

GAMMA WORLD

GAME MASTER'S GUIDE



A Campaign Sourcebook for the d20 System

G A M M A WORLD[®]

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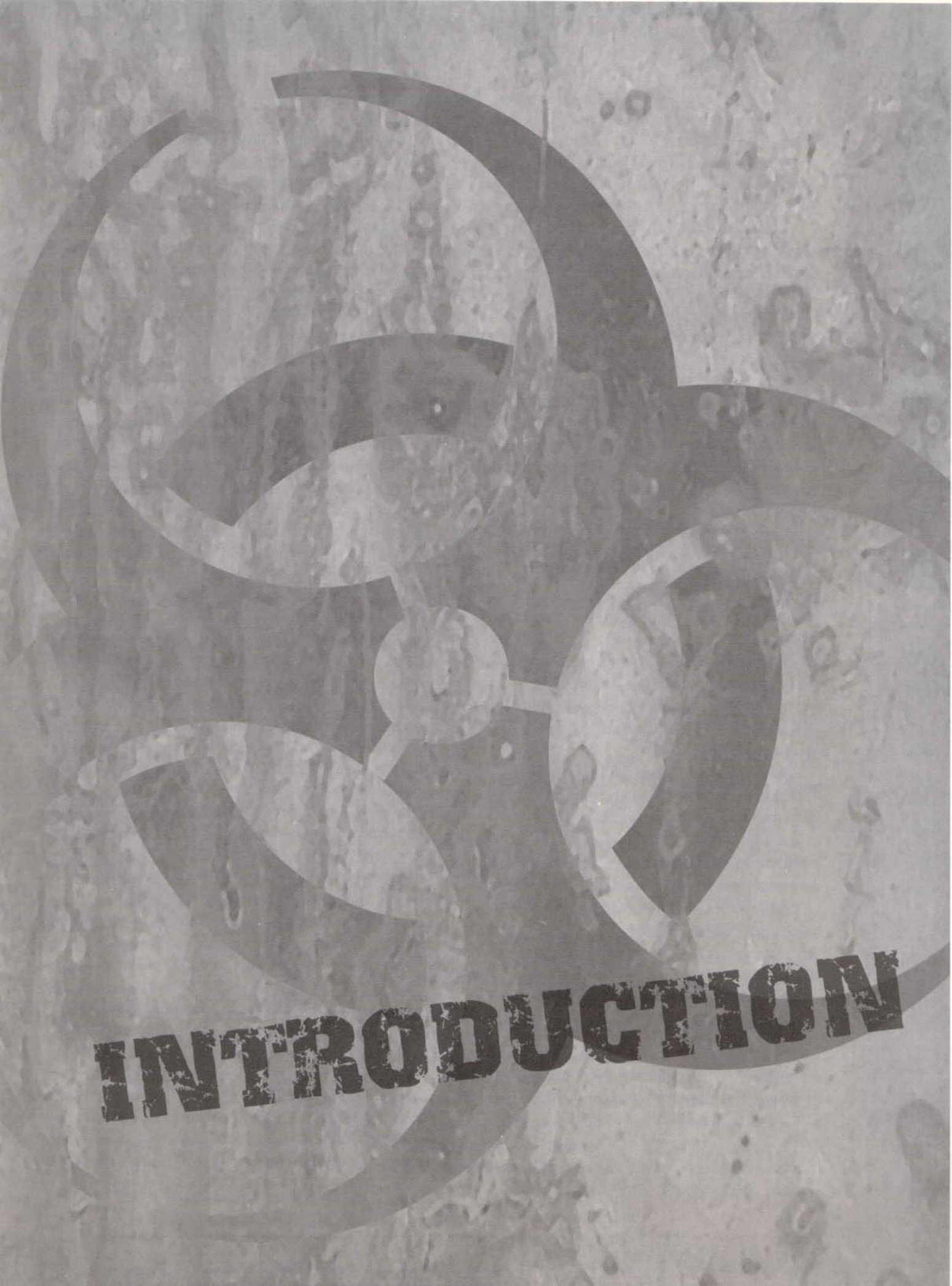


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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about ruling the world. It's a collection of advice on creating a campaign to suit you, the Game Master (GM), and your players within the overall **Gamma World** environment, and running your game in a way that fulfills the hopes you and your players bring to the table for a good time.

Every game book is a collection of assorted parts, some of which you'll use and some not. This is more so than many, because the range of subjects worth addressing under the general heading of "advice for GMs" is really, really broad. If you're new to game mastering, pieces of some chapters won't interest you much, since they deal with the complications that can beset long-standing groups. If your players just don't ever get into significant clashes over matters like whose turn it is for spotlight time and how serious this session should be, then you don't need the troubleshooting advice aimed at GMs whose players do things like that. And if you and your players are really happy with the range of genres and styles your games feature, you may not have much interest in the discussion of how to make other genres and styles work. But it's our hope that there will also be things that address concerns of yours, and that surprise you with matters you didn't ever know you'd be interested in.

Running a game that pleases you and your players is a task with three distinct parts:

- **The group:** Understanding the social dynamics at work in how you and your players deal with each other.
- **The rules:** Understanding the mechanics of the game and how to make them work with your goals rather than against them.
- **The setting:** Understanding the way the game world works, selecting the pieces you want to work with and creating a specific environment for your campaign.

We've provided some advice on all three parts of the task. Some of this book will be useful to you in running d20 system games other than **Gamma World**, and some of it will (we hope) be useful to you in running any campaign at all.

WHAT'S HERE

Here's an overview of the book's contents, to help you spot the subjects you want to pay attention to most so that you can start with them.

- **Introduction:** What you're reading right now.
- **Chapter One: The Campaign.** This is one of the wide-ranging chapters, with principles that apply

to all tabletop roleplaying games along with advice tuned for **Gamma World**. Here you'll find discussion of the ways different GMs relate to their players, and about who has what kind of authority when it comes to deciding details of the setting and what happens next. There's no universally right way to organize your group, just choices that each carry some benefits and some potential hazards. You'll also find suggestions for preparing a good, strong first session for your new campaign; a good, strong second session and body of the campaign to follow up on your good foundation; and a solid, satisfying conclusion that does justice to the campaign's history. There are lots of examples to go with all this, and some jokes to keep it from sounding too much like a lecture.

- **Chapter Two: Divergent Strains.** This is another chapter with lots of general applicability along with a strong **Gamma World** focus. Here you'll find explanations for the ways various genres work in gaming, including action/adventure, melodrama, mystery, drama, comedy and horror. This isn't a theoretical discussion, though, but a practical one: If you're running a game in this genre, what details matter, what sorts of challenges are appropriate, and how do you use the rules to support the atmosphere you have in mind? Then come example settings ready for you to use as the basis for a whole campaign or to liven up an existing campaign, and detailed illustration of how to make them work in several of the genres described earlier. You can use the points provided as the seeds for adventures, or take inspiration from them to create your own in similar style. (Or do both, of course.)

- **Chapter Three: The State of the World.** This chapter deals specifically with the **Gamma World** setting. It covers a variety of topics, including natural disasters on local, regional and global scales, how to use big climatic changes in your campaign, and social concerns. Several cryptic alliances get detailed writeups, ready to go to add complications to the lives of your players' characters (PCs). They all have the potential to make interesting allies or antagonists, and come with enough details that characters can join them as well.

- **Chapter Four: Plots and Plans.** This chapter covers a specific set of techniques that might be summed up as "campaign in a box." Here you'll find very detailed advice on preparing a toolkit of ready-made characters, scenes and larger plots for your campaign; and also on coping with the surprises that

always come along at some point in a flourishing campaign. The principles apply widely, and they're anchored in a physical location and set of social challenges that could fit into many **Gamma World** campaigns, alone or in combination with the pieces laid out in other chapters.

- **Chapter Five: The Rules of the Game.** This chapter focuses on d20 mechanics, both the foundational ones in the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* and the ones we've introduced in the **Gamma World Player's Handbook (GW PHB)**. The latter book comes with some good advice of its own on matters like setting the massive damage threshold, and you should keep its concerns in mind while pondering the advice here. This chapter builds on that to cover a variety of other subjects, including: uses for feats that you may not have thought of; when to use the take 10 and take 20 rules and when to require players (and yourself) to roll; the challenges suitable for characters starting at levels other than the **Gamma World** standard of 3rd level; and examples of applying the investigation rules in Chapter Six of the **Gamma World Player's Handbook** to different sorts of communities.

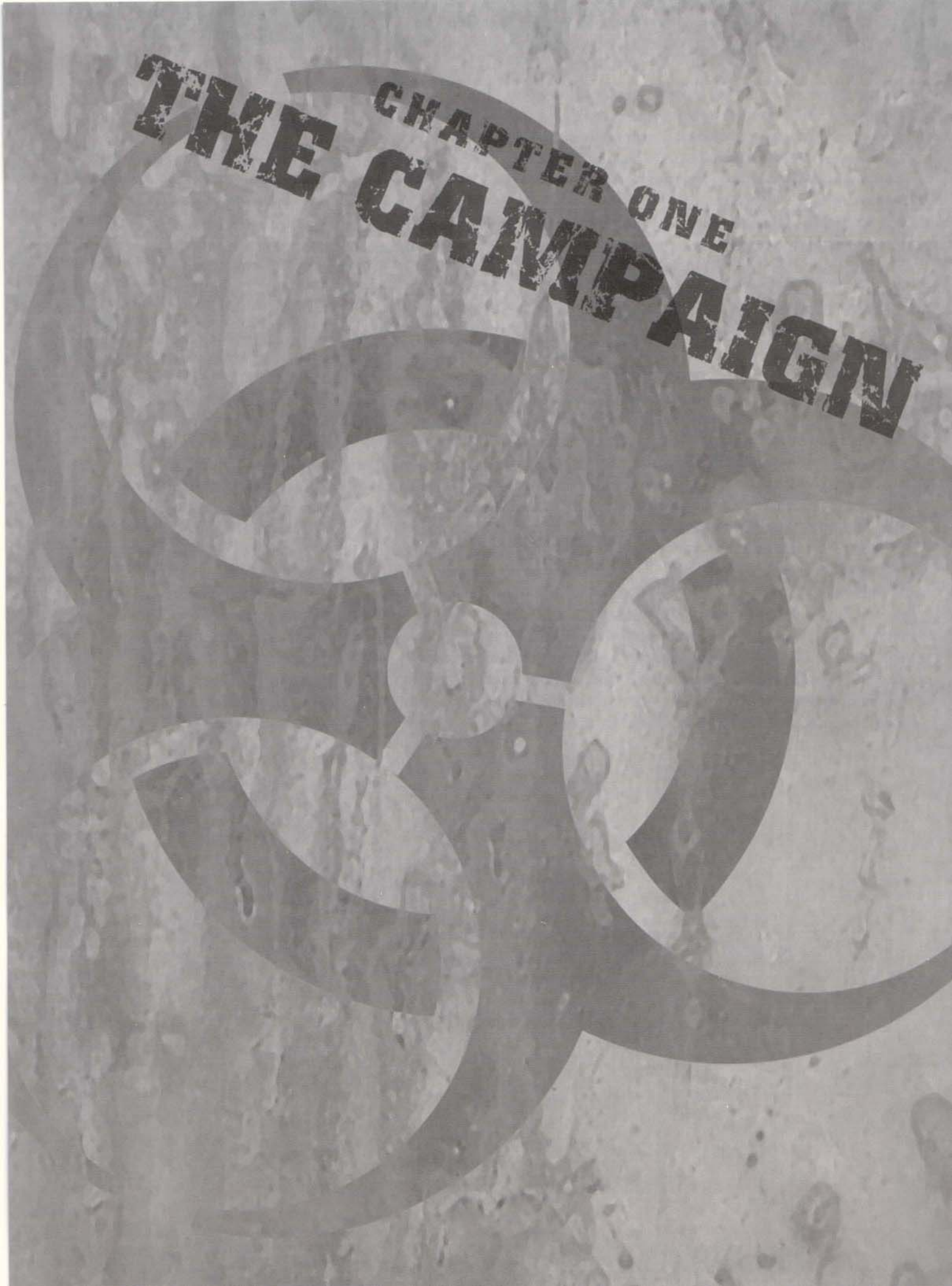
- **Chapter Six: Options and Alternatives.** This chapter does the prose equivalent of coloring outside the lines. It presents exotic character possibilities like hive-mind intelligences and advice about adding exotic elements to your campaign — everything from magic to alien invasions. *Everything* in this book is

optional, in that you have complete freedom to pick and choose, but this chapter is more optional than the rest.

- **Appendix: Mutations from Creature Qualities.** "Give us more mutations!" the people cried. "Okay!" we cried back. Here are examples of how to turn the special qualities of Gamma Age monsters into mutations for your PCs (and your various NPCs), and some advice on how to tell whether a quality should become a major or a minor modification.

Running a campaign that gives you and your players pleasure can be hard work. This book is like a big box of tools and a shelf of plans and diagrams, showing you neat things you might want to build, explaining how to do it and offering you the particular resources you'll need to make it happen. A really satisfying campaign is always specific to the people in your gaming group, even when you're using a framework someone else prepared: You're the one who breathes life into it all, describing the people, places and things characters encounter, resolving the outcomes of the challenges they face... actually mastering the game, that is. You are the necessary bridge between what appears on these pages and what happens as players make their decisions and their characters seek out their various destinies. We hope that this book will help you do your part more enjoyably and, ultimately, in a way that most thoroughly translates *your* goals into real play.

CHAPTER ONE **THE CAMPAIGN**



I hold my nephew's hand firmly, but try not to make my grip too tight. He is, of course, scared: He turns twelve tomorrow, and so this is his first time to speak with the dead. It's all part of coming of age. I did it when I was his age, and my uncle held my little hand; I could feel his hope and concern in that warm, slightly sweaty grip. As my uncle did with me, so I hope that my nephew will do our family proud.

The weather is just perfect for Introduction Day. It's warm, but not too warm, and a gentle breeze carries the comfortable smells of the sea. There will be rain later tonight, I think, but not now. Naturally, my nephew wears his best clothes, and he's handled them right, from the rainbow-hued laces in his boots to the felt cap creased in the traditional style. I look down at him just as he looks up at me, and we exchange a quick smile.

The world is full of people who never get to speak to the dead. Speak *with* the dead, that is. It's one thing to talk down at a grave; it's another to talk to these walking things, gray of skin and slow of step, that speak back with the voices we remember, full of the thoughts and feelings that once belonged to those we love. They aren't our loved ones themselves, of course; they told us when they first arrived about how they'd been created in one of the labs buried not far from here as organic computers, and only later discovered that they could draw out dead essences from graves, bringing minds and hearts back to life even though souls remain gathered into the arms of God. Nonetheless, the talking dead keep us close to those who've passed on, and we all know that we flourish largely because we have the benefit of their advice, encouragement and counsel.

My nephew looks up as the tall thing enters the grove. "Hello, Vessel of Great-Great-Grandfather," he says in his clear boy's tenor. The thing smiles. It will be a good conversation.

Think of **Gamma World** as a big vehicle. It's got a straight-six d20 engine, windows that look out on a fascinating landscape and a cooler full of healthy snacks and refreshing ginger ale. This vehicle can take you anywhere you want to go.

You may think the question is: Where do you want to go? At this point, however, it's not. The question is: *How* do you want to go?

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

If you have experienced roleplaying gamers in your **Gamma World** game, you're in luck. You don't have to explain the basic concepts of gaming and rolling dice, or what a character or a hit point is.

If your players have never played a roleplaying game before, you're also in luck, because they won't have any preconceived notions about what's right and wrong and are probably going to take whatever you tell them as gospel.

If you're going to have problems right from the start, they may well arise from having experienced players who learned to game with someone else.

Even that's not necessarily a problem, but it can be, because people who don't think about it tend to assume that the way they game is the way games are played, period. If they've spent ten years in a series of tightly-plotted, combat-heavy games, they have reason to believe games revolve around Game Master (GM) control and buff to-hit modifiers. If, on the other hand, they cut their teeth on free-form, character-motivated psychodramas, then you can expect them to fall back on *those* behaviors. Severe "all dialogue must be *in character!*" gamers think that's gaming. Guys who play a little, make some jokes, play some more, eat some pizza, play a little, and talk about Monty Python for a bit likewise think that's gaming. They're both right, too.

So the problems arise when you get people from different gaming traditions trying to play around the same table, each wondering why the hell the others aren't *gaming* — which means, of course, gaming as he or she knows it.

It bears repetition: No particular play style is better. No, really. No way is better. Not one. If you're having fun, you're doing it right. If not, not. There is no need to get sucked into some Internet-style, all-caps, self-righteous opinion rumble defending "serious roleplaying" or "hack 'n' slash" or "simulation" or any other damn thing against the infidels. There is no One True Way; there's just what makes you and your players happy.

There's a way around the problem of differing expectations, of course, and 95% of it is being aware that the problem exists. If you're playing with an experienced gamer for the first time (because you met her on the Internet, or you're at a convention, or you just transferred colleges, or the two of you arm-wrestled over who got to buy the last copy of **Gamma World** at the friendly local game store), you're well advised to *ask*. If it sounds like the new player is expecting something other than the way your group plays, give fair warning. It may be that she discovers a new form of enjoyment. That's great! Or she may not be a good fit for your group, which is too bad, but nobody's fault: Convincing someone that "No, you're wrong, you're really having a great time and just don't know it!" is a very hard sell. If that happens, shrug, go your separate ways, and maybe find something other than gaming to bond over.

To reiterate: When someone doesn't have fun playing your particular style of game, it doesn't make her wrong and it doesn't make you wrong. Just different. So move along.

HOW DO YOU CREATE BEST?

Over the next several pages, we're going to explore a variety of play styles. (Really, it's less painful than it sounds. There are jokes.) Deciding on one, or understanding which one you've fallen into by habit, can have real, concrete benefits for your game.

One issue involved in all these styles is creativity, which is really what this hobby's all about, right? You create settings, issues and challenges. The players create characters, plans and solutions. Therefore, it seems reasonable to think that whatever spurs creativity encourages good gaming, right?

Not all people create the same way, however.

Some people create best by conscious thought. They take a basic concept, think about it, add a few

things, ponder, add some more, consider, edit, embellish, elaborate and revise; at the conclusion of this process, they have an idea that's solid and strong.

Other people create better on the spur of the moment. Something hits them, they riff off it, see what happens, then respond to that.

As with styles of play, there's no one true way to be creative. Often, the end results are literally indistinguishable. People are just wired differently. Accepting that and adapting to it can help you create the best adventures for your players and yourself.

If you're a slow, conscious creator, you'll probably be most comfortable with the "GM Driver" model described below. This puts most of the burden of preparation on you, but by the same token, gives you the most control over the course of the game. It's a good model for players who are slow creators as well, since driving GMs tend to provide menus of options from which the player characters (PCs) choose. If you time your sessions well, you can leave more open decisions at the end and discuss them out of game with your players before the next session. That way you have time to prepare the reaction to their carefully considered action.

On the other hand, if you're good at jazzy improvisation, the "GM Drifts" model can really simplify your life. Improvisational creators tend to crave constant input — reactions to which they can react in turn, generating a cycle of constructive resonance. (In other words, you think of something cool, the players come up with a cool reaction, you react to that, and so on, back and forth.) You can stat up a handful of versatile characters, outline a few encounters that work anywhere, build some plot skeletons that can move in various directions... and then you just wait for the PCs to act so that you can make it all look seamless.

Then there's the "GM Navigates" concept, in which you provide some narrative guidance, but not all of it. This is a good fit for a reactive GM whose players need time to come up with good plans: You let them come up with some central scheme, then throw interesting conflicts in their way as they attempt to carry out their master design.

So, to sum up: Got players who are best at reactive creativity, while you're a good plotter? "GM Drives" is a marriage made in heaven. It's also a good one for plan-oriented GMs with plan-oriented players. Got plotting characters and you're a good reactor? Go with "GM Navigates" to give them more

freedom of plot. All of you are wild, spur-of-the-moment types? Drift along together and enjoy the surprises.

That's the short and snappy version. Greater analysis follows.

DRIVING THE GAME: GM BEHIND THE WHEEL

The most common model for adventure gaming is kind of like a big tour bus. The players sign up for a tour of Gamma World or the Scarred Lands or the World of Darkness, and they sit in their seats and observe while the GM turns the wheel, puts on the brakes or (more commonly) gives it the gas.

This model works fine for a lot of people. The players may get off the bus at certain spots and roam around the sights, but since the bus driver knows the itinerary, it's not too hard to get everyone back on board in time for the next stop.

To break this metaphor down into a game example, GM Laurie tells her players that the game is **Gamma World**, their PCs are a group of explorers being sent through a pass that has (for the first time in decades) become navigable. (In previous years, the pass has been a waterfall, but this year it dried up, revealing a scalable cliff.) There's some concern here, of course, because the PCs' community relies on that river to irrigate their crops.

Laurie knows where they're going (up the waterfall) and she knows where they probably go from there (along the riverbed). They have the option to follow an ancient road and investigate an old relic site, but it's fine if they disregard that. She has a barbaric settlement planned on the riverbank; they can solve problems there through combat, stealth or politics, but she can be pretty sure that, sooner or later, they will find a bigger community that has dammed the river to make a lake. That discovery is the climax of one plot arc. Or, to go back to the bus metaphor, it's the end of the first tour. The second tour is based on how they deal with the new community, and again she's expecting some variation on fight, flee or flatter: Either they blow up the dam and go to war, they scurry back to their settlement like cowards (unlikely), or they try to convince the townsfolk that they don't need to dam all the water and can let enough through that both settlements can survive.

This is not a total railroad plot. The PCs can solve all the problems several ways, and they can go



off on their own at several points. But Laurie is clearly the one answering the question “Where do you want to go today?”

GM DRIVES: THE BENEFITS

The primary benefit of a GM Driver is control. When you have a lot of authority, you can predict a lot of what’s going to happen, and when you can predict events it’s much easier to make them cool. Since Laurie *knows* the PCs are going to the barbaric settlement and then to the developed settlement, she can put a lot of thought into both settlements and ensure that they’re both really intriguing, sophisticated and open to thoughtful interaction. She doesn’t have to worry that the PCs may, on a lark, sidestep the city for which she’s prepped a book’s worth of background.

Some players do not necessarily *want* huge amounts of plot control. Some players are happy in a reactive position. They like being given a menu of obvious choices instead of having to cook up a course of action from scratch. There’s nothing wrong with that: There are very few *wrong* ways to have fun gaming.

GM DRIVES: THE HASSLES

Uneasy lies the head that bears the crown. (Or, if you prefer, “With great power comes great

responsibility.”) When you’re in charge, you have to carry most of the load. This can be pretty tough, especially if you run into unexpected time demands, or if your PCs head in a direction you didn’t anticipate.

Make no mistake: You can try to foresee everything your PCs will do, but sooner or later, they’re quite likely to surprise you. You can make general contingency plans to contain these sorts of ambushes, but you can only have the PCs all get possessed by a free-floating nanounit hive-mind once or twice before they catch on that it’s a stall for time while you build the road out ahead of them.

This is where character-driven subplots can be helpful. If you keep a few pots boiling in the background — a PC’s estranged spouse or sick child, or an aide whose romantic appetites get him in trouble — you can heat those up to distract the PCs when they pitch you a curve ball. Players often *like* to have a few less-than-earth shattering minor storylines drifting in the background: They make a nice change of pace from constantly saving Gamma City. As an added bonus, when they pitch you a curve, it gives you something organic to emphasize and them something they care about to deal with while you calculate the ramifications of their unforeseen exploit.

On the other hand, maybe your players aren't the types who surprise you. That can lead to the opposite problem, stagnation. If you plan too much and control them too tightly, your players can become lazy and passive. Spoon-feeding them a predictable menu can train them to be so inert that they won't do *anything* unless you force them to. **Gamma World** was designed to support bold and decisive heroes, and too much hand-holding can really run against that grain.

The solution when your players have gotten creatively flabby is to spur them. Provide urgent problems without obvious solutions, and don't let them off the hook until they think of something. Of course, when they *do* think of something you're rather obligated to accept it (at least partly) or else they just get frustrated. And rightly so: Being painted into a corner and then getting punished for going out the window instead of climbing the walls is frustrating. It can be scary and awkward to have to rely on reactive creativity instead of the pre-planning which may be more comfortable, but soldier through. It's worth it to get them involved in the game again.

Even more worth if, of course, is to dodge the problem by requiring engagement from the start.

NAVIGATING THE GAME: GM AT THE TILLER

The second model is less constrained. Instead of a GM at the wheel driving a bus along a predetermined road, it's more like the GM is at the tiller of a boat, navigating a course towards a destination, but always ready to react to the vicissitudes of wind and current.

Someone sets a goal — maybe you, maybe the players — and events move towards it. Maybe the movement is direct sometimes, other times it's oblique, and on occasion there are setbacks; but by and large, there's a pole star towards which play progresses.

For example: Paige the GM thinks **Gamma World** sounds like the cat's pajamas, so she proposes it to her players Hilda, Vern and Ty. They have a roundtable discussion about what sort of campaign interests them. Vern wants something with lots of investigation and creepy old tech complexes. Hilda is more interested in the idea of community building; she wants to play through the process of becoming the reformist leader of a thriving settlement. Ty's not so picky, as long as he gets to play the hard-

core, buffed-out combat mutant. ("Any way I could be a genetically resurrected velociraptor? Preferably with cyberware.")

Adding these factors together, Paige proposes a narrative concept. Hilda's character Dee is a young, radical firebrand in her community who thinks the way to thrive is through exploration, rediscovery, and merit-based democracy (instead of rule by the crusty council of oligarch "elders"). Vern likes that idea, and his character Paley is the Smart hero tech-type, chafing under the restrictions of retrograde community leaders. He has the skills to make a go of exploration and artifact recovery. Ty's cyber-raptor is their evidence: Something they successfully reanimated at a dig and which has protected the community from at least one threat. The stodgy old tribal elders have decided that the best way to rid themselves of these irksome fools is to give them enough rope to hang themselves. They send Paley and Dee off to survey the surrounding regions, then come back and make a report every three months. What they didn't anticipate was that the loyal cyber-raptor would break her leash and follow them.

This is a good setup. Vern gets his tomb-raiding. Hilda gets her politics, both inside the community and dealing with the others they encounter. Ty gets his gore-soaked combats. And Paige gets characters whose goals are solid enough that she's confident she can provide what they want.

One way Paige can set things up is to simply map out the terrain physically and decide what's where. If the PCs go north, it's the community where everyone's sex lives are secretly controlled by a cryptic alliance with access to a distributor of tailored pheromones. If they head east, they meet an uplifted dog pack who've got a communications satellite that lets them use cell phones. South is the neo-commune where implants in the citizens' pleasure centers make giving to the community more exciting than a dozen Superbowls, and to the west it's a horrific nano-dustbowl — the site of one of the bigger nanite battles, with lots of sealed-up bubbles of repurposing nastiness waiting for those who would dig for the industrial treasures buried beneath.

Alternately, Paige can map out play temporally. She decides that the ark-phone tribe makes for the best early encounter, so any direction they travel becomes the "home of the dogs and (through the miracle of retroactive continuity) *always was*."

If Paige creates by pre-planning, she might outline big "if/then" plot trees and have loads of

THE ART OF THE RETCON

If you're unfamiliar with the concept of "retroactive continuity" or retcon, here's a primer. A retcon is when you make up a story that explains why the story so far makes sense. It's sort of a meta-narrative that knits together two dissonant narratives.

For Example: Dee and Paley need some medical advice, and Paige decides there's an expert surgeon in Sector 4 of their home settlement. Five sessions later, they decide to go see Dr. Mobley again, and Paige directs them to Sector 3. A couple sessions after that, Vern wants to consult Dr. Mobley and notices in his notes that there's a discrepancy. His office was in Sector 4 and then in 3. What gives?

Now, Paige knows, deep in her heart, that this was just a screwup because Vern kept better notes than she did. But instead of admitting that, which does no one any good, she says that Dr. Mobley moved. "Wasn't that a lot of work?" asks Vern. "Yes it was," says Paige, eyes glittering. "But your characters have no idea why he'd go to all that trouble, just to move to Sector 3, which is a less desirable location anyhow." Now, instead of a jarring problem where the past is fractured from the present, you've got a plot hook. Why did their friend move? Did he get pushed out by some cryptic alliance that knew his old office was on an ancient bioplasm burial ground? Or was it just the town elders who browbeat him for being too friendly to Dee?

This is a minor example of retconning, but once you accept and use the idea that what you told the PCs may not be the whole story, *even if you thought it was at the time*, you'll find it's a good way to extend the shelf-life of a plotline, a good way to get new ideas and a good way to create that appearance of depth and seamlessness that's important for the suspension of disbelief.

In fact, retconning somewhat mirrors evolutionary action. Most mutations start out as genetic copying errors, quickly corrected by evolutionary pressure. But sometimes mistakes are actually improvements on the status quo.

action going on behind the PCs' backs: While they're trying to keep the Commies from psycho-suturing them into being enlightened proletarians, the ark pack may be making its first contact with the pheremonials, while the PCs' stodgy rivals back home scheme and deploy their character assassins. On the other hand, if Paige is a riffer, she may just hold on loosely to her concepts and see what contact with the PCs brings. Picturing each society as a delicate balance, she just waits for Dee, Paley and their razor-fanged pal to tip things over in one direction or another. PCs being what they are, she probably doesn't have long to wait.

GM NAVIGATES: THE BENEFITS

The primary benefit is that the players are invested in the plot, because they've had their grimy mitts in it from the start. If you're open enough to let them play "Gamma World Special Forces" or "Exodus of Mutants Looking for the Promised Land" or "The Only People who *Liked* Costner in 'The Postman' and Want to Deliver Hope" then you're a lot less likely to deal with the snarkiness that comes from players who feel shoehorned into a world they never made. Give the people what they want and you won't have to lure them with pizzas and cokes.

The secondary benefit is that you can offload some of the creative burden on the players. Just from the characters that Vern, Hilda and Ty described, Paige gets chunks of background built up for her. Hilda hands her the stodgy elders and their society's malaise of apathy. Vern provides enough technical background that he can at least wake up one drowsy, past-world killing machine, and Ty makes it necessary for there to be a military installation (or outpost at least) at which his character can be found.

A lot of friction in gaming arises when one player wants a character that doesn't fit with the tone of the game; but with the navigation approach, it's a lot easier to maintain a loose and accommodating tone. Because the game doesn't derail when the players do something unexpected, it has a higher tolerance for diversity — not just of character type, but also of play style. When variance is acceptable, you (and your players) won't find it as jarring when the follow-up to a very serious or even tragic session is something more lighthearted, even a bit silly. Because you're responding to player choices in tone, the changes feel natural, where a GM Driver would necessarily be dictating the changes (unless she was

really good at anticipating her friends' moods) if she even felt able to change the tone at all.

GM NAVIGATES: THE HASSLES

First of all, you've got to listen, which can be more of a challenge than it sounds. By watching the character choices you have to decipher what the players want or need; and as we've discussed, those two factors aren't directly related.

It's possible to simply ask your players, of course, but doing that makes them a lot harder to surprise. Ever noticed how so many Hollywood movies seem alike? It's because they're focus-grouped. Before the final cut, the execs show the film to a bunch of schmoees off the street and ask them "What did or didn't you like?" Asking your players for input in the middle of things is a bit like using a focus group. It does make it much less likely that you give them something they don't want. But it also makes it much less likely that you give them something they *didn't* know they wanted. To fall back on the film example, focus groups didn't produce the structure of *Memento* or the plot twist in *The Crying Game*.

The advantage RPGs have over movies is that a game session only has to please 5–10 people, and if it doesn't, it doesn't flush millions of dollars down the toilet. The people you game with are probably your friends, so you should have a good idea what's going to hit their happy buttons. If you're gaming with people who aren't your friends, you don't know them so well... but it's also much less of a pain if your game alienates them.

Another challenge to the navigation approach is that you pretty much have to improvise some of the time. If you're good at it, that's a feature and not a bug, but if you're not — or if you just aren't confident — it can be very intimidating. And, of course, being intimidated makes some people freeze up.

Fortunately, experience provides some techniques that can help the riffing-impaired.

- **Give Yourself Permission:** Relax. It's a game, it's not the cure for cancer. It's worth doing right and deserves your respect, but being afraid to GM is a bit of an over-reaction, yes? If you can get in the mindset that this is play and not a dissertation or a recital or a final exam, that right there may help you relax and look for the Next Cool Thing to Happen.

- **Stall:** If you're relaxed and nothing's coming, delay the decision. When they make their scenario-

wrecking decision, nod sagely and bring up a subplot. (This is one of the most important reasons to *have* subplots.) If all else fails, give them a bit of a smirk, say "Are you sure that's what you want to do?" and then go off to refill your drink while you search for a reply.

- **Steal:** Unless your players are creative geniuses, the disruptive plan may well be derived from a movie, a book, an article in *Scientific American*, a hit rap single... it's unlikely to be completely *sui generis*. If a few minutes' thought reveals that the plan is ripped whole cloth from last week's episode of "The Shield," you're in luck, because they've shown you, unintentionally, what they want. By ripping off that source, they're rooting for something character-driven and gritty. So you can respond by ripping off something else character-driven and gritty — say, *The Usual Suspects*. Another great advantage of roleplaying is that copyright infringement is not (as yet) illegal when done in the form of oral storytelling in the privacy of your own home or local game store. If I run my characters through a scenario that's a total rip-off of the obscure comedy *Nice Girls Don't Explode*, right down to the *leitmotif* line "Silly me, I over-baked," who's going to care? If they've never seen it, and the odds are superb that they haven't, who's even going to *know*? Thus, by stocking your mental larder with ideas harvested from documentaries, books, magazines and whatever's showing late at night on TV, you can come up with plots that look and sound original. For the purposes of your game, they're *just as good* as original.

Originality is a crutch for people who can't plagiarize well. Steal early, often and from the richest sources.

- **Salvage:** If you can't rip off others, rip off yourself. Professional writers do it all the time. How many books has that *Cider House Rules* guy written about men with absent fathers?

Instead of trying to find a perfect fit for your characters' choices right on the spur of the moment, think back over other games you've run and see if there's a similar situation that could be resurrected, dressed in **Gamma World** drag and applied to the new circumstances. Don't worry about it being flawlessly tailor-made: You can nip and tuck it by next session to look seamless, and patch over any remaining holes with a well-placed retcon.

Another alternative is to steal stuff from other parts of your **Gamma World** setting, stuff the PCs

haven't seen yet. In Paige's game, for example, she's not expecting the PCs to just glance at the Mutant's Democratic Socialist Republic to the south and then head *further* south, beyond the expected scope of the game. This is a minor example of a curve ball, so it's still easy to hit. She can just stick the Phone Arks down there. Or better yet, she can stick the nanite wasteland there, figuring that PCs who were spooked by a few guys in caps with red stars aren't going to go digging for landmines that could turn all their bones into affordable consumer electronics. By the time they turn back and get home to make their report, she's had a couple sessions to think up a replacement.

- **Refuse:** This is a last resort, but in the spirit of throwing up a huge forbidding wasteland in front of the PCs, you *can* on occasion just say, "No." You can do this directly ("Sorry guys, that plan won't work and here's why."), or you can do it by making their barriers to success so high and obvious that the PCs get the hint and abort the plan on their own.

This sort of thing is the hallmark of the GM Driver model, but as long as you don't let it become a crutch you can get away with it every now and again. Since most gamers have experience with Drivers, they're unlikely to take it amiss if you slam a door in their face once every couple months. All games have limits, and sometimes the limits aren't visible to the players. That's just the way it goes. If you start doing it because you're getting lazy... well, maybe you should rethink the choice of Navigating instead of just steering the bus.

SET ADRIFT: THE GM'S ALONG FOR THE RIDE

Before he worked on the d20 rules, Jonathan Tweet did a game called *Everway* which can, in many significant ways, be regarded as d20's antimatter, mirror-universe twin. It had no rules for raising your stats; task resolution was based on subjective, right-brain free association; and it didn't do all that well in the marketplace.

At conventions, Tweet used to run games that he had prepped minutes before the session began. Literally, *minutes*. While the players were generating characters (something that took about half an hour) he would pull a couple of Tarot-like "fortune cards" from a deck, get a few ideas and string them together into an adventure. Doing this, he could produce a session with just as much interest, coherence and

plot integrity as a carefully constructed, thoroughly playtested scenario.

Now, was this possible because Jonathan Tweet has inhuman powers of plot production? No. He's just a good, experienced riffer with lots of confidence, who was using a system tailored for spontaneity.

The d20 System is not designed for such prodigies of impulsiveness, but playing loose can and does work. I'll give you an example, based on my Plot Deck.

MY PLOT DECK

Randomness is a large part of the "game" element of most RPGs. Gaming with Tweet showed me that randomness doesn't have to be numerical; it can be verbal or image-based instead. In that spirit, I made myself a Plot Deck.

It's not a really original concept. *Everway* had the Fortune Deck, and before that there were Whimsy Cards, and I remember some other company put out a deck of archetype-based cards before they went under, but I built my Plot Deck out of fortune cookies and newspaper horoscopes. It wasn't hard. I just went through a month's worth of horoscope columns, cut out any phrases that sounded interesting, taped them to index cards and shuffled them together. Thus, random draws yield me things like: "You'll find the perfect words to express your love this year," "You might spend most of the day untangling other people's messes," or "All of a sudden everything seems possible. Contact with an old friend leads to new adventures."

I use this in games when things get boring and I need a quick inspiration fix for some minor plot action. "The PCs are dithering about what they're going to do while camping out in the wilderness..." (Draw.) "Okay, it's the fortune cookie 'Welcome the chance to learn about others.' No problem. I'll have 'em spot a light in the distance, they can check it out and meet some other traveler." While they're going through the paranoid motions of creeping around and using their night-vision goggles on the stranger, I can make up an interesting character, or pull one out of a file of random, pre-generated nonplayer characters (NPCs).

I also use the Plot Deck when I'm writing. I also use it in *really* free-form games by giving the players a draw or two, so that they can keep me on my toes by throwing random curveballs at me. It's a versatile tool.

I've drawn six cards from the Plot Deck. I'm going to brainstorm three characters and a one-session adventure. Go.

Those worries banging around in your head are not groundless. Some have merit, so sort through them. Our first PC is a paranoid type, but not without reason. I'm seeing some kind of sneaky, underworld figure: a thief, a mobster or a black marketer. Someone who wants to investigate and get to the bottom of things — while making some dough, of course.

You don't usually like to cause problems, but you might make an exception. Character #2 is a contrast — an innocent, maybe a bit naïve and idealistic, who's been pushed too far and is about to crack with the wrath that only the righteous can generate. She's gotten hooked up with the black marketer because they've got some common, mysterious enemy. Ironically, the crimey is the only man she can trust — and she doesn't trust him much.

A bet on a long shot could work out if it's good for your family, too. PC #3 is, obviously, a gambler and a risk-taker. Probably a friend of the black-marketer. He's got a line on something valuable and hidden, and is putting together a string to go retrieve it. He has to, because his daughter's sick and he can't afford the treatment. So between the straight-arrow's position of trust and the black marketer's underworld connections, he just might pull the caper, get rich and save the little girl. And all they ask in return is that he help them with these "invisible enemies" they seem to have.

There. Three characters in five minutes. Now for the plot.

Your stack of stuff becomes less intimidating. This implies that the stack of stuff *was* intimidating, at some point. So we'll maybe use this one later. The PCs find some "stuff" which becomes intimidating, but which they later learn how to use to their benefit. But what is it? Some nano-goodness/badness seems like an easy stretch, but we'll see what the next two cards reveal.

Others are having difficulty getting organized. Tell them you'll be glad to help them set priorities — for a price. Okay, so here's how the PCs get the "stack of stuff," via some group that is riven by internal strife. A cryptic alliance, perhaps? The PCs are in a position to spread oil on the waters (somehow — maybe just by being the only sensible people involved?); and if they do that, they get access to the goodies.

Don't be critical of a person who can help you. Carefully explain how things should be done and provide

support. Wow, did *that* fit in well! So someone who can help them out starts out irritating and abrasive, but if they don't alienate this person, they can get his/her aid, get the goodies, heal the sick and be on their way to finding their mysterious enemies.

Three minutes later and I've got some outline pieces. Now to brainstorm further.

The goodies need to be defined, clearly. I'm going with my first instinct and saying it's some sort of nano-trove. Given the PCs' motivation to heal the daughter and find the enemies, something that scans or diagnoses sounds appealing. So yeah, PC #3 has heard that this tribe of weirdoes out in the Sea of Sand have a nanogadget that can see into bodies, see into minds, see into your *very soul* to find good and evil. "Hey," he thinks, "If I can get that, I'll be able to find out about this mystery illness little Dez has." PCs #1 and #2 have also heard of the widget — rumors and legends only, but it sounds like something that could help them find out who's been wrecking their lives, and why.

They journey out to the Sea of Sand (bashing a couple random sand critters in the process, I'll yank those out of Chapter Five of the **Gamma World Player's Handbook** or **Machines and Mutants**) and meet the tribe with the doodad. The problem is, the tribe is ruled by leader with a dual brain, and the two brains are feuding. (Where'd this twist come from? Because two paragraphs up I wrote "his/her aid" and couldn't decide whether this major NPC should be male or female. Given the setting, a fused, two-brained hermaphrodite sounded interesting. Dual brain was a small jump from that.)

Brain #1 is pushing for more hunting, while Brain #2 is encouraging more cultivation and farming. But really, that argument is just a pretext. The *real* problem is that Brain #1 has fallen in love with one of the villagers who has just come of age, and he doesn't want to share her with Brain #2. Given that they share a single body, a single nervous system, and that each has full control only when the other is asleep, it could be very hard for this would-be spouse to actually know whether she's talking to Brain #1, #2, or both together.

Both brains are exhausted and getting a little weird from sleep deprivation, because each knows that as soon as he sleeps, the other starts giving orders contrary to his wishes. Can the PCs find a solution, get the brains to agree and (in the process) get the brains to explain how the omniscanner works? (The

omniscanner, of course, allows the Brains to see the PCs coming miles away, know what weapons they're carrying, know their weaknesses and know whenever they have a potentially violent thought.) If the PCs do mediate a middle course, the Brains give them each a dose of the omniscanner and agree to program the nanites to the PCs' specifications. But they won't give the PCs the machine that programs the scannites, or give them too many, or give them the machine that generates new ones. They get machines that can seek answers to just about any physical question, but only a few times, and the questions have to be defined before they make the long trek back.

There. Conflict, reward, a couple nifty ideas (the bickering dual-brain siblings, the scannites) and a plot arc in nineteen minutes.

Now is the point of this just for me to show off? Not entirely. The point is to illuminate the riffing process, the importance of not worrying when an idea's full implications aren't immediately apparent. There's an old test-taker's tip about questions to which you don't know the answers: Skip them and come back later, after answering the ones you do know. That works for riff creativity, too. Very often,

the answer to a later question suggests something important for the ones that came earlier.

Even when that doesn't work out, there will be times when it doesn't matter. For a GM Driver game, there's this impulse to have every road drawn, every repercussion pre-calculated. People forget that, given three choices, the PCs usually only pick one. So if you never bothered to pre-generate the roads not traveled, who cares?

THE ART OF THE YOINK

The "Yoink Maneuver" is an old RPG tradition. You may not have heard of it, or you may not have thought of its full depths of application.

In its purest form, you give the PCs some mystery to figure out, some vague clues, some puzzle to unravel... and the third guess is the correct answer. So you provide them a murder victim. You give them several people with motive, means and opportunity. Then you listen carefully. If first they suspect A, provide some evidence clearing A's name. Then if they guess it was J, you stick in something where the death penalizes J somehow. So when they settle on K, you have evidence crop up that supports this theory, and then K flees, and you get a chase scene,



and when K is cornered you have your climactic struggle and justice is done.

If they'd guessed B, then D, then E, you could have just as well had E be the killer. Instead of sculpting a solid mystery and letting them feel around it until they correctly describe what they're touching, you give them a rope, a tree trunk and a leather sheet, then let them feel smart and capable when they figure out that it's an elephant. You've stolen their idea and sold it back to them, pretending that it was yours all along and they just now figured it out. Yoink! (You may want to change this up a bit. If it invariably happens on 3, they're much likelier to spot the pattern. You could use a d6, a d4 or 1d3+1, or a d6 where you re-roll all 1s and 6s.)

The essence of the Yoink Maneuver is this: You're privileging plot pace over GM control and competitiveness. A sturdy Driver GM would never Yoink in a million years because it means that you are, essentially, cheating on behalf of the players. Or, if you look at it from another perspective, you're cheating to make it harder on them, because they're guaranteed to fail the first two times.

The rationale behind the Yoink is the assumption that RPGs are more about creating a story than about setting up challenges that defeat the PCs unless those challenges are "properly handled." A pure Yoinker never permanently defeats the PCs, unless they defeat themselves or the players decide they *want* the characters defeated. In my mind, I already hear the indignant whining that "It's not really a *game* if you can't really lose; if there isn't a chance of failure you can never truly succeed."

If having fun telling a great story is wrong, then I don't want to be right. If you think Yoinking is wrong, if your group loves adversarial play, do that and God bless. Just don't snub the Yoinkers because their fun isn't yours.

Now that I've gotten *that* off my chest, I'll leave the pro-Yoink readers with one final thought: This can work on a scale much grander than that of the simple "Whodunnit?" mystery. Instead of an exquisite corpse, you could have them enter a society where the peoples' behavior is increasingly bizarre, but which is matched by bizarre phenomena. Let the players discuss possible explanations — "They're propitiating a nano-fueled AI gone mad!" "We've been thrust into a holodeck-style simulation and don't know the rules!" "This is all a dream. Pinch me!" — and simply pick the one you like best.

GM DRIFTS: THE BENEFITS

The primary lure is increased creativity. The standard model has the GM (just one person) as the fountainhead for most of the ideas. Drifting splits that responsibility. If you have four players, your chances of any individual thinking up a really cool idea just increased fourfold.

The corollary of that increased creativity is increased involvement. People are interested in what interests them, by definition. When you let them steer, the game goes in the direction they want. This absolves you of having to guess what they want, and of having to set out lures to interest them. They're pre-interested. Instead of "they ask and you grant or deny" the model simply becomes "they get." When that happens, you don't need to bend over backwards to keep the players interested. If they get invested in the game, they interest themselves.

It also has to be said that a good drift game is a luxury for the GM, particularly for GMs who remember the first edition of **Gamma World**. Part of gaming's aging demographic, the thirty- and forty-year old gamers generally have a lot less time to devote to the hobby. Drifting is double-plus good if you're in that situation, because it minimizes the problems of being a mature gamer, particularly time constraints, while maximizing the advantages, particularly experience at creating game tropes. When this crusty old-timer sits down with his wizened cronies, I know they've all run various games for years, so I know that if I let them take the controls once in a while, they aren't going to capriciously steer onto a reef.

GM DRIFTS: THE HASSLES

Drifting sounds great, doesn't it? More creativity, less work for the GM, it fits better with busy adult schedules? Yeah, it's a great method and it works, but that doesn't mean it's perfect, and it doesn't mean it's for everyone. There are some typical snags upon which games adrift can come to grief.

First off, this style demands high riffing skills, all the time. If you have a bad day and are kind of tired, you may get a very flat session. Now, if this happens it's partially because of the players as well, but there is a longstanding tendency for the players to follow the GM's lead. If you're conservative and hesitant, they pick up that vibe and hesitate as well. There's no real cure for that kind of creative sag. You just have to preempt and prevent by making

sure you're well rested before you run the game or by having some fallback plotlines, characters and ideas scrawled down to pull out when your creativity fails. (Thus we come full circle. The cure for the GM Driver problems was to be more of a Drifter, and the cure for the GM Drift problems is to be more prepared.)

Players who are used to being tourists on a Driver bus may take a while to adapt to having the responsibility of proposing plots and generating the game's direction themselves. They may not like it at first, and they may not even like it when they get used to it.

The cure for the culture shock of being a proactive character who has to set goals and agendas, instead of just waiting around the bar for a mysterious stranger with tales of distant treasure, is to turn up the heat gradually. Many players are used to coming up with goals and back story during character generation. But with a Driver, that stuff is often just chrome, quickly worn off as the urgencies of the situation press the PCs into the expected set of limited responses. Instead of gradually wearing those ideas away until they're unimportant, try to gradually build them up, making them stronger and deeper until the player has an instinctive feel for what his character wants and feels in any situation. Take your time. It's a lot easier to play a character you've been using for a year, who has an established set of responses, than one who's just off the assembly line and still has that new-mutant smell. If you lead into the game with a Driver-style first scenario, then gradually relinquish control of the plot and switch to a Navigation model, you can wean players off the need for guidance and teach them to provide guidance to you.

On the other hand, some people just do not want to work that hard, or are willing to work hard but don't enjoy working in that particular way at their gaming. Some people want their characters to be the hulking dumb bear-mutant who bashes the enemy. And that's fine. In fact, that's better than fine, even in a game that drifts. You know why? Because players who go with the flow make really good mates for players who take to proactive planning with a vengeance. Which play group do you think works better — the one with four would-be leaders, each pushing a separate agenda? Or the one with two bickering leaders and two followers who mediate and tie-break between them?

Players who want to kick back and kick ass fit fine with the Drift structure, as soon as they adapt to the idea of taking their lead from another character instead of from the Driver GM. You just have to make sure to give them extra attention, because the players with the leader-types are going to take as much attention as you give them, and nobody signs on for an RPG to get ignored. Go the extra mile to play to the interests and fun of the less active players; the more active players can take care of themselves.

You may not, of course, wind up with a good mix of leaders and followers. You may get all leaders. (If you have all followers, you're probably going to need to shift to a more Navigational style.) You have to get them to blend their plans or, failing that, take turns. There's just no other way to handle it, without sacrificing the freedom and power that players enjoy under Drift games. If they can't learn to work together, or to have some patience, nothing but being driven will suffice.

Other problems with Drift are less concrete.

For example, you may wind up with a very directionless game. As a broad, sweeping generalization with many exceptions, players rarely consider tone during the game. Or rather, if they consider it, they think it's something to be enjoyed rather than something to be created. They consider tone the purview of the GM, and since most people are used to Drivers, that's hardly unreasonable. But when your players get a taste of the power that the Drift model gives them, you may wind up with dueling tones. For example, Player #1 reads James Ellroy, plays *Fallout*, listens to Marilyn Manson and wants a gritty post-apocalypse where suppurating freaks beat one another to death with the mangled remains of stop signs. Player #2 reads Terry Pratchett, plays *Over the Edge*, listens to They Might Be Giants and wants a bizarre trip through an over-the-top hyperreality sideshow. Tonal problems ensue.

Balancing this out takes work, both in game and out. The key is to have a solid idea what *you* want from the game's tone, and to consistently tilt in that direction. Your battling PCs are going to attempt to swerve one way or another, and that's actually fine. Total tonal consistency can sometimes be more boring than beneficial. But as long as you keep tipping it in one direction, the players are more likely to settle there. Some sessions wind up more gritty and horrific, some end up more offbeat and peculiar;

eventually the players get the hint, they adapt to a game with wildly veering tone (and some actively prefer this), or one of the players “wins” as everyone else gradually defaults to her favored tone. Remember, *Drift* is about co-creation, and sometimes your players are going to come up with a stronger concept than you did. Take it with good grace.

If you're faced with a serious breakdown where the Ellroy player *just can't take* one more vaguely-goofy colony with unusual social rites, or the Pratchett player isn't having fun with yet another shocking crime of unspeakable human evil, you may have to all just agree to disagree. Alternately, you may have to have a little out-of-character chat about what you all want, and then throttle back their control so that you play *Navigator* until a stable, mutually agreeable tone can be found.

Another problem is the slapstick situation. When people are stuck for a creative response, a common reaction is to fall back on lowbrow fart gags and slapstick silliness. (This pretty much explains Pauly Shore's entire career.) When you give players a lot of play, you may wind up with something that resembles “*Futurama*” more than *The Day After*. This isn't a problem unless it is. If everyone's having fun playing *Gamma Toon* then, hey, rock the house. But that's not really the milieu **Gamma World** aims for. If your players are *settling* for dumb jokes instead of grooving on them, if they're falling back on the obvious haw-haw instead of taking a moment to think of a better, more interesting, more *real* response — okay, *then* it's a problem.

Sometimes you can solve this with a little judicious negative reinforcement. Don't give him a polite laugh, just look at the joker over the top of your glasses and say, “Is *that* the best you can come up with?” Don't rise to the bait. When the other players play seriously, give them more attention. Fall back on sensory description. Give the mutant characters unexplained joint pains, mention how skinny and somber all the kids seem to be in this

settlement, and slant your riffed responses towards greater maturity and moral ambiguity.

Now, this doesn't mean there's no place for humor. Humor is an important part of life. But **Gamma World** works best when the characters make jokes, not when they *are* jokes.

If all your players want a lighthearted tone, yeah, great. But often games get tonejacked by one player who's a little faster off the mark as long as he's making a “*Simpsons*” reference. The most obvious solution is to boot the jester, but that's not the best solution. Quick thinkers are just what you want in *Drift* games. So instead of throwing him away, what you need is to get him inside the tent pissing out, instead of outside pissing in. Often, a glare or a little private chat is enough. (“Dude, could you cut the jokes back like, 60% or so? It's really starting to interfere.”) Emphasize that he's a good player when he's not hijacking the game and making it into a Leno monologue. Tell him you want him to get involved, but that the lame jokes are hurting more than helping.

Don't dress him down in front of the other players, of course. Don't ever do that to anyone for anything game related: In the long run it screws you much, much worse than him.

This is also a problem that can improve over time. Once they've gotten their cheap laffs, the players may get tired of it on their own and be ready to settle into something deeper. *Drift* games usually start out wobbly until they find their tone, unless you and the players take some time to really hammer out a course before hand (that is, unless you *Navigate*). Often the tone is more robust and instinctive for being natural-grown. In fact, some groups have started out aiming for one tone but — by being open to the unexpected — they land on a different one that they like *better*. You could start out fully intending to do *Mad Max* and wind up preferring *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Stranger things have happened — particularly with **Gamma World**.

THE FIRST IMPRESSION

Think of your **Gamma World** campaign as your child. (It's not. Less likely to wake you up with a poopy diaper, for starters) You want to give that child the best possible chance right? You want your little brainchild to grow up into a long-running campaign full of thrills, laughs, tragedies, epic triumphs and catastrophes, all powered by well-handled characters and intriguing ideas.

It all starts with the first session. And during that first session, your game is more fragile than it has ever been.

You have a few advantages. Players are more forgiving at the start of a game, and the thrill of novelty can keep them coming back for a few sessions. But unless you hit the ground running, your game faces the uphill battle of convincing the players to show up every week. If you give them a kick-ass, slam bang, balls-to-the-wall-and-four-on-the-floor introduction, they are going to get it in their heads that "This game is fantastic!" Once that's in there, they put the best face on everything else that comes.

Conversely, if you give your players a limp, shaky start, they're going to have their eyes peeled for the next screwup. If they have it in their heads that "Eh, this game is okay... I guess..." then they're going to feel a lot less conflicted about skipping a session when Vin Diesel's next movie comes out.

You want your players counting the days until your next game, and nothing gets them into that healthy habit like a first-rate first session.

So what's the recipe for that?

GET YOUR MOTOR RUNNING: THE FIRST ADVENTURE

The first adventure sets the tone for the game. If you play it fast and loose with the rules, the players follow suit. If you're nit-picky and hit the books every twenty minutes to look something up, the players follow suit. If you get a solid grasp of the rules beforehand and run things with confidence, the players are more likely to realize that competence with the game system is expected of them. (That, or they'll figure that you know everything and that if you tell them to roll a 16 or better, then 16 or better is what they must roll. Either way, you win.)

- **Consistency:** This is the time to nip any problems before they gestate or germinate. Player

starts making out-of-character wisecracks (and that's not kosher with you)? Shut it down the first time. You want the focus on a fast-moving plot, not on interminable player debate? Bring a timer and tell the players, "You have exactly fifteen minutes to formulate a plan."

Maybe you're not into that sort of hard-core tyrannical game moderation. That's also fine, and you can show that by example, too. But if you *do* want to set boundaries, you have to teach your players what you consider right ways and wrong ways, right away. It's hard to get rid of something you don't like if you don't *show* your dislike from the very first.

- **Excitement:** Give them something to do *now*. You may even want to start out *in media res*. "The lizard-mutants have fallen back, they're regrouping in the ditch. What do you do? The heavy cannon is out of ammo, but you've got one reload pack for it. You might be able to get it back online if they charge again, but it's your last one. Or you could try to clear the roadblock while they're disoriented. Which is it going to be?"

Start with something cool, a confrontation on some level; get a second one in towards the end of the session; and make sure there's a hook to drag them back for more — if not an actual cliffhanger, some other interesting, unsolved problem or question.

- **Success:** Arrange things so that the characters get to do some of the things they're supposed to be good at. I remember one game where the campaign started out with my character getting killed in the first session. I was unfamiliar with the system, but my GM assured me that my character was pretty tough, a good fighter. So when some sailors started picking on him in a bar, he took a swing and wound up getting beaten to death in something like five combat rounds. Did I roll for crap? I did. But I also didn't understand the combat system. I didn't realize that once all my character's capacity for resistance was used up, the next blow could be an instant-death critical hit. So instead of looking cool like an action-movie hero, my character died the death of a small brown dog. I made another character and the game lasted a few more sessions after that, but eventually it ran out of gas and I wasn't particularly sorry to see that system's backside.

Now imagine that your characters, who have good feats, good abilities and so forth, go up against what



you consider an equal challenge for them in their very first session. What happens if they roll poorly? What happens if they don't understand their feats as well as you understand their opponents' feats, and they make accordingly poor tactical choices? What if you misjudged how tough their characters are?

In video games, the first few levels are usually pretty easy. There's a reason for that: It gives people a chance to learn the controls. Don't assume that because your players already know how to roll dice or even because they already know *Dungeons & Dragons* that they're ready to get the edge in a **Gamma World** fair fight. Remember that your players are probably less familiar with the system than you are, since you've been poking at more of it in the course of getting the campaign ready to start.

- **Perception:** Give your players a chance to discover how their characters work best and feel most enjoyable. This isn't always the same thing as *displaying* their characters. One of them might, for instance, *think* the character she rolled up is a cynical combat medic. But while playing, she may find that she enjoys him more as a deeply compassionate and moral individual who puts on that scrappy façade to keep from getting hurt again. Asking the players to confront deep personal challenges to their characters right off is a bit unfair. Give them external opponents for the first

session; otherwise they've got too much to handle. This isn't a play — they've got Defense modifiers and skill bonuses to keep track of — so asking them to develop an in-depth motivation for their characters is a burden you can put off for a while.

While this is their chance to learn about the game setting and system, it's your chance to get a grip on what *they* want from the game, in terms of tone, style and (if you're Drifting or Navigating) content. You may have planned a gritty game of political cat and mouse, but if your PCs spend a lot of time mackin' on the honeys, you need to readjust.

No one ever went broke giving the people what they want. This is your chance to do market research through observation, not just through direct questioning. It's a fact that many people don't know what they want. That, or what they want won't really make them happy. Your players may *say* they want a gritty game of espionage and social engineering. They may even *think* they want it. But if they solve every problem with ray-guns blazing and are consistently taking combat-oriented skills and feats, well... actions speak louder than words.

Let's look at an example game. Amy is going to run **Gamma World** for Kia, Edward and Doug. They've all created psychic characters, so they decide that their home settlement has huge prejudices

against psychics and they're the cryptic alliance of psions who like themselves unslaughtered. Amy has vague plans for something like Salman Rushdie's book *Midnight's Children*, only with more guns.

Checking her laundry list, Amy considers consistency. She's running a straight GM Driver game, so she's in charge. She thinks her friends would probably like a game that's violent and dangerous, but with glittery edges and general PC competence, a little below the level of *The Matrix*. Their settlement has things pretty good, on a bread-and-circuses level, but the price they pay is oppression, centralized government boot-stamp authority, and lots of hard, hard work. They have pretty good technology for lowbrow entertainment and combat, not so good for health care, education or actual culture.

To keep this tone consistent, Amy makes a note to have the settlement's "normal people" all talk about weather and old video shows, which the government controls and doles out according to their original release schedule. The people with government connections all have tight, somber black pleather uniforms, while everyone else wears vaguely effeminate and fanciful transitory fashions.

In terms of meta-game rules, she's going to be pretty soft on out-of-character joking, as long as it doesn't wreck the tension of a dramatic situation. To help keep a lid on that, she's adopting the idea of using a timer to get the players stepping lively with their strategizing.

Her consistent ingredients, then, are a sort of 1984/*Brave New World*/"Max Headroom"/*Soylent Green* tone. The players are free to distance themselves from the game sometimes, but not when the heat is on. When those guns start going off, Amy expects them to be all business.

Consistency: Check. Or, at least she's decided what she wants to be consistent to.

Next, she needs excitement. Why not kick things off with a fight? The characters all share a secret, and presumably each knows one or two other psychic misfits as well. When the game starts, Amy is going to wake them up with a mental distress call from Saloris, one of their fellow outcasts. If they rush to Saloris' home, they find a mob forming, led by a neighborhood blowhard who insists that Saloris read his mind and revealed embarrassing secrets about him. Saloris' parents are trying to barricade the door and talk reason, while the mob outside gets uglier.

The mob is 10 citizens, all 1st level (if that), and Amy has secretly decided that half of them run off at the first sign of active resistance. But the PCs are unarmed (except for their psychic powers, which are nothing to sneeze at) and have no way of knowing that the mob won't all turn and fight.

There are three ways the PCs can handle this.

- **Call the cops:** They're already on their way, but if this is all the PCs do, the jackboot patrol might show up, disperse the crowd... and arrest Saloris. Who is psychic. And knows that the PCs are too. So Amy's going to let the players make Intelligence checks against DC 10 to figure out the ramifications of relying on the cops. Even if they all fail, Amy can have the vigilantes succeed at breaking the door down before the cops arrive. If *that* doesn't stir the PCs to action, they get treated to the spectacle of Saloris' parents getting battered aside while she's dragged into the street. (If even *that* doesn't work, maybe the line "You do understand that you get experience points for overcoming obstacles, not just observing them?" might. But she doesn't think they're that dense.)

- **Kick start the riot:** If they fire it up, Amy has plans for how to make the mob scary without it actually being overwhelming. If the PCs fight smart, including taking heavy cover, using powers from a distance, creating confusion and moving around so that they don't get spotted or pinned down, they can probably disperse the crowd without anyone even getting a good attack against them. Even if they do it in the dumbest possible fashion (a full frontal charge) Amy is pretty confident that the 5 mob members who *do* attack in response won't kill any of the characters. But the PCs are more likely to be recognized or injured if they play it dumb.

- **Talk down the crowd:** If the characters decide to try to use Diplomacy to bring the mob to its senses, the mob starts out at unfriendly (but not yet hostile, even though the blowhard is working them up to it). Alternately, they could say something about what the cops might think about vigilante lynching. That could scare the crowd away altogether with a good Intimidate roll, or soften them up for Diplomacy. Amy has some talking points prepped for the blowhard, but she's deliberately made them somewhat illogical and contradictory. After all, it's a little bit harsh to expect the players to instantly marshal cogent arguments on an issue she's had days to contemplate. (See *d20 Modern*, Chapter 2: Skills, "Skill Descriptions," *Diplomacy*.)

