GURPS Cyberpunk Review

Sun, 01/02/2011 - 11:41 ? rpgrev

A Personal Introduction

My first encounter with GURPS Cyberpunk must have been in late 1989; a friend of mine, Chris Stronach, had managed to get a hold of the pre-release copy. With some maneuvers he had managed to get the multiple sessions introduced to the programme of the local science fiction convention which had a cyberpunk theme. That was Swancon XV, held in Perth in January 1990. We collected comments from the players, I composed a twenty plus page submission, dutifully sent it off and...

... Well, as is well known the offices of Steve Jackson Games were raided by the U.S. Secret Service on March 1st when all the GURPS Cyberpunk material was taken, on the grounds the pending publication was "a handbook for computer crime". About a month later some of the material was returned and GURPS Cyberpunk was published. Alas, apparently without the material that I had sent in and, dammit, without our names on the inside cover as playtesters or commentators. Which is a shame because being listed in GURPS Cyberpunk would have been seriously cool. Maybe one day there'll be a second edition.

The Product

GURPS Cyberpunk is a 128-page softcover designed for the third edition of said system. It has attractive and evocative cover art by David Schleinkofer of a disembodied cyborg head superimposed over a a city scene reminiscent of Blade Runner. The internal art is of lower quality (excepting those pieces by Rick Lowry) with occasional contextual appropriateness. The serif justified text varies between one-column with side-bars and two-column. Content-rich, the style jumps between being formal and rules-orientated to being somewhat less formal and speculative. Like all good GURPS books it comes with *random* italics.

Supported with a good table of contents, an index, a glossary, and a bibliography, there are six main chapters whose headings are pretty much self-explanatory: Characters (pp6-28), Cyberwear (pp29-41), Technology and Equipment (pp42-60), Netrunning (pp61-95), World Design (pp96-114) and Campaigning (pp115-112).

Characters

GURPS Cyberpunk recommends that GMs may want to start their characters with more than the standard 100 character points, as the competition is so tough. Suggested levels include 150 points, 200 points and 250 points. The lower level is considered to be a major disadvantage. This is in addition to 80 points of disadvantages, twice the normal level for GURPS. A sidebar discussion on points-vs-cash for cyberwear underlines a problem faced by the system on how to avoid cashed-up characters (not very cyberpunk) with cyberwear (very cyberpunk), which is expensive. It's an endemic GURPS problem at higher tech levels and the playtest document did include a very simple and effective resolution; split income and wealth. Alas, this was not incorporated for reasons best left to the line editors.

The next ten pages provide descriptive text of potential character types according to the genre; Assassin, Bodyguard, Broker, Celebrity, Cop, Corporate etc. This includes suggested backgrounds, advantages and disadvantages etc. In the main, the descriptive material is too long, mostly obvious, and not enough text is spent on solid recommendations for skill choices, income levels and relationship to the job table, likely social status, equipment and cyberwear choices and

so forth. In contrast the review of advantages, disadvantages and skills is solid, providing good examples for inclusion in the milieu and a number of new choices, including 'alternate identity', 'contacts', 'zeroed', 'amnesia', 'terminally ill', 'on the edge' and the new skill 'computer hacking', among others.

Equipment

The next two chapters deal with equipment, both cyberwear and normal. The text comes with this stated caveat that much of the material is taken from GURPS Ultra Tech, especially for Tech Level 8, and this is largely true, especially for normal equipment. With regards to cyberwear a key difference between GURPS Cyberpunk and GURPS Ultra-Tech is the existence of bionic modifications in the former, allowing for additional or reduced cost enhancements and limitations on the particular parts, although the cost reduction for parts lacking cosmetic appearance (-50% to -80%) seems a quite high. Apart from that there is a lot more cybernetics than in Ultra-Tech, covering limbs, weapons, all-of-body modifications, many sense organs, mental implants, and neurological interfaces. The mental implants are split between personality chips and physical control chips, such as skill chips. Many of these are not TL 8 in the standard GURPS exploration, but well advanced from that level (such as t
he Personality Implant), but are appropriate to the setting.

The equipment chapter covers the range of personal weapons expected for the tech-level and largely available in Ultra-Tech. This includes personal weapons (slugthrowers, gauss needlers, gyrocs, lasers, stun wands), heavy weapons (grenades, grenade launchers), armour (monocrys, reflec, exoskeletons), various communications, recording and sensor equipment, personal vehicles, tool kits, security and surveillance systems, and various medical technologies such as braintaping, cloning, and a variety of hypothetical drugs (giving game effects for real drugs is seemingly a taboo area). As with the previous chapter, the technology and equipment chapter is heavy on the content and system integration, but also written in an accessible manner.

Netrunning

For many, the chapter on Netrunning in GURPS Cyberpunk is the highlight of the book. Certainly the author had sufficient knowledge in this field as a member of "computer security" fraternal organisations such as the Legion of Doom and as a contributor to the journal Phrack. Pleasingly, the chapter kicks off with the an option not to have a cinematic 'cyberspace' environment in favour of 'realistic networks' and then describes various computer types defined in scales of complexity. Each level represents ten times the processing power and speed of the proceeding level, so a complexity 2 computer (a household standard), is ten times the speed of a Complexity 1 computer. Software, along with a financial cost, are also rated in terms of complexity; a computer can run two programs of it's own complexity simultaneously and ten programs of a preceding complexity level; note the (probably unnecessary) distinction between multitasking capacity and processing power.

