



The Future Is Near... A Thematic Review of Near Future RPGS

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The famous Yugoslav academic of science fiction literature, Darko Suvin, once referred to science fiction as the mythology of modernity framed within a scientific cognitive framework. It is the mythological aspect that is explored here, the idea that 'near future' roleplaying games reflect the hopes, dreams, fears and speculations of the authors, whether consciously or not. The scientific cognitive requirement in this context is less important than what Suvin would desire in defining a science fiction game, requiring a solidly materialist outlook. Some near future stories engage in magical thinking of various kinds, albeit with effects that are subtle or hidden, equating with a contemporary mode of consciousness. Thus a core purpose of this article is to review a number of 'near future' roleplaying games both in terms of literary expressions of their setting and themes whilst engaging in the more explicit question of game design.

The Wildly Fantastic

There are a number of games which, whilst nominally set in the near future, cannot be classified as 'near future' roleplaying games in the sense of this review. This includes games like *Gamma World* (1978), *Rifts* (1990) and *Torg* (1990). Their exclusion from a review of "what happens next" is because in the proposed futures are not meant to have a mythic objective. Neither *Gamma World*, *Rifts* or *Torg* are meant to necessarily propose a future, rather the future is a necessity which the setting requires.

With *Gamma World*, although the setting is post-nuclear, it is not in the framework of being near future. Although there were thematic attempts in the first edition to treat the post-armageddon circumstances with a modicum of seriousness, the system and content soon led subsequent games towards a science fantasy trajectory with an mostly juvenile amoral theme. 'Mutations' were an opportunity to acquire randomly determined 'super powers', encounters with other sapient beings was highly orientated towards violent conflict. The social organisations most explicitly described in the rules, the Cryptic Alliances, are thoroughly removed from any real political considerations and largely follow pathological single-issue obsessions.

Similar comments can also be made about *Rifts*, which speculates a cross-over of multiple environments through "rifts" on earth. Also speculating a nuclear war, said conflict opens gateways to fantasy powers (dwarves, dragons etc), horror (vampires, demons), science fiction-derived (cyborgs, aliens) etc. The Megaversal game system, deriving heavily from early AD&D (roll-under percentile skill checks, roll-high d20 combat checks and roll-high d20 saving throws, character classes, experience points), is notable for "Mega-Damage Capacity". The standard disclaimer at the beginning of *Rifts* indicates a cognitive dissonance at work; "none of us at Palladium Book condone or encourage the occult, the practise of magic, the use of drugs, or violence" - except that the entire line of play is heavily orientated towards exploring these practises.

At the other end of the continuum is *Torg*, set with the break-up of earth into different cosms (fantasy, horror, primitive, cybernetic, pulp-era). This does argue that *Rifts* is derived from *Gamma World*'s setting and themes, and *Torg*'s setting. The PC protagonists are 'Storm Knights', attempting to prevent the plans of the High Lords who control each cosm. Despite the title of 'Storm Knights' and unlike the previous two games, *Torg* characters are a very diverse lot as challenges take a much wider variety of expressions, the universal resolution system allows for greater system-integrated activity, and the unique 'drama deck' encourages cinematic narrative input. Furthermore, the

setting suggests more sophisticated alliances between the inhabitants of the various regimes and even in-setting explanations for traditionally problematic motifs (such as the traditional fantasy association of beauty equating with goodness).

Nuclear Armageddon

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the combination of antagonistic and belligerent world-leaders in the form of Ronald Reagan and Leonid Brezhnev and a troubled international arena raised the prospect of nuclear war. There was a significant wave of movies and television postulating such circumstances, such as *Threads* (UK, 1984) and *The Day After* (US, 1983), along with the most under-recognised Q.E.D. documentary *A Guide To Armageddon* (UK, 1982). Roleplaying games also followed this concern with a number postulating life after a nuclear war, most prominent being *The Morrow Project* (1980), *Aftermath!* (1981), *Twilight 2000* (1984), which was significantly revised to the point of virtually being a new game system (following other games by the same publisher, e.g., *MegaTraveller*) in the second edition (1990).

