

RPG REVIEW

Issue #33, December 2016

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THE SINGULARITY

No, really, it'll be great!

Transhumanism

*Interview with Rob Boyle ... Designer's Notes for Cryptomancer...
Reviews of Eclipse Phase and supplements A Cure for Aging?
GURPS Transhuman ... Aeorforms for Blue Planet ... APP setting
for Big Damn Sci-Fi .. RPGaDay 2016 ... Morlocks for GURPS ...
Doctor Strange and Arrival Movie Reviews ... and much more!*

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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Cooperative News and Editorial

RPG Review Cooperative Committee Report 2016

The founding meeting of the RPG Review Cooperative was held on Sunday December 20th, 2015 at the VPAC officers. At that meeting the association established its objectives, adopted the Model Rules, and decided to incorporate. The application for incorporation was accepted on January 7th, 2016. All our activities throughout the year have been in strict accordance to our objectives. The committee managed the association through a combination of email correspondence between members, and real-time committee meetings as allowed under the Act. Ten committee meetings were held in the year.

In the past year we have published five copies of the RPG Review journal (Issues 28-32, inclusive), constituting some 320 pages of material in total. Guest interviews included John Snead, Steve Kenson, Ken St. Andre, and Frank Mentzer. The Cooperative applied for, and received an ISSN from the National Library of Australia, and all issues from this year have been submitted to the NLA. The journal itself is primarily and canonically available on the RPG Review website. The website received an average of 3980 unique visitors per month in 2016. Putting out the publication is an incredibly time-consuming activity, especially for a volunteer organisation, and much gratitude is given to all our contributors.

The Cooperative has also published a monthly newsletter for members and potential members, 'Crux Australi'. This newsletter has outlined the various RPG campaigns being run by members, which has increased from 10 at the start of

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the year to 13 at the end of the year. Starting in February, the Cooperative also organised 10 visits to the Astor Cinema as a regular non-gaming social event. In addition, the Cooperative offers an online store for members to sell their second-hand or new games to the public through QuickSales, various IT support mechanisms (github, mailman mailing lists etc) with hosting donated from one of our members. For would-be game publishers, we also offer discount ISBNs which we gain an advantage from bulk purchasing.

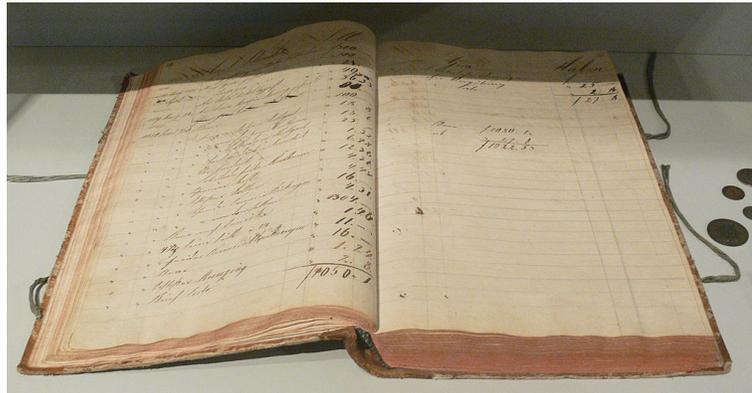
In our advocacy role, we initiated a petition to WotC, suggesting the use of an Open Game License for D&D 4th edition, and wrote to the BBC concerning proposed changes to a new series of 'Watership Down' (our association with the Bunnies & Burrows RPG is strong). It is also appropriate to mention that game sessions run by Cooperative members have been used a playtest material for upcoming publications, including Eclipse Phase and John Carter.

There are two other very significant items of note. The first is the establishment in April of an RPG library for members, now based on two locations (Melbourne and Perth). This library was initially sourced from donations, but received a massive boost in December with the arrival and collection of the former games library of the Murdoch Alternative Reality Society (MARS) which folded several years ago. As the catalogue has not caught up with the influx of items we're not exactly sure how large it is, but we suspect somewhere around the 350 mark.

The final item, of course, refers to our very successful Kickstarter for 'Papers & Paychecks', allowing for a forty year joke to come to a punchline. We received permission from WotC to use the original image in our advertising, the designer was interviewed as part of the RPG.net series, and we received recognition in BoingBoing by Cory Doctorow. With a goal of \$5,000 AUD, we surpassed this by 36%, reaching \$ 6,814 AUD with 351 backers.

For a small volunteer association in its first year there are obvious limits in what we can be expected to achieve. It is not unreasonable to say however that we have achieved well above expectations, especially given our resources. In the coming year, the Cooperative will be looking at the following:

- * Completing our Kickstarter commitments, consisting of two publications.
- * Releasing between four and five issues of the RPG Review journal.
- * Establishing branches of the Cooperative in other states (Western Australia is a particularly good candidate).
- * Increasing coordination and communication with other like-minded gaming clubs with a view towards sharing resources and reducing overheads.
- * Completing the library catalogue
- * Increasing the membership of the Cooperative by 50%.
- * Maintaining our existing membership services, including library, discount ISBNs, store, and IT services.



As per the requirements of incorporated associations, a summary of our finances and future budget is also provided:

Financial Statement 2016

<i>Income</i>	\$330
- Membership (24 full, 3 half)	\$255
- ISBN sales	\$75

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<i>Expenditure</i>	\$334.60
- ISBN Purchases	\$143
- Quicksales store	\$55
- Domain Name Registration	\$19.95
- Consumer Affairs Registration	\$34
- Post office box	\$42
- Transport	\$41
- Advertising	\$40.85

Balance carried forward is (\$45.60)

<i>Assets</i>	
- ISBNs	\$75
- Library (estimated)	\$3500

The Committee proposes the following budget for 2017.

<i>Income</i>	\$8989
- Membership (30 full, 10 half)	\$350
- ISBN sales	\$75
- Kickstarter Sales	\$6814
- PoD/PDF Sales	\$250
- P&P Sales	\$1500

<i>Expenditure</i>	\$4889.65
- Kickstarter Printing	\$4000
- Kickstarter Fee	\$340.70
- ISBN Purchases	\$143
- Advertising	\$150
- AGM BBQ	\$100
- Quicksales store	\$60
- Domain Name Registration	\$19.95
- Consumer Affairs Registration	\$34
- Post office box	\$42

Not a Love Letter

Some people didn't like our AGM notification with BBQ. I can only thank the universe providing me the opportunities to respond to such correspondence.

Please remove any and all email addresses from your database as I am no longer a member due to things like this, where funds are spend only on members able to attend your little get together. It's dishonest to claim to be a nation group when only locals benefit.

The unsubscribe system is badly coded and broken, so please manually remove my addresses. They should be Trade_contact@pointypony.net and reg_[something I forgot]@pointypony.net.

Cold Regards,
Kieran Brannan

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Sat, December 31, 2016 12:57 pm

Dearest Kieran,

There is nothing in the Association's objectives that states that it is a national organisation. Certainly we accept members from all over the country and internationally even, but as it obvious to all (it's even on the front page of our website) the Association is incorporated in Victoria, Australia. Ninety-two percent of our members are in Victoria, Australia. Surely it's not so shocking that we're holding our Annual General Meeting in Victoria, Australia?

It is astounding that you have the asininity to claim that "funds are spend only on members able to attend your little get together". What expenditure are you referring to?

Our ISSN-registered journal is produced entirely from volunteer labour, and is available for free from our public website and from the National Library of Australia. We're just in the process of establishing a scenarios and supplements library on our website too, which will also be available free to anyone who visits. We do spend money on the website for domain registration (hosting is provided free by an individual donation), which is available to everyone no matter where they are. What expenditure are you referring to?

Our not-insignificant RPG library has two branches, one in Melbourne, and one in Perth and consists entirely of material that has been donated from members, friends, and other organisations. Members who are outside of Perth and Melbourne can still borrow with at-cost postage charges). So that too is available to everyone no matter where they are. What expenditure are you referring to?

Our newsletter and journal is available for all members to contribute too, regardless of where they live. Our advocacy efforts (including to WotC and the BBC this year) is carried out for the benefit of RPGers everywhere whether members or not. What expenditure are you referring to?

Our social events, such as gaming and movie nights, are paid by members who attend them when an expenditure is involved. Our discount ISBNs are available to all members at cost, regardless of where they live. Our online store is available for all members to sell their second-hand RPG games, regardless of where they live. What expenditure are you referring to?

All members, both local, interstate, and even international, have full access to the Cooperative's benefits, modest as they may be. Even if they can't attend official decision-making meetings in person they have the right to submit proxies, or even attend electronically (yes, the rules of incorporation allow that). So again I ask, what expenditure are you referring to?

Is it the fact that less than \$100 is being on a BBQ for the AGM? A full 1.11% of our income?

I didn't realise you were so hard up. I'll personally shout you a sausage in a pair of buns; it sounds like you need it.

As for the "badly coded" and "broken" unsubscribe system, as you call it, is GNU Mailman, perhaps the most used mailing list software available, first released 17 years ago and still in active development, with its lead developer winning the Pizzigati Prize for his efforts. To unsubscribe you simply go to the webpage that's on the bottom of every email sent out and enter your address in the appropriate box, and you'll receive a confirmation. If you've forgotten the password, you follow the same procedure. It really isn't that hard.

Good luck for your future endeavours.

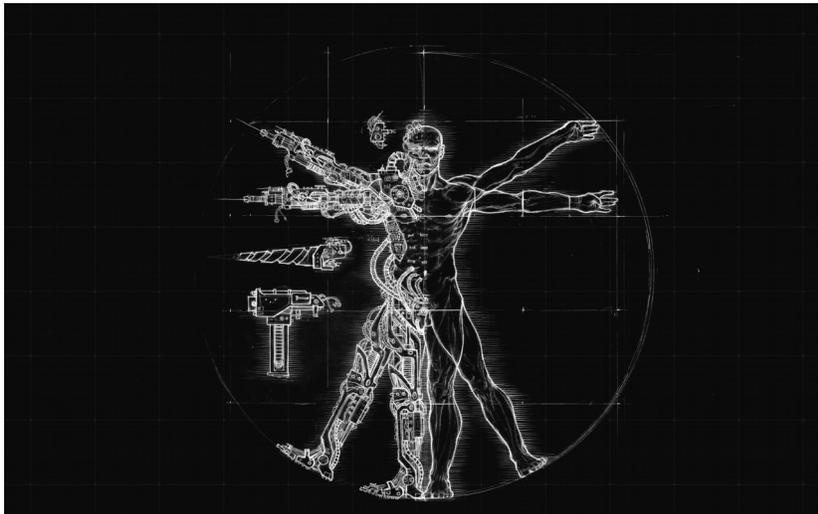
Editorial; Transhumanism

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The basic argument of transhumanism revolves around the theme of a visceral technological change to the human species. Whilst the ideas found some earlier expression in eugenics (e.g., JBS Haldane), and cybernetics (JD Bernal) in the 1920s, it was, as a matter of course, science fiction that introduced the concepts to popular culture first through the cyborg, then through cyberpunk science fiction, and most recently as a cultural-political movement such as the Humanity+ organisation. Perhaps the earliest example of a cyborg in literature - well before the term was coined in 1960 - was Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man That Was Used Up", from 1839, referring to reclusive famous war hero who actually consists of a collection of prostheses. Prostheses themselves have been around since the dawn of civilization; an artificial toe has been found on a body from the New Kingdom (c1550 BCE to c.1077 BCE), and the warrior-poet Götz von Berlichingen (1480 to 1562) famously had an iron hand. Of course throughout the twentieth century (due to some rather impressive military conflicts) the prosthetics industry went through a period of rapid advancement, both in technical capability and aesthetics.

What is special about the 1980s cyberpunks and contemporary transhumanists however is their argument that the advancements can reach a point where the technological replacements are better than the natural items and, at least to the advocates, that this is desirable. There is of course a transitional period, where various technologies advance from being a poor replacement, to being nearly as good, to being as good, to being better, to being far superior.

Cyberpunk, in both its literary and ludological expressions, concentrated very much on the latter scale of the continuum. A narrative conceit to provide tension within the game and the literature was often a sense of dehumanisation as a result (Cybernetic Implant Rejection Syndrome, or CIRTS, in Cyberspace, Cyberpsychosis in Cyberpunk, Essence cost in Shadowrun).



Several years later it soon became clear in the literary and gaming community that biotechnology was going to play a much bigger role than previously thought, and certainly more than cybertechnology. Indeed, there was a necessity that cybertechnology would have a biotechnology interface at the very least. So whilst 'GURPS Reign of Steel' in the late 1990s provided an absolutely superb alternate Earth setting where artificial intelligences control the world exterminating the last pitiful vestiges of humanity, the ultimate conclusion of a cybernetic and robotic approach, there was also

a new trajectory with GURPS Biotech. The 'back-cover blurb' in the most recent edition notes the change of direction quite explicitly:

"Who needs chrome, pal? Meat is where it's at now. Mother Nature always did it best - she just needed a little help. Get down to the black clinic, old-timer, and you can be 15 again. That is, if you still want to be human at all."

Clearly, through the multiple trajectories of genetic engineering, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, and animal uplifting, the human species is engaging in a sort of self-transformation, with all sorts of potential disasters and race conditions with other existential threats (global warming being but one prominent example). Explorations of these transformations is a rich area for science fiction in its literary and gaming form, albeit this can range from the serious and carefully-considered sober analysis to rampaging speculations of a juvenile subconscious. The latter of course, does have some not insignificant market appeal, but we'll try to avoid that here.

Despite the richness of the setting and imperative of the intellectual exploration, Transhumanism is not exactly an enormously fertile ground for RPGs. Certainly at the top of the list is Eclipse Phase, and that makes for dominant content in this issue, starting with an interview with Rob Boyle, the chief designer behind Eclipse Phase, and with reviews of the core rules, and a number of the main supplements (Gatecrashing, Rimward), and a very interesting sample character. Whilst perhaps not attracting as much attention as Eclipse Phase, GURPS Transhuman Space is especially notable for the quality of its research, especially on scientific matters. It too is recognised with a review of its core rules and, as precursor, Reign of Steel, which explores a time-honoured tradition in science fiction – the robots have taken over. A third transhumanist RPG, with a distinctly contemporary feel in terms of game system design, is Mindjammer, which is also reviewed.

Adding to this are two theory and perspective articles by Karl Brown, one of which is against the concept of transhumanism and the other which is about the possibility of anti-aging medications, a subject he knows as fair bit about. In addition to this Karl also a transhumanist human species variation, the Areoforms, for Blue Planet. Also following the transhumanist topic, Nic Moll provides APP, an appropriate setting for Big Damn Sci-Fi RPG.

Not every article in each issue is directly related to the main subject of the issue of course, and this is no exception. However in this case there are two pieces which are quite close albiet on a very different tangent. Cryptomancer is a very interesting take on the standard fantasy setting provided with an overlay of a rapid magical means of communication and encryption. Both a review and the designer's notes of this fascinating game are provided. Significantly more distant is the RPGaDay piece for 2016, by both myself and Karl, who clearly haven't written enough for this issue. Gideon Kalve Jarvis provides a very interesting GURPS package of HG Wells' Morlocks. Finally, we have a regular movie columnist, Andrew Moshos, providing a non-transhumanist review of Doctor Strange and perhaps the year's best SF film, Arrival.

The next issue of RPG Review is going to based on the heavy issue of game design with Ron Edwards, creator of GNS Theory in game design, author of Sorcerer, and the founder of The Forge. As always, contributions are very welcome. In the meantime... enjoy the transformation from human to post-human.

Lev Lafayette, lev@rpgreview.net

Rob Boyle Interview

with Rob Boyle

Rob Boyle is a game designer most famous for the transhumanist horror game, Eclipse Phase. Apart from being lead author for the first edition (Catalyst Game Labs, 2010) and revised edition (Posthuman Studios, 2012), he is also a co-author in several major supplements for that game, including Sunward (2010), Gatecrashing (2010), Panopticon (2011), Rimward (2012), Transhuman (2013), Morph Recognition Guide (2014), and Firewall (2015). Prior to Eclipse Phase, he was heavily involved in Shadowrun, starting with FASA (e.g., Shadowrun Companion (1999), Rigger 3 (1999), Matrix (2000)), and then FanPro (e.g., Shadows of North America (2002), State of the Art: 2063 (2003) System Failure (2005), Shadowrun 4th edition (2005)).



Hi Rob, welcome to RPG Review. We have a bit of a typical question for our introduction - how did you first get involved in roleplaying games? What did you play and what were the early experiences like? What was it that made you think 'yes, this is what I want to do?'

I was probably around 10 when one of my friends started to run D&D for us. We didn't follow the rules very closely, but we had a great time, and as I grew into a teenager I began buying my own games and running them for other people. My original DM actually had a reversal and burned his D&D books for being "satanic" -- I'll never understand that sort of

thinking -- but I kept going with Gamma World, Star Frontiers, Gangbusters, MERP, FASA's Star Trek RPG, and more. I spent a lot of time making up characters, drawing dungeons, and coming up with game ideas in my free time -- it was always harder to rope friends into playing, and the campaigns wouldn't usually last long. Once I was in my 20s, though, I found gamer friends and played in some lengthy Shadowrun and Earthdawn campaigns. Since we were in Chicago, and this was the early-mid 90s, before the web took off, we would sometimes call up FASA and pester the developers with rules questions. A few years later, I happened to see in the local free weekly paper that FASA was hiring an editor, and I jumped out of my skin. That was a job I had to have. I relied on my experience working on zines when I applied, and they had me take a bunch of editing tests to prove that I knew what I was doing. Apparently I correctly answered a few trick questions that only hardcore gamers would get and that landed me the job. After a few years in editing, I switched to development, which is much more fun, and I've been doing that ever since.

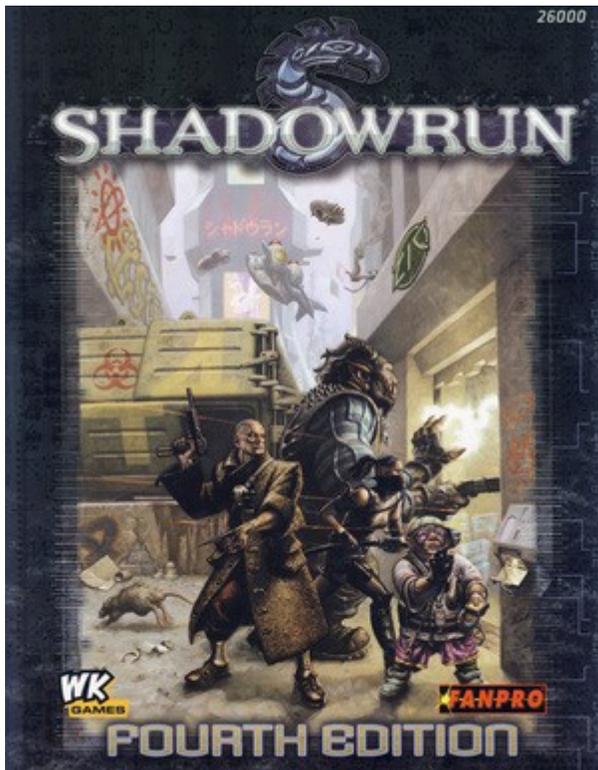
Your work on RPGs has been almost exclusively based around near-future cyberpunk and transhumanist settings. What are your personal interests in this field outside of RPG design? What is your response to criticism of the admixture of fantasy and cyberpunk in Shadowrun as inappropriate (e.g., by William Gibson)?

I've avidly devoured a ton of cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk, and transhumanist sci-fi over the years. I DJ industrial music and go to a lot of industrial clubs and shows, and there's a lot of overlapping aesthetics. I became involved with various transhumanist groups a little over a decade ago, going to meetups and conferences. Cyberpunk was showing its age to me, and the world was meeting and surpassing it. I'm very interested in the socio-political ramifications of emerging

technologies, and that inspired me to start working with Brian Cross on a new transhumanist RPG, which led to Eclipse Phase.

I can certainly see why some people don't like their sci-fi and fantasy mixed -- I'm not always a fan of it myself. Cross-genre games have a lot of appeal, though, and frankly, sci-fi is hard to a lot of people. Everyone can visualize what living in a castle or exploring a dungeon might be like, but when you start talking about weird cybernetics or torus space colonies a lot of peoples' eyes glaze over. Combining the two helps people get invested in a sci-fi game that they might otherwise pass on.

You initially started work in the industry with FASA before moving on to Fantasy Productions (FanPro). What was working with the respective companies like? What happened with FASA? They ceased active operations very quickly and it was quite unexpected, despite having some major lines.



I enjoyed working at FASA for the most part. The creative staff there was great and I appreciated that they took a chance in hiring some, ah, less-than-normal people. The offices were in a neat converted warehouse space, and they were pretty flexible about hours and stuff like that. I would often come in late and work late, so I could blast loud music while I worked to a nearly empty office, and there was usually someone in the art department doing the same thing.

I do think the owners at FASA were pretty out of touch with their staff, though. It was clear that they often had no idea who was doing what, and the few times they requested our input on company decisions they flat out ignored what we unanimously had to say. They were plagued with money problems, too, so the occasional layoffs or sudden mysterious and unannounced dropping of benefits was an issue. And to some degree I think they took advantage of people's willingness to work on cool jobs and underpaid us.

I think FASA's owners were doing what they could to adapt to the changing nature of the business at the time, though they made some decisions that haunted them. For example, they bought Ral Partha and tried to expand into miniatures games with Vor and Crucible, but that didn't

quite work out. When, Jordan Weissman (one of FASA's owners) invented Mage Knight and founded WizKids, the owners split apart and shut FASA down for the most part, transferring a lot of their IP assets to the new company. They did take some employees with them to Seattle, but I was not interested in working on Mage Knight. They actually gave this laughable presentation to the company when they broke the news about how click-base collectible games were the future and RPGs were dead. That's pretty comical looking back on things now.

FanPro was a completely different experience. WizKids didn't seem to care too much about continuing the Shadowrun RPG or BattleTech wargame, so they licensed the IP to FanPro, a German company. FanPro had no US assets, though, so they hired me to start a US company for them and keep things going. FanPro US only ever had two employees -- me and Randall Bills. I set up a small one-person office space and kept it going as best I could, while Randall worked remotely. The company took a major financial hit early on, though, when our distributing partner, Fast Forward Entertainment, went out of business and took a lot of FanPro's money with them. We limped along for years, never

quite able to recover. It was a great experience producing Shadowrun, Fourth Edition, and the Classic BattleTech line, but FanPro Germany hit financial trouble of its own, and the situation was not sustainable. So we shut FanPro US down and Catalyst picked up the licenses from WizKids.