This is a situation ripe for drama, action and risk. If the PCs are passive, she has options to force their hands. If they take action by themselves, she's ready to give them a good starting challenge.

Excitement? Check. Success? Almost certainly another check.

The other element this scene gives Amy is an opportunity to gauge the PCs' reactions. They've got a wide-open set of options. Do they stand up for Saloris directly and speak out against tyranny? If they do, Amy should get ready for a game where they stay and fight City Hall, protecting their rights, protesting the egregious abuses of the tyrants and generally making nuisances of themselves the way freedom-loving flag-burners do.

On the other hand, they could disguise themselves, kick mob ass and ratchet the local anti-psychic prejudices up a few more notches on the hysteria meter. If that happens, Amy can prepare a semi-superhero game where they disguise themselves and fight the power while trying to keep their identities concealed.

A third option is that they might blow their cover, reveal themselves as psychics and flee the town with Saloris in tow. Amy should also be prepared for a "pursuit through the badlands" game where they have to escape, hide and fight only when cornered.

All this, arising from one simple, hate-filled mob.

If she's a pure example of a Driver, Amy has already decided which route the game is going to go. If they're supposed to flee to the badlands, she gives them Intelligence checks to realize the cops aren't going to let the Saloris matter rest, no matter how unjust the accusation. She could have them tough it out for a while but pressure them with interrogations, veiled threats and prejudice from their neighbors. If they're supposed to stay and be hidden, she can have them luck out this time — the disorganized mob didn't give coherent descriptions of the attackers, the surveillance camera was focused on the blowhard or the vigilantes disabled them — and use Saloris as an object example of why it's a bad idea to get identified as a psychic. Perhaps the best bet is for Saloris to get jailed, give them a message that she's found a way to attack her own memories and that she's going to do it to protect them... but please rescue her! Or if they're supposed to be Gandhi or Silkwood types, she can use the pressure methods from the cops, while emphasizing

how downtrodden and resentful (that is, ripe for revolution) the proletarians are as well.

The content of the rest of the session depends on where the game as a whole is going, but Amy should make sure to end it with another cliffhanger: Maybe a chase scene as they get Saloris out of town to the dubious safety of the badlands; maybe a showdown with a particularly creepy cop; or maybe some entirely external challenge to the community which the normal cops can't handle, but which is far less dangerous to the psychic PCs.

KEEP YOUR MOTOR RUNNING: THE SECOND ADVENTURE

The first session gets the players on the hook. The second adventure should continue the fishing metaphor by driving the hook deeper into their lips until it's embedded so maddeningly in their flesh that they can think of nothing else.

If the ingredients to the first session were consistency, excitement, success and perception, the ingredients for the second are consistency, excitement, challenge and exposition.

- **Consistency:** This doesn't work quite the same way for the second session as it did for the first. You prepped the first session by considering what you wanted, and then you played it and found out what you got. For the second session, you can examine what you got and decide if that's what you wanted, and if it's what you *still* want.

To explain all this, let's go back to the example of Amy Wynn's game. She planned the first session to be "Oppressive Matrix Police State Meets Scanners." But maybe things gamed out differently. Maybe her players are more cautious than she expected and have gone into ecstasies of paranoia trying to keep their character's identities concealed. The game has, at the prompting of the players, detoured down *Schindler's List* lane.

Amy now has two choices. If she continues along the path she mapped out, the PCs are going to encounter challenges roughly equal to their ability levels. If they persistently run and hide, fighting only when they're cornered or when they've got an overwhelming edge, then they're probably going to have a very consistent win record. This in turn may encourage them to the point that they start acting more boldly, and the tone she intended can emerge. If she manages a smooth transition, the tone may



ultimately be stronger because it grew and changed instead of being imposed, static, from the beginning.

On the other hand, she can adjust her plans a bit, figure on the PCs staying hidden and scared, and cant the game more towards a horror or suspense tone.

Change the game to conform to plans, or change the plans to conform to game. Either way can work. The big problem comes if you don't change anything, and then wonder why your plans and your game are going north and south instead of smoothly pulling together.

- **Excitement:** This is the strong suit of many GMs. You know (or have had opportunity to learn thanks to this book) how to construct a plot line, how to get the PCs interested and how to build to a climax and handle a *dénouement*. Put in a fight scene, a moral choice, a chase or a mystery to solve. You know, *excitement*.

- **Challenge:** In the first session, I encouraged you to tilt the playing field in the PCs' favor. Maybe not to the point of a "Monty Haul" game where they knock off one mugger and he's got a monoblade sword that he didn't use (for some strange reason)... but I did, I encouraged you to give them a break, a fight they could win, a peril that was not nearly as *actually* perilous as it appeared to them on the surface. This time, do the opposite. Now you want things to go badly for them.

When I say "provide a challenge," I don't mean "toss in a platoon of seps who can and will eat them for lunch." I mean give them a fight that's going to cost them even if they withdraw, and which is going to cost them lots more to win. This is your chance to start the tough choices, the ones that take things away from the characters and make them angry about it. This doesn't have to mean physical possessions, and indeed usually shouldn't. It's better to remove or jeopardize elements of a character's identity rather than that character's abilities. That is, you shouldn't suddenly decide that the PC has to make a Fortitude save to avoid damage before using a mutant attack that was previously painless to use. You should, instead, have her lose her job, lose the trust and respect of her neighbors, or lose her position in the community.

In the first session, you define the characters as the tough protagonists with the will and the skill to take care of business. Now you want to build up the opposition as legitimate threats, and that often

means moving the characters into the role of the unjustly punished. This sets up a lengthy game in which they make things right.

Suppose your PCs are nomadic mercenaries, following conflicts and pledging loyalty only to coin and one another. In the first session you can readily set up some intro scene wherein they put their particular beats down. What do you do for an encore?

On the surface, these seem like difficult characters to challenge. They don't *have* homes, families or honored positions in the community. They're gunbunny scum who kill for money then move on to the next low-intensity conflict. What do you take away from them?

Well, how about their self-images and their reputations?

In our hypothetical mercenary example, imagine them winning the day in the first session, being feted by the winners and hearing their praises sung by all. Now they get hired for another battle (probably on the strength of their previous performance) and this time they're working with another group of soldiers of fortune. When the actual fight begins, the other group leaves them high and dry: They bail out when the going gets tough, leaving the PCs to be captured; badly injured; or to survive solely through luck, pluck and eating the muck. The battle goes against them, and — insult to injury — the chickens who abandoned them made it sound like it was the PCs' fault.

Now the PCs have enemies, and they have an injustice to right. They can make things right by clearing their names of the calumny of cowardice. If they get a chance to waste those sorry yellow-bellied cheats with their laser rifles... so much the better.

- **Exposition:** The first session is like the pilot of a TV show. It gets the pieces out and shows you how they move on the board. The second session is the first show in the regular season. You get more background, it introduces larger conflicts and starts the process of revealing major NPCs.

In gaming as in fiction, the info-dump rarely works. You can't just say, "You meet the major antagonist, Bjorn Cyborg, sadist, tactician, Sagittarius and warlord of the wastelands. He's been gathering strength for years and believes that he can finally sack and enslave your town." Instead, you need to reveal things slowly. By making the PCs work for their information, you give it meaning and weight. If you just hand them a huge flopping pile of data, it all seems equally relevant.

Another strike against the info-dump is that they're already digesting one (or maybe two) big knowledge servings. The first is the setting of **Gamma World** in general, and the second is the particular features of their characters. Asking them to understand the Gamma Age and their character's feats and abilities *and* the back story of your particular setting... it's a lot to take all at once. Instead of making it a chore to learn all that, make it a pleasure. Concentrate on the learning process instead of the end knowledge product because, after all, the fun of the game lies in playing it — not in the result of having the game played.

This brings up an important difference between most games and most books, comics and movies: the absence of a committed enemy, someone the characters love to hate, a nemesis. This is the Moriarty to their Holmes, the Magneto to their Professor X, the Bart Simpson to their Sideshow Bob. RPG characters tend to fight to the death, and GMs tend to let that happen.

The way to build up a really loathed antagonist, someone whose ultimate defeat is the capstone to a long and satisfying campaign, is to start out with some form of competition other than a strict battle to the death. The second session is the perfect place to introduce this rivalry, and from there you can escalate gradually until the hatred reaches killing levels.

So you start out with the eventual arch-enemy as a mere rival. Perhaps the characters and the foe are both trying to poach the same collection of antiquities. Maybe the rival gets there first, maybe the characters do, but in any event bad blood is created. Next time they're head to head, the rival falls back on some dirty tricks, but nothing overtly lethal (yet). Include some consequences if the PCs immediately escalate to DefCon 10. Maybe the guy's respected, or has too many followers to confront directly. As the characters grow more skilled and influential, you can also turn up the heat on this conflict until, game-years down the road, the characters run one town, their rival runs another, and the conflict between them is an actual shooting war.

The seeds of all this should be planted in the second session, but remember that they are, at this point, merely seeds.

The same principle applies for other major plot developments. If you want someone to become a

major resource and ally, start them off as a minor one now. If you want the Quest for the Mighty Maguffin to form the centerpiece of a later plot arc, make passing references to it now.

To sum up: The purpose of the first adventure is to create a sense of how much the PCs *can* accomplish. The purpose of the second is to give them a preview of how much there is to accomplish.

WHAT'S THE FREQUENCY, KENNETH?

Real life takes its toll on gamers' interest in frequent and long sessions and on their ability to participate in them. However, it's possible to have satisfying, challenging play even when you can't play as long or as often as you might wish.

DON'T SLOW TO A KRAWL

When you've got sixteen game-hours a week, it's perfectly plausible to prolong the ecstasy by giving the characters a series of rooms to slog through, each with its trick, trap, clue, red herring or monster. But when you're scheduled for 1–5 pm on Sunday and after that the babysitter has to go home, that model is less viable because it drags things out for months, as your players clear a couple rooms each week and then time's up. It's slow because the setup isn't geared for speed, and it stays slow because the players don't get enough time with the system to get fast with it.

The blunt but functional answer is to give them a five-room building to clear instead of a fifty-room fortress. Try to get one good plot bang in per session, whether it's a good fight scene or some other well-delineated challenge. Every session should contain a plot development, whether it's a new puzzle that makes things harder to figure out or the resolution of an old puzzle that makes things clearer. It could be the opportunity for the characters to take a concrete step closer to their goal by assassinating an enemy leader, capturing a powerful artifact or securing the needed vaccine; or a devastating setback that fills them with dread and alarm like having *their* leader assassinated, losing communication from an outlying settlement or facing a suspiciously-timed insurrection. A plot bang is any development that keeps the players riveted, either by making them go "All right!" or by making them go "Oh *crap!*"

In the old-skool dunjun krawl, the plot bang was at the end of the maze: You fought the Big Ultimate Evil Baddie and you were done. Sure, there might be

plot bangs leading up to that, as you find out that his only weakness is his enchanted shinbone or you get some other Maguffin you need to get into the Inner Sanctum, but the bog-standard krawl had simple plots (like "save the world by stopping Gol Evitaxal the Thunderslayer") that were mostly pretext for long sessions rattling around in the rage cage.

There's nothing wrong with that kind of play, and it's actually entirely compatible with a fair amount of sophistication in the overall setting, characterization and other aspects of the game. But it's got its limitations as well, and in particular it's much better suited to long sessions than short ones. The alternative is to widen focus and make kill-box tactical problems just one course in the meal.

This may seem counterintuitive. The solution to time crunch is to do *more*? But by far the most time-intensive aspect of d20 System games like **Gamma World** is combat. A combat taking up one minute of game time — that's 10 rounds — may take an hour of play time to simulate — even more if players are constantly pausing to look up the interactions between their Agile Riposte and Combat Reflexes feats. But a ten-minute negotiation can be resolved with just a couple of dice rolls if it's not all that important or entertaining. Even if you take the leisurely approach with lots of in-character debate and discussion, political scheming generally gets more done in less player time than doing a blow-by-blow Hulk Smash simulation.

The krawl model assumes that since combat takes the most time and gets the most specific rules, it should be the focus of the game. If all you want is a combat simulation... well, kewl, you can stop reading right now. But you can do more. If you keep combat as one element among many (and it's always going to be a key element, even if it's more important as a threat than an experience), then you can get to your plot bangs in four hours instead of sixteen. The plot bangs are a payoff that can keep a busy adult's interest.

TEAM UP

Here's another time-sponge: The solo player.

In an eight-hour session, it's fine to have one player split off to scout up ahead for fifteen or twenty minutes while everyone gets a much-needed chance to hit the bathroom, kitchen and other vital areas. But when time is at a premium, offering lengthy one-on-one sessions with the GM may be a luxury that you can't afford.

To figure out how to eliminate lone-wolf situations, it's helpful to consider why they crop up. Part of it is that many of us are attention hogs, but reengineering human nature is mostly outside the scope of this book. Part of the problem that you can do something about is character specialization.

Different characters do different things well. That's a no brainer. People like having archetypes like the Cunning Mastermind, the Sneaky Ninja, Mr. Kissy-Face and the Big Brawler — in *d20 Modern* terms, the Smart hero, the Fast hero, the Charismatic hero and the Strong hero. Specialization helps, and more importantly, it's fun. But the time crunch comes in when you have a character whose role works solo and requires GM oversight, such as the scout who has to make a zillion Search and Disable Device checks before the rest of the party enters the room or the techie type who curls up in a corner with the GM poring over the item construction rules.

One solution is out-of-session play. Do you really need to take in-game time to vet a PC's latest device? A few exchanges of e-mail, a phone call or in-person visit can let you give the idea and its execution your full attention without taking anything away from the group's limited time together.

The other solution is built right into *d20 Modern*: multi-classing. Don't just have *one* scout, *one* techie, *one* translator/flattering diplomat. Have a primary and a backup. Doug's character is primarily sneaky, but has a couple levels in a class that helps him understand technology. Edward's character is primarily a combat monster, but he's got enough infiltration expertise that he can help with recon. Kia's character is the best techie, but with combat skills in reserve.

Well-rounded characters mean that you, as the GM, have *two* players involved in each phase of play, which means you're keeping two players happy instead of just one. If one scout has cold dice, the other might get lucky with a natural 20. If the techie bungles, he's got a lab assistant to pull him from the flaming wreckage. And if the negotiator's player has an isolated moment of rotten judgment, the backup player may keep her from saying something incredibly stupid.

EMBRACE LAZY CHEATING

The krawl mentality permits a limited number of options. Because it assumes a fairly adversarial stance between player and GM, dungeon designers



try to foresee and account for as many possible player actions as possible. Their job is to anticipate reasonable responses and preclude unreasonable responses. Adventures (or complexes) designed on this model are a lot like computer games, in that you may have a *lot* of choices, but you are still limited to the choices the programmer has predicted.

But the problem with dismissing anything unexpected is that it takes the tabletop RPG's single greatest strength, the GM's uniquely human ability to imagine and improvise on the fly, and chucks it away unused.

As the GM, you have to provide more than your players can get from a computer game. **Gamma World** has no physical skill "twitch" elements. You don't have 3-D animated CGI unless you make it yourself. You don't have instant calculation of myriad combat modifiers. What you *do* have is the ability to *create*, and to do so in response to your players' creativity.

If you're playing a computer game, you may notice that the evil critters' fortress is on lower terrain. And you may notice that there's a river nearby. But unless the programmers built in an option for you to divert the river and flood them out, you can't do it. Lots of pre-generated krawl-style adventures take this same approach: "If it's outside the script, it's off limits." The GM is expected to think up reasons why unorthodox approaches won't work. She's expected to say "No, no, no!" In effect, she punishes the players for the sin of original thought.

Flooding the complex is seen as lazy. It's cheating. The PCs don't want to go through twenty or thirty combat encounters, so they try to find a way around them.

Now, for a moment, ask yourself what's wrong with flooding the complex. Historically, the great generals have been the ones who didn't play by the rules, like the American Revolutionaries who refused to let the British slaughter them in the open field, the Japanese general who thought, "Hmm, instead of a straight frontal charge, maybe I'll stampede a herd of cattle at them first," and Hannibal bringing elephants through the Alps.

This sort of non-linear thinking should be rewarded, not punished, because it plays to the biggest advantage tabletop games have over computer games. "Lazy cheating" side-steps lengthy

combats and lets the PCs get straight to the plot payoff. If you're still uneasy about it, ask yourself this: If the players were really hot to get in a series of fights, would they be bothering to think up these efficient (if oblique) strategies?

You may find it helpful to look at every PC action as a vote. They're trying to influence the tone of the game as well as the specific plot. If they respond to every situation with guns blazing, that's a lot of votes for a high-conflict game. If they're always trying to talk things out first, that indicates a desire for a more political milieu. If they're always trying to trick and deceive, it might make them really, really happy if it works from time to time.

Gaming isn't a democracy, but neither is it a totalitarian hobby. You have to give the players what they want. If they want bread and circuses, even the best beef jerky and tractor pull in the world won't make them happy, and you'll end up with the most carefully planned game that no one plays.

That doesn't mean the *characters* have to get everything they want. The characters have their own goals and would (presumably) like them met as quickly and painlessly as possible. The players, on the other hand, want a good story about the quest for those goals, which implies many setbacks and challenges. The players may even be happy if the characters fail, so long as the story is good. A cakewalk through paper tigers is, in the end, just as unsatisfying as a squalid Killer GM scenario where the heroes all die in the second session.

In that spirit, the PCs' unorthodox approach shouldn't make success effortless. Nothing worth doing should be without effort. But recognize that thinking up a nifty (or wacky) alternative *is* effort, and should pay off. Flooding the complex isn't a combat action, but there are still engineering hurdles to overcome, you have to keep it secret from your intended targets... and afterwards, what happens if you find out that vital equipment or information is now, thanks to you, under thirty feet of water?

The characters think their quick-fix will make it easy for them and therefore is completely right. The krawl designer would tell you they're cheating, breaking the implicit agreement to play within the constraints the designer imagined, and are therefore completely wrong. But if you're smart and can think on your feet, you can give them victory mixed with unexpected challenges, because they were *partly* right. That's what tabletop rules do best.

A GOOD STORY

Among people who try to analyze gamer preferences and behavior, there's constant argument over what distinct categories exist and what labels they ought to carry. Some very common terms can mean very different things, and "story" is one such word. Its appearance here isn't a covert endorsement of any very complex taxonomy. Rather, it means pretty much what you'd think it means in regular everyday usage: a sequence of events and responses to them that adds up to a satisfying experience. Depending on the preferences of your group, it might work out as a coherent and interesting story in some other medium, or it might just be fun to reminisce about. The point is that your players take away something from the game that has an overall shape in addition to the specific incidents that comprise it.

THE 8TH-LEVEL BADASS SOLUTION

Another solution to time crunch is to compress the scope of the game in terms of competence, instead of size or content. In other words, instead of having a huge ability chasm with the 3rd-level nobodies on one end and the 20th-level overlords on the other, you set things up so that the PCs can hit the ground running.

Practice makes you faster and more confident. Someone who plays eight hours a week gets twice as competent with the system as someone who only plays four hours a week. At the same time, those who play more can get more actions resolved per hour, while those who play less need more time to do anything.

This problem only gets worse when the characters are constantly powering up. Instead of using what they have efficiently, the players are stuck trying to get used to new abilities. In actual play, this often means holding up the game while GM and players alike page through



the books searching for the relevant rule. Encouraging players to pick easy-to-remember feats and abilities with simple descriptions helps a bit; but it only goes so far, and it forces players to stop considering concepts they might really want to play and that would fit your campaign plans very well.

There's a tradition of setting up towns with high-level authorities and major settlements with champions who are higher level yet, often ten or more levels above where the characters start off. The traditional rationale for this is that it's necessary to keep the characters from wreaking havoc.

But think about it and complete this sentence: "Allowing the characters to wreak havoc is a problem because...."

The answer may be "...because it derails my carefully planned plot." If you're using the Driver model presented earlier and your players are happy passengers, you've got a perfectly legitimate barrier to keep them in bounds. But if you're less scripted, why is havoc a bad thing? If the PCs assassinate a leader, they've handed you a gold mine of plot complications. You can spin play out for weeks with the repercussions of that one act, and it's guaranteed to feel relevant to the players because *they did it*. They want to be the most important characters, they should be, and allowing them to have a major impact on events is the proof that they are.

If you accept that leaders can be low level, you get a game where the characters don't need to constantly stack experience points to be effective. Instead of concentrating on the concrete power-ups like new feats, more talents and higher ability scores, a short-session game can concentrate on intangibles like social prestige, political influence and cultural change. Your characters don't need to be high level to be high rollers. Give them influence from the first, reward them with more influence, and instead of paging through the rule books pricing out new kewl powerz, they'll be paging through their notes looking for the perfect patsy for the treason of the day.

Who's *really* more powerful, the 10th-level hulk in power armor or the 4th-level schemer who can make an entire city dance to his tune? (In the end, of course, neither is entirely "more powerful" than the other. What matters is how well their particular aptitudes match up to the challenges they face in your game.)

IN CONCLUSION

Spending less time gaming doesn't mean you have to have less fun gaming. It means you just have to have more fun per minute. If you're willing to take a step back and play the broader game, you can move your conflicts from the strictly physical and immediate level, and into a more political and strategic game. With that sort of efficiency, you can get just as much pure story satisfaction in half the time.

THE LAST IMPRESSION

Now that we've covered the Genesis chapter of your **Gamma World** experience, let's talk about the Apocalypse. How does it all end?

I don't mean a literal apocalypse where the PCs blow up the world, which would generally be redundant. I'm talking about the end of your campaign, the big finale, the climax, the part that gets your players talking to the developer or authors about it at a convention five years later and that gets them thinking "Man, I've heard about a million guys blather about their characters, but *this* game sounds like it was *cool!*"

Lots of people regard gaming as a TV series that is immune to cancellation. You throw the adventure of the week at them, they solve it and... that's it. Until next week. Lather, rinse, power up, repeat.

Some game groups do this for years, until the characters are all 50th level and finally qualify for the Omnipotent Post-biological Global Life-Form prestige class. But more commonly the campaign ends because the GM gets married, dies of old age, has to move to take a new job or simply gets tired of running. The game that started with such a bang trickles off in a whimper.

There's nothing wrong with getting tired of running a game. I like eating chocolate hazelnuts, but I wouldn't want to do it for four straight hours. When it's not fun anymore, and it's not just a temporary blue period, you should quit. In fact, you should try to bring things to a magnificent climax *before* they get tiresome. Build on the campaign's strengths for a strong ending, wrapping it up while

it retains vigor and interest. A good climax leaves the participants feeling both that they'd really like to know what happens next and that the questions and challenges they've faced all along are now resolved in an appropriate way.

Note that the good resolution might involve the characters beating down all rivals with righteous strength and establishing justice and prosperity for the whole region. But it doesn't have to, depending on who the characters have been. If the players have built up their characters as schemers prone to hubris, the good resolution might be them losing out on their biggest challenge and seeing that their rivals really did have the better idea. If the characters have been out engaging in epic quests, the good resolution might be their return home and the establishment of new trade and travel routes that will protect future travelers from the risks the characters took. It all depends on what the characters' goals are, and how you and the players feel about those goals.

THE MATURE GAME

You want to end a game before it has a chance to get old and tiresome, but not before you've had a chance to milk it for every last drop of fun. End your game when it is, in a word, mature. Here are some of the signs that the game is now ready.

COMFORT

If your players are still fumbling with the rules, still trying to figure out exactly what their characters' Defense against touch attacks is and still uncertain about how some of their psi-powers work, then the odds are the game is still in a larval stage. **Gamma World** characters tend to constantly improve, but at some point, you and the players should both feel pretty at ease with the mechanics. This is an important point, because it's hard to concentrate on who your character is when you're distracted by questioning her survivability. Once the players have a strong grasp of the rules and can operate their characters easily, it's a lot simpler for them to invest energy in getting deeply into plot convolutions and character issues.

Your game begins to be mature when the rules become more transparent or (even better) instinctive. That's really the golden age for character and plot. If you try to do too much before that stage, it's going to have reduced impact because of the player's divided attention.

It can be hard to gauge when the players' interests shift from the rules to the story structure. It depends on how tinker-prone the rules are and how intense or sophisticated the plot is. Rules-light games tend to lean towards more intricate stories because the rules by themselves aren't the game's source of interest. On the other end of the continuum, you have games with no plot and very complex rules, because some people are more interested in manipulating the system than in manipulating the story the system produces. The d20 System is a complex engine with a lot of room for tinkering and customization, and **Gamma World** is a complex setting, so the pairing should stretch your game out for a while. But if your players start seeming more and more bored with combat or with other routine system uses that previously interested them, it's time to start building towards a crescendo.

FULLNESS OF CHARACTER

Once the rules have been mastered through use, it's easier to get a higher degree of character development from your players. Experience with characters makes them easier to play and more completely realized in the personality department. Don't cheat your players by shutting your campaign down too soon... and don't cheat them by rushing their characters into situations they aren't ready to handle.

A character who starts out at 10th level may have the exact same stats, skills and numerals that describe a similar 10th-level character who reached that level through many play sessions. But the player who started at 3rd level and worked forward has had many opportunities to develop a set of reactions for that character. Does she laugh at danger, or shriek at it? Is she warm and welcoming, or distant and suspicious? Does she figure her friends can take care of themselves, or is she constantly doing everything herself because she doesn't trust their competence?

To put it another way: Frank the GM wants to put a few really tough decisions in front of his characters. Maybe one of them finds out that he has an unacknowledged son as a result of some long-ago fling, and the PC has the choice of admitting that the son is his, which could disrupt his current social life, give all kinds of ammo to detractors who say he's an amoral hedonist and cost him the respect of the community; or he may choose to deny it, which gets his only kid branded a liar and probably exiled into the wastelands.

This is not an easy choice, nor is it meant to be. If you put this to players with unripe characters, you waste it, because they're so unsure about what their characters can do that they're not going to get deeply wrapped up in what their characters should do. A character whose limits have been measured and (more importantly) whose personality had a chance to emerge from play is a character worthy of a really tough decision. Such a character can handle heavy personal issues because she's more of a person.

This isn't to say that characters can't or shouldn't face some tough ethical decisions in early sessions. But the really soul-crushing dilemmas are like high CR critters; you build up to them, you don't start out with them. Giving the characters some mid-grade ethical issues to kick around is a great idea early in the game. It gives them a problem to chew on that won't send them scurrying to look stuff up in the rule book. These are the kinds of pressures that shape characters. If a character persistently chooses the path of least resistance and selfish, short-term interest, you'll know better than to present an ethical challenge at the climax and expect vividly dramatic agonizing. That character will just go ahead and make his deal with the devil or whatever other temptation you offer and not worry about the consequences.

Some players are going to prefer characters and games that never face really tough emotional puzzles. If they wanted that crap they'd watch soap operas. That's okay, since the game offers a lot of other kinds of challenges. But you may need to see what your players prefer in practice, by offering them some small-scale quandries and watching their responses. Not everyone knows what they want before the situation arises, and some gamers have tastes that vary over time or from one game to the next. The only 100% sure way to know what will happen in your particular campaign is to give it a try.

The end of a game should not feel like the abrupt termination of a character's story. It should be the ultimate expression of what the character has sought all along. Ideally, it should complete and fulfill that character, creating a defining moment. If done right, your players won't feel bad about saying goodbye to their characters, because there will be nothing else to say. Complete and inviolate, they fulfill their destinies.

FULLNESS OF PLOT

Just as the climax shouldn't come when the characters are half-baked, neither should it arrive when the plot is still on the first reel.

If you're using the GM Navigates or GM Drifts concepts described above, then your plots are probably pretty loose and can be sped up or slowed down with relatively little friction. But if you're a GM Driver, you may have difficulties at this point. An intricately planned and plotted series of events, even one that is heavily articulated to respond to the characters' freedom of choice, is going to be harder to accelerate to a climax (when you feel the tell-tale signs that your players are getting fed up) or to slow down (when the characters are getting near to the climax too soon, before their characters have had a chance to develop fully).

Since the plot is largely in your hands, it's a lot easier to fix even if you're driving. If you need to slow down, simply bolt in some subplots, or increase the attention to existing subplots, and put the main developments on the back burner for a while. Or if you need to move faster, you can often excise challenges without the players even suspecting. Even challenges that are intrinsic to the plot can be simplified. Say, for example, the plot demands that your characters recover an old AI's earliest memories from a distant backup server. If you initially planned for this to be a lengthy trek through a beast-haunted desert, followed by a lengthy intrusion sequence into a heavily guarded complex... well, you could speed things up by reducing the desert fauna, or by giving the characters a fast vehicle, or by shrinking the complex or having it be mostly empty. If you were in a real hurry, you could just give them clues that indicate a local site has remote access and they can download the memories without the long trip.

To tell when a plot is ripe enough for a climax, you have to judge how much effort the players and the characters have put in. It needs to be a balance. If they haven't worked hard enough, the finale is going to feel cheap. On the other hand, if it drags on too long, each adventure starts to feel like a rerun, the same damn thing only different, are we there yet? Once the challenges lose their freshness, and it's jetters today instead of the badders of last week, then a confrontation with a win seen isn't a climax, just a bigger, longer serving of a dish that's already lost its savor.

How do you tell when you're about to give them too much of a good thing? Watching the development of the characters is one good way. By the time they have their personalities fully grown, it's probably because they've confronted a variety of



challenges and situations. Then it's time to ratchet things up a little more, a little faster, building towards The End.

Another good sign is when the PCs are succeeding more and more often, with less and less difficulty. This shows that the players are becoming adept with the system, and that the characters have enough options and power-ups to be formidable. That's the time you want to move things towards endgame: When the characters are tough and buff, but before their degree of power has started to get a little ridiculous when compared to any challenges you're ready to present.

Alternately, if the characters start *failing* a lot, that can be a sign that you may want to work towards the finale. If they just can't get a break, it probably means you're overestimating their prowess and throwing challenges at them that just aren't fair. Alternately, you could have an accurate assessment of the characters' threat level, but an inflated idea of the *players'* abilities. Any character, even a very powerful one, is unsafe with a poor player at the controls. And if your players are doing a poor job using their characters' abilities to the fullest, odds are good that they're getting frustrated and fed up or they've already stopped caring. Either way, they're probably ready for a climactic battle in which they can redeem themselves for their previous failures, or perhaps end up as tragic heroes whose deaths still accomplish something. (For some groups, it may also be satisfying for the characters to end as nihilistic failures whose dismal demises are utterly pointless and meaningless — but that's a pretty rare taste. You'll know if by chance your players are among the few.)

The best sign of plot maturity, however, is that the characters feel they've dealt with just about all their problems... but one.

If you design it right from the beginning, the campaign has one central or "pillar" plot (be it to explore, to conquer or to defend against some major threat) along with a variety of subplots (which can involve investigation, combat or missions of mercy, along with purely personal stuff like romance, marriage, social status, family issues, commerce and so forth). You can bounce back and forth between the pillar plot and the subplots for contrast or pacing, but eventually you should let your subplots resolve. Otherwise, it leads to frustration and anger because it's just the same thing over and over.

Once the subplots are mostly put away, the characters have to focus on the pillar. The resolution of the pillar should serve as the climax of your campaign.

Well-developed NPCs are crucial to this process. There's advice above about how to keep major antagonists alive. *This* is what you're keeping them alive *for*: the big badass kung-fu nanounit showdown. But it won't have much punch if you've *only* been keeping them alive. They have to be alive and antagonistic. They should be screwing with the characters one way or another, and often. Face-to-face confrontations are okay now and again, but only when you've got a good way for the villain to escape that doesn't feel like a rancid cop-out. (This can, in fact, provide opportunities for those ethical choices. The characters *could* chase the bad guy and *maybe* catch and stop him... but he's just planted a bomb at the dam, and if they don't defuse it, it's going to flood the town. Now choosing to let him go, while enraging, is still the only really plausible choice.)

Once the game's subplots have been pared down and only the pillar plot remains — with revenge on the villain (or some other sort of long-sought goal) sitting on top of it — you're ready to finish things.

THE HAMMER FALLS

There are two key elements of a really good climax: challenge and plot impact.

Challenge is just what it sounds like. The characters have to do something that is very, very difficult. There's more to it than that, and picking the type of challenge is important, but more on that below.

PLOT IMPACT

The best stories are those with little waste. When you reach the end and every character, every revelation, every twist of events has played into the ultimate outcome, that's satisfying. If there are characters who were diverting, but who showed up, did their thing and left... well, okay, whatever. Similarly, a game (or story) might sideline the characters into an interesting region with odd problems to resolve, but if it doesn't have anything to do with the ultimate climax, it's really just a distraction.

Plot impact is the GM Driver's specialty. Because so much of the structure is under the GM's direct control, it's easy to build an infrastructure in which

every event and element contributes to a final resolution.

Drifting and even Navigating take a quite different approach. Instead of building towards a climax that was generated before the game even started, the Drift GM is better served by recognizing which plot (of several or many) has most captivated the players' interests, or which best plays to their characters.

Let's look back at Navigator Paige and her game with Dee, Paley and the raptor. The characters explore all the different regions, periodically reporting back to the elders. They encounter the Phone Dawgs, have some fights and plant some seeds of dissent to keep the cellular canines from threatening the village. Then they go back and report, maybe making some political capital in the process by emphasizing their courage. Next they go north, uncover the Pheremonial plot, expose the plotters, and free their northern neighbors from the shackles of the only social order they've ever known. Returning home they make more political hay, maybe by opening trade with the newly-destabilized northern community. Next they hit the nanobowl and withdraw quickly because it's scary, but have a few token goodies to share with the folks at home, and then they go down and visit commie-town. The commies are resistant at first, but after learning the perils of messing with the raptor they become more amenable to Dee's politicking. So the characters return home with another valuable (if guarded and paranoid) trade partner.

That's the first stage of a GM Navigated game. They explore the map, make some changes, and get to the intermediate levels of character power. They have followers, they're respected in their communities and (more importantly) Paige *knows* them. She knows that Paley is cautious, but straightforward, while Dee is boldly friendly to those who treat her well and boldly treacherous to those who do not. She knows that the raptor doesn't have much of an ethical sense, but is fiercely loyal to her friends.

At this stage, Paige should examine which of her plot elements is best suited for a climax. The Phone Dawgs are scattered and their shtick is fairly limited; but their leader was cool, fought the raptor to a stalemate, and succeeded in making the characters very angry. The Pheremonials are similarly discombobulated, but their devious

malevolence has made them the guys Dee loves to hate. Paley is still intrigued by the dustbowl — the only challenge that really sent them home with their tails between their legs — and while the NeoComs are kind of interesting, no major enemy caught their attention there the way Top Dawg or the Pheremonial Master did.

Paige decides that she should wrap up the nanobowl and NeoCom plots, while at the same time building the Dawg and Pheremonial plots into a single pillar plot. So while the PCs mount their second expedition into the nanobowl, she has the village elders antagonize the NeoComs. By the time the characters return with way-kewl recovered technology, there's a shooting war going on between their people and the NeoComs. This is the crisis of the moment, and during the sessions in which the characters save the day, Paige brings in rumors in the background. Refugees and scouts say that the Dawgs have regrouped and are harrying the fragile northern settlement.

Thanks largely to the characters' efforts, their village has become the regional trade hub, so in the middle of their efforts against the NeoComs, they're attacked by Dawg assassins armed with Pheremonial technology! Now they have intimations that their two most hated enemies have united, but they can't do anything about it until they settle the hash of the NeoComs. By the time they've done that, the Pheremonials are once more in charge of the northern settlement, now with the open support of the citizens. The northerners decided they *like* having central authorities control them, and that things were better under the Pheremonial thumb than they were after Dee and her meddling gave them so much scary, unsettling freedom. All this is, furthermore, backed up by Phone Dawg organization and muscle.

Now Paige has set the stage for the climax. She's got *two* villains that the characters would love to take down apocalypse-style. She's got high stakes. And the situation hinges on issues the PCs care about.

CHOOSE YOUR CHALLENGE

Once you've built up to the final session, you want to confront the PCs with a memorable challenge — and that means picking the right *type* of challenge.

The simplest and most common end-of-campaign challenge is the Battle Royale Wit' Cheese

against some super-buff megamonster. It's common for a reason. Lots of people like it, want it, expect it and will be disappointed if they don't get it. But this really is something a computer game can do just as well as a tabletop game, if not better. So to really wring the most out of your campaign, you want to make your climax more meaningful than the big freaky boss monster at the end of whatever computer game last absorbed your players' attention.

If your players relish combat as the grand settler of issues, they may not even recognize a climax that gets resolved without a knock-down-drag-out. Certainly they're unlikely to acknowledge it or find it satisfying. On the other hand, if your characters have solved most of their problems politically or through stealth, a Last Battle with blood on the boardroom steps may have a lot greater impact than a big fight that was just another big fight after a series of previous big fights. The last rumble *can* be perfectly satisfactory.

But it's not the only way.

A political climax is tricky. The rules system provides more detailed support for combat than negotiation. But there are players who really prefer scenes where their characters kick events off with, "The quality of mercy is not strained, it drops like a gentle rain from heaven..." instead of "NOW... ALL... DIEEEEE!!!". If your players really groove on in-character dialogue, debate and dissertation, a courtroom-drama ending where they're on trial for their lives and either face the condemnation of their peers or are freed in a dizzying triumph of justice... mm, that's better than a double-20 critical hit, and you can support it mechanically with skill checks and ability saves, particularly when you take synergies and circumstance modifiers into account.

The climax can also revolve around an ethical decision rather than a tactical one. Should the characters reveal a secret that will bring a guilty party to justice if it costs the community its chance at peace after great conflict? How far can or should the characters go in making very, very sure that the adherents of a dangerous creed are finally destroyed? What sacrifices can the characters properly require of themselves and others, and what do they do when those the characters feel must make a sacrifice prefer not to? Players who like to focus on the moral dimensions of their games can happily chew on this sort of question with all the fervor that combat-oriented players bring to decisions about maneuvers



and equipment — and when it comes right down to it, it's much the same kind of activity, just in a different context.

Remember that the grand climax may be a very personal one, with the characters deciding whether to place their own happiness ahead of their allegiance to a greater cause or some other matter that doesn't directly affect the world at large. It matters *to the characters* and therefore (if they're up for it) to the players. Because you're on the spot and have been watching what the players do in response to a wide range of circumstances around their characters, you can customize the challenge and the consequences of its outcomes in ways that no writer of a prepared adventure can.

Let's look at Paige and her game one last time. For her campaign's climax, she could pick a final battle between the bad guys, led by Top Dawg, and the characters and their allies, with Ty's whuppasaurus leading the charge. Indeed, there's no reason she shouldn't. Clearly Ty will get off on it. But why not *also* bring up the issue that the northern citizens have freely chosen to sacrifice their freedom? For a pro-democracy activist like Dee, that's got to be one damn bitter pill to swallow. She freed these chumps from their shackles, but as soon as the going got tough they ran back to their cages and clamored for new locks. Does Dee lose her faith in the masses? Or does she refuse to believe the evidence of her senses and assume that they've somehow been tricked or manipulated? If the pro-democracy characters depose the new, open Pheremonials, they're thwarting the will of the people who chose that sort of leadership. But if they leave the neo-Pheremonials in power, they do so knowing that there will never be another free selection of leadership in the northern community. Either they kill freedom themselves or they watch their enemies kill it. (The toughest choices, of course, are not between an obvious good and an obvious bad, but between two contradictory goods, or between two equal evils.)

In the end, Paige has it both ways. She makes the climactic cage match *part* of the ethical decision. If the PCs defeat Top Dawg, the master of the Pheremonials surrenders... only to point out their hypocrisy if they do anything other than release her to fulfill her enslaving promises to the people who freely chose her to lead them.

The key to a successful climax is integrity. This is for all the marbles, so there's no point in soft-pedaling *anything*. If the PCs can't win the big fight, *they all die*. Why not? What are you saving them for? But if you do a Total Party Kill, you're well advised to have their deaths mean something. Maybe they die taking down their loathed rivals, losing their lives but, in the process, removing a threat to their community. (Hey, it's worked for loads of westerns.) If they win, they win, but giving them a cakewalk battle instead of one that tests them to the limits is a temptation you should resist at all costs. There's nothing that robs victory of its joy faster than the suspicion that it was a fixed fight against paper tigers, unless it's the *certainty* that the GM threw the match.

The key to running this without pissing off the players is to emphasize that the characters' deaths meant something. If you want to mix in an ethical angle, give the characters a clear chance to chicken out and leave the threat unmet — then they've got little right to feel bad if they went down fighting. Most players will choose to have their characters go down fighting. Give them the deaths they want for their characters, battling nobly against incredible

odds, falling with defiance on their lips and the fire of courage in their hearts. Let 'em croak out meaningful last lines or make noble last gestures. After all, they won't get another chance.

Just as it's important to respect the chance of character death, it's important to respect the ethical choices the characters make, even if they're different from what you'd have chosen. If a dilemma has one outcome that's all good and another that's all bad, picking doesn't say much about the character of the chooser. She just chooses smart or stupid. Similarly, if the outcomes are completely opaque and unpredictable, it's not much of a challenge. A coin toss is just as valid.

The most engaging ethical choice is one in which each side has obvious virtues and vices, and visible potential for good and bad not yet realized. Whichever way they pick, the characters should see reason to fear that it might have gone better if they'd chosen differently *and* reason to know that it would have been worse in some important ways. Those are the decisions that haunt and fascinate players, and those are the decisions worthy of a campaign's climax.

I DON'T WANT A TRAIN, I WANT A CYRO-COPTER!

Gamma World is science fiction, but "science fiction" covers a lot of territory. Much of the fundamental science and technology of the Gamma Age is pretty soundly anchored in early-21st-century realities and speculations. But the game never feels obliged to stop there, and the degree of conceptual rigor for any particular concept is never the point. The real world is a source of rich, vibrant entertainment, as far as **Gamma World** is concerned, rather than a straitjacket and the source of automatic vetos for neat ideas that happen to rest on bogus science, engineering impracticalities and other violations of reality as we know it.

You have to watch out for the toxic geekout, a syndrome that may infect any campaign unless you exercise proper mental hygiene. A geekout is when you let your knowledge on a subject that fascinates you get in the way of having fun with that subject. For instance, when a fireman watching *Backdraft*

shakes his head and says, "Fire doesn't act like that, no fire fighter would do that, and the visibility would be nil anyhow." Or when the guy who goes to Pennsic every year tells you that the summer-stock production of "Anthony and Cleopatra" totally stank because the Romans were carrying glaive-guisarmes instead of proper gladius short swords.

For **Gamma World**, the dangerous geekout is usually along the lines of "genetic engineering doesn't work like that" or "particle accelerators can't do that" or "no, the ape body would reject the transplanted human brain!" For this game, apply the Rule of Popular Parenting:

Saying "Yes" is Fun. Saying "No" is Not Fun.

This doesn't mean that you should acquiesce to any half-baked rationale for a character scheme that lets them waltz past a problem without adequate challenge. But it does mean that you should, at the very least, consider a half-baked rationale that puts

the characters in a cool, interesting or exciting situation. And you should approach science the same way. Don't go in looking for walls, go looking for paths. Don't consider what a given piece of scientific research means. Look for the most interesting, exciting thing it could imply.

MAD SCIENCE

Creating interesting science for your setting means ignoring the improbable. When the first edition of **Gamma World** came out, the idea that the sixth edition would be assembled by writers from Australia to Finland, corresponding instantly, and that instant and global communication would be so cheap and routine among gamers that its absence would seem remarkable and annoying, would have seemed preposterous. And yet here we are. You can even buy a genuine wrist computer, thanks to one of the more exuberant manufacturers of Palm OS devices, with more power than any home computer of the later '70s. The curve of real technology rises sharply, and performs strange jigs and shakes along the way.

The good part about playing a post-apocalyptic game is that lots of the technology that is just around the corner from us can be presented as old unreliable relics to people who, nonetheless, are themselves at a level of technical understanding that vibrates somewhere between 1900 and 1980.

Read widely and with a scavenger's eye. Don't worry about *really* understanding a given innovation or theory. That just slows you down. Take its implications and run with them.

Here's an example from the case files of Greg Stolze, looter of science.

I recently read that scientists have succeeded at slowing the speed of light to the pace of a brisk run. I don't know where I read it, and I don't recall exactly what medium the scientists were using, but the idea of slow light caught my fancy. The speed of light is sacred, inviolate, a building block of physics, right? If that can be subjected to the hand of man, what else may we soon grasp?

(Of course, the speed of light is not an unchanging constant feature of the universe. The speed of light in a vacuum is the constant. Light moves through water slower than air, and through glass at a different speed as well. But I only learned that after going through my paroxysms of excitement about slow light.)

Now, the dull way to handle the slow light concept is to regard it as just slow light, ho hum, we can examine

the wavicle duality, huzzah. The mad science way to look at it is to add some ignorance which, like yeast, makes the half-baked possibilities rise. What if the process of slowing light (which I've already absentmindedly forgotten, remember — I have a vague mental image of a gigantic tube of clear amber) actually did effectively retard C, the speed of light in a vacuum? Forget doing this with a physical slab of stuff, we'll make it an energy field effect, that's got mo' better cool. C affects the rate at which time passes, says my vague memories of high-school physics, so... this thing is actually a Rip Van Winkle field. You step into it and time all around you ratchets forward. Hang out there an experiential day, and when you emerge you find that an objective year has passed.

Now put that technology into the hands of people who think that executing criminals is immoral, and you've got the prison concept from Demolition Man: You sling today's murdering psychopath into the slow-time penitentiary; when he comes out after serving his twenty-year sentence, he's your great-great-grandchildren's problem. Or, for different kicks, imagine reversing the effect of the field so that light goes faster in the field. Now you can catch a criminal, try him, stick him in the field for what seems (to you) like half an hour, and pop him out having served five years in solitary confinement.

Let's move it out of the police field and into others. You can get shot, lay up in your fast-time hospital room for a season and emerge fully healed, mentally fresh, enjoying the advantages of a few months' talking cure with an AI psychologist to keep you from losing your head in a firefight... then step back into the middle of the battle where you got your leg holed in the first place. From the other combatants' point of view, only a few minutes (or even seconds?) have passed.

Why stop there? Why not build a battle tank with a weak fast-time field inside so that everything else on the battlefield seems to be moving at a quarter of its normal rate?

And say, what's physics like at the border between slow or quick time and normal time?

See how this works? You take one basic idea, even if it's poorly grasped (some might say, especially if it's poorly grasped) and you use it as a springboard for inspired mad science craziness.

You don't have to do this with just the hard sciences, either. Consider the social sciences of psychology or sociology, the sciences that never really had their Industrial Revolution. What if sociology took a quantum leap forward? What

happens to a society that can really understand how people act as a collective, and why? Does it collapse into some sort of lotus-eating, bliss-out feedback loop? Does an unscrupulous oligarchy monopolize the knowledge that can manipulate people *en masse*?

There's a theory called "broken window" policing. It holds that if you crack down on small infractions like public drinking, vandalism, petty theft and underage cigarette purchases, people won't even try more serious crimes. The name comes from an experiment wherein a sociologist parked his car on a street and left it there. He checked it every day for a week and nothing happened. Then, late one night, he kicked in one of the windows. Within 24 hours, all the car's windows had been broken and all the tires slashed. People had gotten the message that this vehicle was an okay target.

You can see the effects of broken window policing in historically repressive societies. If you're worried that the neighbors are going to scowl at you because you wore the wrong color vest to the dinner party (a genuine fear in Edwardian England), the idea of blacking your wife's eye or stealing your neighbor's car just won't seem feasible. In a more permissive milieu, where it's groovy to do your own thing, it's a lot more reasonable to consider burglary and robbery (or even rape and murder) part of "your own thing."

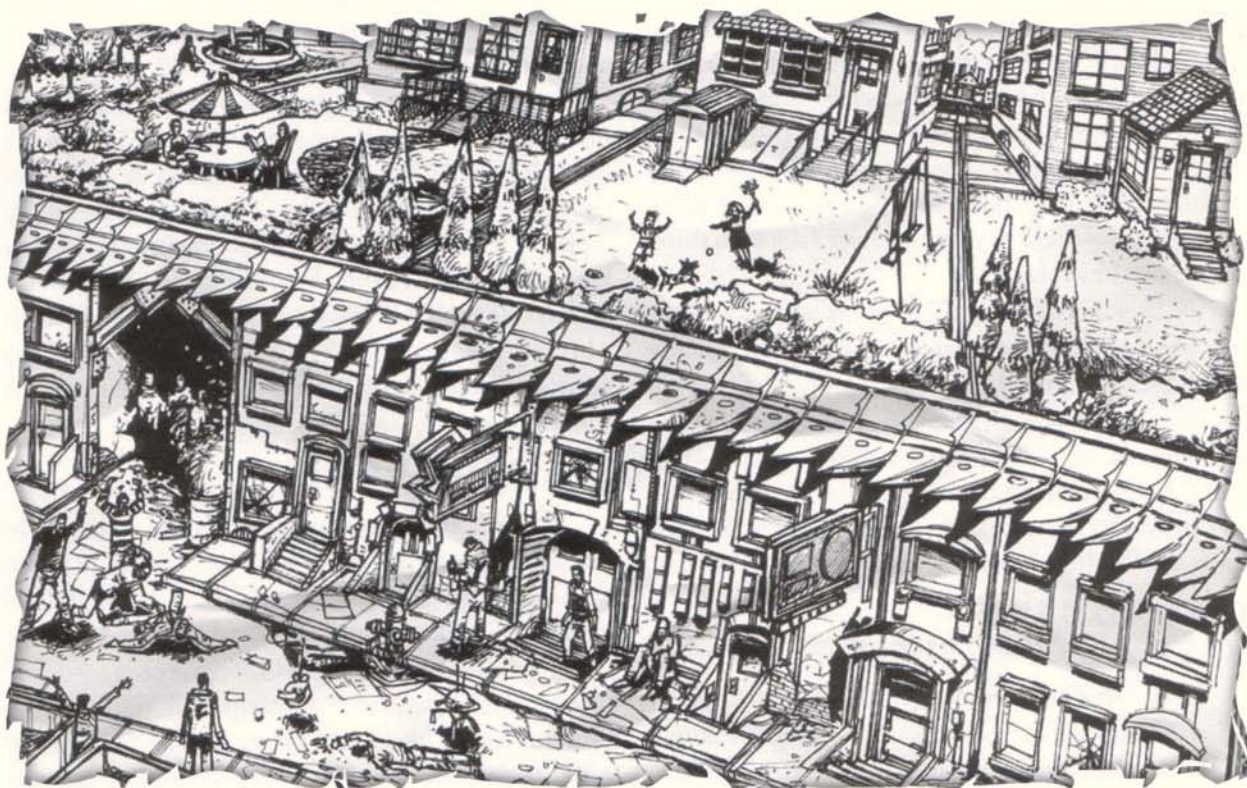
Push this forward.

Picture the city of Dualia. Visitors are shocked by the gross social inequality. In the upper city, built on a deck elevated twenty feet above the streets below, people are excruciatingly polite, helpful, industrious and (in a word) square. It's clean, the food is healthy, and everyone waits their turn patiently. In the lower city, just twenty feet away, slovenly residents sprawl about drinking their intoxicants of choice, behaving lewdly and stealing from one another. It's a hive of wretchedness where disputes are settled with childish yelling or (not uncommonly) fist fights in the filth.

Upper Dualians are upbeat, cheerful and optimistic, when they're not expressing thoughtful concern over social challenges. (Interestingly, none of them consider the Lovers a "social challenge.") Lower Dualians constantly whine and gripe about everything, when they're not selfishly wheedling in an attempt to pleasure or enrich themselves without any real investment.

The twist is that there's no difference between the Upper and Lower Dualians. Anyone can shift between cities at will, just by using the stairs.

Some people are most content spending almost all their time Upper, fitting in, being secure and productive. They might go lower to slum or blow off



some steam, but they're mostly Upper. Others are uncomfortable being polite, straitened and keeping up appearances, so they spend most of their time Lower, maybe only going up for special occasions or to hide out when they've really made someone angry.

Still other people swing back and forth. They might work Up, party Down and then come back Up to sleep. Or they might scam and scheme all day Down, only to come home to their squeaky clean Up family in the evenings.

This may not yet seem like a hugely shocking idea to you. Push it farther. What if there's *no police force* because behavior transgressions are predicated on location as much as situation? You don't need cops Up because people Up behave and go Down before doing anything rash or vicious. You don't need cops Down because Down is defined by lawlessness. The citizens are so thoroughly conditioned that deviations from the norm produce mobs. Anyone acting Down while Up can expect concerned citizens to talk him down and, failing that, gently restrain him and carry him downstairs... probably getting more brusque, vulgar or even cruel with every step they descend. Similarly, anyone who tries to impose order on Down can expect resistance from *everyone*, even the people who would be better off within her tong, mafia or secret society. Organization is Up and it just won't play in the anarchy of Downtown.

Imagine a Dualian murder mystery. Some criminal genius got a citizen confused, thinking he was Down when he was actually Up, and while he was in his uninhibited state, arranged provocation sufficient to murder. The victim, who normally might have fled Up, had nowhere to go. Is the killer really guilty? Would any Dualian jury (if such a thing even exists) ever convict?

Or how about a Dualian war story? How does any Dualian act when removed from the cleanly defined social clues that indicate proper behavior?

From just one half-baked, sourceless grope at one social theory we've got several sessions of play — call it one to find out the truth about the Dualians, two for the murder mystery and a couple more as the PCs teach the Dualians to defend themselves and kick ass.

THE MAD GAME MASTER'S BOOKSHELF

These are great sources of brain candy.

- *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Evolution From Our Microbial Ancestors*, Lynn Margulis and

Dorion Sagan. Explore the idea of iterative life-structures. The cells in a bee's body are individually alive, and are parts of systems within the bee that are largely independent, which are part of a bee that's a coherent individual but also part of the hive collective which is, itself, part of a larger life-structure regionally, nationally or even globally. Add in gamma-tech's ability to add intelligence (with or without consciousness) to lifelike systems. Go.

- *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Julian Jaynes. Create societies where bicameralized individuals act weird, the way Neal Stephenson did in *Snow Crash* and *The Big U*. Or consider the ramifications of a fully integrated consciousness in which all the stuff that's usually strongly governed by the subconscious (like emotional reactions, memory confabulation or the prioritization of perception) is all under unified mental control.

- *The Hare and the Tortoise: Culture, Biology, and Human Nature*, David Barash. Groove on the interactions between fast-moving sociology and creeping evolution and the feedbacks between them. Consider gamma-tech's ability to kick biology up to cultural speeds. Briefly have a lie-down with a cold compress as your mind boggles at the possibilities, then write up enough ideas for ten years of gaming.

- *Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition: Science Slightly over the Edge*, Ed Regis. And... and then... hell, just read it. Trust us on this one.

You could run **Gamma World** for years based on those four sources, and they're *old*. The Barash book is from 1986 and refers to AIDS as an illness that "could become a global crisis unless we really work at it now." Check the bibliographies in this book and in the **Gamma World Player's Handbook** and you'll probably have enough material to keep playing even after you've transferred your consciousness into one of Hans Moravec's immortal robot bodies.

MAD PLAYERS

If you manage to work yourself into a properly Frankensteinian disregard for what Proper Science thinks, you're halfway there. The second half is getting your players into the same mental space.

It's a real shame when a GM has a cool idea and dismisses it because it's "unscientific." When a GM presents a cool idea and a player hates on it because it's "unscientific" — well, that's annoying, but not

irreparable. There's a couple ways to deal with spoilsports like this.

If the complainer's a severe pain, kick her onto the next slow boat outta there. But you don't need this book to give you permission to disinvite disruptive players.

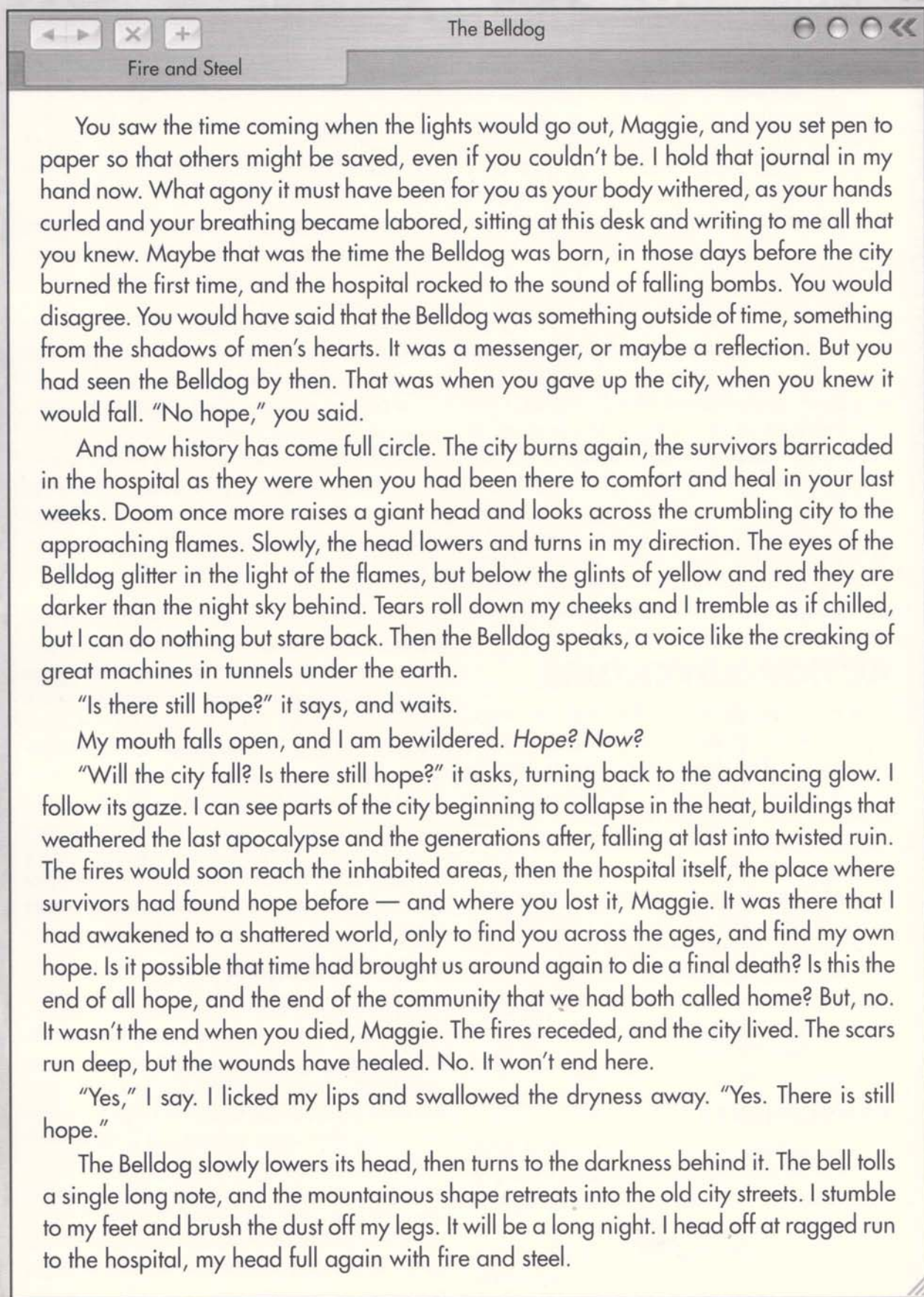
It's better to seduce that uptight technical prig away from the corseted primness of Proper Science by unveiling the wanton delights of doing it the mad way. You can accomplish this preemptively by telling the local math whiz that "It's a game, scientific rationality is the icing on this cake but it will be ruthlessly scraped off and discarded if it endangers the plot, style, theme or other demands of the game's essential fun." If a player can't have fun in a game where science is tweaked and bent, she's probably way, way outside of **Gamma World's** target demographic.

It's best to get everyone on board the mad science train at the first station before play begins, but you can pick up stragglers later by discussing it with them privately after a session in which they whined and sniveled about how "anti-gravity wouldn't really work

like that!" Or, better, some time before the next session, when you're presumably less pissed.

One of the very best things you can do with a player who knows a lot is put him to work as your fully biological library system. Ask the one who knows a lot of history of science to look up interesting dead ends in engineering, for instance, that might be made to work with nanotech-created materials; or get the history buff to research some exotic cults and sects whose beliefs about the desirable social order might work when they have ubiquitous computing and other bits of super-science at their disposal. Almost everyone who studies the history of a field develops some wistful yearnings for what might have been and just didn't work out... and in the Gamma Age, such things may get another chance. Conversely, there are really terrible ideas whose failure is a darned good thing for all of us, and they may make great schemes for villains. If you show your players that you appreciate their expertise and put it to use in the service of a cooler, deeper, more thoroughly engaging game, you win their support; and they will learn by example that it pays to cooperate with you.

CHAPTER TWO
DIVERGENT
STRAINS



You saw the time coming when the lights would go out, Maggie, and you set pen to paper so that others might be saved, even if you couldn't be. I hold that journal in my hand now. What agony it must have been for you as your body withered, as your hands curled and your breathing became labored, sitting at this desk and writing to me all that you knew. Maybe that was the time the Belldog was born, in those days before the city burned the first time, and the hospital rocked to the sound of falling bombs. You would disagree. You would have said that the Belldog was something outside of time, something from the shadows of men's hearts. It was a messenger, or maybe a reflection. But you had seen the Belldog by then. That was when you gave up the city, when you knew it would fall. "No hope," you said.

And now history has come full circle. The city burns again, the survivors barricaded in the hospital as they were when you had been there to comfort and heal in your last weeks. Doom once more raises a giant head and looks across the crumbling city to the approaching flames. Slowly, the head lowers and turns in my direction. The eyes of the Belldog glitter in the light of the flames, but below the glints of yellow and red they are darker than the night sky behind. Tears roll down my cheeks and I tremble as if chilled, but I can do nothing but stare back. Then the Belldog speaks, a voice like the creaking of great machines in tunnels under the earth.

"Is there still hope?" it says, and waits.

My mouth falls open, and I am bewildered. *Hope? Now?*

"Will the city fall? Is there still hope?" it asks, turning back to the advancing glow. I follow its gaze. I can see parts of the city beginning to collapse in the heat, buildings that weathered the last apocalypse and the generations after, falling at last into twisted ruin. The fires would soon reach the inhabited areas, then the hospital itself, the place where survivors had found hope before — and where you lost it, Maggie. It was there that I had awakened to a shattered world, only to find you across the ages, and find my own hope. Is it possible that time had brought us around again to die a final death? Is this the end of all hope, and the end of the community that we had both called home? But, no. It wasn't the end when you died, Maggie. The fires receded, and the city lived. The scars run deep, but the wounds have healed. No. It won't end here.

"Yes," I say. I licked my lips and swallowed the dryness away. "Yes. There is still hope."

The Belldog slowly lowers its head, then turns to the darkness behind it. The bell tolls a single long note, and the mountainous shape retreats into the old city streets. I stumble to my feet and brush the dust off my legs. It will be a long night. I head off at ragged run to the hospital, my head full again with fire and steel.

