, a covert ops tool, and SmartSkin armor. He's loaded for bear. Unfortunately, that comes at a high cost. The gear costs 16,500. I have 5,000. Fortunately, each CP I spend gives me 1,000 credits. So my little shopping spree has cost 12 CP.

Now, I can spend some CP on Traits, which are Merit/Flaw equivalents. Naturally, Flaws give points back now, rather than later. I thought games had moved past that. Oh well. I'll take Ambidextrous three times, to let me use four limbs at once. I also spring for Right at Home (Octomorph), so re-sleeving into another Octomorph is nice and easy. None of the flaws look at all like they'd apply to the character.

Moxie is the "luck" trait. Mostly, it can be used to flip-flop percentile rolls. I want a fair bit of this for the hard-bitten PI angle. Five points costs 75CP, but it's worth it. I also scatter 13 points worth of extra Rep among the various options.

Back to Skills. I have 100 points to spend. I increase Beam Weapons to 45, Deception to 45, Investigation to 50, and stick the remaining 10 points into Unarmed Combat.

6. Motivations

Three goals, that we're either for or against. Pro-Anarchism, Anti-Subversion, and Pro-Socialism. Easy.

7. Final Traits

Lucidity is WIL x2 (20), Trauma Threshold is LUC/5 (4), Insanity is LUC x2 (40), Initiative is (REF+INT)x2 (70), Damage Bonus is SOM/10 (1), Durability by morph (30), Death Rating is DUR x1.5 (45), Speed is 1. Lots of maths. Thank fuck for spreadsheets.

Gene Briscoe, Octopoid Anarcho-Socialist PI

Background Uplift

Faction Anarchist

Motivations +Anarchism, +Socialism, -Subversion

Morph Octomorph

Aptitudes

| | COG | COO | INT | REF | SAV | SOM | WIL |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Base | 15 | 15 | 20 | 10 | 20 | 15 | 10 |
| Morph | | 5 | 5 | | 5 | | |
| Total | 15 | 20 | 25 | 10 | 25 | 15 | 10 |

Stats

| | | | | |
|-----|------|-----|----|-----|
| TT | LUC | IR | WT | DUR |
| 15 | 15 | 20 | 10 | 20 |
| MOX | INIT | SPD | DB | DR |
| 15 | 20 | 25 | 10 | 25 |

Rep @-70 c-25 e-10 f-20 g-10 i-35 r-10

Armor 5/5

Ego Traits Ambidextrous (4), Right at Home: Octomorph

Morph Implants Direction Sense, Enhanced Vision, Bioweave Armor (light), Circadian Regulation, Endocrine Control, T-Ray Emitter, Hand Laser, Medichines, Oracle, Wrist-Mounted Tools

Gear Covert Ops Tool, Smart Dust, Backup Insurance (moderate), Standard Muse, Smart-Skin Armor

| Skill | Total | Apt | Skill | Total | Apt |
|------------------------------|-------|-----|----------------------------|-------|-----|
| Academics: Psychology | 60 | COG | Navigation | 25 | INT |
| Academics: Memetics | 60 | COG | Networking: Autonomists | 55 | SAV |
| Academics: Cryptography | 60 | COG | Networking: Criminals | 50 | SAV |
| Animal Handling | 25 | SAV | Networking: Ecologists | 25 | SAV |
| Beam Weapons | 65 | COO | Networking: Firewall | 50 | SAV |
| Blades | 15 | SOM | Networking: Hypercorps | 25 | SAV |
| Climbing | 50 | SOM | Networking: Media | 25 | SAV |
| Clubs | 15 | SOM | Networking: Scientists | 25 | SAV |
| Control | 10 | WIL | Palming | 20 | COO |
| Deception | 70 | SAV | Perception | 60 | INT |
| Demolitions | 15 | COG | Persuasion | 50 | SAV |
| Disguise | 25 | INT | Pilot: Aircraft | 10 | REF |
| Exotic Melee: Beak | 40 | SOM | Pilot: Anthroform | 10 | REF |
| Exotic Ranged: Ink Attack | 45 | COO | Pilot: Exotic Vehicle | 10 | REF |
| Flight | 15 | SOM | Pilot: Groundcraft | 10 | REF |
| Fray | 45 | REF | Pilot: Spacecraft | 10 | REF |
| Freefall | 10 | REF | Pilot: Watercraft | 10 | REF |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|----|-----|------------------------------|----|-----|
| Freerunning | 15 | SOM | Profession: Con Schemes | 40 | COG |
| Gunnery | 25 | INT | Profession: Security Ops | 40 | COG |
| Impersonation | 25 | SAV | Profession: Smuggling Tricks | 40 | COG |
| Infiltration | 45 | COO | Programming | 15 | COG |
| Infosec | 40 | COG | Protocol | 25 | SAV |
| Interest: Conspiracies | 40 | COG | Psi Assault | 10 | WIL |
| Interest: Detective Stories | 60 | COG | Psychosurgery | 25 | INT |
| Interfacing | 15 | COG | Research | 40 | COG |
| Intimidation | 52 | SAV | Scrounging | 25 | INT |
| Investigation | 85 | INT | Seeker Weapons | 20 | COO |
| Kinesics | 25 | SAV | Sense | 25 | INT |
| Kinetic Weapons | 20 | COO | Spray Weapons | 20 | COO |
| Language: Swedish | 95 | INT | Swimming | 45 | SOM |
| Language: English | 55 | INT | Thrown Weapons | 20 | COO |
| Language: Russian | 55 | INT | Unarmed Combat | 50 | SOM |

A|STATE REVIEW AND CHARACTER

By John Kahane

A | State was the winner of the 2004 Indie RPG Award for Best Production and nominated as 'Best Non-D20 Game' and 'Best Graphic Design & Layout' in the 2004 GenCon/ENworld 'ENnies' awards. The following is the extensive "back cover blurb". It's long, but also thoroughly covers the setting.

Nearly one thousand years ago, as far as anyone can tell, an event took place. Why and how this event happened remains unknown. But it happened, and since then, things have been different in The City. Philosophers, scientists, and poets agree that the The City once had a name. In the present it is simply called The City, for there is nowhere else other than the blasted Outlands.

The event came to be known as The Shift, a change in reality so great that the very fabric of The City was changed forever. Places and people were altered, new beings sprang, fully formed, into existence. One fact that is known is that almost immediately after The Shift, The City was subjected to a rain of fire known as The Bombardment. Infernos fell from the sky and laid waste to whole tracts of land. More important than the destruction of the physical was the destruction of knowledge that The Bombardment caused. Datacores were wiped, libraries reduced to ashes and the memories of the survivors scarred. No remnant of life before The Shift and The Bombardment remains; only a few structures of vast size and strength remain to remind the inhabitants of the past. For centuries people have lived in limbo, the only history that of the past hundred decades.

Rumours circulate that The Outlands were once fertile and green, but now they are a blasted land of desert and rock. The City is a place of dark alleys, ponderous architecture and stinking canals. In the century following these two cataclysmic events, the survivors sought to band together and make some sort of life for themselves. Not only did they have to deal with a lack of technology, they had to deal with the creatures which became know as the Simils, the Ubel, the Drache and the Lugners. The struggles of the first century gave rise to organisations which still exist today. The eight macrocorps all grew from the ashes, each with their own unique story of war, decimation and survival.

Over the coming centuries, The City and its inhabitants would reach a twisted equilibrium with their situation. Society grew and expanded, the population stuttered, fell and then grew. Sciences and technologies were rediscovered, yet even today, many live in poverty and primitive conditions. The rediscovered technologies were harnessed by those who had the power and influence to utilise them. The macrocorps became bastions of knowledge, hoarding their precious discoveries to themselves, only to find them ripped away by unceasing war and the more subtle influences of espionage and treachery.

Now, centuries later, The City is a study in contrasts. The majority of the population live in tenements and towers built of brick, stone and concrete. Their dwellings are lit by gas piped in from huge rubbish heaps, their clothes made from crude fibres and their property that of a society barely reaching the industrial age. In the domains of the macrocorps, things are very different. The corporate citizens have access to the finest food, to unlimited power and light, to shining vehicles and well made clothes. Their soldier who guard them ward off rioters armed with black powder sparklock weapons, the soldiers themselves carrying sleek gauss rifles and compact lasers.

In the slums of Mire End, Dreamingspires and Fogwarren, life is a daily toil, making enough to get by as best you can. The middle classes fear the slums, envisioning them encroaching upon their own moderately comfortable lives. In the corporate bastions of Luminosity Tower, Konkret and The Forbidden City, the corporates look down upon the teeming millions, their workforce and their potential doom.

Through the backstreets and alleys, Ubel stalk, ripping and tearing those who come too close, leaving only a cooling corpse as an

echo of their passing. Simils made of iron and brass, surmounted with a human head, clank their way through the streets or lay down their existences in the hell of the Contested Grounds. Lugner spread rumour, fear and suspicion through their whispers and fleeting dreams.

Some seek to stand up to the despair and hopelessness. Lostfinders search and investigate for little or no reward while Stringers piece together fragments of information to feed into the hungry newswires and memory cores of the Dataflow. The Provosts of the Three Canals try to enforce some form of law and order in a chaotic society, holding on to the belief that there is the one place in The City where life is that little bit better. Others believe that the forces which prevent anyone leaving this place are corroding, that soon they will be able to leave this place for a better life among the stars.

The clouds will one-day part. And then, the people of The City will once again have that rarest and most precious of commodities: hope.

So, what type of characters can you find in The City and in the world of a/state ? alstate is a gothic horror science fiction roleplaying game (some might even call it "Dickens-punk") that is set in a huge city, appropriately called The City, that allows players to take part in the everyday struggle for survival in an environment with no exit, dealing with day-to-day life while at the same time possibly taking on roles that will alter and change the political, social, and cultural landscape of The City as they know it. The characters players can create and roleplay are limited only by their imaginations. Character types in The City include, but are not limited to:

- Lostfinders, investigators and detective types driven by the desire to help others to find things, people, or items, and who do this selfless job for little or no pay.
- Ghostfighters, enigmatic men and women who specialise in knife fighting and the arts of stealth.
- Stringers, reporters and investigative journalists from all levels of society, who are on the scene and report the news to the masses. Conniving and always seeking to get to the top.
- Scientists, while inquisitive for the most part, often have hidden agendas of their own, and while many are found at Longshore University, some work for the macrocorps.
- Business executives from the macrocorps are all very much ambitious, but may play a different style of game depending on who they work for and what they seek.
- Canal Mudlarks, who work The City's varied and widely divergent canals, have various occupations that can run the gamut of the down-and-out, the cargo barge owner, or a small passenger boat, but many of them trawl the depths of the canals seeking, always seeking the way out of their miserable existence.

So, if this game world and environment appeal to you... *Welcome to The City... You will never forget The City. But it will certainly forget you...*

What makes alstate so interesting is that this rpg deals with a city. Not just any city, but *The City*. Cities are fascinating urban environments where, as the proverbial says goes, "There are a thousand stories told in the naked city" (or something like that). When taken in the game context, and adding the Dickensian flavour to the game, alstate is truly something special. I hope that others come to see that in this game, and how unique it is. And the fact that it reflects our own modern, urbane existence through a mirror, darkly.

Character generation in the alstate RPG is a somewhat involved affair that involves putting a solid character background into focus before getting to the game mechanics. The following is from my own playtest experience: Kathy

is playing Cyndra Jesspian, a former house servant of one of the Macrocorporates who may or may not know something she shouldn't, and fled/was booted into The City's more rough and tumble life. Nick is playing Edward Fleckright, a Ghostfighter of some repute who may have been the inspiration for one of Sideband Media's tv shows (or vice versa). Tom has taken on the role of Jason Demonoris, an antique and relics hunter (who has worked with SteveB's Tommy Thackery before), but is something of a sly devil as well. Joanne is playing Hedriana Locke, a Runner, a message carrier, in The City who has finally made a name for herself - and some enemies. Angela hemmed and hawed about matters, but finally decided on Edricka Hatchett, a middle class stringer who has a bit of a cutthroat nature at times. David was pretty easy in this regard, and took Marcus Hangworth, a lostfinder from a drudge family in Folly Hills with a strong sense of right and wrong. In addition, Ellie (SteveB and Kathy's daughter) is playing a precocious street urchin called Genny, who has been taken in by Cyndra for reasons that have yet to be dealt with. Little Genny causes more problems than she's worth at times, but she's...feisty. After we finished, the players told me that they had had a good time doing up the characters. David and Angela were both thrilled and intrigued by the game setting and what was to come, no doubt fuelled by some of the "Tales of alstate" that Kathy, Nick, Tom, and Joanne regaled them with during the night, but did find character generation to be intense, but still enjoyable.

Once character generation was complete, I went through the basic game mechanics for the alstate RPG. These are actually quite simple, a roll-under percentile system with both attributes and skills fall a percentile scale. One-tenth of an attribute adds to related skills. Then we got down to the combat system. The players ran through a variety of samples of combat, pitting their own characters against each other (Little Genny is quite deadly with a knife for someone of such tender years!), and then with the group going up against some street thugs, followed by some Hohler Gang members, and finally a small group of Hirplakker's Grauschjager. The combat system is very complicated at first glance, but in actual fact it runs very fast, is quite brutal, and most definitely deadly. Characters in the alstate RPG learn to pick their fights wisely, as the players discovered in these sample combats. When the session was over for the night, the players expressed mixed emotions about the combat sequences they had played through, with both Angela and David (who are new to alstate) stating they were both thrilled and fearful with the deadliness of the combat system - and wanting to move a few game numbers around in their stats and attributes to make the characters a bit more combat worthy. I told them we'll take care of that at the beginning of the next game session. Kathy and Nick said that the alstate RPG combat system was just as deadly as they remembered it, but that it's a fast system, and that's something they liked.

Sample Character

Books Required: The alstate Roleplaying Game rulebook.

Please note that this post is quite long, as I've gone into the game mechanics a bit in terms of character creation, and have provided background on the character and the choices. Hence the majority of this post is behind the cut.

Step 1: Decide on a character concept.

While this isn't really necessary for roleplaying game character creation, I find that having a Character Concept really helps as it gives the player creating the character a good framework with which to start. I decide that I don't want to play a gun-toting type in this game, nor do I want someone who is Macrocorporate connected. I don't want someone all that atypical, either, but I think someone medical might work well. I decide to create a healer, specifically a streethealer, who either works in a burgh or who travels from burgh to burgh, doing what he can. I'll figure this out a bit more as I go along.

Step 2: The next step is to answer the Character Questionnaire for the game, which can be found in the alstate RPG

rulebook, on page 154. This is technically part of the process of the Character Concept (Step 1), but I've decided to do it as a separate step here.