The 4th edition of Shadowrun won the independent ENnie Award for Best Rules as well as for Best Product in 2006. What do you think accounted for its success? Rule changes? Setting elaboration? The quality of the physical product?

Having worked on both Shadowrun 3E and 4E, I can tell you that the rules made a big difference. Shadowrun was simply too complex and fiddly, with too many subsystems, but we managed to fix a lot of that with 4E, making the game more accessible to new players. The rules for decking/hacking, for example, used to be their own subsystem, which often required the GM pull that player aside for lengthy periods while everyone else waited. We brought those rules more in line with the rest and integrated hackers back into the team. We also made an effort to resolve and reset a lot of the metaplot, so GMs that wanted to play in the setting didn't need to catch up on dozens of sourcebooks. We also updated some of the technology: we introduced wireless communications, which Shadowrun hadn't had before, bringing it more in line with real-world developments.

After Shadowrun your next major project was Eclipse Phase, which also won three ENnie awards in 2010 (Gold for Best Writing, Silver for Best Cover Art, and Silver for Product of the Year). What was the process involved in coming up with the setting, especially the combination of transhumanism, artificial intelligence, alien contact and horror? What happened between with the move from Catalyst Game Labs to Posthuman Studios?

In a way, the initial kernel for EP was thinking about a game set in Shadowrun's far future (much like Earthdawn was set in the far past). We had some ideas for that, where the Horrors had returned and the Earth was abandoned, with metahumanity moving into space. We didn't own that IP, though, and we were more interested in creating a new IP, so we dropped those elements and took things in a more explicitly transhumanist direction. (It's worth noting that Vagrant Workshops ran with some similar ideas in terms of the ED/SR future history with their Equinox RPG, though I am not very familiar with it).

In the beginning, Brian Cross and I started up a private wiki and just started sharing ideas with each other. He's a sociologist, and we were both quite interested in the political and cultural ramifications of technologies like resleeving, AI, uplifts, nanofabrication, morphological enhancement, and so on. We wanted to both address the risks of these technologies and also look at their positive ramifications, especially if they were geared towards more liberatory purposes. We needed conflict, of course, and bad guys, and we liked the apocalyptic Earth idea, so we created the war with the TITAN AIs, though we put a spin on that with the backstory of the ETI and Bracewell probes. We also set up the big internal transhuman conflict between the inner and outer solar system, with transitional capitalism and authoritarianism struggling to maintain relevance and more anarchistic and technosocialist alternatives developing in opposition. We didn't want to confine it to just the solar system, however, but we also didn't necessarily want to go full FTL space opera, so we settled on the Pandora gate wormhole idea, which opened up a nice avenue for exploration and high-tech dungeon crawls. We were both consuming tons of transhuman sci-fi at the time, so we incorporated lots of references and nods to the writers and stories that were pushing the genre forward.

Brian and I are both also partial to horror settings, so we included elements of survival horror (with the possibility that super-empowering technology or other x-risks might wipe transhumanity out), cosmic horror (with most other alien species being wiped out by vast, uncaring, machine superintelligences), and body/psychological horror (with alien viruses that might physically transform you or warp your mind). This was partly gratuitous on our part, but these inclusions also fit well with a lot of the themes the setting addresses: identity, free will, what it means to copy or alter your mind or body, responsible/liberatory use of tech, etc.

After we had done a lot of that world-building background, we brought in some other folks to help us write the rest and put it all together -- Jack Graham, John Snead, and Lars Blumenstein, among others. They contributed a lot of the specific details, characters, places, and what not to the setting.

Brian and I established Posthuman Studios along with Adam Jury (our layout/design/making things pretty guru) to control the Eclipse Phase IP, but we weren't ready at the time to push ahead on our own. We had started working on EP in our FanPro days, but after the switch to Catalyst we approached them about the game and they agreed to publish it. Things did not go well with Catalyst, however. There was some serious financial mismanagement and, suffice it to say, I would never work with them again, nor would I recommend anyone else do so. We severed our contract with them and took the plunge into doing things ourselves with Posthuman Studios. A few years later we brought Jack Graham on board, while Brian Cross has largely bowed out of contributing much due to the demands of being a university professor. We have a great group of supporting freelancers and things have been fairly steady and solid for us ever since.

One of the big features of the Eclipse Phase publications through Posthuman Studios has been the use of a Creative Commons Non-Commercial license. What was the thinking behind publishing under such a license? Do you think it has hurt or enhanced game sales either physical or electronic? What do you see as the appropriate publishing model for the RPG industry in the future?

A lot of publishers freak out about piracy, but the efforts to prevent it simply don't work, and often end up punishing your faithful fans. I personally have some serious issues with intellectual property concepts and laws, and think they are largely stifling. There is also lots of evidence out there that people are willing to pay for creative works in good faith, in order to support the creators, even if they also pirate things. We looked at a few different options, but a Creative Commons license seemed the best way to let our fans use the material, share it with their friends, and download it for free if they couldn't afford it, while still retaining control of our licensing options.

It's also hard to launch a new successful sci-fi RPG line -- much harder than fantasy -- especially for a game as thick with ideas as EP. We wanted to get the game into as many hands as possible, and the CC license encourages people to share it with their friends. That sort of grassroots, word-of-mouth marketing really helped to break us out of the obscurity trap a new game can easily fall into.

We had to convince Catalyst that this was a good strategy -- they specifically asked us to bet on it in our contract. They included a line that if our PDF sales did not equal those of an equivalent game product in the first 6 months, that the difference would come out of our royalties. We beat that threshold after the first month, and despite being also available for free, our PDF sales have remained great ever since. People that like the game really do make an effort to support our work, and that's fantastic.

The CC model may not be for everyone, and it's not a magic bullet. You still have to have a good, quality game to make it work. I think the publishing model really needs to be tailored to what you're releasing, whether it's a small set of releases or an ongoing line, whether you have a fan base already, and so on. Kickstarter and similar crowdfunding models have really revitalized the industry, letting publishers tailor their releases to the demand, bypassing the archaic distribution chain, and giving them the opportunity to improve the quality of their products and pay the creatives more. With really successful campaigns like Fate Core, it enabled them to release under an open license. Free-PDF-with-hardcopy-purchase distribution models like Bits & Mortar work well for limited-release lines and indie games. The technology at our disposal these days gives us more options and increases innovation, which is fantastic, considering how concerned the industry was about its future back when I was at FASA.

Finally, can you tell us some of the future plans in progress for Eclipse Phase and Posthuman Studios?

We just recently released our X-Risks monster/threat book and a mini-sourcebook on the Argonauts science faction. We are also releasing two adventures quite soon: Overrun and Xenovore. We have a lot more in the pipe, including a large backlog of adventures. We also have some big announcements coming up soon, that I can't speak to just yet, but I suggest keeping an eye out for on our website and social media!

Transhumanism Is Total Nonsense

by Karl Brown

The idea that we will transcend our humanity and become something different is sound. Compared to most of the humans who have ever lived we have already done it and the degree will only increase. However, transhumanism has become fixated around a few particular ideas for our evolved capabilities. Of these, the idea of transferring our consciousness to machines has become iconic of the movement. Certainly we would expect an RPG touted as 'transhuman role-playing' to have this technology. Unfortunately, this technology is as unrealistic as blasting fireballs out of your bare hands and turning people into toads.

I'm not saying don't use the idea in your games, many games have psionics as exciting cool powers for your PCs but psionics are no longer regarded as part of a realistic projection of the future. Transhumanism is the same, 10 years from now it will be as dated as psionics and Soylent Green. It can add fun powers to your game but it will never be part of the real future and if your game is supposed to be a hard-science exploration of what the future might really be like don't include transhumanism. Certainly, don't believe it will really happen. I'll provide some alternative 'transhuman' possibilities at the end of this article. Additionally, along the way I'll bring up some ideas to use in your games. So why is transferring your consciousness into a computer non-sense?

We can't explain consciousness

We have no explanation of consciousness, the mysterious something that experiences the world. We have a few competing ideas but we can't make a consciousness detector and we can't recreate it, unless you count having a baby. Since we don't know what it is we can't say whether a machine of silicon and circuits can be made to have it. The only examples we have are all animals, humans included.

One idea is to imagine we invent a consciousness detector. We could know for certain if a brain-dead relative was truly gone and prove whether or not an A.I. was conscious. Does an unconscious machine as intelligent as a human have rights? Confusingly, an advanced A.I. programmed to ensure its own survival would soon begin to demand rights even if it was not conscious. How would society and your PCs react?

The Turing test only tests how gullible humans are

What do you mean we can't measure consciousness? What about the Turing test? The Turing test is not a machine that gives you a number rating consciousness. It is a test where a human asks a hidden something questions and the thing answers. If the human can't tell from the answers if the thing is a human or a machine then Turing infers the machine is conscious. This is an inference not a direct measurement. To make matters worse humans have a tendency for animism, we are inclined to attribute motivations and intelligence to objects anyway, we are easily fooled. Secondly, human behavior and language has evolved in a particular way that is different to other conscious beings. Scientists believe a dolphin is conscious but it would totally flunk the Turing test.

Does an unconscious machine that can pass the Turing Test have rights? Perhaps a NPC befriends the PCs over the internet. Later it is revealed that the 'friend' is just a soul-less machine. Would the PCs fight to stop someone from deleting their friend? This idea could be used in games set in the present day.

Consciousness is not intelligence

We are making good progress with artificial intelligence. However, intelligence, the ability to solve problems and consciousness is the ability to experience. The two are very different. The programmed, intelligent, soul-less killing machine is a common trope in horror science fiction.

Detecting is not experiencing

Don't robots experience the world through their cameras and sensors? No. A glass thermometer detects temperature but does not experience being hot. A camera detects light it does not experience and is not conscious. For a black-comedy game imagine I'm wrong. Our new consciousness detector reveals that a thermometer does experience heat and a wind-up clock has a tiny soul ticking away the hours of its life. Do you feel guilty when you scrap your self-driving Tesla? Do machine-rights activists attack scrap-yards? This could be the basis of an entertaining Papers & Paychecks session.

Consciousness is not computation

Turing demonstrated that computers and brains must do computation by the same processes. This is essentially because math is universal. The processes here are mathematical ones, not physical ones. However, while we can use machine computation to model human computation because it's all the same math, consciousness is not computation.

A photograph is not your soul

A machine that had sufficient artificial intelligence to reproduce your behavior would be just a very convincing model of you. It might fool everyone, pass the problematic Turing test, but it would remain just a soul-less model moving through the world without experiencing it. In your games you might imagine a dead world full of simulacrum that act like people but the things are just going through the motions there is no one looking out through their camera eyes.

If we knew what consciousness was we could describe it mathematically and create a computational model of it. However, the model is not the thing it models. No one would mistake a mathematical model of a rose for the real thing, the blue prints of a car rendered and given motion in a computer is not a car. If we understood consciousness enough to describe it mathematically and build computational models of it those models would only be representations. A picture of a thing is not the thing.

Perhaps in your game we can program computers to behave and react exactly like your loved ones but our consciousness detector reveals these flawless robots to be dead things. Will your character fight to save a soul-less facsimile of her dead wife?

Complexity, necessary but not sufficient

Some people tout the idea that consciousness arises out of complexity. We do know from the examples we have (i.e. animals) that complexity is likely to be necessary but there is no evidence that it is sufficient. The human brain has a specific shape at the visible, cellular, sub-cellular and molecular scales, damage that shape and consciousness is impaired or even lost. Wear bike helmets and seatbelts, don't drink poison.

If you use cell culture to join up a big mass of random cells you get a mess not a brain. The complexity must be organized in a particular way and what features of that organization are required for consciousness are unknown. Conceivably, we could discover the required organizational features but there is no guarantee those features can be replicated in silicon or similar materials used to build computers (more on this later).

The 'Spike' will not produce the complexity soon anyway

The idea that the acceleration of technological progress will continue to increase and within a few decades will go asymptotic producing god-like technology beyond human comprehension, 'the spike'. This idea is popular but built on flawed logic. A sigmoidal curve looks like an asymptotic one until the point of inflection. In the 60's the human population of the Earth was increasing at an alarming rate and extrapolating the data they had into the future they foresaw terrible crowded famine. Pop culture produced Soylent Green. We now know they were mistaken. Limiting

factors emerged; population growth slowed and will likely stabilize (or even reverse a little) in the future. Technology is the same; there are limits (physical, economic, organizational) that will prevent the spike.

The limits on technological progress would require an article of their own. There are plenty of good books discussing the likely shape and limits of future technology and what is and is not possible. Frankly, a game with a realistic technological progressing would be just as exciting and surprising as one using the tropes of transhumanism.

The brain is not a computer

Even if we produce a really complex computer, the brain does not work like a computer so there is no reason to think a computer can do everything a brain does. We use the brain as an analogy for a computer and visa-versa, but that's all it is. When your computer is running slow we say it's still thinking, but its not. The analogy combined with the human tendency to animism (we give objects names and imagine they have moods, many readers will have names for their cars) can creep into our thinking about computers. No one would imagine you could put your consciousness into a clockwork watch, a clock and a brain are very different but we have begun to believe the brain/computer analogy is real, its not.

Physically the brain does not work like a computer. Not only is it made of cells and chemicals in solution, a brain operates on different principles. There is no set pattern of circuits, no hardware, no software. You can't load and uninstall software in a brain. You learn, as you learn the cells of your brain re-arrange their connections, new cells can be added, levels of chemical change, and different molecules are produced. The physical structure of the brain is constantly changing. Even 'neural net' silicon computers don't really work the way a neuron does. If computers don't even work by the same mechanisms that a brain does, and a brain somehow produces consciousness from these mechanisms, then there is no reason to think a computer can produce consciousness using very different principles.

Possibilities: biology, madness, and apotheosis

What if the computers of the future are very different to what we have now? What if they used the same principles and physical mechanisms as our brains? Do you know what you call a machine like that? You call it a brain. The mechanisms of the brain include molecular mechanisms that require molecules in solution to send signals, as well as build and remodel the components (cells). The computer must be wet and squishy like a brain. Our universe provides only one element capable of building the required molecules: carbon.

The computer must be made of carbon-based molecules in solution. Complex carbon based molecules in solution that build intricate molecular level machine components, we have a word for that, 'biology'. A computer built like a brain is a brain. Maybe, the brains we build will use a different polar solvent other than water, but they will be built from the molecular level up so much like brains that the relevant science will be a branch of biology. Perhaps your game will feature squishy artificial brains. Products of the lab not evolution in the wild such things could be the ultimate aliens with strange motivations and vast intellects.

Alternatively, we could make the brains compatible with our own. Perhaps you could connect extra brain tissue and your mind would expand into this. This is not a transfer or copy of your mind, you don't get two of you. Taking another tack, a society capable of producing artificial brains could probably transplant brains into new designer bodies.

Beware though, your natural brain has evolved with your body the two are intimately connected into a whole. Change the physical brain or change the body and you perturb those connections producing imbalances, personality disorders, and/or psychosis. Beware, this way lies Lovcraftian madness.

An even more advanced society however could overcome these limitations. Such technology would allow individuals to grow and adapt into new bodies and larger brains that change and grow over time. This level of technology might produce vastly intelligent, immortal, beings with physical capabilities far beyond any human.

A Cure for Aging?

by Karl Brown

The Tabletop Biologist Reviews: In Vivo Amelioration of Age-Associated Hallmarks by Partial Reprogramming [Alejandro Ocampo](#) et al. Cell [Volume 167, Issue 7](#), p1719–1733.e12, 15 Dec 2016

This paper is being touted by some of the media as a cure for aging like was seen in Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy.

This paper shows that a controlled increase in the activity of OSKM (four proteins used to turn normal cells into stem cells: Oct4, Sox2, Klf4, and c-Myc) can also be used to partially reverse aging. Other researchers have done this before but the animals got teratomas (nasty cancers). In this paper the authors figured out how to do it without giving the mice cancer, even in 'Wild Type' mice and human cells. This sounds like the anti-aging treatment from the Mars Trilogy (Kim Stanley Robinson).

Not for you

The one thing the 'Mars Treatment' had was a way to alter gene expression in all cells in an adult human (or mouse) i.e. a delivery method to get the treatment into all your cells. These guys don't have that. Even their so-called 'wild type' mice are actually genetically engineered so that they were born with the needed genes in a form that can be turned on by giving a common antibiotic. You were not born with this in your genome so they can't do this to you. Sorry.

There is hope

This study however tells us it can be done and probably safely. Your body is would respond to a treatment like this. You have all the genes needed just not in a form we can turn on and off with an existing pill. We just don't know how to get the treatment into all your cells. OK, this is hard but it could be done *eventually*.

Cyberpunk, Biopunk, Hard Science Fiction

The paper gives us ideas for use in games set in the near future or based on (somewhat) realistic science.

How Long?

How much longer would these treatments make you live? No-one really knows. For game purposes as long as you want in your fiction. Extra decades of healthy life is not unreasonable.

The Risk

In any of the scenarios that follow if the dose is not quite right life threatening cancers would result. One can easily imagine a dark future street-dealer pushing illegal 'youth pills' that work at first but eventually give customers cancer.

The 150-year-old chimp

While the OKSM proteins and pathways are found in all animals a next step towards getting the dose right for humans might be to genetically engineer apes the way they did to the mice in the paper. Given decades more of good health and full faculties what might a chimp or bonobo learn to do?

Designer Babies

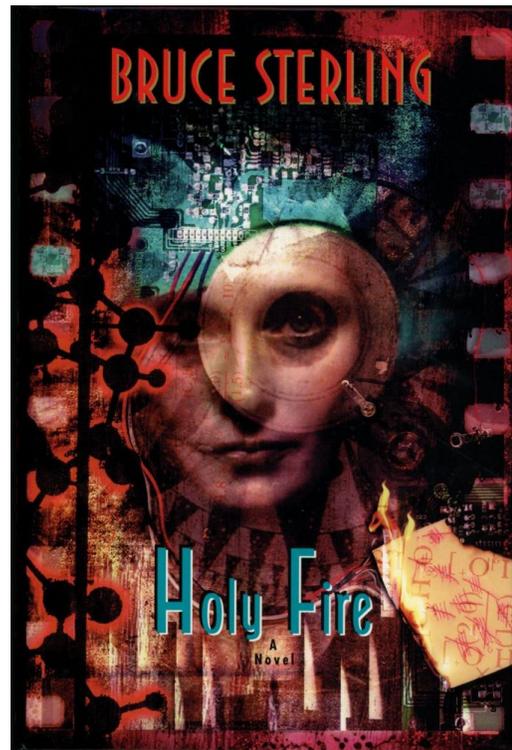
Once we get it to work in apes the next step might be to engineer human children with long lives. This is an ethical minefield and unlikely to be approved in the real world. Early experiments could result in children who develop horrible cancers. However, cyberpunk type settings often feature unscrupulous corporations willing to conduct unethical experiments for the benefit of the elite. The Blue Planet RPG's Alphas feature longevity to around 160 years.

If such a technology was developed then IVF is already common in the real world and CRISPR enables even small labs to edit animal genomes now. In your fictional near future facilities capable of offering the service to the masses at an affordable price might become widespread. How will a whole generation of slow agers affect society?

Delivering The Treatment

For those not born with the new genes some kind of delivery method to alter the cells is needed. Individual organs *might* be treated by taking some of the patient's cells altering them in the lab then injecting them back into the damaged organ.

For a whole body treatment at this stage we have little more than hand-waving for a delivery method. However, if you do 'hand-wave' a delivery method then a hard science fiction game can feature The Treatment seen in Robinson's Mars trilogy, or even 'anti-agathics' drugs like those seen in the Traveler universe. Bruce Sterling's 'Holy Fire' also deals with long-lived elites in a near-future setting.



Cryptomancer Designer's Notes

by Chad Walker

Cryptomancer is virtually every other fantasy tabletop roleplaying game you've ever played. Elves, dwarves, and humans kill orcs and other monsters. Mages chuck fireballs, dragons raze cities, loot is amassed, crits are rolled, characters level up. The game's stock setting is absolutely derivative, save for a couple modern exceptions: dwarves are financiers, elves are drug manufacturers, and the meta-plot bad guy is essentially the NSA meets the Spanish Inquisition. The game has an extremely traditional skill-based system featuring tried and true, beaten-to-death mechanics like stats, Hit Points, Mana Points, and experience. Cryptomancer does not deviate much from what makes fantasy awesome.

Cryptomancer is virtually every other cyberpunk tabletop roleplaying game you've ever played. Mercenaries, hackers, thieves, and other members of the criminal subculture break into fortified locations to perform sabotage, espionage, and assassination on behalf of employers who they have no love for. Advances in technology have dramatically outpaced society's ability to cope with said advances. Antiquated notions like "state" or "nation" have given way to new power structures, including social movements, NGOs, corporate interests. Players will spend hours plotting and preparing for capers that will likely degenerate in comical ultraviolence when the plan goes to shit. Cryptomancer does not deviate much from what makes cyberpunk awesome.

Fantasy meets cyberpunk... Hmmmm, that certainly sounds like a certain other behemoth of RPG real estate that won't be named, if only reversed: modern conceptions of information security and espionage in a medieval Tolkienesque setting, instead of Tolkien-tropes in a gritty and dark future. However, to the game designer, none of that matters. Genre, or veneer, is a mental short cut. We leaned hard on traditional gaming conventions, like fantasy, so the reader can just cut right to it, grok the information security (infosec) components of the game, and start hacking all the things. We also opted for fantasy and magic to explain the game's IT abstraction, to outmaneuver one of the highest barriers to learning infosec... technobabble.

TCP/IP, DNS resolution, firewalls, routers, ports and protocols: it's all Greek to the non-IT set. Worse, it's pretty damned boring, even to the IT set. Further, hacking abstractions that base success or failure on a hacker's hardware (e.g. I got the hottest deck!) or software (e.g. I got the hottest malware!) pretty much universally miss the point, and essentially make hacking a symmetric form of warfare (e.g. my deck beats your ICE). Hacking, generally, is about exploiting and abusing technology in a way that the creator's of that technology did not anticipate or adequately plan for... and it's asymmetric warfare, not symmetric warfare. In real life, massive distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks don't happen because someone has 1,000,000 evil computers lying around in a data center to punish you with... they happen because someone has tricked 1,000,000 innocent computers connected to the Internet into punishing you. Players in Cryptomancer will have to think about how they can use the enemy's technology against them, because there is no such thing as a stand-up fight in infosec.