Two immediate objections could be raised from this list; the first is exclusion of *Paranoia* (1984) and the second being the inclusion of *Twilight 2000*, given that it is well and truly beyond the year 2000 when the game is set. The reason for this is as follows; although *Paranoia* is set after a nuclear war it is not about survival in a post-holocaust environment, even if it does include a great number of cold war metaphors. Rather it is more thoroughly discussed in the *Police State* section below. With regards to *Twilight 2000* the date as such is a rather nominal component of the setting, consisting most effectively of two main components; near future and post-nuclear.

The background narrative of *The Morrow Project* was the cryogenic freezing of teams and equipment to be revived in the event of a 1989 nuclear war to rebuild. Such a war eventuates at the teams (often with psionic characters) awaken far after the allocated time in a hostile environment. The thematic conflict and narrative objective is stated strongly: "Pledged to help humanity recover in whatever way they can, they can easily lose sight of their own ideals and adopt the brutal code of survival. They must find Prime Base in order to survive." As paramilitary groups, huge sections of the game are dedicated to combat equipment and simulation. Realistically, specific U.S. cities are noted for being nuclear targets (including probably bomb type) and 95-99% of radioactive mutations are described as harmful or lethal. Isolated, and often strange, human settlements exist along with normal and, more rarely, mutated fauna; the most fantastic being radioactive undead.

In a similar manner, *Aftermath!* also expressed itself as a realistic game. Indeed it made a point of describing itself as being for "Role Playing Simulation". No specific background story was proposed, except for a nominal setting "20-30 years after the Ruin" (even if the main scenario packs were set 100 years later). At least a third of the game is dedicated to setting information, searching, hazards, beasts both normal and mutant. This includes the survival necessities of food and water, but also salvaging electricity. Occasionally the seriousness of the game is left behind in favour of popular motifs; psionic powers, mutants humans, ape civilisation (as in "*Planet of The*"), super-genius giant rats and highly edible giant cockroaches are all examples. There is a heavy emphasis on martial skills and combat resolution, with a notorious 30 area hit location chart and a two-page flowchart for combat.

Twilight 2000 always took its history background quite seriously. The first edition postulated a conflict between the Warsaw Pact and the People's Republic of China, which took a nuclear turn when West Germany invaded the East, eventually resulting in a nuclear conflict. In the second edition of the game, the history was updated to accommodate the new political circumstances, but the results remain very similar. The game's PC protagonists are, by default, the remains of an isolated military division in an chaotic social environment. Huge sections of the game are, not surprisingly, dedicated to military equipment, however the main conflict that the characters will face are environmental (food and water, radiation, disease) and social (some opposing forces, but mainly "ambitious warlords, local militias and bands of marauding deserters"), rather than classical military conflicts. This was particularly emphasised in the second edition, along with the hanging narrative - a theme on its own - "Good luck. You're on your own".

The common features of each of these games is a strong emphasis on realism, far more than is average for most

roleplaying games. Each of the authors wanted to express a scientific approach to the problem of a post-nuclear age in a manner that was expressing a possible future. Each also expressed a military or paramilitary approach to survival in such harsh conditions. With the breakdown of the State, the theme of people being unable to govern or organise themselves on the same scale is assumed, even if this was not intended by the authors. Of the three examples the one that is the most complete and playable as a game system and offers the best thematic challenges is the second edition of *Twilight 2000*, even though the narrative objective is most clearly stated in *The Morrow Project*.

The Police State

Despite roleplaying games being at their heyday when the famous George Orwell novel reached its titled zenith, the police-state has not been a strong setting in roleplaying games. This is somewhat mystifying as the opportunity for a small-band of freedom fighters against a totalitarian state is surely a golden opportunity for the combination of cinematic heroism, gritty realism and the narrative prospect of the most criminal betrayal. It is perhaps because of the overwhelming dominance of one game in these theme, *Paranoia* (1984), although one can certainly see the thematic considerations in *The Price of Freedom* (1986) and *Judge Dredd: The Roleplaying Game* (1989). What is notable in these three games is an emphasis on satire. With the exception of playing the more recent "straight" *Paranoia* (that is the style, as opposed to "classic" or "zap"), none of the games seem to take the historical prospect or narrative opportunity of totalitarianism seriously.