1. The Name, Age, and Sex of the character.

I decide the character's name is Handry Burkel, he's 34 years old, and is male.

2. What part of The City was the character born in?

I decide that I don't want the character to come from a dirty, filthy, poor district like Mire End or its opposite like Lucent Heights, so I settle on somewhere else, and have Handry come from Folly Hills.

3. What social class were the character's parents?

Handry's parents were both hard-working people living at the lower end of middle class, though they were not affluent.

4. What were the character's parents' occupations?

Handry's father, Jacob, owns a small shoppe that sells knick-knacks and other items salvaged from the canals, ruined buildings, and the like. He thinks of it more as a "second-hand" shoppe. Handry's mother, Elliza, keeps a herb garden behind the shoppe, and sells various herbs and plants to folks who require them, and is something of a healer herself.

5. What was the character's family life like?

Needless to say, Handry's parents were busy running the second-hand shoppe and with his mother's side job as a herbalist, but to give them credit, they treated Handry and his siblings fairly, and were even-handed with Handry. There were laughs, love, and crying at times as the family went through its daily lives in as honest and true a fashion as they could.

6. Does the character have any siblings?

Yes, Handry has two siblings. Adrian is his older brother, two years his senior, and works as a bargeman on the canals in the Sleeping Vale burgh. He has a wife and two young children. Handry's sister, Adele, is five years his junior. She lives in Folly Hills, and works in the shoppe with their father. She's single, but has a little girl out of wedlock. There was also a third sibling, a girl, Hannah, who was three years his junior, but she died when she was 15 of a disease that she contracted after falling into a toxic puddle of water.

7. Why did your character eventually leave the family home (if at all)?

Unlike his brothers and sisters, Handry had no interest in working at the shoppe or in having the type of career that was expected of him. While he did what was expected of him, he was more interested in his mother's work with herbs and plants, and always wanted a career in medicine. He was pretty intelligent, and this brought him to the attention of a local doctor, Felixe Hamers, who took him on as an apprentice. Handry moved in to Felixe's small clinic, and worked with her there.

8. What kind of things did your character learn as a child?

As a child, Handry learned a good deal about working the shoppe, and got a basic education in herbalism from his

mother. He learned that it takes hard work to make a go of things, but that one should never take life for granted. He also learned that people in The City (or at least Folly Hills) ran the gamut of the good and the bad, and that you had to take them as they were.

9. What does your character look like?

In appearance, Handry is a relatively average man for his age, standing some 5'10" tall with a somewhat stocky, if sturdy, build. He has dark brown hair, slightly wavy and cut short with a tinge of grey, and dark hazel, somewhat tired eyes, and has a couple of knife scars on his left arm from when he lost a knife fight as a young man. He has a distinctive mole on his left shoulder. He wears a simple set of clothes - dogskin pants, dogskin boots (a separate pair when he's in his surgery), off-white shirt and a vest, complemented by a dogskin jacket or longcoat when he goes around in public. Handry also wears a pair of battered spectacles that have seen better days.

10. Does your character have any notable physical strengths and/or weaknesses?

Handry has near-sightedness, but he corrects these with glasses. He also has pretty decent stamina, a function of having worked long hours during his training and apprenticeship. Handry is somewhat more athletic a man of his age, and moves with a speed that defies his appearance.

11. Does your character have any notable mental strengths and/or weaknesses?

Handry is quite stubborn, at times refusing to give up something that he is doing despite its not being practical or workable, and he has strong opinions on a variety of subjects. He is also somewhat shy around others in social situations.

12. What does your character do for a living?

After moving in to the clinic with Felixe Hamers, Handry learned a good deal about street medicine, primarily from a practical aspect, and saw that there were all manner of diseases and types of injuries that people in The City were afflicted with. After working with Felixe for a few years and learning what he could (rumours were also that they were lovers, despite the age difference), Felixe arranged for Handry to go to Longshore University and study medicine. However, after a year or so, Handry found that the academic approach didn't work for him, and he returned to Folly Hills where Felixe convinced him to open his own clinic to treat the residents of the burgh. He now practices medicine and streethealing, but while he does go out into the burgh from time to time to treat people, his clinic is more than just his home - it's also his lifeblood.

13. What kind of training (if any) has your character received?

He has received training in medicine, both formal and at the street level, as well as having a good knowledge of herbalism. He also knows about medical techniques and history, and is pretty good with street skills as well.

14. What are your character's main goals in life?

To tend to the sick and wounded. To make a good life for himself, and have a family.

15. What motivates the character?

Handry's primary motivation is the death of his sister, Hannah, and the desire not to see that kind of pain and suffering ever again. Unfortunately, he has, more than once. He is also motivated by a good set of morales instilled by his parents, who were fair, decent, and honest people.

16. Are there any particular traits that the character respects/dislikes in people?

Handry respects those who are hard-working, honest, and straightforward in the way they live their lives. He also likes those who give back to the community of Folly Hills. He dislikes those who take too many risks, those who endanger themselves needlessly and/or recklessly (there's more than enough danger to go around The City, after all!), and has an absolute dislike and distrust of the Macrocorporates.

17. Does the character have any close friends, dependents, etc.?

Handry has several friends and dependents. There is, of course, his mentor, Felixe Hamers (and yes they were lovers, but that was a long time ago), whom he values and would help at the drop of a hat. There is Mousey Jones, a dealer who can acquire all manner of minor medical supplies and drugs of various kinds from his Hohler Gang contacts (Handry doesn't know about the gang connections). Jasper Harpere is a local Lostfinder, and comes to Handry's assistance when he needs tough-to-find stuff, and he's treated the Lostfinder enough to know every stitch scar the man has on his body. Finally, there's Helene Wattson, his girlfriend of two years, whom he plans to marry in the next year or so. Unknown to Handry, she's expecting their first child in the next year.

Step 3: Choose Advantages and Disadvantages for the character.

Once the player has determined the background of the player character as per the alstate RPG Character Questionnaire, the player chooses Advantages and Disadvantages for the character, somewhat based on what they wrote in those answers. The character either pays or gains a number of Attribute Points (APs) or Skill Points (SPs), depending on the Advantages or Disadvantages he chooses for the character, as determined by the game rules. The Advantages and Disadvantages I choose for Handry are listed below, with their severity and the points costs/bonuses that they provide the character for his Attribute Points (APs) and Skill Points (SPs). Some of these are obvious from his background, but I add a couple of Enemies as well to round the character out a bit.

Advantages : Agile (Moderate) -8 APs, Contacts (Moderate; Mousy Jones) -10 APs, Contacts (Moderate; Jasper Harpere) -10 SPs

Disadvantages : Enemy (Minor; Hohler Gang cripplecut fighter) +5 SPs, Enemy (Moderate; Rival clinic owner) +10 SPs, Nearsightedness (Major) +15 APs, Nightmares (Moderate; Hannah's death) +10 APs, Shy (Major; social situations) +15 APs, Stubborn (Moderate) +10 APs

See the results of these choices in Step 6, Attributes, and Step 7, Skills.

Step 4: Choose an Origin for the character.

The next step in character creation is to choose an Origin for the character. The Origin tells you about the family that you come from, and should be firmly based in the Character Concept and reflect the answers that you gave in the sections above (see Step 2). The character Origin gives the player a number of Skills to choose from, and the player receives 40 points to assign to these Skills in whatever manner they decide, as long as no Skill is assigned more than 20

points. Each Origin also confers a bonus to one or more of the character's Attributes.

Based on the character's background, I choose the Lower Middle Class Origin for the character, and assign the Skill Points as follows:

Bureaucracy 5, Economics 10, Ground Vehicles 5, Mechanical Computing 10, Writing 10

The character also receives a bonus of +10 to his WIL Attribute.

Step 5: Choose an Upbringing for the character.

The next step in character creation is to choose an Upbringing for the character. The Upbringing tells the character how he was raised, and once more this is influenced by the character's Character Concept. All Upbringings are available only to characters who come from specific Origins, so one has to be careful in this regard. The character Upbringing gives the player a number of Skills to choose from, and the player receives 40 points to assign to these Skills in whatever manner they decide, as long as no Skill is assigned more than 20 points.

Based on Handry's background, I choose the Apprenticed Upbringing, which fortunately he can take as it is available to Lower Middle Class Origin characters. I assign the Skill points as follows, but rather than taking one of the Trades Skills, I substitute First Aid, a reasonable substitution, I think, and given the option choose the Ground Vehicles Skill instead of the Water Vehicles Skill.

Economics 5, First Aid 20, Mechanical Computing 10, Ground Vehicles 5

This gives me the following Skills so far... Bureaucracy 5, Economics 15, First Aid 20, Ground Vehicles 10, Mechanical Computing 20, Writing 10

Step 6: Purchase the character's Attributes, using the Attribute Point pool that is available.

The next step in character generation is to purchase the character's Attributes. All player characters start with a base of 360 Attribute Points (APs). From my Advantages and Disadvantages (see Step 3), I gain another 32 APs overall, making my total 392 Attribute Points with which to purchase my Attributes. They are bought on a scale of 1 to 100, with each point costing 1 AP until 70-79 which cost 2 points per point, 80-89 costing 3 points per point, and 90-99 costing 4 points per point.

Based on my character's background, I purchase the Attributes at the following values, factoring in the +10 bonus to Will from my Origin (see Step 4, above).

Strength 35, Agility 55, Dexterity 52, Health 50

Awareness 50, Intelligence 60, Willpower 55 (+10 bonus), Personality 45

Step 7: Purchase the character's Skills, using the Skill Point pool that is available.

The next step in character generation is to purchase the character's Skills. All player characters start with a base of 500

Skill Points (SPs) to assign to their Skills, at the same costs as those for Attributes. From my Advantages and Disadvantages (see Step 3), I gain another 5 SPs overall, making my total 505 Skill Points with which to purchase my Skills.

I choose to play a Doctor-like character in The City, and thus start with the following suggested Skills: First Aid, General Medicine, Pharmacology, Surgery, Diplomacy, Persuasion, Biology, and Chemistry. Based on my character's background, and taking into account the points I received from my Origin and Upbringing, I purchase the Skills at the following values when all is said and done.

Armed Combat 25, Biology 25, Bureaucracy 13, Common, Spoken 90 (Default: INT x 1.5), Common, Read & Write 60 (Default: INT), Chemistry 20, Criminal Culture 15, Diplomacy 20, Economics 25, First Aid 70, Gardening 20, General Medicine 70, Ground Vehicles 10, Herbalism 30, History 25, Mechanical Computing 20, Persuasion 35, Pharmacology 22, Surgery 45, Unarmed Combat 15, Writing 30

Step 8: Round out the character, and purchase any appropriate personal possessions.

There are several steps to rounding out the character. First off, I determine the Secondary Attributes of the character:

Reaction (Average of Agility, Awareness, and Intelligence, round down) = 55

Resilience (Health divided by 10, round down) = 5

Encumbrance (Strength divided by 2, round down) = 17 kg

Kick Damage (Strength divided by 15, round down) = 3

Punch Damage (Strength divided by 20, round down) = 2

Given that the Starting Wealth value for the Medical occupation is between 1 and 7, I decide that Handry is on the lower side of average, and given him a Wealth value of 4. Rolling on the Wealth table, I roll a 7 on a d10, so Handry starts out with 32 pounds sterling. Handry starts off with a small clinic in a formerly abandoned building in Folly Hills as part of the profession, and the basic tools of the trade.

Thus Handry starts with : A small medical clinic and apartment above; Clothes appropriate to the character; Spectacles (x2); First Aid Kit (lo-tech); Set of surgical tools that he's assembled over the years

Thus, we get the character Handry Burkel, who looks something like this:

HANDRY BURKEL

Age: 34 *Height/Build:* 5'10" tall/stocky, sturdy *Eye/Hair Colour:* Dark hazel, somewhat tired/dark brown, slightly wavy, tinge of grey *Occupation:* Doctor *Affiliations:* Folly End, Hohler Gang *Origin:* Lower Middle Class

Upbringing: Apprenticed *Character Type:* Medical

Attributes

Strength 35 Agility 55 Dexterity 52 Health 50
Awareness 50 Intelligence 60 Willpower 55 Personality 45

Secondary Attributes

Reaction: 55 Resilience: 5 Encumbrance: 17 kg
Kick Damage: 3 Punch Damage: 2

Advantages

Agile (Moderate) -8 Aps
Contacts (Moderate; Mousy Jones) -10 APs
Contacts (Moderate; Jasper Harpere) -10 SPs

Disadvantages

Enemy (Minor; Hohler Gang cripplecut fighter) +5 SPs
Enemy (Moderate; Rival clinic owner) +10 SPs
Nearsightedness (Major) +15 APs
Nightmares (Moderate; Hannah's death) +10 APs
Shy (Major; social situations) +15 APs
Stubborn (Moderate) +10 APs

Skills

Armed Combat 25 , Biology 25 , Bureaucracy 13 , Common, Spoken 90 ,
Common, Read & Write 60 , Chemistry 20 , Criminal Culture 15 ,
Diplomacy 20 , Economics 25 , First Aid 70 , Gardening 20 , General
Medicine 70 , Ground Vehicles 10 , Herbalism 30 , History 25 ,
Mechanical Computing 20 , Persuasion 35 , Pharmacology 22 , Surgery
45 , Unarmed Combat 15 , Writing 30

Possessions

A small medical clinic and apartment above , Clothes appropriate to the
character , Spectacles (x2) , First Aid Kit (lo-tech) , Set of surgical tools
that he's assembled over the years



DARK HERESY REVIEW

By Redmond Hamlett

The premise of Dark Heresy is that the game is set 40,000 years in the future and mankind is on the precipice of great discovery and extinction. To guard against this mankind has regressed to a semi-feudal state operated by a large bureaucracy to defend mankind against the moral and foreign threats of the universe. Technology is treated semi-religiously, warring between cultures is non-stop and humanity is far-flung across the universe and space travel is done by travelling through the Immaterium, or 'The Warp' where navigators find a path through this realm, and they are guided by the Astronomican, which is the psychic beacon located on Earth, powered by the God-Emperor of Mankind - his rotting but somehow still intact carcass sits on the Golden Throne of Earth (and has done so for a number of years), guiding all those who delve into space. Without this one man, The God-Emperor of Mankind, humanity is lost and would be plunged into a Dark Age once more. So to keep this equilibrium intact the bureaucracy has various arms at its disposal, including the Inquisition, the Left Hand of the God-Emperor doing his will. This is where your players come in.