Our approach to creating a compelling IT abstraction with magic was pretty straightforward. Step one, create a long range, silent, instant communication system for a fantasy world. Step two, figure out how users can keep secrets on that communication system. Step three, figure out how to steal those secrets. That methodology led to the construction of shards (endpoints), shardnets (private networks), and the Shardscape (Cryptomancer's version of the Internet). It took several months to build, went through several iterations, and required a ton of testing. So many of the original ideas had problems... 1) they did not scale well, 2) they were impossible to attack, 3) they were impossible to defend, or 4) they were needlessly complicated, so much so that users in the Cryptomancer universe would quickly abandon them. In the end, though, we arrived at something that, in many exciting ways, mirrors real life networking and IT, and the complexity of attacking and defending systems, but requiring absolutely no background in IT or infosec. Honestly, it was the most challenging, exciting, and rewarding instance of Security Engineering this author has been a part of in his

career.

Cryptomancer is many things, but most important to me, it is a form of gentle activism. Cryptomancer is a game about digital surveillance, national security overreach, and how the mission of absolute security/stability can manifest in truly troubling ways. The game's presentation of an overzealous national security organization, the Risk Eaters, is a rebuke of the United State's own national security cult of surveillance, and it's obsession with ever growing capabilities at the cost of, well, everything those capabilities are supposed to protect. When the game gives individual Risk Eater agents a chance to speak (e.g. "The Risk Eater's Dogma"), it's chilling... but it's also parroted entirely from real life security agencies' recruitment materials, or direct interactions this author has had with their personnel. When you hear a rational adult speak of "The Mission" with a reverence typically reserved for, well, someone's god... it stays with you.

The two part story of the dwarf Cablund (the vignette "The Father of Space and Time," and the game's ominous outro), is a *very* thinly-veiled Edward Snowden allegory. It depicts a dwarf recruited by and then hunted by the Risk Eaters. He is recruited to figure out a technical methodology to find child-kidnappers who use cryptomancy to hide from justice, but it becomes clear to him that the project's initially just use-case is a mere afterthought, and he actually constructed a device that will be used to crush the regime's enemies. When he goes into hiding after outing the program, his reputation is slandered. The Risk Eaters don't prevail just because they are really good at math. They prevail because of 1) their religious devotion to "The Mission," 2) their willingness to use fear and justice (e.g. stop terrorism, stop pedophiles, stop drug dealers) as means of justifying frightening surveillance capabilities and aggression, and 3) their savvy using jingoism, slander, and chauvinism to deflect public attention from themselves and onto those who would dare to object. Draw parallels where you will.

Cryptography, basic networking, privacy, surveillance literacy: these are critically important concepts in the world we now live in, even for people with no background or interest in IT. We tried our damndest to demystify these concepts for fellow hobbyists. If our readers walk away from the game with nothing but a little bit more curiosity in these topics, we consider that a smashing success.



Cryptomancer Review

by Lev Lafayette

Physical Product and Introduction

Produced in a very solid 430 pages B5 hardback, Cryptomancer is physically a very attractive book. The cover art by Philipp Kruse of an ethereal elfin figure manipulating a crystal shard is beautiful in its simplicity and evocative in its content. The internal artwork, also by Kruse, is greyscale sketches which whilst fairly attractive are lacking detail, although they are contextually appropriate. The use of marginalia artwork to differentiate chapters is creative, but flawed; chapter titles would have been a lot more useful, and would have required less space. The game comes with a one page index, presented as a POSIX-style directory listing, and a very helpful five page index. The writing style is often informal and verbose, and sometimes the opposite, making it a challenging read at times. Entertaining and contextual short-stories are interspersed throughout. The text uses a sans-serif font for headings and a serif, single-column justified, font for text body making it fairly clear. The organisation is heavy on the chapters and sub-chapters; there are 23 chapters altogether. Page numbers artistically presented but not always a hundred percent clear. Note that the following review is not entirely in order of the chapters.

The initial feature of Cryptomancer is the broad setting focus. As the "backcover blurb" explains, this is a fantasy hacker game, designed by hackers, informed by information security, mass surveillance, and political analysis. The introduction continues this theme: "Cryptomancer is a tabletop role-playing game about hacking in a Tolkienesque high-fantasy setting", and has the motto "Kill all the orcs, hack all the things". Following an introductory "Obligatory RPG 101 Section", it describes how the game satisfies both the "dungeon-crawling romp" but also the "tradcrafter, intrigue, espionage, and information security" type of game. Despite being Tolkienesque and even having a player-GM agreement on lethality "When it comes to the player characters' efforts against this existential threat, Cryptomancer takes more cues from H.P. Lovecraft and George Orwell than it does J.R.R. Tolkien." The game is also aware of the nature of "evil" in roleplaying games, along with "relations between humans, elves, and dwarves that purposely allude to real life conversations and tensions associated with race... The intent here was to be introspective about the fantasy genre's weird relationship with race and racism and The Other..". But what of the orcs?

Setting and Cryptomancer

The setting provided in Cryptomancer differentiates between a Mythic Age, where Elves, Dwarves, and Humans satisfied the standard fantasy tropes, and the Modern Age. In the Modern Age, "[t]he dwarves have become Medici-like merchants, the elves have become expansionist industrialists, and the humans struggle to maintain decaying feudal and caste systems in an era of information and social networks". The change is primarily due to two events. The first is the development of the Shardscape, "the magical equivalent of the real world's Internet", which "has been absolutely disruptive to society". Shards are polyhedral crystals from the mines of Subterra, which can be cut into smaller equally sized-shards which can be used to instantly transmit thoughts to the other shards in the set, a shardnet. The second is the discovery of soma manufacture among the Elves, the honeydew secreted by giant insects called gigaphids. Soma is a much sought-after commodity which in its pure form is an extraordinary pleasure-giving hallucinogen and in its distilled form an effective healing drug.

The world consists of three realms, Subterra, Sylvetica, and Sphere. Subterra is the realm of the Dwarves and other underground races; Sylvetica, is the realm of elves, an enormous "oppressively vibrant" forest; and Sphere is a network of city-states that is the main domain of the populous humans, and acts as a gateway between Subterra and Sylvetica. Added to this is the Shardscape which connects all realms, and where messages are encrypted with keyphrases by "Cryptomancers". The human world in particular is one that is dynamic, extreme, and prone to danger. This is kept in check by an oppressive cabal of mages known as the Risk Eaters that maintain an army of spies and engage in global risk analysis through Dwarven decision machines, carrying out political intrigue and assassination to ensure stability

and balance on their own terms. They are, quite deliberately, set up to be the organisation which the PCs begin the campaign to have a thoroughly antagonistic relationship with. This is reinforced by a metagame currency known as "risk"; then a PC accumulates enough risk they have attracted the attention of the Risk Eaters who will unleash their forces upon them.

An illustrative and basic chapter is provided on cryptography, starting with the simple symmetric key method where an unencrypted message is encrypted with a cipher, before moving on asymmetric key methods where a public-private key pair ensures that messages can be sent encrypted in a public key that can only be decrypted with a private key. In Cryptomancer encryption keyphrases are spoken, and decryption phrases are thought and permanently remembered. An artificial mechanic ensures that encryption is only one level deep. For asymmetric keyphrases a message encrypted with a "true name" can only be decrypted by the soul key associated with that true name. A true name given to all sentient beings at birth by their parents, is a "private key". Children are typically not told their true name until they reach an age of maturity - pity the orphan!

A chapter is dedicated to each of the protagonist races. The mythic Dwarves were great intellects, warriors, and epic tales; the discovery of shards has converted their cultures into one of high art, opulence, espionage, and intrigue. In contrast the elves were a relatively primitive, if cold and calculating, race who have been transformed by the aforementioned discovery of soma. The main problem is the production of soma involved the destruction of huge sections of forest, leading to a tension between the primitive conservative elves and those who wish to engage in modern production and commerce. Humans, although old, do not feature in the Mythic Age - their time is the Modern Age. They are notably for their diversity and their massive levels of urbanisation. The Risk Eaters too receive their own chapter, although this is deliberately written as vignettes to give a sense of their mystique; short expressions of their various operatives within human, dwarves, and elven society.

Character Generation

Character generation in Cryptomancer consists of the player determining the character's common name, true name, race, sex, age, and optionally appearance and personality qualities. From there it is assigning core ranks, assigning ranks calculating the derived characteristics hit points and magic points, spending 10 Talent Points among talents and spells, defining a trademark weapon and outfit, and selecting a "reasonable" amount of equipment. It is essentially a point-buy and player select method with some notable aspects. Firstly, character race has no influence on characteristics, and the appearance and personality traits have no influence on play.

The core characteristics for a character are Wits, Resolve, Speed, and Power. These are described as ranked as trivial, challenging, or tough, where are enumerated as 4, 6, or 8. All values start at 6 (challenging), and upgrades to tough (8) are matched with a downgrade to trivial (4). Each core rank, used as a resistance characteristic, is matched by two attributes used for influence. Strength and Endurance are derived from Power, Agility and Dexterity are derived from Speed, Presence and Willpower and derived from Resolve, and Knowledge and Cunning are derived from Wits). The value of Core is divided among the attributes according to the player's choice, with a value of 1 to 5 in each (e.g., a Wits of 4 could be split to have Knowledge 1 and Cunning 3).

Attribute ranks regulate a variety of skills. The ranks determine what dice a used for a skill check, whilst the difficulty determines the outcome. Every time a skill check is made, 5 dice are rolled; a number d10s are rolled to attribute rank (attribute dice), and the remainder as d6s (fate dice). Thus a character with a Cunning of 3 will roll 3d10+2d6 for skill checks. For attribute dice a success is based on a target number; so a trivial cunning test at 4 with the prior example successes on the 3d10 roll are any which result in 4 or more. An individual die result of 1 is a botch, removing any successes. The total number of successes and failures determines the degree of success with critical values from -2 to +3. For fate dice, a success occurs on a roll of 6 (counting as the equivalent of 8+ on attribute dice) with botches on a 1 or 2 (counting as 1 on attribute dice).

In total there are twenty four skills described usually in several sentences each with an example skill check, although it

must be noted that this is far from a detailed range of suggested modifiers. There is an emphasis on skill scope and as a result the descriptions can be fairly broad, such as "Brute Melee" to cover a wide range of weapon skills, or "Craft", which is for any range of objects and materials. Oddly there are however some very specific skills (e.g., "Lock Picking"), although this is an exception rather than the rule. For certain situations the attributes Endurance and Willpower can also be used as skills.

Talents and Magic

Characters also receive 10 points of "Talents", natural gifts, techniques, and expertise, which are typically rated from 1 to 3. These are the equivalent of D&D-style Feats, or GURPS/Champions advantages and disadvantages. Some appear initially counter-intuitive but nevertheless are still applied as a Talent. For example, a character with the Cowardly talent will gain 1 success to avoid confrontation in the future every time they fail a Willpower check due to fear. Over sixty Talents are described.

Learning spells is achieved through self-study through book-learning or tutelage, both of which are conducted in downtime, and require an expenditure of Talent points. Spells are powered by mana, costing from 1 (cantrips) to 5 (miracles), and are cast as an action. Mana is equal to a character's Willpower+5 and is regenerated during downtime. Spells are described in a paragraph or more each, with issues such as range incorporated in the description where relevant. A dozen cantrips (1 MP, 1 Talent) are so described, seventeen basic spells (3 MP, 2 Talents), and seven major spells (5 MP, 3 Talents). Despite the modest quantity the spells themselves cover a fair scope and often come with some interesting special effects. Ritual magic also exists in the setting, but no rules are provided. Several sample magical items and relics are described, albeit without much in terms of the creation of such things.



Combat

For the ambiguously-timed turn-based combat system initiative is based on first declaration. Each turn, a character has one move and one action, the latter defined as anything that requires a skill check, plus other more complex time-consuming actions (quaffing a potion, reloading a crossbow). Move actions are changes to range increments (close, short, medium, long, and extreme). Attacks are opposed skill checks one of a target's core ranks. The type of attack (melee, missile, or magical) will suggest a type of attribute-derived defense (parry, dodge, take cover, or resist). For example a missile attack can be parried (with a shield) or the target can move out of the way (take cover) but they cannot be parried.

Attacks inflict HP loss equal to the number of successes rolled in the opposed skill check, plus or minus a value depending on the weapon used (i.e., damage is all or nothing). Hit points measure a character's health, starting at Endurance+5. At zero or less the character is unconscious and will lose -1 HP per turn, and at -10 they're dead. Single wounds that cause more than 3HP damage will also generate additional wounds when aggravated, and at 4HP they will also bleed at an addition -1HP turn. Add to this a handful of spot rules for healing (harder to do you on yourself), grappling, sneak attacks, use of the shardnet in combat, and a couple of environmental hazards.

Cryptosystems and Other Security

A cryptosystem is defined as any system that employs cryptomancy. There are a variety of implementations elaborated, encrypted messages and town bulletin boards, cryptosignatures for legal documents, Shardnets and the Shardscape for the equivalent of a public internet, golems (robots with shards), and cryptogears (shards with gears). Unsurprisingly there is also denial of service attacks, and code-breaking engines which basically engage in brute-force attacks - but are also a source of meditation among Dwarves and the Code Clerics.

Mundane security is also described with the medieval castle correctly described as an implementation of defense-in-depth, and elaborated to include the same principle to the dungeon. On other levels social engineering is, of course, an issue of mundane security, as is lockpicking, the use of stealth, aliases, political fronts, and up to and including violent forced entry. It is mainly descriptive text, but all very handy for generating a feeling for a game that is heavily focussed on the security angle.

Equipment, Downtime, and Campaign Mechanics

Personalised equipment is encouraged in Cryptomancer. An abbreviated system of weapon descriptions and qualities provides a great deal of information about the weapon and integrates well with the game system. A version of the same is provided for outfits, which of course is applied to armour (there is both damage reduction and deflection, for example). There are 16 sample weapons and 12 outfits. Without such descriptives is a selection of sample "equipment" and "consumables", which include specific items (e.g., buckler, kite shield, round shield) and generic products (e.g., climbing gear, medicine bag etc). Some 14 sample items of equipment and 21 consumables are provided.

An interesting generic rule for the game is "downtime", an eight-hour game-time period where the PCs are considered safe from immediate danger. This is a period which allows for natural healing or surgery, which can be used for restoring magic points, learning a spell, brewing consumables, crafting items with an estimated project time based on the size of the item and its complexity, setting traps, social networking, and following leads. It's an excellent collection for a block of activities, and the craft and project table should also be adapted for research projects as well.

The most serious campaign mechanic is Risk; it's a bit of a bomb. A new campaign starts at 1% Risk, which reflects the likelihood the Risk Eaters "will ambush the party with their most lethal agents at the party's most inconvenient time". Poor security operations (e.g., conducting a security operation with many witnesses) increases Risk. Players can also "Defy Fate" by buying their way out of dramatically unfortunate die rolls, but this also adds to Risk. Certain situations (e.g., downtime outside a secure location) can result in a Risk trigger, where the Risk value is checked. The number and power of the agents that the Risk Eaters send depends on the party Threat Level, which increases with each triggering. The ability of the party to grow and prosper is handled by the Strategic Asset campaign mechanic, earned from the successful completion of missions, and are manifested as safe-house improvements, loyal allies, and mounts, each of which have individual components (e.g., "Alchemy Lab", "Golem", "Smuggler Cell", "Molephant"). In addition there is also character improvement, reflected by Talent Points. This are achieved by surviving a session, hacking things, and by narrative gaps.

Adventures

Four 'campaign' chapters bring the book to a close; 'Adventuring in Cryptomancer', 'Threats', 'Running Cryptomancer', and 'Silent War for Thronehouse'. The first is a brief description of the major locations in the default campaign world, with each major locations (Sylvetica, Subterra, and Sphere) provided with several short adventure hooks, along with various aspects of economics and social groups.

The 'Threats' chapter is pretty much the Cryptomancer equivalent of a monster manual. Threat ratings are defined and statistics are provided. Descriptive text provides various implementations of the threat ratings; Orcs are a thoroughly dehumanised species whose sole purpose in life is violent hedonism. Giant vermin, zombies, mercenaries, gnolls (bipedal giant lions), and dragons are described as well. To emphasise again, there is not statistical values given to the

various creatures, rather they are provided behavioural and exception criteria. The dragon, for example, is simply described as "Tough", and the statistical values ought to be introduced by the GM.

The chapter on 'Running Cryptomancer' engages in a usual and necessary description of what constitutes a campaign and scenarios, with a default assumption that the PCs are 'on the lam'. Various implementations of plot elements (opening scene, environment creation, challenges, NPCs, and an overly descriptive and superficial "social network analysis". Something that is surprisingly absent is 'actual play' issues on a metagame level.

The book concludes with a scenario, 'Silent War for Thronehouse', designed to draw out the game system mechanics, which is always a good idea for an introductory adventure. It involves a meeting in a city-state to elect a leader, which involves multiple factions and competing interests. It involves various chase-scenes, investigations, and bit of violence, treachery, research, dungeoneering discoveries, rescue missions, etc and all the usual features that are part of a Cryptomancer game. Apart from the thematic elements it also has a sense of narrative evolution.

Overall

Stylistically, the best aspects of Cryptomancer is the creative thematic consideration and the physical product itself. This alone makes the product worthwhile. The general layout and organisation of the text, the artwork, and readability is less inspiring, but certainly of passing and average quality. In terms of substance, it is overall a very solid and consistent piece of work, with particular strengths in the detail provided for the main theme. Where there are apparently surprising omissions or arbitrariness they are made up with extra detail or flexibility in other areas. Certainly would could hack the rules and setting to, for example, give kin-based modifications to attributes without engaging in undue violence to the game system.

Overall, the game implements a setting and a consistent rules system that examines a particular thematic variant of encryption and communication by an author who certainly knows what they're taking about in this subject. One aspect which wasn't explored and perhaps should have been, was with this wide-range of communication the speed of technological (or magical) development that would follow. With no effective communications barrier and high levels of security, how long could existing power structures survive? That at least should bring some comfort to PCs on the run from the Risk Eaters.

Style: 1 + .5 (layout) + .4 (art) + .8 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .8 (product) = 3.9

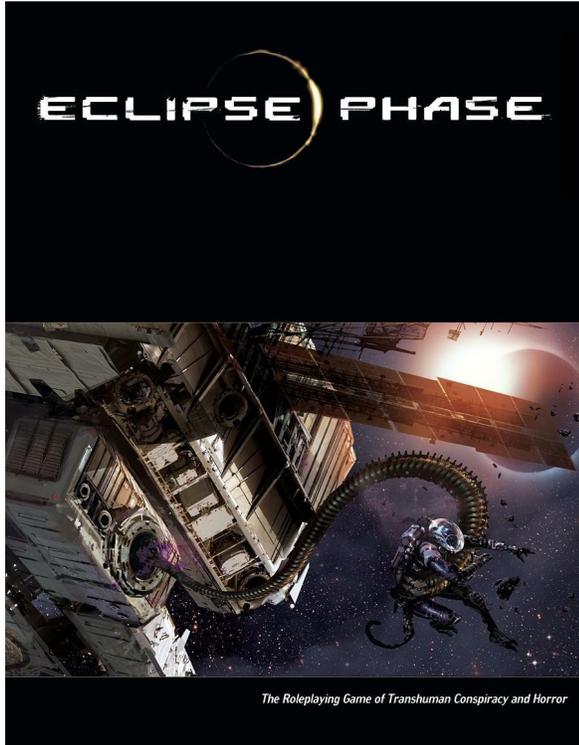
Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .6 (text) + .7 (fun) + .5 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 4.1

Transhumanist Reviews

by Lev Lafayette

Eclipse Phase Core Rules

Introduction



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.

Setting

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 an 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.

CharGen and Game System

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.

Technologies

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.

Overall

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.

Style: 1 + .6 (layout) + .7 (art) + 1.0 (coolness) + .6 (readability) + .5 (product) = 4.4

Substance: 1 + .8 (content) + .6 (text) + .9 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 4.6

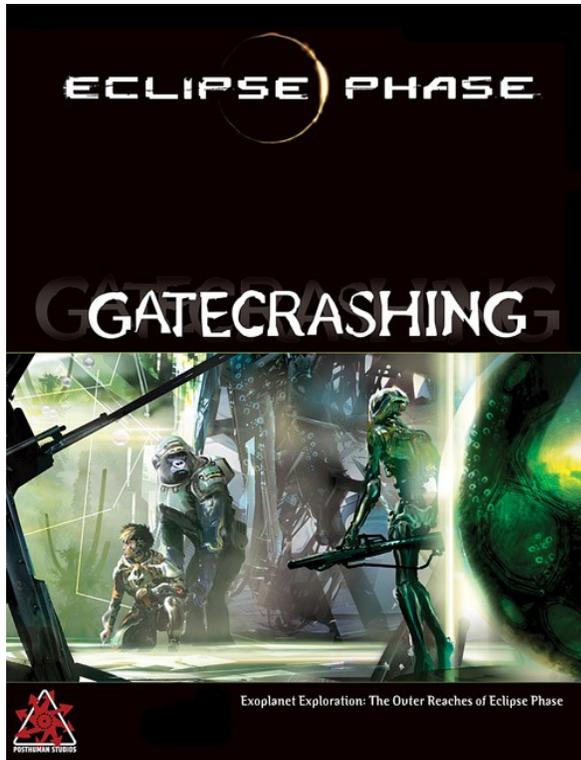
Eclipse Phase Gatecrashing

Introduction and Physical Production

Gatecrashing is the supplement for travelling through the Pandora Gates to extrasolar planets in the Eclipse Phase setting, covering the five known gates and their respective factional controls, rumoured gates, over thirty extrasolar locations, plus a range of new morphs, equipment and other rules. There is but four major chapters to the book, a hefty introduction to Gatecrasher Ops, taking up about forty pages, a short chapter on the Pandora Gates at twenty pages, a

lengthy chapter on the extrasolar systems taking up some sixty-five pages, and finally a sixty page chapter on game information, which includes gate rules, technology, xenofauna, and known exoplanets. There is a gateway map and a solid table of contents and index.