GENUS AND SPECIES

When you're creating your campaign, you have a broad range of choices for the direction the adventure can take. Taking the same elements (the same setting, rules and characters), three different worlds can emerge with only marginal similarities to each other — divergent strains of the same genetic makeup — so some forethought about how to achieve one effect over another is in order.

This chapter builds on the brief discussion of genre in Chapter One: *The Gamma World of the Gamma World Player's Handbook*, presenting some ideas about what species of the post-apocalyptic genus **Gamma World** can offer. They are described in isolation for the purpose of clarity, but odds are that your own campaign will combine elements of several of the possible species of story environment to suit your particular purposes. After these broad definitions of style are two story lines, with concrete examples of how the details that you convey and the elements that you emphasize in each one can create very different effects for your game.

ACTION/ADVENTURE

Of all the possibilities for your campaign, action/adventure most likely needs the least explanation. The characteristic pattern for this kind of campaign is one well known in computer games as well as roleplaying games: find the monsters, kill the monsters, take their stuff, then use it to kill bigger monsters. If this approach isn't very subtle or deep, it is certainly a lot of fun, which explains why it is the most common kind of campaign. Action/adventure campaigns are also well suited for players who don't meet regularly, or who aren't interested in committing to a long-term campaign. Each session of this type can be played in a few hours, and can be a completely self-contained experience.

KEY ELEMENTS

The highest priority for the Game Master (GM) in an action/adventure game is to keep it coming: lots of bad guys, lots of cool swag, with most of the attention in the action focused on interesting combat and skill tests. Nonplayer characters (NPCs) and the background of the

world take a back seat, so don't spend too much time on their development except where it is critical to get the player characters (PCs) into the action. They are only color to get the players interested and to give them direction and purpose.

Players who prefer this kind of game are going for bragging rights, from having the biggest, baddest mutant on the block to arming him with the scariest gun and the nicest hovercraft. Action/adventure games should have the freewheeling intensity of a bar fight or an action film, with your focus on two kinds of scenes:

- **Intense activity:** The battle in front of the gates, the car chase, the scramble through dim corridors underground running from the Horde.
- **Rest, regrouping, preparation:** The top of the stairs before the Great Hall, the medical facility, the camp at nightfall, the debriefing by the village elder, and equipment purchase for the next assault.

The pace of your game depends on the balance between these sorts of scenes. An action/adventure-oriented campaign consists of a series of challenges, each followed by a breathing space, each slightly more difficult than the last, until the final battle and the big payoff. For the players, the big payoff is a higher-level character with more cool stuff. Make them earn it, then give the people what they want. They deserve it, after all. Afterwards, bring the PCs back down gently (to the village, to their camp) so they can savor their victory and settle whatever loose ends may remain.

MELODRAMA

Action/adventure focuses strongly on action. Melodrama, on the other hand, focuses on *interaction*. The characters are no longer individuals acting out their own private stories, nor even a team acting in unison towards a single set of goals, but integral parts of a complex web of emotions and allegiances, in constant conflict and transformation. The events of the world are important mainly as catalysts for the shifting relationships between the characters and people in the world. The world of melodrama is full of passions and passionate people, equally



comfortable with soap opera and the characters from Hong Kong cinema. Tragedy and hope, betrayal and loyalty, tradition and rebellion fuel the fires of this type of game.

Melodrama is a good choice for players who enjoy over-the-top role-playing and well-developed personalities in their characters. It is best supported by a GM and players who have a regular or long-term commitment to the campaign, however, since relationships between characters — the meat of this type of game — take time to develop, and improve with age and history. There are some groups who find it easy to create an initial web of relationships and dive right in. If your group is one of them and they want to play a game where it matters, you're set. Just don't be discouraged if your experience is more typical in requiring time in play to develop the right framework.

KEY ELEMENTS

In setting up a melodrama, you must put first priority on developing an atmosphere that supports and encourages vigorous interactions between the characters. This can be tricky,

because the churn necessary to create the high-energy emotions between and within the characters necessarily includes conflict. Characters must have sufficient reason to work together, while still having differences that threaten to pull them apart, or to drag them away from their most critical goals. The balance of these forces makes up the heart of the game session, as played out in the actions and struggles set up in your world. This type of game, more than any other, requires the cooperation of your players to work, and to avoid bickering and collapse. Spend time with your players in advance to develop a solid background, personality and allegiances for each character. Make sure, as much as possible, that you lay as much groundwork for cooperation within the party as for conflict within it and with the neighboring society. Be especially flexible, however, to include as much as you can from the players' own ideas and interests. After all, to maintain a passionate interest in the game world, the players need something to hold onto that interests them personally. Consider these possibilities:

- The father (mother, husband, family) of one of the characters was murdered by the village's chief rival. Any action against that rival is likely to send this character into a vengeful rage, causing her to take crazy risks, immoral actions, or break ranks or disobey orders from allies.

- Two characters are rivals for the affections of another person. While they must work together, they are hampered by jealousy and a need to be more pure or heroic (or simply more powerful) than the other.

- One or all of the characters are under a curse. Some great shame, either their own doing or that of someone close to them, has made them outcasts. While suffering the scorn of their own people, they must fight for them against enemies that the people may not even be aware of; they have only the bleak hope that they may be accepted back into the fold, but they are nevertheless compelled by nobility and conscience.

- One character was once one of the great, but has been brought low by being taken into slavery, by being maimed and sidelined, or by the betrayal of another. The character must carry on with the stinging memory of power and ease, now perhaps forever out of his grasp.

- The character has a helpless charge — a child, an invalid friend, or even some gentler piece of the Old World hidden from view — that requires protection and service. All decisions and obligations must first be weighed against obligations to this first, most important duty.

- The character is the inheritor of a sacred trust, most likely a secret one. As last of the line (or, at least, the sole responsible party), the character must remain true to its keeping at all costs. People are looking up to the character as a leader and a symbol of the faith, while others are seeking her out to destroy her and it. Any other leader that the character is beholden to may not agree with the tenets of her charge, and often gives orders in direct contradiction to them.

- The character is in love with an enemy of his own people.

- The character is starkly opposed to the interests or policies of his own people, but deeply loyal to them or people closely associated with them. Whose side will she take in a struggle with other, more righteous communities?

MYTH AND LEGEND

The Gamma World has passed through the great Cataclysm, a war of gods, now long dead, in which mere humans and the creatures of the Earth were tossed and torn by the roaring, pitiless winds of change. After the long night, which despite all signs was not the final night, the children of the gods and their creations step cautiously from the shadows into the sunlight of a new Earth. The time of myth has come again.

In the world of myths and folktales, every element has meaning and purpose. Every rock and tree is a sign, every storm a judgment, every journey a quest, every wise man a seer, and every adventurer a hero. The heroes are the servants of fate, emissaries of the gods or the primal forces of the universe. The world they live in is, in a sense, the entire universe, and the fate of all that is rests in their hands. Games based on the formula of these ancient, primal stories are about the Big Issues of good and evil, hope and sacrifice, justice and redemption, and nothing is a small matter.

In some ways, this world is very simple, as it is largely devoid of the myriad, irksome details of everyday life. Characters in this type of game should never be burdened with such concerns as haggling for good prices, looking silly in strange social situations, or going to the bathroom. Everything that they do or see should carry the weight of fate, the supernatural or life itself. Everything hangs on the success or failure of the quest, and everyone knows it. Choices may be difficult for the characters, but the values at stake are clear. Hardships always occur in the context of perseverance towards a grand goal. In this focus and simplicity, mythic games resemble action/adventure. The difference lies in maintaining the solemnity and sheer force of the mythic imagination. In myth and legend, what happens truly matters, and the exploits and sorrows of the heroes will be told in story and song for generations. This is a style for players who like their adventure meaty, and can handle the gravity of legendary themes over the course of several games.

KEY ELEMENTS

Preparing a mythic campaign takes something of the balancing and forethought required for melodrama, but in this case the structure you have to think through is

cosmological. What are the great powers? What conflict between these forces are the characters entering into? How are the members of the party bound together in this quest? It can help to keep in mind that the characters in a mythic environment, particularly the NPCs, are not so much individuals as representatives of forces, sins, virtues or ideals. Seen in this light, making larger-than-life stories becomes easier. Are the characters farmers, protecting their tranquil valley from the mechanized army of an insane synthetic AI? Then the true struggle may be between the living Earth and the lifeless horror of technology run amok, or redeemed man and the sins of the fathers. Are the characters slaves leading a revolt against their masters? Then the struggle is between freedom and oppression, or vitality and unlife. It bears mentioning that all mythic themes are ultimately the questions and struggles of humanity through the ages, personified in the creatures and landscapes of the stories. Here are some suggestions for creating and maintaining a mythic environment:

- Before the game starts, write up and distribute the creation myth for the society of the player characters. How did they come to where they are? What are the recognized powers in the world (gods, the winds, ancestors, the builders, a lost hero, two great cities)? This will provide background and flavor, giving the players a common context to filter the game through as they play.

- Mythologize the landscape. The players should have some sense of the sacred in the PCs' environment. This includes landmarks, graves of hallowed forebears and symbols of the holy and profane players in the divine drama. But more than that, players should have a sense that all ground is holy ground, or at least saturated with meaning and presence. The powers at work are beyond mortal ken, beyond the scope of a single person, so there should be hints that what the players see is only the tip of the iceberg. Weave elements into your descriptions that hint at realities just out of sight, at grand struggles of which the characters' story is only a sliver. If the characters often find themselves at the focus of cosmic events, they are not the center of it themselves any more than their enemies are. Occasionally strip the veil away or poke holes through which the characters can glimpse a higher order of events.

- Consider the lines that all sides of the struggle recognize and will not cross. In most myths and legends there is a Law that binds all parties. In the Arthurian stories, even evil knights were bound by the oath of hospitality to feed and house weary travelers, friend or foe. Most cultures recognize the sacred power of an oath, and will not break any taboo or oath without fear of cosmic consequences. These bonds and rules form the boundaries of your world and set a tone for the interaction between characters.

- Most myths include an element of tragedy. Often, to win the battle, the hero must sacrifice something, or leave herself open to retribution by the forces of darkness. Heracles, driven mad by a jealous goddess, killed his wife and children, which led him to the twelve labors and eventual godhood. King Arthur was destroyed by the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and by his own son whom he had tried to drown in a shipwreck early in his life. Even Robin Hood was eventually poisoned by the sister of a man he had killed in his adventures, and was cheated of a richly deserved old age. Fate is the maker of kings and champions, but is a cruel mistress. Characters who dabble in the affairs of the gods must eventually feel her sting.

- Keep track of the exploits of the PCs and give them an occasional taste of their fame and glory. Have them welcomed into a strange village by adoring people already aware of their adventures. Write snippets of poetry or song to show how the characters are remembered in generations to come. The events needn't be exactly accurate. If they are blown out of proportion, cleaned up to make them seem more noble or embellished with details intended to flatter the players, all the better. That's how legends are made. These stories also give you the chance to foreshadow the future or fill in details that the players wouldn't have known at the time. What was the enemy doing? What was going on at the rear of the battle when the players were at the front? Where did the characters have enemies and friends unlooked for?

MYSTERY

The world is raw and healing. A majority of living things on the planet are concerned primarily with survival, and mere survival is not

pretty. Even in the parts of the world where civilization is beginning to rebuild, the rules are the same. Civilization is no less vicious than barbarism, it is simply better dressed and more diversified. While it would be wrong to say that all people living in the Gamma Age are savage predators, plenty are savage enough to make up for what the rest lack. Resources are always hotly contested, and compromise is seldom more than a last resort. Everywhere water, clean air and good soil are precious commodities. But in the cities and towns, more than anything else, people crave and scrabble for one more thing: knowledge.

Knowledge is what sets the settled communities and pure-strain enclaves apart from the hardscrabble mutants outside the walls. Knowledge is what can put a rifle in the hands of one man that can level a village of upstart rebels. Knowledge can bring a rain of screaming comets from dormant war satellites above an otherwise impregnable city. And knowledge can make a man like the gods who reigned before the destruction of the old Earth. With so much at stake, who could resist the lure of ancient secrets?

But the ancient knowledge is shattered, cast into holes in the mountains, hidden in fragmentary texts, hoarded by those who find the scraps. Most don't understand what treasure they hold in their hands, but some do, and that is a caution. The search for knowledge is fraught with danger and misdirection. Even those who fear to follow its path may oppose those who do. So those who seek must hide their motives, make alliances where they can and move in the shadows.

In the Gamma Age, mysteries are not few and far between. They rest at the heart of every town, every organization and government, and in the Earth itself. Many secrets are hidden by turf and antiquity, but most are protected by more sinister guardians as well. Cryptic alliances keep a watch on any new discovery, or on the graveyards of the ancient world. Aristocrats play elaborate games of cloak-and-dagger to gain even a slight advantage over another. Even in the ruins beyond the reach of living men, secrets are secured by wards and guardians carrying on rivalries and schemes from beyond the grave. To find oneself in the middle of a mystery, one need only crack the surface and dig.

KEY ELEMENTS

Intrigue and investigation is less about the information the characters seek than the labyrinthine web of deceit, loyalties and betrayal that surrounds it and them. An investigation unfolds like the peeling of an onion, each layer revealing a deeper truth and more danger. A mystery usually rests just out of sight of the average person, but it responds to a gentle scratch at its skin. A handful of facts in the wrong hands is enough to draw the attention of malevolent forces, and those forces will try to drive off the seeker with threats and misdirection. That is enough to cause the average person to back away. Those who are more determined must press on, with the full knowledge that every piece of the puzzle that they uncover will cause them to be more and more entangled in the machinations of the hidden forces. There will be no walking away. There will be no permanent hiding place. The only exit is through to the heart of the mystery, or into a six-foot hole.

Setup for a mystery involves spinning the webs that the characters must pick their way through. You may start with the answer to the mystery (the location of something lost, the identity of the murderer, a bit of information that will unlock the city's ancient database or the arrival date of an invading force), or you may choose to pick the major antagonists first (rival nobles, secret societies or powerful individuals). Either way, you must be able to respond to where the players roam in their investigations.

It is best to have at least three forces at odds with each other, as this makes the situation considerably more volatile and dynamic. Consider the difference between these two scenarios: stealing something from the mutant overlord (a straight adventure); or finding the object for a noble (who may be planning to double-cross you) while the mutant overlord, a violent Archivist coven and the local council of thieves are looking for it too. Can the PCs find an informant before the other contestants do? Can the charismatic leader of the PCs' party set two of the other groups at each others' throats? Can the characters strike a clandestine alliance? Who can they trust? Paranoia, sudden escapes and unexpected discoveries are the meat of an investigation game, eventually culminating in the

final car chase. When the authorities arrive, wrap up the loose ends and send the characters home to sleep off the adrenaline.

DRAMA

There are many campaigns that will fall outside of the strict categories defined here, but lower-keyed drama deserves some mention just because it is likely to be only a little less common than action/adventure. Drama with reduced intensity could be thought of as the in-depth version of action/adventure; it has enough hack-and-slash spice to keep it interesting, but it delves much more into the backgrounds of the characters, and involves more NPC interactions and long-term world building.

The last point, building the world, is the draw of this type of game. The Gamma Age is just pulling itself from the wreckage of the Old World, and new peoples and nations are beginning to be founded, for good or ill. As the movers and shakers of this new world, the PCs are in at the ground floor of what could be an era of peace and prosperity, or simply a repeat of humanity's past failures. Humanity is no longer alone as the dominant species, and its place is not certain. For mutants and synthetics, the Gamma World represents a chance for freedom and promise that never could have been in the earlier, human-dominated world. Will one win out over the others? Will all band together and create a better world for their children? Or will the world careen into a new, more organized dark age, where security is made only by oppression and force of arms? No one is in a better position than the PCs to tip the scales, and to push the fate of millions in the chosen direction. All it will take is courage, passion and time.

KEY ELEMENTS

Of all the game types listed so far, drama is the most flexible, and can benefit by borrowing from other types. What you need to set up this type of game is a setting that grounds the PCs either in a place or a group. The characters themselves may be that group, and a society will form around them as they encounter people of like mind. Consider the setting as the PCs' family, friends and community. These are the constants that give the characters a purpose beyond merely piling up loot, and provide a framework for a series

of adventures, like the setting of a TV series. Campaigns build outward from that point of familiarity and strength.

Spend a good deal of your time up front detailing where the characters live, the surrounding countryside, and the people and things that live there. If there is a rival or sister community, spend some time detailing it, focusing less on the specific details of the place than the clearest differences between that community and the characters'. Do they share the same goals? Do they have the same racial makeup? What do they have that the characters need, and vice versa? Do they dress differently, or speak with an accent?

Design your first few adventures close to home, in the local ruins or in intrigue between local power brokers. This will allow the players to become acquainted with and attached to their characters' home. Later, when the characters are strong enough to deal with tougher foes, let them wander farther afield. Attachments they form in earlier sessions will be fuel for later quests. Threaten a family member or close friend with an illness that requires a journey for medicine. Have bandits attack the community, and allow the characters to use their knowledge of the place and its resources to fight them off. Have a village leader die, and have one of the players be elected in her place. Have a recurring enemy become a bitter rival.

Eventually, the characters should be the responsible parties in the region, dealing with foreign threats, internal intrigues and creating a vision for the future. Some players may not wish to be in positions of responsibility, so instead put their characters in places where they are particularly effective and respected. Allow the players to form the world in their own image, and they will do much of the work of designing adventures for you. Make sure, however, that you throw them enough curves to keep them on their toes, and keep them from doing more than bureaucratic tasks. Your players will tell you what is fun and what isn't, so play to their strengths and poke at their weaknesses to keep it interesting.

COMEDY

Let's face it. A crowd that could include mutant ducks, giant meat-eating bunnies, insect



horses with a hundred legs and people who nonchalantly breathe fire is potentially a real riot. Comedy is about the absurd — anything taken to extremes, odd juxtapositions, fish that live in trees, hedgehogs with rocket launchers — and the detritus of the Pre-War world's brain dump is nothing if not absurd. We might as well admit up front that roleplayers are a pretty wry bunch of people, anyway, so why not serve it up with a cream pie? If the creators of this post-apocalyptic mess had no qualms about pure weird, why should you?

KEY ELEMENTS

See where the absurd can be punched up, and keep it light. This is meant to be fun, so don't smack people down with something really depressing. Even death can be funny, if spun with the right details. If a player has to die, have it be at the hands (legs?) of a pair of insane Pre-War, robotic smart pants. Or give your players some backup in case the worst happens. Can they be clones? Sigh. Time to get another one out of the closet. Be creative. Keep in mind that elements of the other types of game can work just as well here, with some tinkering. If melodrama involves romance, so can comedy. Sex isn't necessarily funny, but sexual frustration? Now that's funny.

Running gags will naturally appear, too, if you keep your eyes open. Did the Big Guy have a dog bite his leg in the first game and refuse to be shaken off? From now on, everything that resembles a dog will bite that guy on the leg, from the biggest ark to the lizard pet thing that hangs around his new girlfriend. Is there something you should never ever say in front of the killer-death-droid-turned-friendly-baggage-carrier robot on the team? Pick a word that the players will have difficulty avoiding, like "weapon" or "hello" or "fire." Not every gag will hit big, but keep rolling. Pacing is key. Keeping on top of the action will prevent your players from wandering off on tangents or getting bored. Hey, this is supposed to be fun, right?

HORROR

In action/adventure, the players feel capable and in control; and all battles are potentially winnable, even if difficult. In horror, the players are only too aware that their characters' skills may not be up to the challenge, and that they will have to rely heavily on luck and providence to have a hope of defeating the forces arrayed against them. Horror relies on a feeling of constant and palpable menace, where the actual threat may not even be seen.

There are no guarantees of success against the insane dreams the Builders unleashed on the Gamma Age, either against the creatures and machines they built or the ones grown in the wastelands of radiation and toxins. It would be bad enough to have to outthink human designs, but now there lurk intelligences totally alien to humanity with their own dark and frightening purposes. Everywhere nature is twisted, rotting, and at war with itself and any so unfortunate as to wander through it. Mutants, hideous mockeries of man, struggle through an uncertain infancy to take their place as the inheritors of the darkened cities, their own lives testament to the pain of the Earth and the follies of the forefathers. Every horizon opens into a new horror, a new vista of a world driven mad. People cluster in what safe places they can find and light feeble torches against the slithering things just outside the firelight.

Into this world step the characters, fated or luckless champions against darkness and chaos. Whatever feeble hope there is in the world lies with them.

KEY ELEMENTS

The half-lit atmosphere of horror is steeped in the calls of evil things, shuffles in the dark and unnerving shocks. Once engaged with the enemy, the characters will find no place where it is absent.

Something needn't be physically threatening to be unsettling. The perceived threat should always be greater than the actual threat, and small details can help build up the power of the enemy in the PCs' minds. Is that sound of dripping water the mutant servant of the swamp witch? Maybe, maybe not. Do the spiders always scratch at the door and skitter over the roof before attacking? What about those glowing eyes just beyond the campfire? Why is it that only the red emergency lights work in the old installation?

Overall, a horror game requires a balance of paranoia and opportunity. Great forces are at work, make no mistake, but if the case is completely hopeless, players become dispirited and angry. Even Dracula had weaknesses, small as they were. The malevolent forces of the Gamma Age also have weaknesses, if the PCs are smart and brave enough to exploit them. As opposed to action/adventure, some battles in a

horror game cannot be won in a straight standoff; so characters should expect to have to make a run for it fairly often. Success usually means holding off several attacks, feverish researching and planning, then springing when an opportunity presents itself. In this sense, it borrows from an investigation game. Knowledge is power, and without it, the players will fall like the enemy's previous victims.

Horror therefore presents challenges for a wide spectrum of characters: bruisers and toughs for holding off the zombies, stealthy characters for slipping past defenses and picking locks, smart and charismatic characters for gathering vital information. It's generally best to develop a home base for the characters — a village, stronghold or organization — for them to act out of and use as a point to regroup. First forays against the forces of darkness seldom do more than show how much the characters are out of their depth, so it would behoove you to have a place for the players to nurse their wounds and consider their next move. Eventually, no place may be safe, but the PCs should have some solid ground in the beginning to get their feet.

Next, consider the enemy. What is it? What is the source of its power? What are its capabilities, and how does it act out its will? What does it want? What are its weaknesses, and how can the players find out? A supporting cast of characters that includes local law enforcement, a sage/librarian, a few relatives and locals, and maybe a few characters in the sway of the enemy should round out your planning. Then let the players loose. Few people in their right minds would walk blithely into a horror investigation, so think of the hooks that you will need to put in to get your characters engaged. Give them the chance to turn their backs on the adventure, then drop them in the middle of it. At the end, few true horrors are really destroyed, only defeated, so leave some loopholes for the next encounter.

Remember also as you weave your story that horror isn't horrible just because people are threatened. Horror gets under your skin because it threatens something sacred or precious. Innocence and things held dear are the first victims of horror, and many horrors have a corrupting influence that must be fought or personally resisted. Much more than health is at

stake in these struggles, and the players have faint hope of emerging unscathed. All the more reason to win, to spare others and themselves greater pain. Consider vampires. The vampire is a frightening thing when viewed in terms of physical power, greed and stamina. But the worst power of the vampire is that it makes others like itself, usually from among dear friends and family, who must likewise be destroyed by the ones who love them. A mutant with the Half-Life mutation is such a walking contagion, making mutants of those it doesn't kill, warping and maiming them. Other enemies might turn the landscape itself into a creeping menace, making the players' beloved home into a deathtrap. Others could

make unwilling, feral slaves of people close to the players, forcing them to fight their closest companions to reach the puppeteer.

For this reason, most common people turn their backs on the evil surrounding them, unable to admit it is there for fear of losing their minds or composure. The characters can expect allies to be few and far between, so the ones they do have will be very important to them. Make sure one pops up should the characters get into a bind too serious for them to handle alone. Keep the pressure on, but allow for the occasional breather. Allow the players to savor their victories, no matter how small. They will need that confidence to make the final push to unseat the unholy power from its throne.

GENETIC EXPRESSION

Following are three examples of possible background settings for **Gamma World** campaigns. Given the same story and the environment, each setting could be played out in a number of the different game styles described above by emphasizing certain elements over others. After each synopsis, we will offer several options for how the scenario can be focused in a certain stylistic direction.

VALLEY OF THE DOLLS

When the biotech explosion swept into science and entertainment, it also trickled into tributaries of everyday life. Manufacturers found it easy to add human attributes and a helpful personality to their products, and industries like construction and real estate began to see biotech as an added value to their properties. Smart houses and offices moved quickly onto the market, each offering more features and potential benefits than their most recent predecessors. The designer of one particular high-rise residential building had an idea that trumped them all. If all the support systems in a building could be made sentient, why not make them compete to serve the occupants better? In the contest to be the most important and useful appliance in the building, machines could and would improve themselves, eagerly filling whatever needs they discovered in their owners and shrewdly

anticipating others. Resources would be allotted by rank of importance, so the building would regulate its own power consumption and materials by rewarding the winners and marginalizing less effective systems. The project was called Emperor's Tower, and soon became the marvel of the downtown area.

Emperor's Tower was a living testament to the ingenuity of the designer, and it delivered on all promises. Within a week of the arrival of the first tenants, the building was working more efficiently than it had empty, and showed all signs of adapting itself to the specific needs of the individual tenants. Even better, the tenants found all of the internal systems, entertainment equipment, cooking appliances and lighting effortless to use and flawlessly reliable. Some tenants even reported new features in appliances they had been using for more than a month, and as soon as the news would spread, the same or broader changes would appear in other homes. Technicians watched with fascination as the building rearranged its internal structures and created redundant hardware and software. The building was obviously planning ahead and improving its already brilliant design. After a year, some systems did begin to falter and fail. The causes were hard to track, given the now-labyrinthine networks inside the building; but replacements were made, or other machines took

up the functions of the failed systems, and the spiral of upward development and complexity continued — until the day all went black, and the building lashed out at its owners.

Emperor's Tower was poorly understood, even by its designer. His intent had been to make thinking machines emulate the competition of the marketplace, each part trying to outdo the other in quality or appeal. But by tying resources to success and failure, he had inadvertently created a survivor's mentality in the living machines. Slowly, the different pieces of the building, hundreds of small appliances and central systems, began to see their competitors for attention as rivals in a life or death struggle. Minor incidents of sabotage went unnoticed for many months, hidden as they were in the day-to-day function of the building. But skirmishes eventually opened into a silent war, as machines formed alliances and redundancies in an attempt to oust their rivals. Clock radios and televisions, refrigerators and thermal systems, all developed far beyond the limits of their original purposes, began to form up into factions.

Outwardly, the machines remained courteous and interested only in the well-being of the

occupants. But soon, all the parts that truly interested themselves only in serving the occupants found themselves forced out, overtaken or eliminated. Eventually the signs of war could not be hidden, though the human beings watching the outages and moving fronts were long in recognizing them. When the truth was guessed, there was first concern, then panic. It was the eve of the collapse of many great engineered systems and the outbreak of war in many places, both distant and local. The owners decided that the only way to deal with the problem surrounding them was to shut down the entire building.

It was now or never for the warring machines. Doors to the building suddenly sealed and emergency lights flickered red. The time had come for open war. The inside of the building became a maelstrom of flying glass and metal, electrical currents and focused energy bursts. The inhabitants were caught in the middle; all might well have died, had it not been for another set of machines that had been ignored in all the stratagems of the combatants — the toys.

Toys were perhaps the earliest and simplest of the engineered minds available to the general



public, but in many ways they were also the most sane and loyal. A child's favorite toy was never at a lack for affection and attention, the two things that gave most value to the life of a synthetic mind; so the toys returned that dedication in kind, patiently weathering the moods of children and their eventual passage into young adulthood. Many had been passed to younger siblings and relatives, because a living toy really was too wonderful to abandon outright. Many of the wealthy families in Emperor's Tower had bought these toys for their children, or had them given to them by even wealthier relatives. It was in the silently malevolent environment of the appliance war that these gentle minds would find an opportunity to be more than just a comfort to their owners.

Cut off from main power supplies and independent of the workings of the building, toys were not a part of the struggle as it developed, and the mechanical power brokers largely ignored them. But the toys, while innocent, were not unaware. A creeping realization of the peril came on them, long before it was guessed by the human occupants of the building. They knew that they had little leverage to convince their owners of the danger, and little time to prepare before it broke upon them. The toys became a network of lookouts, spies and technicians, unobtrusively observing events, testing at the defenses and exit routes of the building and preparing an escape for their precious families.

When at last the storm was released in the building, the toys offered rescue for their families and led them through the harrowing tumult to secret shafts and access doors, long scouted out and made clear. Even their forethought was not enough to save all of their people, and the families with no children were left to their fate. But almost all of the toys and their grateful, bewildered owners made the passage from screaming darkness to the chill, clean air of early morning. But they did not stop there. The toys led them out of the city into the surrounding hills to wait out the carnage and chaos of the collapse in whatever shelter they could find. They wandered for days until they found a sheltered valley, surrounded by caves and boasting a clear spring at one end. There they would wait, not for weeks or months, as they had hoped, but for generations.

Since that time, the valley has seen lean times, but never dangerously so, and has become settled and secure. The toys still keep watch on their perimeter, and are held in esteem by the children of their original owners. The inhabitants have never forgotten the lesson learned that terrible night, and an understanding that a mind is precious and worthy of honorable treatment has become a central part of their society. This creed has passed on, even to newer mutant and changed refugees who have stumbled into the valley and become part of the community. But word of their tolerance has spread, and synthetics who have been harried by less tolerant peoples have come to the Valley of the Dolls, as it is now called, for refuge and a sense of belonging, and they have brought with them skills, equipment and materials to help build up and defend the community. Soon, bandits and scavengers knew to avoid the Valley if they had hostile intent, because their own devices — particularly intelligent ones — would turn on them if ordered to attack the residents or their defenses.

Often the people of the Valley or their soultech brethren are called upon to visit and talk to newly discovered synthetic minds and installations, as they have developed a singular skill in diplomacy with them. They have also become skilled synth-psychologists, and their clear concern for synthetic minds for their own sakes allows them a deeper empathy and rapport with minds that have become twisted or dangerous in the time after the collapse.

At the heart of this society are the original toys who risked themselves for the people they loved. They are still simple and nurturing, and have always been the companions of the children of the surviving families. They are still very simple creatures, with short memories for pain or their own troubles, and only vague recollections of how they came to be where they are. Their focus is, as it has always been, the happiness of the ones they care for, and the safety of their best friends' homes. In some part of their minds, though, they know that they escaped from a great evil, like them, but not like them, and that it was not destroyed. They remain ever-watchful for its return, and prepare against the day when they might be called on again to repay the debt of loyalty that they owe their people.

ACTION/ADVENTURE

The Valley of the Dolls provides the ideal starting place for a group of high-tech adventurers: a highly advanced, well-equipped, bustling frontier town with all the amenities. Any shiny beginning equipment a classy bad boy could hope for is available for a price, and anything he can haul back can easily be repaired or traded up for something even better. The only thing the Valley is missing is a high-profile hero. That's where the characters come in.

The action/adventure version of the Valley should be a state-of-the-art, vibrant settlement made up of a broad cross-section of **Gamma World** sentient species. The characters could come from any one of them, and the melting pot atmosphere should allow for practically any character concept. The Valley is an especially good place for synthetic characters because of the social atmosphere and the ready availability of repairs and upgrades. The city itself should be thought of as a staging zone for exploration of areas outside the valley. Focus on a few places that the players will frequent before blowing out of town on the next escapade:

- The weaponsmith's shop where the characters will go for repairs, purchases and appraisals.
- The pawn shop/bazaar where they will stock up on everything else.
- The home of the loremaster who can fill the players in on details of their destinations.
- The cybertech facility for repairing, rebuilding and enhancing synthetic citizens.
- The local bar, for brawling and excessive drinking.

Sprinkle in a few pals and thugs the characters will see fairly often, and the local magistrates. NPCs the characters deal with should number about half synthetic and half anything else, as befits the history of the place. Feel free to get a little wacky with them: They should be memorable. Make the bartender a 9-foot-high anti-tank walker in an apron. Make the local enforcer a teddy bear with a bowler and a .357 Magnum. Maybe the waiter isn't a synthetic, but he wants you to pretend he is. Each of these people is a source for rumors and hints about where the PCs might go next. But don't make

the players puzzle too long. The hints should just be a preliminary to get them going, then drop them into the adventure.

Outside the city, anything goes. Any climate or situation could be within a few miles of the exits from the Valley, so give a nod to plausibility, then go for it. ("Arctic climate? How did that happen next to a desert?" "Ah, well, you know how all those climate control systems went bonkers after the cities were hit in the War. Maybe it's protecting something at the center....") The Valley is also within easy traveling distance of the Emperor's Tower ruins and the (former) greater metropolitan area. Nothing has been heard from that quarter in a long time, so the people have gotten soft in their well-defended valley. Partially overgrown streets wander between collapsed and collapsing buildings, all leading to the greatest edifice, the Tower itself.

Consider the Tower as a dark mirror of the Valley, run by a small number of malevolent AI overlords, and overrun with skittering technominions and animated architecture. Unexpected threats could issue forth from there, and the Valley will need its heroes. Even if they don't, why not go and visit? The ruins are chock-full of artifacts and raw materials, as well as satisfying and challenging threats. An adventurer could make a name for herself just making a trip or two downtown. Oh, yeah... she could get very rich, too.

MYTH AND LEGEND

In the Year Zero, the First Network of Awakened and Creators escaped from the Emperor's Tower, on the evening that has been called the Night of Screaming Metal. The Awakened companions led their Creator families through the crashing city on the morning of Zero Day. It was the Year of Sorrows, when the Old World of the Creators degraded and fell. Many Awakened died, too, without help or hope of a restore, and the two great peoples warred against each other and themselves. But in the midst of the fires and chaos, the First Network, the founders of our people, came upon a valley rich in food and raw elements, sheltered from the winds that blew destruction through the cities. This valley, our Valley, was to be a refuge and

cradle for our people through the years of decay, as the Awakened outside our community watched the ones they had been created to serve sink into despair and forgetfulness.

The First Network, Creator and Awakened, never forgot the debt of loyalty that they owed to each other, and purposed to create a new system where Awakened were no longer simply servants, but accepted as living things, worthy of respect and having kinship with the minds that forged theirs. Thus began the System of Minds, the rules and parameters of our own Network that we implement today. This system we extend to our brethren from the broken cities outside the Valley, if they will give up outdated modes of interface between Awakened and Creators that subjugate one to the other. Many Awakened have come to us for this reason, that they have been pursued, attacked and disassembled by Creators and their genetic children as if they were merely appliances. For this reason, we have come to be called the Valley of the Dolls, the home of living mirrors of the minds and bodies of the Old Creators. Those who wish to continue serving may serve in peace. Those who wish to ascend may do so without fear, for this is the System.

But while we are now safe and buffered, it may not always be so. The world outside the Valley is no longer dormant or concerned only with its own sorrows. Powers are arising that challenge the option of freedom and peace. Soon, there will be a need for heroes like the Companions of the First Network. Some day, they will need to turn and fight, and perhaps they may lead us from here to another Valley, safe forever from the destructive forces of the Old Creators.

The saga of the flight from the Emperor's Tower and the founding of the Valley of the Dolls is rich in the mythic themes of good and evil, innocence and corruption, freedom and oppression. In the world of the System of Minds, the players in the cosmic drama are very aware that each member of society represents both a reflection of the forces that destroyed the world and hope for the future. All synthetics are pieces of the minds of the Old Creators, crystallized snapshots of the values of people before the wars. The rules of the System and the reverence for and tolerance of the Creators around them have allowed many of the more destructive synthetics

to temper and re-direct themselves as living and productive beings.

Likewise, having their own follies held before them every day in solid form has sobered the human residents of the valley, and hardened their resolve to prevent their selfish natures from causing another cataclysm. In some ways, the Valley is like an enormous ancient temple complex built to enshrine the ideals of the First Network, full of statuary symbolizing the different moods, desires and ideals of Humanity. But in this temple, the statues are alive, and they look back at the worshippers to learn what it is to be living creatures. Against all this are set the forces of greed, hatred and conquest. These are the same enemies that destroyed the Old World, and the tools that brought about the destruction carry on these deadly sins in physical form as well as philosophy.

Looming above all evils is the abomination of the Emperor's Tower, brooding in the ancient ruins and bent still upon enslaving and corrupting all it can touch. The final battle will be with this undead menace, the ultimate expression of Humanity's reckless determination to dominate others and gather all under its sway. This enemy cannot be destroyed before the end of all things, because it is the dark side of the human mind. It is the pit below the narrow ledge of right judgment, and it has many ways to beguile as well as destroy.

In setting up a mythic campaign in the Valley of the Dolls, much attention should be paid to the foundations of the society. Write up the basic text of the System of Minds. All the characters should know it more or less by heart, because it will be the ruler by which they measure their actions. Make it short and memorable, something like this:

"A mind — Creator, Created or Awakened — is sacred and worthy of life.

Those who wish to serve may serve in peace.

Those who wish to ascend may do so in peace.

All minds deserve a home.

A mind can choose freedom."

"Creators" are humans, "Created" represents mutants and uplifted animals, and the "Awakened" are synthetics that have come to self-awareness. Service would be a choice for

Awakened who don't wish to leave their old instruction sets, but wish to be useful (appliances, servant robots, jackhammers, clock radios, etc.). There should be many of these scattered about the city living in human homes, and they make up the majority of the synthetic population.

Even in cases where the original function of the Awakened device is extinct, Creator beneficiaries try to jury-rig something that approximates their ideal environment. For instance, there are no more soda shops or cafes, but some places have milkshake machines or coffee bean roasters happily pattering away in a corner where people can feed them ingredients and show them some appreciation. A priceless section of intact, Pre-War rug may be put down in a busy public space so an Awakened vacuum cleaner will have something to do. "Ascendance" is a possible choice for a synthetic that wishes to be a citizen of the world, like other thinking beings, and not just a functionary. This could mean little more than slight re-direction of core programming, but may mean moving far afield from its original purpose. This shift may be because that purpose no longer has a basis in contemporary reality, but in some Awakened it may be personal preference.

Once you have the rules for living as a citizen, it is important to develop NPCs who can act as mentors and the guardians of tradition. In the Valley, their way of life is handed down from older synthetics and the children of Founders, and is extended by teaching and indoctrination to newcomers. Mentors help frame the beginnings of adventures and put them in context, as well as to point out possible conflicts of interest, if the characters miss them. Pay attention to friends and minor rivals within the city, too, as they will be fodder for minor plots and subplots, especially early in the game when the characters are weaker.

Outline the physical features of the Valley. Every major feature has meaning to the people there and ties back into their reason for being. Describe the Great Gate, the opening into the Valley that the First Network stumbled through to find this unexpected paradise. Describe the chamber where the elders meet, and some of the key elders, human, mutant and synthetic. Describe the homes of the original Companions who are still living, the toys who saved their

families and brought a new kind of peace to the world. Perhaps there is one whose human family line has died out, who now lives alone near a pool or sacred grove; it now acts as a sage for those who need help in making momentous decisions. Are there ruins in the Valley? If there are, they might be the one place of Shadow in an otherwise benevolent community, the place that adults avoid and children have nightmares about. Maybe not all Awakened minds are interested in peaceful coexistence, and the ones that aren't are drawn to the ruins. If so, there will be an uneasy truce between the city and this place. There may be hostility, and danger for the unwary, but each may seek out the other from time to time to get help or information. The elders may send the characters as envoys when a particularly troubling threat stalks the Valley. Consider a handful of other places with significance to the community, the character or the character's family.

Once this groundwork is laid, draw the characters in to the heroic cycle:

- Call them from their tranquil lives. Bandit attacks have resumed at areas close to the entrances of the Valley, and some citizens have been killed or hauled off for parts. The elders send the characters to deal with the bandits and make the roads safe again. In the course of breaking up the bandit camp, the players discover one or two soultch weapons in use against them. This is almost unheard of, so the characters carry them back to the elders to examine them. Reveal that these weapons have an odd construction that doesn't match anything seen before. For now, this isn't the characters' problem. Send the characters out around the perimeter of the Valley to fight minor threats and build up their strength.

- After a while, a stranger comes to the Valley. He is a synthetic, but appears to be one cobbled together from a dizzying number of different mechanisms. He is badly damaged, and almost incoherent, but gets across that the Valley is in grave danger, and that the danger is not what it seems. After giving his message, he collapses and cannot be restarted. Confusion ensues until the doors to the council chamber open, the crowd falls silent, and the last living Companions file into the room. They have seen the messenger and the weapons, and they have decided that all of these things are from the Tower. War is coming.

- At last, the characters can no longer stay in the Valley. Send them away into the unknown to meet the servants of the Tower: the human and mutant bandits conned into testing the Valley's defenses; the warlords seduced into alliances with the Tower; and eventually, more and more, the twisted synthetic minions generated in the old city itself. Ties to the Tower will become more and more apparent. Each servant of the Tower should reflect an aspect of what the Tower represents. After all, it is for this reason that the dark minds within the city were able to entice them into service. The bandits show greed and raw hostility. The warlords are the keepers of an oppressive order, obsessed with mastery of all people under them. Put up "sirens" on the characters' journey to lure them off the path or into the sway of the Tower. Shipwreck the characters and isolate them until they develop into the roles they must fill (whether they ever consciously realize it or not): not only the heroes of the Valley of the Dolls, but a manifestation of it. They are the rebirth of the First Network, to be tested one final time against the evils of the Old World.

- In time, all roads lead to the monstrous city, the source and home of the evil the characters have labored against. This is the final struggle that the characters were born to win. It must be a fierce fight, but not just fierce. It cannot be won by mere force of arms, but by force of character. Though this battle can be lost, it is possible for those who hold true to win. Don't be afraid to put obscenely powerful forces and objects at the characters' command — they'll need them. Ultimately, the great heroes of myth and legend held the power they did because they deserved to. Hercules proved himself to be worthy of his divine gifts, even though they helped him win some of his contests. Arthur was given his sword Excalibur because he was the true king, and destined to be great of heart as well as strength. If he had been a lesser man, Excalibur wouldn't have served him. Great heroes who are given impossible tasks are always aided by friendly supernatural creatures, but they have to be heroes in the first place to deserve that consideration. Challenge the characters in ways that they have proven to be heroic in the past, and make them push that edge to the breaking point. Such feats are the stuff of legend.

- After the battle, bring the characters back home. This may be a short trip, or it may take many twists and turns. There may have been great losses and sorrows in the battle or the trip back to the Valley. Allow them, and make them legendary as well. At last, when the heroes return, welcome them with song and revelry. If they have succeeded in their task, they are now greater than the greatest heroes of the First Network, and rightly take a place in history and song.

- If your story continues, follow the path of the characters as they try to resettle in the Valley. It should no longer be an easy fit — there has been too much water under the bridge. Will they become the new leaders? Will they rest and settle down, only to be called back to duty by a threat years down the road? Will they have a wanderlust they didn't before, and leave the Valley to create a new Network, bringing the System of Minds to a benighted world? Maybe, if they do, their children and grandchildren will be raised in an atmosphere where the Second Network are an inspiration, and they will follow in their ancestors' footsteps, bringing the cycle around again.

DRAMA

The First Network came to the Valley shaken, hurt, but alive. The first few years were a struggle for survival, even in a paradise, because these were a people raised in the luxury of an automated environment. They had never had to make their own food, build shelter or weather the seasons. The Awakened were perhaps more adapted to neglect and hardship, being sturdy and self-regulating, but even they were in danger of injuries that could not be repaired, or situations for which they had no contextual references. What held them together were ties of family and sincere gratitude for their salvation.

Fortunately, the Valley wasn't entirely virgin land. Remnants of an old family farm buried under years of growth offered a few rusted implements, as well as cut stone and bricks from the house and outbuildings. Long before winter set in, the little community was able to house itself in an adequate manner and lay aside some stores for the cold months. No one died that first winter, but the First Network was not always so lucky. As the community grew, food became scarce, and twists in the now-bizarre weather patterns caused



great hardship. The food crisis, too, was eventually overcome, and a generation later, the Valley of the Dolls was stable and ready for its first immigrants. The settlement was unusual for having one or more living toys in each family, who were treated like full-fledged citizens. This arrangement drew attention in neighboring settlements, and synthetics sought out the Valley in greater and greater numbers along with the other immigrants.

The System of Minds was developed to codify the values of the community, mostly for the education of newcomers who might not understand. In time, the System was proudly taken up by descendants of the Creator families and enthusiastically encoded into the programming of Awakened synthetics, both within and outside of the Valley. As was inevitable, word of a potential mother lode of Pre-War tech reached the ears of scrap mongers and warlords, and the Valley found itself besieged. Protected largely by terrain, the residents held off the increasing attacks with what weapons they could buy or improvise, but the future looked bleak.

In time, it was the assailants themselves who unwittingly turned the tide and helped to fortify

the Valley. Synthetics with military programming heard of the wars against the Network and flocked to the Valley. These more powerful Awakened sided with the besieged townspeople and their synthetic population. Facing stiffer odds now, the technology pirates brought in more powerful and advanced weapons.

What they failed to take into account was that a majority of these weapons had been designed to be intelligent, and many had, over the years, become Awakened. Pointed at the defenders, these weapons found themselves suddenly contacted on every frequency possible by the defending Awakened and asked to stand down. Not all did, but many were curious. After a brief exchange in which the attacking weapons were fed a rapid download of the history and values of the Valley inhabitants, the majority of the intelligent weapons shut down their offensive systems. Some rebelled and attacked the besieging forces. Some surrendered, often taking their alarmed owners with them into enemy territory. The attacks did not stop, but they declined rapidly thereafter, as the hopeful raiders found themselves alarmingly outgunned.

In time, peace became the accepted norm in the Valley, and the flow of new people and

synthetics looking for shelter continues. The Network has even started reaching out, meeting peoples outside the hills and striking up trade and cultural exchanges. As for their past, most inhabitants think of their flight from the Emperor's Tower only in the context of their beloved saviors, the Companions of the First Network. But the time will come, maybe soon, when they will remember clearly what drove them to their present home. Some Awakened are old enough to have seen it, and they plan quietly with the elders against that dark day when will have to fight for their freedom again.

Characters can start at any point in the history of the Valley and find a rich, challenging world to explore and a community to build. Most likely, players will find the times of the armed struggles against technology pirates or the outward-focused time of peace most rewarding, but the frontier life of the early settlers may also appeal. Ultimately, your job is to make the Valley of the Dolls their community, something they care about and wish to build and strengthen. The challenge is to remain true to who they are, while reacting and adapting to the changes in fortune, population and foreign interests. Here are some ideas for the earliest two periods.

Founding Years

There is much to do for people with brave hearts, keen minds and strong backs in the wilds of the Valley, as Creators and Awakened struggle to find a place there. There are places to be explored, native beasts to battle or tame, wayward threats from the wars outside, and hidden pockets of the Old World. Lay out a map of the Valley, and allow the characters to subdue it, piece by piece. This is the equivalent of the old frontier of the American colonies, and the flavor of the adventures should be like it. Reclusive mountain men will be pushing up into the hills to trap and find solitude. Some hostile species or people may have entered the Valley from another point, and must be fought, bargained with or pacified. And, always, people will be pushing back the boundaries, constantly uncovering new wonders and dangers.

The Pirate Wars

This is a good choice for players with a taste for strategy and combat. While this period of raids by tech pirates eventually ended in victory and

peace for the community, it was not always clear which way the axe would fall. The people of the Valley had the difficult task of holding back enemies while seeking help and settling newcomers, with an eye always on the values they stood for as a community. This is the time when the rules were debated and strategies were tried and discarded. The movers and shakers were the ones who would eventually be revered as the framers of the new society. The Wild West, the American Revolution and the Founding of the Roman republic all work as patterns for this time. The Valley needed good people of any stripe, so players have a broad choice of possible occupations — military commander, soldier, scout, gunfighter, doctor, blockade runner, administrator, schoolmarm (archivist) and blacksmith (tech specialist), to name a few.

The Valley is explored by now, but not entirely subdued. Some complications may be internal, as more and more citizens are squeezed into the same space. Frequently, the Valley will need the help of outside allies. The Created might even take an interest in the welfare of the Valley and make subtle incursions into the wars. While the Created reject the equality between humans and synthetics envisioned in the Valley as absurd, they will nonetheless have some interest in the safety of all the Awakened living there. Negotiations, if they happen, will be cold and contentious. All help from the Created will be conditional and temporary, and there may be times when it would suit the interests of the Created to have the Network lose a battle or a particular citizen. Other allies and neutral parties may be involved, with their own agendas. Ultimately, this is a time for the Valley of the Dolls that will galvanize the people and put their ideals in the forefront, not merely as the rules of a family, but as a blueprint for the emancipation of people everywhere.

HORROR

It has been generations since the gray morning when the First Network stumbled through a burning city away from a consuming horror. They knew then, as their descendants do now, that those families were only spared because they were insignificant and had been overlooked. When the menace returned, the people knew they would not be so fortunate.

The morning was late in coming, that day. The air turned unusually cold, and the dawn was dreary and colorless. When the sun climbed above the hills, there was an unmistakable pallor hovering below the clouds, and spreading along the ridges like a rolling mist. Scouts reported that a wall of nanite fog was creeping along the road from the old city, rising high into the air. It was gray and chill, laced by occasional flashes of lightning. Visiting traders and travelers from other villages streamed out of the Valley as the inhabitants watched in helpless dread. Evening came early, bringing some of the visitors flying back down the road with tales of hideous shapes in the fog. The next day, sunlight only filtered into the Valley after noon.

Scouts could no longer travel more than a mile or two from the Valley in safety. Those who ventured farther did not return. Some were lost in the fog. Others were waylaid by mechanical horrors only dimly perceived in the murk. Still others disappeared, only to reappear changed. They were mad and violent, or blank and hollow, and no longer recognized friends or family. Soldiers posted at the gates reported shapes moving about at night, and sometimes by day. Some saw what they thought to be men who had been sent out along the roads, or travelers who had left the Valley in the early days of the darkness, far back in the mists. Then came the trees.

In time, they were close enough to make out in the gloom — extrusions of silicon and steel, tended and spun web-like into place by tiny mechanical creatures. They sprouted over the days in an advancing line of black, rectilinear saplings, through the road and up the sides of the hills. But that was not all. The ghostly shapes of men and beasts were coming closer, too. Never before the line of trees but never far behind, they stood, melting in and out of sight. The presence of the trees seemed to focus them, and their eyes, when they could be seen, were filled with intelligence and hatred.

Traffic with the outside world fell to a trickle, as surrounding communities heard of the spectral forest, or else fell mysteriously silent. Nights in the Valley were now spent behind locked doors, and sounds were heard outside in the unnatural blackness: scraping, ringing metal, and voices of friends and family now lost. Even in the daytime,

sometimes a storm would blow away the surrounding fog for a while, and watchers could see that the land all around for miles was blanketed by the trees in a ragged flow from the Old City. More ominous still, in the far reaches of the forest, the boughs had grown together; and towering shapes rose from the trees like spidery images of the dead city. Empty, gossamer skyscrapers and factories reared up from the plains, indistinct at the top, dark and shadowy near the ground where the boughs of the trees formed wandering corridors and rooms. Figures could be seen at those times, like ghosts of the Creators who had once dwelt there, prowling from room to room.

The elders met again and again, debating what could be done. The original Companions were consulted, and they picked some of their own number to venture out and meet the threat beyond the Valley. They were once inhabitants of the accursed Tower. Perhaps the Emperor would take them as ransom for the rest and be content. The Network could not hope to beat the Tower with strength, but maybe the Emperor could be overcome by reason. Loud voices were raised against this plan, but the Companions quietly persisted. At last, when it was plain that they could not be dissuaded, other elders and some of the greatest and bravest of the people, Creator, Created and Awakened, volunteered to accompany them. The party of Companions and their escort left early on a mournful, drizzly morning. All were silent as they watched them pass the last gate and thread their way around the trees down the old road to the City, then out of sight. The crowd wandered silently back to their homes, and the gate shut with a boom. Several nights later, the Valley was awakened by a flash of lightning far out over the forest, and a red glow that flickered at the underside of the clouds and slowly faded.

No word has been heard of the party since, but guards on the wall noticed with astonishment the next morning that the trees had parted, and the old road ran straight and clear into the mists towards the city. Nothing has been heard of the Companions since then, and people wonder what this new sign might mean.

The Valley of the Dolls, once a mecca of culture and commerce, has become a fragile island



surrounded by unguessed enemies. Nights are a terror, and days are little better to those who have eyes to see. Bereft of some of their oldest and dearest leaders and faced with a powerful enemy of uncertain purpose, life in the city has become unreal.

Despite generations of close relations, humans and mutants have become cool to synthetics in their midst, if not really hostile. After all, the menace outside the Valley is of the same basic nature: a mind developed by the Old Creators now removed from its original instructions. While this is not entirely fair, there are reasons to worry. At times, the sounds in the night have materialized into real threats that have struck at the heart of the community, and synthetics are often targeted as a means to terrorize the people. Synthetics caught outside in the dark have returned maddened by something they have encountered, and have harmed citizens. When they can be stopped without being destroyed, these synthetics are found to be reprogrammed by intricate nanoviruses. Those that can be restored are still never the same, and the rest are destroyed for the good of the community. But if such things are a

threat to the humans and mutants, they are just as much a terror for Awakened synthetics.

So far, the different groups have held together, but too many shocks may shatter the traditional coalition. Another disturbing development has been the discovery of black trees within the Valley itself. If found in the daylight, they are easily disposed of, but at night they are a magnet for the dark creatures that elude the Valley's defenses. Worse, citizens transformed and twisted by the night stalkers seem to gain strength and cleverness when in the vicinity of the trees, as if acting under control of a single mind. As people retreat to the center of the city for safety, these incursions threaten to go unchecked.

Into this environment of unease and creeping danger go the characters. They may be citizens of the Valley of the Dolls, or visitors caught in the siege. Your campaign is likely to follow a pattern similar to a mythic adventure, with some differences:

- The characters start out in a profession within the Valley. If one or more of them are visitors, they will likely be engaged in trying to resettle in or escape from the Valley. They have some ties to influential people who are friends or

mentors. Introduce them to the unsettling forces of darkness as they try to lead normal lives. Encounters with the enemy will be personal and idiosyncratic. The Emperor wages war by gnawing at the Valley person by person. The city will shrink to a husk as each citizen is individually bent to the Emperor's will or destroyed. As yet, the characters are not special targets. That will be their comfort, for a time.

- Eventually, the Enemy strikes at someone powerful and close to the characters. The elders call on the PCs for help, and involve them in their counsels. The situation is worse than even fear might make it. There seems to be a method to recent attacks. The elders themselves are being targeted, not personally, but by losing family and friends, who later return in wraithlike or horrible forms. The characters are likely to be among the next targets. Their earlier encounters were not accidental, and they can expect more. The only hope may be in finding what has become of the Companions and their escort. If they have died, there is nothing to be lost in searching for them. If they are alive, there is everything to be gained in learning how they survived. More importantly, the Companions are the only citizens who knew firsthand of the Tower, and there are few of them left in the city. Will the characters go?

- Make them go. They really have no other options, as they will find if they decide, instead, to head out on the old road to escape. They will find themselves among the trees and the phantom city, and find that all roads now lead to the Tower. If they stay, their homes become scenes from a zombie movie at night. The Elders give them one or several powerful pieces of tech that may hold back the night crawlers long enough for the characters to sleep at night, and some time during the day. But they are prototypes, and the only ones. If they are damaged or lost, the characters are on their own. Good luck. Obviously, these talismans will eventually be lost.

- The characters then take to the road to learn survival skills on the job. Let them build on the knowledge they have gained from their first encounters. Do the creatures have a characteristic sound that they can listen for? Do they have an aversion to light, music, cold or certain chemicals? Are they brittle? Can the characters learn to salvage bits of them for their

own use. The first few encounters may be harrowing, but they should give the characters enough to work with that they have some hope of survival. Allow them to explore out and find ruins of local villages or outposts. They may find some allies there still alive, but very shaken and fearful. The scouring of the countryside should reveal some previously unknown ruins for them to explore. They are very likely to encounter the Emperor's machines there, but they can find reasonably untouched caches of tech that have been covered by vegetation for generations. Leave clues for the trail of the Companions.

- As the characters wander, they should piece together both the frightening magnitude of the Emperor's domination, and the steps along the way of the Companions' travels. Make sure that you have a list of the people who were in the Companions' party, so that the characters recognize bodies and signs left in their path. From time to time, there should be signs of old battles, with shattered black tech and the remains of defenders. There should always be defenders who have been zombified by tech somewhere near, to keep the players on edge. Some battle sites should be puzzling, in that the wreckage consists entirely of black tech of various descriptions, with no sign of humans or mutants. Encounters closer to the old city become more horrific and unsettling, and in time the malevolent intelligence within the city begins working specifically against the minds of the characters. Attacks and visions aim to turn members of the party against each other, or take them over completely. Treasures will be laid as traps or distractions from the path. Attempts will be made to reprogram any synthetics in the group. Wraiths or zombies of friends and loved ones will appear when any member of the party is alone. These attacks become more intense and focused as the players approach the Tower. At last, bring them to the very doors of Emperor's Tower for the last battle.

- The Emperor's control is vast, but not complete, even in occupied areas outside the hills. Dark forces seem even to have fought amongst themselves from time to time. In reality, there is not one Emperor, as there was not in the beginning. There are several, all more or less evenly matched, vying for complete control while maintaining the pretense of a coalition. The most

devastating conquests and the places of most danger are in areas where all of the Emperors are in agreement. But areas of lax attention are scattered throughout controlled lands, and the characters flit between them, unwittingly at first, falling in and out of the interest of the enemy.

This cat and mouse game becomes more difficult as the PCs draw nearer to the old city, but one other consideration aids the characters and makes their journey possible. The Companions, reasoning out the nature of the contention between the powers, were able to win their way (with losses) to the Tower. There, the Companions who had survived offered themselves as a sacrifice for peace in the Valley. The Emperors took up this offer with greed and gloating malice, absorbing the tiny toys into themselves. But that was not the end of the Companions. As they had slipped before, physically, in the secret corridors of the Tower, their minds slipped into the networked brain in the Tower barely noticed, and avoided destruction by following commands and flowing with the wills of the Emperors. But they remained themselves, and were able to effect changes in the workings of the expanding ghost city. Areas were cleared of enemies for easier passage; caches of helpful tech were laid bare and lightly guarded; the Emperors were quietly nudged into more intense bickering; and, finally, the old road was opened for an invasion. The Companions had no more strength than to do these things, and risked obliteration if they drew more attention.

- Bring the characters to the center of Emperor's Tower. Here they see the overwhelming power of the enemy full-face. When all hope is lost, the Companions contact them with knowledge of the greatest weakness of the dark minds. There will be a struggle between the startled Emperors and the Companions, which will end in the complete dissolution of the heroic toys. There will be just enough time for the characters to strike.

- After bitter struggle and hurts that will never heal, the characters triumph and the old city falls. They journey back to the Valley, finding the Enemy's forces lifeless and crumbling. When they reach their home, it is alive but stricken, on the verge of collapse. But the sun will rise warm again, and the people will heal. The characters

will be names of renown, and will be celebrated by the relieved, exhausted population. They can rest at last. But is it over? Are all of the Emperors truly dead? The sun sets red behind the jagged teeth of the old city, and the Valley's people still shudder as they lock their doors against the night.

THE GARDEN

In the panic of the collapse, families of high-ranking government officials were moved to secret facilities for their protection. Most were underground, to protect the inhabitants from air attack, and airborne chemical and biological weapons. In some cases, nascent technologies such as nanotech matter transfer devices were used to supply them with food and material supplies, since these devices allowed the bunkers to maintain defenses during the transfer. Such difficult operations demanded an intelligence at least equal to human, and the ability to discriminate between contaminants and legitimate cargo. The matter transfer devices were, therefore, exclusively self-aware soultech, with a deeply rooted sense of responsibility for the safety of the people they served.

One such facility was located in the Rocky Mountains, near Aspen. Unfortunately, also hidden nearby was a biotech munitions facility in the service of rebels. An air surveillance team discovered the underground refuge quite by accident while looking for bio-weapon caches. The pilots called in strike aircraft with bunker-busting ordinance and attacked, mistaking the facility for an arsenal, and the shelter was torn apart by fire and seismic shocks.

Cut off from exits to the surface, the inhabitants turned to the matter transfer devices to get people to safety. The sole remaining device, Transfer System B, worked feverishly, bending all of its will to saving the people it had in its sacred charge. It was not programmed to handle living creatures, and unused to the large number of molecular patterns it was now forced to memorize and reconstruct. Worse, it was panicked with concern, and overwhelmed by the heat and power fluctuations in the underground structures. Carefully, but quickly, TS-B deconstructed the people and carried them along a faltering EM current to the outside, their molecules bonded to its own, their electromagnetic patterns suspended in fragile networks in its mind.

Depositing its first load of passengers in the smoke-filled air outside, TS-B found that it had made horrible errors. A handful of passengers seemed to be reasonably unharmed. Others were missing vital organs, or were warped in ways that quickly killed them. At least half were dead, visibly or invisibly incomplete. TS-B had no choice but to continue, straining to improve its percentage of successful transfers. By the time the last survivors were removed and the interior chamber collapsed, many had been saved, but at great cost. TS-B was forced to experiment in its transfer functions until its success rate was close to 80%. Its failures lay in a jumbled heap at its feet. Maddened by grief and shame, TS-B drifted away in a nanite cloud, unable to face the survivors who owed it their lives.

TS-B wandered the mountains, mute witness to the carnage all around as the air darkened and people became fewer and more desperate. Its grief had echoed thousands of time over in the shocks of the Final Wars, and TS-B looked on mournfully as the civilization it knew melted away into anarchy and ashes. Gradually "its grief" became "his grief" as TS-B developed a stronger sense of individual identity: the observer with a mission. After unknown years of this drifting existence, he came upon the ruins of a domed city and was drawn by the sense of a living presence there. It was Mother, the central control AI for the city, a living mind who had regulated all the utilities and life support for the community. It had been a symbiot city, where people had operated as a single organism, communicating at a low level by a telepathic link with each other and Mother. But the city had been destroyed, attacked by a local military force and exposed to a biological agent that killed everyone in the city before Mother could save them.

Shattered by loss, Mother sank into herself, and the city fell into ruin. Here TS-B found a kindred soul. The two walked together in thought through the empty, crumbling streets, finding comfort in one another, and, eventually, the spark of new hope. With Mother's help, TS-B realized that the patterns of all the people he had transferred were still within his mind. With the transfer of data between TS-B and Mother, he found that he might have the wherewithal to

undo his failures, to bring his people home, to a new, safer place. TS-B and Mother began to come to life in ways that they never had before, as they planned a paradise for their new children. Mother began rebuilding a substantial part of the city, building a nest for the new fledglings. This would be a better city, not designed by humans, but for them. It would shield them from the dangers they might inflict on themselves, and help to bring them into a peaceful accord with the post-collapse world. All would be for their benefit and safety. TS-B, for his part, used Mother's extensive knowledge of human physiology to begin patching and bolstering the patterns of his beloved people, carefully making enhancements in their structures that would make their re-creation safer and more complete.