This RPG is largely based on the hugely popular Warhammer 40,000 board game where Space Marines and Orks and other races clash in deadly combat. This RPG is incredibly well fleshed out, located in a realm of space called the Calaxis Sector where players take on the role of Acolytes in an Inquisitors retinue and seek out internal corruption, alien threats, and demonic incursions to save the Imperium, all in the name of the God-Emperor. The game I believe was originally produced by Black Industries in 2007 and later taken over by Fantasy Flight Games in 2008 who were responsible for the Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay series, all under license from Games Workshop.

The best comparison for this game would be Call of Cthullu, where essentially the players are a team of investigators who solve various dark mysteries that are machinations of a mad man, strange aliens or far more hideous dark horrors. And not without its pitfalls and risks for the players, as they are essentially exposed to the worst of humanity, as Fear and Corruption are frequent themes in this game. Players will be exposed to Fear and Corruption regularly, and its manifestations come from this world and the next. Your characters will be expected to carry on in the name of the Emperor, no matter the personal cost to their egos, or their souls.

The Inquisition itself is a multi-armed beast, and your characters will be exposed to its many faces throughout - whether in the form of their own Inquisitor, or others who they meet along their journeys to solicit the PCs services in doing their work for them. Your PCs will find that Heresy can occur within - from misinterpretations of Imperial faith to radicals making death pacts or with daemonic forces to gain powers they would never have access to, of course so they can fight the enemies of the Emperor with (?). We haven't even mentioned the other races yet, so this makes for an extremely colourful, if not perplexing game setting.

Characters

Players of Dark Heresy choose from 8 archetypes, and also determine their background - this includes their homeworld, upbringing, social status, traumatic events, reasons for joining the Inquisition and so on. Backgrounds often have in-game affects, for instance there are packages for characters whom were orphaned and become raised on planets that are deeply religious, so whilst they might have gained a lot of general knowledge in areas of faith they react poorly to morally confronting situations because of their sheltered upbringing. This can be challenging for players, but it makes for an interesting game. Dark Heresy's Class system is similar to that found in D & D, and there are options later on

for players to refine this, or even diverge to a completely different class (say, a soldier character develops a serious religious bent and develops from this), however, the rules for this are not explicit in this book, at least and compared to other systems (GURPS or Hero Games) on how to establish this for players. Game Master's need to be flexible here and negotiate with players accordingly.

The basic character classes are..

Guardsmen - Frontline soldiers of humanity - good a blowing stuff up

Cleric - Leaders of men, exemplars of faith and diplomats

Arbitrator - Officers of the law on Imperial worlds, street fighters and masters of guile

Adept - Bureaucrat supreme, the quest for knowledge guides their actions

Sanctioned Psyker - Master of ethereal arts and destructive psychic powers

Techpriest - Masters of machines, repositories of secret knowledge and technology

Scum - Thieves, survivors, gangers, resourceful types who make do in the far-flung future.

Assassin - Artisans of the kill.

Each Class type resembles a typical 'human' character that WH40K fans have come across. The point of difference for those not familiar with WH40K would be the Techpriest. They are unique to the WH40K universe as they are motivated by acquiring secret technology, and sacrifice their humanity to become more and more like a machine themselves. All the other Class types are staples in RPG systems, but in Dark Heresy there are options to diverge from this. For instance a Psyker can go towards being overtly militant or becoming more of a mystic with powers of introspection. The same goes for Guardsmen - they could concentrate on being a fighter; a sniper or; develop command skills to lead others. So this aspect of the game allows for players to have choices in this regard, but not a great deal of flexibility in completely diverging from the path, although personally the plethora of Skills and Talents available mitigates this. Also, there is not much structure in the Core Rulebook to create your own Class (or even create a character that is classless) which is unfortunate given the size of the book.

Characters gain experience points throughout their adventures to spend on either Skills, Talents or their own Characteristics which are given a rating out of 100. The average score in this system is considered to be about 30 - 36. WH40K fans will be familiar with setup for this, these being Weapon & Ballistics Skill, Strength, Toughness, Agility, Intelligence, Fellowship, Willpower and Perception. Starting out Characteristics are generated randomly (I can hear GURPS players screaming about this!) for each class, but there modifiers for this. Players will find they will have to make some tough choices regarding their purchase of skills, talents and characteristics, as for each class the priorities are different, so it follows that an Adept would have to spend more XP to gain Strength or Toughness, as would a Guardsman to gain Intelligence or Fellowship.

That is not to say that characters, or this system is balanced. In playing we have found that the Psyker character even at starting levels seems too powerful (lets say, being able to crush people with your mind is much more affective than firing guns wildly), but there is danger in using these too as the psyker risks putting a hole through the Immaterium and inviting the realm of chaos into the realm of the living. Something that could happen easily enough with a poor Willpower and Power Check roll. The effects for this could be something inconsequential such as unexplained noises or spooked humans, to more sinister things such as weeping statues, to scary things such as accidentally summoning daemons (sic). The later hasn't happened yet, but this remains to be seen.

System type?

Every in game tests are determined with a 2D10 percentile roll (out of 100) using a players Characteristic as a basis, and to each a Skill or Talent there is a base Characteristic which is used for the test and this has modifiers. For example how long a player determines they are taking on a task, if they have help from other PCs. There are also negatives applied to tests as well, as determined by the GM or in the scenarios. Because of the Characteristics for players being derived from the boardgame, it makes the tests sound simple enough but in practice makes what would be otherwise routine tests in another RPG can easily become fraught with danger. For instance, if a character wishes to test their Drive Skill (which is defined by their Intelligence) and they have average Intelligence, unless they have purchased a bonus to this Skill they must roll under their Intelligence (say 33) on a 2D10 percentile roll. So as you can see, if this rule were applied widely to every NPC in the game system, not much of anything would get done. Furthermore, there are charts upon charts on things such as Critical Damage, Perils of the Warp, to more mundane things such as working out availability of equipment. Not to mention all the caveats about penalties and bonus's for tests, this system can be a bit of a headache for GMs, so a fair amount of creative license is required on the part of GMs and Players when playing this game.

We haven't even talked about combat. It's a big part of the game and is fast, furious and incredibly bloody. The universe is a big place, and there are all sorts of weapons in this system, from conventional firearms and melee weapons, to powered blades, plasma weapons and the WH40K staple - the Boltgun (shoots rounds that explode on impact). Combat on the other hand is exciting, but can be very frustrating for PCs as it is very easy to die, or at least

lose all of your PCs hitpoints before needing immediate medical attention. There are several tables which can determine the Critical Damage effects from certain types of weapons (eg. Impact, rendering, energy & explosive damage - this is something Dark Heresy excels on and the effects for these are quite explicit) on different locations on the body. These are quite graphic, and not for the faint hearted! But then again, in the WH40K universe, if you are a fellow with a gun, that's it!



The book itself

It's over 400 pages, hardcover with high-quality paper in full colour. As with most GW and associated productions, the artwork is excellent, although artists such as John Blanche and David Gallagher are less prominent in the WH40K RPG books, which is unfortunate as their depictions of this universe have been crucial to the development of its dark, foreboding feel. So yes its beautifully produced. However, regarding content there is heaps of background info on the universe the game is set in, all the factions, homeworld types, xenos, daemons.... it really does go on a bit, and may have been done for stylistic reasons (read: increase the bulk so the publishers can justify charging

more for the book) rather than for setting rules and so forth. There is a lot of background development which is useful for GMs, but perhaps less so for Players. However, whilst there are in-depth rules for combat and situational tests, there are no rules on vehicles being used in combat or otherwise, and not much written about travelling between planets or in space itself.

Players of the boardgame would at least expect some of the more common vehicles being represented in the core rulebook (namely land-speeders, tanks and sentinel walkers). I guess these things are covered in other WH40K titles such as 'Rogue Trader', but for a book of over 400 pages it seems that more specific system rules should be included. Also regarding other races that are unique to this game series, they are more or less brushed over. Fans of the boardgame probably complained bitterly at the thought of there being no rules and very little introduction for other races and cultures such as the Eldar (think elves in space), the Tau (quasi humans with a sort of socialist-personal liberties bent) or the ubiquitous Orks (techno-hooligans with a bent for ruthless power). And there are no Space Marines (super human warriors of humanity) in this book either, which is AMAZING given their uniqueness to GW and the game setting. Furthermore, the Eldar probably the most colourful character types in the WH40K universe, and they barely get a mention in Dark Heresy! Yes, it is true that other WH40K RPG titles / supplements to Dark Heresy cover these in some depth, however a short introduction and examples of typical 'races' for the system would have been useful in the Core Rulebook. However, having said this, the developers of this game have refined the scope as some of the races / cultures noted above would not be typically met by the PCs of this game, given the Inquisition deals with threats from within the Imperium, rather than from outside this.

One thing the producers of Dark Heresy do well is provide well thought out adventures - with the exception of the one found in the Core Rulebook - it has to be one of the biggest 'railroad' adventures our RPG group has played to date. Having said the basic adventure was a good introduction to the players of the WH40K universe, fleshing out themes of societal dystopia, religious extremism and corruption. The downloadable adventures found on the Fantasy Flight Games webpage were excellent and allow for a much freer RPG, where players can tackle problems as they choose, instead of how the book tells the GM what is acceptable. At Church of Gaming East Melbourne, we are currently running the scenario series Purge the Unclean and are finding it quite enjoyable. I don't think my players were expecting quite so much intrigue and behind-the-scenes work required to play this adventures. So there is a bout a 60 - 40 role-playing to combat ratio in this series if that sways any new gamers.

Final thoughts

A RPG set in the WH40K universe has been something that a lot of gamers have been waiting for. Even with the refined scope its a massive universe, and the developers have done their best in this to make it playable, which it is. But WH40K fans are going to be wanting a bit more completeness from the Core Rulebook before needing to spend on more supplements and scenarios. This book has a bit too much 'fluff', and could have taken a few leaves out of the pages of GURPS books to give players structure on how to make characters / protagonists / vehicles from scratch. It is an expensive title but it is beautifully put together. Gamers who are not familiar with the darkness of this setting may become forlorn, but for WH40K fans it truly is a stepping stone to fleshing out adventures in a universe where, whatever happens, you will not be missed.

TRAVELLER: THE OUTER VEIL

By Tom Zunder

OUTER VEIL is a new setting book for the Traveller rpg published by Mongoose. Traveller has a pedigree going back to the very root of roleplaying (1977) and has a well developed setting that has emerged, somewhat organically, over the intervening decades. This setting, which is usually referred to as the Original Traveller Universe (OTU) is set very far in the future and has a very decentralised feel with a light feudal oligarchy ruling over it. It also has some anachronistic touches, and despite being millennia in the future it often feels oddly like 1972!

Spica Publishing, founded in July 2006, have published a wide range of support material for the current Mongoose edition of Traveller, and yet in the past they did have plans to publish an entire sector in the OTU. This seems to have been somewhat derailed by the new licence, although not by any active intervention by Mongoose or Mark Miller, and it seems that they have turned their hand to a new and independent setting.

Overview

OUTER VEIL is a near future setting, the game date is 2159, and yet mankind has explored a full sector, divided into the dense Core, the growing Frontier and the thinly settled Outer Veil. The pace of technological progress has been consistent and IMHO more acceptable for a SF genre project. From 2033 to 2159 Earth has moved from TL8 to just TL11, with Jump-1 ships developed in 2068, and Jump-2 in 2150. The history of the setting is well developed and addresses a lot of the usual issues about Traveller, e.g. Why doesn't knowledge spread evenly and how can barbarism exist a week away from abundance and ultra technology? In OUTER VEIL the whole of space is nominally TL10-11, and if you have the money you can buy equipment at that level. ICT is cheap, pervasive and wireless, and as the text says "storage is effectively limitless with 22nd century technology". That's not to say that backward colonies don't exist, indeed on the Veil some goods are imported in a lower tech form just so they're easier to maintain. Gravitics is a new technology and although it has replaced aircraft, ground vehicles are still wheeled, tracked or waterborne.

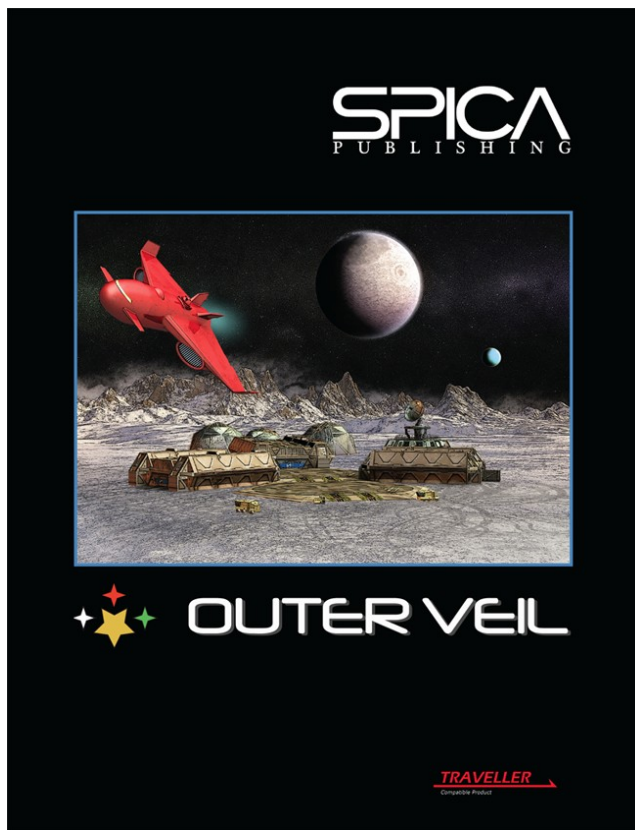
The history and the setup of OUTER VEIL has been done extremely well, so as to be believable, consistent with the core Traveller rulebook, and yet also to deliver a style and feel that is far more Firefly or Aliens than some SF games you may have played. Essentially space was colonised by Megacorps that seized political control through the Inter Stellar Trade Organisation (ISTO) after various corporate wars. Eventually the nation states rebelled and after a civil war established the Federated Nations of Humanity in 2131. The government structure of Humanity is rather similar to the present European Union, a ruling Executive of three members, an elected Assembly, and Commissions of civil servants that manage the broad decisions of the other two institutions. The wider structure of Member Nations and Colonies mirrors the colonisation of North America by the U.S.A., with Colonies similar in form and type to the Territories, and the Member Nations like full states. The Megacorps still run 60% of the economy, the FNH actively runs 25% with the balance in the hands of Independents. There is a wider variety of 'actual' governments the further away from the Core that one goes, and there are good rules on setting up new Colonies: independent, corporate charter world and government colonial projects. The political system is dominated by three broad coalitions: Stability (conservative), Progress (expansionist) and Unity (lefties), all of which can provide excellent flavour and motivation. In addition there are Secessionists, militant and peaceful; pirates, privateers and raiders, unsanctioned colonies and a whole grey zone in which dissidents and outcasts can dwell.