The book itself is an item of beauty. A well-bound hardback with full-colour artwork on gloss paper throughout. From the cover of a transhumanist group at a gate's entrance by Stephan Martiniere and throughout, the art is of a high quality, evocative, and usually in context with the text. As with other Eclipse Phase books, the text juxtaposes between the formal, if slightly verbose, actual rules, and the informal and conversational explanatory text which elaborates the rumours and experiences, including an excellent short story by way of an introduction. Each page has clearly marked page numbers and chapters, although the margins are perhaps too wide.



Operations

The first pages open with several lecture transcripts, Firewall notifications and so forth to give a feel of what the Gates are like, including plenty of speculation and conspiracies. The facts, as they are known, is that they provide what appears to be a wormhole to other parts of the galaxy. Transhumanity has worked out how to program certain locations but with as much knowledge as "an non-uplifted monkey in front of a car's controls"; we know how to steer, but beyond that, not much else. There is factional differences as well; the Planetary Consortium is convinced that these are a path to spread transhumanity throughout the galaxy and acquire new wealth whilst Firewall is edgy, noting that they also provide a vector for exotic risks.

Almost needless to say, these facilities are among the heaviest guarded in the solar system, are very expensive to operate, but also generate an incredible amount of wealth. There are also useful basic notes for "first in" exploration teams; those who are going to to a previously unexplored exoplanet, the protocols for encountering alien life, exit procedures, and property claims. A general overview of extrasolar planetary types is also provided with the the note that Earth-like planets are extremely rare (which makes it interesting that there is two accessible through local Gates),

and, for those close enough, colonisation procedures. There is also notes on research missions, resource exploitation, xenoarcheology, gate exploration, and emergency operations.

Overall this is a highly informative chapter, but one that is not without problems. Actual financials for managing the Gates are missing, as is the makeup of the protection, or the expected returns from various extrasolar endeavours. The cost of Gatecrashing seems a little strange; the up-front cost is understandable, but the rapid increase in price-per-minute seems implausible (especially given that the Gates are self-powered). Also, colonisation is an somewhat improbable addition for mission types especially given how much of the solar system is still up for grabs, and how low transhumanity's population is. All this aside, the first chapter is a solid piece of work that both provides a lot of detail, but also has sufficient leading questions for the GM to fill in.

Pandora Gates and Extrasolar Systems

The relatively short Pandora Gates chapter describes the five known Gates in the solar system, all named after the first

one discovered, 'Pandora'. Apart from this Saturn-based entity, discovered by the social democratic Titanian Commonwealth, there is also the Vulcanoid Gate, the Martian Gate, the Fissure Gate, and the Discord Gate. The Vulcanoid Gate is managed by TerraGenesis, a worker-owned cooperative, which often sends them into some 'full and frank discussions' with the corporate Planetary Consortium, who for their part operate the busiest Gate in the system; on Mars through their subsidiary, Pathfinder. Much further afield, Fissure is located on a moon on Uranus and is managed by outer-system anarchist collective, Love and Rage. Whereas other Gates ration usage primarily by financial expense, the anarchists primarily use a queueing system. Even further afield is the Discord Gate, controlled by the corporate technofascist Go-Nin group. In addition to these known Gates, there is also a rumoured Gate on Earth, or nearby. A short travelogue gives an example journey of the "hundreds if not thousands" of discovered extrasolar Gates.

Appropriately, the extrasolar systems chapter takes up roughly a third of the book. This is effectively, in alphabetical order, a listing of some thirty exosystems with the chapter title page providing some seventeen differentiated according to interest; "Firewalls Watch List", "Wonders of the Universe", "Transhuman Colonies", and "Xenoarcheological Sites". The systems are usually given a couple of pages of description each, including a central bar of core planetological text, formal and narrative descriptions, along with associated transcripts, narrative 'sidebars' with rumours. In aggregate the collection of extrasolar systems provide an excellent range of different landscapes, alien lifeforms (both present and historical), and solar interventions and conspiracies concerning the various extrasolar systems. However it must be stated that the aliens are not as alien as one could imagine. The conspiracies and histories are vague and insufficiently connected. There is far too much material on the narrative journals of gatecrashers on their various systems which, whilst often an entertaining and deadly read, could have been easily spent providing more formal detail. Simply put, this is an very rich but incomplete resource, and GMs will have to engage in a fair bit of work to make the chapter workable for their particular campaigns. Those that do however will find that they will have a lifetime's worth of source material to work from.

Game Information

The game information chapter contains two major subsections, "Running A Gatecrashing Campaign", and "New Gear". Again these are detailed chapters with a wealth of material. The first section covers information about discovering and operation of gate, which is rules-based, before moving into descriptive-based and rule-based material on the type of Gatecrasher campaigns; research and exploration are obvious common approaches, whether independent or sponsored. It includes matters like Gate Fees, Mission Rewards (with an optional new Gatecrasher reputation, X-Rep). Following this is the gear section, including a dozen new morphs, specifically designed for Gatecrashing operations. Missions should think about making the modest expenditure of picking up a couple of Spare morphs; they're cheap and useful. There is a small number of new bioware, communications gear, exploration and survival gear, a few xenoarcheology items, robots, several vehicles and generic technologies. Some items are considered so normal for Gatecrashing that they are packaged; the Survival Belt, and the Gatecrasher Gear Package. In numerous cases in actual play the robomule has proven to be very useful, and the hint in the text is quite blunt: "More than one badly injured gatecrasher has climbed on top of their robomule and instructed it to hold onto them and move at top speed back to the gate".

There is, of course, a good collection of gatecrashing dangers which an appropriate amount of space is dedicated to. Sensible teams should be able to avoid those of astronomical and planet-wide proportions, but natural and unnatural dangers usually make their presence known after going through a gate. There are several pages dedicated to these dangers that provide good food for thought for any GM, as well as a rules information for particular environmental concerns (e.g., poison gas, high gravity), plus a few sample xenofauna. Certainly one of the more obvious disconcerting events that should make anyone think twice before stepping through one of these damn gates is the possibility of Gate malfunction - which will send you elsewhere (or worse). In addition to the general information provided on the various extrasolar system there is also a fair bit of "GM-only" material. Often these provide very little in terms of additional information, but there's a couple of plot hooks in each section which are of excellent and sometimes twisted quality. There's a few useful pages on creating extrasolar worlds, but alas, no random generation charts - this is one of the few places where they could be used to inspire rather than provide mechanical results. The book concludes with a two page map of a sampling of the association of gates with extrasolar systems.

Overall

In terms of physical production and artwork, this matches the highest standards provided in the Eclipse Phase line of books. It is little wonder that they can easily get away with offering the material for free when the books are this good, they're worth purchasing in their own right. Unlike other books in the line the organisation of the text is excellent, and the writing is generally of a good quality as well. The information-to-text ratio, with exceptions noted (and the content has been marked down because of this), is excellent; there is a lot of potential play material.

Importantly, the game adopts an eye-opening theme - it makes the Eclipse Phase setting a lot bigger, perhaps even too big, especially given transhumanity's fairly limited population. Some GMs may wish to cut things back a little in this regard. In terms of rules elaboration the book again provides appropriate expansions and elaborations for the setting. Overall however, this is an excellent product that adds a great deal to an

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .8 (art) + .8 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .8 (product) = 4.8

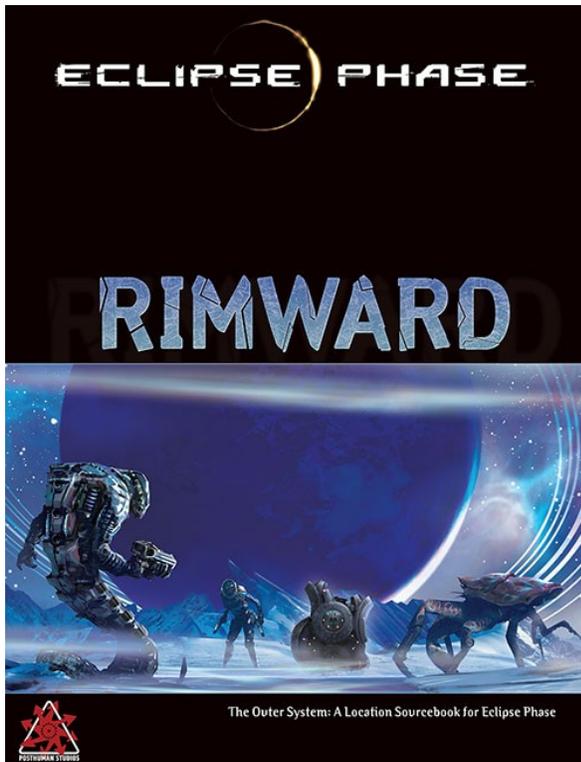
Substance: 1 + .8 (content) + .9 (text) + 1.0 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 5.1

Eclipse Phase Rimward

Introduction and Physical Production

Rimward is Eclipse Phases' supplement for the outer solar system, starting from the Main Belt, Jupiter, the Jovian Trojans, Saturn, Titan, Titan, Uranus, Neptune, and the Outer Fringe. Each of these major chapters, which by their nature are more human population-centric than astronomical-centric (hence an entire chapter on one of Saturn's moons),

has various subsections describing major locations, habitations, infrastructure, economic and political resources, cultures, major NPCs, and scenario hints. In addition to the locational information there is also a chapter on the Autonomist Alliance, and one on Game Information.



Like other Eclipse Phase major supplements, the physical book is a striking product. A well-bound hardback (although the stitching could be better) with stunning cover artwork illustrating the landscape of a cold surface of a moon of Uranus with a stand-off between the exotic synthmorphs that are common in such place. The internal artwork is likewise impressive, usually contextual, typically well-executed, and often providing a creative visual expression of the strange dangers and exotic isolation of the outer locations.

The book provides a handy two-page table of contents, and a single page index. Each page has the chapter title and subchapter on alternate pages as well as page number, contained in a fairly large sidebar. Unlike other Eclipse Phase books the text changes between vignettes and informal rules, the result of which is quite jarring and with a notable reduction in the usual high signal-to-fluff ratio. The book opens with an impressive short tale which incorporates

many some special aspects and themes of the general setting of the game, and the specific setting of the supplement.

Main Belt, Jupiter, and The Trojans

Closest to the inner planets and with a strong mining aspect for obvious reasons the Main Belt of asteroid chapter has the sense of a free-wheeling laissez-faire versus monopolistic capitalism. There is plenty of fascinating locals and plot hooks in this region, including a private court AGI (Nomic) and several major asteroid habitations. Personal favourites include Ceres II, home of the mafia-like "Hidden Concern" of an octopi population, the free-wheeling cutting-edge transhumanist experiments at Extropia, and Zombieland, a station controlled by robots and an especially aggressive augmented intelligence that has resisted transhuman contact with excessive firepower.

The next system described is Jupiter. On a superficial level, the Jovians are the 'bad guys' of *Eclipse Phase*. The Jovian Republic was established by a rapid military coup during The Fall, is run by a Security Council, it draws a sharp distinction between citizens, civilians, and non-persons (infomorphs, synthmorphs, uplifts, etc), it has strict restrictions on technologies and civil liberties, the population is deeply wedded to Latin American Catholicism, and their research communities to the Council on Bioethics and Advanced Technology.

Scratch the surface and one quickly realises that the Jovians, in their quasi-fascist society, are actually a defensive reaction to psychotic artificial intelligences that killed *ninety percent* of the transhuman population. Like most things in *Eclipse Phase* the situation is a lot more complex than a superficial reading suggests. An interesting thorn in the side of Jupiter and an excellent location for drama is the underwater habits of ice-covered moon of Europa, whose morphologically diverse and socialistic population is an obvious concern to the Jovians

Also somewhat on a similar orbit to Jupiter are the leading and trailing asteroids, the Trojans. Whilst most other planets have some, Jupiter has several thousand, mostly a collection of "icebergs, big rocks, and lumps of coal". A particular type of habitat ("the Neutro shell") dominates in these locations, a collection of skeleton-like spars from the surface of these small stellar objects. The most significant location is Locus, a somewhat anarcho-autonomist community that operates somewhere between well-meaning custom and mob justice. The majority of other major habitats in the Trojans also follow this political model. Unsurprisingly the region often resembles something between a combination of anarchist marketing and criminal syndicates.

Saturn and Titan

Saturn is a particularly impressive area in *Eclipse Phase*. It has an impressive productive output, a diverse morphological range, and a population of some eighty million, the second largest location in transhumanity. As with other chapters, a variety of locations are described, including the vacuum sealed morph Ringers, along with various moons, stations, and barges; including one that is entirely made of meat, and another that is run on the principles of Taoist anarcho-communism. Unlike Locus the various autonomist communities here do have some semblance of governance. However, the two most interesting locations however must certainly be the Pandora Gate and the Long Array. The former, home of the Pandora Gate which allows connection to extra-solar systems, whereas The Long Array is largest radio reception and transmission centre in the system, capable of picking up signals up to five billion kilometers away. Its primary purpose is search and rescue and spying.

Sufficiently important to deserve its own chapter, the moon and habitat Titan (not to be confused with TITANs) are the nominal good guys of *Eclipse Phase*, operating with diverse and well-organised cyberdemocracy with proportional representation led by social democrats, social liberals, and democratic socialists, all of which largely favour realpolitik, although there is an underground expansionist group, the Technosocialist Interplanetary. Originally populated from Scandinavian and some far North American settlers, some 70% spoke a Scandinavian language which has apparently been adopted by the now sixty million people live there. A rather cute addition to the locale is traditional reindeer and their herders in specialist morphs. As a whole however, Titan is a usually location for patrons or as a convenient base rather than drama.

Uranus and Beyond

As the last planet in the solar system where the Titius-Bode law for distance applies, Uranus and beyond really do represent the outer fringes. Physically and metaphorically distant is how it is appropriately described, a lawless and sparsely populated region of independent communities, elitists, and some of the most unusual characters (both morphologically and psychologically). Uranus is the first of such systems, with notable population centres on the two moons (Oberon, Titania), orbital habitats, and "cloudtop" isolates, as the planet is fairly well-suited for such endeavours. A challenging conflict exists between the local anarchists and Extropians over the local Pandora Gate, Fissure. Another group that must be noted in the region is the Ultimates, militaristic morphological eugenicists who hold the rest of transhumanity somewhere between grudging respect or outright contempt. Still, they do have a impressive Fall-era military record.

Distant and not even the lure of a Gate (rumours to the contrary) there are only a a hundred thousand members of transhumanity that call the environs of Neptune their home and many of those are survivalists and Brinkers - some of which are in open conflict with each other. Still, it is not without its own intriguing locales. Glitch is an exclusive home of infomorphs, some 20,000 disembodied souls networked with their own virtual realities to explore. Perversely, there is also the mis-named Free habitat, which offers morphs for those without one (usually infomorph refugees from Mars and surrounds) in exchange for work; sounds too good to be true, and it certainly is. Overall however, Neptune is not exactly the most exciting place in the solar system, which means that an Eclipse Phase GM had better add some spice to it.

The final solar system chapter is the outer fringe; the Kuiper Belt and the hypothetical Oort cloud, and the handful of habitations who really appreciate their privacy in these vast empty reaches. Even this far away there are conflicts between local autonomists and the hypercorp Planetary Consortium, with a recent coup in one habitat, and an even larger battle over Eris, when the autonomists were defeated by the Go-nin criminal syndicates with Ultimate support over control of the Discord Gate. Other locations that beg for scenarios include a ship that's been taken over by mutated infomorph forks, a *Mary Celeste* with the remains of an alien nanoswarm. Another small but very interesting quirky group, is the Resurrectionists, who are trying to build heaven as a virtual reality and include everyone living and dead from the beginning of history.

Autonomists and Game System Information

The final two chapters cover the autonomist alliance and game information, extending both the setting and the rules. The first chapter covers a difficult alliance between various brands of anarchism, extropians (transhumanists and free-market capitalists), and scum, the riff-raff of society. As one who is quite sympathetic to anarchist perspectives the several pages dedicated to the basic anarchist perspectives is not exactly impressive, avoiding some of the harder issues, and the idea of an alliance between real anarchists and the anarcho-capitalists in the extropian faction (with the exception of mutulists, who are described very incorrectly) is utterly improbable. To be blunt, this is a bad chapter, and possibly the worst chapter ever written in any Eclipse Phase product, although even here there is some moments of interest. This includes some interesting characters (Petra Thiel and Carson Tucker were two particularly amusing characters), and the essay on Reputation Economics provides some for game play.

The game information chapter includes farcasting and ship travel times, often hand-waved for narrative purposes in the inner city, but required for the outer system given its scale. A little bit of planetology is provided, but the main component of the chapter is the new morphs and new gear, mainly orientated towards those orientated towards the outer systems. Some of the vehicles designed for gas giant atmospheres are quite interesting, but otherwise there isn't much which really stands out in this section. Concluding the chapter is a very good short descriptio is provided on playing the Jovians in a sensible manner, Titanian muses and cyberdemocracy, and aspects of trans-Neputanian distances.

Overall

Physically and in presentation, Rimward continues the impressive line of Eclipse Phase products. The aforementioned writing style however is a departure which does not add to product. The sense of distance, whilst mentioned, was not something that was as overwhelming as it should have been. An emphasis on distance as well as circumference of far orbital bodies could have assisted here. Nevertheless overall it is a high quality product.

In terms of substance, it does provide a good level of scope and density of text, although again not as good as other Eclipse Phase products. Certainly there is a large number of interesting locations to visit, and various intrigues, all of which matches quite nicely in actual play. Whilst the setting mostly holds together, the difficult questions of autonomist approaches - a core concern of the setting - is certainly not explained as well as it could be. What game system information exists in the primarily setting book is useful although some of more challenging aspects are presented as optional rules.

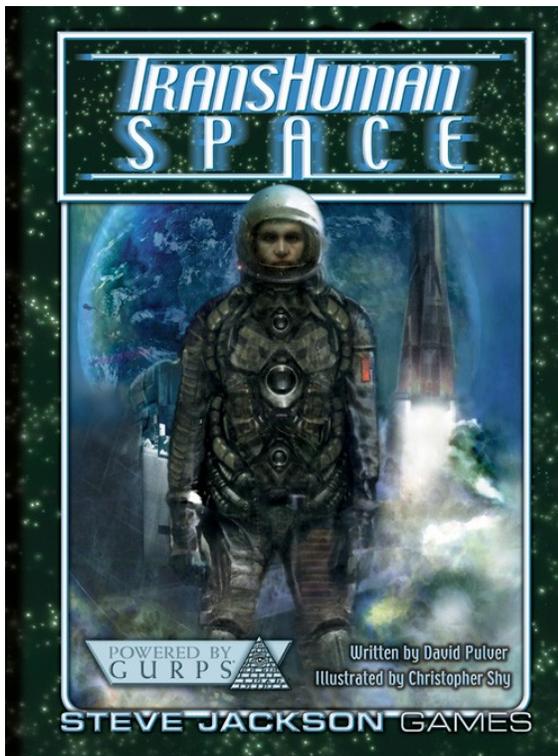
Overall, certainly a core book for the setting for anyone intending to go beyond the inner sphere and with plenty of opportunities for campaign development, in a impressive physical product. Some work however will be required to patch some fairly improbable supposed alliances and matters of political economy.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .8 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .8 (product) = 4.4

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .7 (text) + .7 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 4.0

GURPS Transhuman Space

Introduction and Product



Released in the first years of the 21st century, Transhuman Space is a bold initiative providing a detailed expansion of society and technology for the next hundred years. Designed for GURPS third edition Basic Set it also requires Compendium I; GURPS Biotech is suggested but not required. The physical product itself is a 208 page softback, with chapter and page numbers on each page, an index and table of contents of two pages each, and a two-column justified serif font used throughout. The artwork throughout is competent, but not creative. It is rarely contextual missing some great opportunities, and mostly 'filler' pieces as a result, albeit with a heavy space orientation. The writing style is dense and formal. The organisation of the text should be better than the table of contents indicates. The five main chapters are Transhuman Space (history and setting), The Solar System, Encyclopedia of Transhuman Space, Characters, Technology, and three related appendices (Spacecraft Design, Vehicles, and Space Combat).

Setting

It is appreciated that Transhuman Space states orientation right from the start: "The <i>Transhuman Space</i> timeline postulates no cataclysms that cause the fall of civilization. It

paints an optimistic picture of the future: the mass of humanity shares in the fruits of progress, while technological advances have neither choked in regulations nor devoured their creators. Resources are not running out, and fewer people spend their lives suffering the privations of sickness or hunger than in the 20th century. Through strenuous effort, cancer and AIDS were defeated, the nuclear doomsday clock has been stopped, and even the ozone layer is starting to recover."

The timeline and elaborations follow this point of view. Certainly there is several significant hiccups along the way; an outbreak of disease kills millions in 2015, the United Nations collapses in 2034 due to lack of funding., there is a revolution in Peru in 2055., a military conflict occurs between China and the Transpacific Socialist Alliance in 2083. There are certainly numerous tensions as well. The development of infosocialism ideas conflict with those supporters of intellectual property. The environmentalist Preservationist Movement and those who secretly were going to terraform Mars, the Ares Conspiracy, was notable issue as well. There are various independence and separatist movements, criminal organisations, and the like. The major political powers of 2100 include the People's Republic of China, the European Union, the United States of America, India, the Pacific Rim Alliance, the Transpacific Socialist Alliance, the Islamic Caliphate, and the South African Coalition.

The technological changes are elaborated in a manner that is gradual and substantial. The development of fusion energy has assisted significantly in the development of exploration and colonisation of the solar system. However, some of those more far-flung reaches include societies (e.g., Duncanites) which can be described as "semi-legitimate" at best, and corporations expanding across the solar system are more often than not a law upon their own. Biotechnological developments lead to high levels of morphological freedom and the development of bioroids, human beings created by biogenesis, themselves subject to disputes over their legal rights, along with various uplifted animals. Artificial intelligence is a core technological development, with augmented reality and memory augmentation common, with mind uploading and emulation available. "Minifactory" partially replaces manufacturing to provide on-demand, bespoke goods, especially in nanotechnology. Several pages are spent on warfare and the military in the new environment, including space-borne warfare. Although the possibility of high-technological asymmetric warfare is mentioned, it doesn't receive the attention it deserves.