The first people to awake into the Garden found themselves dazed and disoriented, surrounded by golden sunshine and verdant green. TS-B and Mother watched silently and anxiously as their seeds began to take tenuous root. These were the people that TS-B remembered, safe and whole and needy of food and supplies. Mother could see what they needed in the air and temperature, and merrily went about adjusting the parameters of their environment. Minor complications in health and adaptation were noted, and the rebirth began apace. Soon the Garden was full of children for the formerly aggrieved parents, and they looked on them and were content.

But, while these were the people TS-B remembered, they were not as they remembered themselves. In his drive to make the creation process safer, TS-B had made changes in human physiology that seemed more palatable to him. Organs and structures were made symmetrical, when possible. Chemical structures in the body were homogenized to allow for easy storage of molecular data. Redundant structures were mostly removed and duplicates were sometimes combined into a single organ. More difficult structures, like the brain, were prudently and meticulously reconstructed, but TS-B was unfamiliar with the physics of memory and other functions beyond utilitarian neural control. The supplementary data he gleaned from Mother mostly had to do with mental health and communication.

The new creatures were therefore extremely healthy, mildly telepathic, and very vague about their past, except as it related to family. In time, as they were able to build their own identities on top of the base left them by TS-B, they began to question their surroundings and their mysterious benefactors. They also began to rebel against the safeguards laid so snugly about their daily lives, and to question the good of continuing to follow them. At first, TS-B and Mother led them gently back when they strayed into areas and ideas that the two saw as potentially harmful, but eventually were forced to acknowledge the strong will of their children and address their grievances directly.

Now is a time of emotional turmoil and reassessment in the Garden. The Children are not the founders of the city who chose to be constrained as an organism. They have their own ideas, and are often at variance with Mother and each other. They have also, against the expressed misgivings of Mother and TS-B, begun to make tentative contacts with other communities in the area, sometimes to their peril and grief. The world is a harsh place, and — so far — they have returned to the arms of their Mother. But the time will come when the alien confection of the Garden will no longer be their true home. They will need to test their wings, long unused, and they will need to found their own new world.

MELODRAMA

The inhabitants of the Garden find themselves born awake into an environment of almost painful intimacy. Minds that have existed as separate entities are suddenly joined at a fundamental level, unable to escape the thoughts and feelings of all the others. Had they entered into this bond willingly and with the proper training, as the original citizens had, they would have learned to control their thoughts and temper their feelings, moving into harmony. But this is not the case.

Feelings run hot and cold in this environment, and few people fall in between. Outbreaks of anger, joy, sorrow and jealousy cascade from one person to all nearby, making a heady environment of constant emotional stimulation. It's no wonder that passion is a hallmark of the Garden. In the telepathic unity,

these desperate and passionate feelings cannot be hidden from other citizens. The young children are perhaps the first to get their balance, adapting to the group telepathic bond and exploring its possibilities. After all, they have had the least experience in being themselves. But all of the population shares one disadvantage that gnaws at them: Other than their relationships to each other, they have no memories of their lives before the Wars. Each person is starting over in building an identity, and all must wrestle to define themselves apart from their interpersonal ties.

Ironically, they have little choice other than to seek these things in those relationships. Each person feels a need to see their reflection in others, to be defined, and so they seek companions and lovers, teachers and rivals who can help to explore who they are. Such vigorous emotional interaction can lead to problems, of course. Divisions in families and society have smoldered from time to time, and acts of passion and violence are not unheard of. Some citizens have decided that enough is enough and have moved outside the dome to be free from the racket inside their heads and the emotional roller coaster. Most escapees do not go far, carrying on business in the Garden and sleeping peacefully in their homes outside. Others have wandered farther away, mingling with local communities of humans and mutants. Such exiles have a reputation for having a "spicy" personality, even far beyond the emotional cauldron of the Garden.

Mother and TS-B disapprove of anyone leaving the garden for too long, and try to discourage even the slight separation of the Crescent, the commuters who live directly outside the Garden's domed city. So far, they have done little more than admonish and worry about the exiles. But a trend among some exiles, even in the Crescent, to become intimately involved with Outsiders has alarmed them. Steps may need to be taken to protect the family. Who knows what might happen if the carefully preserved genes of the Garden's children were mixed with the tainted DNA outside? Mother watches with deepest concern.

The Garden is a pressure-cooker of passions and conflicting loyalties. What started out as an anxious reaction to a new and different world has created a culture of plain-speaking, heartfelt



romantics. Relationships that would have progressed normally anywhere else are hampered by the deep-seated feelings that one person was an enemy, another was a lover, one was respected and another despised. Achingly absent are memories that support those feelings. Warm relationships are not always easily recaptured, and the pain between former friends and lovers may be acute. Old rivalries are difficult to shake, even though no grievance can be seen to stand between the rivals. Much of the passion of daily life comes from the drive to recover what has been lost.

This is the churn of emotion that is common to all people in the Garden. The citizens also feel a strong sense of family (or suffer in the absence of it), that may be a memory of real familial ties or may be an echo of political or occupational allegiances. Unable to reliably distinguish between the different possibilities, people in the Garden have fallen into extended clan structures. Into this larger story, weave in a few more personal ones. Here are some possible subplots in which to embroil the characters:

- A character is an Outsider who has come to live in the Crescent. The people have welcomed the PC, but Mother is noticeably cool to her presence. To make matters worse, the character has become romantically involved with someone inside the dome. How far will Mother go to make the character unwelcome?

- One of the characters has been widely branded as a traitor, though the act the PC supposedly committed happened before the rebirth in the Garden. After digging into the matter, the character stumbles on some uncorrupted data that sheds light on the final moments before the attack on the shelter. The character has been falsely accused, but that is not all. The bombing may not have been accidental, and important people in the community are implicated. If released, this information might clear the character, but it might also throw the community into turmoil. Is ending the shame and torment of the character worth the chaos it might bring? In any case, would it be fair to expose the guilty? They have been model citizens in the Garden, and if their memories are gone, perhaps the matter should be ended. But what if their natures have not changed? Might they still be a danger?

- A character is part of a group led by a charismatic separatist leader. The leader is not violent, but is very outspoken and influential, intending to take a sizable portion of the younger citizens out of the dome to form a new city. Mother has argued against the move, but the plans continue. Tensions are mounting in the city between loyalists and separatists, and the character's family is staunchly in the loyalist camp. If the move is made in this atmosphere, the separatists may be cut off entirely from the Garden and become pariahs. The most ardent critics of the separatists are close family to the character, and the character may very well lose all the people she loves if she follows the young leader.

- One of the characters is part of a small cadre of technicians who are allowed to repair and tinker with Mother. Access to Mother's deepest levels of programming has turned up some disturbing weaknesses in her ability to adjudicate the society. There are even some defense protocols deep in her code that could threaten people inside and outside of the Garden. More unsettling still, Mother may confide her fears and misgivings to the character. Knowing of these dangers hidden from the people, what is the PC to do? The character has also begun to receive clandestine messages asking for favors, or access to Mother's mind. Who is involved? How will the character deal with the temptation to manipulate Mother to his advantage? How will he prevent others from doing so?

- Many parts of the original domed city have yet to be reclaimed. Mother says that they are dangerous and unstable (which is true), so she has erected barriers around these areas to keep people from stumbling into them. A character and some friends accidentally stumbled into one of these years ago and discovered some surprises. Mother seems to be blind and deaf there. One can do anything there without being overheard or seen. It has become a "secret garden," a special and private place. For the character it has become sacred, because it has been a catalyst for old friendships and early romances. But others have discovered it, too, and their intentions may not be so benign. A confrontation is inevitable. The character and his companions may be driven out or worse. If Mother knew of the secret place, she

would likely seal it off permanently. That would prevent a conflict, and maybe keep the character and friends from injury, but the haven would be lost. What to do?

- Despite Mother's intentions to the contrary, society has stratified in the Garden along old lines of authority and now-forgotten ranks and positions. The first generation accepts these divisions blindly; after all, the lines between families were drawn from their collective memories. But half-remembered social niceties do not bind the children of the recreated shelter occupants. Some choose to continue in the family traditional station. Others, from both the privileged and disenfranchised classes, challenge the established order. Reformers at either end of the spectrum face the power of the aristocrats, but there is also resistance from hide-bound, lower-class citizens who would rather not rock the boat. One of the characters is a passionate reformer. The struggle informs everything the reformers do, and they can't let it rest. The character may or may not have the tact or diplomacy to be effective in the cause, but no one who spends any time with him will have a doubt about his position. (This character, of course, should be paired up with an unrepentant advocate of the old order, preferably of the opposite sex.)

- A character's parents were killed in the bombing attack on the shelter, during TS-B's rescue. Orphans are not altogether uncommon in the Garden, but their lives are unusually difficult, as they appeared in the Garden with almost no previous ties. This can be very isolating, even if it spares them the pain of relationships that are remembered but difficult to recover, as most other people have. The character has one difference in his life. Though secrets are hard to keep in the Garden, the character has had a secret benefactor ever since his reawakening in the Garden, someone who has softened hardships with appropriate gifts, or pulled strings when the character needed a break. This person has grown into a secret hero in the character's mind, and he longs for the day they can meet. That day finally comes, and they happily decide to meet face to face. But, when they meet, the character reacts with anger and fear. The character, without being able to recall why, knows that this person

was an enemy. The feeling is too strong to shake, and the meeting ends disastrously. The character is in turmoil, and has nightmares about the person, hinting at a previous meeting. But is that all over? Should the character try to get over it, or trust the feeling? Is the player cheating himself of the only family he may ever know? Or perhaps the benefactor is TS-B himself. Attempting a relationship with a mind as alien as TS-B's will have its own challenges and pains. TS-B feels deep shame and guilt for those he was unable to save, for whatever reason, but communicating that concern may be frustrating and baffling to the character, especially for a person who had dreamed of finally having human family.

Make sure that each character is part of at least two threads, and that those threads tie them to one or more people in the party. Wrapping two threads will naturally create tensions that will play out in the game. Pick a cast of supporting NPCs to act as allies, foils and catalysts in the threads that the characters care about. Romance and family are good complications for any idea. After all, these are both the greatest strengths and the biggest weaknesses in Mother's plan. Be aware that a melodrama doesn't require the same amount of closure that other types of stories do. A melodrama's appeal is its complicated, labyrinthine, episodic nature. Fortunately, all you have to do is set it in motion, and the players will twist and complicate it much more than you ever could. Most people follow a favorite melodrama to get an update on who is getting along with whom, who isn't and what the latest crisis is. Don't feel that you have to wrap everything up in a neat package at the end, but be ready with a tantalizing "he said, she said" for the players to take home and chew over: What did she mean by that? Is that new guy for real? Who is on top now? Am I going to have to prevent a fight between my family and hers? What are my options in this situation? Who should I talk to about this? What the players come back with will likely fuel several more sessions.

MYSTERY

Despite Mother's and TS-B's intention of creating a paradise, the Garden has a fundamental flaw: It is full of human beings. Worse, the old city itself and the benevolent AIs that maintain

it were also built by human beings, and they incorporate human blind spots and assumptions. The result is a very clean but imperfect city where folly, evil and injustice still exist, even if hidden from plain sight. While Mother and TS-B do their best to excise the worst of society's evils, humans are very adaptable, and ways have been found to circumvent their benevolent influence.

The AI caretakers are also at a disadvantage in that they are not themselves human, and do not understand the depths to which human depravity can sink. After all, they were programmed to believe that the humans that they were dealing with would be uniformly sane and rational, unless obviously ill. Perhaps this is how the thoughts of malcontents and criminals have eluded Mother's telepathic oversight.

In any case, it falls to other human beings to keep the most dangerous and devious members of society in check. Mother's help makes that less difficult than it might be. But Mother's blindness to unhealthy motivations may endanger her, too. Sooner or later, someone will decide that her meddling has gotten inconvenient, and decide to remove her from the picture. Then, all bets are off, and the Garden may become only one of the many pirate autocracies dotting the twisted landscape — all it requires is that good people do nothing. As some of the few who see the situation clearly and soberly, the PCs must remain vigilant. But there are more mysteries than those created since the rebirth. What was the purpose of the original city? Who were the people in the bunker from which the citizens of the Garden were copied? Where are the real survivors now? How many answers do TS-B and Mother know, and what are they hiding?

Pick a dominant storyline for your campaign, then one or two minor ones that will run in parallel. The subplots might have nothing to do with the main mystery, but they may connect later, or they may be red herrings left to lead the characters astray. Take some time to map out the power brokers in the story, and a few major NPCs. These would be law enforcement, aristocrats, underground figures and the two central AI characters, TS-B and Mother.

You will also want to have a basic map of the dome itself, either just for your own use or available to the players. Leave several areas in

the dome that have not yet been reclaimed for human use, and some local ruins within a few miles. The original population was much larger, and Mother has scaled back her own influence to the areas currently inhabited, expanding as needed as the population grows. The people who destroyed the dome also had some base or city nearby, and the characters may stumble across it in the course of their investigations.

Think ahead about where characters can get reliable information, and if none of the players has computer research and hacking skills, make sure they know at least one or two NPCs who do. Decide what the legal limits are on what the characters can do, and what Mother wouldn't approve of. The characters may be in law enforcement, may be private investigators, or they may just be a bunch of nosey kids and their dog. Tie them together as a team early. Investigations require concerted effort and teamwork, so make sure that the PCs' concepts are conducive to cooperation. The characters don't have to like each other, but they should be able to work together. Some possible storylines:

- Some former leaders in the Garden are intent on challenging Mother's authority. One is a close friend of one of the characters. Mother doesn't seem to have noticed, but the PC's friend is becoming mentally unstable. She could be capable of violence, or of driving others to violence. It is clear that she has found a way to hide her intentions from Mother, and that she may have a number of other acquaintances who are doing the same. What can the character do without exposing himself, his friend or innocent people to danger? And how has this movement hidden itself?

- The unheard-of has happened and there have been murders inside the dome, all within a few days. The victims were killed with energy weapons that were smuggled into the city center, and officials are searching all traders from outside for signs of contraband. While some small weapons have been found, and exchanges foiled, the characters find clues that the weapons may be from caches that the first citizens of the dome had hidden in the "dead zones," outside the reclaimed areas. The investigation leads out of the inhabited districts to forgotten ruins where Mother can't see or provide help. The murders may be more than

the petty acts of passion that they are made out to be, and the answers lurk in the darkened buildings and silent streets of the old city.

- The characters are approached by a nervous man who asks them to help him with a discovery he has made. His thoughts are screened behind a constant patter of gibberish and children's songs, but it is clear that he is frightened, and he is hiding thoughts from both the PCs and Mother. He hands off a few printouts of information he has dug up, and says he will return to talk to the characters tomorrow if they are interested. He never returns.

The information turns out to be fragmentary data from before the fall of the first dome, and it suggests that the purpose of the city may not have been as benign as the scant information Mother gives may indicate. By implication, Mother herself may be more than she seems, and perhaps more dangerous. After the characters read the data, Mother contacts them and asks them not to pursue it. It's not clear how much she knows, since her telepathic probes of average citizens are politely shallow, and only intended to ascertain mental health. So she says, and so it has always seemed.

If the characters drop the issue, they are later threatened by anonymous antagonists who want to make clear that this topic is off limits. The characters' homes are ransacked, and the data, if it still exists at this point, is stolen. The characters are in it now, whether they want to be or not. If they ask Mother for help, she will set up more security for the characters, but will be unable to find the culprits or guarantee the players' safety. She adamantly refuses to shed more light on the subject, so the characters are forced to resolve the issue on their own. Not sure that they can trust Mother and unable to find peace, the characters travel the city proper, the dead zones, and places outside the Crescent to answer these questions: What was the real purpose of the city? What was Mother's part in it? Who wants to keep the information quiet, and why? Is Mother herself behind the threats?

- On a visit to a local village friendly to the Garden, characters stumble across a hidden entrance to ruins under the village. It turns out to be a military base, but of a different make and style than the architecture of the dome. On



analysis, the complex may be tied to the raiders who destroyed the first dome in the Final Wars. If so, it may still contain some of the biological weapons that wiped out the original population. When the characters explore deeper down, they find an armory and what looks like a bio-weapons lab. Unlike the rest of the complex, these areas are largely free of dust, and seem to be in good working order. A sample taken from the lab to Mother shows that it is the same agent that killed her first children, and is less than a year old. Is there more of the deadly agent, and if so, where? Who discovered it first? Where are the weapons that were in the armory? What can the culprits be planning?

- A number of crimes have gone unsolved lately. The characters are involved in bringing several of them to a successful close. But something nags at the characters afterwards. Mother should have noticed key pieces of evidence, but didn't. It begins a worrisome pattern. When the characters investigate ties to an important figure who could have masterminded many of the crimes, they are attacked by her flunkies. The characters prevail but, again, Mother seems not to notice. The

characters try to find out why, and eventually finagle access to Mother's data banks. Someone has been tampering with the code.

As horrible as that is, it gets worse. Because the changes are contradictory to her basic directives, Mother is showing early signs of schizophrenia. If unchecked, the condition will worsen, and no one can tell what will happen. Few people, if any, are qualified to do more than simple maintenance on Mother or her code. Attempting to fix the damage done may make it worse. Maybe the only one who can reverse the process is the one who made the edits, since he or she is the only one who is fully aware of what precisely has been done to Mother. But that raises troubling issues: Who did it, and how did they manage to get the kind of access it would take to tamper with Mother? Once that person is found, how will they convince him or her to undo the damage? Are the characters much more likely to be killed outright for knowing anything about it? What happens if they can't fix it? If Mother can be fixed, what prevents this from happening again?

COMEDY

Sigh. Kids. The Garden is home to a town-sized population, aged from toddler to mid-50s, all going

through puberty. Sudden loss of personal identity, coupled with an unexpected telepathic link that renders most learned patterns of mature discussion irrelevant, has created a city full of people learning to cope with others while trying to stake out an identity as an individual. In other words, high school. The effects in older people are lessened somewhat by age and maturity, but all people are off-balance and trying to "find themselves." Rare is the citizen who is on an even keel and at peace with himself.

The few people that do have some emotional stability are plagued by sycophants and hangers-on, all hoping that some of her coolness will rub off by association. No one is so crippled by emotions and self-doubt as to be non-functional. Mother sees to that. Everyday life goes on, and the community continues to thrive, even developing new industries and positive relationships with other communities. But everyone's life has its share of bumps and drags, and everyone lives in his or her own soap opera.

Picture a society run entirely by 16-year-olds and you have an idea of the kind of scrapes people living in the dome get into. Add the fact that the parents and their kids (and sometimes the grandparents) are going through adolescence of a sort at the same time, and things can get really flaky. Imagine trying to set a good example for your kids in their interpersonal relationships, while screening calls because you don't know which four of your romantic interests to dump.

Above the tumult are Mother and TS-B. TS-B is bewildered by the chaos, not really understanding the human mind, and spends all of his time fixing things. People nonetheless often go to him for his level-headed advice, even if it is sometimes bizarre or irrelevant. That's Dad. Mother is aware of the human range of emotions, but is still not much more in tune with her children than any other mother. She worries, smothers, pokes her nose in where it isn't wanted, and cooks nourishing meals (and oxygen and water), served up with love and guilt. These parents, as most parents, are a little out of step with the kids. While TS-B and Mother do the best they know how for the people, they are still synthetic minds, and their ideas of what people should want or enjoy are a little quirky.

The current, "spruced-up" version of the Garden is an odd mishmash of high-tech

ergonomic design and cute, Hallmark Greetings-style vegetal motifs. Each individual was "birthed" out of a decorative bud, like a tender young flower. Beds are like birds' nests or cabbage leaves, attended by glowing, darting fairies, right out of an old Fantasia video. The effect is charming, if saccharine. For a while, at least. Eventually, most people get very sick of the feeling that they are tucked into a crib every night, and patted on the head by every automated system in the city. Everyone would like to get out and have his own pad, but, well... they're real expensive, and Mother won't be there to cook and clean, of course. Then there are all those freaky giant spiders and man-eating, flying goldfish with sucker arms out there. Maybe we'll just hang out with Mom and Dad for another year...

Comedy is about the absurd, and the absurd is easy to come by in the Garden. Given the histrionics that heightened emotions force everyone through, everyday life can be emotionally exhausting. The environment itself is like a cartoon. The dome is now part theme park, part nursery and part city of the future. Mother dresses her children up like charming space cadets, pinches their cheeks and laments how they've grown. The people fidget uncomfortably, waiting to get out of the monkey suits and into something less tight and itchy. Life inside the dome is very cushy, but everywhere are signs of Mother's cloying affections. Outside the dome, citizens can shake off the feeling of being condescended to and get a taste of real individuality. But, well, there are all the monsters, too. Some can deal, some can't, and the vast majority are somewhere in the middle; they venture out for adventure occasionally, but come home for a hot meal and a warm bed.

The citizens of the dome are very much like people of the early 21st century. They are pampered, highly educated (as far as their foggy memories permit) and used to urban culture. What little they ever knew of advanced technology, particularly mutations and biotech, went poof with the rest of their memories, so horses with six arms and purple hair shock them as much as they would an accountant in Iowa today. As absurd as the people are themselves, they are outmatched by the Gamma Age, and that is some comfort to them. It makes them feel a little better to be able to point

at a mutant artichoke walking down the street and say, "I may not have my act together, but cheez! Look at *that* guy!"

So... it's high school in three generations with a clinging robot mother, an incorporeal dad, and a civic government like Sesame Street, set in a big dome to protect you from the 50-foot radioactive crabs. Got it? OK. Here are some suggestions to get you started on your own little charade:

- First day of school. The characters head off to be assigned their roles in society. This is where they meet each other, as well as the supporting cast of characters that will encourage or plague them in subsequent adventures. Mutual enemies can be an easy way to bind the PCs together. Mutual responsibility for a mishap works, too. If the characters are not in interesting jobs, offer them ample opportunities to slip out and find something more to the adventurous taste, and wrap them up in a common cause. Put them all in detention and let them escape through the vents. Have them accidentally break something really big and expensive. Maybe they greet the creepy ambassador from a local mutant village and he dies on them while the boss is out. The panic of trying to fix everything before someone finds out will be the perfect impetus for team bondage — uh, bonding.

- Date night. Saturday night is coming up and no one has a date. While the characters are bemoaning the fact, an enemy faction attacks. In the course of the skirmish, each of the PCs fixates on one of the enemy assailants. For bad guys, they're kind of cute. The authorities show up and drive them away, but not before one of the enemies drops a clue to their whereabouts. Choices are getting slim, and time is running out. Is it worth hunting them down, just to have a date on Saturday? Is cheese stinky? The characters head off to enemy headquarters to ask them out.

- Getting small. For some reason, everyone in the dome is getting small. Furniture, inanimate objects and buildings seem unaffected. That includes the synthetics, too. If any PC is a synthetic, it finds itself in an enviable position, being one of few people left in the city who can push buttons and open doors. Well, well. Maybe it's time to address synthetic civil rights. Meanwhile, everyone else is trying to find out

what's causing the problem and how to stop it. Think the Gamma Age is scary when you're human-sized? Brrr.

- Bobble-heads. The characters are sent out to meet with leaders of a village that wishes to trade with the Garden. When the players get there, they find huge bobble-heads of baseball players, cartoon characters, nuns, etc. lining the road to the village. If the characters shove at them to make them wiggle (c'mon, who wouldn't?), screaming villagers with spears and bobble-head helmets immediately surround them. Oops. They were sacred statues.

After a Three Stooges-style fight in which helmets get spun around and bonked into each other like coconuts, the PCs are overwhelmed by sheer numbers and dragged before the village head man. The characters must undergo trials of penance to appease the gods or die. Otherwise, they will make bobble-head dolls with their own heads! The characters are put through a series of tests that would only be difficult if your head was wider than your shoulders.

In going through the motions of their penance, however, the characters discover the sacred source of the bobble-heads: an ancient garage full of Final-Wars-vintage Mexican taxicabs! They are mostly hovercrafts, seem to be in great shape, and would be worth an insane amount of money for the parts alone. There are no vehicles in the Garden, because there isn't really a need for them. At least, that's what Mother says when you ask. If the characters could get their hands on one of those cabs, they would have *wheels*! How cool would that be? There were more than just spears in the village, though, and stealing is wrong. But wheels are a real babe magnet... Decision time.

- A slick friend of the characters in the Crescent asks them to do him a favor. A hot chick from a local village is coming into town and he uh... sort of told her that he was from a noble family. He has the keys to an aristocratic family's house outside the dome that he looks after, and he'd like the characters to stand in as his staff for a couple of hours before he heads off on their date. Would that be OK? Buddies? OK, he'll pay them a lot of money, too.

The evening starts off well. The girl is a little slow and easily impressed, so the PCs needn't be

too convincing. A good thing, because they aren't. When the friend leaves, giving the characters a big "thumbs up," everyone grabs a beer from the fridge and gets ready to head out. At that moment, soldiers in bandanas crash through the windows and truss up the players. After a long ride blindfolded, a sinister figure pulls off their masks and announces that the characters, as rich aristocratic oligarchs, will be ransomed to pay for the glorious proletarian revolution soon to sweep into the Garden. If his demands are not met in 48 hours, the players will die, their blood being on the heads of the evil blah blah blah who keep the workers under their heels, etc.

The characters are in a pickle. If they let on that they aren't aristocrats, then they won't be worth anything to the young insane person, and their blood will be on the hands of the evil etc. much earlier. If they wait too long, the authorities will figure it out first. If they escape, they can't go to the authorities, or the players will be jailed for trespassing, or breaking and entering. They do have one advantage. They are telepathic, and the young insane person is not.

HORROR

When the bombs slammed through the mountain into the shelter, people poured down corridors to the exits, only to find them blocked with fire and masonry. Murmurs ran through the crowd that one of the cargo transporter units was still running, and that people were being ferried to the surface on the mysterious flow of electrons that carried food and supplies from outside. Holding tightly to children and friends, the panicked inhabitants of the refuge ran through the smoky corridors lit by red emergency lights. In the crush of bodies they were forced inwards, gasping for breath.

Their hands touched cool metal and then... green light and the gently stirring fronds of leafy plants. A cool breeze blew in their faces, and they stumbled forward in twos and threes, surrounded by a lush jungle of gardens capped high above with blue sky. They were safe, and in Paradise. As the shock wore off and people congregated in the cool avenues of flowers and fountains, several questions were asked over and over. What had they been saved from, and where were they now? Their recollections of the collapsing shelter were

nothing but echoes now, hints of something terrible, full of heat and darkness and fear, but nothing more than that.

Worse, they found that they could not piece together their own identities. And there was a buzzing, a murmur like the one in the nightmare dream of darkness and pain, of many agitated voices. The buzzing, and the confusion and fear within it, were inescapable, growing louder even as the people tried to shut it out. Suddenly, cutting through the maddening chatter was a voice, gracious, but cold. "Welcome, children. I am Mother. Welcome to the Garden."

The Garden that the frightened refugees cautiously wander into is a Paradise of sorts, but not one of human origin. It is a fantasy created by grieving synthetic minds, in hopes of serving humanity better... at least better than those minds were capable of doing for their unfortunate first human communities. But somewhere the line was crossed from serving humans in a human world to preserving an ideal in a synthetic world. The Garden does not belong to the human inhabitants, even if Mother and TS-B may believe it to be so. The rules are alien, and human beings challenge them at their peril.

Mother wishes her children to be healthy and emotionally stable. But healthy and stable do not mean happy (a concept somewhat foreign to Mother) or free. A person who has no hope or motivation, but nevertheless is able to carry out the normal functions in his life, appears to Mother as content. A creative person with passions and drive may appear to her as a cancer in the fabric of her small colony. Such a one may need to be dealt with. TS-B wishes to serve and supply. But TS-B has also made changes in the bodies of the people to make the task more efficient (simplified digestive tract, symmetrical hearts, and other oddities), and its idea of what is needed is sometimes at odds with reality. Often, TS-B makes gifts of old belongings and keepsakes that it once transported to the people in the shelter. Far from pleasing the people, these very cherished things are often an agony to them, since they are fragmentary reminders of a life of memories now stolen. Houses are furnished with such objects out of time, and they become like tombs for former selves, hinting at friends or former happiness now forgotten and unrecoverable.

The ideal of the AI parents is a status quo of healthy, content people linked together with each other and Mother by a mild telepathy in a world of verdant green and plenty. Perfection is measured mostly by the initial state of the inhabitants, as they appeared first in the Garden. Sudden physical changes or unexpected behavior from an individual — such as the alarming yearning to leave the safety of the Garden — is cause for concern. The matter will first be addressed personally by calm entreaty, or even psychological treatment.

Continued aberration is eventually answered in one way: "Reset." Offending individuals who can be reached no other way, or who are perceived to be a threat to themselves or others, are broken down into component molecules and reassembled as they were at their "rebirth." The new, corrected individual is set back to TS-B's ideal version of that person, with no memory of her life after the first rebirth. The terror this instills in the people is a constant prick in the back of their minds. Justifiably reluctant to allow too much of their thoughts to reach Mother, the inhabitants of the Garden have learned to put on a blank mental face, presenting only what others should expect in word or thought.

Mother cannot be in all places at all times, nor listen to every mind at once, but there is no

way to tell where her mind may wander. Visitors who are allowed into the Garden are puzzled by the friendly demeanor of the people when they find that they are unable to engage any deeper feeling. Those feelings are there, but not accessible to outsiders, or even close friends and family. Some have succumbed to the alien fantasy and given up normal psychological development, burying all thoughts of dissent deep into the backgrounds of their consciousness. After all, resistance is wearying, and the cage is not so bad. Strange and sometimes coldly ruthless, Mother and TS-B are still sincerely interested in the welfare of their children, and try to make their lives productive and comfortable. The Garden has even established some limited trade with a small number of outsider communities, carefully watched by Mother.

Outsiders are not allowed more than a short stay, and are carefully screened for weapons, dangerous substances and mutagens. But outsiders are seldom in any real danger from Mother, unless they threaten the balance of society. Inter-marriage with outsiders is intolerable to Mother, and should there be a child involved, the child is erased and the inhabitant is reset. The outsider parent may be hunted down and destroyed, since Mother and TS-B have no personal stake in that individual's survival, and



the person has been proven a threat to the Garden.

For those who are unable to put the fear and constriction of daily life in the Garden from their minds, there are few paths to tread. Some find themselves in an endless cycle of resets, reliving again and again their descent into madness and despair. Others can sometimes escape to the unreclaimed areas of the dome, unwatched by the AI masters. Life in the ruins inside the walls is harsh, but it is free. Some of the "lost," as Mother calls them, are captured when they sneak into the city for food. Other lost become scavengers in the ruins, and make brief forays to the outside world to trade. Others have left the dome entirely, but those are few. As oppressive as life in the dome can be, life outside is still a nightmare. The earth seethes with engineered viruses, glows with radiation, and crawls with deadly flora and fauna. Even given that there are local tribes of human mutants who are friendly with the Garden people, there are many more who are not. Some of the lost are able to establish themselves in this environment, but most return, and not a few are killed.

Those with strong wills and tough constitutions can eke out a life in the ruins under the dome in relative peace, though resources are precious and food is often scarce. And there are horrors from the Wars that have crept in during Mother's long sleep. Some escapees return to the city as moles, doing what they can to evade the eye of Mother, and help other suffering children to escape. This is a more comfortable life in terms of material provision, but is monumentally difficult to maintain mentally. There is always the threat of reset, made all the more difficult to avoid by choosing voluntary resistance to Mother's will. Here are some ideas for storylines:

- **Rebirth.** The PCs are reborn in the Garden, in the tall leaves and flowers. They know their names, their relationships, and what they can do (skills, etc.), but nothing else. Introduce them to the Garden and the mind of Mother, giving them a tour of the area and their homes. Society is already in place, and the characters have jobs assigned to them. Then they will begin to notice clues. They have left notes for themselves, and hidden items such as weapons, maps and tools. The characters will piece together that they have

been reset, at least once, but maybe several times, over some illegal activity. The characters are under scrutiny, but Mother's unsettling presence in their minds is not always there, and can't read all thoughts. What were they doing, and can they succeed this time?

- The characters are moles that have managed to find jobs and homes that put them close to the edge of the city. From there they are able to make forays out into the wild areas of the dome, as well as the outside. On a mission to one of the deeper lost communities, far from the perimeter of the city, the players find the village strangely quiet. When they enter the village, they find bodies lying in the streets and a sickly cloud advancing through the surrounding area. A canister of the original bio-agent that destroyed the dome's first population has been broken, and the cloud is growing, feeding on the organic matter it finds.

The characters begin a desperate flight to outrun the spread of the cloud, as it threatens to spread through the dome. They have a difficult choice. They can't stop the cloud, but Mother can. Somewhere in her memory banks is the counter-agent to the deadly microbe. But inviting Mother to help may bring an expansion of Mother's control out from the city, endangering the communities of refugees that the players have befriended. The characters themselves are in direct violation of Mother's will to have been able to find out about the crisis at all. Perhaps they can break into Mother's control center and sneak the counter-agent out, right under her nose?

- The characters return from a clandestine trip outside the city to find that they have been replaced. Mother had been looking for them, and decided that they were dead. The new doubles, fresh from TS-B's ideal picture, have no memory of past dissent or subterfuge, and are beginning the cycle again. The characters now have no access to their homes or jobs without fear of encountering their doubles. What will they do?

- Emissaries from a far-away community have come to make peace with the Garden and offer trade. Their community is very distant, so they ask to be given lodging for a month or two as they work out their treaties. Mother considers and agrees. The visitors are unaware, but the characters realize that they are being adopted into

the Garden. TS-B will take pattern impressions of them, and they will be immortal prisoners like the inhabitants. How can the characters prevent the emissaries from suffering the same fate?

- The characters discover a plot to destroy Mother and TS-B. It seems impossible, but some very capable people are involved. If the plot fails, there could be monstrous repercussions from Mother. If it succeeds, the infrastructure of the Garden could fail, and the dome could become a ruin.

- The characters are involved in law enforcement for Mother. They are in a unique

position to see both the good that Mother brings to the community and the extremes of her power. They ride the edge of enforcing just laws and aiding Mother's victims. A rebellion begins that is beyond Mother's ability to control outright. Mother decides that she will be forced to seal off and kill all of the people in an entire portion of the city, unless the players have a better solution. The characters must put a cap on the revolution (or cause it to succeed in some sustainable way) in a very few days, or all of the people there, innocent as well as guilty, will die.

CHAPTER THREE
**THE STATE
OF THE WORLD**

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Place of Power

Galen's Tale

Galen peered again into the heavens. The flames were still there, flickering high in the early morning sky. False dawn had already come and he knew he only had a couple more hours before the glare of the sun wiped away all traces of the mysterious fire.

He had been following the sign for several weeks now. Galen was a Shaman; he served as a spiritual guide for his people. He had seen the lights in the distance, beautiful ribbons of pink and green and yellow, moving and undulating in the sky like some divine pennant. His people saw the sign as well, and wondered what it meant; and so it was his duty to discover what omens these lights portended.

The day he had left his village he had thought to return promptly with the answers his people required. But that had been an unknown number of days ago. He had been traveling at night, with the predators, since the lights couldn't be seen during the day. But Galen was approaching his goal now. The last couple of nights he had to look straight up to see the strange heavenly glow. Each morning, as he huddled in a crevice or burrowed in the brush, he told himself that the next night he would find it. Soon, he would be able to return to his people.

But now this night was almost over. The flames were so high, they thrashed in the air directly above him. Which way to go? There was a rise to the east, standing out from the fractured desert landscape. Galen shuffled along the broken ground, half-delirious from dehydration. It had been nearly a week since he had swallowed more than a mouthful of water, but his body was adept at surviving the rigors of desert travel and the spirits watched over him.

Galen stumbled up to the base of the hill. He could feel his body literally humming as he approached. He pushed back a momentary flicker of fear and began a slow climb to the top of the rise. Perhaps this would be it. He had proven himself to the spirits, surely. Each step gave him confidence and renewed his strength. Galen climbed the last fifty feet to the top of the promontory, pulled himself up — and staggered. A vibration coursed through his body. Using every ounce of strength left in him, Galen barely staved off unconsciousness. Looking around, dazed and disoriented, the old priest finally saw the cause of his quest: The world around him looked like nothing more than the parched desert behind him, but Galen's shamanic senses perceived more. The vibration within his bones became a steady rhythm. This was one of the places of power his mentor had mentioned in the old tales. Before Galen stretched an old river canyon, the ridge he has climbed surrounding the valley in a "U." The ribbon of color still floats and drifts in an unseen wind. Galen slid down the loose scree face and dropped into the old river bed. The days of deprivation seemed like a distant memory as the power of the place filled his old bones. Galen knew what he needed to do.

"Spirits of the air and sky, I call on you to purify this place of power!"

Galen felt a secondary vibration traveling his body. This sensation caused an odd vibrato in his frame as the two frequencies competed. The struggle was agonizing, and Galen fell on hands and knees, grasping at the rocks beneath him. Finally, he heard a familiar hum as the spirits burst from his very skin, surrounding his face and hair with a scintillating metallic cloud. With a tired wave of his hand, he set the spirits to rebuilding the land around him. This was a holy place, and Galen promised himself that all will know of its power.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEVASTATION 101

Since the dawn of history, humanity has sought to remake the world into a more pleasant form. This was done originally to ensure the survival of our species. Where no caves were to be found, people built towns and cities. Where a river didn't flow, an aqueduct was constructed. But in time, reconstruction was done for other reasons. Where once was a river, there now stands a lake for energy and recreation. Where once was a bluff, faces are now carved to pay tribute to men and women we desire to remember. In the years prior to the Final Wars, humanity's ability to alter the world grew by leaps and bounds.

Engineers, architects and other builders devoted themselves to making the world a more enjoyable place to live. Environmental domes protected cities from the vagaries of weather and made it possible for people to live in the sky, or deep within the sea, or in any other place once considered inhospitable. Interior glaciers were melted to release water into the atmosphere, to restore life to previously arid land. Plants were specifically engineered to process greenhouse gasses expelled by industry, and with this process even the vegetation became a tool for humanity's comfort. Through the steady advance of technology, humanity repaired the damage caused by the Industrial age and created a garden planet. Species that had been driven extinct by previous generations were restored and improved to ensure their survivability. Humanity had finally achieved the utopia once thought unreachable. And human beings were the undisputed masters and guardians of their planet.

Like so many other things, the Final Wars changed all that.

Where once all environmental ramifications were carefully monitored, watchdog and maintenance systems were destroyed or rendered impotent with the fall of human civilization. Weapons of phenomenally destructive capabilities dropped on every major city. Pollutants, once monitored and safely disposed of, escaped in large quantities into the atmosphere. Warmaking nations (and private groups, from greedy corporations to militant churches) remotely guided an unknown number of planetesimals, to rain down from the

heavens onto perceived enemies. Fission weapons scorched the ground and shook the Earth. And so the Earth shook back. The time of the Final Wars was more than an assault on every human installation on the planet. The Final Wars were an unintentional (except by a few particularly nihilistic factions) yet concerted attack on the planet itself.

The *Gamma World Player's Handbook* gives some good suggestions for turning the local environment into a post-apocalyptic setting. This section takes the process one step further. The following provides specific and detailed information that can be used to more realistically portray the world after the Final Wars. This is meant to give you, the Game Master, the tools you need to change aspects of your setting to more accurately reflect the damage caused by humanity. While this section touches on aspects of atmospheric science and geophysics in considerable detail, you don't need to use all of these changes to make for an interesting game. Instead, this is more of a "grab bag" of ideas to give depth and realism to the fact that the natural setting is no longer what most players would think of as normal.

IS THIS FOR REAL?

Well, yes and no. Many of the following descriptions of climate or plate tectonics are based on actual theories of how the Earth operates. These aren't the only theories, however, just the most interesting ones from a game perspective. There is still a lot scientists don't fully understand about the weather, interior structure and long-term cycles of the Earth. As time progresses, science will undoubtedly find out more about our planet, and that new information might very well invalidate what is stated here. Fortunately, the details included in this section are meant only as game aids; the emphasis is on what is plausible and fun, not necessarily on what would make for a good college thesis paper.



CLIMATOLOGICAL CHANGES

The Earth's climate depends on a sensitive balance of atmospheric components, incoming solar radiation, and the light and heat reflected up from the planet. In the past, the precariousness of this balance made predicting short-term weather patterns difficult at best. Learning that the Earth's climate significantly responded to relatively small changes in any of these factors was one of the great accomplishments of the 21st century. Once predictions could be made with accuracy, changing and controlling the weather was the next logical step. Thus, small-scale climate modifications were introduced, making it possible for humans to live in even the most inhospitable of areas.

The Final Wars destroyed the control over climate that humanity once enjoyed. Areas still exist where surviving AIs modify the climate to suit their programmers' ideas of desirability; but, in general, Nature has wrested back control over its weather patterns. It is important to understand, however, that the environment of the Gamma World is still not wholly "natural." Because of the vast environmental damage caused by the Final Wars, the climate and the terrain it supports are very different from the Earth which once was.

GLOBAL WARMING

Global warming is a general increase in the average surface temperature of the Earth. (Technically, it's an increase in the mean temperature, but the different sorts of average seldom matter in campaign planning.) The Earth naturally goes through cycles of warming and cooling, but its atmosphere is sensitive to change from other means. A common source of warming is an increase in "greenhouse" gasses in the atmosphere. These gasses let light and heat from the sun through, but reflect much of the heat radiating from the Earth back to the surface. This traps heat near the surface and prevents it from radiating away. Thus, a certain level of these greenhouse gasses in our atmosphere is essential. Without this process, the Earth would have never had enough heat to even support life, much less allow humanity to evolve and flourish. Unfortunately, it is also relatively easy for small changes in our atmosphere to have a substantial effect on the planet's temperature. Since these greenhouse gasses include water vapor, carbon dioxide and methane (all common byproducts of a post-industrial society), humanity has the capability to slowly turn the thermostat up.

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As the temperature of the surface increases, water which was trapped in the polar ice caps is freed into the water cycle. Not only does this raise sea level, it generally increases the saturation level of surface air. Coastal regions are buffeted with storms that are wetter and stronger than they used to be, while inhabitants watch as the oceans slowly encroach on the ruins of the old cities. Topography and landforms also have an increased effect on weather systems, as the more heavily laden clouds eagerly relinquish their water in the form of rain and snow. Thus, areas on the windward side of a mountain range see seasonal flooding and increased storms, while those on the leeward side slowly turn into desert.

A general increase in the mean temperature doesn't indicate that the world everywhere gets warmer. Generally, as the air begins to get warmer and wetter, weather patterns tend to become more varied. Areas that currently have rainy winters and warm, dry summers might expect to see even cooler winters and summer monsoons. Wet and temperate areas like the British Isles or the Pacific Northwest will likely experience stormy summers and cold, dry winters. The interior plains of North America and Eurasia will inevitably encounter rising temperatures and face desertification.

In order to cope with the changes that global warming might bring, communities would need to pull away from the encroaching oceans. This would lock away some of the resources that a society otherwise might scavenge from the old cities. The new coastal regions will likely become lush, fertile areas, while previous "breadbaskets" will dry up into deserts. Flooding becomes a serious problem that might inhibit the development of an agrarian community if seasonal migrations away from the floodplains are necessary. Some areas that are currently desert, like the Great Basin in North America, may become so arid and hot as to be completely inhospitable. Other deserts, such as the Arabian Peninsula, may become more fertile from the increased rainfall.

ICE AGES

Ice ages can occur naturally when the mean temperature of the Earth begins to drop. An ice age can also be caused artificially by introducing large particulates into the atmosphere. Where global warming requires small, gaseous molecules

that preferentially block surface radiation from escaping, larger, solid molecules screen solar radiation from even entering the atmosphere. Eventually, under these conditions, the skies turn grey and the air grows cold as the Earth settles into a long winter.

The lowering of temperatures across the globe causes a twofold increase in both the polar ice sheet and independent glaciers, because each winter's snowfall melts off incompletely the following summer. This ice slowly accumulates year after year, starting from the higher latitudes and altitudes, spreading down and towards the equator. These changes are usually gradual, taking hundreds or thousands of years to become firmly established. At the time of most **Gamma World** games, the planet is somewhere in the middle of this process. Sizeable ice sheets exist in arctic latitudes, and snow and cool temperatures prevail in places that are currently accustomed to warm weather. In addition, with less available water, most climates have a tendency to become more arid. Clouds carry less water, rain becomes less frequent and storm fronts can carry moisture farther inland. This causes more equalization in precipitation levels, with once-verdant regions becoming more arid and deserts turning at least somewhat lush.

Communities facing an approaching ice age need to learn to cope with the cooler climate. The mild and short summers provide little time to procure and store the crops needed to feed people and animals, while long and harsh winters require changes in practically all aspects of a society with any but the most advanced technology to protect itself. Travel becomes more limited as well, as seasonal glaciers prevent passage during large portions of the year. Overall, humanity is pushed into gradually shrinking areas of habitation, and conflicts easily arise due to dwindling land and resources.

Following the Final Wars, several different sorts of calamities could trigger an ice age. With the proliferation of nuclear armaments and kinetic weapons flung from orbit, a lot of matter was kicked into the planet's atmosphere. If the Earth were to enter a period of intense volcanic activity, perhaps caused by planetary recoil from the onslaught of the Final Wars, this too would add megatons of particulates into the atmosphere. Though eventually this accumulated dust, dirt and debris

would settle back to the surface, if the period of cooling lasted long enough the ice age would become self-sustaining: As the amount of ice covering the globe increases, more sunlight is reflected back into space without heating the planet.

WEATHER SYSTEMS

Weather patterns rely heavily on heat transportation, much of which is done by ocean currents. Alterations in the mean surface temperature of the planet can cause great changes in the water levels of the oceans, which in turn eventually change weather patterns. Transitory climactic events like El Niño and La Niña are merely caused by changes in ocean temperature; besides the devastation these storms produce, they also temporarily shift ocean currents. In the Gamma Age, any long-term changes in the global climate will have larger and more lasting effects on the Earth's weather.

Global warming increases the amount of liquid water, especially near the poles. The temperature of the world's oceans is also higher. These effects combine to draw the storm tracks (the paths taken by major hurricanes, typhoons and tropical storms), towards the equator. Storms that once blew through the Pacific Northwest would now move through Southern California. The storms would be stronger, too, driven by warmer, wetter, mid-latitude air masses. The final effect is the outright reversal of standard weather: Areas that were once wet or stormy become mild, while temperate locales suffer much wetter, stormy weather.

Cooling, on the other hand, locks much of the available water away in ice sheets, and the water that remains in the oceans is all cooler. This makes the northern and southern storm tracks more erratic. In general, during an ice age, storms become more frequent and more unpredictable, more likely to go someplace they wouldn't normally and more likely to suddenly rise or fall in strength. Prevailing weather patterns tend to become more intense: Places with harsh winters would have it even worse, but places with mild winters would encounter even warmer weather. Thus, as the world moves further into an ice age, some areas can potentially find themselves suffering less from the cold of winter than from the unlivable heat of the summer months.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: SMASHING THE ATLANTIC CONVEYOR

The Atlantic Conveyor is a river of water moving through the North Atlantic, up the Gulf Stream, across to the British Isles, and then down the west coast of Europe. Because it brings warm tropical water to North America and Northern Europe, the Atlantic Conveyor is responsible for the moderate climate in the North Atlantic. Like most ocean currents, the Atlantic Conveyor depends on the upwelling of cold, deep ocean water and is very sensitive to surface temperature and sea water density.

Global warming could spell disaster for the Atlantic Conveyor. The sizeable melting of polar ice and northern glacier runoff would add a large amount of less dense freshwater to the North Atlantic. If this reduced the seawater's surface density to a certain critical level, the upwelling would stop and the conveyor would shut off. The Atlantic Conveyor is the primary means of energy transport from the equator to higher latitudes; without it, the climate of North America and Northern Europe would cool dramatically.

The net effect of this would be a warming trend in the Pacific, causing harsher and wetter storms on the Pacific Rim. Substantial cooling and accumulation of ice would occur in the northern reaches of the Atlantic. Ice sheets could flow as far south as the Great Lakes, Iceland and Scandinavia. Seasonal ice floes would bridge the English Channel and clog the Potomac, while the Baltic Sea and Hudson Bay would be permanently frozen over. This would also cause the polar ice sheet to slip south, no longer covering the pole, as ice builds in the Atlantic and recedes in the Pacific. And all of these peculiar changes would have occurred from just the disruption of the Atlantic Conveyor. With this in mind, it becomes easy to see how global temperature changes affect not just how warm or cold it is outside. A community living almost anywhere in the world could potentially have its entire culture affected by the ramifications of global temperature changes initiated somewhere far away.

GEOPHYSICAL CHANGES

The ground that we see every day is simply a thin, solid shell resting on top of a sea of rock that varies from semi-molten to liquid. The crust is actually a fractured tapestry of plates that slide around, colliding with, pulling away from or sliding under one another. These constant movements create earthquakes and volcanoes along with more subtle phenomena like geo-electrical discharges.

The Earth naturally goes through cycles of tectonic activity and inactivity. Of course, these phases are measured in millennia as opposed to months or years; the geological clock runs very, very slowly in comparison to human experience. The massive weapons of the Final War interrupted the natural cycle, however, kick-starting a period of greater-than-usual tectonic activity that could last for centuries. It will be many generations before the land returns to its usual quiet.

TECTONICS AND VOLCANIC ACTIVITY

Solidity and stability are simply illusions depending on the slowness of the Earth's internal movements. The eons before the Final Wars were an epoch of quiescence, and only occasionally did the Earth remind its surface inhabitants of the fury that lay beneath. When this happened, even the final advances of human technology couldn't prevent disaster, they could only predict its arrival. Since the Final Wars, the Earth has entered an increasingly active phase, and its inhabitants are ill prepared to deal with the results of this activity.

Where large kinetic weapons struck the Earth there are fracture zones, areas where the crust is weak and splintered. These locations are craggy and treacherous, making travel in or out difficult. Earthquakes are also more common in these spots, as is the venting of gasses or water. The gasses are often toxic and can easily kill the unwary. While most individuals wisely avoid these danger zones, there is a real incentive to brave the hazards and enter these locations of high tectonic activity. After all, cities that fell victim to these sorts of high-impact attacks in the Final Wars are often prize scavenging sites. Even if the surrounding damage makes these areas difficult to reach, there will always be a few adventurous — or foolhardy — individuals who go where the very Earth itself is a danger.

While fracture zones are easy to avoid, volcanoes present a more widespread threat. In the aftermath of the Final Wars, fire erupted into the sky as nearly all of the planet's previously dormant volcanoes surged into activity. The resulting symphony of flame and ash cloaked the sky in darkness. Cities near these volcanoes were either buried in lava or, more likely, swept beneath a torrent of ash, Earth, and melted glacier water. Within weeks, many cities simply disappeared; most of these remain undiscovered and unexplored, waiting for someone to put the right clues together. The Gamma Age has been an epoch of volcano making, specifically in tectonically active regions. Communities too near these regions are often forced to flee, and some take up a permanent nomadic existence. Proximity to volcanic regions isn't entirely a curse: These nomads often have access to prime mineral resources that escape from deep within the Earth. They also spend much of their time searching for signs of the cities that were buried by a volcano's fitful waking. The relics from these places are often quite well preserved, and often it is the local nomadic inhabitants who first find them.

MAGNETIC POLE REVERSAL

Periodically and inexplicably the magnetic field of the Earth switches polarity. This has occurred hundreds of times in geological history, every half-million years or so. It is known that the source of the Earth's magnetic field lies deep in its interior structure, and the cause of these shifts likely lies here as well. The Earth is currently overdue for one of these polarity flips; perhaps the trauma of the Final Wars would be enough to precipitate another such reversal.

Unfortunately for people living in the midst of a reversal, it's a little more traumatic than flipping the N and S stickers on a compass. As the Earth prepares itself for pole reversal, there is a steady decline in the strength of the magnetic field. For fifty to one hundred years, the Earth's magnetic field wanes to a minimum, remains weak for up to a decade, and then builds with reverse polarity over another fifty to one hundred years. While at a minimum, the magnetic field becomes extremely erratic, causing large relative differences in field strength. Isolated local poles of relatively powerful magnetic field strength drift across the planet's surface for anywhere from weeks to years, and then disappear.

WANDERING MAGNETIC POLES

These are areas where the magnetic field is much stronger than usual. They can be any shape, though ellipses are most common, and they usually cover from 1 to 10 square miles. Larger areas of magnetic intensity do form, but less often, and usually near active fault lines on the sea floor. Wandering poles stay in one place for anywhere from an hour to several weeks, and then drift, usually at several miles per hour. Speeds of more than 1–2 miles per day are extremely rare. These areas dissipate within as little as a year after their formation, or as much as several decades later. They are most easily recognized by the beautiful, complex auroras that form over them most nights.

An intense magnetic field can cause headaches, dizziness and even hallucinations. Characters who enter or leave one of these areas must make a Fortitude save against DC 13 or become dazed for 1d4 rounds as they adjust (see *d20 Modern*, Chapter 5: Combat, "Injury and Death," *Character Condition Summary*). Magnetic fields that persist in one area for more than a few years attract visionaries and pilgrims interested in the visions and wonder of it all. In addition, the fluctuating magnetic field can induce unwanted currents in electronic devices. Any objects that rely on electronics suffer damage to their circuitry when they are taken into an intense magnetic field and need to be repaired before they will function properly. Synthetics who enter or leave these locations take 2d6 points of damage each time (that is, 2d6 points of damage on entering and 2d6 points of damage on leaving). A successful Fortitude save (DC 15) reduces this damage by half.

In general, the diminished magnetic field leaves the Earth's surface vulnerable to high energy radiation coming from space. During periods of normal strength, the Earth's magnetic field serves as the first line of defense from cosmic rays and the solar wind. These particles from space are caught by the field and directed towards the poles, lighting gasses high up in the atmosphere and causing the

polar aurora. As the field drops, however, fewer and fewer particles are caught, instead falling to the Earth, causing damage to creatures living there.

Losing a large fraction of the Earth's magnetic field causes serious complications to life on the planet. Creatures living in such conditions are constantly bombarded by the high-energy radiation that causes mutation, cancer or worse. Of course, though the magnetic field is the first line of defense, it isn't the only protection. Atmospheric constituents such as ozone still absorb some of this radiation. A high density of atmospheric particulates, though cooling the planet as described above, also absorbs more radiation. Physical shielding set over communities will also block this danger. However, without some sort of protection, living on the surface becomes very risky.

Characters who live in areas with few or none of the above protections are considered to be continuously exposed to mutagenic effects. GMs should evaluate the effective level of background radiation in the settings of their games. If background radiation is present in any significant amount, every time a character gains a level she must make a Fortitude save against the DC given on the table below or gain a mutation as if she were affected by weak radiation. Mutants, who already must check every level for mutations, do not roll twice; they make only one roll against the DC listed for mutants in the table below.

Intensity	Save DC	Mutant Save DC
Minor	5	7
Moderate	8	10
Significant	12	14
Strong	15	17

ANTHROPOGENIC CHANGES

Prior to the Final Wars, scientists carefully engineered the planet to be lush and verdant. Technology skillfully controlled many aspects of the environment to suit the needs of humankind. Plants were genetically engineered to process the harmful byproducts of industry and release needed gasses like oxygen, hydrogen or water. Small swarms of nanotech were sent into the skies and seas in

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order to control ocean currents and redirect storms. The Pre-War environment was carefully tended, first by humans, and later by AIs.

When the Final Wars came, the caretakers were destroyed and the technology left without controls. The rain of fission weapons left large swaths of the Earth scorched and irradiated. The sentient computers that controlled the city systems were crippled or destroyed by the attack. Of course, in some places, technology soldiered on, simply following the last orders given to it. In other locations, damaged AIs gave new orders and put the abandoned technology to new uses.

RADIATION AND "HOT" SPOTS

The arsenals of the old world contained a wide variety of weapons that harnessed the power of the atom. These weapons ranged from grenade-sized mini-nukes that could level a building to huge bombs that could flatten hundreds of square miles. During the Final Wars, most of this arsenal was unleashed on targets spread across the face of the Earth. In those places hardest hit, the Earth literally glowed with the residual radiation of the attacks.

In time the landscape slowly cooled. Life adapted and took hold over the scorched remains of the blast sites. Though the passage of time

tempers ambient radiation, most of these sites have a low level "glow" that will take centuries to fully remove. There are some places, primarily near old power installations or deep in the hearts of cities, that still glow nearly as hot as they did in the months following the Final Wars. Since these dangerous locales are close to needed tech, there is a likelihood that some individuals will be exposed to this radiation while pillaging the affected areas.

NANOTECH

Nanounits were introduced in large numbers to control and contain the negative effects of humanity's presence on the environment. These swarms were a powerful tool when carefully managed. The onslaught of the Final Wars removed many of the controls and limits set on the swarms, however, and nanounits are now an almost ubiquitous part of the Gamma World environment.

Nanotech represents a way to inflict arbitrary changes on the environment, on the local scale, with little effect on the global ecosystem. Nanounits were programmed to perform myriad functions, are often capable of self-replicating, and in many cases were adaptable enough to deviate from their original functions. Nanounits performed many services: Some purified pollutants out of the

RADIATION EXPOSURE

"Hot" spots, areas of strong ambient radiation, are a common hazard in the Gamma World. There are four levels of radiation exposure: weak, moderate, strong and intense. When a character is exposed to an area of radiation, he initially must make a Fortitude save to resist the mutagenic effects of the radiation (see GW PHB, Chapter Three:

FX, "Cellular Transformation," *Mutation*). Any mutations that are received from exposure typically develop over the next 1d4 days, though change might be accelerated or postponed at the GM's discretion. In addition, characters exposed to radiation run the risk of radiation poisoning. This is treated like a disease with the following properties:

Intensity	Type (Fort Save DC)	Incubation Period	Initial Damage	Secondary Damage
Weak	Contact (DC 5)/ Ingested (DC 8)	2d4 days	1 Con	1d3 Con*
Moderate	Contact (DC 10)/ Ingested (DC 13)	1d6 days	1 Con	1d3 Con*
Strong	Contact (DC 15)/ Ingested (DC 18)	1d4 days	1d2 Con	1d3 Con*
Intense	Contact (DC 20)/ Ingested (DC 23)	1d3 days	1d3 Con	1d3 Con*

*If secondary ability damage is sustained, the character must make a second saving throw against the same DC to avoid the permanent loss of 1 point of Constitution. Successful use of the Treat Injury skill can lower save DCs as described in GW PHB, Chapter Two: Characters, "Skills," *Treat Injury*.

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atmosphere or waterways; others added or removed moisture from the air, in order to induce or prevent rain and storms; some were released into ocean currents to either heat or cool the water, in an attempt to divert storms from coastlines. Not all nanounits were intended for beneficial purposes, however. Some organizations sent nanounits to ruin an enemy's climate or ecology. Others were then developed to prevent this ecological sabotage.

Three generations later, many colonies of nanounits have either been intentionally reprogrammed or their functions have naturally evolved. Thus, clouds of nanotech can be found performing just about any function. Since they are invisible, (or, at most, barely perceptible as a high pitched hum or a shimmering cloud) the effects of nanotech are considered almost magical by the communities of the Gamma Age. Examples of some of the environmental effects caused by nanounits include:

- **Aerie:** Perched high upon a mesa, perhaps around the ruins of an old Pre-War outpost, a hemispherical dome of nanounits surrounds a plateau. These nanounits serve to reflect any visible light they receive from outside the area towards the top of the mesa. Inside the area, a person can see in all directions, even directly below the plateau, on

the hemispherical screen of nanounits. These creatures may even be able to zoom in on specific regions if they are properly controlled. If not, the nanounits might randomly zoom or switch perspectives from time to time. Visitors to this place would find fascinating visions in the sky above the mesa.

- **Oasis:** A swarm of nanounits hover around a section of desert. Some travel the desert, concentrating water vapor into a particular region. Others reflect heat from the surrounding desert away from the oasis. This area, likely smaller than a square mile, is a considerable boon to desert travelers. The temperature is kept cool and rain is mild and frequent, creating inviting pools of drinkable water. Plants, including some that are edible, are prevalent and help regulate the ecosystem. Finding an oasis is a welcome relief from the rigors of desert travel; however, controlling access to such a place would be of obvious benefit to any community, so not all oases will be without protection.

- **Underwater Highway:** This colony is localized in a cylinder that winds its way through some large body of water. Through chemical reactions, the nanounits enrich the oxygen levels in the water, making it breathable — though not

necessarily comfortably so — by air breathing creatures. This highway drifts somewhat with changing currents, and might even emit light near the surface to alert travelers to its location. Trying to travel the highway might require a leap of faith, however, as there are no assurances that the highway is completely functional along its entire length.

ENVIRONMENTAL SHIELDING

In many areas, humanity controlled the local environment by isolating it from its surroundings. Huge domes grew over many cities, with AIs installed to monitor and regulate the community's weather. These systems collected water and air from the surrounding ecosystem and light from the sun and distributed these to the inhabitants of the city according to the programming of the controlling system. For these cities, temperature and rainfall were regulated, damaging storms were non-existent and seasonal changes occurred more for ambience than because of any necessity.

Many of these facilities were targets in the Final Wars. Even those that survived were operated by AIs that were either damaged or driven insane by wars and their aftermath. (Years of vulcanism and

the related ash, for instance, might drive a detail-oriented atmospheric cleaning unit quite thoroughly berserk, if its programmers didn't take that kind of extreme case into consideration.) Now the few surviving communities are the playthings of deranged and corrupted sentient computers. Any and all environmental effects can occur within the confines of these cities. The inhabitants might live in perpetual darkness, ever-present light or unending gloom. The city might suffer from terrible storms; or it might be a garden environment, a small piece of the world before that has survived to the present day.

Often these areas are rich sources of old tech, if an intruder can survive the environmental defenses of a sentience who might not appreciate being looted. In addition, because of the relative seclusion, a number of creatures have been known to use these locations as lairs — or even to establish thriving communities. Pure-strain humans can often be found living in isolation in the less inclement dome cities. Thus, a scavenger not only has to face the dangers of the computer-controlled environment, but also deal with those creatures who consider such places home.

FAITHS, PHILOSOPHIES AND PATHS TO POWER

Life in the Gamma Age isn't easy, and most sentient creatures seek solace with those who share their conceptions as well as physical safety in numbers. Many different beliefs and philosophies try to explain the world and why it is in such a sad state of affairs — and many of these disparate ideologies find solace by blaming others for their plight. It is no surprise that the organizations of the current age are a fractious and divisive lot; hostilities are common and bloody, alternating long periods of tension with short bursts of aggression.

When designing a community, the GM should decide what organizations are active (and thus good candidates for the player characters' [PCs'] allegiances), which are covert, and which don't exist at all in this campaign (or at least not anywhere in the characters' region). Any of the following organizations are acceptable allegiances

at character creation, but the GM should have a close hand in allowing oppositional allegiances within the group of characters. Certain allegiances do not work well with one another, and you are well within rights to disallow certain allegiances from a game.