Military concerns are not pressing for the FNH at the moment, they keep a Core Navy, a Marines Corp (FNHMC) and planetary armies. Few warships above 1000 tonnes are seen in the Frontier and the Outer Veil, most smaller than that. Mercenary units exist and are licensed, and in the Frontier and Outer Veil illegal corporate wars still erupt. Meson guns haven't been invented, combat armour isn't known, and this and the small size of ships means that a referee need not use High Guard or Mercenary, although they could.. This is not a setting for huge naval battles or a Honor Harrington "ship of the line" style campaign. It is well suited to brush wars, black ops by corporate teams and possible bug hunts. I say possible, but not yet.

The economy is well explained in the setting, the role of the Megacorps allows for Outlander or Blade Runner games, but as the scale diminishes in the Frontier and the Outer Veil, then the Free and Subsidised Traders start to play a key role, allowing a Firefly or classic small scale mercantile/troubleshooter game. As mentioned above, the possibility to start colonies is covered, and colonial games have great potential for economic gaming. The nature of travel and the distances to HQ mean that even the largest Megacorps can get very entrepreneurial on the borders.

The culture is Neo-Modernist, most religions we know now are extant, although they have to have adopted an explanation for multiple worlds, and the evidence of alien intelligence, not to mention psionics. From the dense activity of the Core to the abandoned 'land grab colonies' composed of a single ethnicity or culture, most SF cultural diversity can be extrapolated and encompassed.

Did I mention aliens and psionics? Well there are no aliens, but there were. Ruins exist of the Monument Builders and the Ascraeus Civilisation, but these are ancients and no current non human sophonts have been encountered. The Ascraeans were a TL13 humanoid species and through their artefacts humans discovered psionics, although it requires a psionic amplifying device to be effective.



Contents

OUTER VEIL is well written, it uses concise but rich text to build a good overview of what is a huge setting, and it does so in 8 key chapters: The Outer Veil, which is a summary of the overall setting, Outer Veil Characters, which provides eight careers suited to the setting: Citizen, Colonist, Elite, FNH Marine Corps, FNH Navy, Justice Commission., Planetary Army, Scout, Starships of the Outer Veil: 14 ships that cover the full range of Traveller core ship types with deckplans, Belting, as it says, mining rocks Astrography: The full sector, mapped and detailed at the level of about a page per sub sector, so similar to Mongoose sector write ups, Referee's Information: Outer Veil Patrons: four of them, Brotherhood and Justics: An introductory adventure.

Conclusions

OUTER VEIL is a very good product. It is well written, the setting is meshed into and out of the core Traveller rulebook, and by being written from the ground up it is consistent, believable and allows for many excellent gaming opportunities. It will suit players who want an SF game that might happen in fifty years, where society has changed but the culture is recognisable and the tech is still within human comprehension. It allows for dystopian, corporate, colonisation, first contact (hey add your own aliens), and frontier games. There is no meta plot, no 300,000 year history, it's new and it's all up for grabs.

On the other hand, it's Traveller. It carefully doesn't break anything. You can grab a ship from a Mongoose book and as long as it's TL11 or lower and doesn't have a meson gun, it's fine. You can use High Guard or Mercenary or Agent or Robots or Cybernetics. Nothing you have in your Traveller collection is redundant, well maybe that TL16 Twilight Sector book, but that's the opposite end of the spectrum.

The book is simply laid out, readable, and illustrated with neat CGI images that fit the feel of the setting whilst not setting any hearts a flutter.

Should you buy it? Yes: if it sets your teeth on edge explaining away OTU's tech levels and historical absurdity, or you don't want aliens, or you want a new brave frontier. No: if you IOVe the OTU and are happy and love the depth and scale of all the existing material. Maybe: if you fancy a read, might port some of the ships and careers to your game or back to OTU, and since it doesn't really break Traveller, just like the idea of diversity.

Am I pleased I have it? Hell Yes!

Outer Veil - Spica Publishing | DriveThruRPG.com <http://bit.ly/zs5oIW>



SPACE OPERA RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW

by Lev Lafayette

Space Opera is certainly one of the oldest and best known science fiction roleplaying games. It has a reputation, not undeserved, of being quite complex, although from the outset strong disagreement is expressed towards some opinions which claim - perhaps with only a modicum of an attempt - that it is unplayable. Nobody should be terribly surprised by the alleged complexity, after all, it was co-authored by Edward E. Simbalist, partially responsible for Chivalry & Sorcery. Furthermore, it says as much on the introduction to the game by Scott Bizar: "Space Opera is not an easy game. The individual systems are actually fairly simple and quite logical, but the sheer number of systems can be staggering".

The second edition of the game comes in a boxed set with a pretty interesting cover by Gene Day (with a variant by Robert Charrette in a later printing), illustrating inspirations from Barabarella to Star Wars among others. Inside the game comes with two 96 page books, saddle-stapled with cardstock covers. Despite some rough treatment my personal copies have stood up surprisingly well over the years, however cramming such a large number of pages into a fairly flimsy cover and binding isn't really recommended. Also the game comes with several cardstock forms for character sheets, planet sheets, ship sheets etc, which is a nice touch. If you're going to put a game in a box, put something in the box.

Throughout the two volumes is some rather good contextual artwork by Jeff Dee and Gene Day which really captures the feeling of the game. The textual style inside the two books leaves a lot to be desired, and is possibly why the game receives a reputation for complexity. It is tightly-packed sans-serif font that is more than somewhat difficult to read. As one perseveres they are confronted with a rules organisation that is quite difficult to follow, despite a writing style which appropriately moves between formality and informality whether the author is describing the game system, or providing some usually excellent advice on roleplaying and running the game. The layout also leaves a little to be desired as well; although following a standard two-column justified throughout, some pages are significantly misaligned. There is no index and the table of contents, whilst complete, is also poorly laid out.

Once one gets behind the curtain of formatting and content obfuscation, there are some pretty familiar conventions which were common for the period, and are arguably still dominant in RPG design. This is a game with character classes ("careers"), characteristics, "races", and skills. From the outset, it is recommended that players generate multiple characters to take part in different scenarios - well before *Ars Magica*, it must be mentioned. The careers options are soldier, technician, researcher, scientist: research, scientist: medical, scientist: engineering, and astronaut. This is a tiny indication of the need for active editors; anyone can see how much easier it would be just to call the scientist professions, 'scientist', 'physician', and 'engineer' and reduce the possibility of confusion.

Following this is characteristic generation which is again more complex than it should be. The main characteristics are Physique, Strength, Constitution, Agility, Dexterity, Empathy, Intelligence, Psionics, Intuition, Bravery, Leadership, General Technical Aptitude, Mechanical Technical Aptitude, and Electrical Technical Aptitude. Yes, that's right fourteen primary characteristics. These are determined with a d100 roll cross-referenced across characteristic categories generating a value from 01 to 19. The table is biased towards PCs, so the average Strength for example is 13. Furthermore, according to the different class selected, there is a pool of points that can be added to the percentage roll. As you can see, this is another example of unnecessary complexity. There is a number of easier ways that one can generate values from 01 to 19 with a positive bias. It's not wrong, per se, the results don't break any sense of

verisimilitude - it's just that it's harder than it should be.

After this is the random determination of birth planet, defined by gravity, atmosphere, and climate, which make various modifications to characteristics and skills. Following this is the choice of character race - these aren't at all particularly alien, rather they are earth normal plus uplifting, evolution, etc. The options are (a) Humans and Humanoids, (b) Transhumans, (c) Pithecines, (d) Canines, (e) Felines, (f) Ursoides, (g) Avians, and (h) Saurians (warm blooded humanoid lizards). Each race is given a fair description of their preferred environment, appearance, perceptual qualities, and main personality traits. This is followed by determination of height and weight, empathic personality, carrying capacity, and damage factor. We are alerted to the benefits of the drug thanokalamine which, upon death, stops cellular decomposition. How it moves through the circulatory system without a heartbeat is not explained (a contemporary suggestion would be nanobots). Then there's more personal characteristics; shock resistance, wound recovery, stamina, fatigue, and wind, which are not the same at all. Then there's movement rates, over a variety of terrain types, intelligence tests (with some of the most sensible discussion on the subject from any RPG), intuition tests, bravery, surprise tests and - also surprising - two pages of how to pass an item from one character to another. Finally there are balance and initiative tests before moving on to character careers.

The career system follows a similar format to a certain other science fiction roleplaying game. There is a range of paramilitary civilian or military services which the character becomes attached to from the age of 18 to a number of two-year tours, minimum of two, maximum fifteen. This period of service allows for the possibility, subsequent to a small mountain of die rolls for each tour, for improving one's rank, and pay from the relevant service. At the end of the service, the character will also receive severance pay, perhaps a pension, and will have savings, and various mustering out benefits depending on service, including passage, and surplus equipment discounts.

The period in the careers also assists in the acquisition of skill, through skill points. Each pre-game PC receives skill points equal to a sum of seven personal characteristics, according to career, plus five times the number of years in the service career, plus 6d6. This compares with learning skills during the game which is required the expenditure of time in training, and a successful random roll. There are over two hundred skills, all ranked from 0 to 10, differentiated according to career (but not exclusively), with prerequisites, and usually described in a couple of sentences to a paragraph or two. There are particular resolution rules for scientific research, medical diagnoses, survival, bomb disposal etc, without an inkling of consistency. Other skills are described more as a hand-wave.

Space Opera has a psionics systems, where according to the personal characteristic score, the character will be "dead", "open", or "awakened", to psionic abilities. A psionic personal characteristic of 11 or more is required to have any degree ability, with the maximum potential ability governed by the characteristic. There are five psionic fields (telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, clairvoyance, telurgy, and the force) with a number of talents in each field, almost one hundred in total, with power levels from 0 to 10 in each field. The increase from the personal characteristic scores is quite rapid; a score of 11 allows for level 1 talent powers in 1 field, whereas a score of 19 allows for level 10 talents in all fields. Psionicists may also discover (not manufacture) PK Crystals which can greatly augment the magnitude and range of psionic talents (e.g., telepathy to light year distances). Like the skills, talents are played as individual systems to their self.

From psionics the game moves on to the extensive rules and material concerning equipment. The initial rules concern system breakdowns derived from the Breakdown Number given to each item of equipment in stress situations, and are followed by damage to specific vehicular systems from the same, as well as malfunctions for starship systems, expressed in very specific examples, with each malfunction type demanding an additional subsystem to the game. Maintenance and repair costs are also provided.

The first book concludes with layouts and specifications with a half-dozen or so spaceships, along with a system for determining the mining and profits made from "meteor mining". The second book includes a vast quantity of different items of equipment available for purchase, from general survival, medical, vision aids, communication systems, battle and space suits, robots, dozens of aircraft and vehicles, personal weapons of all technology levels, more guns, and more guns. Oh, and drugs of course. Like all science fiction games of the era, Space Opera underestimate the capability of computer and communications technology. The cheapest computer, at a mere 100 000 credits and weighing in at 500 kg, comes with a 6 gigabyte hard disk and just over a 1 gig of RAM, and of course, software costs tens of thousands of credits.

The major game system contribution at this level is personal combat. Attack rolls are made on a d100 to hit, with various modifiers of course, followed by another d100 roll to determine location, followed by another d10 roll (with modifiers) to determine whether the attack has penetrated the armour worn by the defender. This latter target number is determined by cross-referencing the weapon against the armour worn, e.g., a 3mm laser pistol against type 'E' requires a 6 or more to cause damage. Assuming this is successful, a d20 is rolled to determine the wound category, modified by the weapon, with the specific damage varying according to the location struck. Whilst various wounds do require a shock CR, which obviously does scale, there is a percentage chance at the high levels for an outright kill, which does not. As expected there are a variety of equations and modifications that run through the entire range combat system. For example, the base chance to hit with Unarmed Combat is Expertise + 2/5 (Dex + Agil + Str + Con + IQ) +2.

A science fiction game like Space Opera requires travel in space, and as a result there is a lengthy description on sub-light drives and maneuvers, the same for FTL drives (based on tachyon space). There is a generous starship design, with the inclusion of all the features that you would expect in terms of size, drives, armour, weaponry, staterooms, berths, and of course, a significant price-tag to match. There is, as expected, an entirely distinct and detailed starship combat system, which includes a delightful set of tables to cross reference such actions as the target speed in light seconds compared to the target range to generate the percentage chance to straddle the target. A summary form of the starship combat system consists of statement of intent, initiative, displacement, weapons fire, and torpedo fire.

Following this is the effects of starbases, the purchasing of used starships, bank accounts, trade and commerce, and finally the world creation procedure which includes three-dimensional starmaps, the possibility of planetary bodies, their sentient population, a paragraph or so on various social and governmental types, followed by the government support index, a corruption index, a repression index, and so forth. General planetary conditions are described along with hydrography, atmosphere. A range of sample NPC statistics are provided in according to the "racial" types described in character generation along with some "bug-eyed monster" types as well.

Overall Space Opera is a detailed paramilitary science fiction roleplaying game which provides enormous selective detail within that focus. Whilst it remains fairly "realistic" in terms of results throughout, it frustrates the player with the lack of a consistent and intuitive system throughout every stage of the process, making it one of the least enjoyable games to actually play. Whilst fairly well written, and with some fairly interesting ideas, it is plagued by some terrible design decisions which would also reduce the desire for active participation. If given a thorough rewrite to 21st century design standards - in terms of the game system, scope, and style - there could be something quite interesting here. However, as it stands it is not recommended.

RINGWORLD AND BRP: EXPANDING ROOT/BRANCH SKILLS

This particular example can easily be changed for any BRP game, including Ringworld's Root/Branch System. It was originally playtested using Avalon Hill/Chaosium RuneQuest (3rd edition). It has also been elaborated somewhat for Rolemaster (see <http://www.guildcompanion.com/scrolls/2007/aug/chardevskill.html>)

Root/Branch

One of the most interesting contributions of the Ringworld roleplaying game was the concept of root/branch skills. In order to suggest a means of simulating the enormous variety of potential skills in a manner that is both realistic and playable, Ringworld suggested that there were two types of skills, Single Skills and Root/Branch skills. For Single Skills, which were typically physically-orientated, the character could learn the skill to any level as per the normal BRP system. For root/branch skills however, the character was limited to learning the root skill to a value that combined two characteristics (e.g., STR+DEX for Agility root skills, INT+APP for Communication root skills etc). After reaching that maxima, the character had to specialise from within the root skill, with each branch effectively becoming a Single Skill.