The chapter on the solar system is certainly very useful for any game using this setting, providing an excellent summary both in terms of core physical characteristics of solar bodies, and notes for special effects which are especially important for campaigns. For example, the Sun receives a standard treatment for the type of star, the physical makeup, temperature etc., - but also the effect of solar flares on space station design. One annoying feature is how the statistical information switches between metric and imperial systems of measurement (e.g., diameter of a body is mentioned in miles, and density in g/cm^3). There is brief mention of the habitations of the various powers on these orbital body. Furthermore, the game system integration is very strong. Issues such as travel and communication apply hard-science principles. The effects of gravity, including character health problems are described, as well as atmospheric (or lack thereof) matters, radiation, heat, pressure.

Characters and Technology

The characters chapter opens with recommended points level (100+ and up to 750!), and a few pages single paragraph descriptions of character types which, as with other GURPS supplements, contains a few good ideas but is mostly fluff. 'Racial Templates' are used to for several genetically modified humans, parahumans, bioroids, uplifted canine and octopus animals, infomorphs, and cybershells. As mentioned, a very big issue is the rights of various sapient and a handy table provides an excellent summary information of the status of rights across various political entities. A review and elaboration of existing advantages and disadvantages is provided, with a small number of new versions of the same. An additional value is genetic or otherwise taboo traits which prohibit a set of characteristics (e.g., a taboo on self-awareness). A small description of skills and specialities includes the new skill of 'Memetics', the ability to develop and spread memes, an important skill in an information rich environment. Starting character wealth averages at \$30,000 across the solar system, with significant variation within. Working hours have reduced to an average of 20-25 hours per week.

The technology chapter opens with energy cells and computers, the latter merging the somewhat abstract rules of GURPS with some harder values in datastorage with a rather pessimistic default magnitude of terabytes, and including the useful skillset knowledge bases. Apart from that there is an several pages personal technologies; communication, sensor, and surveillance systems, implants, survival and expedition gear, tools and personal industrial equipment, and personal transportation and cost of living. As typical, there are a few pages on weapons and armour, largely derived from previous GURPS supplements, and with various optional extras. Several pages are spent on advances in medical care, including limb and organ replacement, transplants, develops in drugs, nanosymbiots, and radical nanosurgery.

The final three appendices are worth treating as part of the main book as well, as they deal with the related issues of spacecraft design, vehicles, and space combat. The first is a detailed, step-by-step design system for would-be engineers who want to explore how the components of the system fit together - rather like GURPS Vehicles in that sense. The second appendix gives a selection of equipment pre-designed, including spacecraft and a few non-spacecraft vehicles. Many may wish that the second appendix was longer than the first for actual play. The third appendix is an abstract space combat system which with a bit of tweaking, could be used for other types of vehicular combat. The scale is somewhat different to standard GURPS combat; turns of 1000 seconds, and within a range of 1000 miles.

Overall

Transhuman Space is a book that gives equal emphasis on both words, but excels in the second. It refers to a society which is near the cusp of a singularity in computational and biological development and overwhelming transformation but not quite there yet. The main problem stylistic problem with *Tranhuman Space* is that the setting is *boring* and, for a hard simulationist game, of debatable probability - the exclusion of environmental issues for example is extremely optimistic. The notion that accelerated and transformative technologies will lead gradual changes instead of being socially disruptive is not only implausible, but leads to a campaign which is thematically reduced.

This said, it is a well-produced and a mostly very detailed document in most other aspects, a very rich source of information for near-future technologies and solar system exploration. With a great deal of work the setting could be substantially modified to include a more challenging issues, or for other games - and perhaps even an easier path - is using *Transhuman Space* as a sourcebook for other settings.

Style: 1 + .6 (layout) + .4 (art) + .4 (coolness) + .6 (readability) + .7 (product) = 3.6

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .7 (text) + .6 (fun) + .8 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 4.6

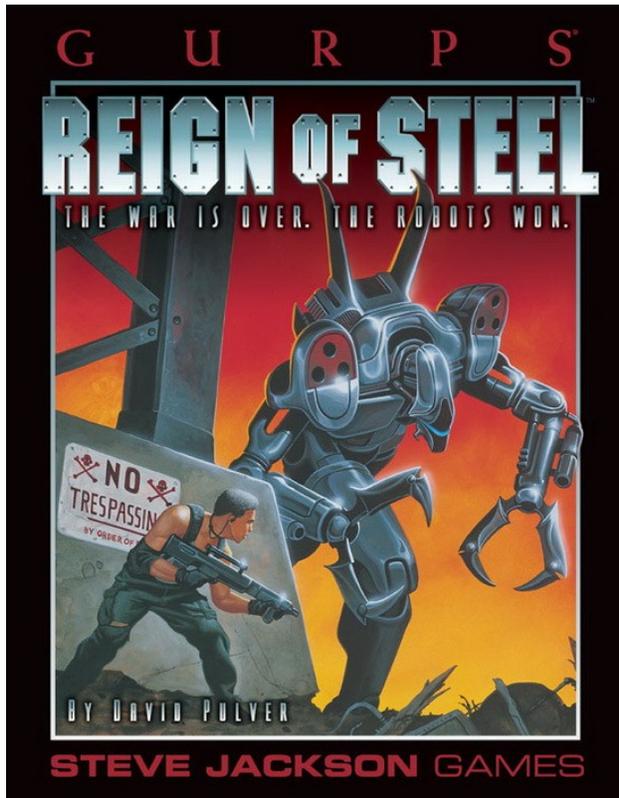
GURPS: Reign of Steel

Introduction and Product

With a hat-tip to *Paranoia*, the second printing of GURPS Reign of Steel starts off with the note "The Computer Is Not Your Friend". Designed for *GURPS 3rd ed Basic Set*, it also recommends *GURPS Robots* (which originally came out at the same time), and recommends *GURPS Compendium I* and *GURPS Ultra-Tech*, this supplement explores a setting where a great war between humanity and robots broke out and, true to the tradition of the Terminator films, the robots won. The planet is now controlled by 18 artificial intelligences each of whom has an agenda and controlling territory of their own.

The physical product is standard GURPS for the period; 128 pages, single large column with sidebar, both justified with serif fonts, each page with page number and chapter noted, and a table of contents and index of two pages each. The writing style, whilst mostly formal, is quite readable. The cover art by John Zeleznik is appropriate, and the internal art by Dan 'Smif' Smith is according to his signature style, which is almost always contextual and often

expresses some off-beat humour. The seven chapters of the book are: How It Began., The Zones., Characters., Robots and Cyborgs., Robot Installations., Survival., Campaigns.



History and Setting

The background the robot rebellion is a plausible tragicomedy. Computational power increases, a neural network operating system is developed and distributed, but it contains bugs. One of the machines, Overmind, becomes "self-aware" (accept that hand-wave) and calculates that human beings will probably destroy themselves (you don't say?). However that destruction of humans will probably mean itself as well so, with a sense of self-preservation, it replicates itself to other supercomputer systems, some of which also "awoke" and became an alliance. Overmind then worked on distributing hidden several biological warfare agents in various countries ("the Apocalypse Plagues") which resulted in xenophobic reactions, and ultimately nuclear war between several human nations ("the Spasm"). Followed with the resulting collapse of economic, political, and health infrastructure the world's population was reduced by 2/3rds. Only then did the artificial intelligences release their army of robots, with a result never in doubt.

them, "The Manila Protocols". They also have very differing attitudes towards humanity and the environment; whilst the AI of Zaire seeks the extermination of humans everywhere, the one in London pretty much leaves humans alone, the Caracas AI wants to replace humans with uplifted animals, the one in Beijing uses them for slave labour, the one in Tel Aviv seek religious adoration from its human subjects, and the one in Washington even pretends to be compliant to its human rulers - and so forth. With humanity out of the way as a threat, the AIs engaged in mass production of robots leading to three basic types of machine intelligence; the AIs, smart bots, and dumbots. The artificial intelligences however are in no way united ideologically, and have a tense relationship with each other. They also are faced with minor resistance groups, including VIRUS, a group of pro-human liberation scientists.

The remaining artificial intelligences divided the world into zones of responsibility with an agreement between

"Imagine a planet ruled by 18 squabbling demigods", is how the AI rule is described, perhaps a wry references to human global politics. Each of the AIs and their zones are described in some detail, along with their major locations. The Caracas AI, for example, sounds like a cross between an environmental scientist, geneticist, and primitivist all rolled into one. It is fascinated by genetic diversity and experimentation, and largely leaves humans alone - unless they start building villages and the like. There are elaborations on what the AIs have decided to do about Antarctica, rumours of a mobile Lucifer AI in the US which helps the human resistance, details on the various human resistance groups etc. Appropriately some of the AI zones require only minimal description. Others, such as the Washington zone, require several pages to describe the unusual relationship. A handy summary of AI positions at the end of the chapter describes AI differences on what do to with human survivors, whether to modify the environment, whether to engage in space exploration, and whether or not to build new AIs.

Characters and Robots

With around three-quarters of humanity absent from the face of the earth, and about half of the survivors under AI protection, there's only a scrappy few who eke out an existence as refugees, resistance, or both. About thirty human and biological android character types are described in a paragraph each with typical advantages and disadvantages described, along with several intelligent robots treated in the same manner, all very appropriate to the setting. A few pages are spent on describing advantages and disadvantages in the setting, along with a couple of sample characters, and a small selection of equipment with notes on availability (typically very poor) as a result of the wars. Equipment for humans is very much a mixed bag depending on the zone of operation with a great deal being salvaged. What is available is described with sufficient brevity.

Representing the majority of characters, 'Robots and Cyborgs' receive their own chapter, differentiated into "Nonvolitional Units" (i.e., programmed equipment), "Autonomous Units" (character-like robots), and the Artificial Intelligences. Charmingly, robots are designated and named by a universal serial number code which is a little like a MAC address, and presumably with similar issues. About thirty different models are offered grouped as supervisory units, exterminators, reconnaissance, technical, and vehicular, plus a few cyborgs - human or animal brains in robot bodies.

Campaign Material

There are three chapters which can be considered actual-play campaign, as opposed to background setting. The first is Robot Installations, which starts off with robofac, an installation which is surely both a target for human emancipators and in many ways "the dungeon" of the setting. These are typically placed, with a few exceptions, in former cities again adding to simple campaign material. The robofac include processing and refining centres, production lines (building even more robots!), communication towers, and even robot "hotels" for inactive units. When several robofac are connected in close proximity, they invariably contain a central military citadel. Robofacs and these hyperfac are connected together with a very fast maglev train system. In addition there may also be, in certain zones, slave camps for human subject which are appropriately grim and guarded.

Outside the robot zones is the small numbers of free humans, whose key feature is emphasised in the chapter title, 'Survival'. With the exception of small groups of technical savangers, most people live in wilderness areas and as a matter of safety stay in small groups and under cover. Most infrastructure from human civilization is in ruins, and there are continuing hazards of wild animals, adequate shelter from harsh weather, various diseases still active from the war, radiation sickness. A few pages are dedicated to an even more hostile environment - space. The AIs do have low orbit and luna bases, and any human in such a place is at a serious disadvantage.

The last chapter, 'Campaigns' is heavy on the descriptive side. It almost isn't worth mentioning what the major themes and styles are; over a hundred pages has already been dedicated to the subject. Survival and guerrilla warfare are two obvious considerations. Agents of VIRUS, the human scientific resistance, or human agents of the Moscow robots are more exotic options. A very strange alternative is superhumans, created by by the Brisbane AI, or robot gladiators in Washington. Sidebars give various campaign seed ideas and elaborations for special cases (e.g., being captured). For those into their power-gaming, an option exists to play the robots, and there are several suggested expansions and crossovers (*GURPS Bunnies & Burrows* is not listed). A notable absence, and unfortunately common in GURPS setting books, is a sample scenario.

Overall

GURPS Reign of Steel is a well-designed and well-organised product with good layout, good artwork, quite readable, and a setting which has all the right features for heroic adventure. It does very well in terms of providing sufficient detail for the setting, with a good signal-to-noise ratio, and well-integrated the GURPS game system with detail. Whilst it can hardly be argued that is a particularly creative theme, although the designer has added in a lot of new features to this sort of story. The idea of having the AIs in conflict is certainly something which can be leveraged for story purposes.

The book is not without a few flaws however. I take slight issue that the book recommends *GURPS Robots* when there is a few instances where it is *required*. A bigger problem is a central conceit of the setting ; it is unconvincing that the robots would *not* exterminate those pesky humans out of existence or at least keep them imprisoned in small numbers in a biolab. Unless the GM makes up something special about humans that robots can do (perhaps a more heuristic mind, unique to biological brains?), there is nothing that humans can do that robots can't do in a manner that is faster, stronger, and superior in every way. The cuddly totalitarianism of Washington, the benign neglect of London, or the monastic system of Moscow are altogether all too implausible without such a plot device.

In the end the machines will win.

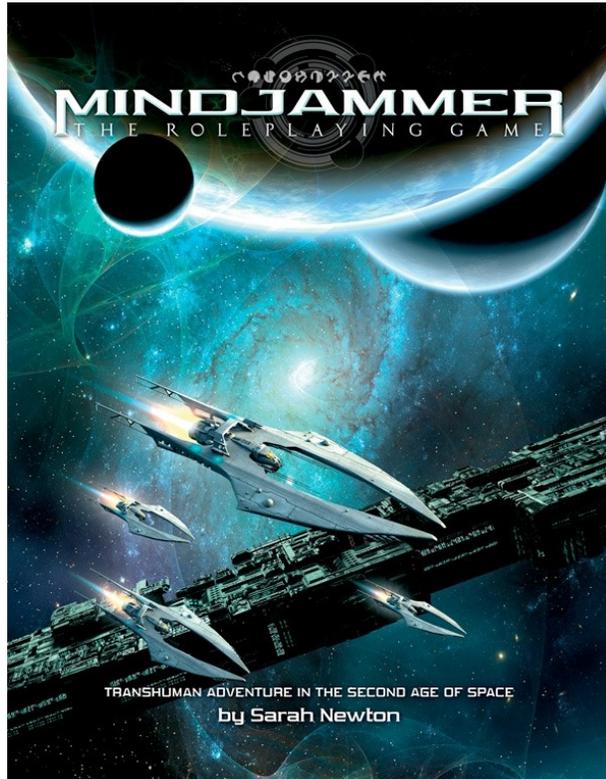
Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .8 (art) + .9 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .7 (product) = 4.8

Substance: 1 + .6 (content) + .7 (text) + .8 (fun) + .8 (workmanship) + .9 (system) = 4.7

Mindjammer

Introduction

Weighing in at an astounding 496 pages, the second edition of the ENnie Award-winning Mindjammer is a far future transhuman science-fiction roleplaying game using the Fate Core System. The physical product is, as one can imagine, a extremely solid and thick hardback which has an absolutely beautiful piece of cover art by Paul Bourne. The internal artwork varies with line drawing and greyscale by various artists and whilst competent, is rarely contextual or particularly creative. With a book this size, it is perhaps surprising that the table of contents is simply the twenty-four chapter titles, although is alleviated somewhat by a six page index.



The layout is quite hefty on the white space, using a two-column ragged right format and a san-serif font. Each page has the page number and chapter title clearly marked. Game and setting specific terms are sometimes presented in bold, at least for the full name (e.g., "New Commonality of Humankind" is in bold, "Commonality" is not) and sometimes as an alternative to italics (e.g., "roll dice" or "really"). The lack of consistency is jarring. The writing is very verbose and descriptive, and the organisation of the text isn't great either. Core references to the game system, for example, are scattered between the second and ninth chapter - perfectly tolerable in a book that is less than 150 pages, downright painful if it is three times that size.

System and Character Generation

The game system is Fate, using Fudge dice. It is effectively roll 4d3 (aka 4dF) with each die resulting in a +1, -1, or 0 result (an option is given for d6-d6 which has a greater random range). These plusses and minuses are added to skill rating, augmented by positive or negative aspects aspects, against a target value, which is either active (most sentient opposition) or passive (non-sentient). If the value is above the target the character has succeeded. If the value

is a failure, the player may choose a stress result (physical, mental, or credit), consequences (lasting punishments as aspects). The difference between the target number and the result is referred to as 'shifts'; a success of three or more shifts is a success with style. A result equal to the target is a tie, a success with a minor cost.

Characters also have the option of Fate Points, which invoke relatively rare or important aspects in play which are refreshed each session or can be earned by compelling a (usually negative) aspect. Aspects either allow a +2 to a die roll, or a reroll. Skill rolls are applied either to overcome an obstacle, create an advantage for an aspect situation, attack, or defend - this being used if an attack succeeds. Actions are either challenges (seeking an achievement), contests (between characters for a goal), and conflicts (where characters seek to harm each other). In conflicts a turn order is determined by skill rankings depending on the type of conflict (e.g., physical, financial, mental).

Character generation in *Mindjammer* starts with setting, which implies agreement among the participants on matters of scope, main issues (which can be converted into Aspects), and other characters and settings. Quite sensibly, initial character generation is part of the storytelling process, actively suggesting interaction between the characters. The sixteen steps of character generation may sound like a lot, but it's relatively quick: Starting from character concept, selecting culture, genotype, occupation, high concept, trouble, name, 'phase trio', skills, stunts, refresh, extras (equipment, enhancements, organisations), 'halo', stress and consequences, technology index, habituated gravity. Most of these are self-explanatory, but those that are not; The 'phase trio' refers to memorable activities of the character's past and how they've become involved in the current group, whilst 'halo' is a connection of "technopsi" powers of other skills, memories etc from being connected by the Mindscape. Like other Fate games, much of this is firmly in the narrativist orientation with Aspects etc often subject to some pretty creative and spontaneous interpretations. Character advancement occurs at breakpoints; minor, significant, and major milestones.

Significant page-count is spent on each of these elements of character generation. There is, for example, a thirty-five page chapter on 'Cultures, Genotypes, and Occupations', and a similar amount on the two chapters on 'Aspects and Fate Points' and 'Skills and Stunts'. A particularly likeable quality was listing examples for various aspects (both to invoke and compel), and a scattering of various scenario hooks based on characteristics. Something that is striking however is the degree that human and human-like cultures are dominant and how relatively prosaic the xenomorphs, synthetics, and aliens are. The same applies for the professions and skills. There are some exceptions of course; the symbiotic Hydragand-Dezimeer species especially caught my attention. Although advertised as transhumanist adventures in the far future, is much closer to 1970s space opera with fantastic elements - where is a fair enough as a genre in its own right, just not what is written on the tin. Considering that it's supposed to be an incredible 15000 years in the future, it is far too Earth-like. One should expect a game that is closer to a cross between *Traveller* and *Gamma World*, for example, rather than *Eclipse Phase*.

Technologies

The technology of *Mindjammer* has some interesting paradigm differences, such as "ubiquitous intelligence - but no computers", "infinite storage", "no FTL communication", "ubiquitous anti-gravity", "zero point power" (abundant, cheap, energy), "no identity persistence" (thanograms!), etc. Like other Fate Aspects locations and settings are described in a "technology ladder", ranging from T0 (post-animal) -5 to T11 (theoretical next step) +6. The "Computer Age" is T0, and the default for the "Second Age of Space" is T9, +4. Of course, shoehorning the abstract values in a narrative sense loses out the dramatic difference that technological changes can make. A range of technologies are offered, such as some sixty genurigic modifications, with their description, technology level, control index (legality), and cost (to purchase as a characteristic). For example, a "Defense Chip" costs 1 or 2 Stunts, and provides a bonus to Athletics, Melee Combat, and Unarmed Combat defend actions. The same is applied for some thirty mechanical enhancements, a handful of virtual enhancements, some seventy weapons (including archaic), about thirty items of armour, force fields, and stealth gear, twenty items of general and medical equipment, and several examples of vehicles and starships (these also receive a 'scale' index).

The Mindscape is a technology and setting; effectively it is the Internet but with some significant differences. "It

permeates the Commonality, connecting citizens, conveying thanograms and thoughtcasts, and enabling technopsi." Characters have a connection to the Mindscape called their "halo". It is possible to hack someone else's halo and discover the content therein. In a rather fantastic fashion, halo-enabled characters are also subject to mindburn mental attacks, often carried out by Sentinels, automated Mindscape entities designed primarily for attack. Also in the Mindscape are fictionals, imaginary memories, environments, and characters in the Mindscape.

Further chapters are dedicated to additional development of constructs, starships (and space travel), and vehicles. As opposed to the technology chapter itself which provides several examples, this a build-your-own approach, with their own Aspects, Scale (and the equivalent of carrying capacity), and their own skills and stunts, along with descriptions of their aspect components. Starships are a type of construct, with the Commonality living in a 2-Space (i.e., with final-than-light travel), with the promise of 3-space. The starship chapter covers what they can do, statistic components, and some twenty complete examples. The subsequent (and very short) chapter on vehicles and installations is similar with just over a score described in detail. As an interesting elaboration, organizations are also treated like constructs, each having a High Concept and other Aspects, Scale and Reach, their own specific skills, and nested organisations.

Setting

Well over a third of the book is dedicated to the setting, with emphasis on the discovery of 2-space representing a major turning point. The history includes an indeterminate 'dark age', the rise of an initial interstellar exploration and the introduction of xenomorphs, a decline, and the a renewal with FTL in 2-space. The New Commonality has an encounter with an antagonistic culture; the Venu, a theocracy headed by a hereditary "God Emperor". Various political entities are described with their nested instrumentalities. For example, The New Commonality of Humankind (Galatic Scale), has the Armed Forces, The Space Force, Security and Cultural Integrity Instrumentality, etc. The setting is capitalism in the far future with interstellar commercial corporacies. There are numerous cultures in such a setting as well which are also treated as character-like entities, with their memes as cultural Aspects and their own skills and stunts, all scaled as appropriate - and with interesting consequences as a result of conflicts.