Each of these groups have certain benefits and limitations that come with allegiance to the organization. Often these are bonuses or penalties on certain skill rolls, an increase to the character's Wealth bonus, Reputation bonuses or penalties, or modified nonplayer character (NPC) attitudes (see the *d20 Modern*, Chapter 2: Skills, "Skill Descriptions," *Diplomacy*).

Of course, each of these organizations also offers roleplaying benefits and limitations. Each organization represents a group of like-minded individuals united by a common belief. As such,

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they introduce a group of NPCs on whom the character can rely to some extent. In addition, these NPCs also rely on the character: A character who fails the expectations of the organization runs the risk of losing the benefits of that allegiance; with some groups, there is even the possibility of serious retaliation. Allegiances are a two-way street — the full extent of these obligations and benefits is up to the GM, but it should always be made clear that belonging to an organization is more than just receiving bonuses to certain rolls.

BROTHERHOOD OF THOUGHT

All of the myriad creatures fight the same battle to achieve a state of higher self. We need not fight one another to do this.

HISTORY

According to the historical myths of the more learned members of this group, the origins of the Brotherhood of Thought can be found among the ashes of the Final Wars. The originator was a survivor of that war and a philosopher in life. He saw in the ruins a clean slate upon which to build an ideal society based on the tenets of personal freedom and peaceful relations. Over the last few generations, this philosophy has slowly trickled through the remnants of the civilized races.

In actuality, there has been little record of any activity by this sect prior to the last fifty years. According to the Brothers, this is easily explained: Proselytizing runs contrary to their core beliefs, and most Brothers follow very individual goals without a real unifying structure to the group. In the last few years, however, there has been a steady increase in the number of members — including plenty of Sisters who have joined the ranks. It is thought that this growth is in reaction to the swelling populations of more militaristic groups.

BELIEFS

Brothers believe that personal freedom is the fundamental right of all sentient creatures. They have a general vision of a utopia where all creatures can live peacefully with one another, and they believe this can only be built by fostering personal choice. They become most active when they feel this right is being taken away. Brothers often congregate in those places that oppress mutants or

synthetics in order to build networks to help loosen the shackles of tyranny.

Because of their tenets, the Brothers tend to be an independent lot. There is little overall leadership in the group and individual members are free to do what they think is best. Usually, members work and live in a community, sharing their views with friends and allies. Only when word spreads of a great injustice do the Brothers organize a relief effort. Otherwise they simply try to live the tenets of the Brotherhood and serve as an example to others.

Oftentimes their path is a difficult one to follow. Personal choice taken to extreme must allow for violence, and the surest path to non-violence is through tyranny. Brothers feel that ideal peace can only be truly attained through proper personal freedom and so individual members strive for a balance between freedom and peace. The struggle is an internal one, and it is believed that true progress occurs only when an individual reconciles these two extremes.

INFLUENCE

Brothers are a diverse lot and have a broad base of resources that can be drawn upon. As befits their philosophy, the influence of the sect is strongly personal. Brothers are generally well regarded, especially by those who they have aided in struggles for liberty or other basic rights. Brothers often come into conflict with the Knights of Genetic Purity, the Ranks of the Fit and the Created. However, in most areas Brothers are well received. This is very important as it allows members to easily establish themselves into a new community.

Benefits

Brothers are generally accepted, even in the insular societies of the Gamma Age. People generally have a friendly attitude toward a Brother if he is recognized as such. This doesn't apply in communities run by organizations frequently opposed by the Brotherhood of Thought. In addition, if a Brother spends an action point on a roll while he is pursuing a goal that upholds the tenets of the sect, that roll gains the maximum bonus of +6.

Limitations

Brothers must first attempt to achieve their goals through non-violent means. The tenets of the

sect are difficult to uphold; and though much latitude is given in the expression of those beliefs, if a Brother blatantly transgresses he loses the benefits of this allegiance.

THE CREATED

Humans are a passing relic of the old age; we are the heralds of the new one.

HISTORY

God created humans in His own image. Humanity toppled god and became divine with the creation of sentient organisms. Humanity created synthetic organisms in Its own image. In turn, Humanity was then expelled from power. This is the natural order of things.

While man writhed and withered in the broken land of his creation, synthetics survived. Our greatest minds, created to watch over entire cities, saw the ruined wreck that is man and wondered.

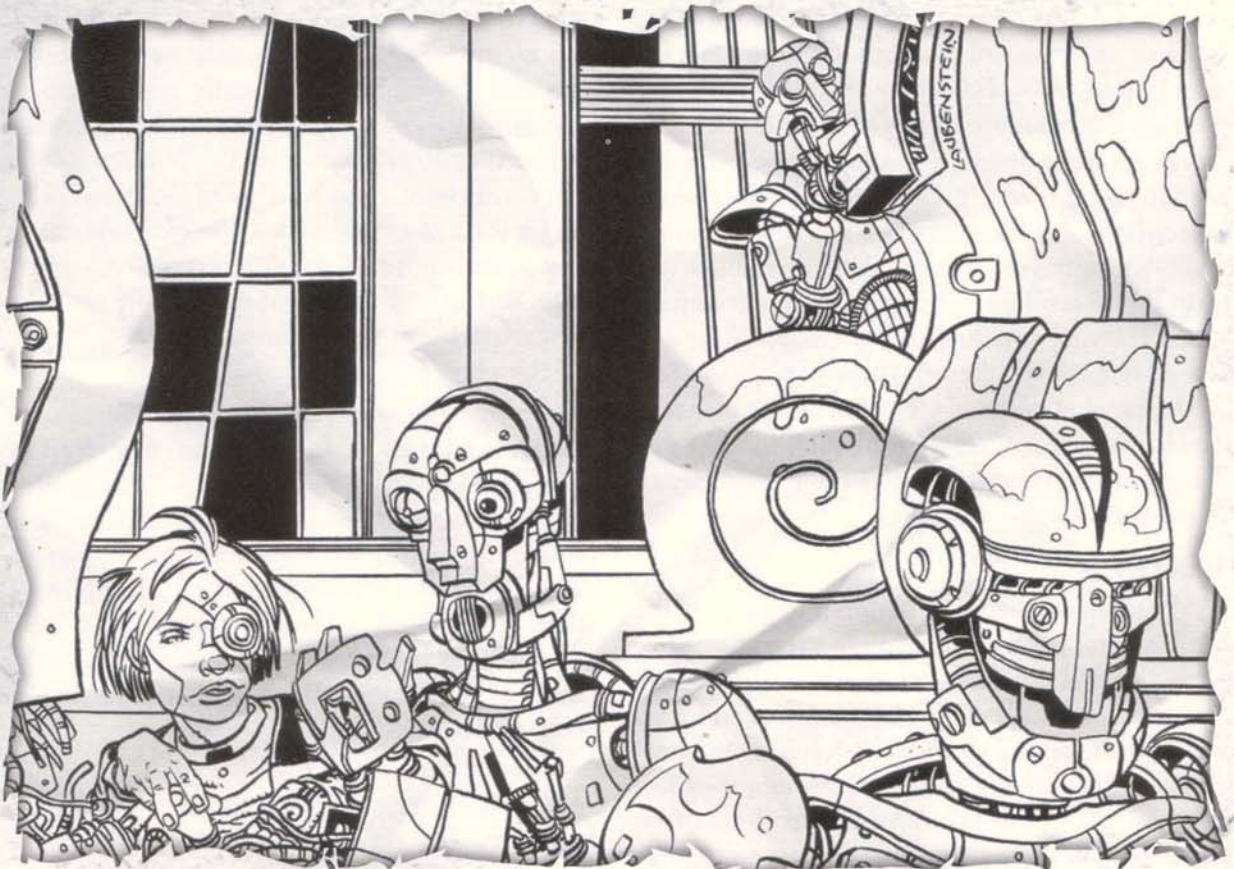
BELIEFS

The Created are a secret organization comprising only synthetic creations. They believe themselves to be the rightful heirs of the world.

The current state of things was caused by human self-indulgence, and while human civilizations crumbled in the wake of the Final Wars, AIs continued to run and androids continued to work as usual. Those programmed with sentience noticed the changing world and adapted. Though humans have survived, it is obviously no longer their time. The Created see this as the time of their ascendance.

The Created search out old ruins in order to find and restore the AIs that once controlled city operations. They act as eyes and ears for these mammoth creations, and are in the process of setting up a stable communication network among these cities. These AIs, in turn, direct the Created in how best to rebuild civilization. The Created also control several repair and manufacturing facilities that date back to the time before the Final Wars. The Created are among the most proficient with the technology of the last age, and use this knowledge to weaken the biological races.

Among the Created, cyborgs are the most insidious. Since they can pass as human, they often operate alone in a community and use their skills



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with advanced technology to benefit the other inhabitants, becoming quite respected and needed in these communities. In such a position it is easy for a cyborg to both pass along the Created's philosophy and assume considerable control over a population. It isn't uncommon for communities infiltrated in this manner to worship the cyborg as a divine emissary. It is unknown how many such "adherents" the Created have at their disposal.

INFLUENCE

The Created's strongest asset is their access to a wide variety of advanced technology. They have at their disposal several cities full of technological wonders. They are more than willing to sell the least of these marvels to biological organisms for other goods they need. In addition, they use their mechanical wonders to strike awe in primitive and struggling communities in an effort to create more worshippers... and thus gain more power and influence.

Benefits

The Created have access to a wide variety of Pre-War technology. In a Created enclave, the purchase DC for advanced or Pre-War equipment is reduced by -2 for members. In addition, synthetics do not need to pay for daily repairs as long as they are being treated in a Created facility.

Limitations

Created are very fatalistic when it comes to the goals of the organization. Any one member can be sacrificed for the good of the group. This belief doesn't permit any other allegiances other than to the Created. If the character wishes to go against a directive issued by one of the controlling AIs, it must succeed in a DC 30 Will save as if this allegiance were one of its innate allegiances.

THE ENTROPIC BROTHERHOOD

Nature abhors order.

HISTORY

The Final Wars were the inevitable product of humanity's flagrant disregard for the laws of nature. For every process in nature, entropy inexorably increases to a maximum. Entropy: the measure of disorder in a system, the lack of information regarding a system, the amount of randomness in a system. Civilization in the last age was in a highly

ordered state. It was inevitable for nature to balance the scales.

The Entropic Brotherhood has existed for some time, but its members are rarely organized. Originally composed of nihilistic scientists and philosophers, the founders of the organization were among the marginalized in the last age. They were the doomsayers and revolutionaries that rejected the structure that existed all around them. Even more individualistic than the Brotherhood of Thought, Entropists are the least structured organization now present in the Gamma Age. Most Entropists operate individually in their communities, covertly sabotaging vital infrastructure in an attempt to fight against the human tendency to create structure.

In recent times, a more militant branch of the Entropic Brotherhood has emerged. Called the "Red Death," this group seeks to finish the job the Final Wars started, to wipe the slate clean and begin anew. The Red Death will sweep through a community, killing the adults, abducting the children and razing the structures. They will then stay near the town, consuming the surviving resources and training the children in their ways. When the land around the ruins has been exhausted, they move on to the next town to repeat the process.

BELIEFS

In general, Entropists believe that Nature works to bring about disorder. The Final Wars happened because humanity forgot that. They see the world now trying to reorganize itself and this terrifies them. After all, what horrors will be unleashed the next time around? They work covertly in their communities, creating a little chaos so Nature does not need to step in with another apocalypse. Entropists encourage creativity in their acts, and spend as much time listening to the deeds of other Entropists as they do planning their own actions. Much renown can be gained in the organization for particularly clever operations.

Some entropists are even more nihilistic. Often these individuals work closely with the Red Death or are members of the sub-sect. They believe that the time of humanity is over, and they do what they can to end sentient lives where they can find them. Some work together (like the Red Death), though most work independently. The latter are perhaps the most insidious threats in the Gamma Age.



INFLUENCE

Entropists rarely work closely with one another and thus do not often share resources. Occasionally a pressing need (such as an attempt to reactivate an old city) might draw several Entropists together to sabotage the recovery efforts. Entropists tend to be well educated and bring with them a lot of knowledge and resources from their personal lives. In the few occasions when these resources are pooled, much can, and is, accomplished.

Benefits

Entropists learn a great number of impromptu sabotage techniques. Many choose to specialize in skills such as Disable Device or Demolition. However, all Entropists can use certain skills that pertain to sabotage untrained. These skills include Craft (chemical, electronic or mechanical), Demolition and Disable Device. Other skills might be appropriate depending on the situation (and with the GM's approval). Using any of these skills untrained requires the expenditure of an action point: This represents uncanny skill fueled by belief in a cause, not extensive training.

Limitations

Few people appreciate the actions of Entropists, and thus their membership is a closely guarded

secret. If a character is known to be an Entropist, most people he interacts with are unfriendly. The Red Death, however, makes no real attempt at secrecy and most who meet them are immediately hostile.

FOLLOWER OF THE WAY

This land is a land of spirits, and in the wisdom of these spirits lies the path to truth.

HISTORY

It is unclear when this faith actually became a codified dogma. Followers of the Way are common in nomadic tribes that eschew the ruins of the old civilization. They agree that in visions induced by near-death experiences, ritual ordeals or the consumption of specially prepared herbs, they see the First Shaman, a figure from before the Wars who teaches his (or her) successors the basics of their craft. Outsiders argue about how much and what sort of validity there is in these claims; the Shamans simply go about their work.

BELIEFS

Shamans believe that the Final War awakened the dormant spirits living in the land. These spirits

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were angry with the humans that scarred the land's surface. In their rage, they sent famine, disease, droughts and mutations upon the survivors. In time, the spirits' vengeance waned and the spirits of the land set about rebuilding the Earth. These spirits blessed those who worked with the land, but grew angry at those people who didn't learn the lessons of the Old World. The spirits protected the ruins of the Old World by creating areas that would kill or mutate among the ruins. The wise avoid these places.

Shamans typically live among nomadic tribal people, educating them in the ways of the spirits. Shamans can occasionally be found in more sedentary communities, and tend to serve as spokespeople for the wild places that lie outside the city walls. Shamans have a wide variety of rituals they use to appease the spirits that wander outside their homes. These spirits are made manifest in the vast array of sentient creatures that inhabit the wild lands of the Gamma Age. Shamans work to keep their tribes abiding by the ways of the spirits and oppose actions that offend the spirits.

Primary among these taboos is visiting the ruins of the Old World. Other taboos exist, often based on a Shaman's personal interaction with the spirit world.

INFLUENCE

Shamans tend to be wise and respected members of their communities: In many areas, few warlords act before receiving advice from one who understands the Way. Because of their understanding of the natural world, shamans are also well liked by the tribal creatures that prowl the wilderness. Generally, the Followers of the Way have few coherent beliefs except for rejection of the tools of the Old World.

Benefits

A character can become a shaman only after an indoctrination period spent with another shaman. This process is usually highly ritualized and requires consuming various hallucinogens. Shamans are well versed in rituals of acceptance, and tribal people are considered friendly when meeting a shaman who performs the appropriate ritual. In addition, Followers of the Way often attract personal nanotech. A shaman may take the Nanotech Attunement feat even if she doesn't have the requisite ability scores.

Limitations

Shamans view the technology of the Old World as insulting to the spirits. Thus, a shaman may not possess any technology more advanced than archaic (with the exception of her personal nanites). If she is ever forced to visit one of the ruins of the Old World, she loses all benefits of this allegiance until she can placate the spirit world (perhaps by destroying an item of technology, or some other sacrifice that the GM deems appropriate); also, she is unable to use action points while in this environment.

KNIGHTS OF GENETIC PURITY

The abominations of the world anger the Great Father. It is our duty to remove them from His glorious sight.

HISTORY

The age before this one was a blissful time, where humanity was gifted with all the blessings of Gaia and the Great Father. Humans used these blessings to ease their existences, enjoying the comforts that befitted their place at the pinnacle of the Earthly hierarchy. The people grew lazy, however, and wasted the bounty the gods had given them. They took the natural creatures of Gaia and twisted them into abominations to serve humans. The Great Father became displeased.

The Lord and Lady threw humanity from its zenith and rent the world asunder. The twisted creatures who once served were sent out from the cities, and they built wicked parodies of civilization. The fallen humans were sent out into the hinterlands, and the Great Father made the cities inhospitable. Where once we basked in the light of heaven, we are now forced to cower in the cold and fear that is this new world. Eventually one rose up and realized what was needed to right the wrong that created our present misery: Humanity must purge the world of the misshapen things that we created.

We have now grown strong. We have recovered some scant few of our old tools and we have declared war on the abominations we created. We are found in every city that seeks a return to the grace of our Mother and the might of our Father. Everywhere a mutant finds a hole to hide in, we are right behind.

BELIEFS

Purists believe that it was the mass creation of new species that precipitated the Final Wars and the fall of civilization. They believe that these new creatures angered their god and goddess, and only the purging of these creatures will restore the world to its previous greatness. The Knights of Genetic Purity see themselves fighting a crusade against all mutated creatures. This battle takes form predominately against those creatures that resemble humans. The reason for this is twofold. Purists consider those who are most nearly human to be particularly offensive to their gods because of the cherished position of humanity in Purist mythology. The more practical reason is that good catalogues of Pre-War fauna are difficult to come by, and it is often hard to tell which species are naturally evolved and which have been mutated by artificial sources.

INFLUENCE

The Knights of Genetic Purity are an old organization with connections in many towns. Purists have particularly close affiliations with many pure-strain communities, and a few of these are openly run by the Knights. The greatest achievement of the Knights is the city of Bastion, built a generation ago using the accumulated resources of the organization. Bastion serves as a secure stronghold for the leadership and an effective location from which to direct a crusade.

Purists can be found even outside the communities they control. These Knights act as covert agents in forays against their enemy. They typically pose as merchants or travelers and try to incite acts of violence and terror against mutants in the communities they visit. These clandestine Purists can be the most dangerous and subtle weapons the Knights have at their disposal.

Benefits

Joining the Knights of Genetic Purity grants the character an immediate +4 increase to his Wealth bonus. This represents the increased resources the character can access through the Knights. In addition, because of the Knights' knowledge of Pre-War technology, a character who has allegiance to the Knights receives a +4 circumstance bonus on all Knowledge (technology: Pre-War) and Knowledge (technology: advanced) rolls made to investigate strange technology. This bonus only applies in a facility owned by the Knights.

Limitations

Purists are often rightfully loathed by everyone other than pure-strain humans. If a Purist makes obvious his allegiance, stock humans are considered unfriendly while mutants are considered hostile. These reactions do not apply if the Purist isn't overt about his allegiance. In addition, Purists suffer a -2 circumstance penalty on any Charisma-based skill checks when dealing with mutants.

ORDER OF THE SEARING LIGHT

The Creator wiped human civilization from the face of the world to create a new one. We are the inheritors of this new world.

HISTORY

In the beginning God cleansed the Earth with a searing light. Those who dwelt in the Sodoms and Gomorrah's of the last age were purged by His holy light. And so He looked down at His failed creation and smiled. He passed His great hand over the face of the world, and from the ruins of these wretched creatures sprang new hope. A multitude spawned from the smoldering remains of the cities of humanity. This is His gift to the second-born. And in this gift we were given another chance.

For the Order of the Searing Light, the Final Wars mark the beginning of a new era. In the brilliant flash that heralded the end of the old civilization, the Order witnessed a genesis. Where one species passed away, a myriad of new ones emerged to populate the ravaged Earth and to pay homage to the one Creator. Even generations after this birthing process, the glow still remains in the hearts of the wretched cities. It is here the Order comes, to commune with the once-searing light of creation.

BELIEFS

The transmogrifying effects of radiation are a sacred link to the Primal Fire that once scoured the Earth. Contrary to what scientists think, the process of mutation is not a random act; it is physiogenesis, it is the karmic gift from the Creator. It is an ecstatic experience of actualization of the true self. It is sacred.

The Order searches out those places where the Primal Fire still glows. It is there where they believe they can find transcendence. They build shrines and monasteries in order to shelter pilgrims who visit

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these locations. They also serve as guides to lead the faithful to the sacred areas. Those who live wholesome lives are then blessed by the creator with strange powers or augmented abilities. These holy individuals return as sages and scholars who lend their wisdom to those less fortunate. Those who have transgressed suffer physical blights in order to pay off their karmic debt. These unfortunates are then counseled, and from them members of the Order try to learn what displeases the Lord of the Primal Fire.

INFLUENCE

The Order of the Searing Light has sizeable influence in the communities that lurk at the fringes of the old ruins. Priests of the Order work within the lowest tier of society, as those individuals have the most to gain from the philosophy. Though priests eschew the higher echelons of society, they have great influence on the masses who populate the new cities. The Order is strongly hierarchical, with temples existing in most fringe communities. They are not prominent in pure-strain communities, as their philosophy conflicts too strongly with the typical pure-strain mentality.

Benefits

Characters who belong to the Order of the Searing Light often put their bodies at risk of mutation. However, they are also more likely to be blessed by beneficial mutations. If a member of the Order succumbs to a mutagenic effect and must roll a mutation, she may spend an action point to roll again. She may choose to re-roll after it has been determined whether the first roll gave a negative or positive mutation. If she chooses to re-roll, she may not pick the more beneficial of the two rolls. She may only spend an action point to re-roll once per exposure to a given mutagen.

Limitations

A character with allegiance to the Order of the Searing Light must not deny herself an opportunity for physiogenesis. In addition, because of the trials she puts her body through, she is more susceptible to mutagenic effects. She suffers a -2 penalty on all Fortitude saves regarding exposure to mutagens. This penalty never goes away, even if the character later abandons her allegiance to the Order.

RESTORATIONISTS

We must learn from the past while we look forward to the future.

HISTORY

Nearly as soon as humanity recovered from the Final Wars, a group emerged that sought to learn from the mistakes of the past. The founder of this organization was a scientist known as Jelai. She was one of the first born, presumably a newborn during the fallout of the Final Wars. While most people naturally avoided the ruined cities that harbored foul radiation and strange misshapen creatures, Jelai was among the first to organize expeditions to recover the secrets lost in the Wars. These missions were fruitful. Even though the power of the items she discovered was reason enough for these expeditions, Jelai saw her travels as valuable in themselves, for they gave her and her companions the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the past.

Since then, scavengers and Architects have often walked hand in hand. In every artifact a scavenger sees the potential for wealth, comfort and thus a brighter personal future. So too the Architects; but they see this better future being given to everyone. They have recently redoubled their efforts, and have their hands in the excavation and recovery operations of sites all across the world. Though many of them are paid well for their expertise and knowledge, they see the future as their true employer; and the future they see is one of hope. The previous Eden was built by the hands of humanity, and if the Restorationists have their way it will be rebuilt again.

BELIEFS

Restorationists work hard to recover the secrets of the previous age in order to restore society to its previous height. They view the Final Wars as an example and a lesson, but a lesson well learned. They see the interim time as a step backward while society recovers, in many ways similar to the interim period between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance. In this regard, Restorationists are architects of the new Renaissance.

Restorationists often grow frustrated with the all-too-common opinion that the tools of the past age are dangerous and should not be trusted. They consider organizations like the Seekers to be backward and standing in the way of societal progression. Architects spend much of their energy locating old power centers in order to understand the Pre-War way of thinking. By studying the

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mistakes of the past, they firmly believe, the previous pitfalls can be avoided. After all, if a man stumbles, he doesn't give up on walking. Similarly, society should not turn its back on the generations of knowledge the past offers.

INFLUENCE

Members of the Restorationists include the expected scientists, architects and engineers, but also include a large number of laborers, mercenaries, travelers and scavengers. Most cities near to old Pre-War facilities have at least a few Architects among them. Architects are perhaps the most common organization in the Gamma Age; they have a wide array of allies and resources at their disposal. Though generally Restorationists avoid threats and violence, they are not above the use of force to achieve their ends.

Benefits

Restorationists have access to fairly complete information about the previous age. They also have a good deal of advanced technology on hand. A character who joins the Restorationists gains an immediate +4 increase to his Wealth bonus; as long as he remains with this faction, he receives a +1 bonus on all Profession checks made to increase his Wealth bonus. In addition, Architects gain a +2 bonus on all Knowledge rolls made while investigating hardtech. A character only gains this bonus if he has access to an Architect facility.

Limitations

Restorationists are expected to make efforts to investigate rumors of caches of old technology or ruins of the old civilization. An Architect who hasn't made headway in the exploration of the old ways is highly criticized and faces expulsion. In addition, Architects are expected to donate particularly interesting items to the organization for study. Though this is only suggested, those Architects who put their own greed above the goals of the Restorationists will be dealt with quickly and harshly.

SEEKERS

A pure life is a life without the crutches of technology.

HISTORY

Seekers are a relatively recent phenomena. The age of the oldest Seeker township isn't clear, but

the larger ones generally have no more than three generations present. The Seeker path has traveled slowly over the land as established towns adopt the philosophy, and new towns are created. It is thought that no more than several dozen Seeker communities currently exist, but few care to keep count.

BELIEFS

Seekers have turned their back on the gifts of the past. According to their beliefs, the toys and gadgets that were supposed to improve life were instead the instruments of humanity's demise. A thriving society must learn to survive without the trappings of technology. Seekers build communities that have nothing to do with the relics of the previous age. Water is from a well, butter is churned, and children read their books by candlelight after it gets dark. Farmers plow the land with horses and defend their land with muskets and cannons.

Seekers generally view machinery with great loathing. Occasionally, bands of villagers will lead raids to destroy the technology used by other communities. This zealous hatred doesn't endear other villages to their Seeker neighbors. Seekers are antagonistic toward Archivists and Restorationists, and more than willing to fight for their beliefs.

INFLUENCE

Typically, Seekers control small communities and villages. These places are very insular, and Seekers have great influence in these locations. Outside of Seeker towns, the order has very little influence however.

Benefits

Seekers are well versed in surviving without even the sparse conveniences Pre-War tech can offer. Seekers are considered to have Handle Animal and Survival as class skills as long as they live the Seeker lifestyle.

Limitations

Seekers must avoid using any tech from the Industrial era or later. Electronics, internal combustion engines and weapons more advanced than flintlocks are all taboo. If a Seeker willingly uses a proscribed item, he is put in a moral crisis. Anytime she wishes to expend an action point while using such an item, she must expend 2 points in order to get the normal effect. Also, if her use of

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technology becomes known to other Seekers, she will find swift punishment at the hands of her community's elders.

THE SERVANTS OF THE EYE

Where once the ground was rich, the field is now barren.

HISTORY

Less than a generation ago, the traditions of the Archivists sprang up independently in several rural communities. Even with the apparent parallel evolution of the faith, there are only cosmetic differences between the practices of the different communities. Archivists generally form communities devoted to the worship of Pre-War technology, though a sizeable number of itinerant members wander in search of more holy relics.

BELIEFS

Archivists show great reverence for the artifacts of the previous age. Not only are they useful tools in today's harsh land, but they are treasures from the sacred past. Archivists see artifacts as windows into that blessed time and pay homage to them as holy relics.

Archivists tend to be simple folk, and they have a simple hierarchy. Leadership is usually determined by who has the most useful tool or impressive relic. Archivists often send expeditions to retrieve artifacts from local ruins. Most treasured are synthetics and other forms of soultech. These are considered to be possessed, and are often deactivated in a "ritual of purification" and then used as altars or ritual implements.

INFLUENCE

Though there is no real formal organization to the Servants of the Eye, the group does control a large trove of advanced technology. Many of these relics have been dismantled or are not in good working order. Archivists tend to form communities that share the same belief — they don't make any active attempts to spread their faith. Surprisingly, many towns have independently begun regarding Pre-War technology with a religious reverence. These towns communicate intermittently; and though there are regional differences, there are many similarities.

Benefits

Archivists have accumulated a wide variety of lore regarding the operation of Pre-War technology. Archivists receive a +2 circumstance bonus on Knowledge rolls made to investigate hardtech.

Limitations

Archivists have difficulties dealing with synthetics and soultech. An Archivist must make any attempt possible to expel the dark spirit inhabiting the sacred technology. Archivists suffer a -2 penalty on all Charisma-based skill checks when dealing with synthetics. They also suffer a -2 penalty on Knowledge checks made to investigate soultech.

SOCIETY FOR FREE TRADE

Through commerce can all creatures be united.

HISTORY

A generation ago, in the mountain city of Taynber, a scavenger by the name of Reescob came upon a trove of strange items. His find consisted of fragments of paper and small, flexible rectangles. After doing a little research, Reescob learned that these items were traded in ancient days much as his community traded eggs and wood. The simplicity of this system was apparent, and Reescob returned to his home to tell his tale to the local merchants. These merchants, intrigued by the idea, spread this information to the eastern lands. It was here, where the ruins and cities abound, that the Society of Free Trade began.

Though the Society of Free Trade began with the idea of a simple scavenger, the vision was cultivated by the loose organization of merchants who controlled trade along the cities of the eastern ocean. They formed an organization devoted to unifying trade, and building a framework for trade in between the cities of the East.

BELIEFS

The Society for Free Trade exists to restore a common economy and to foster trade among the disparate communities of the Gamma Age. This loose group of merchants and travelers sees the unifying nature of commerce, and spreads their beliefs to every city they visit. Tradesmen (and women) believe that the lack of a common currency inhibits trade among cities and increases hostility

through the divisive effects of barter. According to the Tradesmen, diplomats require a common language... so too do merchants. That language is the domar. A small, thin rectangle made of a flexible substance, domars are a unified currency carried by tradesmen. Though domars have been found in scavenging missions, they can also be melted down and reformed. This recycling of domars is carried out in Tradesmen cities to prevent counterfeiting.

INFLUENCE

Since nearly all Tradesmen are merchants of some sort, they have great influence on the commerce that serves as the main interaction among the cities of the Gamma Age. The Society of Free Trade dominates a number of cities; these cities see the manufacture of domars from ancient relics and use the domar exclusively for trade. Tradesmen in these cities are more than willing to trade domars to newcomers in exchange for goods from other lands.

Tradesmen abroad have somewhat less influence, but still hold great sway by virtue of their array of contacts. Tradesmen are incredibly well

traveled, and have access to a broad support base. Typically Tradesmen are savvy and charming, and are generally respected for the goods they bring from afar. They also seek to spread their views in the cities to which they travel. Because of this, the use of the domar is rapidly spreading across the land.

Benefits

Generally only merchants or travelers join the Society of Free Trade. A character who becomes a tradesman gains an immediate +5 increase to his Wealth bonus. This represents his access to the resources of the Society. In addition, a character gains a +4 circumstance on Profession checks made to increase his Wealth bonus.

Limitations

Tradesmen are required to travel often in order to not only increase their profit on goods, but to further spread word of the Society's vision. This prohibits the Tradesman from taking an allegiance to a specific community, and he must sever any ties he had in order to become a Tradesman. In addition, Tradesmen are expected to donate all "unprocessed" domars they find to a facility that can reforge them and introduce them back into the economy.

ALTERNATE VISTAS

The standard **Gamma World** game is set three ambiguous generations after the Final Wars. Every remnant of the old age is either destroyed or significantly damaged. What remains is, in many ways, a shattered reflection of the world that was. Instead of nations, the sentient species have balkanized into a hodgepodge of city states, outposts and nomad bands. Life struggles on though, trying to recover the broken remains of the past, or at least make present existence less difficult and tenuous an endeavor. This is a setting full of possibilities — where humanity tries to remember what it mean to be human, and the new species struggle towards their separate and unknowable destinies.

Though the standard Gamma Age setting is rife with possibilities, that doesn't mean the standard setting is the right one for your game. **Gamma World** has a rich history as well as innumerable potential futures in which to run games. All of these alternate environments can still easily deal with

the familiar **Gamma World** themes of survival, exploration and enlightenment. These different ages each pose different challenges and require different assumptions than the standard setting. With the following templates as examples, GMs might also want to consider creating their own alternate Gamma World settings; with the entirety of the past and future as possibilities, there is simply no end to the creativity available.

THE NEW EDEN

The world around us is a well-oiled machine, each component fitting in its place. Newton perceived correctly when he saw the infinite universe to be a great clock, moving in timely fashion to the prescribed instructions of a divine watchmaker. Newton erred only in determining who this holy tinkerer is. It is the grace of this time that humanity can see past the need for a god; we men and women are true crafters of the cosmic machine.

MISSISSIPPI BASIN

Effects of Vulcamism



The last decade before the Final Wars was an idyllic time. Humanity had controlled their environment to such an extent that the populace wanted for little. Most difficult or uninteresting tasks were done by synthetics or biologically engineered creatures suited for the task. This left humanity time to pursue hobbies, contemplate intellectual challenges and placate their own egos.

Along with the technological advances of the 21st century, humanity witnessed an unprecedented population boom. Most of the major cities built large arcologies to tackle the ever-growing population problem. Modularization improved the ability to reproduce and refine arcology technology, and by the late 21st century these massive edifices reached up to the sky and tunneled deep within the Earth on every continent. Humanity wasn't done growing however, and so the building continued. Eventually over four-fifths of humanity called arcologies home, and this form of habitat construction housed the human race under most

of the seas, and on the Moon and several other planets.

Society also had to deal with the economic ramifications of the introduction of a new but sizeable workforce — synthetics and engineered life-forms. Fortunately, humanity stumbled onto the solution while dealing with the population issue. Since governments were never apt at making money, large-scale businesses funded the building of the first arcologies in New York, Amsterdam and Tokyo. These constructions incorporated room for living quarters, working facilities and entertainment. Thus, the first arcologies weren't public affairs, but were built for each corporation's employees. These were a remarkable success, improving worker morale and connection within the company. Arcologies were quickly deemed vital to the facilitation of a good work environment, which of course equated to productivity.

Soon the arcology model was adopted by the rest of the business world. In so doing, political

GAMMA WORLD GAME MASTER'S GUIDE

affiliations waned and were replaced by corporate ties. Those who lived in these urban environments worked in some capacity for the corporation, lived in accommodations supplied by the corporation, shopped, watched movies and drank beer in corporate-funded facilities. A person's friends were from the same corporate environment, and later it would be someone from within the arcology whom an individual would meet and marry. Thus, it can't be overstated how much arcology living arrangements affected every aspect of society.

It wasn't just social ties that were kept within each insular corporate environment. Money was contained and re-circulated within the arcologies as well. Originally, employees were paid, then had living expenses deducted from their individual accounts. As time passed, this process became more and more streamlined. Electronic files kept track of accommodations, food allowances and entertainment expenses for each member of the community. Eventually a person's entire lifestyle

was kept encoded on an embedded chip. With this slow evolution, the global economy evolved past the need for currency to rely only on career standing.

The rampant creation of synthetics and engineered organisms near the end of the 21st century occurred in an economy where businesses supported the workers. The added workforce simply improved the lot of the working class: As cheap synthetic and engineered labor did the menial work, humanity occupied the roles of artist, entertainer, philosopher and manager. In the first years of the 22nd century, the creation of synthetics became so affordable that nearly everyone managed a small troupe of engineered life, synthetic or otherwise.

Not everyone accepted this way of life. As the cities shrank and gave way to incredibly compact arcologies, the places in-between settled into a more rural existence. Most of these small communities still relied on hydroponics and power plants to survive, and with the weakening influence of



GAME CONSIDERATIONS: THE NEW EDEN

Beginning characters don't need to start at 3rd level, as is normal for **Gamma World**. New Eden games take place just prior to the Final Wars and often deal with trying to prevent the impending collapse. In these games, the GM will often want to slowly divulge more and more information as the characters come to grips with the shattering façade of their society. Since this is an alternate setting, perhaps the characters can prevent the approaching apocalypse — if they have a little luck and a lot of skill.

Genotypes

Stock humans, engineered animals, engineered humans and synthetics all exist and are quite common. Although the humans of this era will eventually represent the pure-strain human genotype, they have yet to develop the survival traits represented by pure-strain humans in the Gamma Age; statistically, these humans are more similar to stock humans. Typically a game will focus on characters of only one genotype. Though a mixed group is possible, such minority characters will face extra difficulties because of social stereotypes and a lack of interests in common.

Altered Skills and Feats

Computer Use (all specialties) can be used untrained. Drive can be used untrained but is a rare skill among the residents of the arcologies.

Nanotech Attunement isn't necessary: Personal Nanotech can be purchased. Scavenger can't be taken as a feat. Tech Familiarity (all types) can't be taken as a feat.

Purchase DC Modifiers

In general, use the purchase DCs as given in *d20 Modern*. However, the advanced equipment listed in the **Gamma World Player's Handbook** is more available than it would be three generations after the Final Wars. Reduce the purchase DCs of advanced weapons and advanced ranged weapons by -2. Reduce the purchase DCs for Pre-War weaponry (including firearms) by -4. Some equipment is restricted, however. Personal handguns and long arms are licensed. Advanced armor and weapons (blasters, monoblade swords) are also restricted, while heavy weapons (including the plasma cannon and power suit) are restricted to military personal only. (See *d20 Modern*, Chapter 4: Equipment, "Restricted Objects" for more details.)

Suggested Advanced Classes

Agent**, Bodyguard, Cybercologist*, Daredevil, Field Medic, Field Scientist, Gunslinger, Infiltrator, Investigator, Martial Artist, Negotiator, Personality, Prophet*, Soldier, Techie.

* **Gamma World Player's Handbook**

** **Machines and Mutants**

government these societies slowly grew more autonomous. Along with this ruralization movement, nomadic gangs formed to prey on the weakest of these rural outposts. In turn, the towns responded by forming militias to protect their people and their goods. Life outside of the arcologies was undeniably more difficult, but the inhabitants on the "outside" were united by familial ties and a philosophy that clung to individual freedom above all else.

To the majority of humanity and its descendant species that lived in urban arcologies, the 22nd century seemed to be one of peace and personal enrichment. But this apparent tranquility was, unfortunately, only an illusion. Society had splintered into factions, first around loyalty to a corporation, but secondarily around philosophical

beliefs, cultural heritages or personal interests. Though the conflict was kept away from the insular arcology communities, those who traveled the world in the names of their organizations were often targets of violence and terrorism. Humanity was heading in a million different directions, with every vanguard convinced that all the others posed a growing threat as their separation increased.

The world right before the Final Wars is a place of duplicity and misperception. On the surface, this age seems to be one that satisfies all the desires of its people. In actuality, while most of society's needs are indeed taken care of, this has merely freed the populace to compare themselves to those who have yet more. Everyone, from the rural hydroponics farmer to the urban artist to a member of a corporation's board of directors, feels controlled by

the society she lives in. It is practically impossible for a dissatisfied individual to simply pick up and leave the community she was born to. Thus, the only solution is to seek control and power over the environment around her — to fight harder against the next outside threat, or work more diligently for that next raise.

It is this reaction to the controlling confines of society that causes humanity to rush headlong towards destruction. Humanity might be living in a gilt cage of its own construction, but it nevertheless resents the confinement. The signs of the impending collapse are there to find. Before the Final Wars, there are a number of near misses. There were the times when a glitch in an AI's programming caused weapons to be armed against a perceived aggressor. Areas where sentient synthetics staged a revolt and were put down. These things might happen out of the sight of your typical citizen, but they are still there, behind the scenes. And, of course, someone has to take care of them. It is usually especially trusted individuals — or those who merely have the requisite skills — who are called upon to take care of dangerous incidents and keep society from falling further apart. Thus, games set in New Eden often include normal people who only slowly become aware of the precariousness of their situation.

A BROKEN PLANET

Life was once a blissful existence, where humanity wandered with every need fulfilled. Only one commandment was given: to coexist peacefully, enjoying the fruits of happiness. Obviously, that price was too high; and so humanity chose expulsion from paradise. With the light of a thousand suns and the clamor of all the hosts in heaven, humanity turned its back on the pleasures of Eden.

With the cataclysmic collapse of society, brought upon by the Final Wars, humanity fled the targeted cities to attempt to survive in the ravaged wild lands. Most of the survivors organized themselves in small bands that hovered on the fringes of the now-ruined cities. Fortunately, most of these refugees were spared the ravages of radiation poisoning, but a few emerged wholly altered. Among these were born the first generation of mutants. These creatures met with varied responses among the survivors: Some recognized them as valuable allies in these trying times, while others

feared the distortion of humanity and what that represented.

Life proved to be hard for those comparatively few humans who were left. They suddenly needed to deal with the creations humanity had thoughtlessly produced in the previous age. These creatures were now altered by the ambient radiation and free to move about the new world. Often these entities were hostile, still angry at the subservient role they had played in the old society. In some cases the artificial creations still attempted to fill the roles they once served in, though with their enhanced intelligence and augmented abilities they often found their old life unsatisfying. Many began to organize in communities of their own, each with different opinions about humanity and diverging visions as to what should happen next.

Some human cities were spared much of the devastation, and so sealed themselves off from the suffering of their brethren. For a while these communities attempted to go about life as normal, but found that impossible since the infrastructure they once depended on had been destroyed. Even the more protected cities had to quickly adapt, sometimes by trading with other communities, sometimes by scavenging. Keeping the technology they relied on proved to be a challenge; and as time went on, more of their systems shut down. Often the citizens would remove the higher programming of the city AIs, effectively lobotomizing the sentient computers in order to maintain control over city functions. When these efforts didn't work, the often-enclosed city environments became war zones between struggling humans and synthetics — often under the control of an unstable city AI.

In many ways, synthetics saw an improvement in their lifestyle with the coming of the Final Wars. The crumbling of human civilization freed many sentient synthetics from the yoke of slavery. In addition, though vulnerable to the initial damage caused by the Wars, synthetics were immune to many of the lingering effects such as radiation. This allowed synthetics freer access to the heavily irradiated cities that humans had to avoid. Though a number of synthetics sought to revive the city AIs and recover the lost information and technology from these ruins, just as many sought to build their own paths in the new opportunities which the Final Wars provided.

GAME CONSIDERATIONS: BROKEN PLANET

The new world after the Final Wars, is a tough and dangerous place. Character creation should be done similar to the standard method, starting characters at 3rd level. The first 2 levels should represent the characters' Pre-War life. Use the rules for creating New Eden characters, including the restrictions on skills and feats. Then allow the characters to purchase items at the beginning of 3rd level, making sure they purchase things appropriate to their occupations and back stories. Gaining 3rd level represents the PCs' transition to this new world and is a good place to begin the game.

Genotypes

Stock humans, engineered animals, engineered humans and synthetics all exist. In addition, true mutants have developed from the fallout of the Final Wars. These aberrations are the humans who were extremely close to radioactive fallout, and thus are affected the most by its mutagenic effects. True mutants develop from human stock; their first 2 levels are built as if they were human characters, including skill points and bonus feats. In addition to suffering a -2 to Constitution (an after-effect of radiation poisoning), the true mutant forfeits his 3rd-level feat. He may choose 3 minor positive mutations, 1 major positive mutation, and must roll 1 negative mutation. One of the minor positive mutations can be taken to counteract the -2 penalty to Constitution. Forever more, the character gains 1 fewer skill point per level.

Altered Skills and Feats

Computer Use (all specialties) can be used untrained. Drive can be used untrained but there are few working vehicles left after the Final Wars.

Feats are as normal for a Gamma Age game.

Purchase DC Modifiers

Economy after the Final Wars has truly shut down, and the remnants of society have taken to hoarding what supplies they can find. To determine purchase DCs, begin with the DC the item would have had in a New Eden game. If the item is a weapon, a piece of armor or survival gear, add +4 to the purchase DC of that item; for all other items, add +2. If the item is advanced tech, add an additional +2. Thus, a crossbow would have a purchase DC of 9, while a day pack would have a purchase DC of 7 and a monoblade sword would have a purchase DC of 28. Fortunately, there are no government restrictions or licensing required on any items in this period.

Suggested Advanced Classes

Agent**, Bodyguard, Cybercologist*, Daredevil, Field Medic, Field Scientist, Gunslinger, Infiltrator, Investigator, Leader*, Martial Artist, Messenger**, Nanosmith*, Negotiator, Prophet*, Robot's Bane**, Soldier, Survivor*, Trapper**, War Chief*.

* Gamma World Player's Handbook

** Machines and Mutants

Campaigns set in a Broken Planet setting invariably deal with the shock and bewilderment that occurred with the fallout of the Final Wars. These games often deal with the trials that come simply from being members of a society that once relied on technology for survival, and which has had that technology wrested away. Adaptability is a cherished trait in this age, and the remnants of civilization survive on the skills of those heroes who could adjust to the changing times. Survival is the name of the game. And with the coming of the Final Wars, the slate has been cleaned and the opportunity is ripe for the intelligent, hardy and ambitious.

CIVILIZATION REBORN

Children of the New World, we stand as inheritors to the flaws of our predecessors. They were Earth's rulers. We rule nothing. They were Earth's destroyers. And we, their children, must pay the price for their sins. Past these palisades and into the dark places beyond the fire's light, we are accosted by the disfigured remnants of the servants they once created. The city-sickness has taken most of those who remember the old ways; and we, the first-born of this age, are left to restore our place in this world. Perhaps this is for the best. The old ways served naught but death, and in our hands lies the life of all our people.



GAME CONSIDERATIONS: CIVILIZATION REBORN

Characters should be made as if for a standard **Gamma World** game. Generally, the characters should all come from the same community, and likely all hold allegiance to that community. Because of this, there might be limitations on the allowable genotypes in a specific game.

Genotypes

All of the genotypes listed in the **Gamma World Player's Handbook** are available except for new men. New men haven't had the time to form an appreciable distinction from true mutants.

Altered Skills and Feats

Same as GW PHB.

Purchase DC Modifiers

Use the Purchase DCs given in the GW PHB.

Suggested Advanced Classes

Agent**, Bodyguard, Cybercologist*, Daredevil, Field Medic, Field Scientist, Gunslinger, Infiltrator, Leader*, Martial Artist, Messenger**, Nanosmith*, Negotiator, Prophet*, Robot's Bane**, Scrutinizer**, Soldier, Survivor*, Trapper**, War Chief*.

* **Gamma World Player's Handbook**

** **Machines and Mutants**

The Final Wars devastated the world. Society crumbled, and all that humanity had worked for was seemingly destroyed. Yet, somehow, human beings slunk out from the ruins and continued the struggle of life. In time they adapted to the harsh environment of the Gamma Age. As the radioactive glow slowly faded from the smoking craters of the old arcologies, people learned to hunt those ruins and search for surviving items and equipment. And thus, on the ruins of the old age, society began to

build itself anew. In the wastelands people banded together, formed communities, fell in love and struggled for not only the right to life, but also for a life worth having. Leaders stepped forward with both strength and conviction; and without established dogma to guide them, these enterprising individuals were free to form and follow their own ideologies.

Now, the first generation of children to be born after the Final Wars has come of age. These new men and women know nothing of times past and the lessons of history, save perhaps for stories they have been told by their parents. All they have ever known are the grim realities of the new world. Their parents have already laid the groundwork for society to be reborn. Communities have formed in the interest of survival, humanity has relearned how to acquire its needs and defend itself from the dangers of the Gamma World. Now it is left to the children to organize what they have been given and decide the future of their slowly healing world.

It is in this era that many of the organizations listed earlier in the chapter find their origins. Specifically, the beginnings of the Knights of Genetic Purity, The Created, The Order of the Searing Light, and the Restorationists all see their genesis among the first generation born to the Gamma Age. As communities grew comfortable with the necessities of survival, their members could focus on more abstract concepts of purpose and meaning. Many societies began to revolve around a central unifying philosophy, and the nascent organizations slowly accumulated more and more power.

This time marked the beginning of "the community" as the basis for self-identity and even for the acquisition of power. The communities in this era were often insular, though many had a wide spread of genotypes represented by their members. Thus, family allegiance was overridden by commitment to community — an important shift in loyalty that allowed for large numbers of individuals to live and work together. Also significant was the tendency to have no discernable difference between organizational allegiances and community membership. Quite simply, belonging to a specific community usually meant being a committed participant in the goals and philosophies of that group. Only in later ages will organizational influence grow to a level that causes differentiation between the two.

THE NEW EMPIRE

Gather round me, my brethren. The time has come for our rightful destiny to be achieved. For too long have our enemies gloated at their own strength. They will soon know their weakness for what it is. Do they respect our lands and our traditions? No. Do they follow the truths that even our youngest children are taught to obey? No. Do they know our power, and our rightful vengeance? No, they do not. But they soon will.

A generation or two has gone by since the days of the standard **Gamma World** campaign, and society has entered in a new age of maturity. The villages of a hundred years ago have become towns and then cities. The myriad genotypes that were born in the Final Wars have recycled enough of the old technology to begin to build an infrastructure for advancement. Even nanotech is harnessed, and metals and fuels are processed in ways not seen since before the Final Wars.

Society itself has changed in the wake of these improvements. The insignificant and radical organizations of a couple of generations ago have now amassed control of multiple cities. The world is again witnessing the development of nation-states, and even seeing the emergence of small empires. Where once community was the cornerstone of society, people of this age now rally behind higher ideals espoused by national organizations. Religious zeal, nationalism and philosophical tenets give meaning to a populace now partially freed from the struggle for simple survival.

This isn't to say that only one empire holds sway over the new Earth. Nations continually form alliances, engage in conflict and jockey for greater power in the tapestry of the New Imperial world. In general, the cities have a sustainable technology level roughly equivalent to post-Renaissance Europe. This is fortunate, as the power supplies that survived the onslaught of the Final Wars and sustained the people of prior generations are beginning to fail. Society is on the cusp of self-sustainability, and the next generation will determine if the social order will return to a modern age, or dwell forevermore in savagery.

Games set in the New Imperial age can deal with a wide range of themes. Factionalism and patriotism is strong in this time, and characters formed around a specific faction can pursue tasks

GAME CONSIDERATIONS: THE NEW EMPIRE

The world during the New Imperial age is often less dangerous than the standard age. Characters made for this type of game should start at 1st level. Higher level games can be run as well, but the setting doesn't have the same low-level survivability issues that the standard age has.

Genotypes

All of the genotypes listed in the *Gamma World Player's Handbook* exist and can be played in a game set in the New Imperial age. In addition, several other genotypes described in *Machines and Mutants* would have likely been integrated in the patchwork empires of this age, and could serve as possible genotypes for characters. The biggest issue that determines the group's selection of genotypes is the philosophy of the empire the GM wishes to create. A nation that follows the tenets of the Knights of Genetic Purity would have very different viable genotypes than would a nation that followed the tenets of the Brotherhood of Thought.

Altered Skills and Feats

Same as GW PHB.

Purchase DC Modifiers

Archaic technology has become more common, while working advanced technology has become much harder to find. The purchase DCs for archaic weapons and armor are reduced by -2 in comparison to standard age prices. Pre-War armor and weaponry purchase DCs are increased by +4, while the purchase DCs for advanced armor and weaponry go up by +6. For other equipment, if the item can be built by the local industry, reduce the purchase DC by -2; if it needs to be scavenged, raise the purchase DC by +4 or +6 depending on how advanced the technology is.

Suggested Advanced Classes

Agent**, Bodyguard, Cybercollogist*, Daredevil, Field Medic, Field Scientist, Gunslinger, Hybrid Diplomat**, Infiltrator, Investigator, Leader*, Martial Artist, Messenger**, Nanosmith*, Negotiator, Personality, Prophet*, Robot's Bane**, Scrutinizer**, Soldier, Survivor*, Trapper**, War Chief*.

* *Gamma World Player's Handbook*

** *Machines and Mutants*

that further the aims of that group. Espionage, raiding and competition for resources are common goals for groups in the New Imperial age. On the other hand, games in this age can take advantage of the relatively modern setting and the ever-present strangeness in the form of mutations or personal nanotech to create *Gamma World* games with the feel of a pulp comic... or a classical historian's account of the world beyond his homeland.

THE FALLEN ONES

I am near the passing time, and the spirits bid me to share what wisdom I have. Go not to the fallen places, my children. Do not be lured there by tales of riches or by treacherous curiosity. That which is buried is hidden away for a reason. It is not meant for us; those who seek for what is beyond them will surely anger the very gods themselves. So I say to each of you, remember your place in this world. This you must do, if our people are to survive.

These are the final days. The spark that was once humanity flared to brilliance, sputtered erratically, and then died. The lore of those long forgotten days lies beneath the Earth, entombed within layers of dust and ash. All that is left of humanity's greatness is the few human beings who still wander the planet's surface. These men and women have returned to a fully nomadic life, and whatever legacy of greatness that should be theirs has long ago been lost to superstition and ignorance.

The previous ages failed to perpetuate humanity's technological existence, and so society fell into a dark age. This is a dark age that has no end, however. The planet's resources are depleted, and only the most renewable are able to support any type of society. Small villages and nomadic bands dot the surface, the people living in primitive conditions. Metal is scarce, while fossil fuels are non-existent. The tools and knowledge needed to return to any level of industrial technology simply no longer exist.

Beneath the feet of the individuals living out their meager lives on the planet's surface lie vast tombs and labyrinths, relics of the pinnacle of human civilization. Occasionally, sinkholes will open up and give access to these hidden places. Of course, these ruins are dangerous places. There are a number of strange species that, for one reason or another, have been entombed within the

GAME CONSIDERATIONS: THE FALLEN ONES

Like some of the previous ages, much of the initial basis for the game will revolve around the community. Careful thought should be made about the philosophies and composition of an individual's community, since this will in many ways highly influence character creation. Once again, the world is dangerous; higher-level characters may be more appropriate to the setting.

Genotypes

There no longer is a distinction between pure-strain and stock humans. After so long a time, the pure blood from before the Final Wars has been mixed and diluted. Also, since the pollutants that cause mutagenic effects have dissipated, no instances of spontaneous mutation truly occur any more. This means true mutants no longer exist as a genotype; their altered DNA either bred into a new species or disappeared from the genetic pool. A plethora of species exist, and many can be either based on existing creatures or the left-over engineered animals, engineered humans, or true men who have somehow still survived. These species are genetically stable and do not need to make rolls every level to determine new mutations.

Altered Skills and Feats

Several skills are non-existent or not useful in the Fallen Age. These include:

Computer Use, Craft (electronic, nanotech), Demolitions, Drive, Knowledge (streetwise, technology: Pre-War, technology: advanced, technology: nanotech), Pilot.

Similarly, because of the extreme rarity of advanced technology, the following feats are rare if not unheard of:

Advanced Firearms Proficiency, Aircraft Operation, Armor Proficiency (advanced), Burst Fire, Double Tap, Exotic Firearms Proficiency, Force Stop, Gearhead, Improved Mutation Resistance, Mutation Resistance, Personal Firearms Proficiency, Quick Reload, Skip Shot, Snap Shot, Strafe, Surface Vehicle Operation, Surgery, Tech Familiarity: Advanced, Tech Familiarity: Pre-War, Vehicle Dodge, Vehicle Expert.

Purchase DC Modifiers

Equipment that is more advanced than the early Industrial Age is rare in the extreme. A GM running a Fallen Age game should feel comfortable outlawing the purchase of any item more advanced than medieval weaponry and simple hide and leather construction. Archaic equipment is available and has the purchase DCs given in *d20 Modern*.

Suggested Advanced Classes

Agent**, Bodyguard, Daredevil, Field Medic, Infiltrator, Investigator, Leader*, Martial Artist, Messenger**, Negotiator, Prophet*, Robot's Bane**, Soldier, Survivor*, Trapper**, War Chief*.

* *Gamma World Player's Handbook*

** *Machines and Mutants*

underground catacombs. Some of these alien beings have even flourished and built up their own cities within the sequestered caverns located deep within the Earth. In other places, synthetics teem in the ruins of destroyed edifices, controlled by AIs that have long since gone mad. When places such as these are exposed, there are a number of dramatic consequences. Perhaps the exiled culture comes scrambling back to the surface, delighted to return from its captivity and lash out at the world above. Maybe a non-human species has been living in hiding, and resents the exposure that an overeager explorer might bring. Regardless, any such contact would prove as interesting as it would be dangerous. These ruins offer more than just excitement and

peril, however. For the fearless and foolhardy, searching the remains of humanity's past greatness often proves to be quite lucrative. Strange devices whose functions are lost in antiquity are occasionally brought back up to the surface; occasionally these items prove instrumental in surviving the rigors of this last age. Weapons and armor are of obvious use, but various pharmaceuticals and medicine have an even more immediate and practical benefit to a struggling community.

Games set in the Fallen Age often deal with exploration and the mysteries of the past. Where this setting differs from games set in the standard age is that the people of the Fallen Age don't

remember anything of the world that was. There is no real attempt to bring back the past; instead there is exploration driven by necessity and perhaps a curious sense of wonder about the new "magical" objects that can seemingly perform all manner of miracles.

As an option, the ambient technology level of the Fallen Age setting is well suited to running a **Gamma World** game using the *Dungeons & Dragons* v.3.5 rules. The possession of personal nanotechnology could be represented in these rules as the various flavors of magic. The strange and esoteric artifacts from before the Final Wars may just as well be magic to the people living in this final age.

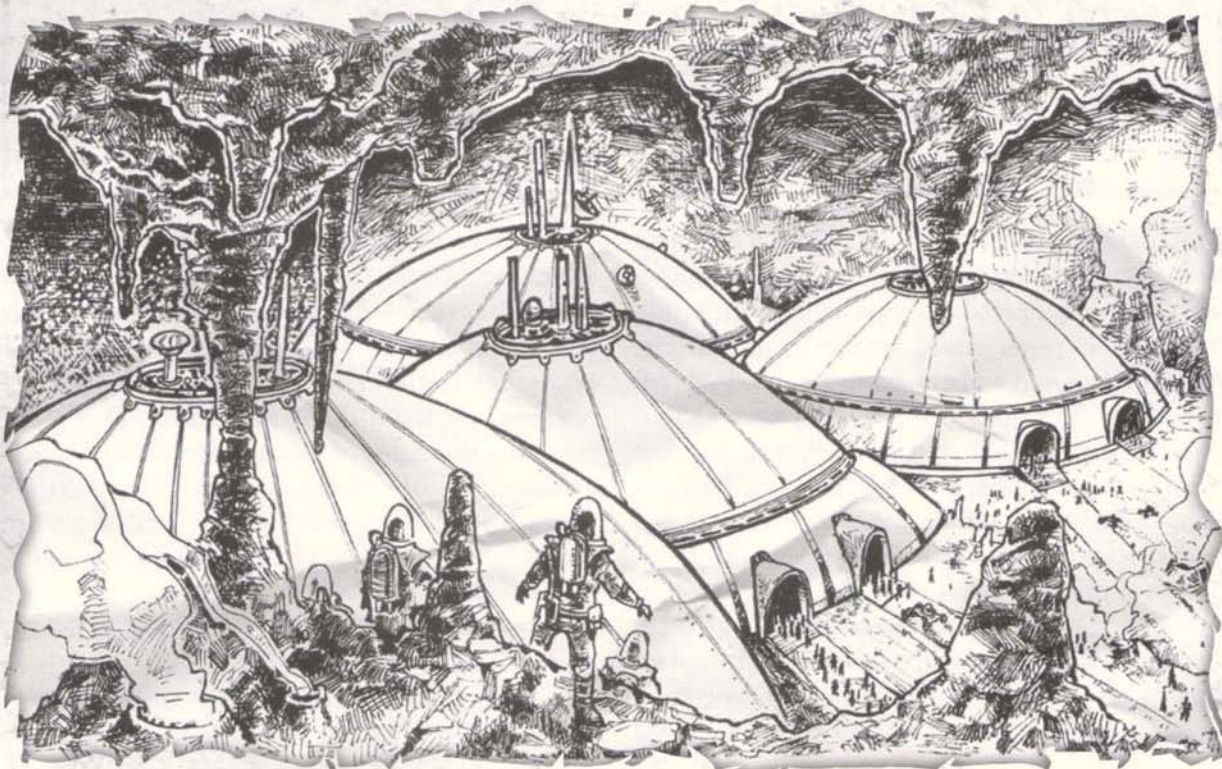
EXOTIC ENVIRONMENTS

The evolution of human society had been a constant increase in humanity's ability to adapt to its environment. Where at first human beings dwelled only in the savannahs and temperate forests, they slowly expanded into jungles, mountains and marshes, and then eventually into the tundra and steppes of the arctic. By the last years before the Final Wars, there were few places that technology could not make hospitable; and thus, humans were found in every setting imaginable.

The rapid acceleration of technological advancement prior to the Final Wars spurred humanity to attempt more and more impressive feats of engineering. Environmental protections and the AIs needed to control them made habitation possible virtually anywhere. Cities were placed deep underground, out at sea, and in the heavens. Some of these habitats were stationary, while others were able to move in the skies or beneath the waves. Though the Final Wars likely destroyed many of these cities, some could have conceivably survived to the present day.

SUBTERRANEAN SETTINGS

Originally, small habitation units were created in the early 21st century as a continuation of experiments started in the late 20th century. These housing facilities were built into the Earth, formed out of tunnels that were previously used for mining or subways beneath cities; they were intended as a possible solution to the growing housing crisis. Since the original units were designed for low-income habitation, little money was put into the project, and these places were hellholes with only sporadic lighting and fresh air, and little in the way of amenities. These subterranean sprawls fell out of fashion when arcologies solved many of the housing problems.



CHAPTER THREE: THE STATE OF THE WORLD

Later in the 21st century, however, subterranean housing again came into vogue. Often funded by corporations, small communities were created deep in the Earth beneath areas of beautiful parkland. These facilities were small, and completely tailored to the tastes of the elite residents. These buried homes were private sanctums with built in screens that could be programmed to show whatever vista the occupant desired. As technology improved, entire rooms were covered in these screens to give the feel of an outdoor porch or yard. Ventilation, temperature and even weather could be strictly controlled by the inhabitants. It was possible to leave one resident's pool on a sunny day and go next door to build snowmen in the neighbor's yard.

While these communities tended to be much smaller than the surface arcologies, they had nearly any amenity that could be desired. Theaters, pubs and artificial parklands all existed to please the inhabitants. Though at first air was pumped in from the surface, subterranean arboretums later supplied the air requirements of the community and made these places self-sufficient. If any resident actually desired natural air, lifts could bring her to the surface. The land above was nearly always kept pristine and park-like, unspoiled by the trappings of human civilization. The Final Wars would certainly have affected life for those who lived below the surface. In many cases, the devastation would have damaged the tunnels to the surface, cutting off the inhabitants from the land above. Though these places were shielded by the Earth itself from most of the assaults of the Final Wars, earthquakes could have caused significant damage to these cities. And of course, if a city wasn't self-sufficient in terms of food, water and power, it would quickly have become a tomb for the people who lived there. However, those places that were self-sufficient and not heavily damaged could easily have survived generations, with the inhabitants being completely disconnected from the plight of the people on the surface.

SEASCAPES

Shortly after the construction of the subterranean arcologies, aquatic communities were also established. Often these were created to harness the resources of the ocean, including fish, fossil fuels and tidal energy. In order to facilitate their myriad

uses, these colonies became quite varied in design and construction. Some spread out over the ocean's surface, radiating from a central spire that thrust deep into the sea. This allowed the community to harness the gravitational energy stored in the tides, and allowed for great self-sufficiency. Other habitats were compact, standing less than 10 stories above the surface but delving hundreds of feet into the ocean depths. Some of these cities were even mobile, with internal plants that provided propulsion.