Although the system proposed here was developed independently of Ringworld, it certainly has some similarity, and can be perceived as an elaboration and generic version of the same.

Core Principles

Physical skills are largely dependent on innate ability, whereas mental skills are largely dependent on learned experience, and social skills are in-between. The starting values and rate of improvement thus varies. Physical skills thus typically start with a higher emphasis on characteristics, whereas Mental skills, whilst usually having a low base, are picked up quickly.

There are four levels of skills; Basic Skills, Expert Skills, Advanced Skills, Mastery Skills. Basic skills cover the 0-40% range, Expert skills the 41-70% range, Advanced skills 71-90%, and Mastery for any level beyond that. The more complex the activity, the more prerequisites there will be and the greater the degree of potential specialisation.

Improvements

Ringworld recommends a skill experience check whenever an action was important. If the character rolls over their skill or below their intelligence (but not both), they receive 1d6% increase, or 1d3% in a Simweb. Training in a skills provides 1% per sixty hours. Research provides an experience check but with 100 to 200 hours of research, depending on the type of study. Characteristics take 25 hours times the current rating, resulting in an increase of 1d3-1.

In contrast, Basic Roleplaying requires a successful use of a skill roll that is worth an experience check. The player then rolls over the current skill rating "after an adventure" with half their INT rating as a bonus. A successful check results in an add of 1d6% to the skill, or a default of 3. Training takes a number of hours equal to the current rating in the skill.

The teacher's Teaching skill roll determines the result ranging from -1d2% (fumble) to 1d6+2 (critical), up to the teacher's skill level for the skill in question. Researching is described in BRP as "self-training"; this requires a test on the relevant skill as per an experience check, resulting in a 1d6-2% increase. "Guided instruction" is deliberately made more beneficial than self-guided research. Characteristic training is also based on 25 hours times the current level, with an improvement of 1d3-1.

Because the values are different, in this skill system a combination which is compatible with both systems is sort. The following is a useful guide.

a) An experience check can be received from successful or unsuccessful use of the skill from critically important situations (GM determination). Approximately three per session per character is recommended. Each check is resolved by rolling d100 + INT, over the skill level or over 100 if the skill level is already at 100. Each successful skill check roll provides an improvement.

b) Taught training of skills requires a teaching skill check. A successful roll provides an improvement, an unsuccessful roll no change, a critical provides double improvement, and a fumble causes a negative improvement. A training skill improvement takes a number of hours per week equal to the current level of the skill.

c) Study, or self-tutoring, requires a research skill check. A successful roll provides an improvement, an unsuccessful roll no change, a critical provides double improvement, and a fumble causes a negative improvement. Note that this diverges significantly from the BRP argument; it is proposed here that a good researcher is actually at least as good as an equivalent teacher. However the challenge for the researcher is to find material that provides new information that they do not already have (e.g., finding an advanced textbook is like trying to find an advanced teacher). A study skill improvement takes a number of hours per week equal to the current level of the skill.

d) Research, also requires a research skill check. However in this case the researcher has been unable to find an equivalent text or manual that provides information greater than their current skill level. They are working on trial and error on their own and hoping to make a breakthrough. In these unfortunate cases (and they often are the case when the character is at the 100% plus level of a skill), the researcher will usually either confirm what they already know, or fail an experimental test. A successful or unsuccessful roll no change, a critical provides an improvement, and a fumble causes a negative improvement. A research skill improvement takes a number of hours per week equal to the current level of the skill.

e) Characteristic improvements remain at 1d3-1 points after 25 times the current level.

Every improvement will provide a variable level of improvement to a skill as follows.

Physical Skills: +3% (basic), +2% (expert), +1% (advanced), +0.5% (mastery, that is +1% every 2 improvements)

Social Skills: +4% (basic), +3% (expert), +2% (advanced), +1% (mastery)

Mental Skills: +5% (basic), +4% (expert), +3% (advanced), +2% (mastery)

Mental skills advance through training faster than social skills, which advance faster than physical skills.

Skill Base

Physical skills have a higher characteristic bonus than social skills, which have a higher bonus than mental skills. Whilst it will vary according to the specific skill, in general physical skills are derived by three characteristics (e.g., STR+STR+DEX), social skills by two (e.g., CHA+POW), and mental skills by one (e.g., INT). On average this means that the starting level for an untrained character will be around 33% for physical activities, 22% for social skills, and

11% for mental skills.

Skill List

The skill list proposed in this system is very different to that in both Basic Roleplaying and Ringworld by necessity, as the skills engage in ever-increasingly levels of specialisation. If as given only the Basic and Expert level skills are elaborated here in any sense of a near-complete list. The possible levels of detail that can developed, especially in the scientific skills, are well beyond the scope of this article.

The Basic skills are Simple Maneuvers, Common Knowledge and Social Norms. These are specialised according to Medium, Technology, and Culture, respectively. "Medium" means the locomotive medium (earth, air, water). "Technology" is the an elaborated broad social category used in RuneQuest and expanded for technological era (Primitive, Nomadic, Barbarian, Slavery, Feudalism, Industrialism, Biotechnical, Spacefaring). "Culture" is the broad division of a language family (e.g., Celtic, Germanic, Latin, Slavic, Hellenic).

The following are Expert Mental Skills. All have General Knowledge as the prerequisite.

Mathematics, Meditation, Siege Engine, Engineering, Mechanics, Medic, Fishing, Hunting, Gathering, Farming, Husbandry, Astrology, Alchemy, Research, Planning, Bestiary, Physics, Survival, Literature (culture), Geography

The following are Expert Social Skills. All have Social Norms as a prerequisite.

Language (specialisation), Ethics, Relationship (specialisation), Animalism, Romance, Poetry, Aesthetics, Write, Evaluate, Mesmerise, Law, Divinity (specialisation), Commerce, Savoir-Faire, Streetwise, Carousing, Diplomacy, Acting, Intimidation, Compose, Teaching, Interrogation

The following are Expert Physical Skills (all have Basic Manuevers as a prerequisite)

Lovecraft, Drive, Ride, Pilot, Ski, Stealth, Sport, Melee, Shoot, Fighting, Acrobatics, Dancing, Singing, Play (specialisation), Drawing, Craft (specialisation: cloth, wood, glass, leather, metal etc),

Contortion, Sleight, Skate

The following are examples of Advanced skills; each have the relevant expert skill as a prerequisite.

Mental Skills Mathematics (discrete mathematics, calculus, functions, geometry, algebra), Ethics (meta-ethics, normative, applied)...

Physical Skills Drive (vehicle type), Ride (species), Pilot (vehicle type), Ski (medium), Melee (style), Shoot (weapon type)

Social skills Law (specialisation; torts, contracts, criminal, etc)

MASS EFFECTING THE THOUSAND SUNS

by Stew Wilson

Character Creation

Mass Effect characters tend to be larger than life. To reflect that, they start with 33 points to distribute between ability scores, rather than 30.

Being considered for Spectre membership is a 2-point Benefit, as is membership in C-Sec, the Citadel Fleet, or a military, police, or mercenary organization. Being a Spectre is a 3-point benefit. Benefit points converted to Assets give 2,000\$ rather than 10,000\$.

Species

This section doesn't include Collectors, Elcor, Hanar, Volus, and Vorcha—the majority of these species don't appear in combat roles; those that do are solely antagonists. And while Blasto the Hanar Spectre would be funny to play, we don't have enough information to make decisions about how to make a playable Hanar.

Most characters rely on the machine translation provided by their personal hardware (see *Omni-Tool*, below). Characters start with a language from their species, all communication is translated into that language. Characters who pick up additional languages through their careers can either choose to increase a language they already know, or pick up a new language (human or alien).

Asari: A mono-gender race—distinctly feminine in appearance—the asari are known for their elegance, diplomacy, and biotic talent. Their millennia-long lifespan and unique physiology—allowing them to reproduce with a partner of any gender or species—give them a conservative but convivial attitude toward other races. The asari were instrumental in proposing and founding the Citadel Council, and have been at the heart of galactic society ever since.

Culture (Asari) 2, Empathy 1, Language (Asari) 2, Mental Contact 1, Presence +1, Curious, and 6 bonus points to spend.

Batarians: A race of four-eyed bipeds native to the world of Khar'shan, the batarians are a disreputable species that chose to isolate itself from the rest of the galaxy. The Terminus Systems are infested with batarian pirate gangs and slaving rings, fueling the stereotype of the batarian thug. It should be noted that these criminals do not represent average citizens, who are forbidden to leave batarian space by their omnipresent and paranoid government.

Culture (Batarian) 2, Language (Batarian) 2, Intimidation 1, Streetwise 1, Hypersensitivity, and 9 bonus points to spend.

Drell: The drell are a reptile-like race that were rescued from their dying homeworld by the hanar following first contact between the two. Since then, the drell have remained loyal to the hanar for their camaraderie and have fit comfortably into galactic civilization.

Culture (Drell) 2, Language (Drell) 2, Observe 1, Body +1, Humid Susceptibility, Eidetic Memory, and 7 bonus points to spend.

Geth: The geth are a race of networked artificial intelligences that reside beyond the Perseus Veil. The geth were created by the quarians, as laborers and tools of war. When the geth became sentient and began to question their masters, the quarians attempted to exterminate them. The geth won the resulting war, and reduced the quarians to a race of nomads. Each Geth platform runs hundreds or thousands of individual programs.

Computers 2, Culture (Geth) 2, Language (Geth) 2, Observe 1, Perception +1, Armor Restriction, Echolocator, Eidetic Memory, Pheromone Repulsion*, and 6 bonus points to spend.

*: The Geth are hated by many species in Citadel space. They suffer the penalty for Pheromone Repulsion without a

range limit. Their internal radar acts in the same way as Echolocation.

Human: Humans, from the planet Earth, are the newest sentient species of notable size to enter the galactic stage and are hands-down the most rapidly expanding and developing. They independently discovered a Prothean data cache on Mars in 2148, and the mass relay networks shortly thereafter.

Culture (Human) 2, Language (one human), and 10 bonus points to spend.

Krogan: Due to the brutality of their surroundings, natural selection has played a significant role in the evolution of the krogan. Unlike most species on the Citadel, krogan eyes are wide-set – on Earth this is distinctive of prey animals, but in this case it gives the krogan 240-degree vision, giving them greater visual acuity and awareness of approaching predators. Prior to the genophage, krogan could reproduce and mature at an astonishing rate.

Culture (Krogan) 1, Language (Krogan), Melee 0, Unarmed Combat 0, Body +2, Armor Restriction, Attack Bonus (+1), Natural Armor (AV 4), Ultra Immune System, and 4 bonus points to spend.

Quarian: The quarians are a nomadic species of humanoid aliens known for their skills with technology and synthetic intelligence. Since their homeworld Rannoch was conquered, the quarians live aboard the Migrant Fleet, a huge collection of starships that travel as a single fleet.

Culture (Quarian) 2, Culture (Geth) 2, Language (Quarian) 2, Computer 1, Technical Sciences 1, Medical Sciences 1, Perception +1, Armor Restriction, Frailty, and 10 bonus points to spend.

Salarian: The second species to join the Citadel, the salarians are warm-blooded amphibians native to the planet Sur'Kesh. Salarians possess a hyperactive metabolism; they think fast, talk fast, and move fast. To salarians, other species seem sluggish and dull-witted, especially the elcor. Unfortunately, their metabolic speed leaves them with a relatively short lifespan; salarians over the age of 40 are a rarity.

Culture (Salarian) 2, Language (Salarian) 2, Observe 1, Dexterity +1, Perception +1, Armor Restriction, Curious, Eidetic Memory, Hypersensitivity, and 6 bonus points to spend.

Turian: Originally from the planet Palaven, turians are best known for their military role, particularly their contributions of soldiers and starships to the Citadel Fleet. They are respected for their public service ethic—it was the turians who first proposed creating C-Sec—but are sometimes seen as imperialist or rigid by other races. There is some animosity between turians and humans, largely due to the turian role in the First Contact War. This bitterness is slowly beginning to heal—as shown by the cooperation of the two races on the construction of the SSV Normandy—but many turians still hate humans, and vice versa.

Culture (Turian) 2, Language (Turian) 2, Shoot 1, Tactics 1, Will +1, Armor Restriction, Damage Reduction (Radiation, AV 4), Natural Weapon (Claws, DV 1), and 8 bonus points to spend.

Homeworld Packages

Mostly, homeworld packages can be handled by renaming the packages provided in the **Thousand Suns** rulebook. The “Core Worlds” packages instead apply to the Citadel. “Civilized” covers advanced colonies and most homeworlds—Pavalen, or Ilium. The “Marches” packages apply to less developed colonies like Eden Prime. “Spacer” applies to characters born in space. “Wildspace” covers stations in the Terminus Systems; as such, low-tech Wildspace locations are very rare.

Career Packages

Most protagonists in **Mass Effect** take some level in Army, Bounty Hunter, Criminal, Law Enforcer, Marine, Navy, Rebel, Scientist, Esper, and ESPO. It's rare to find a protagonist (as opposed to a supporting character) who doesn't have at least Novice in one of those. ESPO is particularly useful to reflect a character with military biotic training, while Esper reflects a natural biotic talent.

A character who takes a career that offers Technical Sciences at 4 or above can reduce her Technical Sciences rank by 1 to take a *Tech Power* specialty. Alternatively, a character can take Technical Sciences with a single *Tech Power* specialty in place of a biotic power, at one less than the rank of the power.

Example: Daniella is making a sentinel, who has a range of biotic and tech powers. She chooses Novice Trader/Experienced ESPO. She chooses Barrier and Pull as her biotic powers, and Overload as a tech power. She already has Technical Sciences 2 from her Trader career. Her Tech Power gives her Technical Sciences (Overload) at 3, which adds to her existing Technical Sciences as normal, leaving her with Technical Sciences (Overload) 3.

As many weapons need a Shoot specialty to use, any career package that gives the Shoot skill at 4 or above converts one of those ranks into a specialty. A character can't lower his Shoot skill to lower than 3 from any given career in this way.

Example: Talos is a Veteran Law Enforcement, which normally gives Shoot 6. Danny, playing Talos, believes his Turian should be familiar with shotguns and assault rifles. Talos thus has Shoot (Assault Rifle, Shotgun) 4.

Due to the new systems around Tech Powers, the Infiltrator career is available to characters.