Despite being set after WWII *Paranoia* is not about such a war, or the narrative tropes that arise from such a conflict. Rather, as the game describes itself; "Imagine a world designed by Kafka, Stalin, Orwell, Huxley, Sartre and the Marx Brothers... *Catch-22* meets 1984!". A totalitarian state, nominally run by The Computer, is built on doublethink and hysteria; 'Chutzpah' is a key characteristic, an important skills include 'Spurious Logic' and 'Bootlicking'. The protagonists are trouble-shooters, assigned by The Computer to find traitors, mutants and secret society members - except the player characters, individually, are traitors, mutants, and secret society members. In recent editions the game has become more aware of the thematic conflicts between the slapstick and the macabre and allowed for playing styles to diverge, although for the latter style the problematic aspect of clones being readily available conflicts an in-game necessity (because *Paranoia* is so violent) with the setting; a clone of troubleshooter executed for treason will also be treasonous. Resolving this in a manner that makes narrative sense is an opportunity and challenge both for current individual GMs but also for designers of future editions.

Also treading the border between the deadly serious and the satirical is *The Price of Freedom*. In this setting, explicitly following movies like *Red Dawn*, a deliberately over-the-top totalitarian and humourless version of the Warsaw Pact and its allies manage to occupy the United States (think Stalin rather than Gorbachev). The tone is described as "grim patriotism", with cathartic "opportunities for mayhem". Substantial theoretical and practical emphasis is placed on waging guerrilla warfare with the importance of trust and support of the local populations and the strategic importance of engaging in the diverse low-intensity tactics, complete with appropriate quotations from Mao Zedong and Che Guevara. Notably the game has a very complex and technical combat system and states that it is as much a wargame (on a squad level scale) as a roleplaying game. It is worth pointing out here that *The Price of Freedom* is written by Greg Costikyan, a senior developer for *Paranoia*, with stated assistance from Ken Rolston, who was also a developer for *Paranoia*. Both were originally published by West End Games. Costikyan also mentions the significant influence of Frank Chadwick, designer of *Twilight 2000*.

The last game in this set is *Judge Dredd*, which is rules light (8 attribute/skills, plus abilities) with characters very much being dependent on their equipment. As can be imagined much of the story is dedicated to being on patrol and making arrests and there is some discussion of the legal mores required along with the harsh penalties in Mega-City One (three months for an overdue video, one hundred days to two years for jaywalking). As with *Paranoia*, *Judge Dredd* is set in a post-war environment, but the war is background, not central to the setting. The setting is primarily the Mega-City, the entire eastern seaboard of the United States, which is a nominal capitalist democracy of significant leisure (87% unemployment), and fair resources. Sapient apes and aliens are also a feature of the City. A great deal of attention and detail is dedicated to the setting, characters from the comic series etc, but there is very little on emphasising the satirical

themes.

Alien Contact

Surprisingly, alien contact is not a significant theme in near future science fiction roleplaying games, despite a rather strong association in literature and film (e.g., *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Alien* and its sequels (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997), *Predator* (1987), *Men in Black* (1997)), although such sf is often associated with contemporary times rather than the near future. It is possible to suggest that, applying for a lower common denominator, the combination of the challenges of new technologies *and* alien contact is too much for a mass market. Nevertheless in the roleplaying field one can suggest games like *Fringeworthy* (1982), *Traveller 2300/2300AD* (1986), *Aliens* (1990), *Eclipse Phase* (2009) as examples.

In *Fringeworthy*, a small number of people (including the PCs, obviously) are able to step through gates into alternative earth histories and alien worlds. Left behind by a now deceased benevolent dog-like species called the Tehrmelern, these gateways unfortunately have another visitor; the Mellor, a malevolent and very hungry species who engage in multiple life stages, shapeshifting, and memory absorption, making them extremely dangerous foes. As the Mellor advance in stages they become more intelligent and are require less messy means for memory acquisition. Of course, the *Fringeworthy* are not even aware of this existence of the Mellor - at first.