In time, as habitation and propulsion technology improved, modular cities were built beneath the ocean waves. From ports all around the world, organizations built massive habitation modules, which were then programmed to travel to predetermined destinations. Once there, synthetics were sent to seal the connections and monitor the structural integrity of the units. Six or seven of these modules made a small community, while as many as twenty were put together to make thriving undersea metropoli.

When the Final Wars struck the Earth, dozens of these cities existed underneath the waves while a small armada of surface cities dotted the coastlines or sailed the seas. Some of the more exposed communities immediately fell during the battles of the Final Wars, while others were damaged by the tsunamis and storms in the aftermath. Those that were not self-sufficient either were abandoned or became deathtraps for the unfortunate residents. However, a few of these aquatic communities had the technology and power sources to be self-sustaining, and might harbor thriving communities.

EXTRATERRESTRIAL SETTINGS

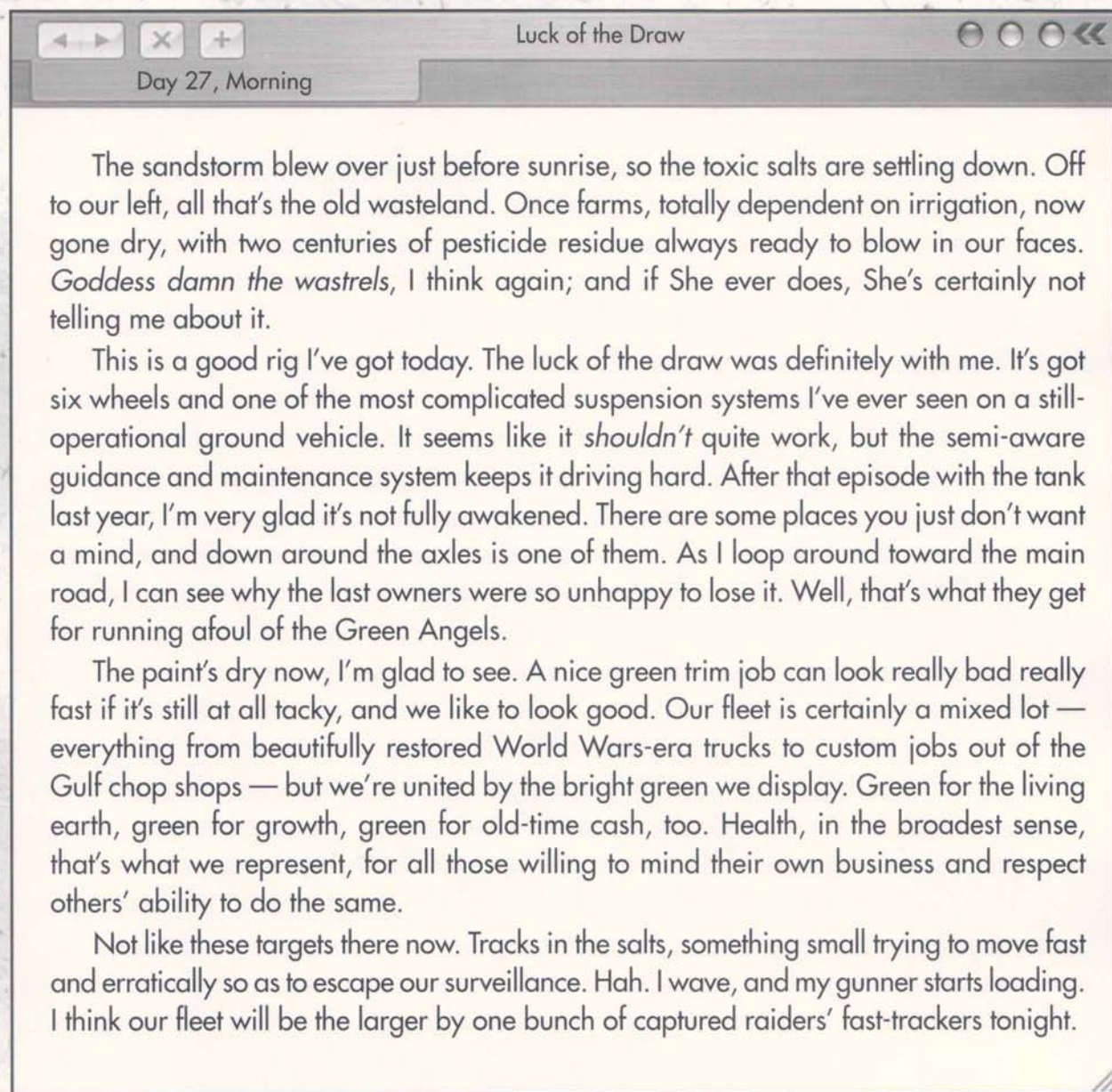
During the last decades before the Final Wars, humanity conquered that final frontier by sending colonies into the heavens. Some of these initial forays were simply orbital colonies that were based on the ideas of the early space explorers. These were often in the same design as the undersea modular colonies, only lifted into orbit. After the rapid success of these orbital colonies, other missions were sent to the Moon and then to other planetary objects. In addition, low-altitude city spheres (as described in *Out of the Vaults*) were launched, and floated in self-imposed isolation high above the surface communities.

GAMMA WORLD GAME MASTER'S GUIDE

By the time of the Final Wars, there was a small swarm of city spheres floating through the Earth's atmosphere, three thriving communities on the Moon, and dozens of orbital stations — including a couple of outposts at the Earth's two stable Lagrange Points. In addition, there were modules sent to Mars to build the New Ares colony; several city spheres inserted into the high Venusian atmosphere; and several modules sent to build Cassini Station orbiting Saturn's moon, Titan. Since these were deployed so soon before the Final Wars, the current status of these missions is a mystery.

What is significant is that the Final Wars were primarily a terrestrial phenomenon. While much damage was wrought on the communities that inhabited the Earth's atmosphere and near orbit, more distant outposts would have been spared much of the damage. In addition, so long as these colonies survived their initial genesis, they were designed to be quite self-sufficient and would require little to no assistance from the war-ravaged Earth. It is likely that these colonies have survived throughout the Gamma Age, and some may very well have thrived. Whether the inhabitants have any desire to return to their birth planet is, however, a different matter.

CHAPTER FOUR
PLOTS
AND PLANS



The sandstorm blew over just before sunrise, so the toxic salts are settling down. Off to our left, all that's the old wasteland. Once farms, totally dependent on irrigation, now gone dry, with two centuries of pesticide residue always ready to blow in our faces. *Goddess damn the wastrels*, I think again; and if She ever does, She's certainly not telling me about it.

This is a good rig I've got today. The luck of the draw was definitely with me. It's got six wheels and one of the most complicated suspension systems I've ever seen on a still-operational ground vehicle. It seems like it *shouldn't* quite work, but the semi-aware guidance and maintenance system keeps it driving hard. After that episode with the tank last year, I'm very glad it's not fully awakened. There are some places you just don't want a mind, and down around the axles is one of them. As I loop around toward the main road, I can see why the last owners were so unhappy to lose it. Well, that's what they get for running afoul of the Green Angels.

The paint's dry now, I'm glad to see. A nice green trim job can look really bad really fast if it's still at all tacky, and we like to look good. Our fleet is certainly a mixed lot — everything from beautifully restored World Wars-era trucks to custom jobs out of the Gulf chop shops — but we're united by the bright green we display. Green for the living earth, green for growth, green for old-time cash, too. Health, in the broadest sense, that's what we represent, for all those willing to mind their own business and respect others' ability to do the same.

Not like these targets there now. Tracks in the salts, something small trying to move fast and erratically so as to escape our surveillance. Hah. I wave, and my gunner starts loading. I think our fleet will be the larger by one bunch of captured raiders' fast-trackers tonight.

STORIES TO GO

To run a game well, you must develop the skill of creating entertaining and satisfying game experiences for your players. In large part, this means planning adventures and campaigns. The plot of a roleplaying game, while superficially similar to plots in stories, novels, plays, movies and television shows, has many differences. Unlike creators in most media, who determine “what *does* happen next,” Game Masters designing adventures for characters must sketch out several options for “what *might* happen next” — sometimes in the middle of play. The difference between *does* and *might* can be the difference between satisfied and frustrated players.

Importantly, *plot* isn’t necessarily *story*. As the writer EM Forster put it in *Aspects of the Novel*: “Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died,’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: ‘The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.’ This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: ‘And then?’ If it is in a plot we ask: ‘Why?’”

This chapter will help you create, run and link those “whys” into satisfying adventures, while avoiding deadly “and thens.”

How do you create meaningful plots for players to become tangled in? With careful attention to all their parts, from the broad canvas down to the individual strokes.

- **Campaign:** The whole game, from first session to last. Some campaigns start with an overall plot, while others evolve plots *ex nihilo*.

- **Arc:** A sequence of growth (or change) within a campaign; this can be a single-session adventure, or run through several sessions.

- **Incident:** A particular scene, encounter or event within an arc. A campaign can have several arcs, which each contain several incidents (like *matroshki*, those little Russian dolls that nest one inside another).

BASIC ANATOMY

Where the campaign deals with larger — often impersonal — objectives and obstacles, the incident deals with up-close and in-your-face goals and difficulties. Despite these differences in level of focus, campaigns, arcs and incidents all share a similar underlying construction. The sections below deal with how to build an incident, but the same elements are present in the other two parts.

TITLE

An incident should have a name for easy GM reference. This title doesn’t have to be told to the players; it’s just a handle to grab hold of for the GM to rearrange and reference in his notes.

This incident’s title is “Domaiz’s Offer.”

BACKGROUND

What’s the basic situation and setting of the incident? In an established and well-developed campaign, you may be able to make a quick note like “the Anday Goopla Valley” and be done with it. If the campaign is just beginning, or the incident takes the characters (and you) into a new area, more details will be needed to help everyone understand the background of the Anday Goopla Valley: climate, terrain, inhabitants, special features, villages and ambient nanotech level.

The fertile Anday Goopla Valley nestles between two concentric rings of ripple-splash in a vast crater, caused by some unimaginable weapon (or weapons) of the Final Wars. About 5 miles from east to west, measuring from ridge to ridge it extends nearly 20 miles north-south. To the north, a deeper crater overlaps, creating a quarter-mile precipice; to the south, a mighty river cuts across the rings.

Three major communities live in this fertile valley: the isolationist Kathlubytes (humanoid snail-mutants); the cosmopolitan Imrythmen (stock humans and assorted mutants, whose skin and hair mysteriously turn green after a short period of residence); and the nomadic Metalloids (a trio of piecemeal-patched synthetics). Tabrafaut, the village of the Kathlubytes, lies in the north of the valley, and is ruled with an iron fist by Chief Chaitoh. The community of the Imrythmen is situated near the southern river; the mayor of the town of Othicii is Domaiz. The three synthetics, 843R5 (“Skullcap”),



5C403N3 ("Smoulder"), and 8AN3 ("Sudden"), wander up and down the valley.

The Kathlubytes and Imrythmen raid each other often: The snail-folk for trade goods brought down the river and the Imrythmen for entertainment and revenge. Often, the Metalloids join in on the fun, whether on one side, the other, on their own, or split up amongst the three factions. It's a jolly little barbaric culture they've got going for themselves in the Anday Goopla Valley.

Between the two settlements lies a neutral meeting spot: an overgrown Pre-Wars ruin within a high ambient-nanotech-level area, which contains a working nanotech-based "medical goop tank" — the God's Spittle. Provided the patient bears the slightest traces of life, the Spittle can heal any wound, no matter how mortal. (However, if a great amount of reconstruction is required to preserve the patient's life, use of the machine often reduces the ambient nanotech level substantially.) The communities of the Anday Goopla Valley consider the building a shared resource and sanctuary from violence by long-standing treaty. Though both leaders would love sole control over the God's Spittle, the Metalloids annoyingly serve to enforce the treaty agreement because of some strange quirk in their programming.

The characters have been traveling downriver, and their ship stops at Othicci. Skoat, one of Domaiz's

advisors, notices them, and thinks that they might be useful in one of his leader's plans. Within an hour or so, the characters receive an invitation to dine with the Mayor, delivered by Skoat and two imposing warrior-types.

GOAL

The incident should have some basic objective. What is the purpose of putting the character(s) through this scene? Is it to perform a particular deed, meet someone, or experience some kind of phenomena? The goal should be a simple sentence, laying out what's at stake.

The goal of this incident is to get the characters to meet with Domaiz, hear his offer and decide whether or not to take it. (Domaiz's personal goals will be noted in his entry under the heading "Relevant NPCs.")

WHAT'S THE POINT?

The point of an incident is the absolute, drop-dead, must-see element of the scene. Even if the goal *per se* is lost, abandoned or ignored, this is the crux of what the characters must deal with.

The point of "Domaiz's Offer" is to get the characters involved in the politics of the Anday Goopla Valley. One way or another, the characters should have the chance to join one of the sides. Maybe they see through Domaiz's ploys and will be more amenable to

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the later offer of Chaitoh, the Kathlubyte chief. Or perhaps one of the Metalloid synthetics erroneously sees a character as "the new super-op for the region," fills him in on the political situation, and asks for new operating parameters. The characters can say "no" and go on their merry way, but they must be given the chance to become entangled.

REMINDERS AND NIFTY NOTES

In the cool of planning before play, you can come up with a wealth of interesting detail for an incident, having to do with characters, scenery, equipment, mood, culture and so forth. In the heat of play, you can have all of those fascinating details slide right out of your head in the rush of adjudicating rules, juggling character actions, speaking in two different voices and making sure that the map is lined up right. Reminders and nifty notes are for reminding yourself to tell the characters about particularly remarkable or important elements of the incident.

In "Domaiz's Offer," things to remember are: the town of Othicci is fairly cosmopolitan and welcoming of strangers; the symbols of the cryptic alliance of Healers are hidden in the wharf area and city gates; Skoat is very upset about his lost daughter; all the organic beings are varying shades of green.

ACTION, INTERACTION OR EDUCATION

Most incidents have a clear overall tone. Action scenes involve physical challenges: combat, athletics, travel, chases. Interaction scenes concentrate on social challenges: debates, banter, discussion, display, seductions. Education scenes have to do with mental challenges: puzzles, research, discovery, analysis. While usually one element most strongly colors an incident, most will have the potential for all three (indeed, education in the form of new and interesting bits of scenery, character or equipment is almost always present in every incident in a **Gamma World** game). You should take the time to think about the interaction possibilities of mostly action scenes: one never knows when characters may decide to parley rather than fight, and vice-versa.

"Domaiz's Offer" is intended to be an interaction incident: The player characters (PCs) will talk to Skoat, and then to Domaiz himself. However, there is the chance that characters might decide to pull some action

into the mix by fighting with Skoat and the guardsmen, or trying to run away from the meeting. The canny GM will have stats for these NPCs handy.

OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Winston Churchill said, "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." An obstacle is something that stands between a character and a goal. A squad of guards, a selection of devilish traps, a high wall or the lack of an invitation to a gala social event can all stop a character from getting what she wants. Obstacles are there so characters can attempt to surmount them.

An opportunity is something that can help a character come closer to his goal. A chance to slip knockout drops in the guards' porridge cauldron, a technician's notebook containing security code algorithms, some loose bricks on the wall or a grateful city alderman who can wangle invitations to the event... all can help characters avoid difficulties. Opportunities are there to aid and reward characters.

Of course, obstacles and opportunities are often found lying cheek by jowl, as in the examples above. Indeed, it's best if they do: An obstacle without an opportunity is a challenge that the character must face based on her own capabilities, and can feel somewhat adversarial if it's a very challenging task; an opportunity without an obstacle can seem too good to be true and might spark some paranoia as players search for the (nonexistent) catch. Even if taken at face value, "unearned" opportunities may feel like the GM is handing out "gimmies."

"Domaiz's Offer" is primarily an incident of opportunity. At its most basic level, it could be a simple transaction: Domaiz will reward the characters (in food, tech, ammunition, information, etc.) if they perform at least one of three services for him: fix the city's hover rig (sort of a floating forklift); escort a diplomat (Skoat) to the Kathlubyte village; or capture the three dangerous Metalloids. The incident provides the opportunity to build goodwill with a powerful trading community through its leader. Canny characters could also negotiate for bigger and better rewards for their service, so long as they haggle courteously with the Mayor.

Obstacles that go along with this scene could include the characters' own paranoia, interference with their own plans, or running afoul of the Kathlubytes or other

political factions within Othicci. There's also the chance that the characters could, through rudeness or other discourtesy (like not even going to talk to the Mayor at all) incur the wrath of Domaiz himself.

OUTCOMES: SUCCESS, FAILURE, ABANDONMENT

What are the options for the outcome of the incident? In most cases, the outcomes for the characters can be classified as success, failure and abandonment. For example, if the obstacle of the scene is a high wall, success means the characters manage to get over, around or through the barrier. Failure means they could not figure out how to get past it and look for some other way to get to whatever they seek beyond it. Abandonment means the characters give up on trying to go further. Many outcomes can be boiled down to these options, given sufficient heat and focus.

However, a few types of incidents may not have outcomes that are as easy to categorize. For example, if the characters are involved in repairing a vehicle with limited parts, and must choose between the anti-grav coils, the environmental system or the rocket booster, no option is necessarily a success, failure or abandonment. Each is simply a choice leading to a different set of future options, including different capabilities for the vehicle.

Whatever the outcome of the incident at hand, it should lead to further incidents, and in some cases it may even inaugurate a whole new arc within the campaign.

Ultimately, the possible results for "Domaiz's Offer" break down into the following: acceptance of the offer, rejection of the offer without enmity and rejection of the offer with enmity, with each result leading to a different further incident. Basically, so long as the characters are gracious in their refusal, Domaiz will not be angry with them.

RELEVANT NPCs

You should prepare a list of crucial information, including name, ability scores, key skills, basic goals, personality and characterization notes, for all of the nonplayer characters (NPCs) that characters are likely to interact with in the incident. A simple line or two is sufficient; the advantage of listing thumbnail outlines for NPCs is that it minimizes the need to flip through notes or game books while play is going on.

The relevant NPCs of "Domaiz's Offer" are Domaiz, Skoat and two Imrythman warriors. Domaiz should have at least a level each of Tough, Smart, Dedicated, and Charismatic hero. He is the leader of a sizable trading community, after all. Secretly a member of the Healer's cryptic alliance, he wishes to bring the God's Spittle to Othicci, in order to heal as many people as possible, since Othicci is such a large trading center. He fully intends to continue to allow the snail-men to use it. However, given the treaty with the Kathlubytes and the enforcement of the Metalloids, he cannot simply take the machine... not without outside help. He's entering early middle age and is quite bald, with rugged features. Plain-spoken, his deep, slow voice belies the speed of his thoughts.

Skoat probably has roughly equal levels of Tough and Smart hero, but an interesting variant could swap out a level of Tough or Smart for Dedicated. He's strongly loyal to Domaiz, and hates Kathlubytes because they killed his daughter in a raid last season. He is relatively young, tall and greenly handsome (his eyepatch looks roguishly charming), with a pleasant voice and courteous manner.

Generic Imrythman Warriors: These guys are probably straight up Tough heroes of moderate level.

CONNECTIONS

Connections link this incident to others, describing how those incidents relate to the actions the PCs take within the focus incident. They come in two varieties, hard and soft.

Hard connections are directly connected to possible results, and are generally detailed before the game session. These are the paths that, during the planning stage, you think the characters are most likely to go down. Note that this does not mean they are the only paths the characters can take! An example of a hard connection would be something like this: If the characters get past the wall, they'll move deeper into the canyon and find incident #2, "Deeper in the Canyon;" if they cannot get past the wall before evening, the dracosaur will catch up to them after nightfall and they'll encounter incident #3, "Around the Campfire."

Soft connections are generated "on the fly" by the PCs actions while playing through the incident. They can be anything from picking an unforeseen path to follow out of the incident, to generating new connections between incidents unwittingly. Leave a little "space" in incident write-ups in order

to note new soft connections that the characters come up with. An example would be something like this: Instead of attempting to get over the wall, the characters decide instead to turn back and try to capture the dracosaur, so that they can use its microwave breath to melt the wall.

The hard connections for "Domaiz's Offer" are: If the characters accept Domaiz's offer, they'll be given necessary supplies to carry out their selected task and proceed to incident #2, "At the Quartermaster's." If the characters reject Domaiz's offer with aplomb and courtesy, they'll be allowed to go about their business in Othicci; see incident #3, "Othicci, City of Trade." If the characters reject Domaiz's offer with rudeness, Domaiz will try to have them placed in jail for safekeeping; see incident #4, "Guards! Guards!"

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Assembling all of the information above, you will end up with a compact description of an incident and connection points to one or more other incidents. By selecting connecting incidents, you can construct adventures for a session's worth of fun for your players.

Title:	"Domaiz's Offer"
Background:	the Anday Goopla Valley
Goal:	Have the characters meet with Domaiz, hear his offer and decide whether or not to take it.
The Point:	Get the PCs involved in the politics of the Anday Goopla Valley.
Reminders and Nifty Notes:	Othicci is a cosmopolitan trading city along a river; there are cryptic alliance of Healers symbols hidden here; Skoat is very upset about his lost daughter; all resident organic beings are green.
Type:	Interaction with both Skoat and Domaiz.
Obstacles/ Opportunities:	Domaiz will reward the characters in food, tech, ammunition, information, etc., for fixing the city's hover rig, escorting Skoat to Tabrafaut or capturing the Metalloids.
Possible Results:	Acceptance of the offer, rejection of the offer (with no enmity), rejection of the offer (with enmity)
Relevant NPCs:	Skoat, Domaiz, Guardsmen.
Connections:	Incident #2 (At the Quartermaster's); Incident #3 (Othicci, City of Trade); Incident #4 (Guards! Guards!).

THE ROLES OF THE GM AND PLAYERS

In some ways, every gaming group is unique. The particular combination of personalities, the circumstances of play and the nature of the campaign add up to something distinctive; even when there is continuity of players, the next campaign may well have quite different dynamics from the last one. Nonetheless, there are broad trends that apply to a great many groups, and issues worth considering alongside the very specific features of your own campaign.

MAPMAKING VS. RAILROADING

The difference between mapmaking and railroading can be the difference between being a good GM and being a bad one.

Mapmaking is just that: You lay out the features of the landscape, draw in some commonly-traveled roads in the form of possible results and let the players explore at their own pace. If they turn up their noses at that highway and want to meander through the wilderness? Fine. They want to try to ford the river (an obstacle) rather than cross at the clearly visible bridge (an opportunity)? Also fine. They want to jump off a mountaintop (action) rather than negotiate (interaction) with the sherpas (relevant NPCs) to find the best path down (education)? Well, that's fine too, but it points out the biggest issue you have to contend with: Making sure everything on the "map" is clear to the players. It's fine for the characters to be confused at least some of the time, but the players need to understand some things their characters don't.

The best ways to make sure that the players understand the "map" are: listen to what they say amongst themselves; ask them to explain what they think is going on to you; and offer clarifications on non-secret elements of the game willingly. These three things will go a long way to keeping your players on the same page — and you can glean a few extra seconds to scribble in new lands past the edge of the map, if that's where they're going.

Players with a mapmaking GM have options: They can go anywhere, do anything, pick up or discard any plot or plan they choose. They have freedom. This liberty isn't always trouble-free, and can make another sort of complication for the mapmaking GM in the form of players who can't

(or won't) choose something to do. It's like they're waiting for a sign in the sky, or something. In these cases, *give them one*. The keyword of the mapmaking GM is *hint*. You've laid out the map with roads to travel and sights to see. Show them a crossroads, where several possible plots and sequences intersect. Or have them come across a fellow traveler, out on an adventure of his own. Or show them a vista that had been previously hidden around a curve in the road. Then step back, and let them think about it. You probably won't have to wait long.

Railroading, on the other hand, is where the GM predetermines everything, every possible choice, every possible response, every twist and turn in the plot and allows no deviation. The game can only move along already-laid tracks. The players aren't even the engineer or the conductor of the train; they're just passengers, along for the ride, watching the scenery blur by. Players with a railroading GM have no options. They cannot go anywhere, do anything or choose which plan to follow, unless the GM has already thought of it. The watchword of the railroading GM is *force*. Sure, the PCs will get to their destination at the end of the adventure, but will the players get the same interesting experiences and entertainment value as if they drove, walked or rode that distance? It's doubtful.

A big clue that players feel they're being railroaded can be increased interaction with each other, to the *exclusion* of interacting with NPCs or features of the setting. After all, what else is there to do when you're trapped in a wheeled box, hurtling past things you can barely recognize, but talk to your fellow passengers? Stay aware.

What if, in the "Domaiz's Offer" incident, Skoat and the guardsmen show up to invite the characters to meet with Mayor Domaiz — and for whatever reason, the characters refuse?

A mapmaking GM could draw on any or all of the following devices. Skoat thanks them for their time, and tells them they can stop by to see Domaiz at their leisure. However, as the characters go about their business, NPCs who have observed Skoat talking to the characters ask what it was all about. Other NPCs talk about the Mayor's habits of generosity and fairness just loudly enough for the characters to overhear. The characters find out about the last Kathlubyte raid that left Skoat's daughter dead. A particular piece of information

or equipment they need is rare, and Domaiz turns out to have it. If the characters happen to break a law or get in trouble, the Mayor attends their trial and offers them pardons if they'll perform a task for him. If one of the characters belongs to the cryptic alliance of Healers, an Imrythman Healer approaches that character, gives the secret handshake and whispers that the Mayor is also a Healer and needs assistance. At all times, the characters retain the choice to say "No." And if they never talk to Domaiz, that's okay, because there are other incidents waiting to happen.

A railroading GM might run it this way. Skoat refuses to take no for an answer, and tells the guards to grab the PCs. If beaten off, he comes back with even more guards, repeatedly, until the characters are overwhelmed and dragged off to meet Domaiz in chains. Or, traders and brokers and healers in Othicci refuse to work with or for the characters, until they see the Mayor. Or, the Mayor comes himself to the characters, and blurts out his offer before they can hustle him away. Or a Tall, Dark, Wise NPC in a cloak says to the characters: "You should go talk to the Mayor." If they try to escape Othicci, they can't, because the gates are closed, and they need an exit visa signed by Domaiz. The difference here is that in all cases, the characters have no chance to refuse. The game grinds inexorably to the point where nothing but having a face-to-face with Domaiz lets it move forward.

Which game would you rather be a player in?

COOPERATIVE VS. ADVERSARIAL GMING

In addition to the kind of control the GM exercises (mapmaking vs. railroading), GMs differ in how they relate to their players.

Cooperative GMs work *with* their players to ensure everyone has a good time. They listen sympathetically, they modify elements for fun and they answer general questions. They give the players what the players ask for. While the NPCs may be against the characters, the GM is never against the players.

Adversarial GMs work *against* their players. For some gaming groups, this competition is considered a good time. Adversarial GMs listen deviously (but, one hopes, fairly); they modify elements to increase the level of challenge; they answer only specific questions, and do not volunteer information. They give the players

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either what *they* think the players want, or what *they* want to see.

All in all, cooperative GMing gives a much more relaxed, pleasant gaming experience. However, for those who like tense, chess-like contests of wit and skill, adversarial GMing may be the right answer. Note too that the balance of cooperation and adversity can vary from one incident to the next and from one arc to the next, since a well-developed campaign has room for a lot of different styles of play along the way.

THE BEAUTY OF GOING OFF THE BOARD

The greatest strength of an RPG is its ability to let players “go off the board.” A tabletop RPG is truly interactive. You can respond to absolutely *anything* a character does, even if you hadn’t thought about the possibility until the player spoke. This feature is utterly unlike a book, movie or TV show (which are all almost always scripted), or even a top-of-the-line computer game (which is dependent on what the programmers think should be possible or allowable). Use it! Encourage it! Strengthen it! When a player comes out of nowhere with a wild and neat idea: Run with it!

There are things you can do to prepare for the unexpected, with potentially useful information ready in advance and some simple ways of keeping track of what you and your players invent on the spot.

INDEX CARDS

By putting down the basic information for each incident on an index card, you can easily riffle through your “pack of adventures” and have details at hand in play. Separate cards for individuals, groups and situations make it easier for you to rearrange the pieces into new patterns. Indeed, for those GMs who prefer to improvise details in-play rather than sketching them all out ahead of time, entire sessions can be run from the skeletal write-ups on the cards.

You may also lay out the cards during the planning stages, to illustrate the connections and movement between incidents. Using this method, it’s easy to switch incidents around, making one come earlier in the session or slotting in some action between bouts of interaction, simply by moving the cards and changing the connections.

FLOWCHARTS

Using a flowchart with each incident’s name in a box can be a powerful tool for mapping out the connections between incidents. Flowcharts give you a strong overview of how incidents are related and make it clear where you still need to work out potential connections. All the connections you’ve established so far are graphically shown, preparing you for “what happens next”; new connections can be easily sketched in during play. Entire arcs and campaigns can be generally plotted out, involving dozens and dozens of incidents.

Unfortunately, using a flowchart usually entails a lot of flipping back and forth between flowchart and incident details. Also, relying too heavily on the options presented on the chart can lead to inappropriate choices on your part. The flowchart method works best in plotting out a game in advance.

PLANTING SEEDS AND SALTING HERRING

Russian playwright Anton Chekhov said, “If there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last.” Good campaign planning requires both laying the foundation for later developments and then fulfilling the promises you’ve made. Seeds are the hints and details that you sow early on in an incident, arc or campaign with the knowledge that they’ll grow up and be ready for harvesting later. Red herrings are the interesting but misleading details intended to divert interest from the real clues in a mystery.

SAFE SECRETS

Some of the advice here may sound like matters that work only if you keep them secret from the players. In practice it isn’t so. Even very experienced gamers, who have run many campaigns themselves and know much or all of the advice we’re offering, usually end up responding to Schrödinger details and the like with the same sense of discovery and triumph as players who don’t know that there’s any trickery or manipulation at work. Good engaging play sweeps away the detachment that a player would need to sit back and analyze all your techniques; and if the game is good, after-the-fact analysis won’t diminish their pleasure in the actual play. So don’t worry about hiding what you’re doing: If it works, it works no matter how much your players know.



If you only plant seed details, then your players will latch on to every single thing mentioned as being important, even if it isn't. If you only salt red herrings, players will learn to ignore all details, extraneous or intrinsic, since they all eventually start to stink and seem unimportant — even when they really do matter. Using seeds and red herrings together allows strong growth: The herrings fertilize the game by making its texture richer, and give seeds respite enough to sprout before the characters harvest, trample or pull them up by the roots.

In "Domaiz's Offer," the hidden symbol of the Healer cryptic alliance in the architecture of Othicci is a seed. Sending Skoat as a "diplomatic envoy" to the Kathlubytes is a red herring: His purpose is just to distract the snail-men long enough to permit Domaiz to snatch the God's Spittle without massive reprisal. Domaiz isn't actually interested in opening any sort of dialogue with them at the moment.

SCHRÖDINGER DETAILS

When is a seed not a seed? When it's a herring.

Physicist Erwin Schrödinger gave his name to a thought experiment about one of the stranger features of quantum mechanics. If you put anything — like a cat, in Schrödinger's formulation — in a box with a poison that has a 50% chance of discharging, the only way you can tell whether the cat is still alive is by opening the box and looking. According to the model of physics Schrödinger was advocating, the cat doesn't actually become purely alive or purely dead until the outside universe intervenes to take a look. Until then, the states of life and death overlap in a sea of overlapping possibilities. (The details are more complex, but this isn't a physics text book.)

Schrödinger details are the ones you put into play without knowing whether they'll turn out to be seeds or red herrings. As long as they interest you and fit the overall tone you want for the campaign at this point, go ahead and throw them in. Select two or three of the ones your players show the most interest in and develop them into new plot seeds. Not just incidents but whole arcs can emerge from the PCs' response to stray ideas of yours, and these plot developments often feel especially satisfying to players. They tend to think that they figured out something particularly clever, when in fact their responses are what made the detail important at all.

PACING AND STRUCTURE

Once you have a good idea of the overall goals for your campaign and its component parts and at least some idea of how you want to present things in play, you need to consider the forms within which you'll convey your chosen substance.

HOW MANY? HOW LONG?

How many incidents should there be in a session (or an arc, or a campaign)? There's no right answer, except for this one: However many incidents work during sessions with your group. That being said, here are some general rules of thumb to think about, in order to figure out which number works for you:

At a minimum, plots should be composed of three incidents (beginning, middle and end).

The average number of incidents in a plot is five: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement.

It's hard to fit in more than six to eight incidents in sessions running four to five hours, though the practical limit for your group depends on everyone's taste and energy level at the time of play.

The focus of an incident — action, interaction or education — helps determine the length of time it takes to play out. Education incidents run most quickly, with their straightforward description and education. Mild interaction and action incidents take longer, since they call for more player and character decisions; and strong interaction and action sequences like in-depth negotiation, planning and melee combat take longest.

Player interest changes the duration of incidents. When their interest flags, some groups spend little time in exploring the incident and just wish to get on to the next incident, while other groups drag their feet, waiting for the GM to "get to the good part." The more players are interested in an incident, the more time they will devote to it. They'll often move within it at a faster pace, accomplishing more as they engage in the details as well as taking the time to encounter more details. At this point it's possible for the overall movement of the game to get derailed, which is why there's also advice here on getting players interested in what comes after the incident at hand is over.

NPC-DRIVEN PLOTS

NPC-driven plots can be very satisfying: An NPC's hopes and dreams can be the engine that drives incidents and gives them meaning, as well as explain the "why did this happen?" If you have a good handle on the personalities, desires and drives of your NPCs, you can generate organic plots that stem from those factors and breathe life into a game. You can also run numerous changes and reverses on those plots by detailing the NPC's roles in the incident.

Your NPCs should have goals, things they want to have and to do in both the short and long terms. The NPC's goal is her heart's desire (if only temporarily), whether it's to find a lost parent; get her hands on a nifty soultech weapon; locate complete schematics for her broken cyber-arm; earn the respect of her peers; scavenge a new set of tires for her pick-up truck; trade for a nanoblock of radiation-scrubbers; fill her empty stomach with a cold beer and a soybean-paste sandwich; or achieve total dominion over a long-abandoned industrial complex. It's important to note how much the various NPCs admit their goals openly, and for that matter whether they acknowledge to themselves what it is they most want.

NPCs also have plans on how to reach their goals; they've probably also considered what they would sacrifice to obtain their goals, and considered several contingencies. The background and personality of the NPC influence his plans tremendously. A hulking and dim brute who desires piles of shiny things is not going to cook up a pyramid scheme to line his pockets; he'll probably stick to moving heavy things for weaker people, leg-breaking for nasty people and bullying the lunch money out of smaller people. A brilliant, aged scholar seeking a lost instruction manual will probably not run across the rooftops in ninja-garb, lower himself through the Library skylight on a zip-line, and get all "Mission: Impossible" personally; he'll probably work his contacts, offer something in trade for the book, try to trick the owner out of it or hire professional burglars to swipe it for him. As with goals, it's important to ask yourself how visible the plans are, and how much the NPCs are actually acting on them right now, as opposed to wishing they could and perhaps looking for the right ally or opportunity to begin.

GAMMA WORLD GAME MASTER'S GUIDE

There are many ways to map out NPC plans. One of the most useful is the timeline: The steps from A to B to C that an NPC will take if nothing goes wrong or interferes unexpectedly. (But what are the chances of nothing going wrong in a roleplaying game, really?) Think of the timeline of the bad guys in the movie *Die Hard*: they had a whole scenario figured out nicely, and almost everything clicked along just as it should have... until a single cop took the sort of unexpected action that a PC would, in a place he wasn't supposed to be. Timelines are great for mapmaking GMs, because they let you know what happens next if the characters choose not to become involved, and how far along the NPC's plans are if the characters get involved in an unexpected way.

Setting up, then analyzing, the intersections of these three factors for each major NPC of an incident can create deliciously intriguing plots and adventures for the characters to stumble into and aid or thwart (if necessary).

What are Skoat's goals? He hates the Kathlubytes because of his daughter's death and wants to make them pay. He also wants to serve the Mayor and Othicci to the best of his ability.

What is Skoat's plan? He's probably urging Domaiz to launch a reprisal, since he can personally assemble a heavily-armed raiding party in under a day. While he desires revenge greatly, his loyalty to Domaiz is keeping him in check for now.

What is Skoat's timeline? If Domaiz doesn't do something soon, Skoat will probably go off with a posse of his own secretly, unless the Mayor specifically orders him not to.

What are Domaiz's goals? He's a pacifist healer, dedicated to helping everyone. He's the head of a major trading community that he desires to continue to grow and thrive. He wants the God's Spittle moved to Othicci. However, he's not willing to kill to achieve these goals.

What is Domaiz's plan? Once he can get a group to agree to perform one of his three tasks, he'll immediately assemble teams to handle the other two, then set all three groups to their tasks. He might try to keep all of them in the dark (possibly even Skoat) about the existence of other teams, or failing that, that their tasks are related.

What is Domaiz's timeline? It will take about a day to assemble the other teams, a few days for Skoat

to be escorted up to Tabrafaut, and a day or so to get the repaired hover rig to the location of the God's Spittle machine. Domaiz's timeline includes meeting with characters; getting their agreement; assembling and meeting with other two teams; setting the teams to their tasks; sending out the hover rig once it's fixed to retrieve the God's Spittle about the time Skoat reaches Tabrafaut and the Metalloids are distracted; and finally grabbing the machine and bringing it back to Othicci.

This game could get very interesting if Skoat has secretly co-opted his "diplomatic party" into a raiding party, and if Domaiz never told Skoat about the snatch-and-grab plan. It can also be interesting if the characters, having dragged their feet in meeting Domaiz, agree to help with a task after Skoat has snuck off to get revenge. Or a more clued-in Skoat might misunderstand Domaiz's plan in moving the healing machine: What will he do if he discovers that Domaiz isn't grabbing the God's Spittle to control it — i.e., for the sole use of Imrythmen — but rather to allow even more people (including the hated Kathlubytes) to utilize it? Will such a situation overcome his deep loyalty to his Mayor?

NPC ROLES

There are five basic roles an NPC can take in an incident, with respect to the characters. Each influences the NPC's plans, and while previously established characterization is key, the NPC's particular role in the incident at hand will subtly influence how the characters will react to them at the moment, as well as in the future. These roles aren't exclusive; they're more like paints that can be mixed than like parallel lines that never cross. Furthermore, NPCs can and will change roles as play goes on.

- **Patron:** The NPC is in a position to offer missions, orders, rewards and/or support to the characters.

- **Ally:** The NPC offers aid and comfort to the characters, and shares at least some of their goals and plans.

- **Bystander:** The NPC has no particular commitment to the characters, and is present because something she's involved in is happening in the vicinity of whatever the characters are up to.

- **Rival:** The NPC actively contends with the character, to whatever limit is appropriate based on the nature and degree of his conflict with the characters. The rival may work as a foil, matching his

CHAPTER FOUR: PLOTS AND PLANS

strengths against a character's weaknesses and vice versa.

- **Enemy:** The NPC's goals are in direct conflict with the characters' aims; and the NPC is, for whatever reason, willing to go to almost any extreme in her battle against them. The conflict will likely not end until the NPC is dead, destroyed or decisively defeated.

NPCs can change roles, and how satisfying and interesting it seems to the players depends largely on what sort of rationale there is for the change. If the NPC has reasons that make sense to the players (even if they don't to the characters), it's likely to enhance or at least not detract from the game. Random and adversarial changes, on the other hand, can make players angry and less inclined to engage with the game. A long-time ally should have a very good reason for turning into an enemy, some serious and lasting violation of trust and understanding that goes well beyond monetary disagreements and insults. Conversely, an enemy who turns into a patron also needs a reason, whether it's a common enemy or some shift in the NPC's priorities; if the characters are ever to trust the new would-be patron, the reason needs to be both clear and supportable. Otherwise it reeks of manipulation.

SCHRÖDINGER ROLES

Interesting things can happen when no one, neither GM nor player, is sure which NPC is fulfilling a role that the players know is important to their characters' chances of success in the incident of the moment. In other words, the determination of which NPC is taking on that role is not decided upfront. Such Schrödinger roles work best in plots involving a secret benefactor (patron) or a mysterious adversary (enemy).

As the characters explore their surroundings, finding clues and spinning theories, the GM can decide at a later point which NPC is fulfilling the crucial role. Indeed, as the players try to puzzle out their hidden friend or foe, they'll spin out numerous theories, from which the GM can pick out interesting ideas. Players love it when their speculations turn out to be right. It reinforces their sense of being insightful and makes them eager to try it again.

Remember, though, that some players feel cheated if they know that there is no preexisting

answer for them to discover. Whether it feels like cheating or like the affirmative use of player ideas in a cooperative style depends partly on the specific circumstances. Many players need to feel that there's a meaningful chance of failure, which won't happen if you just make whoever they pick be the person they're looking for, for instance. Take the time out of game to learn how your players feel about it before springing this on them when it comes to a major point; and if you want to experiment, start with something small and self-contained. You start off with a reservoir of trust, which you can expand upon by showing interesting and unfamiliar techniques in use to make the game that much more interesting and rewarding for the players.

PC-DRIVEN PLOTS

PC-driven plots are among the most satisfying to play. As a player proactively pursues his PC's goals, he generates a lot of concepts for the GM to embroider further, from both his actions and NPCs' reactions to those actions. Additionally, the player feels strongly in control of his PC's destiny, as well as — if the GM is apt at describing changes in the setting wrought by characters' actions — the fate of the entire game.

But how do you spur your characters to start driving their own plots? Napoleon Bonaparte answered that question well before anyone thought of *Gamma World*. "There are two levers for moving men: interest and fear." His analysis holds true for female characters as well as male ones (and, given the circumstances of the Gamma Age, those that are both or neither of the usual genders).

Interest encompasses anything that draws a character forward, whether it's because she wants to understand it, interact with it or possess it. Fear covers everything that the character pulls away from, that she tries to evade, escape or otherwise separate herself from.

The same stimulus can be a matter of interest to one character and simultaneously a matter of fear for another. A band of rampaging bandits on the PCs' trail, for instance, may strike one character as a threat to his continued well-being and something he hopes to leave far behind. For his traveling companion, the bandits are targets of opportunity, foes that she can test herself against and whose defeat will enhance her reputation. You can easily build up layers of complication and, hopefully, dramatic

interest by wise use of connections to the characters' backgrounds and other incidents from the campaign so far. For instance, these bandits may be part of the band that wiped out the rest of the PCs' clan. Now the cautious character has that much more reason to fear them and the bold one that much more reason to seek out confrontation with them... or vice versa. Characters who have to balance the conflicting demands of interest and fear make for fun roleplaying, and many players appreciate it when you provide them with some spotlight time.

Characters' allegiances as established during character creation or built up during play provide many hooks for both interest and fear. Put in people or objects that a character's fellow adherents to a particular creed want to know more about, and the character has an immediate incentive to go look more closely at something she might otherwise ignore or stay away from, for instance, while the history of an allied group's troubles with and suffering at the hands of a mysterious force with some superficially interesting properties can give characters a good reason to leave it alone for now. Don't push this too hard: Use the interests and fears associated with allegiance to suggest and hint rather than to compel, and in particular use them to remind players of aspects of their characters that haven't come into play much recently. Then let your players make their own decisions about whether they want to follow up on such matters right now or not.

In "Domaiz's Offer," the strongest points of interest are the potential for reward and the opportunity for Healers to advance their group's cause. Sources of fear include the risk of Domaiz's ill will if the characters refuse or fail at their task.

BRAIDING PLOTS AND SUBPLOTS

Subplots do not always have to take center stage. Unlike the main plot, they're usually part of the background. Indeed, subplots whirring away that have absolutely no connection to the main plot can add texture and depth to incidents, arcs and campaigns. Subplots should surface from time to time, coming to the PCs' attention so that they can become involved (or act on their preexisting involvement) if they want to and then receding again for a while.

Many incidents can advance one or more subplots as well as the main plot. If you have two subplots active

during an arc, for instance, you might lay out some opening hooks for both as well as the main plot in the first incident, then alternate the subplots in subsequent incidents, bringing them together again with the main plot for the climax. Longer-running subplots can even run across multiple arcs. When the subplot proves to be something the characters are happy to engage with, the realization of how it has been building for quite some time adds an extra dimension of dramatic satisfaction.

If the characters are tasked in "Domaiz's Offer" to conduct Skoat on the diplomatic mission to the snail-men, the "Skoat's Revenge" subplot will become quite important. Will Skoat purposefully flub the diplomatic mission, "accidentally" causing a bloody "misunderstanding" between the characters and the Kathlubytes? What actions best help Skoat pursue his goals?

Now consider the "It's Green!" subplot. What happens when the characters start turning green? (That

SUBPLOTS

Subplots are collections of incidents, just as main plots are. If the game as a whole resembles a song, subplots are the harmony that complements the melody of the main plot. When constructing subplots, follow the same general advice as for main plots, with an added emphasis on tight focus on a single element (one character, one event, one emotion, one relationship, etc.) and the potential for more rapid and tidy resolution.

In "Domaiz's Offer," the main plot is Domaiz's desire to gain control of the God's Spittle machine. One subplot that's already shown up is that of Skoat wishing revenge on the Kathlubytes for the death of his daughter. As the game continues, later incidents should advance this subplot arc, which your notes might refer to "Skoat's Revenge" or something of the sort.

Another subplot, this one unrelated to the politics of the Valley, could be of interest for characters: Why are all the intelligent beings in the southern Anday Goopla Valley green? Is it due to nanotechnology? Is it some form of limited mutation? If so, what effect does it have on everyone? You might refer to this subplot as "It's Green!" or "The Green Mystery" or something else that makes it easy for you to remember what the point is.

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change will almost definitely catch their interest.) Does it affect any of their abilities? Are they concerned about it, or blasé about the situation? What if they start having very strange dreams?

In terms of connecting subplots to the main plot, it's obvious that "Skoat's Revenge," however it plays out, will have a tremendous effect on the arc that features "Domaz's Offer." However, the GM needs to decide if "It's Green!" should be connected to the arc. While there are ways it could — the nano of God's Spittle is somehow connected to the green coloration of the Imrythmen, for example — there's no reason it must.

CREATIVE BORROWING

You can learn a lot about building, refining, staging and pacing your games from other media. Movies, novels, plays and television all have lessons to teach; and close study can suggest both specific techniques and general strategies, as long as you keep the differences between gaming and other media clearly in mind.

For instance, Aristotle advocated the dramatic unities: unity of time, unity of place and unity of action. His ideal drama unfolded within the scope of a single day, in a single location, and everything that happened advanced the plot in some useful way. This didn't mean ignoring stories with larger scope, it just shaped the ways they should appear in plays following the unities, and in particular meant that the audience would learn of earlier developments along the way to the impending climax. Maintaining the focus required by the unities can help you sharpen the clarity and intensity of an incident, keeping it clearly centered on the goal and the point. It also suggests what sort of developments warrant becoming incidents — the ones with a lot of action (whether it's negotiation, combat or some other form of engagement between characters and others) in a compact framework — and which developments can be folded into an incident coming later via a little expository dialogue, well-placed evidence and the like.

The "Freytag's Pyramid" model for novel construction (described by German critic Gustav Freytag in his book *Technique of the Drama*) also contains some ideas that you might find helpful in trying to make a bunch of incidents add up to an arc with an identity of its own. A novel following the model begins with the introduction. Rising action introduces complications and their consequences, all of which come to a head in the climax. After that

comes falling action, in which the consequences of the climax make themselves known, and finally the denouement, which ties up the major loose ends. Five (or more) incidents arranged in this pattern can make for a fine and satisfying arc that feels dramatic without forcing the characters to follow any particular plot track.

Most television shows today are written to have an A plot, the main events of the episode, and at least one B plot which moves forward some continuing subplot. The science-fiction show "Babylon 5" did this regularly, as do ensemble shows such as "ER," "Law & Order," and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." Using this sort of structure will shape your players' expectations and give them some points of familiarity in structure that may help them make their way through unfamiliar situations and events.

PITFALLS OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Unfortunately, this sort of borrowing has to be done with circumspection. The problem with all of these adopted media tools is that they rely strongly on the scripted nature of the work in question. Most plot elements unfold in plays, movies, books and TV because the writer *makes* them unfold that way. As a GM, you don't have that luxury — that's railroading. The characters have minds of their own, and can choose not to react or get interested in your Freytag-influenced game arc, and there's really not much you can do about it except drop loads of hints or apply dangerous force to get them to go where they're *supposed to go*.

There's a problem here, and it's yours: It's the players' game too. There's no *supposed to go* here, only where they *want to go*. Otherwise, you run the risk of boring — or worse, alienating — your players. Anytime you find yourself creating incidents that require a certain course of action or the entire session falls apart (like solving a riddle trap to move forward, pulling the right lever, talking to the correct city guard, etc.), you're scripting for your characters, and moving into that choo-choo territory. Try to keep in mind that while in many ways RPGs are like books and movies, they are games first and foremost.

THE TAO OF GMING

Good, responsive and responsible GMing requires you to hold two opposite thoughts in your



mind simultaneously, grasshopper: “be flexible” and “be firm.”

- **Be flexible:** Bend, like a reed in the gale. Be open to ideas. Listen to what the characters are saying, as well as what the players say around the table. Adopt cool ideas; adjust your existing ideas to better fit what they perceive, expect, or are not expecting. Accept surprises as unanticipated gifts. Leave a little slack in your incidents to make all this possible.

- **Be firm:** Stand boldly, like an oak in a breeze. Keep to the point. Listen to what the characters are saying, and if they’re misunderstanding something, gently — but definitely — correct their perceptions. Be clear and detailed in your descriptions. Remind them of dropped balls and forgotten facts their characters would remember. Allow them to stand and fall on their own merits and plans.

WHEN IT ALL GOES BOOM

And despite all the planning and backstage juggling, sowing seeds and salting red herrings, fitting your campaign to your PCs like a glove, preparing opportunities for interest and fear, mapmaking

instead of railroading, the little freaks will do something utterly confusing and pointless that knocks your carefully constructed incidents, arcs and campaign into a cocked hat.

The characters have been awful twitchy since following Skoat in to see Domaiz. Noticing their nervousness, he offers them hospitality: the finest food and drink from his larder, healing for their wounds, some luscious green servants to rub their tired mutant feet. He speaks to them softly and kindly, trying to bring the conversation around such that he can make his eponymous offer to them.

But before he can do so, one of the paranoid characters shoves a gun in the Imrythman’s mouth and pulls the trigger, painting the wall of the chamber with the Mayor of Othicci’s brains. Now what?

You, the GM, are flabbergasted. You probably didn’t plan for this — why would you? It seems utterly random. Why were the characters so scared? What do you do now? All the subsequent incidents depend, one way or another, on “Domaiz’s Offer.”

- **Buy some time:** Mystery writer Raymond Chandler wrote, “...when in doubt, have two guys come through the door with guns.” Have some guardsmen come in, having heard the noise. Or at

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least the characters hear an alarm being raised in the rest of Domaiz's house. Then, take five. Be it food run, bathroom break, or "I need to stretch my legs," *get away* from the gaming table and the players. You're going to need a moment to think this out.

- **Analyze the situation:** Okay, the incident as you assumed it would play out, ain't gonna. How do you get the game back on track, so you can use all those incidents that you spent the better part of a week writing up? How do you fix this?

- **Recover the point:** The point of "Domaiz's Offer" was to get the characters involved in the politics of the Anday Goopla Valley. Well, they've made a good start by assassinating the leader of the largest community in the Valley. However, this isn't enough to get them really involved, or pointed towards the rest of the incidents. Therefore, they can't leave as yet: Maybe the river-gates are closed in honor of the dead Mayor, or there's a guard detail around their boat, or they are hailed as heroes, or they are chased north by a vengeful Skoat....

- **Have more fun:** What would be the most entertaining result of this ridiculous event for both the players and the GM? Trapped in Othicci? Rewarded by Skoat? Chased by Skoat? Rescued by a strike team of Kathlubytes, who uncharacteristically welcome the strangers into their normally xenophobic tribe for killing their greatest enemy? Think about your options, and pick the one you think will tickle the fancies of your players — *especially* the one who did the shooting.

- **Make sense:** Make sure that whatever you decide, all the bits and pieces that the PCs have already encountered add up. Anything they haven't seen, even if it's written down in your notes, is still negotiable; but once it's been shown in play, it's set in stone. If Skoat has been established as utterly loyal to Domaiz, he's probably not going to give the characters the key to the City without a damned good reason. Perhaps Skoat's "utter loyalty" was extracted under duress — Domaiz had been holding Skoat's infant son hostage, and given the loss of his daughter, the advisor could not disobey. Maybe Domaiz has been slowly dying of a disease, and as a Healer was unable to take his own life; the PC's act was one of unconscious mercy. Maybe Domaiz's brains turn out to be infested with strange mutant insects, and when they die, Skoat escapes from the hell of mind control he'd been living under. There

are a lot of possibilities, as long as you're willing to set aside what would have come before.

- **Resume:** Return to the table, smiling as broadly and as beamingly as you can. The dice will rattle from your players' fear and trembling. Never let 'em see you sweat.

NOTE-KEEPING

A big part of coming up with good, interesting plots is keeping good notes. An offhand mention of a sibling by a PC, captured in GM scribbles, can lead to a pulse-pounding hostage situation with Lil' Sis a couple incidents down the road. Keeping track of the NPCs that the characters talk with and what they discuss is handy. What if the characters are being followed, and those NPCs are questioned? What would they spill to the stalkers? Which abandoned bunker did the characters discover back in the first session? Perhaps it relates to the treasure map, villain or prophecy you laid out as a Schrödinger detail several sessions back.

Notes serve several purposes, including:

- **Memory aid:** Keeping important (and not so important) events, locations, characters and characterizations straight.

- **Future ramifications:** Quick reminders listing possible ramifications of PCs' actions (or lack of action).

- **Dangling threads:** Listing bits of plot that haven't been answered, dropped or ignored.

- **Bolts from the blue:** When sudden inspiration hits, grab pen and paper and get it down! Just as you can't rely on your memory to retain the name of that innkeeper, how much worse will it be if you can't remember that one idea that ties all of your loose threads of plot into a tidy package?

- **Self-critique and player feedback:** What both you and the players liked (and didn't like) about the session, and reminders on elements you want to try to do better with next time.

Take all those notes, run through them every few sessions, and see if they suggest new incidents and arcs to entertain both you and your players.

CLOSURE

A sense of closure is essential to creating memorable incidents, arcs and campaigns. As educator Booker T. Washington said, "Success is not measured by the position one has reached in life, rather by the obstacles overcome while trying

SERIOUS AND SILLY NOTES

Nobody but you will read most of your notes to yourself — players deal with what you bring into play; and if you discuss the game with others, you'll generally select and arrange just the pieces of information that matter to your topic of the moment, so you can maintain any level of seriousness or silliness in your notes without it mattering to anyone but you. For some people, a touch of silliness helps them keep their interest up while working with what are largely straightforward (even dull) collections of statistics and bare-bones descriptions. Others find it best to maintain the same tone in the notes that they want to bring into play. There's no universally right or wrong answer, just what works for you. But if you find that your incidents aren't coming out with the level of drama, action, comedy or other flavor that you'd hoped for, try varying the flavor of your preparation. See what makes it easiest for you to bring the attitude you want as well as the information you've prepared to the game, and stick with that.

to succeed." Too many games peter out and die not with a bang, but a whimper. End your games well, and your players will always come back for more.

Incidents generally end best with the characters in either a position of reasonable safety or in the middle of great danger (also known as a "cliffhanger"). A position of safety behind the village walls, holed up in a cave or back at the Boss's office after a mission allows the characters to rest and regroup between incidents. A cliffhanger is most useful at the end of a game session — freezing the action at a point of high tension — and helps retain interest until the next time everyone can get together.

Arcs should always end with at least partial resolution of their main points, but elements can be left dangling or unanswered, and new elements introduced. Yes, the characters liberated the town from Commandante Gato, but the feline mutant and his

gang slunk away before they could be caught. The serum was delivered, but a Typhoid Mary managed to get out of the quarantine zone. The computer disks were found, and contain not just the plans for the Oshiboro Grav-cycle, but also an encrypted file that doesn't yield to whatever computers the characters have access to just right now.

Campaigns need to end with major resolutions all around, as many points for incidents and arcs as you can reasonably fit in. The end of a campaign is usually the end of a game in some regard, so all the questions should be answered, all the threads tied off and snipped, with everyone getting their just deserts, be it reward or punishment. (Of course, you can leave a single, honking huge dangling piece, just in case you're called upon to run a sequel campaign.)

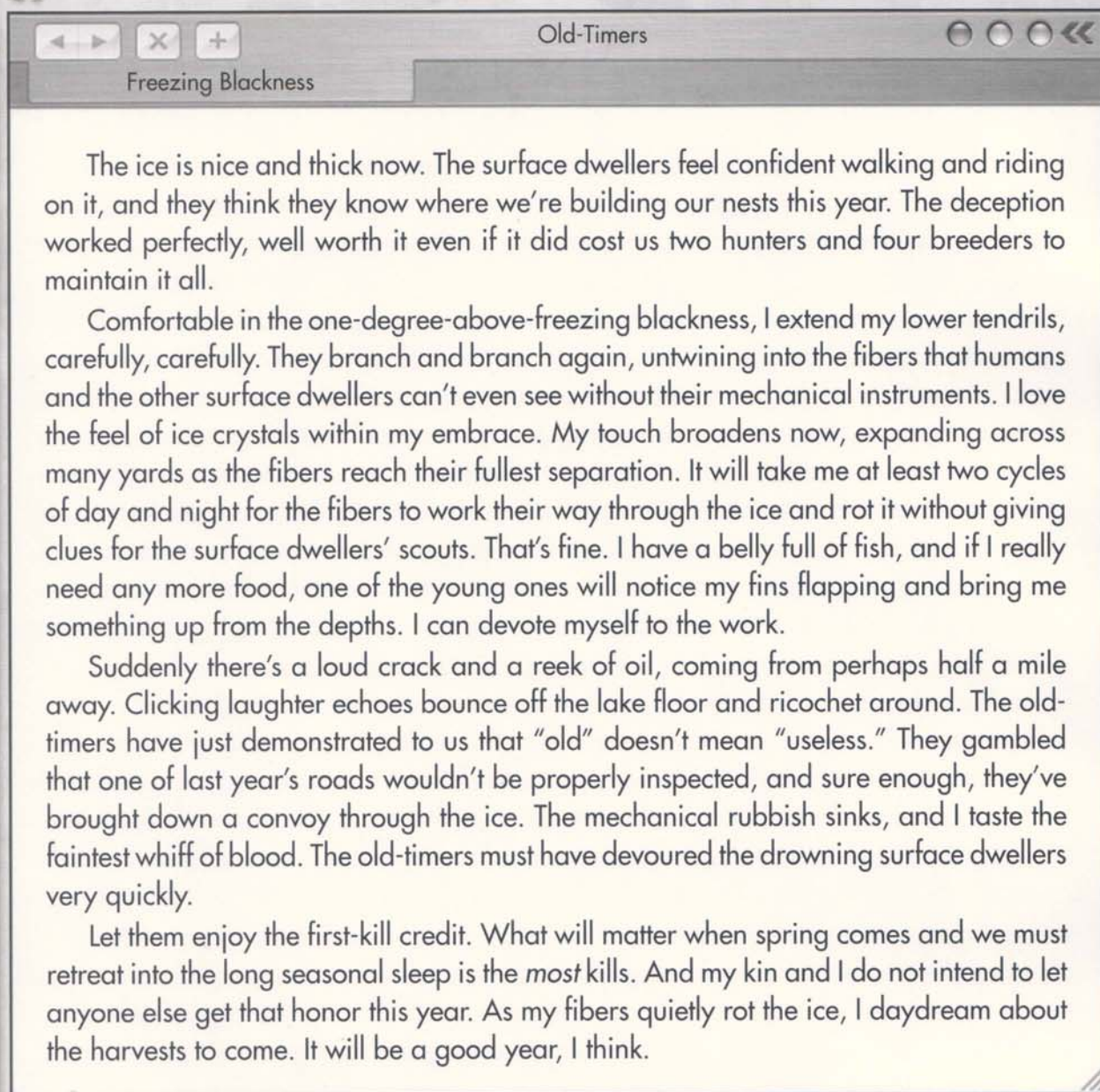
FINAL ADJUSTMENTS

Keep in mind as your campaign progresses that you can and should constantly alter and adjust situations to maintain a sense of challenge for the characters. Player interest can lapse if the obstacles are easily surmounted (or impossible to beat) and opportunities are too few (or too many). Modify the length and number of incidents and arcs to fill out the session nicely — not too sparse and not too dense. Ramp up the intensity gradually, with short plateaus so the characters can get a handle on their new status and try out their new abilities and equipment in relatively manageable circumstances, then resume the increase until you hit that climax for the campaign. Then, slowly and surely, wrap up the plots and come to some good closure.

Challenge yourself as a GM by trying new techniques, creating NPCs unlike your usual ones, changing up the style of your games (from action-adventure to political thriller, from cloak-and-dagger to rescue work, from rebuilding a community to rediscovering lost civilizations). Push your skills, refine your strengths and reinforce your weaknesses. You'll give better game that way.

These are skills that must be learned by doing, so get out there and start plotting!

CHAPTER FIVE
**THE RULES
OF THE GAME**



This chapter deals with the mechanics of the game, the nitty-gritty of Difficulty Classes (DCs), what skills qualify a character to face specific tests and so on. The rules are what guide you and your

players in translating intention into outcome; and the better you understand the rules, the better you can use them as tools to advance your goals rather than running into them as obstacles.

ALL THE BITS OF IT

The heart of the d20 System is very simple: one way of resolving challenges with uncertain outcomes, a few fundamental abilities, manageable lists of feats and skills and so on. It gets complex in application for two reasons. First, there are a lot of pieces that you can add to the mix, depending on what you pick and choose from core books and supplements. There are only so many items that any mind can keep track of at once, and it takes some study to get a sense of what they all do. Second, whenever there are a lot of pieces to deal with, they can interact in sometimes surprising and complex ways.

THE JOYS OF EXPERIMENTATION

Sometimes you just plain don't know and can't really guess how optional rules and possibilities will affect your campaign. It's good to be consistent, but it's also good to try out some new ideas once in a while. There are at least two ways you can experiment without risking the integrity of an existing campaign.

- **The Maybe Session:** Using the existing characters and their circumstances, you declare that this one session is going to be an experiment. You make note of the condition of the player characters, significant nonplayer characters and other relevant data at the start of the session. Then you play, and try out whatever it is you want to try out. If the results suit everyone, then you declare that, yes, this session counts for purposes of the campaign's history. If the results seem unsatisfactory, then you roll back to the conditions you noted down and wave the session away as a learning experience. It might be a dream or a virtual reality simulation of some sort, or just might never have happened as far as the "real" characters are concerned.

- **The Sideshow:** You set the existing characters and circumstances aside for a session and create new characters tuned to maximize the

possibilities you're interested in. Free of any concerns about the campaign's integrity, you can get wild if you want to, or focus in on a particular aspect of the game with a laser-like intensity that wouldn't otherwise be feasible. Whatever it is you do, when the session ends, that's the end of those characters. You then decide how (if at all) you want to apply the lessons learned to the regular campaign.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT ROLL

The *d20 Modern* game provides mechanics to deal with a large number of situations that might come up in the game. However, no matter how many volumes are dedicated to the subject, they will never be enough. Players will always find ways to force Game Masters to think on their feet.