Infiltrator

An Infiltrator is a combat engineer—someone skilled with using tech powers and applying them to combat advantage. Trained both as a soldier and as savant engineer, an Infiltrator can be the turning point of a battle, overheating an enemy's weapons or enhancing a squad's weaponry. Most military cultures retain Infiltrators, often as long-ranged combat experts.

Novice: Perception +1, Athletics 2, Defend 2, Dodge 2, Melee 2, Profession (Infiltrator) 1, Resist 2, Shoot 2, Technical Sciences 2, Tactics 2, Unarmed Combat 2, any two Tech Power specialties.

Experienced: Perception +1, Athletics 3, Defend 4, Dodge 4, Intrusion 3, Melee 3, Observe 2, Profession (Infiltrator) 3, Resist 4, Shoot (Sniper Rifle) 4, Tactics 4, Technical Sciences 6, Unarmed Combat 4, any three Tech Power specialties.

Veteran: Perception +1, Athletics 4, Defend 5, Dodge 6, Intrusion 6, Melee 4, Observe 5, Profession (Infiltrator) 5, Resist 6, Shoot (Sniper Rifle) 6, Tactics 6, Technical Sciences 6, Unarmed Combat 4, any five Tech Power specialties.

Biotics

Biotics refers to the ability of some individuals to generate mass-effect fields, caused by natal exposure to element zero. Asari are the only known natural biotics among the known species; they can pick up Biotic skills at any point. Other races can only acquire Biotic skills by selecting the Esper or ESPO careers.

Biotics are handled in the same way that **Thousand Suns** handles psychic skills. The list is rather different between the two games. The following powers use existing psychic skills:

- Barrier (Telekinetic Shield)
- Pull (Telekinesis)
- Reave (Telekinetic Grip)
- Slam/Throw (Telekinetic Blast)

Throw and Slam both use the rules for a Telekinetic Blast, but are bought as separate powers. Slam throws the target

straight up rather than back on a failed Dexterity test, dealing an additional 1D12 damage in enclosed spaces.

Affecting Shielded Characters

It's hard, but not impossible, for a character to use biotic abilities against shielded individuals. Characters who have active shields (see *Technology*) can be targeted by biotic powers, but the TN of the skill check is increased by +2 *per remaining shield*.

New Biotic Skills

Charge (Body)

Action: 1 • **Performed On:** Self • **Cost:** 4

The character uses bionics to augment speed and strength, and charges across the battlefield towards a target. This culminates in a powerful collision that sends unprotected enemies flying backward, inflicting massive damage. The character travels in a straight line, ignoring all obstacles. Everyone within 5m of the character's destination takes damage equal to the ranks in this power plus the degrees of success on a Charge skill test. In addition, the target must achieve more degrees of success on a Dexterity test than the biotic achieved or fly back 1 meter per degree of success and be knocked prone.

Singularity (Perception)

Action: 1 (Maintenance) • **Performed On:** Others • **Cost:** 6

The biotic launches a dark energy sphere to create an intense mass effect field. The field creates a warp in the space-time continuum, creating a gravity well akin to a black hole. The biotic makes a Singularity test opposed by the Body of everyone within 3 metres of the Singularity. If the biotic wins, the target is helpless and levitated out of cover, unable to move or attack for as long as the biotic maintains this power.

Stasis (Perception)

Action: 1 • **Performed On:** Others • **Cost:** 4

A biotic can hold a creature in his line of sight by making a Stasis test. If successful, the target cannot move or attack for a number of turns equal to the ranks in the power plus the degrees of success. If the target makes a successful Resist test, he's held for half duration. While held in stasis, the target takes no damage.

Warp (Perception)

Action: 1 • **Performed On:** Others • **Cost:** 4

A biotic can spawn a Mass Effect field that destroys an opponent's armor by making a Warp test. If successful, the target's armor (and any telekinetic shield) is reduced by the ranks in the power, for one round per degree of success. If the target has been affected by other biotic powers this round, Warp deals damage equal to the ranks in the power for each other biotic power, and ends that power's duration (if any).

Morality

Decide at character creation how to divide your 5 Action Points between Paragon and Renegade, and make a note of the split. Each can be spent as normal, with the following caveats:

Paragon Points

If you use a Paragon point on an action that is clearly Paragon (GM decides if the table's unsure), treat it as though you have a Hook. If you also have a Hook, you gain both benefits: a +2 to your TN *and* a re-roll if needed, though further Paragon points only give you one of the two benefits.

If an action is clearly Renegade (GM decides if the table's unsure), you can't spend a Paragon point on that action.

Renegade Points

If you use a Renegade point on an action that is clearly Renegade (GM decides if the table's unsure), treat it as though you have a Hook. If you also have a Hook, you gain both benefits: a +2 to your TN *and* a re-roll if needed, though further Renegade points only give you one of the two benefits.

If an action is clearly Paragon (GM decides if the table's unsure), you can't spend a Paragon point on that action.

Regaining Points

You regain all Paragon and Renegade points at the start of each session. At a particularly dramatic moment, the GM may let you permanently shift your balance of Paragon:Renegade, but only one point at a time.

When you buy another action point with experience, decide whether it's a Paragon point or a Renegade point.

Technology

Shields

Kinetic barriers are repulsive mass effect fields projected from tiny emitters. These shields safely deflect small objects traveling at rapid velocities. This affords protection from bullets and other dangerous projectiles, but still allows the user to sit down without knocking away their chair.

Characters who have kinetic barriers—most of them will—have a number of Shields. When a shielded character is shot, she loses one shield. If the shot would have done more than 50 points of damage, she loses an additional shield. If the firer is using automatic fire (an option on submachine guns and assault rifles), she loses an additional shield. These two are cumulative—an autofire burst that deals 55 damage strips 3 shields. Shields only apply against firearms damage, not melee combat.

A character can make a Technical Sciences roll to recharge her shields. Doing so takes an action in combat, and recharges a number of shields equal to the degree of success on the roll (up to a maximum of her armor's shields as normal). Shields also recharge at the end of each fight.

Tech Powers

Using Tech Powers

A character needs two things to use a Tech Power: the components for the power in her omni-tool (see below), and a Technical Sciences specialization in the specific Tech Power. This is a Trained Specialization, characters with the right omni-tool components but no specialization suffer the unskilled penalty as normal.

To use a Tech Power, make a Tech Sciences roll. On a success, the power activates, and lasts for that action unless otherwise noted. Using a Tech Power stresses a character's omni-tool. Each power has a cooldown. This indicates how many rounds the character must wait before using any other Tech Power.

AI Hacking

This power can only be used against robots. The target does whatever the character commands for one round per degree of success. The target also regains half of its maximum shields. This power does not work against enemies with active shields.

Cooldown 6

Cryo Blast

Your target suffers a -6 penalty to all Dexterity rolls. If this penalty is higher than his Dexterity, he's frozen solid. This penalty stacks with the penalty applied by Cryo Ammo. This power does not work against enemies with active shields.

Cooldown 2

Energy Drain

You channel your enemy's Shields into your own. Reduce the target's Shields by one for every three degrees of success on the test (minimum 1). You recharge one Shield for each one drained.

Cooldown 4

Flashbang

You deploy a flashbang grenade. Everyone within 2m of your target must succeed at a Body test at -2 or be stunned and unable to act for one round.

Cooldown 3

Hardened Shields

You gain one Shield per degree of success, up to a maximum of twice your normal number of shields. Any shields remaining above your maximum deactivate at the end of this power's cooldown.

Cooldown 6

Incinerate

You set your target on fire. He takes 2d12 damage now, and a further 8 damage each round at the start of his action. This power does not work against enemies with active Shields.

Cooldown 3

Neural Shock

You interfere with your opponent's synapses. Lower his Initiative rank by your degree of success. If you reduce his Initiative rank to 0, he cannot act this turn. This power cannot be used on robots, and does not work on enemies with active Shields.

Cooldown 3

Overload

Reduce your opponent's Shields by one for every two degrees of success on the test (minimum 1). If used against a robot, treat as a Neural Shock.

Cooldown 2, 3 vs robots.

Ammo Powers

Ammo powers are a subset of Tech Powers. All the rules for Tech Powers apply to ammo powers. Once turned on, a given ammo power remains active until the character disables it. A character can only activate one ammo power at once, and can be deactivated whenever the character wants. All ammo powers have cooldown 1, which takes effect

when a character *deactivates* the power.

Armor Piercing

A weapon that's enhanced with Armor Piercing Ammo treats the target's AV as half its normal value.

Cryo

A weapon that's enhanced with Cryo Ammo deals damage as normal. On a damaging hit, it applies a Dexterity penalty much like a Tangler gun.

Disruptor

A weapon that's enhanced with Disruptor Ammo strips an additional shield on each hit. When firing at robots, increase the weapon's damage by 2, and increase the maximum damage by 50%.

Incendiary

A weapon that's enhanced with Incendiary Ammo can set a target alight. At the start of his turn, a character who has taken damage from incendiary ammo takes 4 points of fire damage.

Warp

A weapon that's enhanced with Warp Ammo ignores any AV from a character's biotic barriers. It also strips a second shield if a hit deals more than 35 damage (rather than 50).

Robots

Several factions in the **Mass Effect** universe use robots as guards and security personnel.

YMIR Mech

As the War Drone in **Thousand Suns**.

LOKI Mech

As the Personal Assistant Robot in **Thousand Suns**, with Shoot 4 and an M-4 Locust submachine gun.

FENRIS Mech

As the Security Robot in **Thousand Suns**.

Weapons

Available weapons include the pistol, submachine gun, shotgun, sniper rifle, and assault rifle. Their stats are as follows. Note that the assault rifle does not include a grenade launcher.

Assault Rifle

M-8 Avenger Damage 4(60), Range 30m, Firing rate: S/A, Cost 1000\$
M-15 Vindicator Damage 5(70), Range 25m, Firing rate: S/A, Cost 1300\$

Pistol

M-3 Predator Damage 3(60), Range 9m, Firing rate: S, Cost 350\$
M-6 Carnifex Damage 4(65), Range 9m, Firing rate: S, Cost 500\$

Shotgun

M-23 Katana Damage 5(70), Range 10m, Firing rate: S, Cost 950\$

M-27 Scimitar Damage 4(60), Range 20m, Firing rate: S, Cost 650\$

Sniper Rifle

M-92 Mantis Damage 5(80), Range 50m, Firing Rate: S, Cost 1800\$

M-97 Viper Damage 4(60), Range 50m, Firing Rate: S/A, Cost 1400\$

Submachine Gun

M-4 Shuriken Damage 3(60), Range 18m, Firing Rate: S/A, Cost 500\$

M-9 Locust Damage 4(65), Range 22m, Firing Rate: S/A, Cost 950\$

Characters attempting to use an assault rifle, shotgun, or sniper rifle without an appropriate Shoot specialty suffer the unskilled penalty when using one of those weapons.

Most weapons have large ammo reserves, and reloading is automatic. A character runs out of ammo for one specific weapon if his player rolls a Dramatic Failure on a Shoot action.

Armor

Characters can use light, medium, and heavy combat armor. This armor has the computer and communications capabilities described for the Militisto Armor in the book, and all suits can be locked down to operate in space and hostile environments.

Some species cannot use human-standard armor. Geth upgrade their frames directly, while Krogan, Quarian, Salarians, and Turians can only use armor made for their specific body types. To represent this, species that have Armor Restriction increase all armor costs after character creation by 50%, and must succeed at a Bargain roll in order to find a vendor.

All suits are fitted with kinetic barriers as noted below.

Aldrin Labs Onyx

Light AV 15, Shields 3, Dispersion 30, Weight 2, Bulk 0, Cost 2000\$

Medium AV 25, Shields 3, Dispersion 40, Weight 15, Bulk -1, Cost 4000\$

Heavy AV 35, Shields 3, Dispersion 45, Weight 50, Bulk -2, Cost 7500\$

Aldrin Labs' Onyx armor is the standard-issue armor of most police forces and military units.

Devlon Industries Explorer

Light AV 15, Shields 4, Dispersion 40, Weight 2, Bulk 0, Cost 2800\$

Medium AV 25, Shields 4, Dispersion 50, Weight 15, Bulk -1, Cost 4800\$

Heavy AV 35, Shields 4, Dispersion 55, Weight 50, Bulk -2, Cost 8000\$

Explorer Armor is hardened against environmental hazards. Wearers are immune to radiation and take half damage from fire.

Sirta Foundation Phoenix

Light AV 15, Shields 5, Dispersion 40, Weight 2, Bulk 0, Cost 3500\$

Medium AV 20, Shields 5, Dispersion 50, Weight 15, Bulk -1, Cost 5500\$

Heavy AV 30, Shields 5, Dispersion 55, Weight 50, Bulk -2, Cost 8500\$

Sirta Foundation's Phoenix armor is designed to keep the user running, by trickle-feeding medi-gel from an internal reservoir. While wearing it, a character regains one point of Vitality each round, at the start of his action.

Hahne-Kedlar Predator

Light AV 23, Shields 6, Dispersion 40, Weight 10, Bulk 0, Cost 5000\$
Medium AV 35, Shields 6, Dispersion 50, Weight 30, Bulk -1, Cost 8000\$
Heavy AV 45, Shields 6, Dispersion 55, Weight 60, Bulk -2, Cost 12000\$

Predator armor is the highest-grade military armor available on the black market.

Starting Equipment

All characters start play with a suit of light Onyx combat armor with a built in kinetic barrier that provides 3 Shields, an omni-tool, and an M-3 Predator pistol. They'll probably be issued with a ship in short order. Characters looking to buy better armor can sell their light Onyx armor for 2000\$.

Additional Equipment

Many characters will have access to some or all of these items.