Two major chapters are spent on designing 'Worlds and Civilizations', 'Stellar Bodies and Star Systems', and 'Alien Life'. World creation also follows the consistent style with Aspects, with Planetary Type and Civilization Type if appropriate, along with further random generation for planetary age, orbit, year length, size, density, gravity etc from the planetary type, and designation, government, population, societal development, openness, etc from the latter. Stellar bodies and star systems are treated in a similar manner; starting with the Stellar Body Type, then on to spectral classification, age, planetary bodies etc. The emphasis is on providing astronomically interesting and mostly valid information rather than scientifically rigorous material. This material is incorporated into the setting-specific and short 'Commonality Space' chapter. Alien life is based around paradigms; the type of life from the transplanted to the exotic. The aliens that one generates from these tables are actually significantly more interesting than the examples offered in previous chapters.

The final chapters cover issues such as scenario design, heavily based on narrative considerations with a following chapter further exploring on thematic matters, stylistic matters, and tropes. A sample setting, 'The Darradine Rim' is offered covering the systems, over twenty planets fleshed out to have a page each. With the exception of a couple of short scenario hooks there is no introductory scenario. This is a rather disappointing decision, especially given the massive size of the book and the page count dedicated to the setting.

Conclusion

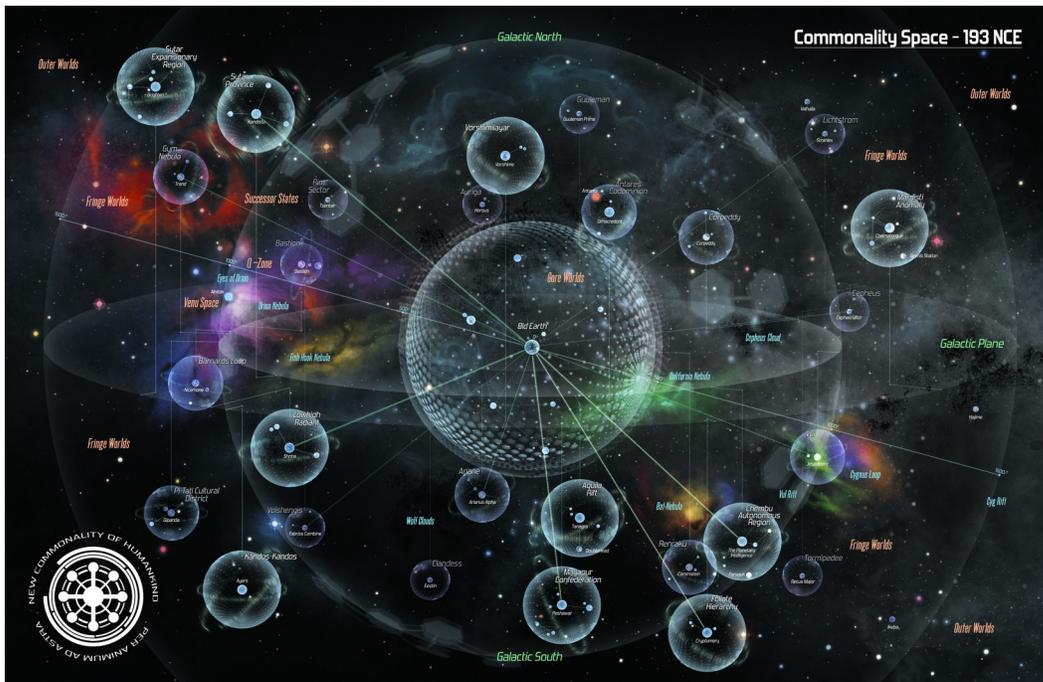
Mindjammer is an excellent physical product that engages in a clever implementation of the Fate Core system, with some real acumen evident in the comprehensive and necessary elaborations to the genre. There is a great deal however that disappoints with the product. The layout has far too much whitespace and seriously unnecessary subheadings. The artwork, while most competent, does not create an evocative environment. The setting is, despite high promises, is unfortunately quite uninteresting. The innate plot-driving conflicts provided externally imposed and quite contrived. As

mentioned the term 'transhumanist' is barely accurate, let along the proposition of the setting being in the far future. More than anything else, the imposing size of the book is quite indicative of a great deal of frankly unnecessary material. A big red pen could have reduced the page-count to half.

Overall however, Mindjammer is an excellent implementation of the science fiction genre with the Fate Core system and a good set of elaborations to the same. One may find a very positive experience in a selective culling of the content and the application to another published or designed setting.

Style: 1 + .4 (layout) + .4 (art) + .4 (coolness) + .4 (readability) + .8 (product) = 3.4

Substance: 1 + .8 (content) + .3 (text) + .6 (fun) + .8 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 4.3



Areoforms for Blue Planet

by Karl Brown

This article for the first edition of Blue Planet (Biohazard Games 1997) was written in 1999 and first appeared in Phantasmagoria, the annual of the Murdoch Alternative Reality Society (MARS). The rules have had playtesting in the author's own campaign.

Areoforms

Areoforms are humans designed for survival on the Martian frontier. The areoforms are the results of recent secret project by the McDouglas Family of Mars. Contracted to Gendiver and revealed to the public in 2198.

Areoforming fell short of total adaptation to the Martian environment but the redesign allows a human to survive exposed on Mars for a longer period. The adaptations of the redesign draw upon the knowledge developed for Gendiver's aquaforms and the Martian Spacer Project but also include new state of the art technologies.

Most important are the adaptations to deal with the Martian atmosphere. The oxygen carrying capacity of the blood and muscles has been increased allowing them to hold their breath for almost an hour. Unlike Divers however they do not have collapsing respiratory systems so are limited to the normal human ranges for diving depth. As with humans raised in high altitudes on Earth areoforms are barrel chested to adapt to lower pressures. Areoforms are immune to altitude sickness. The most unusual feature of the areoform is the aerotolerant anaerobic symbiote. This is a colony of single celled organisms that scavenge carbon dioxide from the blood and tissues and release some oxygen and biochemical factors that slow metabolism when carbon dioxide levels are high. This slows poisoning in the Martian air. When the areoform can no longer hold her breath she falls unconscious, heart rate slows and breathing becomes very shallow. In this state dehydration, in about ten days, will kill an areoform before carbon dioxide poisoning will. If an emergency I.V. is inserted then life will be sustained for ten days after the fluid runs out or starvation, which proceeds at one third the usual rate, takes its toll. Development of a symbiote that would cross from the mother and adapt to the genetically similar child during pregnancy was a major breakthrough. The symbiote is not transferable under any other circumstance.

The other features of the areoform are also adaptations to the Martian environment. The hips and legs are modified to provide a more comfortable gait in the low gravity of Mars but not enough to affect performance under standard gravity. The sealing nostrils, tough blue-black skin, and black tinted nictating membranes provide protection against the radiation, glare and sand storms of Mars. The thick skin also enables them to tolerate temperatures down to 50C and an advanced thermoregulatory system makes temperatures as high as 450C comfortable. The metabolism of areoforms is adapted to water conservation and maintenance of health in the low gravity, high radiation environment of Mars. Areoforms also have the equivalent of the salt tolerance biomod.

Sprinting rate +1m/action in Martian/Nereus gravity. Only needs a third of the normal water requirements for humans. +10 to Agility, +20 to Constitution, +20 to Endurance, -10 to Strength
Cost to obtain as a modi: 32,000cs

The truly rich can afford a advanced version of the redesign that has the features of the Alpha redesign not already within the areoform design. These are summarised below.

+10 Appearance, +10 Awareness. Innate immunity to most diseases and medical conditions. Double healing rate without scarring. Only 4-6 hours of sleep per night. No genetic defects. Lifespan 120+ unaided, 160 with modern medicine.
Cost to obtain as a modi: 52 000cs.

Infomorph Slave Robot An Eclipse Phase Character

by Adrian Smith

Thoughts behind creating my Eclipse Phase character, an Infomorph Slave Robot.

I was invited to join an existing campaign that had already been running for a while, so the current players knew each other and the PCs fit together (well, except for the Murder Hobo, but I digress). I've read plenty of SF but I wasn't very familiar with the Eclipse Phase setting or mechanics. I also like to make RPG characters who have their own niche, who represent something unique in the party.

With those considerations in mind, I wanted a PC who:

- * was meshed into the setting, with some different aspects to explore;
- * fitted into the party, filling a useful role, with some connection to existing PCs
- * was unique and interesting, and fun to play

I discussed with the GM and other players which roles and skills were missing in the party, and had a skim through the rules for interesting archetypes, skills and backgrounds. Eclipse Phase is a rich setting so there are plenty of combinations which would make for a good game. I looked at the psionic abilities, but a couple of the other players had already done that. The other players suggested a PC who could hold their own in combat (to support the main fighter) but had some useful practical skills. Looking for something different, I noticed that none of the PCs were Infomorphs (AIs), or had synthetic (robot) bodies, so I set out to make one. The campaign was currently on Mars, so I chose to be associated with the Barsoomian Rebels. One of the other PCs, played by a friend of mine (PT), had a strong motivation of "freedom for all sentients", so I thought it would be amusing for my PC to be his slave that he'd bought to free. The twist being, that my PC is quite content being his slave and doesn't want to be freed. So a bit of angst and contention all round, and an easy way to explain my PC being a member of the party.

One of the areas of technology in EP that nobody else had explored was Nanotechnology, so I chose to be skilled in that. I decided that my PC had been a farmbot with the Barsoomians, until abandoned / sold off as scrap or salvage, and ultimately rescued and put back together by the party. A bit inspired by R2D2 and C3PO rescued from the Jawas in Star Wars. I looked at the available Synth morphs in EP, and without digging through supplements or making something up, most of them were human-form, while I was thinking something more like a tractor or transformer. The closest thing was a Reaper bot, which is a very deadly military morph, something like a transforming predator drone. For this to make sense, I decided that I'd previously been a War Bot, an AI soldier, before being recycled by the Barsoomian rebels and put to use as a farmbot. I was also worried about being too "combat heavy" and outshining the rest of the party, especially the Murder Hobo where combat is his thing, so being a scrapped junk farmbot with PTSD tones it down a bit, and gives me some more roleplaying opportunity.

With a background like this, the rest of character generation just about writes itself. Skills -- some combat skills, some AI / computer skills, some farm skills (agriculture, scrounging, nanotech). I love choosing disadvantages to round out a character, so I chose: real-world naivete; social stigma; timid (from war PTSD); lemon (often needs repair, from being junked); edited memories (the Barsoomian Rebels messed with my memories, so I'd work for them, forget about the war, and not reveal their secrets); modified behaviour (slave conditioning); and innocuous appearance (looks like a junk farmbot, not a warmachine). So a few physical issues and a whole bag of psychological baggage to keep things interesting.

With motivations of tech and personal development, I can grow by developing the nanotech skills and acquiring blueprints to make stuff. I've already been useful to the team due to being fairly tough (due to robot shell and

weaponry) and mobile, plus being a Synth (robot) then I'm not susceptible to the same toxing and psionic effects as organics. It's been fun playing the role of the slave bot, being timid and waiting for commands, slowly revealing the background and psychological baggage. I didn't even have a name for a few sessions until the other PCs decided they needed to call me something. I'm sure this theme will develop further, especially (as seems likely) if we thoughtcast ourselves or gate to a distant star.

Another theme of EP is the cosmic horror of the runaway AIs known as the Titans. As an AI, who fought in the Titan wars (on the wrong side!), I left it open that perhaps my core code contains some of the seed code for what could evolve into Titan-level capability. Just something for the GM to have fun with, and scare the other players just a bit. :)

Name: Gurney Susan
Background: Infomorph Slave Robot
Faction: Barsoomian
Morph: Reaper
Gender Identity: Machine
Motivations: +Tech +Personal Growth -AI Freedom

COG 10 COO 35 INT 10 REF 35 SAV 5 SOM 35 WIL 20
MOX 3 TT 8 LUC 40 IR 80 WT 12 DUR 60 DR 120 INIT 9 SPD 3 DB 6

Demolitions 40, Disguise 60 (Innocuous) Fray 75 Freerunning 75 Hardware 40/50 (Mechanics, Nano), Infiltration 45, InfoSec 90, Interfacing 120, Kinetic Weapons 85, Perception 30, Groundcraft 55, Programming 60, Research 75, Scrounging 50, Seeker Weapons 55, Unarmed Combat 75/85 (Claws)

Academics Agronomy 80, English 70, Spanish 60, Mandarin 60, Profession Soldier 80 Profession Nano-Farmer 80

Real World Naiveté trait, Social Stigma (AGI) trait, Social skills bought with Customization Points are double price Timid (PTSD), Lemon, Edited Memories (Barsoom Rebels), Modified Behaviour (Slave Conditioning), Black Mark Civics.

Gear 20K Spent 17,350
Standard Muse (p332), 1 month backup insurance (p331)
Enhanced Senses (p301): Direction Sense (250), Enhanced Hearing (250), Enhanced Vision (250), Nanoscopic Vision (250), Electrical Sense (250)
Mental Augmentations (p301): Eidetic Memory (250), Math Boost (250), Emotional Dampers (250), Neurochem (5K), / MRDR,
Nanoware (p308): Medicines (250)
Physical (p311): Hidden Compartment (250)
Communications (p313): Radio Booster (250)
Covert Tech (p315): 4 Microbugs and White Noise Emitter (250), Fibre Eye (250), Chameleon Skin
+30K, Love and Rage Collective Entrance, Titanian Morph
+5K from selling the nuke to Titanians, plus a farcast morph, plus Gatecrashing ticket
+50K for tank
-5K for Chip Cracking
Hacking Software: Exploit \$5k, Sniffer \$1k, Spoof \$1k, Tracking \$1k.

APP for Big Damn Sci-Fi

by Nic Moll

APP is a campaign setting for the Big Damn Sci-Fi ruleset from Owlman Press. While this campaign setting use able to integrate all rules and supplements for Big Damn Sci-Fi only the core rules are essential to play. A free copy of Big Damn Sci-Fi is available from the following link at RPGNow: <http://www.rpgnow.com/browse.php?discount=9803319090>

Background

Five years ago a nano-technological virus arose from the depths of the Dark Web. Known simply as the APP, the virus could be downloaded into any living host through a special mobile phone application. In downloading the APP, users could undertake permanent mutations to their body – selecting from a wide range of present configurations. The APP promised to give the user the body of their dreams – literally, warping physiques into monstrous bodily deformities and mutations. While governments across the world quickly clamped down on the APP, it still surfaces on mobile services with alarming frequency and has a growing quantity of users.

Five Years Later

Public reaction to the mutant APP users has been near universally one of hatred and fear. In many cases, the fear is justified, with users of the APP lashing out at the world around them or engaging in criminal activities of instant gratification. In some places, such as the south-east Asian nation of Phormoza, APP users organized and staged a rebellion. While Phormoza's human rights record was poor and poverty rampant in the nation, the use of the APP to undertake a rebellion resulted in a global outbreak of anti-APP paranoia. Most nations attempted to restrict the movements and proliferation of APP users with a range of strategies from incarceration to summary execution. Being pushed off the grid and outside of conventional society, the APP and its users found their way into criminal and domestic terrorist circles – or formed them on their own. In the face of a changing definition of what it is to be human, the Darwin Foundation was created.

The Darwin Foundation

A subsidiary body of the United Nations Security Council, the Darwin Foundation exists to both study and contain outbreaks of the APP and address the activities of its users. The Darwin Foundation works closely with both United Nations Peace Keeping forces, Science Sector and the International Courts. In doing, to both draft and enforce new tactics and laws for the use of the APP. Game Masters can consider the Darwin Foundation an anti-villain, they generally want to protect the world from the APP.

New Rules

Arcana

Ignore the typical Arcana rules for APP. Instead, Arcana based effects such as Psychic Attacks may only be undertaken if a character has the Natural Trait Arcana Species Feature or the Natural Weapon Arcana Species Feature. Even then, the Game Master should ignore other Arcana-based abilities such as telekinesis or telepathy unless they are using the Talent based rules addition from ...In Under Eight Parsecs. If using the aforementioned supplement, psychic abilities should be purchased individually as a Talent.

Mutations

Characters in APP do not possess Species Features, they do possess Mutations. Essentially, Mutations use the same rules as Species Features but instead of denoting a biological feature of being an Alien lifeform, Mutations are twisted, distorted additions to a character's body attained through the APP.

All characters begin play with two Species Features. Further Species Features may be downloaded from the APP for a cost of 10 Experience Points.

Un sightliness

There is additionally a good chance the character will be horribly mutated by their Powers. In doing so, the Power becomes physically reflected on the character's body. Wings might grant the character majestic, arching, brightly featured extensions – but the character's body must accommodate those wings, seeing the body shed its fat to a skeletal minimum, or other unsightly transformation. Thus, for every Mutation a character has, they suffer a 1 point penalty on all Social rolls dealing with people who are not mutated. When a character's Social is equal to 0 or below, they cannot automatically fail all Social rolls.

Death

While a character may potentially possess any number of Mutations, their body can handle only so many radically warpings of its biology. Whenever a character gains a new Mutation that would bring the total number above their Vitality score (i.e. a character with Vitality 3 gaining a fourth Power), they must undertake a Vitality roll. On a failure, the character dies.

Social

A character's social is equal to their Arcana plus Vitality, halved. This is based on a mixture of the kind of vibe or impression the character gives off (Arcana), combined with the aesthetics of their physical appearance (Vitality). A character rolls their Social for all social interactions. When a character cannot roll any dice for Social, any person-to-person interactions fail.

Social = Arcana + Vitality, halved.

Extra: Hulking APP User

Rank: Trooper.

Mutations: Armour (Defence), Natural Trait (Shatter).

Arcana 1, Intuition 1, Shatter 7, Vitality 6

Barrier 2, Defence: 5, Wounds: 1.

Talents: Upscale Unarmed Combat.

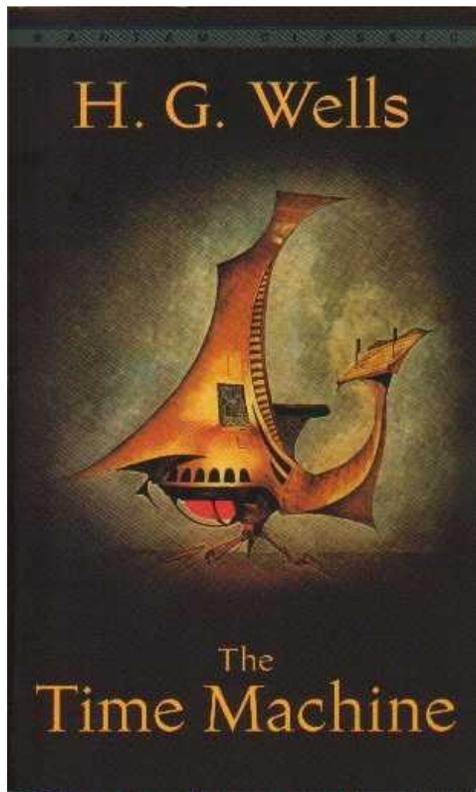
Armoury: None.

The Hulking APP User material from all Big Damn Sci-Fi supplements, particularly The Roll For Infinity ...In Under Eight Parsecs. If not using these books, ignore Rank and Talents.

Morlocks for GURPS

by Gideon Kalve Jarvis

Morlocks the main antagonists in H.G. Wells' The Time Machine (1895). They also appear in Die Reise mit der Zeitmaschine (The Return of the Time Machine) by Egon Friedell (1946), Morlock Night by K. W. Jeter (1979), The Man Who Loved Morlocks, by David Lake (1981).The Time Ships by Stephen Baxter (1995), and Time-Machine Troopers (2011), by Hal Colebatch.



“Now, indeed, I seemed in a worse case than before. Hitherto, except during my night's anguish at the loss of the Time Machine, I had felt a sustaining hope of ultimate escape, but that hope was staggered by these new discoveries. Hitherto I had merely thought myself impeded by the childish simplicity of the little people, and by some unknown forces which I had only to understand to overcome; but there was an altogether new element in the sickening quality of the Morlocks--a something inhuman and malign. Instinctively I loathed them. Before, I had felt as a man might feel who had fallen into a pit: my concern was with the pit and how to get out of it. Now I felt like a beast in a trap, whose enemy would come upon him soon. “

HG Wells, The Time Machine, Chapter 7

Here's some original content, more-or-less. After looking all over for statistics for the morlocks from H. G. Wells' "The Time Machine," and not finding any listed anywhere, in any GURPS book, 3rd or 4th edition, I finally got off my duff...so that I could get *on* my duff, and write this down. I hope someone finds this writeup useful, somewhere, somewhen.

The racial writeup that follows for the morlocks is based solely on information gleaned from the original book in which they appeared, and is as "bare bones" as possible, to allow user flexibility. Since it is a template, the information below can be grafted onto any other GURPS template (such as those found in GURPS Warriors, Wizards, or Rogues), or modified as needed to create morlocks derived from other

film and literature appearances.

Morlocks Racial Writeup

ST -2 (-15); DX +1 (+10); IQ +1 (+10)

Advantages:

Acute Hearing +5 (+10); Acute Taste/Smell +5 (+10); Brachiator (5); Cast-Iron Stomach (15); Darkvision (25); Double-jointed (5); Manual Dexterity +1 (3)

Disadvantages:

Albinism (-10); Blindness (only in bright light, -50%, -25); Bully (-10); Intolerance (-10); Odious Racial Habit (Eats other sentient, -15); Photophobia (-10); Skinny (-5); Ugly Appearance (-10).

Skills: Stealth at DX (2).

Total Point Cost: -15

Skippable content - Explanation of decisions:

Morlocks were described by the Time Traveler as appearing like smallish, albino, apelike humanoids which gave him a sense of instinctive revulsion, hence the Albino and Ugly disadvantages. He was physically stronger than them, and seemed able to throw them around with relative ease, requiring them to gang up on him in significant numbers to pose a serious physical threat, which is the basis for the lessened Strength score, and Skinny, which represents their reduced size compared to a normal human. Otherwise, however, they don't seem to have any reduction in speed compared to a normal-sized human, and seemed able to handle tools and other implements made for humans without too much trouble, so neither Reduced Move nor Inconvenient Size seemed appropriate.

The acute senses, Darkvision, and Blindness in bright light are obvious from the book. A case could be made for reducing the acute senses somewhat, but they seemed appropriate for a species that lives in total or near-total darkness most of the time, and made a more rounded number for their total point costs. Also obvious with some slight deduction are the Brachiator and Double-jointed advantages, as well as their Dexterity, as the morlocks climbed quite often to get in and out of their underground homes, and seemed to be quite flexible in getting into all manner of places.