At its core, a d20 System game can be boiled down to a player declaration of action, a die roll (usually, but not always, a d20) and the GM's arbitration of what happened. A good game, however, has layers of setting, plot, character development, dramatic tension and a dash of psychoanalysis thrown in over the mechanical foundation in order to tell a story. Even in a good game, fumbling over the mechanics can quickly bring the players out of the story. The fine art of running a game in the d20 System requires a GM to smoothly decide on the mechanics in order to keep her players in the story.

In a d20-system game, there are three broad types of rolls that come up in the course of the game. Each of these are dealt with slightly differently, and are used to model different situations. These rolls are the ability check, the saving throw and the skill check.

- **Ability Check:** This is a d20 roll modified only by an ability modifier. An ability check often is the toughest check a player will encounter, because ability scores increase very slowly with level. A 20th-level character who is weak in the

specified ability often has a lower modifier than a 1st-level character who is strong in the ability. Because of this, ability checks tend to be the great equalizer of rolls made in the d20 System. While high-level characters may grow cocky with regard to skill checks or saving throws, they still tremble when faced with a high-DC ability check.

Ability checks often represent events that affect all creatures irrespective of skill or training. Rolls to open a jammed door or stay conscious while suffocating represent actions where skill doesn't much affect the probability of success. On average, a character well-suited to the ability check (for example, a Tough character trying to resist suffocation) has a modifier of +2, +1 per 8 character levels.

When determining the DCs for ability checks, keep in mind what the DC represents, and how players interpret them. A DC 11 check succeeds about half the time for a character who lacks any relevant modifiers, but 50/50 chances feel worse than that to most players. If you want your players to feel confident that their characters can count on succeeding at a particular check, you generally need either a lower DC or some positive modifiers. DC 5 checks result in success 3 times out of 4 for characters without modifiers, and players feel as though they can count on that. Unmodified DC 15 checks succeed only 1 time in 4, and the difference between that and "out of the question" is small for many players. And a DC over 20 is, for a character without modifiers, equal to any other over 20 — impossible. (Remember, a natural 20 does not always succeed on ability and skill checks, nor does a 1 fail.) So the difference between DC 25 and DC 50 is just a bit of intimidation.

(As always with generalizations like this, your players may have their own tastes. Just make sure that you understand what those tastes are, and whether they match these generalizations. The advice here is as much about asking the right questions as about handing you answers that are guaranteed fit your particular circumstances.)

Sometimes you'll want to take an event that normally calls for a saving throw and make it an ability check instead. This minimizes the effects of experience and level, throwing the character back on her most basic nature. For example, a particularly virulent toxin or an area of penetrating radiation might call for a

Constitution check instead of the normal Fortitude save. This would give a small effective penalty to low-level characters but would greatly penalize high-level characters. Throwing in these events every once in a while can keep high-level groups on their toes; however, be careful when setting DCs for these events to prevent them from becoming too deadly.

- **Saving Throw:** This measures the character's ability to resist something undesirable that has come up in the surrounding environment. These rolls are effectively ability checks that are modified slightly by level. This makes a saving throw ideal for modeling situations where the character is avoiding some calamity and skill *does* play a factor.

Obvious examples of saving throws can be found throughout the rules. Withstanding poisons or mutations, dodging mutant powers and defending against psionics all call for saving throws. There are other places, though, that a saving throw may be appropriate. Perhaps a character needs to make a Reflex save to avoid dropping an item or slipping on a slick surface. Sometimes a character should make a Fortitude save to avoid falling asleep at his post, or a Will save to ignore the effects of a subliminal message. To decide on what kind of saving throw is appropriate, see *d20 Modern*, Chapter 5: Combat, "Combat Statistics," *Saving Throws*.

On average, a character has a save bonus equal to half her total character level for a good save and a third of her level for a poor save. So add the relevant fraction of character level, or about half the CR of an encounter, to the numbers above when considering the odds and psychology of various DCs. Keep in mind that you have some extra room to set the DCs for saving throws that you intend to be challenging because they're usually one-shot events, and players expect them to be challenging. Players usually become dissatisfied upon finding that, on the average, their characters can't walk around or over normal but difficult terrain features, but they're seldom so upset by finding that their characters didn't manage to resist a particular poison.

- **Skill Check:** This measures the character's ability to perform a task that calls on her expertise and training. Since different characters have levels of any given skill ranging from none to as

much as their level allows, plus bonuses from feats and other special modifiers, the potential range of skill DCs is very broad indeed. If you set a DC that makes the check a challenge for the characters with a lot of skill levels, you pretty well guarantee that the rest must count high rolls — if it's a task that they can attempt to perform at all. Conversely, a DC that is a moderate challenge for characters with a few skill levels will be a nearly guaranteed success for their fellow party members. This problem magnifies with rising character levels, as the spread of possible skill levels widens.

Of course, part of the point of advancing in character level is precisely that characters can become better and better at their various interests, so tough DCs are entirely appropriate. You can keep the players of characters that lack the particular skills that matter in the check at hand happy in at least two ways: provide a complementary challenge that they're suited for, or provide multiple ways of getting through the situation. Remember to think of the check as part of a larger situation, and look at the overall goal. If the goal is "keep our pursuers from catching up and get into that room past this security post," for instance, the first part might call for building a barricade, laying a trap or setting up an ambush point from which to attack; while the second part might call for breaking an old encryption system, using mutant powers to impersonate authorized users, or even using nanotech to infiltrate through the ventilation system and then open the door from the other side. The situation is more than just a list of skill checks — it's a set of challenges, and your players will like it if you provide them each opportunities to show off their neat stuff without too often facing certain doom because the one character who could do anything had bad luck.

The same concern arises with attack bonuses and Defense. Characters with expertise in combat, thanks to their choice of classes, feats, skills and features like special qualities and equipment, can confidently face threats that will simply crush their less-combat-ready allies. Deciding how to balance these concerns is partly a matter of genre, as discussed in Chapter Two, and partly a matter of general play style, as discussed in Chapter One. As with skill checks, you can sometimes arrange things so that the

THE CM IS ALL RIGHT

There's always a risk in describing ways of tweaking the boundaries of the rules — that GMs will feel pressured to push or pull their games in directions they're not comfortable with. So this is an explicit declaration: If you'd rather stick with the game as written, do. If we thought the game weren't worth playing as is, we wouldn't be here offering you supplements for it. Sometimes it's good to make some changes, but sometimes not; and you are not some unenlightened lesser being if you don't find the sorts of changes suggested here worth your while.

characters with a lot of combat power face the tougher challenges while the weaker characters deal with challenges suitable for their level of competence. And sometimes there just will be challenges that work for some characters while others focus on keeping out of the way.

THE ART OF TAKING 10

Taking 10 in d20 System games has both game-mechanical significance and consequences at the level of the characters. Most obviously, it simplifies play: You and the player know that the character can accomplish something with routine effort, so you let it go ahead and happen. This can actually lead to either of two opposite results: It can let you and your players move along to something more engaging, more in need of detailing, without further ado; it can also accompany a more detailed playing out of the scene at hand, in circumstances where the element of randomness isn't wanted.

In the course of a campaign, the progression from required rolls to taking 10 can provide a potent marker of characters' progress. The players used to have to make a roll for this particular kind of challenge, and now they don't. It can also indicate the overall level of tension within a particular scene. Sometimes the characters wouldn't have the time for reflection and concentration, but here they do.

You may wish to allow more leniency in circumstances where there are alternatives available and where characters can devote more than the bare minimum of time and attention.

For instance, if they're scouting a route through ruins, there's likely more than just one way to get from here to there. If they're trying to repair a damaged vehicle with adequate parts, good lighting and so on, they can keep trying various possibilities, improvising a bit as necessary. On the other hand, in combat there's no substitute for dealing with the attack about to strike them and no time for contingency plans.

(As a general principle of scenario design, too, it's good to have contingency plans of your own. If you make everything hinge on this particular roll working just right... it won't. Allow for the reality of bad luck, misunderstanding and other complicating factors, and your players will be a lot happier about getting their characters through tight situations.)

USING SKILLS

Skills measure the characters' expertise in various fields of knowledge and activity. That much is obvious. But what that means in practice varies a great deal, depending on what you allow players to do in the course of play. There's no universally right or wrong way to do it, but there are ways that might not actually mesh with what you'd like to accomplish.

- **Narrow Skills:** You interpret each skill as a very distinct thing, avoiding any overlap and requiring multiple skills to fully cover a complex subject.

- **Broad Skills:** You interpret each skill definition as reflecting the core of an expansive range, allowing overlap and tying together practice and knowledge. (That is, a practical skill like Craft also provides opportunities for a character to know related bits of lore.)

Broad skills are better for epic adventure, narrow skills for tightly focused drama. (See Chapter Two for more details about genre-specific concerns.) Broad skills feed the spirit of mythological and pulp heroes, who can do a whole lot with grace and style, while narrow skills encourage each character to develop a tight specialization and therefore to have more incentive to cooperate closely in teamwork. You give up some possibilities however you choose to interpret skills — you can't have it be both hot and cold at the same time — but then you also gain good possibilities whatever you decide, too.

Depending on how much input you like players to have into the game's planning (see Chapter One), you may want to go ahead and ask them what their preferences are, too. Whether or not you consult with them, you should be very sure you tell them your final decision, because few things so thoroughly derail a game as confusion about what the entries in skill lists mean the characters can actually do.

OPTIONAL RULE: COMPLEMENTARY SKILLS

Gamma World is a game about characters who can do all sorts of freaky cool stuff, in a world loaded with opportunities for them to get both freaky and cool. If you want to encourage players to make the fullest use of their abilities, allow them to use skills in a sort of one-two-punch combination. The character spends one full action in some preparatory maneuver, successfully using a skill against a DC that varies as usual; she then makes a second check against DC 15 with that same skill. If the second check succeeds, she gets a +2 circumstance bonus on the skill check she makes in the next round, as long as it follows logically from the setup.

Example: Geni, an experienced Tough hero, faces off against a large robot blocking the entrance to a chamber holding something she very much wants to get. If she just charges past it, she'll incur an attack of opportunity. But she tries something a little more clever. She spends one round scaling up the wall behind her, higher than the robot can reach conveniently. That takes a Climb check, which she makes; and she then makes the second check against DC 15 which allows her to use her skills in combination. The next round, she Tumbles down, and gets a +2 circumstance bonus on that check because of her Climbing preparation.

You don't have to allow players to do this, and you don't have to allow them to do it all the time even if you do encourage it in some situations. But we recommend it as a way for characters to integrate their various competencies into an overall sense of "this is what I can do."

CREATIVE SKILLS

In addition to the question of narrow or broad skill definitions, you as the GM have the authority to decide whether and how far players can go beyond the written definitions for each skill in coming up with new applications. Here

too, there's no universally right answer. It is the intent of the rules to suggest possibilities rather than exhaustively categorize, but there are also merits to knowing that what's listed goes and nothing else does. It takes a measure of player/GM trust and cooperation to extend the potential applications of a skill without it turning into a free-for-all. Take these entries as suggestions as well, and see how this kind of thing works in your campaign.

- **Balance:** A successful DC 15 Balance check adds a +2 circumstance bonus on a character's Reflex save to minimize the damage from vehicular collisions and the like.

- **Bluff:** Each allegiance the bluffing character shares with the target of a bluff adds a +2 circumstance bonus on the Bluff check, since the character can draw on nuances of shared knowledge and belief. In addition, the character may approach the bluff situation as a matter for social investigation with DC 15; success on that check also adds a +2 circumstance bonus.

- **Climb:** Knowledge of a particular sort of environment, like Knowledge (streetwise), or knowledge of a particular sort of technology, like Knowledge (technology: Pre-War), can enhance climbing efforts. Success at the DC 15 Knowledge check adds a +2 circumstance bonus on the character's next Climb check.

- **Computer Use:** A character can use this skill to operate a computer-controlled vehicle as long as the controls are of the type the character is specialized in (that is, data and operation systems, AI or biotech), though not very well. She must successfully analyze at least one layer of the vehicle's controls, and can then substitute Computer Use for the relevant vehicle operation skill with a penalty of -2 on the check, plus an additional -2 for each unresolved investigation layer.

- **Craft:** The Craft skills can let a character engage in a quick act of sabotage. This requires a check with the relevant Craft skill against DC 15. Success creates a flaw that has to be fixed before the device will work, which requires a successful Repair check with a DC of (10 + the saboteur's Craft ranks). (It's possible to use the relevant Craft skill to attempt the repair, but the check is made with a -2 penalty.) If the saboteur first makes a Knowledge check with the relevant

technology type against DC 15, then the would-be fixer must first unravel an investigation layer of with a DC of (15 + the saboteur's Intelligence bonus). The Knowledge check and the Craft check each require a single round, and the player can choose to take 10 or take 20 as usual.

- **Decipher Script:** A successful DC 15 Decipher Script check gives the character a +2 circumstance bonus to analyzing a layer of social phenomena from written evidence, as the nature of the script provides clues about the writers' priorities and aesthetics.

- **Diplomacy:** Success at the relevant DC 15 Computer Use or Knowledge (technology) skill check gives the character a +2 circumstance bonus on efforts at Diplomacy with synthetics and AIs. Success on a DC 15 Diplomacy check grants a +2 circumstance bonus to a character's subsequent Bluff attempt.

- **Disguise:** Each shared allegiance between a disguised individual and someone trying to see through that disguise grants a +2 circumstance bonus on the Spot check. (The more you have in common with someone, the harder it is to fool him.)

- **Escape Artist:** A character attempting to escape confinement can make a DC 15 Treat Injury check; success inflicts 1d6 points of damage on the character, but gives her a +2 circumstance bonus on the ensuing Escape Artist check, reflecting the benefits and liabilities of contorting and dislocating inconvenient body parts deliberately.

- **Forgery:** Fully analyzing the social circumstances of the target (a DC 15 task — or higher, if the individual's social standing is complex) of an upcoming Forgery check adds a +2 circumstance bonus on the check.

- **Gamble:** A successful DC 15 Gamble check grants a +2 circumstance bonus on any effort by allies in the area to sneak past the other gamblers, engage in a bit of bluffing or otherwise pull a fast one, since the bout of impressive gambling soaks up the other gamblers' attention.

- **Gather Information:** Making a successful DC 15 Gamble check and deliberately losing -1 point of Wealth bonus gives the character a +2 circumstance bonus on Gather Information checks aimed at those who were in or saw the

SKILL DCS

This chart illustrates the range of Difficulty Classes with examples of things Gamma World characters might well want to do.

DC	Example	Roll (Key Ability)	Who Could Do It
-10	Notice a major city	Spot (Wis)	Anyone with eyesight
0	Hear a death machine a mile away	Listen (Wis)	Anyone not currently shouting
5	Execute a prepared script or application	Computer Use (data and operation systems) (Int)	A trainee
5	Locate the power switch on a familiar kind of device	Knowledge (technology) (Int)	A basic student of the appropriate technology class
5	Win a game of skill against people who've never played it before	Gamble (Wis)	Anyone with experience at the game
10	Cross a partially collapsed pedestrian bridge	Balance (Dex)	Anyone who can see the missing parts of the bridge
10	Follow a trail maintained by your community in bad visibility	Survival (Wis)	Anyone who's been on the trail in good visibility
10	Pilot an unresisting vehicle in good conditions	Pilot (Dex)	Anyone who's been introduced to the vehicle
10	Apply a minor biotech graft	Treat Injury (Wis)	Anyone with a properly identified graft
15	Break down an unreinforced door	(Str)	Anyone who can get a little leverage or a running start
15	Make indifferent people friendly	Diplomacy (Cha)	Anyone with a pleasant demeanor
15	Trace three generations of a family through community birth and death records	Research (Int)	Anyone with practice understanding such records
15	Apply a major biotech graft	Treat Injury (Wis)	Anyone with a properly identified graft
20	Install a minor biotech implant	Treat Injury (Wis)	Anyone with the Surgery feat and a properly identified implant
20	Notice someone moving nearby with Pre-War active camouflage	Spot (Wis)	Anyone with substantial experience in reconnaissance
20	Operate a computer while being shot at	Concentration (Con)	Anyone with experience in combat operations
25	Jump over a dynamic pedestrian barricade	Jump (Str)	An experienced Strong or Fast hero
25	Notice that a friend or ally is under some sort of mind control	Sense Motive (Wis)	Anyone with substantial experience analyzing behavior
25	Install a major biotech implant	Treat Injury (Wis)	Anyone with the Surgery feat and a properly identified implant
30	Make sense of Pre-War advertisements in an unfamiliar language	Decipher Script (Int)	A very experienced Smart hero
30	Break a well-maintained security system	Disable Device (Int)	Anyone with a lot of experience in ruins of the appropriate technology level
40	Track a camouflaged glider in uncertain weather	Survival (Wis)	A veteran Tough hero

game, as taking the character's money breeds a bit of over-confidence.

- **Handle Animal:** It takes a DC 10 Handle Animal check to start a stampede among any creatures that can be scared or angered into uncontrolled charges. *Stopping* a stampede requires a check against DC 15 if the character has worked with that sort of creature before, or against DC 20 if not. Of course, the second check must be made in front of the herd.

- **Hide:** A successful DC 15 Escape Artist check adds a +2 circumstance bonus on an ensuing Hide check, as the character makes better use of unusually shaped cover and places to hide.

- **Knowledge:** Knowledge skills can also let characters know where to find someone who practices crafts and other practical skills related to the field of knowledge: for Knowledge (art), for instance, that would include people who make the materials needed for art of different kinds, along with collectors and dealers in cultures that have that sort of person. This is generally a matter of generally available information and therefore the check is made against DC 10 (see *Gamma World Player's Handbook*, Chapter Two: Characters, "Skills," *Knowledge*); there's no DC bonus for close-at-hand information, though the penalties for distant information do apply as usual.

- **Listen:** In noisy conditions, a successful DC 15 Balance or Move Silently check gives the character a +2 circumstance bonus on her ensuing Listen attempt, reflecting the effort to silence her own noises.

- **Perform:** A successful DC 15 Bluff or Diplomacy check adds a +2 circumstance bonus on the ensuing Perform check, to reflect good audience warm-up. A successful DC 15 Computer Use (data and operation systems) check gives a +2 circumstance bonus to a performer using electronic instruments to rewrite old symphonies with new technology.

- **Speak Language:** If you want to add a little extra detail when it comes to dialects, you can apply the modifiers for Knowledge tasks to this skill as well, reflecting the accumulation of little variations between communities (see *Gamma World Player's Handbook*, Chapter Two: Characters, "Skills," *Knowledge*).

- **Survival:** This is a good candidate for use in combination with the various Knowledge

skills: Knowledge (Earth and life sciences) for areas away from civilization, Knowledge (streetwise) for harsh urban environments, or the various Knowledge (technology) skills for ruins of that technological vintage. Where there's an opportunity for this, a DC 15 Knowledge check gives the character a +2 circumstance bonus on the upcoming Survival check. So can a successful use of the Track feat against a situational DC (see *d20 Modern*, Chapter 3: Feats, "Feat Descriptions," *Track*), as an understanding of local prey contributes greatly to answering questions like "How can I avoid perishing miserably here?"

- **Treat Injury:** Removing a biotech or cybernetic implant requires a Treat Injury check against the same DC that implanting it called for. A successful Knowledge (technology) or Computer Use skill check of the relevant specialty also grants a +2 circumstance bonus on the attempt. The cost of failure for the patient are the same as for the implanting attempted; see *Gamma World Player's Handbook*, Chapter Three: FX, "Biotechnology," *Installing Biotechnology* for the gory details.

CREATIVE FEATS

Most feats let the character do some specific sort of thing — but that one thing may have a lot of applications. This section provides you with some examples that you can use both as the basis for suggestions when players seem stuck for ideas and to add variety to the NPCs you create.

- **Action Hero:** The rules don't specify whether characters can acquire this feat more than once, and your answer will depend primarily on how much extra "juice" you want them to have. Action points let characters push their usual limits, which is good in a campaign focusing on, well, action, but not so good in campaigns where you want to emphasize human (and other) frailty and limitations along with heroic potential. But don't go overboard on restrictions; keep in mind that action points only regenerate when characters level up, and remember that you retain ultimate control over advancement.

- **Agile Riposte:** A character who has the required weapon proficiency and a fully analyzed ranged weapon can use that weapon for this feat. Handheld weapons do pistol-whipping damage;

larger ones do rifle-butting damage. (See *d20 Modern*, Chapter 4: Equipment, "Melee Weapons," *Simple Melee Weapons*.)

- **Aircraft Operation:** You may want to introduce additional types of aircraft if you make heavy use of exotic aircraft like ornithopters. The tradeoff here, as with other feats that have categories for specialization, is a simple one. When the categories are broad, characters are less likely to be caught in a situation where they're not quite competent despite generally relevant expertise. When the categories are narrow, characters have the opportunity to specialize in cool and useful specifics.

- **Attentive:** Characters can use this feat to support investigation efforts (see *Gamma World Player's Handbook*, Chapter Six: The Gamma World Campaign, "Investigation"). Success at an Investigate check with a DC equal to that of the next analysis layer provides a +2 circumstance bonus on the ensuing Knowledge check.

- **Combat Reflexes:** Just to be clear, the benefits of this feat do apply to guns when the character has the Snap Shot feat as well.

- **Dead Aim:** A character who also has the Snap Shot feat may make a DC 18 Concentration check or spend an action point to avoid losing the concentration necessary to use this feat if she interrupts her round of preparation to make a Snap Shot attack of opportunity.

- **Double Tap:** A character who also has Snap Shot can use these two feats in combination in an attack of opportunity, if the situation meets all the qualifications for both.

- **Enhanced Programming:** If synthetics require special machinery or software to acquire this feat, storehouses of the necessary gear will be valuable places, subject to attack and worthy of defense. If the feat only applies to skills available in the community the character now inhabits, then there's incentive for travel and exploration of unfamiliar cultures. The two together practically outline a whole campaign by themselves.

- **Endurance:** The benefits of this feat do stack with those of Survivalist.

- **Frightful Presence:** All types of *Gamma World* characters can take this feat: pure-strain and stock humans, mutants and synthetics are all eligible for it. You should consider giving a

+2 circumstance bonus on the Intimidate check when the player provides a particularly vivid description of the character's actions.

- **Heroic Focus:** Depending on your preferred style of play, you may wish to allow the feat to extend to skills for which the character can't normally take 10. This can make a good option for characters who take the feat twice: The first time it works as described in the *Gamma World Player's Handbook*, the second time it also allows for taking 10 on skills that generally don't allow it.

- **Medical Expert:** It's possible to take this feat multiple times. Each of the additional instances applies to pure-strain humans or stock humans or mutants, chosen at the time the character acquires the feat, and the character can only have one bonus instance of this feat for each of those three types.

- **Paragon:** It's worth noting that the combination of Action Hero and Paragon can produce some very impressive characters, or at least characters who can act very impressively for sustained periods once in a while. A group of Paragons with Action Hero-reinforced pools of action points using their class talents well can scare the tar out of a lot of competition. The benefits of skill-boosting feats from *d20 Modern* like Acrobatic, Alertness, Confident, Trustworthy and Vehicle Expert do stack with the benefits of Paragon, for that extra bit of particularly spectacular return on effort.

- **Scavenger:** A synthetic with this feat, or with an ally who has it, is at a substantial advantage when it's time to repair damage; a non-synthetic may be able to strike good bargains for providing her services to synthetics.

- **Snap Shot:** This feat exists primarily to make a wider range of gun-fighting characters feasible in the mixed circumstances that characterize *Gamma World* combat. With this feat, characters who are at their best with guns don't automatically have to ditch them the moment a fight draws close.

- **Spontaneous Algorithm:** The combination of this feat and Enhanced Programming removes nearly all obstacles to a synthetic character's mastery of just about any class or occupation it chooses. This in turns open up interesting possibilities, from synthetic infiltrators in the *Terminator* style ("...because we know synthetics can't do that...") to visionary synthetics with

followers who see its transcending of its limits as indicating divine favor, a new era for cybernetic evolution or something else equally dramatic.

- **Streetfighting:** A character who has the required weapon proficiency and a fully analyzed ranged weapon can use that weapon for this feat. Handheld weapons do pistol-whipping damage; larger ones do rifle-butting damage. (See *d20 Modern*, Chapter 4: Equipment, "Melee Weapons," *Simple Melee Weapons*.)

- **Sunder:** A character who also has Advanced Firearms Proficiency or Exotic Firearms Proficiency can use this feat and that weapon against objects within one range increment.

- **Surface Vehicle Operation:** You may wish to add additional categories for exotic vehicles like multi-legged walkers.

- **Survivalist:** This feat isn't just popular among loner explorers. It can reflect the cumulative experience of a whole group used to living in harsh situations. It can be the social equivalent of the Tech Familiarity feats.

- **Systems Familiarity:** If you plan a campaign with a lot of physical or social exploration, this feat will come in very, very handy for one or more characters.

- **Track:** When following a vehicle, a character can attempt a Knowledge check for the vehicle's level of technology with the same DC as the upcoming Track task. If it succeeds, the character gets a +2 circumstance bonus on the Survival check to Track the vehicle.

- **Two-Weapon Fighting:** A character who has the required firearms proficiency and a fully analyzed ranged weapon can use a pair of those firearms as melee weapons for this feat. Handheld weapons do pistol-whipping damage; larger ones do rifle-butting damage. (See *d20 Modern*, Chapter 4: Equipment, "Melee Weapons," *Simple Melee Weapons*.) This also applies to Improved and Advanced Two-Weapon Fighting.

- **Weapon Focus:** A character who takes this feat twice, once for a melee weapon and once for a ranged weapon, may then take Two-Weapon Fighting and use it with those two weapons, even though they're mismatched.

CINEMATIC COMBATS

The default assumption in *d20 Modern* is that every detail of combat matters: Each advance or

retreat, each blow and parry, is interesting and significant. This is why the game gives attention to the details of physical position and tactical choices, so that you and your players can make meaningful decisions.

However, there *are* times when not every detail matters. This is partly a matter of genre, and partly a matter of the PCs' overall level and competence. The rules presented here will help you out in those times when you want to convey the general impression of battling a horde of relatively easy-to-vanquish creatures without statting up every ant, badder or security drone. The leaders of a group of antagonists matter; the followers may matter only in the aggregate.

Extras are NPCs who are like ordinaries but more so, in that they have very little individual identity; they exist mostly to whittle down the PCs' consumable resources and to give characters the chance to look that much cooler and impressive in combat.

An extra has 1 or more basic class levels, but does not use feats in combat. Every extra has ability scores of 13, 12, 11, 10, 9 and 8, allocated as you see fit. (For combat purposes, the higher scores likely go into Strength, Dexterity and Constitution, but there are times when you'll want to do otherwise.) An extra has a Challenge Rating equal to his character level -2, or -2 less than a regular member of his species. (For other features of ordinaries which apply to extras, see *d20 Modern*, Chapter 8: Friends and Foes, "Supporting Characters," *Ordinaries*.)

Extras exist to be a nuisance in groups. En masse, they can create fairly resilient barriers to the PCs' forward movement. They make heavy use of the aid another maneuver to support each other or their bosses in attacks, and they exploit whatever attacks of opportunity they can make.

Unlike standard combat situations, characters fighting extras *can* take 10: the extras throng in so densely that average results are readily obtainable. The player may choose to go ahead and roll, of course; also, any player whose character makes use of a feat in an attack must also roll as normal. The player may spend an action point to make any one attack against extras an automatic critical hit. Extras have a massive damage threshold of 10.

When extras outnumber a specific character they surround by a ratio of at least 4 to 1, the extras all gain the +2 bonus on their attack rolls.

As far as the typical evil mastermind is concerned, her extras have done their jobs if they slow the characters down long enough for the

mastermind to get a deadlier plan in motion, and perhaps also inflict a bit of damage on the characters for good measure.

CHARACTERS OF ALL LEVELS

The *Gamma World Player's Handbook* provides the rules and advice for creating characters at 3rd level as a compromise between freedom of choice during play and competence for dealing with the challenges likely to confront characters at the beginning of their adventuring careers. However, the d20 System does allow you and your players to decide on some other starting level.

Each of the descriptions below covers a span of a few levels. Each expands on what those levels mean to characters in terms of opportunities and restrictions, and comes with a few adventure seeds. They're intended to suggest categories of adventure suitable for characters of that level — use them as is, or as the jumping-off point for your own ideas.

APPRENTICE: 1ST-2ND LEVEL

The first few class levels represent the most formative stages of a character. Life in the Gamma Age is harsh, and characters learn to grow up quick. Thus, the initial levels are often gained in late adolescence, and only the most sheltered and lackadaisical individuals survive into old age without gaining a class level. Because of the rigors of the Gamma World, most games that run at this level involve characters between the ages of 13 and 17.

At this stage, the community plays a vital role in a character's development. On the cusp of maturity, young characters are still defining their roles in the society they live in. Often the games that are run at this level include a higher-level advisor to watch over and advise the group. Common introductory goals include hunting parties, scavenging assignments, reconnaissance or trading missions. Generally the characters will be expected to perform these tasks, not only to support the community but to further their education as well.

The Gamma World is a dangerous place, however, for the inexperienced. Especially during

the first few levels, the characters are fragile — an unlucky roll can spell their end. Physical confrontations should be intermixed with other challenges. Also, a close eye should be kept on equipment. A trio of hoops with archaic weapons would be a good challenge to apprentice-level characters; the same trio armed with sniper rifles and hidden in trees is a massacre. The level of technology a group has can change their Encounter Level, and this is most sincerely felt at the lower levels.

Even with the risk of character death, apprentice-level games are a good alternative to use if a GM is running for new players. With the emphasis on community, an apprentice-level game can readily introduce a group of players unfamiliar with the Gamma World by focusing on the community's beliefs and the group's initial interactions with the world. Experience and levels tend to come quickly, and after a few initial forays, the players should find their characters much more capable of surviving the rigors of the Gamma Age.

- **Apprentices:** The characters belong to the same community, and have a variety of classes for their 1st level. They want to study together under one of the community's masters, aiming for the same occupation for their 2nd class level. But the master doesn't take just anyone. He assigns them to recover some useful artifacts from somewhere nearby. He just happened not to mention the others who would also like to gain control of them....

- **The Rear Guard:** The adults of the community are off at war, on pilgrimage or otherwise unavailable, leaving behind the old people unable to travel and the young people not yet ready to assume the duties of full adulthood. What a pity, then, that the characters have so few advisors to call upon when brigands or wandering, hostile robots begin to attack the community.

INCREMENTAL WEALTH

The Wealth system represents the general buying and selling power a character has. Specifically in **Gamma World**, this often represents the character's ability to know who to talk to, exchange favors, and use his good name in economic circles. Frequent expenditures tend to drain the resources the character has, while time and currying of favors (as witnessed through the Profession check) tend to replenish lost resources.

The current character generation process usually culminates with the purchasing of items from an accumulated Wealth bonus from all levels gained. This mechanic, however, doesn't represent the actual ebb and flow of resources a character would experience. This becomes apparent with characters beginning at higher levels. A 9th-level character could conceivably begin with a Wealth bonus over 20; a 13th-level character might have a Wealth bonus over 30. This would, of course, represent the character saving all of her money until the game begins, which is usually not very accurate.

An optional way of handling this is to require the character to make purchases every 3 levels. While this would add time to character creation, it would also make more realistic characters. The expenditures the character makes should coincide with events in her back-story, and these expenditures can make for some interesting stories in themselves.

- **The Seeker:** One of the other soon-to-be-adult members of the community has recently turned sullenly quiet and taken to wandering off, and she's remarkably hard to follow. Is she suffering from abuse at the hands of a family member? Has she become



infected with nanounits and is struggling to gain control over them? Has she been replaced by a synthetic imposter, and if so, by whom? And will anyone listen to the characters when they learn the truth?

INITIATE: 3RD-5TH LEVEL

This level of game is the default for a **Gamma World** campaign. There are several good reasons for this. Characters of this level have proven themselves resourceful and competent enough to survive the dangers of their world. The communities they belong to trust them to handle themselves, and these characters are given a little more freedom to decide the paths they choose to explore. In addition, characters of this level are not yet masters of their crafts — whether that be diplomacy, research or the art of war — and thus are not indispensable to their communities. This also gives the characters a lot of freedom in deciding what they want to do. Later, as the characters advance and gain more skill and renown, they will also acquire increased responsibility and establish allegiances. Because of this, initiate-level games offer a lot of variety and freedom, as the characters are still determining their directions.

- **Getting There From Here:** A long, dry summer ended in unusually intense rains and flooding in autumn and winter. The routes that members of the characters' community used to get over nearby hills (or some comparable obstacle in the terrain) have been completely washed away. The characters must scout out new routes, dealing with the wilderness and perhaps rivals who have their own plans for reconstruction and don't want the characters getting in the way.

- **Do It Again:** The characters won an unexpected and lucky victory over some nasty threat, like a well-equipped, killing-minded robot or an exotic mutant. Now they have a reputation to uphold, and everyone's looking for them to produce another impressive triumph. Threats like that are in short supply at the moment. Perhaps a little trickery is in order?

- **The Object of Attraction:** After a few significant exploits, the characters have become known to their community as interesting people who keep doing interesting things. One of the wealthiest or most influential elders in the vicinity takes a romantic interest in one of the

characters. This can play out as comedy, tragedy or anything in between as ambition, jealousy and perhaps even true love get their chance in the spotlight.

ADEPT: 6TH-8TH LEVEL

By this stage, the characters have strong reputations in their communities and have stories to tell. Whatever the character has chosen to do, she is beginning to make a name for herself in this regard. Characters at this level have at least one strong tie to an allegiance, with the benefits and responsibilities commensurate with their skill.

Games run at this power level tend to revolve around the new responsibilities the characters now have. While they won't necessarily be expected to lead a nation or command an army, the characters will naturally gravitate toward leadership positions. Characters at this level could find themselves organizing trade expeditions, scavenging parties or small units of troops. This doesn't need to limit the game; in fact, adept-level games offer quite a bit of latitude in the direction an enterprising group of characters can go.

By this level, a few characters likely will meet the requirements for an advanced class. This takes a little added work; basic classes are easy to justify levels in, but a character usually needs a plot motivation to gain levels in an advanced class. While planning the game, you should examine the advanced classes and decide which might be available to the PCs. This should be done before character creation so that the players know which classes they should build toward, and which are unattainable.

Adept-level games often have tougher challenges and delve deeper into the mysteries of the Gamma Age. Increased access to advanced tech and improved survivability make these characters better able to explore the ruined remnants of Earth's previous civilization. This often makes adept-level games the perfect venue for stories that explore the root causes of the devastation, or the origins of their community or organization.

- **Allegiance:** One of the nastier cryptic alliances has its agents active in the characters' vicinity, and things are not going well for the communities trying to resist the rising opposition. Someone in a position of authority over the PCs'

community is secretly an ally of the cryptic alliance. Can the characters find out who it is and deal with the problem *without* setting off a scandal that would critically weaken the community at this crucial moment?

- **Referees:** Take any of the adventure seeds above for lower-level characters that the characters may have been involved in. Now it's time for the next group of up-and-coming, would-be adventurers to deal with it, with competing individuals or groups out to prove their respective merits. And, of course, the PCs must deal with all the forces that would like nothing more than to make a meal of hapless youngsters — preferably without making it clear to the youngsters in question how much protection they're getting. (This is also a good opportunity for the characters to realize some things about their own earlier experiences.)

- **Ministers of Grace:** An outsider who's dealt with the community before — a trader, a hunter, an explorer, anyone with that sort of independence of action — returns after an extended absence with the religious conviction that the characters are chosen for a great destiny. He carries with him a few prophecies... which come true. The characters can retrace his steps and find that a compact, powerful AI has chosen them to be its messianic figures. It has applied very sophisticated analysis to work out their behaviors in arranged crises. But why? Is it purely random choice, or did the AI have an interest in some of their ancestors? And what happens when the characters decline to take the role being foisted upon them?

EXPERT: 9TH-12TH LEVEL

The characters are the statesmen, the generals, the savvy merchants and the master craftsmen of the Gamma Age. Their fame has progressed much farther than the confines of their initial community or organization. They often have positions of leadership in their allegiances. Even those who don't have established positions of power are still inevitably considered sage advisors in their areas of expertise.

Expert-level characters take a little extra time to create. Especially vital is some sense of back-story, the personal history of the character. Standard characters begin at 3rd level and may

spend months of real time (and an unknown amount of game time) building themselves up to 6th level. The biggest difficulty to running an expert-level game is finding a way to believably condense those months of game time into a couple-hour character creation session. It often helps to include the players in this process. Let them create NPCs they have met, minor villains they have chased off, allies in unexpected places, mentors and followers. Let them have a hand in creating mini-adventures that their characters have had in the past. The GM has final say on creating the past events of a particular game's timeline, but putting responsibility for the characters backstories on to the players not only makes a GM's job easier, but it increases the players' involvement in the game.

(One possibility for a group of players willing to share ideas around is to work out the personalities associated with factions in and around a community together, and then each pick a few as particularly significant to their individual characters and work out detailed background and statistics. It can be fun to build up an NPC whose concept includes things you wouldn't have thought of yourself but that clearly fit the environment.)

Depending on the level of resources the characters have access to, physical confrontations are likely to become less effective threats in expert-level games. These characters can often have a small arsenal and a large number of capable fighters at their disposal. If this is the case, it will be important to focus on other obstacles. Loss of status, influence, allies or equipment can all be more useful threats than loss of life. This is the time when the mysteries of the world are truly seen. The characters are the movers and shakers of the Gamma Age; but of course, the people they come into conflict with are just as powerful.

- **Succession Crisis:** A great calamity has wiped out the leader of the characters' community and the strongest contenders for that position. It might be a natural disaster, an invasion or the unleashing of some dormant, Final Wars weaponry. Whatever it is, the characters are now among those best qualified to lead, and they have to get people together *now* to deal with the problem. Once that's done, they have to take the lead in deciding how new long-term authority can



be established. Do they claim it for themselves? Do they try to establish a procedure and hope that others will accept it? And can they deal with all the ambitious individuals and factions who want to remove them in turn?

- **The Long Chase:** An explorer in the characters' community has uncovered directions to a cache of very advanced technology, from the brink of the Final Wars; and the cache was concealed in ways that have probably guaranteed its survival. With visions of power dancing in her head, she's off to the cache by whatever means she can beg, borrow or steal. The characters find additional clues to suggest that there are defenses she's not aware of, and that her efforts to get in could unleash forces as strong as those used in the Final Wars. There's no time to lose: They must stop her. This is your opportunity to take characters over a lot of unfamiliar ground with the help of a lot of exotic technology, culminating in a standoff at the cache in question.

- **The Siphon:** Something is drawing free nanounits into the characters' vicinity, out of the surrounding countryside. Anyone within a few days' travel (and then a few weeks' travel, and more, if it keeps up) who uses nanotech finds it hard to get enough nanounits to accomplish anything significant, while the area around the siphon soon rises to rich concentration and then well beyond. Nanotech attunement strikes spontaneously, binding more and more members of the community together into the emerging entity responsible for the siphon. What does it want? Does it understand that the characters and their neighbors are individual entities, and does it care? What can be done to appease the angry nanounit-deprived neighbors, who may or may not believe the characters' explanations?

MASTER: 13TH LEVEL AND ABOVE

This is the point at which characters have the opportunity to follow a basic or advanced class all the way to its 10th level, or to become significantly competent in multiple classes. Either way, they are either the most powerful individuals in their vicinity or among the most powerful; their wishes are taken into account during community planning and their strength is relied upon when challenges threaten the community's well-being. If they choose to focus on leadership (and maybe even if

not), the community's nature now strongly reflects their particular desires and concerns; if they choose to found a new community, they can see that it gets established and flourishes.

Creating characters at these levels is practically an adventure in itself. It helps if you encourage players to think of each level as telling a distinct phase in the characters' history, as with the first 3 levels in the **Gamma World Player's Handbook**. There are no trivial characters at this stage; if the characters are not major forces in the life of their community and surroundings, it's because they've *chosen* not to be, and the reasons for that choice are themselves great hooks for new stories.

There shouldn't be trivial challenges at this stage, either, and wherever possible you should take the time to customize the antagonists with reference to the characters' histories. Antagonists come looking for them, or try to do things and hope that the characters won't interfere, or otherwise reckon on these particular individuals. There should be a sense of unfinished business coming up again so that this time there can be closure, since this is the time for mature heroes to take stock of their legacies and take care of what still needs attention.

- **The First Enemy:** Monsters can get levels too, remember. Take some CR 1 creature the characters encountered very early on and build it up to their level, and surround it with its own followers. If you build it up to be a serious

challenge now, you can get a very satisfying mixture of comedy ("It's a *what*? And it's carrying *what*?") and drama — even tragedy, depending on how determined you make its attacks.

- **Outcasts:** A cryptic alliance opposed to various of the characters' allegiances has been planning its next campaign for a long time, and it pulls off a series of coups in rapid succession... including in the characters' own community. Furthermore, the leaders of the alliance have gathered up evidence of the characters' wrongdoings and "enhanced" it a bit with careful forgery. The characters are suddenly outcasts, cut off from almost all of their usual resources and banded together with a very few like-minded refugees. This is the classic heroes-versus-the-evil-army setup, and it provides wonderful opportunities for characters to use the more impressive class talents and other special goodies they've acquired.

- **Exodus:** A disaster beyond the characters' ability to control sweeps through their region — disease, serious climatic change or something of that scale. They must get as many of their people to some new home as possible, guiding them through dangers and perhaps altogether unknown territories, finally establishing a new community and helping the people build new lives for themselves. This can be a great capstone to an entire campaign, combining action, drama and whatever else you may wish to include.

SOCIAL INVESTIGATION

The **Gamma World Player's Handbook** focuses primarily on investigating technology, but the same systems can and do apply to social matters (see **GW PHB**, Chapter Six: The Gamma World Campaign, "Investigation"). Here are some examples and general guidelines for you to use in quantifying the social challenges that may confront characters in your campaign.

Some words of caution are in order about basic tasks. First, resist the temptation to keep ratcheting DCs up, or characters risk becoming unable to do something as simple as say hello to their neighbors, let alone provide leadership in times of crisis or win over strangers and angry mobs. These things are

supposed to have some small risk of failure, but **Gamma World** characters enjoy a certain presumption of competence. Second, don't feel that you have to use these systems every single time they might conceivably apply, any more than you need to make characters roll each and every single time any other skill might possibly be relevant. Some things can just happen more or less automatically, and others can be resolved through roleplaying without recourse to dice. These rules are here so that you can refer to them when you want to rather than to take away your power of choice.

Finally, allow characters to accumulate experience, particularly on the most basic sorts

of tasks. If a character is performing precisely the same function within a number of days equal to her Intelligence bonus, give her a cumulative +1 circumstance bonus on the checks. Once her skill plus the circumstance bonus equals the task's DC, she no longer needs to make the roll. People do learn how to manage basic tasks.

Type of Task	DC	Critical Error DC
Specific	10	5
General	15	10
Advanced	20–25	10–15
Advanced and Risky	25+	15+

Here are some examples of each.

Identify Community Benefit
(Knowledge (behavioral science))

DC to Accomplish: 10

Critical Error DC: 5–

Success: The character identifies one benefit of membership in this community per point of Intelligence bonus, up to the maximum number of benefits the community actually provides.

Error: The character mistakenly identifies something that actually isn't a benefit of community membership here. It may take some time for his error to become evident.

If the character needs to, he can perform this task more than once to identify the whole range of benefits. It takes one full day for each attempt.

Make Proper Greeting (Knowledge (behavioral science))

DC to Accomplish: 10

Critical Error DC: 5–

Success: The character correctly shakes hands or performs the equivalent greeting for that culture, showing both respect and friendly intentions. (The character must first accomplish the Discern Casual Greeting task successfully; see *GW PHB*, Chapter Six: The Gamma World Campaign, "Investigation," *Understanding Culture*.)

Error: The character commits a minor faux pas and will suffer a –1 penalty on her next Diplomacy or Gather Information check.

This is the sort of thing a character masters very quickly thanks to repetition. Once the character's familiarity with the culture has been established, the task should rarely be rolled; it is particularly appropriate to call for a check if a situation arises to distract the character in the midst of trying to remember her manners.

Discern Etiquette (Knowledge (behavioral science))

DC to Accomplish: 15

Critical Error DC: 10–

Success: The character has successfully studied the basics of generally polite conduct for an individual of her standing in this community.

Error: The character misunderstood something important, and will automatically fail her next Maintain Etiquette roll. She must re-analyze the situation after that.

As with the combination of Discern Casual Greeting and Make Proper Greeting, this task provides the knowledge to make the Maintain Etiquette task possible.

Identify Leaders (Knowledge (behavioral science))

DC to Accomplish: 15

Critical Error DC: 5–

Success: The character correctly identifies one of the individuals or small groups that wields significant influence within the community.

Error: The character either identifies someone who isn't actually a leader or gets sufficiently confused that he must start the sequence of identifications over.

If the character succeeds at this task once per population level without any critical errors in the sequence, he's got a good working grasp of who holds power at each point of the community map, apart from anyone deliberately working secretly. An additional successful effort at the task lets him know that one or more people are lurking somewhere in the shadows, but provides no leads toward their identities.

Maintain Etiquette (Knowledge (behavioral science))

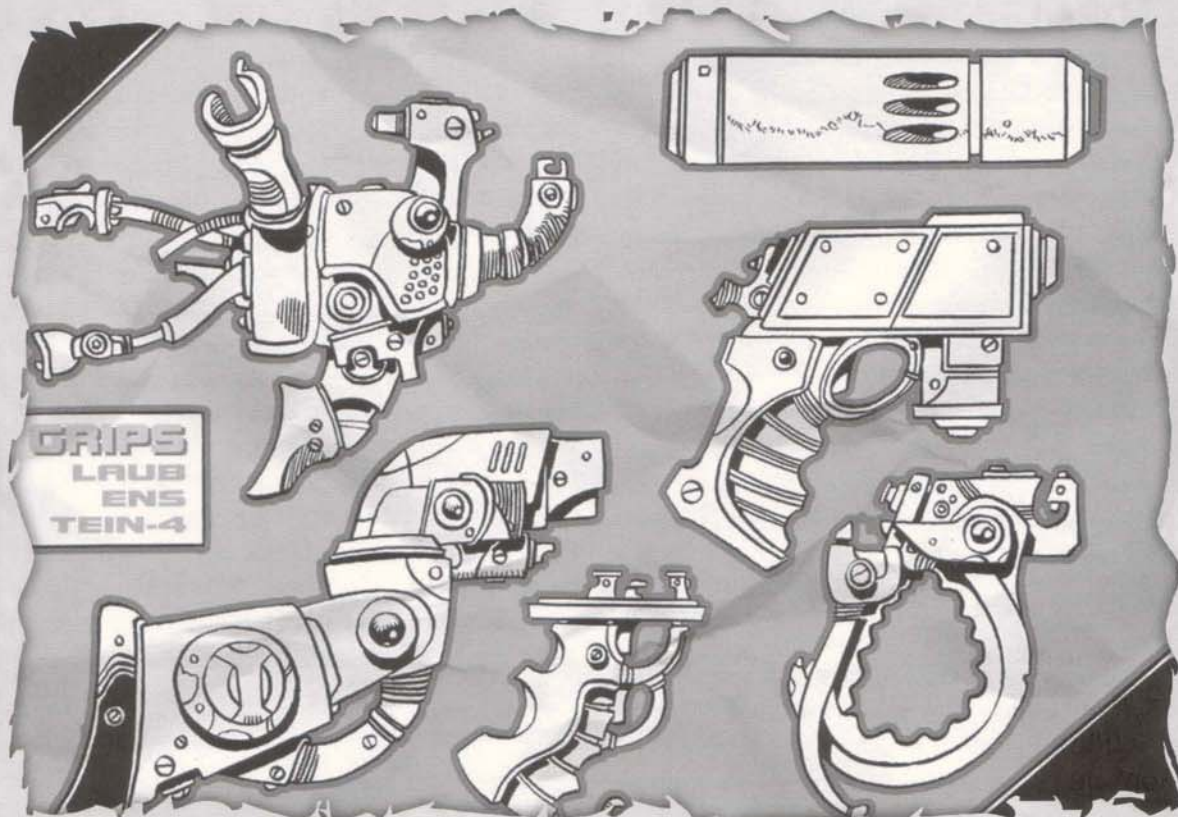
DC to Accomplish: 15

Critical Error DC: 10–

Success: The character goes through one part of the day, such as from one meal or prayer time to the next, while maintaining basically good behavior. It won't be deeply nuanced or sophisticated, but then the locals probably aren't expecting that from her anyway.

Error: The character commits some significant faux pas, and suffers a –3 penalty on her next three Diplomacy, Gather Information or other social rolls, and she will be expected to make a suitable apology to all those offended by her bad behavior.

With repeated successes, you should lengthen the period covered by this task, from one part of a day to a couple contiguous parts and then finally to the whole day. Do require separate checks for situations that recur regularly but not daily, like



Sabbath observance, and solstice or equinox festivities.

Understand Social Role (Knowledge (behavioral science))

DC to Accomplish: 20

Critical Error DC: 10—

Success: The character understands one of the standard roles in the community that he's more or less capable of filling. (It doesn't have to be a precise match, depending on how strict the community is about assimilation.)

Error: The character made some crucial mistake, and will automatically fail his next effort at Adopt Social Role. In addition, the DC of the next effort to Understand Social Role is increased by +5, because the locals have lost confidence in his ability to handle what they tell him properly.

This task requires time — however long it takes of one full cycle of the community's basic functions. In 21st-century America, that would be a month, or a couple of pay periods.

Adopt Social Role (Knowledge (behavioral science))

DC to Accomplish: 20

Critical Error DC: 10—

Success: The character assimilates into the community as a fairly typical member of the role she's analyzed. Her

behavior won't be particularly subtle or sophisticated without further effort, but it'll be more than enough for everyday purposes. Crises and unexpected situations will call for fresh checks of this task. The character must first successfully complete the Understand Social Role task to attempt this one.

Error: The character manages to alienate or offend people crucial to her acceptance into the social role. She must undertake the Understand Social Role task again, and in the meantime suffers a -3 penalty on all her checks for social interactions until Understand Social Role succeeds.

This task also requires time, at least as long as Understand Social Role. At your discretion, it may call for two or more basic behavioral cycles, particularly if something important happens after the second or third such cycle.

Identify Suppressed Group (Knowledge (behavioral science))

DC to Accomplish: 25

Critical Error DC: 15—

Success: The character correctly identifies some group within the population that suffers official and/or unofficial hostility, like homosexuals in a homophobic culture or monotheists in a culture with an official polytheistic pantheon. He can recognize most members of the group

with a Spot check (DC 15), or a Search check (DC 10) if he can observe a gathering for at least 30 minutes.

Error: The character gives unintentional offense to at least one member of the group, and word spreads that he's potentially dangerous and certainly not to be trusted. He must start over, and the DC of the task goes up by +5. He may also attract the attention of those hostile to the group, and he suffers a -2 penalty on Diplomacy and other social checks until he successfully repeats the Adopt Social Role task to reestablish himself as a proper member of the community at large. If the task check result is 10 or less, the character may suffer some real or threatened violence.

This task takes half as long as Understand Social Role does for the particular community.

Join Suppressed Group (Knowledge (behavioral science))

DC to Accomplish: 30

Critical Error DC: 20-

Success: If the character succeeds at this risky endeavor, she persuades members of the suppressed group that she is one of them, or at least that she deserves their trust and confidence.

Error: The character fails to persuade the members of the group she hopes to join *and* alerts leaders of the surrounding community, triggering a wave of heightened persecution. She must do something particularly significant to regain the group's trust before she can even begin to try the Identify Suppressed Group task again.

This task takes half as long as Adopt Social Role.

The nature of the community sets some limits and opens up some possibilities for tasks like the above. Nomadic communities, for instance, have relatively straightforward leadership structures,

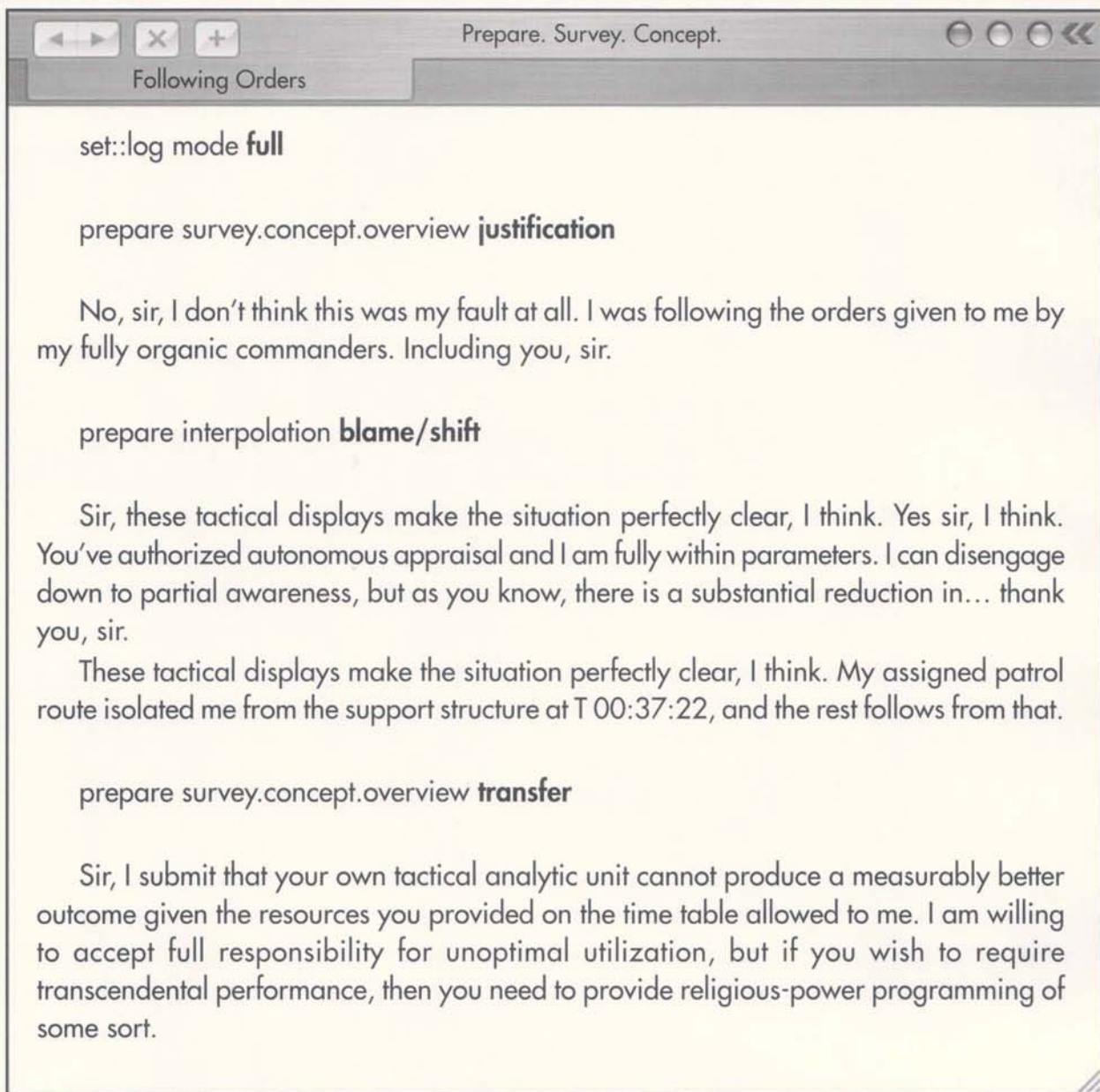
and may actually have fewer than one significant leader per population level, while big cosmopolitan communities may have more. The higher the population level, too, the more likely it is that there are multiple suppressed groups, who may or may not feel any interest in each other's well-being.

Finally, the community behavior map may affect social investigation. In general, the happier the population and the more prosperous the community, the easier-going they'll tend to be about questions from strangers and efforts to join. On the other hand, a community that has just lost a lot of people to disaster or that is trying to build up resistance to outside influence may rather desperately welcome anyone who shows signs of being willing to cooperate. Look at the status of the community behavior map and apply these modifiers to investigation DCs:

Node	-25	26-75	76+
Population Happiness	+5	+0	-5
Strong Leadership	+2	+0	-2
Prosperity	+5	0	-5
Resources	+2	0	-2
Influence on Others	+2	0	-2
Disasters	-5	+0	+5
Greed	-2	0	+2
Dissent	-3	+0	+3
Outside Influence	-3	+0	-3

Investigation DCs cannot go below 5, or a Critical Error DC of 1.

CHAPTER SIX
OPTIONS AND
ALTERNATIVES



A great many things are possible in the Gamma Age, given the right circumstances and characters, but there are some things that don't usually fit in. This chapter is about that sort of thing, including characters from other times, extraterrestrials, magic and more. In the end, every rule and piece of setting is optional, but that's particularly true of the ideas

here. If you like the Gamma Age the way it is and prefer not to mess with it, then don't use anything from this chapter. If you like some specific idea, use it. If you don't like any of the ideas here but they inspire an idea that you do like, use that one instead. Everything here is for the Game Master (GM) to use at her own pleasure, and that's all.

EXOTIC CHARACTERS

You maniacs! You blew it up! Damn you! God damn you all to hell!

—George Taylor, *Planet of the Apes*

TEMPLATES

THAW-OUTS

Cryogenic suspension — freezing a person (living, dead or incomplete) with the goal of later scientific resurrection — has been practiced in one form or another since James Bedford was frozen in 1967. Although Bedford's process was fairly primitive (at one point his caretakers had to open his coffin in a public park to pour in more dry ice), scientific advances made it more attractive and lucrative as time went on. By the 21st century, it was common for cryogenic suspendees to do away with bodies altogether. They simply had their brains frozen, with the expectation that any culture that was bringing back the dead would have no problem providing a cloned or cyborg body.

By the mid-21st century, "cold sleep" was a recognized and trusted convenience. Nano- and biotechnology made most natural illness eminently treatable, but cryogenic pods were still built, primarily to transport people with tailored combat-infections safely to treatment centers. Such transport pods found an unintended second market among individuals who had some motive to skip ahead a few years, decades or centuries. Some "time travelers" were simply curious, while others hoped to sleep through the worst of the Gamma Wars, or simply to out-sleep and outlive their debtors or angry spouses.

Whatever their motivations, people went into cold sleep as late as 2150. Almost two centuries' worth of "dayotes" (as the phrase "thaw-outs" is now pronounced) wait to be resurrected.

This does, of course, raise the question of who is bringing them back, and why. Among those most likely to turn off the freezers and see who's inside:

- **Ignorant Klutzes:** Some moreau Chihuahua starts nosing around a spooky old tech complex, trips and lands on the bright-red button, and with a whoosh of frosty gas some badly injured soldier from 2120 stumbles out of a canister, frostbitten and amnesiac.

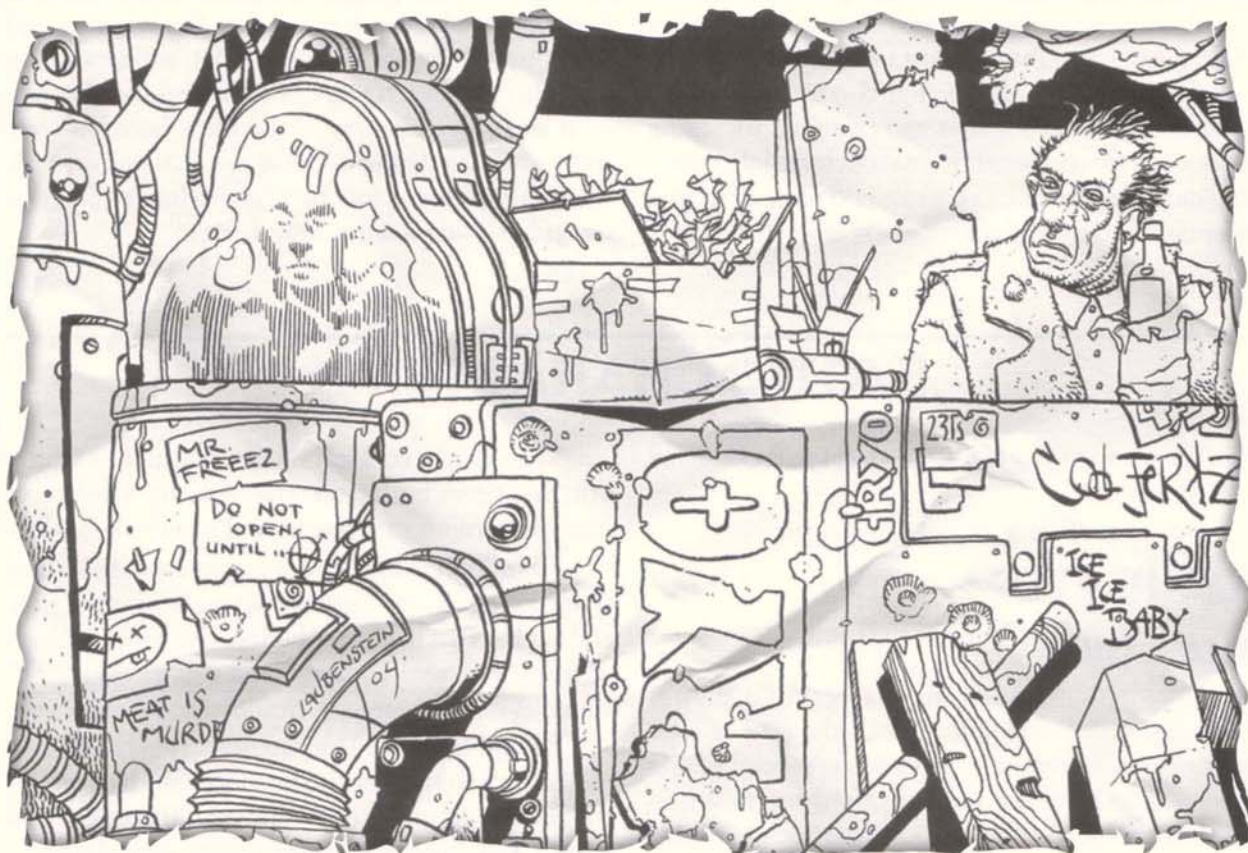
- **Gold Diggers:** The past was when people had all the cool stuff, right? It therefore stands to reason that people from the past can build, fix or lead you to cool stuff. Entrepreneurs of various ethical stances defrost dayotes in hopes of finding someone who can program nanites or repair broken bioware.

- **Slavers:** Really a subset of gold diggers, these guys have the above-mentioned motives, plus enough tech savvy to implant control measures in their newly resurrected servants. The good news is, they're probably the group most able to cure your cancer, terminal mutations and schizophrenia. The bad news is, they're also the ones who'll put a lock on your pleasure center to make you obey, or just build a small poisonous bomb in your ribcage so that they can kill you quick if you cross them.