Omni-Tool

The omni-tool itself is a combination computer and general-purpose engineering device that fabricates tools and equipment as needed. It acts as a translator, computer, holographic recorder and player, full translation software, and can create lockpicks and any other equipment needed to use a character's skills. An omni-tool can be upgraded with a number of options. Characters start play with an omni-tool at no cost.
Cost 2,500\$

Monoblade

The monoblade costs the same amount as in the **Thousand Suns** rulebook, and has the same stats. It's built in to the Omni-Tool, which fabricates a blade on an as-needed basis then deconstructs it so the user can still use both hands.
Cost 450\$

Grenade Launcher

The grenade launcher is a military-grade omni-tool accessory. The omni-tool fabricates small explosive devices and projects them at high speeds. The grenade launcher must be bought with at least one grenade template (the same price as a box of grenades). Changing an installed grenade template takes about five minutes. The range and so on is based on the Personal Grenade Launcher.
Cost 1,100\$

Combat Cloak

The combat cloak provides the character with complete invisibility for his next action. Enemies can neither dodge nor defend an attack from a cloaked shooter. The cloaking device can be used once per combat, it can be re-set by the character taking an action and making a successful Technical Sciences roll.
Cost 1,500\$

Combat Drone

The combat drone creates a small (1m spherical) hovering drone. The drone can move and attack on the character's action, but doesn't have a controlling VI. The character can direct the drone to attack any character (the drone's attack

uses the stats of a laser pistol), the drone can hover at the same speed as the character that created it. The drone has AV 6, Vitality 30, and no shields. Creating a combat drone takes an action, if destroyed, it takes a character two consecutive actions and a successful Technical Sciences roll to re-create.
Cost 1,000

Shield Modulator

An enhanced capacity rig that increases the power output of military-grade kinetic barriers. A suit can handle three Shield Modulators (sold separately), one on the greaves, one on the chest, and one on the shoulders. Each one increases a suit's Shields by 1.
Cost 750

Tech Shields

This enhancement channels a biotic's Barrier through her armor's kinetic barrier matrix. The cost of the Barrier power increases to 3, but the AV granted by the Barrier is double the degrees of success on the biotic's Barrier roll.
Cost 1,800\$

Medi-gel

Each dose of Medi-gel, when administered by via her armor's computer or a medical facility, allows a character to regain lost Vitality up to one third of her total.
Cost 60\$/dose

Omni-gel

Omni-gel can be used to force electronic locks and security systems to deactivate. It has a TN of 15 for the sole purpose of disabling locks and security systems. **Cost** 50\$/dose

Ammo Powers (each)

An omni-tool must have special components and subroutines installed to use an ammo-based Tech Power. An enhanced ammo power affects everyone that the character chooses, but each weapon can only benefit from one active ammo power at once (the weapon's user chooses which).
Cost 350\$
Cost (enhanced) 900\$

Tech Powers (each)

An omni-tool must have special components and subroutines installed to use a Tech Power, which requires military-grade technology. An enhanced Tech Power component either adds two to the degrees of success to activate the Power, or affects everyone in a 5m radius (choose one when the component is installed). A character cannot use a Tech Power without the appropriate components installed in his omni-tool.
Cost 520\$
Cost (enhanced) 1,100\$

SAVAGE JORUNE CONVERSION NOTES

By Bruce Anderson

The world of Jorune is one of the most detailed gaming worlds ever created, second only to Tekumel in complexity. I first discovered Skyrealms of Jorune in the mid 80's. The artwork on the box completely captivated me, and when I started reading the books I was not disappointed. The combination of artwork and text that made up the game was so foreign and evocative that I could not help but be captivated by it. It presented a world and cultures very different from the standard RPG fare at the time. Sadly, I never managed to get beyond creating some characters as the interest in gaming for a lot of my friends was gradually being replaced by real life. However, the lack of gaming comrades didn't prevent me from enjoying Jorune in my day dreams.

Off and on through the years I would return to gaming for a short time, but it was difficult to maintain the hobby with consistency. About 7 years ago, however, I started up a small gaming group playing D&D 3.5. This developed into a three year long fantasy campaign that I really enjoyed. Near the end, however I was beginning to grow dissatisfied with the complexities of the D20 system, and began a process of trying to simplify things and speed up play. I was very relieved when a friend introduced me to Savage Worlds, it was everything I was looking for in a fast and simple system. Besides the inexpensive rule book, and the speed of play, I was impressed by the vast number of fan made conversions available for the system. Ultimately, about 3 years ago, my fascination with Jorune, and my familiarity with Savage Worlds led me to the point of combining the two into a fan conversion in the hopes of finally getting to play in the world of my dreams.

The Savage Worlds philosophy of game conversion is best described as "Convert the setting, not the rules." This is easier said than done, as I was to discover. My first attempt at creating "Savage Jorune" was very frustrating and awkward. The world of Jorune is very complex and detailed. In my attempt to be faithful to Jorune it was very difficult to separate the rules from the setting. Eventually I realized that I had created a monstrosity that was neither "fast, fun and furious" nor was it faithful to what I loved about the world of Jorune.

Since that abortive attempt 3 years ago, I would occasionally return to Savage Jorune on and off, whenever the inspiration hit me. The biggest challenge was dealing with the concept of Isho – the ambient energy on Jorune and the source of many of the weird and wonderful aspects of life there. Isho is more than simply mana or power points to fuel astounding mental powers, it is also an energy field that gives sight to the blind and enhances many other senses as well. Simply changing the name of Savage Worlds' Powers and Power Points to Dyshas and Isho was not sufficient; I had to make Isho a part of every character.

My first attempt was to consider Isho manipulation simply another Arcane Background that players could take as an Edge, but doing that left out so many aspects of Isho that it was unacceptable. I would also have to create several different Isho manipulation Edges and Powers; as many Joruni races and creatures interacted with Isho differently. I finally figured out that I had to build Isho sensitivity into all of my conversion elements. In Savage Worlds, humans are considered the base line race that all other races are compared to. My conversion of Jorune had to start with the basics and therefore, I had to re-define what made a human on the world of Jorune. I gave humans, and all other races, a Color rating based off their Spirit. Color in the original setting was a measure of a character's sensitivity to the surrounding Isho. In Savage Worlds terms, Isho sensitivity wasn't an "Edge", but the lack of it was a "Hindrance." I think it was this epiphany that finally opened the way for completing the rest of the conversion.

Another element of my conversion process worth a brief mention is the Bestiary. I was torn between wanting to create a very faithful trait-by-trait conversion and finding an easier way to do it. The Jorune bestiary, as with all of the setting of Jorune has an amazing amount of background detail. I read through the text of the creature entries and built their Savage Worlds counterparts based on their descriptions, rather than their stat blocks. From time-to-time I had to look more carefully at a stat block, however for the most part, my bestiary is more a summary of the descriptive text than a stat for stat conversion.

As I was working on the conversion, and writing out my ideas, I also considered how I wanted the final product to look. Granted, the conversion was primarily for my own gaming pleasure, but I also hoped that if I did a good enough job others might also find it useful. Now that I have discovered how much work a conversion of another gaming system is, I have a great deal of respect for those who write and post them to the Savage Worlds fan sites. However, I have found that while most of them contain all the necessary information a few of them don't have a look or layout that is easy to work with. With that in mind, I decided to make my conversion notes as professional looking as possible to make them easier, and hopefully more enjoyable to read and use. I began to pull out my other Savage Worlds books to see how they were laid out. I attempted to comply with the Savage Worlds Style Guide as much as possible. I compared several different setting books to see how headings, sub headings and charts were laid out.

At the end of it all, I was very satisfied with the look and feel of the conversion. I was also content with the idea that I had successfully ported a faithful vision of Jorune over to the Savage Worlds rules. The one final test I felt necessary was to see if what I had written made sense to eyes other than mine. I posted on all the Savage Worlds and Jorune forums and mailing lists that I knew of looking for proof readers and playtesters. Despite the fact that the game is only a fan conversion, I felt this was necessary – there is no point in writing and sharing an incomprehensible document. I hoped to find one or two people willing to take this task on, but was greatly encouraged by how many responded with a willingness to help out. The charitable and thoughtful suggestions and the detailed corrections of typos and style are deeply appreciated. I'm eagerly looking forward to receiving some play test results over the summer months as well.

In September, after having had a chance to absorb some more of the responses, and after having a chance to play the game myself (finally!!), I plan to make it available through sites such as Savage Heroes and Savagepedia. It is my hope that Savage Jorune will be something that will introduce other gamers to the wonders of Jorune and provide many hours of fun on the most amazing (fictional) world ever created.

DIASPORA TECH LEVELS

by Karl David Brown

The following is a quick reference table that references Diaspora Tech levels with historical equivalents and GURPS categories with suggested technologies available.

| Diaspora 'T' | Approx Historical period | GURPS <u>Hard SF</u> TLs (see Ultra Tech 2 p6) | <u>Suggested</u> (only) technologies |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| -4 Stone Age | To 3000BC | Nil-0 (nil to Stone Age) | Fire, lever, language, spear, axe. |
| -3 Metallurgy | 3000BC-1700 | 1-4 (Bronze Age, Iron Age, Medieval, to Renaissance) | Crops, wheel, writing, swords, keystone arch, gunpowder. |
| -2 Industrialisation | 1700-1940 | 5-6 (Industrial Revolution, to World Wars) | Steam engine, vaccines, telegraph, antibiotics, revolvers, machine guns, cars aeroplanes, radio. |
| -1 Atomic Power | 1940-2030 | 7-early 8 (Modern, to Early Spacefaring) | Nuclear energy, computer, rockets, atom bombs, nuclear missiles, implants, cloned babies, Neural net computers. |
| 0 Exploring the system | 2030-2045 | Late 8 (Spacefaring) | Biocomputers, fusion power, human genetic engineering begins, staffed spacecraft, gauss pistols. |
| 1 Exploiting the system | 2045-2080 | 9 (GURPS Descriptor inappropriate) | Commercial spacecraft, extended lifespans, uplifted chimpanzees, slow terraforming. |
| 2 Slipstream use | 2080-2150 | Early 10 (Early Antimatter) | (Almost) convincing artificial personalities, CAD/CAM designed animals, antimatter power, private spacecraft, tank lasers, microwave beam tanks, electro-laser rifle, O'Neil colonies. |
| 3 Slipstream mastery | 2150-2820 | Late 10 (Antimatter) | Human lifespan maxes out at 225, particle beam tanks, Laser rifle, laser pistols. After centuries of work: Kepler rosettes, non-solid Dyson spheres made of O'Neil colonies. Kardashev Type I – early II |
| 4 Verge of Collapse | 2820-2825 | 11-16 (GURPS descriptors inappropriate) | Particle beam pistol, forced growth clones, uploading personalities, (super) human level AI, FTL radio, sun eating warp drive, grey goo. |

T&T PLANET OF THE APES

by Gianni Vacca

The 'Planet of the Apes role-playing game' is simply an adaptation of the existing T&T 7.5 rules to the PotA universe. Everything is as per the T&T 7.5 rules, with an emphasis on the use of Talents.

The adaptations are as follows:

Attributes

Player characters are described by ten attributes rolled on 3D6 (instead of eight in standard T&T):

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Strength (STR) | 6. Charisma (CHR) |
| 2. Constitution (CON) | 7. Knowledge (KNW) |
| 3. Intelligence (INT) | 8. Perception (PER) |
| 4. Power (POW) | 9. Speed (SPD) |
| 5. Dexterity (DEX) | 10. Luck (LK) |

For those who are not familiar with T&T: attributes are as per most old-school role-playing games, and should be self-explanatory by their name. POW is a measure of one's psychic strength. KNW is a measure of one's formal education. SPD is not speed of movement but how quickly a character reacts.

Skills

T&T Talents are called Skills in the PotA rpg. Skills are based on attributes +1D6, e.g., Acrobatics (DEX+3) means that any Acrobatics skill rolls are based on DEX with a bonus of +3.

Adds

Adds are bonuses in combat. A clearer difference (compared with standard T&T) is made in the PotA rpg between mêlée combat adds and distance combat adds.

1. Hand-to-hand weapon adds are computed as follows: for each point over 12 in STR, DEX, SPD, LK the character gains 1 point of adds; for each point under 9, he gets -1 adds.

2. Missile weapons & firearms adds are computed as follows: for each point over 12 in DEX, LK the character gains 2 point of adds; for each point under 9, he gets -2 adds.

Character classes (of sorts)

All player characters are from Ape City and fulfil some role within ape society.

Orang-utans have emerged as the ruling class. Generally, they shape and control all branches of Government, serving as Judges, Ministers, and Administrators. Use the Leader Specialist character class from T&T.

Gorillas are the enforcers; Policemen, Soldiers, and Hunters. Whenever severe measures have to be taken against enemies of the State, gorillas carry out the desired action. Use the Warrior character class from T&T.

Chimpanzees are the intellectuals of the society. Usually they are Doctors, Teachers, or Writers. Some are viewed with suspicion since they seek answers buried in the past, questioning the very doctrines and tenets upon which Ape Law exists. Use the Wizard character class from T&T. Replace the ability to cast spells with a single extra intellectual Talent.

Humans occupy menial roles. They do not have the power of speech. Their INT represents resourcefulness rather than real intelligence. [Note: if the GM elects to use the background from the TV series rather than that from the classic 1968 film, then some humans do have the power of speech. They live at the fringe of ape society and are more or less subject to the apes' suzerainty. If the GM elects to incorporate the events from Beneath the Planet of the Apes (1970) then mutated humans with spell-like telepathic powers can be used as nemeses. Use the Citizen character class from T&T.

Equipment, Weapons, and Armour

Players may choose some reasonable equipment for their PCs based on the 1968 film and a general early 20th century technology level. It is suggested that only gorillas should have access to firearms.

M  le weapons

Cane 2D6, Cudgel 1D6+3, Knife 2D6+1, Unarmed 1D6

Special weapons

Net – no damage but if target fails a L2 skill roll vs. DEX, it is entangled. Freeing oneself requires a successful L3 skill roll vs. DEX.

Whip – inflicts 3D6 but cannot be used in close combat.

Firearms

These are rather crudely manufactured, hence their low effectiveness.

Carbine 3D6 – bolt-action, single shot, Handgun 2D6 – 5 rounds, Rifle 4D6 – bolt-action, single shot

Armour

Padded clothing –1, Leather jerkin –2

Recommended reading: http://planetoftheapes.wikia.com/wiki/Planet_of_the_Apes_Wiki

COMPUTER GAME REVIEWS

by Matt Lindus

Audiosurf

When I first heard of this game, I absolutely had to have it. It was mentioned to me in the context of a racing game where the tracks are automatically generated based on the music you are playing. I love this concept, so went and got me a copy as soon as I could after that.

Well, I wouldn't so much call it a racing game, since you aren't actually racing against anything, so I felt a bit let down by the initial description I'd been given. It did however impress me greatly in its ability to interpret varying style and quality of mp3 files and turn them into individual courses where you have to collect and/or dodge coloured blocks as you drift or fly along the multi lane track in your little hover vehicle.

Asides from the track though, the background graphics are rather abstract. The track is pretty much floating in space, and there are some special effects going off in time with the music in the background. While I'm not a fan of this background, and the options to change it don't make it any less abstract or better, I don't think it really detracts from the game. Especially when you are flying along to some fast paced music!

It stores on their servers the high scores for all players for all tracks played also, which makes for some ability to see how good you are (or how poor you are, and thus needing to find tracks noone has played so you can at least hold the record for a little while!)