An excellent summary of the development of packet-switched networks is provided, along with a handy list of existing networks c1990. Naturally enough this was prior to the near-universal adoption of the TCP/IP suite, although "APRAnet" and "Internet" are listed as two of the seventeen network names for the United States. For security purposes a distinction is drawn between users and superusers, with optional further detail. A successful upgrade from normal to superuser after is perhaps a little easy. However this is an exception to an otherwise highly realistic, and very well simulated simple and clear explanation of the very basics of computer security.

For a more cinematic flavour, a cyberspace environ is also offered where increasingly expensive neural and graphic environmental interfaces provide heightened speed of interaction; a more realistic alternative which could have maintained the GUI would have been improved skill for basic tasks (i.e., Computer Operations, rather than Programming or Hacking). Cyberspace activity is measured in milliseconds with system complexity provided in the base value with modifications for hardware enhancements and the GUI. Attempts to carry out multiple actions during a phase constitutes a -3 cumulative penalty to the 'runners Cyberdeck Operation skill. Movement through the network between nodes is one phase per 500 mile hops, a very accurate measurement which has it's own apocryphal tale [1]. "Vision" is limited to the complexity rating of the 'deck in hops. "Combat" is carried out by activating the sometimes

outrageously expensive p

rograms which usually have a default based on either Cyberdeck (or Computer) Operation, Computer Programming and Computer Hacking. Programs can be ordered according to conditional logic and indeed, players and the GM are encouraged to do so.

Networks are mapped realistically, that is, they have nodes, subnets within the nodes and connections between the nodes and the subnets, with standard icons used to differentiate between system types (academic, banking, military etc). Involvement (and spontaneous generation) of artificial intelligences is included in this direction, a little oddly. An illustrative sample system map and netrun is also provided which aids clarification of any issues.

World Design and Campaigning

The final two chapters cover the main issues of running a GURPS Cyberpunk campaign. The world design chapter starts with the stylistic elements of a typical cyberpunk setting derived from the portmanteau components of the phrase; urban blight combined with cutting edge technology (computers, medicine, transportation), and the results of such combinations (drugs, organlegging, cyberghouls). The economics section describes the probability of instability in government currency, greater stability in specie-backed money; computer chips are suggested as a popular item for barter. The unregulated corporate world, a corpocracy is described as a techno-feudalism, and the dangers of quasi-monopolies. Some space is dedicated to work, income and changes of foodstuffs of the post-industrial economy.

A range of governments is described with a passing head-nod to cyberpunk literary convention as the norm. No attempt is made to assign government types to socio-economic conditions. Governments and societies are defined by Control Ratings which determine the degree of control. There is the additional challenge of international relations between the breakup of the state into smaller components and its balancing form in the form of united economic and political communities. There is a brief discussion of wars, with an emphasis on a winding-down of conventional wars by nation-states in favour of increasingly exact strikes. In according with the literature, there is an assumption that a cyberpunk setting "will include a high degree of personal and societal violence... [t]errorism will take many forms in the future." Other issues of societal descriptions include crime and punishment, with a special reference to corporate relation to crimes. Arcologies and city services are describ
ed under urbanisation. Changes to family structure, including same-sex relationships, contractual periods and the problems with clone marriages and "vat babies" are discussed. Hypertexted and individually selected news is considered probable, along with an expansion of private publication.

The Campaigning chapter debates the relative virtues of campaign realism, the scope of the story, the hidden agenda within the plotline, the thematic importance of incorporating technological change, political, economic and even religious struggles, the difficulties of generating a workable group dynamic with characters which are typically antisocial, and crossing with other genres (Special Ops, Space on one level, Fantasy and Supers on the other). Adventure, rather than campaign themes (read: narratives), are also given brief mention.

Overall

In substance, there are many areas where this book excels; the Netrunning chapter was certainly the best for its time and stands up well today. The cyberwear and equipment chapters are also excellent content-heavy chapters. The system rules for characters is likewise excellent. The rest of the book however is a little light on content. This is not to suggest that there are any game-breaking features, or descriptive text that is patently wrong, it is just that it often took a lot of reading to find something that wasn't fairly obvious or a particularly interesting angle on an old problem. The World Design and Campaign in particular often read like page filler. Stylistically, The product, presentation, layout, organisational work and readability is very good. The only real negative here was some of the internal artwork.

Overall GURPS Cyberpunk is a very good piece of work. Perhaps not deserving of being the subject of a Secret Service raid, and certainly not a handbook on computer crime (except to mention trashing and 'social engineering'). Interetsingly, it not actually a necessity for cyberpunk games; one can manage quite adequately with Ultra-Tech and the

right information attitude for example (cyberspace rules aside). Overall however, it is recommended as an easy summary of available technology, for the netrunning rules, and as a moderately good source of ideas.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .5 (art) + .9 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .7 (product) = 4.5

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .6 (text) + .8 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 4.5

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