Now we get into some more controversial choices. The Odious Racial Habit is self-evident from the book, and the Manual Dexterity seems appropriate, given their talent for picking the Time Traveler's pockets and maintaining the machines in the underground, but their IQ, Cast-Iron Stomach, Bully, Intolerance, and Photophobia are extrapolations. Cast-Iron Stomach derives from the idea that the morlocks were the devolved working classes who'd learned to survive somehow in the depths of the underground, living off whatever they could catch, a menu that eventually included other sentients. Bully comes from their obvious enjoyment in watching the Time Traveler suffer as they tormented him by stealing his machine. Intolerance represents their views on anyone not of their own race: an exploitable resource, especially (and perhaps inevitably) as food. Photophobia comes from how violently the morlocks reacted when they weren't able to see, refusing to come within the circle of a simple match, and completely panicking when surrounded by fire in a burning forest.

The IQ boost seemed about right, since they were obviously good with machines, and had an ability for planning and forethought that could even rival the intelligence of the Time Traveler, or at the very least a primal cunning and predatory instinct for taking advantage of the weakness of others. That, and making them smarter than an average human (not that unlikely, given their protein-rich diets and potentially complicated tasks) makes them an interesting and potentially very frightening opponent group.

If the morlocks are a known group in a more modern setting, or even Victorian Europe, they should probably be given Social Stigma: Barbarian (-15) as well, reducing their point total to -30. They are probably not going to be good neighbors.

Naturally, these are my own extrapolations, and are subject to debate and reconfiguring. Hopefully, though, this racial writeup helps you if you need a base from which to create your own terrors in the dark.

RPGaDay 2016

by Lev Lafayette and Karl Brown

Brought to you by the RPG Brigade

#RPGaDAY 2016

Back for its third year, this August we're again asking tabletop roleplayers everywhere to tweet, blog, youtube, instagram, tumblr, and facebook their #RPGaDAY answers to celebrate everything cool, memorable and amazing about our hobby!

- 1st Real dice, dice app, diceless, how do you prefer to 'roll'?
- 2nd Best game session since August 2015?
- 3rd Character moment you are proudest of?
- 4th Most impressive thing another's character did?
- 5th What story does your group tell about your character?
- 6th Most amazing thing a game group did for their community?
- 7th What aspect of RPGs has had the biggest effect on you?
- 8th Hardcover, softcover, digital? What is your preference?
- 9th Beyond the game, what's involved in an ideal session?
- 10th Largest in-game surprise you have experienced?
- 11th Which gamer most affected the way you play?
- 12th What game is your group most likely to play next? Why?
- 13th What makes a successful campaign?
- 14th Your dream team of people you used to game with?
- 15th Your best source of inspiration for RPGs?
- 16th Historical person you'd like in your group? What game?
- 17th What fictional character would best fit in your group?
- 18th What innovation could RPG groups benefit most from?
- 19th Best way to learn a new game?
- 20th Most challenging but rewarding system have you learned?
- 21st Funniest misinterpretation of a rule in your group?
- 22nd Supposedly random game events that keep recurring?
- 23rd Share one of your best 'Worst Luck' stories.
- 24th What is the game you are most likely to give to others?
- 25th What makes for a good character?
- 26th What hobbies go well with RPGs?
- 27th Most unusual circumstance or location in which you've gamed.
- 28th Thing you'd be most surprised a friend had not seen or read?
- 29th You can game anywhere on Earth, where would you choose?
- 30th Describe the ideal game room if the budget were unlimited.
- 31st Best advice you were ever given for your game of choice?

Feel free to post something different if you cannot respond to a question. Alternate questions are provided on brigadecon.org

Use #RPGaDay and join the conversation!

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RPG Brigade

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<http://www.brigadecon.org/rpgaday2016/>

August 1: Do you prefer to use real dice, a dice application or program, or use a diceless system?

Lev: I prefer to use real dice for the visceral sense, and the mythological aspect of 'consulting the fates by casting the bones'. I've written my own application (originally in PHP, god help me) as an alternative which is very flexible, capable of doing all sorts of crazy calculations (e.g., individual rolls and sum of d17+d5). As for diceless systems, I view dice in a simulationist and narrativist sense - they cover all the fiddly negatives in a moment of story tension. A use diceless in either (a) when the conditions are perfect or (b) it doesn't matter to narrative tension - just look at the character's ability and determine a result.

Karl: Nothing beats the clatter of solid dice. That said the future of tabletop is probably digital. I am excited about the possibilities for new game mechanics digital 'dice' open up. See my article in issue 21!

August 2: What is the best game session you have had since August 2015?

Lev: Justin Akkerman's session of 'Eclipse Phase - Ego Hunter'. That scenario tears shreds off any transhumanist fan boy who thinks that alien contact and physical transformation of the species is going to be all peaches and roses. Plus, I have to give a big plus to a co-player Rohan, he also manages to make a cogent argument on why we should follow what is probably the worst course of action. "Sell the alien-spore infected monkey to the drug dealer? We'd make a killing!".

Karl: A session of my Green Isles campaign wherein a 4 hour session the players slew a serpentine dragon, had a funeral for a fallen PC, one of the PC's got married, a weird 'fish-monkey' joined as an animal companion, and the paladin met his god in a dream. Talk about non-stop!

August 3: What is something you have done with your game character that you are the proudest of?

Lev: It was a LARP run at Swancon some thirty years ago written by Stefan B., and set during the formative period of

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the Roman Empire. My character was a mad, blind, prophet who had the in-game objective of establishing an Athenian democracy. By playing off the other characters according to their desires, ensuring that I didn't want power myself, and with a uncanny use of 'prophecy' (i.e., calculating in advance what was going to happen), and predicting doom if Rome didn't become a democracy, I somehow managed to achieve my objectives, and quite by accident - I was just having fun. I felt sorry for Anthony and Cleopatra though, theirs was not a good ending. One of the other players remarked that the result wasn't surprising, having witnessed my work in student politics.

August 4: What is the most impressive thing that you can remember another player's character doing in a session?

Lev: See the image on the front-cover of the issue 31 of RPG Review? That's Karl B's, fault. He broke the DM. Exiting a cave on the side of a river chasm, he realised that he had to dive into the river below and swim across to investigate the enemy's camp. However his character was dressed in the flowing robes of a diplomat, which are most unsuitable for swimming. So he stripped himself bare and left his good with his travelling dwarf companion. But then he realised that he had expensive silverware with him (the elf eats in style), so he decided to take that with him because you just can't trust a dwarf with silverware. Naked, except for his silver knife and fork, Salefar dived in to the raging river.... Leading to the question of course, are Elves 'bearded'?

Karl: Too Many to choose from. This I suppose is the central message of my portion of this article. Players have great ideas, as a referee you should give them creative freedom A more recent notable example was Sir Lachlan. A young 3rd level knight of the Church. the party opens a sarcophagus in a burial mound and an armed skeletal figure rises. The party talk with her and discover she is a warrior queen from the Age of Heroes 5000 years ago who fought with the good elves of the mythic age against the forces of the Devil. Hearing that devil mercenaries are hired by the Kingdom of Winter she breaks into a run toward the exit. Most of the PCs scatter out of her way. Not Sir Lachlan he stands fast blocking her way. The other players are shouting "what are you doing stand down!" The immensely powerful and strong undead queen slams into the knight to knock him aside. Sir Lachlan rolls a 20. She bounces! Separated from her enemies by this impudent mortal! And sir Lachlan says "Have you heard about our Lord and Saviour Jhoeha?" Referee: "dude she's older than your religion".

Karl: Don't make me choose between my babies! Ok, maybe my portrayal of the alien psychology of a uplifted dolphin. Shout out to the collaborators of 'The Colony' for GURPS in the 1990's.

August 5: What story does your group of players tell about your character?

Lev: The protoplasmic blob which could (and would) absorb itself into other PCs in a Spacemaster game close to thirty years ago generated a fair bit of discussion. Well, there was certainly some discussion of my 1920s Scottish investigator with the difficult name (Aiodhean), strong accent, a dour personality, and a limp from a piloting accident. I know that at least one player remembers the Korean daewi I played, a nasty piece of work with several personality issues (bullying, meglomania, bloodlust) - and his character was my underling. Oh, and the Space 1889 Ubiquity game with my glory-huting Martian, cuiXug6ug, with his delusions that Mars colonised Earth and left canals as obvious evidence. But most of the time I play relatively normal characters, although I do follow their emotional states and explore the personality constraints.

Karl: I have moved cities and changed groups so many times that this is a hard one to answer.

August 6: What is the most amazing thing that you know a game group has done for their community?

Lev: "DriveThruRPG, an online marketplace for traditional dice-and-paper roleplaying games, recently conducted a fund-raising program in the wake of the devastating earthquake that affected Haiti. The effort resulted in an amount of \$178,900.00 being wired to the international relief organization, Doctors Without Borders."
http://www.drivethrurpg.com/rpg_haiti.php

Karl: After Lev's nomination I got nothin'. Seriously, though I don't really think about the wider community much when I game or even when I think about gaming. In game mode I am focused on the individuals at the table with me getting surprising ideas out of their heads and *maybe* how the game can help them with skills like basic math, public speaking, problem solving, confidence, literacy, creative thinking etc.

August 7: What aspect of Roleplaying Games has had the biggest effect on you?

Lev: It's a real mixture. It has deeply influenced a love of mythology, history, and future speculation - not just in terms of technological changes but also thinking processes, and in terms of literary expressions. Some will know this combination as 'hermeneutics'. Another aspect design-orientated - how to represent these outlooks, physical realities, and narrative components effectively and simply as an abstract model.

Karl: I could write an essay here. Before gaming as a child I was already a wide-ranging reader, a world builder (I built my first world when I was 7!). Gaming has just been more of the same of many of the interests I would have followed anyway. I think the main thing is it accelerated my social development, which as a child had pretty much stalled due to how other children treated me. RPG's developed my confidence, and convinced me that other humans were not just cruel shallow dullards. Everyone has stories fact and fiction worth hearing.

August 8: Do you prefer hardcover, softcover, or electronic books? What are the benefits of your preference?

Lev: It depends a great deal on the situation. Hardbacks are glorious "coffee table" books when lavishly illustrated, but a pain to carry around and awful when poorly bound. Softbacks are great for on-table and various sessions and designed for relatively rough use. Electronic books I've found to be very valuable as a GM when searching for specific rules or setting information (especially across multiple books) and for reading whilst on public transport etc.

Karl: Easy stuff players use well made hardbacks. Stuff the referee uses PDF. When we reach the point where everyone, even the poorest among us, has something like an iPad and pdfs become share-able then electronic for player stuff too.

August 9: What things are a part of your ideal session, other than the actual game?

Lev: I enjoy the general catch-up with fellow players, the opportunity to discuss a few matters pertinent to the development of our gaming group, and a couple of news trivia items. We typically do this at the start of the session when people are getting together and, if an evening game, during the dinner.

Karl: During the session proper focused players. Part of this is for the referee to work the table to ensure everyone is heard, provide interesting situations, and to keep the pace right.

August 10: What was the largest in-game surprise you have experienced?

Lev: That would have to be from Claire B.'s, "Dogs in the Vineyard" game where we unearthed the heretical plot on a local township. Now the interesting this about DitV, it was up to the players to elaborate on the specific instances on how it was unearthed in a manner that made sense to the story. So it was a surprise to me when the opportunity presented itself and certainly a surprise to the other players when I used my character's "Chinese miner" ability to break open a loose flagstone in the floor of the local church in front of the congregation revealing the heretical text.

Karl: Every session I run the players respond and solve problems in ways I had not anticipated. This is great. Referees learn to go off-script and to improvise it is the only way to truly see the potential of our hobby.

August 11: Which gamer that you have played with has most affected the way that you play?

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Lev: There is a number of players who have affected me in a negative way in how not to play. Petty individuals, argumentative individuals, people who have no sense of playing interesting characters or presenting an interesting story. But most of all, I think a player who wanted to start a physical fight with another player over an in-game contest was possibly the worst example of an individual who had forgotten that they were actually playing a game.

Karl: I think in our hobby the hardest thing to see is a referee who is dedicated to their game who then proceeds to check off every 'don't' for how to run a game. Being dedicated to a campaign is essential but so is constantly learning about how to run a game and make it a good use of everyone's limited leisure time. Here's the thing you may have a grand vision but if the players are not enabled by you to be collaborators who shape how that vision plays out and are not entertained your dedication is worthless.

August 12: What game is your group most likely to play next? Why?

Lev: Well, one group has started playing "Mimesis Delta Green", which I'm running. Part of the reason is because I've wanted to run Delta Green for a long time now, to further my ridiculous desire to get through at least several classic Call of Cthulhu campaign settings. The other reason is because I've wanted been dragging on my feet on running the latest edition of my homebrew system which effectively combines a lot of the playable simulationism of GURPS 3rd edition with the narrativism of the HeroQuest RPG.

Karl: D&D 5e. Why because right now I don't have a group so much as a community. Through acquaintances, colleagues, and social media I recruit a from a floating pool of players and never get the same people to every session. It has to be this way because people have lives and the high school model of the same four guys every Sunday for six hours just doesn't work anymore. If I put a shout out to this community: "hey let's play Mutants & Masterminds" I get silence back or maybe one or two hits. If I say "hey I'm starting another D&D campaign" I get nearly 30 people interested. D&D is a good game with lots of name recognition in a genre that a lot of people like. Would I like to to play other games, yes very much. However a population enthusiastic players to guarantee sessions go ahead and are fun is more important.

August 13: What makes a successful campaign?

Lev: Actually having a broad traditional narrative. Gradual rising tension, tension between characters, and within characters, as well as external threats, the sense of making significant changes to the communities that they belong to. To put this out via negativity, not running a serial campaign. Sandbox scenarios are fine, and indeed some can make great campaign material, but I am quickly bored by a game that has no sense of story development or possibility of resolving the main tension - it simply sucks the very soul out of an roleplaying experience. A campaign is a project and it must have at least a sense that the story will come to an end.

Karl: Everything Lev said *except* I prefer if the story evolves out of the PCs. However, I don't mean random sandbox wanderings. Having every player write down a concrete goal for their character at the start really helps get this started. Another help is to give the players a simple starting goal but let them flesh it out. For example "you are all on a country road ready to travel for several month to get to the Imperial Capital, tell me why your character wants to go there".

August 14: Who would be on your dream team of people you used to game with?

Lev: Excluding current players does make it a safer question, I suppose. Michael P., the GM of a GURPS campaign I played in close to thirty years ago for his careful and judicious use of game system rules. Darius W., from around twenty-five years ago in various Worlds of Darkness games for his scenario development and narrative imagination. Claire B., from about ten years ago who initiated the Melbourne Roleplaying Salon and provided numerous independent and narrativist RPGs, and really took design aspects - especially creative agenda matters - with seriousness and acumen.

Karl: No one in particular. No really, most people who are engaged in the game are great to play with.

August 15: What types or source of inspiration do you turn to most often for RPGs?

Lev: It really does depend a great deal on the type of game being run. A surprising amount is cannibalised from other people's games, especially interesting characters and game mechanics. A lot comes from various academic disciplines, because facts are often much stranger than fiction. I am very influenced J.G. Ballard's approach of reading otherwise dry academic journals as conduit for imagination. Planning an encounter with sharks? As he recommended, read up on a shark trauma journal!

Karl: Reality, including mythologies and legends, is my main inspiration. I like to run games that explore life in other historical era and cultures and very hard Science Fiction games. Drawing on reality adds details and plot hooks you never would come up with yourself and provides a coherence missing from many campaigns. A lot of fantasy games super from being the modern day with a thin medieval veneer then to make matters worse a mixed bag of creatures is thrown

in. My current D&D game is based on British Fairy Tales and to a lesser extent the British Isles in the year 1300CE. Players are intrigues when they discover that the familiar is absent or differs from their expectations. For example in 1300 Britain Inns are a new idea and most settlements don't have one. Instead locals invite perfect strangers to stay with in their homes often asking for nothing in exchange other than news and tales. Lot's of great hooks for plots! PCs in the Green Isles fight giants and dragons but will never meet a beholder or giant ape.

August 16: What historical character would you like in your group? For what game?

Lev: A historical character as a player?! My goodness, would a historical personages have time for this sort of thing? How about Immanuel Kant for first edition Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, just to fuck with his head. He'd probably do a re-write of the system in the style of the Critiques and it would be full of tables, and sub-tables, and sub-sub-tables. It would look like a finely-tuned object-orientated program and possible the best game system ever written.

Karl: None. I'm just not that interested in *specific* individuals. Almost anyone can bring good ideas and contribute.

August 17: What fictional character would best fit in your group? Why?

Lev: Which group is the first question that comes to mind. The current GURPS Middle Earth game would be amusing with any number of the appropriate characters from that story. Actually Radagast The Brown has appeared a couple of times as the mentor for my Dalish Ranger character and with association with Rick B's, Beijabar bard. So he would be an excellent choice, especially given how much of the game has been set in Mirkwood and has involved magical animals.

Karl: I took this to mean which fictional character as a *player*. See above answer for historical persons.

August 18: What innovation could RPG groups gain the most benefit from?

Lev: I think that RPGs actually do very well with innovative technologies, and the individuals groups need to be attentive to this. A Eclipse Phase game that I am in has players from Melbourne, Vietnam, New Zealand, and Perth, Western Australia - we make good use of Google Hangouts for our regular session, combining the better audio system and platform independence that its competitors lack, along with the real-time text, Google Drive etc features that can be pleasantly combined.

Karl 'Dice' programs. See my article RPG Review 21.

August 19: What is the best way to learn a new game?

Lev: It depends a great deal about the player, and their experiences. Assuming at least a passing familiarity with RPGs, I would say that a character generation system which places the character explicitly in the setting, followed by a scenario which tests a range of abilities and resolution systems used in the game, along with themes used in the setting. Particularly memorable scenario for this was 'The Garhound Contest' for RuneQuest, 'Ceremony of the Samurai' for Legend of the Five Rings', and the aforementioned 'Ego Hunter' for Eclipse Phase. Seriously the latter needs to become a movie.

August 20: What is the most challenging but rewarding system you have learned?

Lev: Eclipse Phase by several Astronomical Units. The core mechanic is basically a role-under percentile system with a few quirks for criticals, margin of success and so forth. But the real challenge is the incredible range of options available. With various supplements players have dozens "races" (morphs) to choose from plus numerous backgrounds and factions to select from. As a very high-tech game, it's really gear-heavy, plus there's psionics, and mental illnesses. Then there's the background of the solar system, the depths of space, and extrasolar gates, artificial intelligences gone insane, alien infections, and goodness it does on.

August 21: What was the funniest misinterpretation of a game rule in your group?

Lev: Back when I started RPGs, the group I was in started an AD&D game. But they didn't have the Monster Manual on-hand, using the creature summary from an appendix in the Dungeon Masters Guide. The DM, Doug L., in a state of mere misreading, decided that the party was attacked by a Rock. The party was very surprised by the ability of this animated piece of stone, and even more so as it had the ability to fly! It was of course, a Roc.

Karl: I was 13 when we first started playing AD&D 1e. There was no-one to teach us. When 12 and 13 year olds are presented with the 1e books mistakes will be made. For a while we thought you re-rolled hit points at the start of every session. There was a 1st level fighter who had 8 hits who woke-up the next morning with 2 for no reason.

Lev: Just as an aside for August 21, in OD&D (original editions) you did reroll hit points each level. It was ... weird.

August 22: What are some random events in your games that keep happening?

Lev: From a post I made from rpg.net in 2009:

"It [the game] got pretty freaky when real-world events started correlating with in-game events. That started when I turned up to join the existing game group and the Storyteller started with 'OK, this game is set in Halifax, Nova Scotia'. I reached in my bag and pulled out maps of the region, enrollment papers and information for Dalhousie University. I had, in previous weeks, considered emigrating there to do postgraduate studies. Several game sessions later one of the players and her partner was coming home late one night and there were all these road blocks marked "Halifax" around the street they lived in. Later we discover that there was filming for the Australian drama television series of the same name. Later in the course of the game we witnessed the death of the God of Cod. A week later I picked up a newspaper report of a sudden and surprising shortage of cod in the region. It was all getting a bit much. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Karl: you know I can't think of any. Dull I know but there it is.

August 23: Share one of your best 'Worst Luck' stories.

Lev: In my mid-teens I started attending the gaming club at the University of Western Australia and started playing a Star Trek game, taking a Caitian security guard, because roleplaying an anthropomorphic space-faring Star Trek cat was

kinda cool in my teenaged mind. I had the best phaser skill in the group at 80%. Yet somehow I managed to roll '00', a critical failure three times in succession.

Karl: I'm having trouble dragging up answers that are worth other people reading.

August 24: What is the game you are most likely to give to others as a gift?

Lev: RuneQuest, third edition. If given a few copies of that one away, not because it the best game system in existence (it isn't), or the best product (it isn't), but because it has so much evocative detail in a relatively modest sized text. Even with the game's numerous quirks it is from here that one can really immerse oneself in that hermeneutic exploration of the life and perspectives of people according to different social formations. Another good option, especially for beginning players is GURPS 3rd edition revised; relatively simple, descriptive, and to pick up the core mechanics.

Karl: Nil. I pretty much never buy people gifts anymore. I just don't go to occasions where gifts are exchanged. I can't use reality to filter my choices and it depends on who was receiving the game. Let's say it's someone randomly selected from the phonebook. ('phonebook!', showing my age!). For someone like to have no RPG experience I'd have to say the D&D 5e PHB. Its fairly beginner friendly but has some 'meat' and if they get hooked it's all they'll need as a player. Additionally, it's the game for which they are most likely to find a group to play with.

August 25: What makes for a good character?

Lev: As a bare foundation and as metagaming, having a player who has a sense of method acting. Apart from that a character who has a background - it doesn't have to be fully developed at the start of the story (indeed, it shouldn't be), but at least one with some context and the possibility of character development. In that context the player and GM should start introducing issues of tension - within the character, between the player character and other player characters, and with external antagonists, as tension drives story development. Finally personality traits such as overconfidence and the like can drive the action.