It also generates a bronze/silver/gold level for each course, and for each style of play or difficulty. And there are a few of each. Personally though, I mostly enjoy only a couple of them as I mostly play to relax, so the cruisy style of the most relaxed level of difficulty is best for me. It's one of the few games where I've almost completely ignored the achievements, having not got half of the 19 that it comes with. And some of them, I don't think I'll ever get, just based on the way I play, and what is needed to get them. I might have a crack at them though if I get the urge.

Still not sure that the development of generating the main component of a game from the music is fully developed, and I'm sure that better games can be made using this style, but there will always be a place for Audiosurf for me though as it was the first to do it that I'm aware of, and certainly the first I've played to do it.

AaAaAA!!! - A Reckless Disregard for Gravity

So, it's a simple game with a simple task. Jump of the initial platform that you start on, fall until you are near the target, pull the parachute and land in the circle.

Ok, so it's not quite that simple.

For a start, there are other buildings and pillars seemingly floating in the area you are falling. You need to fall close to them to score points. There are also protesters and fans that need recognition, government buildings that need some new paint, and glass score panes that need breaking. And then there is the landing zones that depending on the level as to their size and location.

The graphical detail isn't that intense, mostly with framework or single block colouring. It does however stand up to the speed that you are travelling through it at quite well, which is probably more important in this game. There are many levels and a few items to unlock on the way. Over 80 levels to dive through, and some of them with quite tough scores needed to get the 5 star score. In fact, I haven't actually finished doing this myself yet.

You earn more teeth (the games currency) for getting higher star ratings, which you then spend to unlock new levels or buy upgrades if available. All the levels and upgrades are arranged in a 5 row high cylinder, and you have to unlock adjacent levels to where you start. Some of the levels are just hints or spoken word clips and don't count, so need to be navigated around also. I found them mostly annoying though and detracted from what was otherwise a nice simple game.

It's controls are simple, and the default keys are layed out nicely and seem to be rather well designed. They also make sense. if you dive in one direction, it's harder to move in the opposite direction quickly. possible, but difficult. And harder the longer you dive in a particular direction.

Not worth a huge amount, but a few bucks for 5-10 hours of entertainment is well worth it in my mind. It's a nice, simple, and well executed game. If you have a chance to pick it up, I hope you do and enjoy it as I have.

Worms Crazy Golf

I picked this up as part of a Worms package on special on Steam. I've always been a golfer and loved the worms games (although the 3D one had issues for me). It is a pretty well executed game, with 4 18 hole courses that each have a different theme. There is also a series of different challenges with one option in each course of each type.

The main game is very much like the game of golf. You start at a designated start location and have a set number of shots to get the ball into the hole. Each hole is a series of islands that you need to navigate through, while avoiding the obstacles such as bats, worms, old women, sheep and general land masses and bunkers. You only have 4 different club

types (driver, iron, wedge and putter) to use, but they can be upgraded or changed through the shop. You also have the ability to use some powerups, some of which are useful, and some which I have found no use for yet. As a golfer, the game wasn't too difficult to complete all the courses, requiring finishing each hole with a par score or better.

There are the following challenges :

Chip in - a series of set shots to get as many balls in or on the green as possible in as quick a time as possible

Keep ups - the object of the challenge is to keep a single shot going for as long as possible. There are many explosives and obstacles, all of which make the ball bounce again.

Target - A series of challenges to destroy waves of targets. Usually 3 waves (from memory) of 4 targets.

Time Attack - A variation of the Target challenge.

Skill Shot - This is also a variation of the Target challenge.



The game comes with a hot seat version of the game which allows up to 4 players to compete against each other on a hole or series of holes. Fun, but not really as useful as online multiplayer would have been.

I wouldn't pay too much for this, maybe \$3, but it is well worth picking up as a bonus with other worms games.

MOVIE REVIEW: PROMETHEUS

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Ridley Scott

This film doesn't need to exist. It didn't need to be made. But I'm glad Ridley Scott made it, and I'm glad I watched it. I guess. I even saw it in 3D, and not only did I pay for the experience by literally paying money, but also by incurring a headache from watching it that plagued me for hours afterwards. I don't think, when our bodies were being Intelligently Designed by some kind of benevolent Creator, that our ocular physiology was ever designed to watch films in such a way. I think 3D is probably a form of blasphemy, and that it should be declared a mortal sin by the Vatican, or NASA, or the Stonecutters. Even with the heavy toll I paid, I do have to admit that it looked utterly splendid, and that it used the 3D effectively to give both a sense of space and of the alienness of the two main locations in the film, being the ship called the Prometheus, and structures on the surface of an inhospitable planetoid.

The very first scenes of the film, before the title, show a somewhat luminous looking humanoid chap drinking something clearly not fit for human (or otherwise) consumption. The horripilating liquid, which looks like that foul Jagermeister stuff, comes in this totally manky cup, so we can safely assume it's not very hygienic, whatever it is. To fill in a little more detail, this chap strips almost naked next to a great rush of water, as some kind of space ship lifts up out of the planet's atmosphere, and drinks. Immediately, like a dose of MoviPrep, it goes straight through him, making him feel somewhat poorly. His body starts breaking down, falling apart, and then we get a microscopic view of what's happening to the cells in his body. Oh, he's long dead, but even the DNA, if that's what it is, breaks apart. As the rest of him dissolves to nothing in the raging waters he's fallen into, we see images of that DNA reknitting itself into some new form.

Wow, they can do anything with science. The next exact scene has two adventurous scientists, Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) and some other guy, knocking some rocks down and getting into a cave on the Isle of Skye, where they weep with joy over the discovery of a particular image carved into the wall. Do you think the two scenes are related in any way? Does this prompt curious questions in your mind? Do you think the film will seek to answer them to your satisfaction, you poor deluded fool? The film then cuts to a bunch of people flying on some kind of interstellar ship, making its way towards a planet, far, far away from earth. Only one person seems to be up and about on the ship, someone who's clearly better than human. How did I brilliantly perceive this without help from anyone else? He rides around on a bike on a basketball court throwing three-pointers from the half-line, never missing a throw, with all the angles perfectly aligned.

And this chap called David is played by Michael Fassbender, and so you know he's both awesome and that he's going to be a fairly complicated figure in whatever goes on. David is a synthetic, but don't let that bother you. He loves humans, loves doing everything they do, and also loves Peter O'Toole in Lawrence of Arabia, which he watches and mimics whenever his tight schedule allows. He even tries to style his hair like him, though he doesn't try to get spanked by some sweaty Turks at a police station, so he's not going all the way. He's been stuck in this routine for two years, with no-one to talk to, no-one to do anything to, but it doesn't seem to have dulled his spirits, surrounded as he is by sleepers. At no stage does he bellow "Sleepers Awake!" or "No prisoners!", but then he's not programmed to. He learns new languages, eats gourmet food, and maintains his magnificent appearance. No, there's no nudity, ladies and interested gents, but that doesn't detract too badly from the overall experience.

The oddest thing he does is peer into the mind of a sleeping woman, sampling either her memories or dreams, as a child she speaks to her father about various stuff, including her mother's death, the existence of heaven or hell, and really, it's very confusing as to why this smiling, aloof creature is meddling with such things.

Bells and whistles ring and toot, and a destination has been arrived at. The sleepers awake, and the purpose of their journey is revealed, though it's going to be hard for you to discern, from what I've written or any of the ads/trailers, what the hell is really going on.

The dissolving chap at the beginning, the carved image in the cave, and a long journey through space all connect to a mystery, a very elemental mystery but not an elementary mystery. It's our origins that they're investigating, our origin as a species. You thought that the lecherous drunk Charles Darwin spoke the truth when he dreamed up his sinful theory of evolution. Apparently, he was wrong. That doesn't mean the religious nuts are right either, but that the pseudo-Creationists known as proponents of Intelligent Design were right: some alien species must have created humanity. Those on this quest aren't trying to prove whether this happened or not, which perplexes me, since nothing we've seen thus far or will ever see during the film actually proves this: They're trying to find out why they did so. They, being the two scientists, Shaw and the other guy, have been bankrolled in this endeavour by the richest man in the universe, a crumbling old edifice of a man called Peter Weyland (Guy Pearce), who greets a room full of awakened stereotypes with a holographic recording.

On the supposition of a couple of scientists, with virtually no concrete evidence for this theory to have any kind of sensible basis, this man Weyland has funded an expedition with a hope that makes no sense scientifically, but perhaps, to the audience, makes sense emotionally. The film is at its best when it is considering (and we're thinking about) the impulses, the drivers it suggests we possess that compel us to find out more about the universe itself and our place in it, and the compulsion keeps some element of the story relatable. Who wouldn't want to speak to their creators? What child of adoption or genetic material donation doesn't want to 'know' where they come from, by tracking down the source of their genetic uniqueness? In reality, probably a lot of people don't bother, but in art everyone seems to have the same atavistic desire, whether it's The Kids Are All Right or The Omen. Kids want to know who their 'parents' are.

It's pretty much everything else in the flick that doesn't make sense, or that seems like it's from another film. Prometheus works beautifully when it is focussed on the wonder some of these people feel in the face of such an alien puzzle, or when many of the



better actors in this are acting with awe towards each other. There are scenes where David's complete deference and disinterest towards most of the humans on the ship is frightening, but energising at the same time. There are scenes where Shaw's need to know why the Engineers 'created' us, and, later on, why, like an Old Testament God, they grew to hate their own creation, that are genuinely powerful, as is her decision at the end of the film, harebrained as it is.

Unfortunately, there's a lot of shit that doesn't belong in the mix as well. The legacy of what Ridley Scott is working with allows for some very lazy work on the part of the screenwriters, who were forced, I think, to add some action-y elements that don't work, don't really make sense, and result in characters spouting stuff they couldn't know in order to alleviate our confusion at what stupid stuff is going on. Stupid is a pretty unhelpful term, I'm sure. It's not very descriptive. Let's just say, so I don't spoil much of anything, that there's a lot of stuff that happens that doesn't belong in the film and doesn't enhance it. It doesn't enhance our understanding of the story or Scott's point in making the film or our overall enjoyment.

The flick has the burden of being seen as the prequel to Alien, to the whole Aliens franchise, for good or ill, and to emphasise that it does a bunch of stuff that's familiar to those of us who've seen all those other films (including the completely leotarded Alien vs Predator flicks), and maybe they embiggen the whole universe, or get us to think of it differently. That doesn't mean the stupid scenes of pointless violence come across any less stupid. It's also inconsistent in its manner of upping the tension, of showing us how inhospitable the rest of the universe could be with how inherently dangerous it is for humans to go offworld. Whether we were designed by aliens from a film, or whether our form arose from millions of years of evolution (whichever is more likely), our bodies only thrive in one place, so seeing just how fragile our existence can be on another planet is gratifying. Overembellishing that by adding crazy stupid mutant humans and other stuff seems unnecessary to me.

There's this stuff, the Jagermeister stuff I referred to at the beginning of the review, which magically does whatever the story wants, from turning people crazy, to mutating shit within their bodies, to making them impregnate infertile people, to turning them into angry zombies, to making them create this type of creature, and then that kind of creature, and it might as well be magic that's doing it. Have a fairy flitting about with a wand doing all this stuff, making people happy here, monstrously mutated there, and it would make about as much sense. Of course, why would you need a magical fairy when you can just treat technology like magic anyway? Really drilling down into a lot of the stuff that happens, especially in the latter stages of the film, brings no benefit to anyone. It's a fruitless endeavour to compile the instances of stuff that don't make any sense, or to explain them or try to think differently about them. They're just there, and you just have to accept that they're there, like extra testicles on the face of someone who'd otherwise be quite attractive.

So much stuff just makes no sense, in this or any other universe, least of all the actions of most of the crew, the people behind the expedition, the idiots on the expedition, the Engineers, the people in the audience, Ridley Scott, everyone. I don't mind too much, and can forgive much of it because of the elements that are intriguing, but, really, nothing excuses intelligent people doing such stupid stuff (like the two scientists getting lost in a corridor they've already mapped) only so that there can be a little action. It's what nearly sank the Danny Boyle flick Sunshine, and they do the same dumb "crazed killer will spice things up" shit here too.

Let me differentiate between the stuff that's just not explained, or which the characters think they have explanations for but might be wrong about, and the stuff that just happens which makes no sense and for which no explanation matters. There's plenty of both. Worst of all for me is the stuff people do, whether it's sensible or not, for which there is little if any motivation. I'm not talking about David's actions, which sometimes seem malevolent for a being incapable of malevolence, it's moreso stuff like the captain's actions at the end, or any of the stuff the Engineer does, or the Weyland

character, or his daughter, and I could just go on...

The one true consistent through-line throughout these films is also the most potent. It's something you'd associate more with someone like David Cronenberg, yet for me the major horror element these films have always maintained beyond the terror inspired by an acid-blooded, many-toothed, super-fast predator is the more visceral fear of penetration which is the really unsettling visual image and concept. From Alien onwards, the worst fate of a character is not being chewed up or torn apart by a creature with two mouths; it's the far more gruesome fate of those whose body gets penetrated by these various xenomorphic manifestations, only to be threatened with a 'birth' that will kill them most horribly.

That is the truly horrifying part of the flick. Not to spoil anything, or to belabour the fear of motherhood these films are obviously based on, but at least the flick is pro-choice, as we see in a particularly brutal self-surgery scene. If it gets some stuff right, and too much other stuff wrong, well, I didn't care too much by the end. I enjoyed the ominous and portentous soundtrack, the stellar performance by Michael Fassbender, and the very good pseudo-Ripley by Noomi Rapace, who shows she has far more range than just as the star of the Swedish Girl With The etc movies. She's the human face in the story, because she's about the only real human in it. Everyone else is inhuman in their intentions, in their origins or their actions, or they've neither the characters nor the qualities required to differentiate one from each other.

The quieter moments in the flick, the conversational moments, are the film's strongest moments, although having said that, David's solo investigations into the Engineers are great as well. The set design is familiar enough from the earlier (later) films, but looks tremendous, especially in 3D. Inhuman and grandiose in the Engineer places, downscale and deliberately clunky looking on the ship, which deliberately and deftly meshes the latest in technology with the look of the Nostromo from the first Alien film. Very well done, monkeys and starving grad students who did the art and set design, well done. In the end, I walked out with more questions than answers, confused about what the point was, and with a whopping headache. I think it was from the 3D glasses, but it could have just as easily been from a script only a former writer from that terrible tv show Lost could conjure up. Maybe Ridley Scott needs a few more director's cuts or sequel-prequels to get it just right, just like George Lucas. You never know.

6 times In space no-one can hear your groans of disappointment out of 10

"There is nothing in the desert and no man needs nothing." - from some better film, perhaps – Prometheus

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