Continuing the theme of the only good alien is a dead alien *Traveller 2300/2300 AD* provided the Kafer. Derived from the German phrase for "beetle" it had the unfortunate connotation at the time to refer to black South Africans ("kaffir") by the more racist sections of the white community. Making disparaging comments about "kafers" in the late 1980s, the twilight of apartheid, could cause some social embarrassment when misconstrued when overheard by those unfamiliar with the context. To be sure, there will be those who rush to *Traveller 2300/2300 AD*'s defence - after all, they were not the only life form. There was the cute and friendly the Sung, the helpful Pentapods, the primitive Xiang and so forth. But realistically, the chief setting in *Traveller 2300/2300 AD* is the conflict between the various branches of human civilisation and the Kafer.

It is hardly worth elaborating in great detail how the *Aliens* RPG, obviously, also follows this theme. Of course the ante is increased somewhat because the aliens in question are more than a match on a one-to-one basis with any human. So in this context aliens aren't just the enemy they are a very powerful and dangerous enemy. However, through technology and social organisation we might just stand a chance.

Eclipse Phase is interesting in this consideration as both artefact artificial intelligences (TITANs) and aliens both take the role of antagonists to humanity, or rather the transformed humanity. The TITANs were artificial intelligences that decided to turn on their transhuman creators by causing international wars with devastating results. Forcing and collecting uploaded human minds, the TITANs suddenly vanish from the solar system. Later wormholes, left by the TITANs are discovered. Entry into these areas result in the encounter of an alien species who warn humanity to turn back and never again create self-improving AIs.

Cyberpunk

The conventions of the cyberpunk literary and subcultural genre are well known, expressed in films like *Blade Runner* (1982), the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), and novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985), and Neal Stephanson's *Snow Crash* (1992). This issue of *RPG Review* already contained detailed reviews of the major cyberpunk games; *Cyberpunk 2013/2020* (1988, 1990), *Cyberspace* (1989), *Shadowrun* (1989), *GURPS Cyberpunk* (1990) - the latter aided by *Ultra-Tech* (1989). We can also add to this list supplements such a *Earth/Cybertech* for *Traveller 2300AD* (1989), *Cyber Hero* (1992) to new games such as *OGC Cybernet* (2003) and *Corporation* (2006). In each of these games, true to the genre, the key setting-based thematic considerations are cybernetics, cyberspace and societal and environmental decay.

In this area various bionic parts were considered the most important form of the technological transformation of the

species. Biological and transgenic changes would mostly come later. In all the games (except GURPS Cyberpunk) there was system integration of the issue of artificial components into the body corpus through the gradual loss of empathy leading to psychopathological behaviour. GURPS, ever realistic, did not entertain such possibilities, although an arguable trajectory not considered by was that the behavioural changes were sociopathological rather than psychopathological. Especially if they were the result of workplace or military requirements, rather than being introduced for health or by free choice.

The concept of an international global communications network may seem mundane to us now, but back in the late 1980s the concept was certainly relatively unknown, except for those who participated in various international BBS systems or were fortunate enough to be associated through an APRAnet-connected system. The rise of the GUI within such a international system was certainly science fiction. A universal feature in all cyberpunk games was the use of a cyberspace environment derived from Gibson, an icon-driven, three-dimensional, an immersive universe of Platonic cleanliness which juxtaposed harshly with the external environment. Again, only GURPS diverged from this model allowing individual GMs to use "realistic" operating system interaction with the network. At the other end of the scale Cyberpunk 2013/2020 managed to develop computer networks that were more like a D&D dungeon crawl. Shadowrun deserves special mention for making the network entirely wireless and ubiquitous by 2070 in their fourth edition (2005).

The final component was a collapse of the social mores of the late twentieth century. Across all games there is an assumption that democratic nation-states have lost significant power to multinational corporations. In Cyberpunk 2013/202 and Shadowrun, for example, this was coupled by landmark legal cases which gave corporations the right to control their own military forces. Whilst rarely stated explicitly (except to a degree in GURPS Cyberpunk) such changes alter political economy, leading to a greater division of wealth, the strengthening of corporate monopolistic behaviour, and a disregard for negative externalities such as pollution.