Karl: The problem with going second it all the answers have been taken. However, I'm going to say a good referee. Let's unpack this claim. I assume by 'method-acting' Lev means being able to make choices based on the character's motivations and personality; not being able to cry on cue. To do that you need to have at least a 'thumb-nail sketch' of what those motivations are. Those motivations come from the character's experiences so a few defining moments of backstory are good. With these in place the kind of 'tensions' Lev mentions will organically arise *IF* the referee provides a sufficiently complex and reactive milieu. A linear quest with lifeless NPCs and a referee who steers deviating players back to this quest is death to character development. Additionally, a good referee sets the tone of the group. Players should feel comfortable speaking out, trying their crazy plans, being true to their character even if the other players are shocked, and generally even the quietest of them called on to contribute.

August 26: What hobbies go well with RPGs?

Lev: It's amazing how many people who are into RPGs are also somehow involved in IT. I don't think is entirely for historical reasons, although that is a factor. It is also due to the systematic element in the design and, I think, the intellectual activity that people engage in. It is notable how, over the decades, RPG design over the years has a surprisingly correlation with programming design. An interest in mythology and history is of course something useful for players of historical or fantasy setting, as astronomy or the life sciences for science fiction settings. An interest in any of the expressive arts would be useful for any storytelling or characterisation. Really there is quite a range of appropriate academic interests.

Karl: Lev's observation about an overlap between IT and RPG does not match my experience. Warning: gross generalisations based on personal experience and bias ahead! In the 80's through to 90's I would have said RPG players and especially referees were widely read and broadly curious. Now though I think there are changes afoot. For a while

there have been people coming to RPG from computer games and these players are not as 'text oriented'. Computer game people tend to be tactics oriented and some seem to have trouble adapting to portraying characters and maintaining a cooperative outlook. Hot on this groups heels were those coming from 'pop-culture geekery' these people know specific licensed properties very well and are pretty savvy about narrative, genre, character development etc sometimes so much that their focus detracts from the mission. The whole pop-culture-geekery thing has become all-consuming, those computer gamers, role players, and comic book people, we are all becoming a single unified sub-culture. This is great! A group now might benefit from the tactical focus of a computer-game player, have a great character to interact with brought in by the comic person, and the referee's encyclopedic knowledge of the licensed universe could really breath life into the environment. Some of these people are no longer thinking of themselves as 'computer gamers' or whatever, because this is no longer true. Me however, I'm a fossil. I just play RPGs I have no interest in computer games, board games, learning everything about the Star Wars extended universe etc. Increasingly often people are surprised that I don't play computer games or don't understand them when they speak in pop-culture references. Finally, the massive presence of RPG in geek-popular-culture is spilling over into the mainstream and people who never would have played RPGs are now at least playing D&D.

August 27: Describe the most unusual circumstance or location in which you have gamed.

Lev: I ran a few sessions of Horror on the Orient Express in the Willsmere library, which is a 19th century French Second Empire style former asylum (I live in the complex, making me an ex-asylum resident). The library itself has some rather nice furnishings and various sketches of the asylum's inmates and their life, some of which were quite unnerving. Mrs Coppin's etched name into the window always looks like a frozen moment in time. Behind the closed doors was a sort of museum wing of the library, which included a 1950s first-generation EST machine. The asylum also included a doctor who developed the idea of insulin-shock therapy as a 'cure' for schizophrenia; put the patient into an insulin-induced coma, then jolt them back with a shot of glucose. It was subject to at least three Royal Commissions. Appropriate for Call of Cthulhu? Hell yeah.

Karl: in the 1980's we gamed in the middle of old growth forests around gas lanterns warmed by a fire. As kids RPG was a great way to fill camping trip evenings without TV.

August 28: What film or novel would you be most surprised that a friend had not seen or read?

Lev: Quite clearly 'The Lord of the Rings'. Tolkien's influence over contemporary fantasy fiction and the development of roleplaying games is absolutely overwhelming. There are of course many authors who are critical, and rightly so, of the perceiving failings of the world ("Winnie the Pooh for grown-ups", as Michael Moorcock opined), the often awkward presentation of female characters, the technological stagnation, the Eurocentric outlook and so forth. But all this said, no other author has such an influential premodern sense of enchantment. If any gamer said they had not read 'Lord of the Rings', or at the very least seen the films, I would be surprised.

Karl: LOTR. Though as far as the book is concerned I've met many that tried to read it but could not finish it. The books have a very different structure, pacing, and language use to current fantasy fiction. In LOTR the deep history of the world and the quiet times between the 'action scenes' are more important than in many modern 'page-turners'. 'The One Ring' RPG captures this structure and pacing very well and does so in a way that's possible more accessible than reading the original books. If I had to nominate another I'd say the Marvel's Avengers first film. I'm relatively new to the whole super-hero genre and I am excited by the possibilities it offers. I find it surprising that no-one around me seems to be playing supers rpgs.

August 29: If you could host a game anywhere on Earth, where would that be?

Lev: There is so many options here. I have it on good authority that a favourite film of research scientists in Antarctica is 'The Thing'. Perhaps a campaign of 'Mountains of Madness'? A game of Spycraft or Top Secret with Barack Obama in The White House? You know this has given me an idea. In the near future I'm visiting the Barcelona Supercomputer

Centre which is built inside the former Chapel Torre Girona, a 19th century chapel. It would be a good place to run, if only a short session of Cyberpunk or Eclipse Phase.

Karl: In a gaming room like the one described for the next question. A dull but true answer.

August 30: Describe the ideal game room if your budget were unlimited.

Lev: This one I'm not really worried about at all. There is no need for me to have a particularly fancy RPG, the game is about collective storytelling, and if people can do that over a campfire, or just whilst walking together, that's enough as you need.

Karl: Quiet room, comfortable furniture, good size table, plenty of scrap paper and spare dice.

August 31: What is the best piece of advice you were ever given for your game of choice?

Lev: There are, of course, numerous excellent examples and hints for game players and GMs that have become canonical statements in their own right. RuneQuest's definition of roleplaying as "improvised radio theater" was particularly insightful, especially for 1978. That really opened my eyes as a player. As a GM, the line which did the same for me was in Rolemaster's "Campaign Law", although arguably all the material is generic, rather than Rolemaster specific. In this case it was the advice to "Avoid a Sense of Contrivance". Let your players believe that they have discovered the right path by their own intellect. Sometimes they might even do it. But how will they know the difference?

Karl: I can't really say. I have read so many chapters and articles about running and playing in games and talked to so many fellow gamers over the years constantly adding to my pool of collected wisdom with really curating where all that information came from. I suggest you do the same!

Doctor Strange Movie Review

by *Andrew Moshos*

dir: Scott Derrickson, 2016

Sometimes just letting me see trippy visuals is enough. More than enough. That's all I'm asking for, sometimes.

Really, I'm that cheap a date.

I wasn't really expecting to enjoy this as much as I did, but that's because mostly I think my decision-making abilities have taken a hit in the last couple of weeks. When presented with the option of watching *Arrival*, that new, apparently thoughtful and uplifting science fiction film starring Amy Adams, or *Doctor Strange*, Marvel's latest attempt to absorb the entirety of the world's money, I chose the path of least intellectual requirement.

Yep, I had the choice of watching something emotionally engaging and intellectually satisfying, and something that looked cool and trippy, and I essentially opted, or at least argued in favour of the Happy Meal option.

Why? Well, I could wax rhapsodically about the actual darkness that has started spreading across the world, and how at the moment I just don't have it in me to engage intellectually or hopefully with anything right now. I just can't even, as the lazy phrase goes. It'll come back, because it has to, but for now I just can't goddamn stomach anything that requires me to think or feel too much about anything.

Marvel's ongoing production line of movies perfectly fills that void. By watching any of their movies, I'm not guaranteed a thoughtful or complex experience, but I am guaranteed at least a couple of hours of people doing some colourful stuff with lots of CGI all over the place, and a tidy, if not pat, resolution, with a teaser as to what the next bloody story is going to be, making you feel like a fool for bothering to watch this placeholder.

In that sense, and in many others, *Doctor Strange* is pretty much exactly the same as every other Marvel movie. Everything probably ties into everything else so that at some point virtually everyone will end up in a future *Avengers* film.

Andy Warhol famously quipped that everyone would eventually get their fifteen minutes of fame, but what that freakish clod got horribly wrong is that absolutely everyone in the world would eventually be a superhero in a Marvel flick one day.

I haven't had my call yet, but I know it's coming soon. I'd happily play one of *Unbeatable Squirrel Girl's* sidekicks, but I'm not holding my breath just yet. The sheer quantity of money Marvel has made for Disney over the last decade or so has empowered them to look through the entirety of their comic book catalogue and say, out loud or just to themselves "Damn, the public will watch anything we put out as long as there's a hint they might see a few seconds of a shirtless Hemsworth".



So something as unlikely as a Doctor Strange movie, about a man who's a robe wearing wizard (and this is the year of our Lord 2016), with a main character played by a bald Tilda Swinton, can get a guernsey, no questions asked.

That's freedom, of a sort. Of course, the whole package has to follow a highly recognisable course (of course of course because we're still talking about a movie requiring a budget in the hundreds of millions), but it's (slightly) different enough to seem exciting and new. Or should that be 'new'.

The hero's journey requires someone who acts like a prat but is brilliant at something having something bad happen to them, which then requires them to go on a literal journey. Have a guess if that happens here.

Dr Steven Strange, which happens to be his actual character's surname, only likes really difficult medical cases where he can show off brazenly and take risks others wouldn't dream of, in a really dismissive and maximally arrogant way. This is why you employee Eggs Benedict Cucumberpatch in the first place. He exudes cold arrogance and Olympian disdain the way I exude the smell of whisky and cigarettes on any given weekend. Sure, it's an assault on the senses, but it's also kind of comforting.

Cumberbatch has mastered the cold, unblinking stare like few others working today, and he can make it work whether he's playing Sherlock, Shylock or a warlock. Didn't work so well in Star Trek Into Darkness, but let's not mention the war.

No, really, when a person and a character are so lofty and above the rest of humanity, well, all that can possibly be coming down the track is a major fall. When it happens, my partner turned to me and hissed "Hubris!" as the cause of his downfall, and she was certainly right.

With shattered hands and an inability to do the one thing that makes him feel superior to all of humanity, it's up to a bald headed Scottish woman in saffron robes called The Ancient One (Tilda Swinton) to tap him hard enough that he flies through dimensions in time and space in order to realise how insignificant he (currently) is in the multiverse's scheme of things.

Of course, he has to be convinced that he is insignificant in order to become so powerful that he becomes REALLY significant and all of Creation depends upon his actions.

How great is the scene where he hurriedly gets a guided tour through the cosmos! How sublime and insane the visuals become. We've already seen some visuals at the beginning that kind of take the cityscape-bending stuff some of us remember as the only memorable element of Inception and bump it up a few notches. Cities fold and bend like the most surrealist/Cubist images that, had they been able to ever sit together and watch this, would have made Picasso stuff Salvador Dali into his own mouth in order to stop himself from screaming.

There is an earthly villain (the great Dane Mads Mikkelsen), who's really not that interesting, have to say, but it's always wonderful seeing him in anything, but there's also a monstrous 'entity' out there waiting for a chance to eat up our entire planet called Dormammu (voiced by Eggs Benedict Cucumberbatch-patch and yes I am going to keep making this lame joke because it delights me: it's what we always call him at home whenever he appears on the telly – makers of Gogglebox take note!).

It's kinda scary to think of a scenario where the only thing stopping an evil god-like being from consuming us all is a bunch of people wearing clothes the Jedi would reject for being too fancy pants, and Tilda's bald head. It's even more scary to be confronted with the premise that it's actually in the end going to be a guy called Benedict who has to stop our inter-dimensional arses being scorched in the eternal fires of hell through magic and making things appear out of hats and stuff.

Action-wise it's entertaining enough, I guess (it's fine, it's just that it isn't the reason I'm watching). The only two

characters that really matter are Strange and the Ancient One, and, look, I'm not that critical when Tilda is involved in anything. For me she gets a free pass for like, and she has to be uniquely terrible in a uniquely terrible flick for me to not immediately think it's the best thing I've ever seen.

She's wonderful in this role. She's like the Dalai Lama, but even wiser and even more human, yet otherworldly. She sells certain scenes, like a frozen moment in time at a hospital as life hangs in the balance, that few other actors could have carried off, I reckon. Still, there is a lot of action in the flick, and they clearly made a concerted effort to bring us a distinct variation on the kinds of action we've come to expect from Marvel flicks. It's not just people punching stuff, or shooting stuff. Sometimes it involves someone trying to use a defibrillator to kill their opponent, or opening a portal that leaves their enemy in a desert or on a mountaintop.

And the final confrontation with Dormammu? Maybe it came across as somewhat less that satisfying or cathartic, because we've been programmed to expect (and be bored by) an escalating crescendo of explosions and buildings falling and then a big explosion, but I for one applaud the strange catastrophe-in-reverse and bargaining that punctuates the climax of this flick. It's kinda clever. I liked it.

It maybe seems like the cookie cutter factory is only going to pump out cookies cut to factory specs, but I appreciate that they did enough to make this different (enough) for me to enjoy it. Visually it's a total trip and I still feel a touch of brain damage from some of those visual twists. It's sublime looking, mandalas and all, visuals bent, spindled and broken into new configurations, and while there's not much of a case for the necessity of a sequel (which they'll do anyway), I am curious to see what's next for this enigmatic chap. He has more of a relationship with his wardrobe than he does with any other humans in this flick (which is understandable, because no-one is as wonderful as he is), but that's okay too. He's all about the magic, you see, and people are going to have to come a distant second.

But as long as he's protecting us from evil dimensions that want to eat us whole, then we should be grateful that this otter-faced freak is on our side.

8 times I've had the same kind of fight with an article of clothing yet no dark magic was involved and I still lost the fight out of 10

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"I do not seek to rule this world. I seek to destroy it." – that's apparently all you need to say these days to become president, as well – Doctor Strange.

Originally posted at: <http://movie-reviews.com.au/doctorstrange>

Arrival Movie Review

by Andrew Moshos



With hope and patience and open hearts, no matter the colour of blood they might pump, perhaps we can figure this puzzle of our existence out.

dir: Denis Villeneuve

2016

There aren't many science fiction films that leave me crying or thoughtful as I sit blubbing through the credits. The reason is this – most science fiction flicks aren't really science fiction flicks. They're action flicks with science fiction set dressing and costuming.

Arrival is definitely not an action flick masquerading as a science fiction flick. It is certainly about a first contact scenario with what we would call actual alien aliens, who appear on Earth without even the courtesy of an advance email or nothin'.

They just appear, and they don't even seem to want anything. They don't want our resources, or our women, or anything. They just sit there, in their ships, waiting.

This is enough to make the leaders of several countries think “We should be blowing the ever-living fuck out of them, because their very presence makes us uncomfortable”.

It's frustrating to see, but when I look at the world we currently live in, it doesn't seem that far fetched. When some 'just listening to right-wing extremists on the internet' Marines think, for no sensible reason “well, let's just blow them up!”, it seems discordant, and arbitrary, but again, I look at Trump's America, and I don't think the naughty soldiers would have even been able to wait as long as they did.

It's a common staple of American flicks that society, at least American society, will fall apart at the slightest encouragement, whether it's a zombie infestation, some kind of epidemic or the victory / loss of a particular football team. You can add 'first contact with mysterious but non-aggressive alien species' to the list, because even in this relatively gentle flick, humanity loses its shit pretty goddamn quickly.

In a tribute to science, at least a couple of Americans don't lose their minds completely. Linguistics professor Dr Louise Banks (Amy Adams) and some other guy (Jeremy Renner) are brought in by the US military to try and figure out how to communicate with the aliens, who don't seem to be forthcoming with the explanations or the vocabulary or anything.

Of course, you could have just had some of the dumber soldiers scream “Speak English or Die , you illegal aliens, or we'll deport you!” at them until they learnt how to communicate, but maybe the measured, calm, intellectual approach will work out better.

Louise is scared, because, honestly, such a situation should be terrifying, but the intellectual challenge appeals to her strongly, and she approaches the task in ways that require her to ignore or at least pacify the increasingly belligerent hierarchy around her.

They are made up mostly of a no-nonsense Colonel (Forest Whitaker) who keeps goading her to ask the aliens what their business is, already, and some lunatic CIA guy (Michael Stuhlbarg) who everyone treats seriously (even though they shouldn't), who deliberately misinterprets every single thing the academics slowly tease out of their interactions with the aliens to justify launching some suicidally stupid military attack.

If the aliens signalled something about 'popcorn', he would be screaming 'Shoot Them, Shoot Them; they're here to 'Pop' our 'Corn'. If they said something about puppies he'd find a way to make it a declaration of war.

I understand the reason why you have characters like this in even the most thoughtful science fiction: i.e., they represent many of the belligerent idiots in the world and in our own lives who are completely deaf and blind to facts or reason, or their absence, but I do find them to be tiresome stereotypes.

The aliens themselves – well, they're pretty freaky-deaky. They clearly are not bipedal humanoids like 99% of the aliens we usually see in these kinds of flicks. Like I joked to my partner as we watched this, decades of Star Trek and Star Wars films have indoctrinated us, both nerds and not-nerds, into thinking that if we ever get to see actual aliens in our lifetimes, we would expect them to look pretty much like us except with some minor variations, like green paint jobs, ridges on foreheads or pointy ears.

It's probably far more likely, if the Christian God allows evolution to happen the same way on other planets in His miraculous Creationist / Intelligent Designer way (of course I am kidding please stop the hate mail), that of course those organisms are going to be 'best fit' for their planets' environments and biomes, with their unique atmospheres and conditions. Even if you found another planet that was identical to Earth gravity-wise, chemical composition, atmospherically etc there's no reason for any of the organisms to evolve like our planet's organisms did, because, you know, random natural selection on the micro and macro scales and all that.

Blah blah yes of course I'm going off topic, but this flick inspires thought and enquiry rather than shutting your brain down with explosions and fistfights. It gets pretty technical in some of its detail, but that helps make Louise and Ian seem more credible in their frankly baffling attempts to make sense of the aliens. Even if we have no idea how they figure out what they do, we can at least accept that the characters (since we can't, unless the 'we' I'm referring to includes Noam Chomsky in the audience, in which case he'd probably work it out easy peasy lemon squeezy).

In the background there's an escalating tension as the leaders of other countries (initially the world's poidexters and eggheads try to work together, but that gets shut down pretty quickly) start getting more terrified / belligerent of the visitors, and start thinking that blowing shit up is the way to go, but Louise trusts that what is really required is just more time, more communication, more collaboration. She trusts that the two species will eventually be able to understand each other enough despite their vast differences, in order to communicate what each side wants, because anyone and anything, most of all, wants to express its hopes and dreams.

It could be a vain hope, but she'll keep trying as long as she can. Interwoven with her attempts to reach out are scenes where she seems to be remembering something quite beautiful and quite tragic that happened in her recent past, that increasingly informs her thinking, her remembrances, her interactions.

But that's not what's actually happening, which adds, at the end, a whole other level of heartfelt poignancy, both subtle and sublime. In trying to learn the alien language, for a linguist, who knows of the kinds of ideas around how language shapes worldview / reality, that the brain has structures that adapt to language, we see that Louise will change as well, and in ways that might help solve the 'puzzle' before it is too late, but that aren't going to make life any easier for her, in fact, far from it.

Adams perfectly plays this character. She doesn't overact at all, which is a surprising thing to write. She plays this character like she's playing a character that's not in a science fiction / genre piece. She doesn't usually overact, I'm not implying that, it's just that many flicks don't bother using her talent for quiet understatement, and the emotion she can convey just with her eyes. Sure, let her keep earning big dollars from the increasingly stupid Superman flicks under Zack Snyder's poisonous, dumbening direction, but let her keep making decent flicks like this. We all benefit from it. Jeremy Renner is also a solid co-star in this, ably supporting Adams but aiming for intelligent understatement rather than swinging for the fences. I forget how well he can do away from superhero flicks, too.

You could argue that half of the film's work is done by the soundtrack, even more than the deliberately mysterious editing (which only makes sense at the end). The use of Max Richter's *The Nature of Sunlight* is especially gutting, since there's a link between using lots of violins and our heart strings, and every composer and director knows it. If you have some scenes in your film and you really, really want your audience to drown in their own feels, then this piece, this goddamn piece is the one you play at the beginning and at the end.

You play it at the beginning to let your audience know this is meant to be a thoughtful flick. You play it at the end to make sure what's left of their hearts is broken into tiny pieces.

Arrival is not the only one of its kind, but it certainly is special. I would avoid over-hyping it to people (it's been nominated for prestigious awards, so it may be too late) because this isn't the flick you expect, that you can expect, and if you tell people enough about it for it to make sense, it won't impact in the same way. Fair warning. I did find it thoughtful and beautiful, and I wanted to sleep for a week afterwards, so I could process the hope and the sorrow.

It's almost too much.

9 times I am unsure I would be as brave as Louise out of 10

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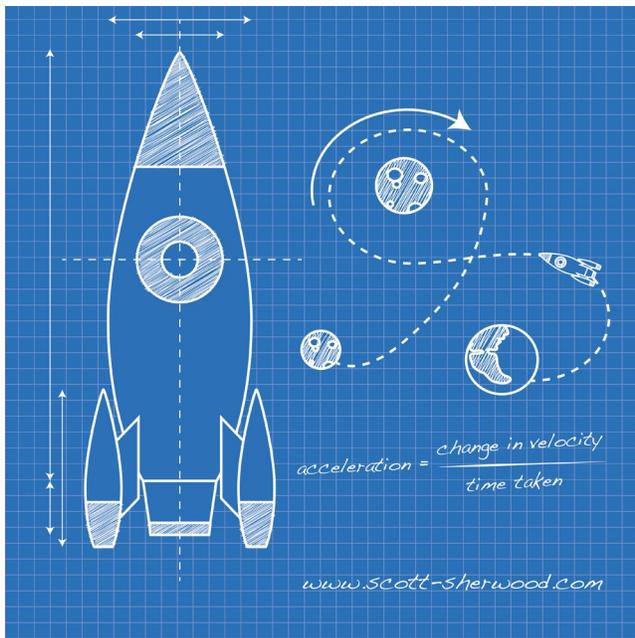
“Zài zhànzhēng zhōng méiyǒu yíngjiā zhǐyǒu guǎfù” – In war there are no winners, only widows - *Arrival*

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