Transhumanism

It is a relatively smooth transition from the Cyberpunk dystopias to the self-transformation of the human species in the transhuman predictions in roleplaying games, more directly derived from science and academia rather than from literature. GURPS is again a particular leader in this field positing an optimistic forward trajectory in history albeit with outstanding changes to humanity. GURPS Bio-tech (1997) and Transhuman Space (2002) are clear leaders in this predictive genre. Transhuman Space in particular discusses the development of divergent life forms, such as genetically enhanced animals (GURPS Uplift was first published in 1992) and parahumans, with perhaps more attention to artificial intelligences than was even discussed in the various cyberpunk RPGs. The themes in transhuman face are orientated towards the challenges of space colonisation, speciesism and, most interestingly, the rise of "information socialism". Notably, there is no "cyberspace" version of the network.

In a similar trajectory, with an equal attempt for the realistic, Eclipse Phase (2009) posits a transhuman (cybernetic and genetic engineered) future that colonises most of the solar system. The title of a game refers to the period when a cell is infected but does appear as such, and the game claims, as a thematic consideration that transhumanism is a type of post-apocalyptic event, that there is conspiracy around the providers of transhumanist technology to shape humanity's future, and that the technological transformation of the species engenders horror. As previously mentioned, the TITANS take the role as malicious artifacts.

Less realistically, SLA Industries (1993), whilst the first cyberpunk-like game to concentrate on genetic engineering and biological enhancements, posits an interstellar society hundreds of years in the future where one company (SLA Industries) controls most of the economic transactions in populated space, and PCs carry out the less tasteful tasks of the company, on contract. An amazingly naive and uncaring population is happy to slurp up the entertainment offered by SLA Industry-controlled media and ignore its shocking history and dubious past. As far as an elaboration goes, it is clearly on the extreme side. Most importantly for the transhumanist subgenre, SLA Industries provided much of the development for biogenetics for military purposes.

Underground (1993) also falls under the category of transhuman. Through the discovery of an alien pod, a genetic

engineering arms race results with resultant "hot wars" where the supersoldiers are put to test. In a similar manner to the loss of human empathy due to cybernetics, the biotechnology derived superpowers are prone to causing various pathologies, for example, paranoia from the Danger Sense power, multiple personality disorder from Emotion Control. It is particularly surprising that such supersoldiers are let back into civilian life at all; some \$20 million (yes, you read that right), is dedicated by each player for their character's recruitment, reconditioning and genetic modifications.

As a game which manages to cross the cyberpunk and transhuman categories is Shadowrun in its own unique combination of cyberpunk and the 'reawakening' of magic. With the appearance of "metahumans" (Elves, Dwarves, Orks, Trolls) among human populations, these new creatures are a type of transhuman in their own right. Significant complaint can be raised by the attempt to combine Tolkien and Gibson (indeed William Gibson did level such complaint), and the cultural impoverishment in deriving metahumans entirely from North European mythology in the core rules. Regrettably, even given that the designers took the easy option, there is very little that emphasises the metahuman as a thematic consideration in Shadowrun.

Concluding Remarks

This has been a thematic review, rather than a system review, of various near-future science fiction RPGs. There are, of course, a great number of game systems and settings which have neglected in this review, however with comments directed to around twenty or so systems this is nevertheless sufficient to derive some conclusions. Before that however, mentioned must be made of a neglect in this article, and that is, of hypothesised supernatural near-futures, which could include supplements like GURPS Cthulhupunk (1995), although this is a subgenre which seem to have greater association with the 'modern', rather than the 'near-future' (e.g., Heaven and Earth (1998)). It is a crying shame, for example, that the Heresy: Kingdom Come (1996) cardgame - a sort of In Nomine meets Cyberpunk - was never released as an RPG as planned.

What can be derived from this thematic review from near-future RPGs does not speak particularly highly of the genre. The first is that the industry slavishly follows what is popular. Whilst of course they are interested in profit, the attachment to the genres is not a critical one which break genre conventions whilst retaining the setting. Often that is left up to the players of such games themselves, which one can suppose is an advantage of the hobby. So survival in a post-apocalypse event depends on military and survivalist skills, and alien encounters will inevitably result in warfare. Even in the cyberpunk/transhumanist games attempts to uncover the causes of environmental and social breakdown within the context of political economy are totally absent. Whether or not future roleplaying games take up these challenges obviously is yet to be seen; the prognosis however is not promising.

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