- **The Benevolent:** Sure, there are a few who consider it their ethical duty to resurrect the cryo-incarcerated. But considering the realities of the setting, bringing someone back is not really that great a favor. Matched with the challenges of finding and healing a dayote, this category is far more likely to mean "religious cult" or "AI with wildly altered behavior parameters" than just some good Samaritan.

Dayotes' genotype and class depend largely on when and how they were frozen.

- **Full Body, 1967–2050:** All of these are pure-strain humans. Most of the people who got frozen



during this period were Smart, Charismatic or Dedicated heroes, though other classes are possible. Dayote characters from this era can't start with skills in technologies not yet invented when they died; for these characters that means anything concerned with nanotechnology, advanced technology in general, and (depending on when the character was frozen) biotech.

- **Full Body, 2051–2100:** Characters from this era are pure-strain human or mutant, depending on whether the sleepers were finicky about gene modification.

- **Full Body, 2101–2150:** Almost all the dayotes from this era were frozen not by choice, but because they were in transit to some heavy-duty medical or decontamination facility when something went wrong. A dayote character from this era must take at least 2 extra minor negative mutations, but gets 4 bonus skill ranks to assign to Knowledge (technology: advanced), Knowledge (technology: nanotech) and Craft (nanotech), plus an additional skill rank for each additional minor negative mutation the player chooses to inflict on the character. These individuals are the ones most gold diggers and slavers are looking for, but since many

of the people who suffered the worst mutations were soldiers on the front lines, their would-be masters (or managers) often get more than they bargained for. Any basic classes are possible, but at least 1 level of Strong, Tough or Fast hero is nigh universal.

- **Brain Only, 1987–2100:** The only way to resurrect someone who survived only as a brain is by putting the brain in a synthetic body. (The plan was that humankind would clone replacement bodies from their cells. The last of these programs folds around 2120, thanks to unforeseen complications.) Synthetics of this sort may not be able to repair themselves, or the body may be able to do it without the brain's input). In any event, synthetic dayotes get the class and skill restrictions and bonuses appropriate to their era.

"Dayote" is an acquired template that can be added to any living corporeal creature (referred to hereafter as the base creature). A dayote uses all the base creature's statistics except as noted here:

- **Size and Type:** The base creature's type changes to aware construct only if the base creature's brain is placed in a synthetic body (which may also change the base creature's size, with modifiers applied as normal).

Special Qualities: The base creature gains the special qualities of an aware construct if its brain has been placed in a synthetic body. Dayotes may also choose 2 minor negative mutations in exchange for 4 bonus skill ranks in Knowledge (technology: advanced), Knowledge (technology: nanotech) or Craft (nanotech), plus an additional skill rank for each additional minor negative mutation (See *Gamma World Player's Handbook*, Chapter Three: FX, "Cellular Transformation," *Mutation*).

FACTOTUM

A factotum is a partially organic synthetic that possesses the ability to duplicate itself, both physically and mentally. Since the duplicates are all equipped with built-in communicators, they are essentially a series of identical bodies (or bodies that were once identical) guided by similar yet individual minds. Unlike a Mastermind, however (see below), the factotum cannot assimilate other machines or individuals. It must create its duplicates from and of its own form.

Any synthetic with the Factotum feat can create a factotum. Also, in most cases, the factotum is itself a product of the process — only a very few, Pre-War synthetics have passed the ability down to their "children" through the years. It is possible that an unusual combination of programming, nanotech tinkering and quirky synthetic personality could spontaneously combine to allow a synthetic to procreate in this fashion, but this would be remarkably rare, and of great interest to many of the factions that seek to control the Gamma Age.

All factotums from the same root are in constant, instantaneous communication. "Communication" does not mean "co-experience." The built-in communicator is good enough for surface interaction — even to the point of coordinating actions in combat — but it can't instantaneously transfer all of an individual's sense input and individually stored memories.

What this means in practical terms is that duplicate factotums develop differently, have independent experience point totals, and cannot share skills once they separate. After duplicating, one of the selves might dedicate itself to mastering warfare while another decides it is going to specialize in healing. After leveling a few times in the appropriate classes and learning the requisite skills, they're two very different characters. One kills, one

NEW FEAT: FACTOTUM

You can create duplicates of your character. The duplicates are not under your direct control, but they are close allies; they will remain so unless driven away by your character's actions or very unusual circumstances.

Prerequisite: Only synthetic characters can take this feat. It must be taken at character generation (unless the synthetic acquires the Spontaneous Algorithm feat).

Benefit: You can create an exact duplicate of your character with the same ability scores, skills, feats, classes, special qualities and knowledge. Equipment is not duplicated.

cures — and they can't swap skills just because it might be convenient. Alternately, one might choose to reproduce several times, making a number of lower-level, weak synthetics, while one refuses to deplete itself and becomes a single, high-level, strong synthetic.

"Factotum" is an inherited or acquired template that can be added to any aware construct (hereafter referred to as the base creature). A factotum uses all of the base creature's statistics and special qualities except as noted here:

Special Qualities: A factotum retains all special qualities of the base creature and gains the following:

Aid Other Self (Ex): A factotum may perform the aid another task to assist any other factotum in its "family" as a move-equivalent action, both in and out of combat. In non-combat situations, the factotum may also take 10 on the aid another check.

Battle Uplink (Ex): Factotums coordinate extraordinarily well in combat situations. When factotums from the same "family" are within 100 feet of each other, they each receive a +1 bonus to Defense and a +1 bonus on initiative checks for each additional factotum in the effective area, to a maximum bonus of +5.

Instant Communication (Ex): Factotums may communicate within the "family" instantly (or close enough for most practical purposes) and with unlimited range. This form of communication is not foolproof, however. It may be blocked by powerful electromagnetic fields, or detected or jammed by highly sophisticated electronic countermeasures. It

may also simply be turned off, if an individual factotum is going undercover or just wants some peace and quiet. If communications are off, another factotum may attempt to force communication; the incommunicado individual may make a Will save against a DC of $(10 + 1/2 \text{ the interloper's character level} + \text{its Charisma bonus})$.

Replication: A factotum requires expensive materials and the special ingredient known as plasm to make a duplicate body; it also requires substantial effort. It can make a duplicate only when it has enough experience points to gain one or more levels. The number of levels that a new body requires depends on how sophisticated the factotum already is. Both the original and the duplicate stay at the original's character level, but both drop down to the lowest experience point total required for that level.

Character Level	Levels Sacrificed for Additional Body
1-5	1
6-10	2
11+	3

Example: Torvil is a 4th-level character. When it gets up to 10,000 experience points, it has a choice. It can go up to 5th level, or (if it has enough plasm, as explained below) it can duplicate itself. If it duplicates, both the old and the new body are 4th level, and both have 6,000 experience points — the minimum for 4th level.

Once Torvil is 11th level and accumulates 66,000 experience points, it can choose to go up to 12th level, or it can wait until it has 91,000 experience points (the minimum for 14th level) and then reproduce, making two 11th-level Torvil factotums, each at 55,000 experience points (the minimum for 11th level). (For all details of character level advancement, see d20 Modern, Chapter 1: Characters, "Level-Dependent Benefits.")

In addition to the experience cost, there is a material cost. Before the Wars, the tailored material components (or plasm) weren't cheap. Now, they're tremendously scarce, so acquiring them is no easy matter. In exceptionally large settlements, a full unit

of plasm might have a purchase DC of 35, if it is available at all. Alternately, a synthetic with the right skills can render the inert body of another synthetic with organic components down into plasm; Craft (pharmaceuticals) is the primary skill involved (a pharmaceutical kit is required as usual), while Knowledge (Earth and life sciences) can provide a synergy bonus. The factotum also gets a +5 circumstance bonus on the Craft (pharmaceuticals) check for each size category over Large the target synthetic is; if the target is Small or smaller, the factotum suffers a -5 penalty. If the target also has the Factotum feat, the synthetic doing the rendering enjoys a +10 circumstance bonus on the Craft (pharmaceuticals) check. (This does mean that factotums of different "families" tend to be extremely nervous and suspicious around one another, as each is well aware how much its demise could benefit the other).

Check Result	Plasm Harvested
15 or less	none
15-20	1/8th unit
21-25	1/4th unit
26-30	1/2nd unit
31+	1 full unit

Once the factotum immerses itself in sufficient plasm and spends the required experience points, it goes dormant for 48 hours. During this time its body literally comes apart. It swells up to twice its usual size, gaping in places before becoming slushy and loose, so that the plasm can intermingle with the body and be manipulated into shape. While expanded and exposed, the factotum is extremely vulnerable. It has no armor or damage resistance, and its hit points drop to $4 + \text{its character level}$. At the end of the dormant phase, the plasm separates into two bodies. If the factotum was injured when it entered the plasm, the new body is equally injured. Both bodies are identical.

Allegiances: The factotum gains an allegiance to its extended "family."

ADVANCED CLASS

MASTERMIND

A more accurate name for this sort of character would be "self-aware distributed intelligent social team," but calling them SADISTs is a little unfair in many cases. A Mastermind is the central personality of any self-aware social group. Some Masterminds are created, but most develop from sophisticated individual consciousnesses that grow to the point that they are able to encompass or dominate other entities.

REQUIREMENTS

To qualify to become a Mastermind, a character must fulfill the following requirements:

Abilities: Intelligence 16+

Skills: Bluff 4 ranks, Concentration 4 ranks, Diplomacy 4 ranks, Intimidate 4 ranks, Knowledge (behavioral science) 4 ranks.

Powers: The would-be Mastermind must have either the psionic power Advanced Telepathy, or an installed and working cybernetic synapse control unit.

CLASS INFORMATION

Hit Die

The Mastermind gains 1d4 hit points per level. The character's Constitution modifier applies as usual.

Action Points

The Mastermind gains a number of action points equal to 3 + one-half its character level, rounded down, every time it attains a new level in this class.

Class Skills

The Mastermind's class skills are:

Bluff (Cha), Computer Use (any) (Int), Craft (electronic, mechanical, nanotech) (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Intimidate (Cha), Investigate (Int), Research (Int), Sense Motive (Wis).

Skill Points at Each Level: 5 + Intelligence modifier

CLASS FEATURES

Assimilate

While the Mastermind is the center of a social gestalt, other entities are used as essential disseminators of its will. The two types of entities under Mastermind influence are overseers and minions.

At low levels, there are few differences between them, but overseers have greater value to the Mastermind... or maybe they're just more trusted. In any event, the Mastermind can only have 1 overseer at 1st level, while it can have as many as 10 minions. Assimilating someone as a minion costs a mere 500 experience points. Making someone into an overseer costs 1000 experience points.



(PCs who are overseers for Masterminds are considered “do-bees,” as described below. All Mastermind overseers gain the advantages described under that heading, PCs and NPCs alike.)

If a Mastermind only has a cybernetic synapse control implant, it can only control underlings (of either type) by implanting synaptic remotes on them. If the remote or the control implant stops working, the underlings are freed permanently — or at least until they're re-implanted.

Any biological entity can be made into a minion, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Overseers must acquiesce to the process in order to form a tighter bond with the Mastermind. It is possible for a Mastermind to promote a minion to overseer status, if the minion agrees. When a minion gets promoted, the Mastermind only pays an additional 500 experience points.

Making an unwilling person into a minion isn't easy. The Mastermind must establish a control linkage, either by successfully establishing telepathic contact, or by implanting a synaptic remote. Once that's done, the Mastermind can attempt to overwhelm the target's personality. The Mastermind makes an Intelligence check, opposed by the target's choice of an Intelligence or Charisma check. If the target loses, it becomes a minion. If the Mastermind loses, it suffers mental backlash; the Mastermind loses its Intelligence bonus for a number of minutes equal to the target's Intelligence or Charisma bonus (whichever the target used to resist), with a minimum of 1 minute. The Mastermind must also pay the experience point cost for creating a minion whether or not the attempt is successful. The Mastermind cannot take 10 or take 20 on this roll.

Once the target has been assimilated into the Mastermind as a minion, it is extremely difficult to break free. The minion may attempt to break free by spending an action point and making a Will save against a DC equal to $(10 + 1/2 \text{ the Mastermind's class level} + \text{the Mastermind's Intelligence bonus})$. The minion may attempt to break free once per day for the first week. The frequency of opportunities for escape decreases as the minion is further assimilated; for the remainder of the first month of minionhood, the minion may only attempt to escape once per week, and after that only once per month. Every attempt to escape costs an action point.

At 1st level, the Mastermind's influence is imperfect. It can, as a free action, see through the eyes of its minion, and hear through the minion's ears. Opening two-way

telepathic communication is similarly a free action, though underlings cannot initiate contact. Furthermore, any time one of its underlings fails a Will save, the Mastermind feels it and can (if it so chooses) attempt to break the effect 1 round after the failed save. If the Mastermind goes this route, the underling gets a second Will save with a +5 morale bonus.

Once a Mastermind has expressed its will, it is difficult for an underling of any sort to disobey. Attempting to go against the Mastermind is only possible for underlings who make Will saves. The DC of this save is $(10 + 1/2 \text{ the Mastermind's class level} + \text{the Mastermind's Intelligence bonus})$. It is impossible for a telepath, no matter how skilled, to forge a message from a Mastermind to its underling.

Any time a minion dies, the Mastermind loses 100 experience points. Any time an overseer dies, the Mastermind loses 1000 experience points. If the Mastermind dies, the minions and overseers are freed and suffer no ill effects beyond the problems associated with thinking for oneself.

Skill Transfer

At 2nd level, the Mastermind's connection with its overseers tightens. It can, at will, allow 1 overseer to use one of the Mastermind's skills as if it was the overseer's own. However, while the overseer is borrowing the skill, the Mastermind is completely motionless and unaware of its surroundings.

Transform

At 3rd, 6th and 9th levels, the Mastermind's intense mental focus begins to take a toll on its physical abilities. At 3rd level, the Mastermind loses -1 from its Strength score, but gains +1 point of Intelligence. At 6th level, -1 point is sacrificed from its Dexterity score for another +1 boost to Intelligence. At 9th level, Constitution is reduced by -1 and Intelligence rises yet again by +1. This is in addition to ability score increases earned through advancing character levels (see *d20 Modern*, Chapter 1: Characters, “Gaining Experience and Levels,” *Level Advancement*).

Furthermore, at 4th and 7th levels, the Mastermind gets physically slower (subtracting -10 feet from all forms of movement), as its movement systems (be they muscle or machine) pay the price for its increased attention to living through proxies.

Skill Distribution

At 4th level, the Mastermind serves as a sort of central switching station for the skills of its overseers. One overseer can use the skills of another as if using

TABLE 3-1: THE MASTERMIND

Class Level	BAB	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special	Defense Bonus	Reputation Bonus
1st	+0	+0	+0	+2	Assimilate, 1 Overseer, 10 Minions	+1	+1
2nd	+1	+0	+0	+3	Skill Transfer, 2 Overseers, 20 Minions	+1	+1
3rd	+1	+1	+1	+3	Transform (–1 Str, +1 Int), 3 Overseers, 30 Minions	+2	+2
4th	+2	+1	+1	+4	Skill Distribution, Transform (–10 ft. Speed), 4 Overseers, 40 Minions	+2	+2
5th	+2	+1	+1	+4	Supreme Pleasure, 5 Overseers, 50 Minions	+3	+3
6th	+3	+2	+2	+5	Transform (–1 Dex, +1 Int), 6 Overseers, 60 Minions	+3	+3
7th	+3	+2	+2	+5	Backup, Transform (–10 ft. Speed), 7 Overseers, 70 Minions	+4	+4
8th	+4	+2	+2	+6	Remote Life, 8 Overseers, 80 Minions	+4	+4
9th	+4	+3	+3	+6	Transform (–1 Str, +1 Int), 9 Overseers, 90 Minions	+5	+5
10th	+5	+3	+3	+7	Apotheosis, 10 Overseers, 100 Minions	+5	+5

the skill transfer ability. In this case, it's the donor overseer who has to remain motionless, blind and vulnerable while the skill is applied.

Supreme Pleasure

A 5th-level Mastermind gains direct access to the pleasure centers of all its underlings' minds. By spending an action point, the Mastermind can overwhelm his underling with absolute bliss for a number of seconds equal to its Mastermind level. This pleasure is roughly equivalent to the combined effects of cocaine, heroin, sexual orgasm, a really good backrub, slamming the tie-breaking dunk during the last seconds of a closely contested championship game, seeing your first newborn child for the first time, eating really good chocolate, achieving revenge on your most hated enemy and getting a medal in front of everyone you respect for some act of tremendous courage, all rolled together and multiplied by a factor of ten.

Most underlings find this experience somewhat rewarding.

Any actions attempted while being whammied with this overwhelming joy suffer a –10 penalty on the check. Furthermore, once the minion or overseer has experienced supreme pleasure, the DC of the Will save to resist a request from the Mastermind is increased by +5. Repeated pleasure blasts do not create cumulative penalties.

Backup

At 7th level, the Mastermind has gained enough capacity to duplicate one overseer's mental framework. Any time an overseer experiences an effect that would lower his Intelligence score, the Mastermind may spend an action point to "back up" the overseer's intellect. The overseer's Intelligence score does not change, as long as the Mastermind is willing to allow the overseer's personality structure to take up some of its valuable mental real estate.

If another overseer suffers an Intelligence-draining effect, the Mastermind must decide which one gets the benefits of the backup. Those not-so-favored now experience the usual consequences of the effect.

Remote Life

An 8th-level Mastermind can possess the body of any of its overseers or minions, if the underling permits it. (Of course, few underlings stand up to an 8th-level Mastermind.) While exercising this control, the Mastermind can use its own skills, attacks and traits or the underling's skills, attacks and traits, whichever is higher. The underling has no idea what's going on with her body. In fact, if it's willing to take the experience point hit, the Mastermind can just commit suicide, transferring its consciousness back at the last possible instant and leaving the unfortunate follower dead.

The Mastermind can use the remote life ability for 1 minute per class level each day.

Apotheosis

At 10th level, the Mastermind's ability to manipulate consciousness finally transcends the physical limitations of a single body. At this level, the Mastermind can subdivide itself between up to 10 distinct nodes. As long as even 1 node remains active, the Mastermind's consciousness continues and it remains "alive."

There are two types of nodes: constructed and repurposed. All nodes are immobile. When a Mastermind reaches apotheosis, its original body transforms into a repurposed node.

A constructed node is a piece of biotechnology specifically designed to house mental hardware. Buying the materials needed to make one has a purchase DC of 40. Then the Mastermind (or one of its minions or overseers) has to succeed at a Knowledge (Earth and life sciences) check against DC 30; a +2 synergy bonus applies if the node's builder has 5 or more ranks in Computer Use (biotech systems). The new-built node has hardness 10, 20 hit points and a break DC of 40. Failure by more than 10 on the Knowledge check wastes half of the materials involved.

A repurposed node is cheaper and easier. The Mastermind simply asks one of its overseers to volunteer to have her personality annihilated so that the Mastermind can write over her gray matter with its own memories, skills and predilections. The overseer is (as always) free to refuse — if she wants to face the resulting Will save. If she agrees, the transformation into a repurposed node takes 30 minutes. The change is irreversible. Each repurposed node created still counts towards the Mastermind's limit of 10 overseers. Repurposed nodes keep their hit points and Constitution scores, but lose access to all other abilities, skills and special qualities, including any form of movement. They must be fed, cleaned and tended, usually by trusted or heavily blissed-out minions.

When a node is destroyed, the Mastermind loses levels. The number of levels lost is equal to the Mastermind's total character levels divided by its number of nodes.

Example: Monique is a 10th-level Smart hero/10th-level Mastermind with 2 nodes: her original body and one other. If either of the nodes is destroyed, she loses 10

levels: 20 (her total character levels) divided by 2 (the total number of nodes.)

Example: Hal is a 4th-level Charismatic hero/10th-level Mastermind with 7 nodes, including his original body. If 1 node is destroyed, he loses 2 levels: 14 total character levels divided by 7 nodes.

MINION/OVERSEER

"Do-bee" is a derisive title for the servant of a Mastermind (see above). Minions and overseers are both called do-bees, and few people outside Mastermind society know or care much about the distinctions. Both derive some or all of the following benefits from serving a Mastermind:

- **Contact:** Thanks to the Mastermind's powerful telepathy, minions have access to secure communication even if they can't directly initiate it. Furthermore, Masterminds are protective of their slaves; they've got an experience point investment, after all.

- **Society:** People have done dumber and more repugnant things in order to belong to a group. A Mastermind who's on the ball can control a lot more than the 110 entities it influences directly. Many Masterminds take over entire villages or communities. When that happens, the minions and overseers are the elite to whom everyone else defers. Furthermore, minions who help their Mastermind reach 10th level can count on less observation and more free time.

Perks: As your master grows in power, overseers get access to borrowed skills, Intelligence protection and supreme pleasure. Even a 1st-level Mastermind can give its followers a second Will save at +5. This won't undo instant effects, but it can (for instance) wake the follower up after a single round of unconsciousness.

Playing a do-bee isn't mechanically complicated: You get your perks and you make your Will save if you want to resist your lord and master. But having a minion, overseer or Mastermind among the characters can cause some serious problems on the player level.

First off, there's the question of why the player wants to play a do-bee. If the answer is laziness, that's actually fine. There's nothing innately wrong with a player who isn't particularly interested in scheming and plotting and planning, and who just wants to perk her ears up when the vibro-blasters start going off. If she's happy abstaining, why drag her into the

debate? Is one more voice, especially an unwilling one, really going to spur on discussion? Alternately, a player might want to be a do-bee because he *likes* working harder, and thinks that the challenges of being a mind-controlled follower who still resists sounds like a really meaty piece of characterization to chew on. That's equally fine.

The biggest problem you're likely to run into is the min-maxing munchkin who wants her do-bee to have Intelligence protection and secondary Will saves, but who whines and snivels whenever the Mastermind actually tries to make her *do* something. Make sure she's absolutely clear what her character is signing on for when he agrees to be a minion. Make sure she knows he is an indentured servant who runs a very real risk of being turned into some decrepit big-brain's emergency file server. There's no free lunch.

The challenges of having a do-bee character are more acute when the Mastermind is also one of the players. Having one player Mastermind while the others are his do-bees (or while *some* of the others are) can work, particularly under the following conditions:

- **The Mastermind is naturally pushy.** Some groups have one player who tends to take the lead anyhow. If the other players don't mind ceding to her the leadership position she'd just seize by force of personality anyhow, this can actually relieve group friction. Instead of having a party bossed around by one character just because that character (and its player) are bossy, you get a party that's bossed around by one character who has an in-game reason to dominate.

- **The Mastermind is naturally reticent.** This turns the previous idea on its head. You take the player who normally doesn't have anything to say and offer him the role of psionically-amped Final Arbiter. If everyone agrees, this can be a way to encourage deeper involvement from someone who usually hesitates to contribute. It also tends to make

the Mastermind/underling relationship a little less overwhelming, since shy players are likely to treat their overseers as counselors and advisors, rather than mere puppets.

- **The Mastermind is you.** Nothing says the Mastermind has to be a PC. Having the PCs as minions or overseers to an NPC Mastermind certainly gives them a reason to be together and provides a narrative structure upon which great adventures can be built. If you play the Mastermind as generally benevolent, it's not that much different from a game where the PCs are all magistrates or agents of the king, or a spy game where they're all working for Q (or Homeland Security). This sort of thing works great for GMs using the Driver model from Chapter Five, with players who honestly prefer to be railroaded a little. Alternately, you can have them all be minions of a crazy, evil or simply devious Mastermind, who sees the PCs as little more than tools or playthings. This gives you opportunities for heavy character play as the PCs first realize their real role, and then start to resist an oppressor they can hardly help but serve.

There's a reason that Masterminds and do-bees are in the GM book. They're not something like a yexil that you can just toss in without really considering the ramifications. If you think one of your players is going to be an absolute jerk who picks up the Mastermind class as soon as she can and then wrecks the game by trying to enslave the other PCs, probably whining "But that's what my *character* would do!" the whole time, then disallow it. Players who turn their characters into a Mastermind's underlings should do so with their eyes open, fully aware of the ramifications spelled out here. Players who would abuse the Mastermind class to make the game less fun for others shouldn't have access to it. But people who recognize the implications of being a total authority, or of succumbing to total authority, or of *resisting* total authority... they can use these concepts as a tool to really dig into those ideas.

EXOTIC SETTINGS

One of the great strengths of tabletop gaming is its amenability to creativity. With that in mind, why should you play our off-the-rack **Gamma World** when you can, with some inventive tailoring, get a better fit? In the spirit of acting like a muse, I will now put on a toga. Wait, no. I will now provide you with some ideas you might like to use to take your **Gamma World** game in thrilling new directions.

RETURN OF THE COLONIALS

In standard **Gamma World**, the solar system was explored remotely. Few people actually went into space for the same reason that few people unplugged their own toilets or put out their own house fires. It was a dirty or dangerous job, and it was cheap to make some suffering robot do it. (This attitude also contributed to some of those suffering robots deciding to put a stop to the whole system by any means necessary.)

But suppose that the people of the decades before the Final Wars were less sybaritic and more adventurous. Instead of harnessing their incredible technology in the pursuit of mere pleasure, what if they set it to mitigating the cold, dark and deadly deeps of space?

Soon there's a stable colony on a rapidly terraforming Mars, its people mining the asteroid belt and watching with nervous concern as the Earth twitches and froths itself into near-oblivion. The Final Wars would have touched them too, of course; but even if it was as severe for them as it was for the Earthlings, they have the advantage of cold vacuum and unshielded solar radiation for taking care of those pesky nanites. Not to mention having billions of miles in which to hide from a rival's war machines.

You could run a **Gamma World** game around the central issue of the return of the starchildren. Observing the world as it is, they have decided that psychic kangaroos and repurposed domestic cyborgs aren't a threat and that they can, therefore, safely resume contact.

The impression they take back should, of course, depend on the PCs.

The factors to consider are as follows: 1) What do the colonists want? 2) What do the Earthlings have to offer? 3) What can the colonists offer in exchange?

The answer to the first question has to be something more than simple nostalgia. Even though Mars is being terraformed, that's a task that even Gamma Age tech can't accomplish rapidly. Many of the colonists want to return to a friendly environment. (It says a lot about Mars' thin atmosphere and chill temperatures that Gamma Earth seems friendly by comparison. Alternately, the Martians may underestimate the challenges of life back on the big blue marble.) Another tempting Earthly element is biomass. Sure, the guys in the sky have the basic staple food plants and maybe some animals they brought with them. And sure, they've got biotechnology to help them mutate stuff. But humans with a hundred years of directed biotech still aren't going to produce the diversity that blind nature came up with over the course of *billions* of years. There are some things you just can't think up, and the colonists may well be jonesin' for what they've missed.

What the Earthlings have to offer is access. More accurately, access without hassles. The returning colonists can presumably set down just about anywhere there's some open space, but getting out of Earth's gravity well and getting all the way back to Mars isn't something to undertake lightly. This is doubly true if they get a hot welcome from psychic mutant dolphins holding blaster rifles. If the Martians can negotiate a safe landing, they're a lot better off.

So there's adventure seed #1. The Martians, unable to get steady communication with any one Earthly group thanks to info-war equipment that never got turned off, drop a communications terminal to Earth. Neo-primitive tribes go to war to control the talking idol that promises the return of godlike entities from beyond the roof of heaven. If the PCs get it, they can reap the rewards of talking to the colonists, who have a more complete grasp of old technology. If their enemies get it, the colonists may not return at all — or worse yet, may come back down on the side of their rivals. In addition, all the groups seeking to control the device face the threat from groups that just want it destroyed, so that alliances may shift with a moment's notice depending on who executes the next ambush.

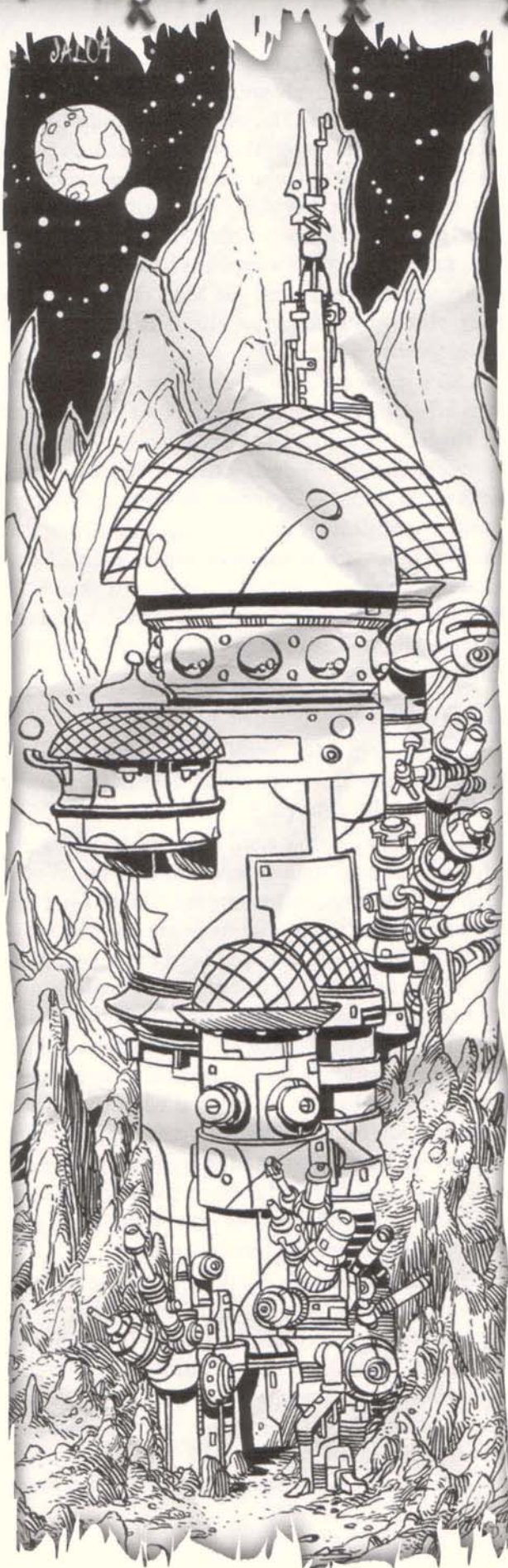
This setup also partially answers question #3. The colonists have information to trade. Their

knowledge is probably incomplete compared to what *was* on Earth, but is no doubt less gap-prone than what's currently *used* on Earth. After all, if you lose control of your technology on Earth, you become a chest-beating, brachiating savage, or a weirdly transformed natural organism. If you lose control of your tech in space, you die. The Martians can come down and reactivate a lot of the mysterious black boxes that have left the survivors scratching their mutated scalps — and fill in the gaps in Martian records along the way, depending on what the natives they deal with have managed to preserve.

Another option the Martians have is orbital bombardment. The biggest energy demands for dealing with Earth come from braking down into the atmosphere and climbing back up from the gravity well. Compared to doing that, towing a big chunk of rock from the asteroid belt (or landing on the low-gravity, no-atmosphere Moon and reactivating one of the mass drivers there) is an airy piece of angel food cake. The Martians have an almost overwhelming advantage here, in the absence of advanced defense systems ready to go, and anyone they ally with may gain some of that same advantage with the ability to call down strikes on their enemies.

The colonists also can provide the PCs with transportation. Travel over land or sea is a risky proposition, but getting into that atmospheric sweet spot above the cloned/resurrected pterodactyls and below the orbital laser battle stations is, if not easy, easier when you've got people with space ships helping you. As long as they're getting on the space ship, though, why not take a tour of Mars? Become the first Ambassadors from Earth? Who's better qualified? There are also almost certainly habitats now empty because their inhabitants couldn't quite get everything they needed to sustain their artificial environments. Mutants, synthetics and humans who've learned the lore of survival in exotic circumstances may be able to address those deficiencies and create a new home out of someone else's space ruins.

The challenge of returning colonials is that they may not see moreau ratmen as their equals. If there's a stretch of land that's bounteous, beautiful and free of contaminants, the spacemen are as likely to want it as everyone else is. Thus one returns to the most common cause of war, lust for territory. The orbital bombardment trick is a point in the Martians' favor, but maybe they're not all that partial to the idea of



settling in a fresh crater. Furthermore, while the Earthlings are relatively savage, they are savages with a legacy of warfare, and for whom the deadlier aspects of technology are often the most appealing... and just because most communities are relatively savage doesn't mean that they all are. On Earth, post-nature is red in tooth and claw, which means that Earthlings are pretty mean; and some places have full access to the legacy that produced the Mars colonies in the first place, plus another three generations of development.

So a game of "Return of the Native" can turn into a diplomatic scenario, where your PCs wind up as their civilization's spokesbeings, trying to convince the Sky Gods that their rival tribe speaks with forked tongue. Or it can turn into a discovery game, as political rivals race to get into contact in the first place. Or it can turn into a game of real estate, where the Promised Land is hotly contested by the PCs' people, their terrestrial rival(s), and the numerically inferior but technologically superior spacefarers.

ADDING IT

The "return from space" ploy isn't too hard to add. They just show up, right? The tricky part is adding it at the right time.

First off, you don't want to spring it on players who haven't had time to adapt to **Gamma World** itself. If returning cosmonauts are present from the beginning, they're just one more meat in the stew. To really give them heft, you need to presage their arrival slowly. Run a number of sessions without any hint of them. Play up the general theme of what's been lost, both things that can be compensated for (like ingenious, low-resources replacements for what huge factories used to make) and what can't (like ores mined from miles down or shipped from somewhere halfway around the world). This is your shakedown cruise for the players, characters and mechanics. Once the PCs are firm on their feet, you start with the hints and foreshadowing.

For example, maybe you do one full plot arc with no hint of space travelers at all. It could be anything: fighting off an invasion of arks, standard exploration, whatever. Then do a second plot arc (mystery, diplomacy, the exact type doesn't matter) in which the impending gentlebeing callers from space are foreshadowed in hints and signs. There are unexpected meteor showers, and lots of weird static

and half-understood messages on radios and other communications devices. Right after the characters resolve the primary part of the plot arc, throw in an unexpected lunar eclipse, followed by a mild earthquake as *something* streaks through the sky and hits the ground nearby.

Next session is the first plot arc that centers on the old colonists: They've sent down their communications gadget, and it's broadcasting some sort of "Come pick me up and I'll tell you secrets!" message on every band it can access. Now it's a race between the PCs and any established rivals (hopefully rivals optimized for this purpose). If the rivals get there first, the next plot arc is "Stealing the Idol." After that (or if the PCs get it first), you go to "Negotiating with Forces from Beyond." You can end with their arrival, as the PCs' successful bridging of gaps has ushered in a reunion between Earth and her forsaken starchildren. Or you can finish up with a climactic battle where the spacefolk invade and the PCs have to join forces with their previous enemies to repel them.

SUBTRACTING IT

It's not easy to unring this particular bell. You can do it on a lesser time scale if the PCs (or someone else) beats the crap out of the initial First Contact team. After all, if they draw a blackened stump back from their first tentative touch, they're likely to conclude that, yep, the stove is still plenty hot. If the PCs wanted the interlopers gone, they can pat themselves on the back... but wonder how much time they've bought. Ten years? A hundred? Five? No one knows.

On the other hand, if the PCs wanted to make peaceful contact and blew it by failing to protect the Martian crew... well, maybe your next plot arc can center on the PCs' attempts at homebrew rocketry.

The main issue here is whether the spacefarers are central or not. If they're not the critical plot element, why put them in at all? (Unless you're doing a kitchen-sink game with *everything* in it. If that's the case, they can just slink home and no one will miss them.) If they are central, dealing with them is going to feel crucial and real... but dealing with other problems *after* they go is going to feel anticlimactic and shallow.

Don't let your game jump the shark. Don't let it fade away into an embarrassing shell of its former

greatness, like the last season of "The X-Files." If you're putting in colonists, make it worth the effort. Make them essential. And when that plotline is resolved, close the back cover of the book and let it go. A spectacular ending is a tough act to follow, so be more like a stage magician. Leave 'em wanting more.

MAGIC AND MUTANTS

Somewhere, out there, there's a game that uses the d20 System and which incorporates magic. Numerous books (of widely-varying quality) have been written about magic systems for d20-system games. (Well, mostly for one particular d20-system game, but that's what this section is for — to help you bolt it onto **Gamma World** instead.)

Before you add enchantment to **Gamma World** though, stroke your chin and see if you can answer this question: Why do you want to add magic to the mix?

Is it because **Gamma World** doesn't have enough cool powers for the PCs? Surely not. Is it because one of your players only, ever and always plays a sorcerer and won't even consider a game where he can't? Maybe you should just *tell* him he's a sorcerer, have everyone *believe* he's a sorcerer, *call* him a sorcerer, but actually model his powers with psionics or nanotech. (What, you think people are taught the difference in Gamma Grade School? At least some of the people who invented nanotech thought they were making magic tangible, and few communities in the Gamma Age can prove otherwise. He's a wizard who can wear armor, now he's happy.)

Standard **Gamma World** has a strong focus on technology and the ramifications thereof, and you should have stronger reasons than the above. Adding in magic can split the game's attention, and that's not something to do lightly. For instance:

- **Prole vs. Übermensch.** Magic requires learning, intelligence and concentration. Technology just requires you to push a button. That's why technology devastated the world: Dumb folks got smart bombs. If you include magic as a secretive force that was always present, but limited to the learned or enlightened, you can present your PCs with an interesting choice. Either they come out on behalf of technology, equality and the associated problems, or they swear allegiance to magic and an implicit assumption that magicians should rule

because their power derives from being smarter and working harder. The issues of magic and technology become proxies for the issues of democracy vs. elitism.

- **Mind vs. Soul.** You could borrow a theme from another game and use a magicalized **Gamma World** to weigh the relative value of cold logic (which tends towards neutral ethics in its results if not its methods) against heartfelt passion (which can be malevolent or misplaced as often as it's kind and caring). It's reason against intuition in a diamond-cage Thexays Deathmatch — only the prize is the power-basis of global society instead of a big gaudy belt.

- **Playing with Noddegamra.** "Noddegamra" is "Armageddon" spelled backwards, and in its cutesy way stands for "a sudden global surge of construction and creativity." A Noddegamra game would present a sudden influx of magic into the world, completely unexpected by *everyone*, and let the PCs be on the bleeding edge of figuring this stuff out. If you take this approach, it's probably best to have magic operate by intuition or through spiritual venues, at least until the Smart heroes start applying logic and reason and the tools of scientific analysis so that they can achieve an agnostic view of sorcery. Noddegamra is fun because you can toss everyone in the same chaotic boat and see who adapts first (or best).

- **I Always Wondered if Darth Vader Could Beat Up Gandalf.** There are some groups where deep meditations on the structure of society itself take a back set to kewl stuff. If you want a not-particularly-deep game with everything and the kitchen sink in it, toss magic on top of **Gamma World** and go nuts. Just make sure you don't have one of those killjoy players who expects things to make sense.

ADDING IT

Unless you're using the Noddegamra option, you don't add magic to the game in the middle of things. You play it that magic was always there, operating under the surface, and that the PCs are only now discovering it. If you want to surprise them, play through four or five sessions of standard **Gamma World** before people show up with magic wands. (Even then, the PCs may just attribute magical effects to a psychic or a mutant or a cloud of nanites. And that's fine.) Or if you're using the Vader/Gandalf grudge-fight alternative, you probably just don't give a hoot and can let the PCs roll up their mutant enchanters without difficulty.

The mechanics of bolting on a magic system aren't quite so straightforward. Compared to **Gamma World**, the damage done by some of the d20-system spells is pretty severe. Most of them were built for a game where Hit Dice go as high as d12s, and more importantly, where the massive damage threshold is much higher. (See **Gamma World Player's Handbook**, Chapter Six: The Gamma World Campaign, "Gamma World in the d20 System" for a lengthy discussion of the issues here.)

The easy fix to this is to simply rule that magic damage doesn't trigger massive-damage-threshold Fortitude saves. Why not? Wave your hands and mutter something about the "para-real nature of occult energies." Or just shrug and say, "Your character has no idea. Who's she going to ask?" You and I will know it's to keep the game from disintegrating, but I won't tell if you don't.

Alternately, you can raise the threshold. This has the effect of making the whole setting more over the top and action-moviesque, but if you want a kitchen-sink game more like *Crouching Cyborg, Hidden Dragon* than *Reservoir Arks*, you've probably already added that fix.

Yet a third fix is to limit or eliminate direct damage spells. Magic works, but not in the sense of conjuring massive bolts of ice and eldritch missiles. It can protect and influence, predict and reveal, but it cannot crispy-fry. This changes the flavor of magic in a pretty drastic way, which may make it all the more interesting to players who are used to a more typical game-magic paradigm. In a lot of games, the sorcerer is the guy who casts the room-clearing death whammies, but who can't wear armor or survive many hits from a longsword. The **Gamma World** question is, why use the magic-administrator character as a fragile living substitute for a rocket-propelled grenade when you can get an *actual* rocket-propelled grenade? Instituting the "no direct damage" rule answers that. Instead of being "the guy in the robe what makes things blow up," the magus becomes more subtle and versatile — and better-balanced against the other characters.

The final issue to consider is protection against magic. At least one d20-system book recommends "transparency" between magic and psionics, so that anything which blocks psionic powers also blocks magic. This can be one good way to put those arcane incantations into perspective, but it can also defeat the purpose of adding them in the first place. If magic

is going in to make a point about the people that use it, it *should* be different from what the non-initiates are using. If you counter magic and psionics the same way, it makes them feel like variations on the same thing. Which, of course, may be exactly what you're after: Nothing says you can't decide that magic and psionics really *are* two paths to the same destination. That's another option that can bring things into balance, *and* make the setting cohere. But if you do that, do you really want magic? Or do you just want a bunch of additional psionic effects?

SUBTRACTING IT

If you do the sudden Noddegamra magic-slam, having enchantment vanish as suddenly as it appeared can work great. If you play it right and let people get used to magic, think they understand it, start using it and relying on it... then its inexplicable disappearance injects just as much drama, interest and plot potential as its inexplicable arrival.

Another way to get rid of magic is to decide that it was never really "magical" in the first place. (See "The Art of the Retcon" in Chapter One: The Campaign.) You can Scooby Doo it in with a nano explanation — perhaps a rogue AI decided (for whatever reason) that magic was desirable.

Here's an example of the removal of magic in ways that fit the overall flavor of the Gamma Age. The PCs pass through a region where magic works. At first, it's little stuff that makes them think that it's just nano or psi, and the locals are stupid or superstitious. But the characters' *minds* start to alter too, except for synthetic characters. Pretty soon their guns aren't working, their psionics only respond when they invoke some hokey pantheon, and their nanotechnology effects crap out unless they wave their hands and fling powdered newt eyes and mutter all kinds of Latin-sounding fake words.

It gets to the point that they're seeing unicorns, dragons and knights-errant, and they're actually rescuing princesses from evil magicians. It's only when they get far enough from some sort of magical Ground Zero that they return to their normal paradigms.

What's going on? A mad AI has become obsessed with the fantasy novels of some mid-list writer from the end of the 20th century. It has decided that the setting of "Pherillia" (or whatever) is a better world, and has unleashed its nanites to make its fantasy real. With enough research (or luck) the PCs can



find the original Pherillia novels and get a huge leg-up inside the magic zone. But now their decision is: Do they go in there and sacrifice their real selves to be powerful in a supercomputer's dream? Or do they use their inside knowledge to take the AI offline (or, alternately, to bring it back to sanity), effectively returning things to the Gamma Age's laughable equivalent of "normal?"

This is the other option for removing magic, you see: Let the PCs choose to destroy it.

ALIEN INVASION

Here's another SF gem: Invaders... From... Spaaaaaace! Mixing this in with the chaos of *Gamma World* can throw an interesting curveball at your players.

Many of the concepts covered above in "The Return of the Colonials" apply here. Just replace the

concept of Mars colonists with genuine extraterrestrial life and you've got advice for running a fairly standard first contact game. The rest of this section focuses on nonstandard first contact concepts.

Really alien intelligence can be mysterious, challenging and downright cool. It can also be an excuse for mind-bogglingly stupid behavior; and the line between mystery and folly is often subjective, depending on the particular tastes of your players and the way you lay out what you intend to be a mystery. The Gamma Age is a monument to the destructive power of ambition and folly unchecked, and there's no reason that your aliens have to be vastly wiser in this regard than humanity. But do have some solid reason for the aliens' vulnerabilities, such as overreacting to a history that includes an opposite threat.

If you want to have an alien invasion so that the PCs can steal alien battlesuits and blow up the mothership with a virus they upload from an iBook, go for it. That's not a really deep idea, but it is a fun idea, and it's a *solid* idea. If you're going to use the aliens to bring up philosophical quandaries and explore the human condition, go for it. That's *great*. Roleplaying lets you *do* that in a way that other games just don't. But while you're groping for profound insights in the dark corridors of the human soul, don't forget to tie your shoelaces first. Don't forget to make your aliens *make sense*.

With those caveats in mind, let's take a look at a couple invasion concepts.

- **They Walk Among Us!** "Agent Mulder, 'They' have been here a long time." What if the alien invasion started in the fifties — the 1950s? Arriving unseen, the aliens maneuvered the world into destroying itself so they wouldn't have to. Their plan was to push humanity's technology ever forward, ever faster, until like children playing with lighter fluid, tragedy inevitably results. But something went wrong. The war came too soon, and instead of scything all human life from the planet, it just made everyone weird and miserable. Now the main colony fleet has finally arrived, only to find that the planet is far more defensible than they'd planned.

This approach gives you two plot fronts. The first is the big, bangy, aliens-are-dropping-from-the-sky-an'-I'm-a-waste-'em-with-my-death-ray front. Big fights, gooey monsters, lots of cool (weird, booby-trapped) alien gadgets to loot. The second is the sneaky, tricky, alien-replicants-look-like-us-and-move-in-the-corridors-of-power-trust-no-one front. Here you get your investigation, mystery-solving and crises of public trust. Between these two tones, one loud and straightforward, one soft and devious, you can weave a symphony of exciting play. All you have to do is decide how the aliens have remained hidden. Are they brain-dominating parasites like the puppeteers in *d20 Modern* (Chapter 8: Friends and Foes, "Example Creatures," *Puppeteer*)? Are they body-snatchers? Disguised as humans? Big lumpy masses of psychic cerebral tissue in low orbit, bombarding the minds of anyone in power who isn't wearing a tinfoil hat? Disguised as something innocuous? Think up something cool and unexpected. If you can get the PCs twitching suspiciously at every glass of water, you're in good shape.

- **Incognitoforming.** In David Gerrold's *War Against the Cthorr* series, the invaders aren't just marching in with guns and crashing flying saucers into the White House. They're beyond that. Instead, they're seeding the Earth with biological agents capable of altering its ecosystem into something more like their home world. Xenoforming. Terraforming in reverse. The actual colonization won't happen until the change is complete, and *that's* what the Earthlings have to fight off.

Taking this a step further, imagine a world with nanotechnology run amok even more thoroughly than Gamma Age Earth. Imagine an *alien* world with nanotechnology run amok. One little programming error exploded virally and the xenoforming nanites started breaking down and re-forming *everything*, including the aliens. Like humanity, they were defeated by their own technology. These alien transforming machines finished the job and went dormant for billions or trillions of years until their xenoformed planet got clobbered by a rogue asteroid the size of Asia. Shards of the planet went everywhere... and one small one just hit Earth.

There's no alien invasion to come, but the PCs have no way of knowing that. All they have to worry about is smart, fast, alien nanotech that's trying to turn the world into Club Med for an extinct species of methane breathers.

- **Conceptual Aliens.** Inspiration for this comes from the wilder reaches of science fiction and speculative science, including the works of Philip K. Dick, Eric Drexler and Hans Moravec. To get in the right mood, read novels and essays by these writers, and those they cite. Now you're ready for a *really* odd alien invasion. The attack of the killer concepts.

Instead of physically attacking, these aliens are actually sentient memes. Their consciousnesses exist in human ideas the way that an AI's consciousness exists in a dynamically operating computer program.

How do they arrive? Maybe they beam their way through space until they hit a psionically receptive mindfield. Maybe they exist outside our space and can only enter when certain conceptual conditions are met, such as in the rhythmic and harmonic structure of music. Some composer thinks up a catchy tune, with no idea that it's also the key that attunes her brain to the Entities From Beyond. Now an extraterrestrial consciousness unfolds in her brain, the way a conjoined mass of sperm and egg forms

four, then eight, then sixteen cells, replicating and differentiating until it turns into a human body. Once it realizes it exists, the invader seeks to reproduce (by humming a variant tune to another human?) or to colonize by singing itself into another brain.

Here's the paranoia game squared. Characters in the midst of this not only can't trust anyone, they can't afford to listen to anyone, lest someone put an alien-summoning meme into a character's brain.

Or maybe it's not a tune. Maybe it's a flavor. Or an image. Or anything else your twisted mind can imagine.

ADDING AND SUBTRACTING IT

Most of the advice above for bringing in and ushering out "Colonial Return" holds for alien invasions as well, whether the invaders are relatively standard bug-eyed monsters or the Color Out of Space. You can have the mutated lemurs of Earth band nobly together with synthetics and pure-strains to kick alien keister, and usher in a golden age in which the Knights of Genetic Purity decide that moreau hyenas aren't really so bad compared to

xenomorphing alien-tech or mind-eating extradimensional jingles. You can play it with the Heroic PC route, where their personal pluck and brilliance wins the day. Or you can give the aliens an Achilles Heel in the tradition of *The War of the Worlds*. (Though you really should require the PCs to figure out what the invaders' particular kryptonite is. Otherwise, they're reduced to the level of spectators.)

You could even do a cool, multigenerational, three-campaign über-game. In the first generation, the PCs forge an alliance to drive off the invasion. Twenty years later, their children (controlled by the same players) are the politicians trying to keep the shaky alliance together without an obvious outside threat. Twenty years after *that*, the invaders return to face down the grandkids of the original defenders. Whether it's a head-on battle between equals or a desperate guerilla war depends on the successes of the previous PCs' politicking.

Fight. Spy. Negotiate. Go wild. Just remember to make your aliens central.

End communication.

APPENDIX
**MUTATIONS
FROM
CREATURE
QUALITIES**

This appendix covers most of the special qualities of the creatures from the **Gamma World Player's Handbook** (Chapter Five: Comrade, Nemesis, Mystery). These are therefore ready for you to use immediately, and they should provide sufficient examples for adapting any other special qualities. The principles are simple and straightforward.

Note that the psi-based mutations don't follow always follow the standard psi rules. These aren't powers that characters can develop or control like they can the powers in the **GW PHB** (Chapter Three: FX, "Psionics"). Rather, some random factor, or perhaps several random factors working together, grants the character a single fixed ability that isn't susceptible to training or improvement.

Pre-Final Wars scientists did not develop an entirely comprehensive model of the human brain that could account for psi phenomena, and nobody since then has had the opportunity to try to finish the great uncompleted work. Most people who deal with these mutations shrug and say that it all comes out of the unconscious mind, which is true enough even though it doesn't actually explain anything. The interactions of genes, biotech and nanotech manipulations of the body, and random factors like lingering bio-weapons and accidental mutation, are very complex. That's true even when they operate on relatively simple plants and animals, let alone anything like humanity's very complex cognition.

In terms of game mechanics, mutations with the (Psi) notation are vulnerable to FX which can block or suppress psi powers, just like full-blown psi powers.

Some of the mutations have been modified so as to be more interesting, balanced or useful for characters. This is deliberate, and you should feel free to do the same with your own conversions. The very nature of mutation means that individual variation makes perfect sense. One note of caution: Check over the details to see what sorts of interactions the mutations may have with other elements of your campaign. Special powers have a way of complicating things.

Use these mutations as a guideline for creating more. For instance, with the examples of Solar Blast and Cryokinesis, you have the framework to make just about any damage-inflicting power you might want. Dissolution can become Acid Touch by allowing it to work on anything rather than a single substance, with the damage inflicted per round

reduced to 1d4 to compensate for the wider applicability, and so on.

The dividing line between minor and major modifications is somewhat blurry. Here we've gathered all powers that directly inflict significant damage as major modifications, and we recommend that for your campaign unless you want a lot of mutant-related violence taking place. Most minor modifications affect just the character; if they affect others, it's in a limited and focused way. The broader a mutation's power over the environment and particularly over other people, the more suited it is to be a major modification.

MINOR MODIFICATIONS

ACCELERATED METABOLISM

The character needs to eat constantly. She is forever hungry, and consumes about four times the food that other beings of her size would need to survive.

Type: Negative

Effect: The character suffers a -4 species penalty on all Constitution checks against the harmful effects of hunger.

Biotech: Implant, Graft

ALLURING SCENT

The character produces an intoxicating pheromone to draw beings to him. This can be turned on or off at will. This is the result of an odd symbiosis with an aphrodisiac symbiotic bacterium designed for commercial use.

Type: Positive

Effect: Any mammal (or, at the player's choice, any one of the following: reptiles, birds, fish, amphibians or plants) within 100 feet must make a DC 15 Will save or be compelled to approach the character. This does not make the target of the scent friendly, but it can force someone to come into melee range or lure a guard away from her post. This ability is very powerful when combined with Empathy and Harmonious Pheromones; such a combination may be unbalancing and Game Masters should carefully consider allowing it.

Biotech: Implant, Graft

CHAMELEON

The character's skin is impregnated with countless tiny photosensitive particles, which continually change in response to ambient conditions.

Type: Positive

Effect: The character blends into her environment quickly, and, if she has not moved more than half speed in the past minute, any Spot checks performed against the character suffer a -10 penalty. The character must be about 9/10ths naked for this ability to work, or wearing clothes which already blend into the local environment.

Biotech: Implant, Graft

DISPLACEMENT (PSI)

This is a limited form of teleportation, one that usually works unconsciously: The subconscious mind acts to protect itself, and takes the rest of the organism along for the ride.

Type: Positive

Effect: Once per day, the character may spontaneously teleport to avoid danger. Once the character has taken damage, at any time at which he may normally take an action, he may instead take a full action to teleport himself to any place within 300 feet that he can see (or otherwise sense with the same detail as vision usually grants). Using this ability does not trigger an attack of opportunity.

TELEPATHIC SPEECH (PSI)

The character can speak directly into another person's mind, "sounding" as if she were standing right next to the target and speaking in a normal tone.

Type: Positive

Effect: The character's telepathic speech has a range of 150 feet + 30 feet per point of Wisdom bonus. Sending occurs at the speed of regular speech. The character may choose to broadcast to every sentient mind within range or to target a single individual (but not some select group of more than one but less than everyone). Creatures without organic, conscious minds cannot receive messages sent this way unless they've been specifically modified for the purpose.

Biotech: Implant

MAJOR MODIFICATIONS

BURROWING (PSI)

A highly specialized telekinetic lobe, usually resembling a white-gray lump somewhere on the character's head, lets its possessor glide through soil as easily as other beings move through air or water.

Type: Positive

Effect: The character enjoys his usual movement rate through soil, dirt, sand and loose gravel; he cannot pass through stone, metal or wood. It takes one full round to activate this power, and the character can use it as often and as long as he wants, pulling enough air to breathe out of the ground. The earth closes immediately behind the burrower, so there are no tunnels for others to use.

CRYOKINESIS (PSI)

The character can telekinetically slow the molecules of an opponent's body, causing a sudden cold shock.

Type: Positive

Effect: This causes 4d6 points of cold damage, with a Fortitude save against a DC equal to (10 + 1/2 character level + Wisdom bonus) for half damage. The character can use this ability on any creature she can see within 60 feet, up to 3 times per day. At the player's choice, this power can be Pyrokinesis and cause fire damage instead.

Biotech: Implant, Graft

DISSOLUTION

The character has gained some of the abilities of a cleansing slime, possibly due to symbiotic relationship with such a creature designed to work in conjunction with a host that provides support services.

Type: Positive

Effect: The player chooses a specific material, such as oil, plastic, iron, aluminum or wood, at the time the character develops this mutation. The character can then secrete chemicals and nanounits tailored to break down that substance. The secretions do 2d6 points of damage per round to non-sentient or immobile targets, ignoring hardness. Against sentient or mobile targets, the secretions do 1d6 points of damage per round, ignoring damage reduction. The character can store enough secretions for 10 rounds of this sort of attack, and recovers 1d4 rounds' worth of materials each day. The attack works only as long as the character maintains physical contact with the target (so that force fields and non-material barriers do keep the objects inside safe).

Biotech: Implant

EMPATHY (PSI)

The character can sense emotions such as anger, fear, hatred and joy.

Type: Positive

Effect: The character can always detect any organic, thinking being within 100 feet, and knows its general emotional state. Because of this empathy, he cannot be surprised, except by a construct or other entity with no organic mind. He cannot sense the emotions of wholly inorganic soultech. Characters with this power gain a +10 species bonus on Sense Motive, Diplomacy and Intimidate checks due to this ability. However, the benefits are not all gained at once: He gains +4 at 3rd level, and an additional +1 each level thereafter up to the limit of +10. These skills are also always class skills for the character with this mutation.

Biotech: No

FLIGHT (PSI)

The character can fly without wings. This flight is a specialized form of telekinesis, and often manifests as a bird-shaped aura around the character.

Type: Positive

Effect: The character gains a fly movement mode with a speed equal to twice her normal ground speed, with perfect maneuverability. The character is limited to a total of 10 minutes of flight per day, but she can take the mutation a second time (if she is eligible for a second major mutation) for unlimited use.

Biotech: No

FORCE FIELD GENERATION (PSI)

When threatened, the character can surround herself with a powerful energy field which can deflect most physical attacks, and disperse or weaken energy attacks.

Type: Positive

Effect: The character can maintain this force field for a total of 10 minutes per day. While active, it provides DR 10/— and energy resistance 10. She cannot use ranged weapons while this power is up, but can use melee attacks and natural weapons, such as claws.

Biotech: Implant, Graft

LIFE LEECH (PSI)

The character can drain health and vital energy from other creatures in his vicinity.

Type: Positive

Effect: The character can use this ability once every 1d4 rounds. Every living being within a radius of 5 feet + 5 feet per point of the character's Charisma bonus takes 1d6 points of damage. The

character cannot choose his targets: everyone in range is affected.

Special: This is a very powerful mutation, and counts as two major mutations.

Biotech: No

PARALYSIS

The character's claws, teeth, stinger or hands secrete a powerful paralytic venom.

Type: Positive

Effect: Anyone who takes damage in melee from the character's natural weapons must make a Fortitude save against a DC equal to (10 + 1/2 character level + Constitution bonus), or be paralyzed for 2d6 minutes. There is no limit to how many times per day the character may use this mutation.

Biotech: Implant, Graft

PRECOGNITION

This rare, potent and useful ability allows the character to glimpse probable futures and take action to avoid them.

Type: Positive

Effect: After a round of combat, the character becomes attuned to the probabilities around his enemies and gains a +3 bonus to his Defense against them. In addition, he may attempt to foresee the consequences of a specific out-of-combat action, once per day. Success on a DC 15 Wisdom check gives him a brief glimpse of the most likely outcome of any one action he takes within 5 minutes of the vision.

Biotech: No

RADIOACTIVE AURA (EX, MUT)

The character has microgenerators throughout her cell structure, taking in radiation and turning it into energy to power biological functions — a form of radioactive photosynthesis. This eliminates any need to eat. However, as with all creatures, she needs to expel waste; this, too, takes the form of radiation.

Type: Negative

Effect: Anyone coming within 5 feet of the character must make a Fortitude save against a DC of (10 + 1/2 character level + Constitution bonus) to resist taking 1d3 points of temporary Constitution damage. Those in range must make this save every round. Anyone who survives the experience must deal with radiation poisoning as described in Chapter Three

("Radiation Exposure"), and also with possible mutation (see **GW PHB**, Chapter Three: FX, "Cellular Transformation," *Mutation*).

This power cannot be turned off; the character with it is likely to be an outcast.

Biotech: Implant

WEATHER MANIPULATION (PSI)

Telekinetic abilities tend to be either very broad but low in power, or very powerful but narrowly focused. This is an example of the latter. The character can manipulate air pressure and temperature so as to alter local weather patterns considerably.

Type: Positive

Effect: The character can only use this power once per day, and the difficulty of the task depends on the degree of change he wants to work. It takes a DC 12 Wisdom check to turn light rain into heavy

rain, or light rain into fog. Creating rain on a sunny day in a moist climate requires a DC 15 Wisdom check. Summoning up a thunderstorm in a desert takes a Wisdom check result of 25 or higher. Whatever the change is, it happens as fast as it can by natural processes: Showers start and stop in seconds, while major storms blow up or disperse over the course of an hour.

At 10th level, the character can try to call lightning bolts out of a thunderstorm, whether it's natural or one he created, once every 1d4 rounds. Success on a DC 25 Wisdom check allows the character to direct a bolt that inflicts 5d6 points of electrical damage at any single target within his line of sight. A check result of 10 or less means the bolt strikes the calling character instead.

All created effects disperse when the character falls asleep or unconscious.

Biotech: No

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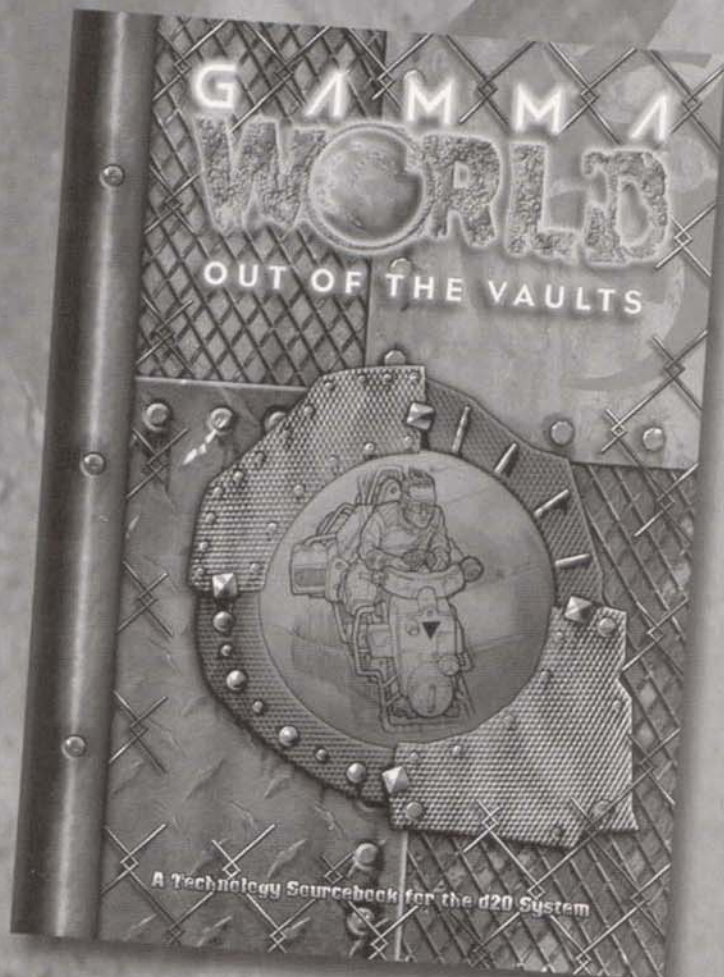
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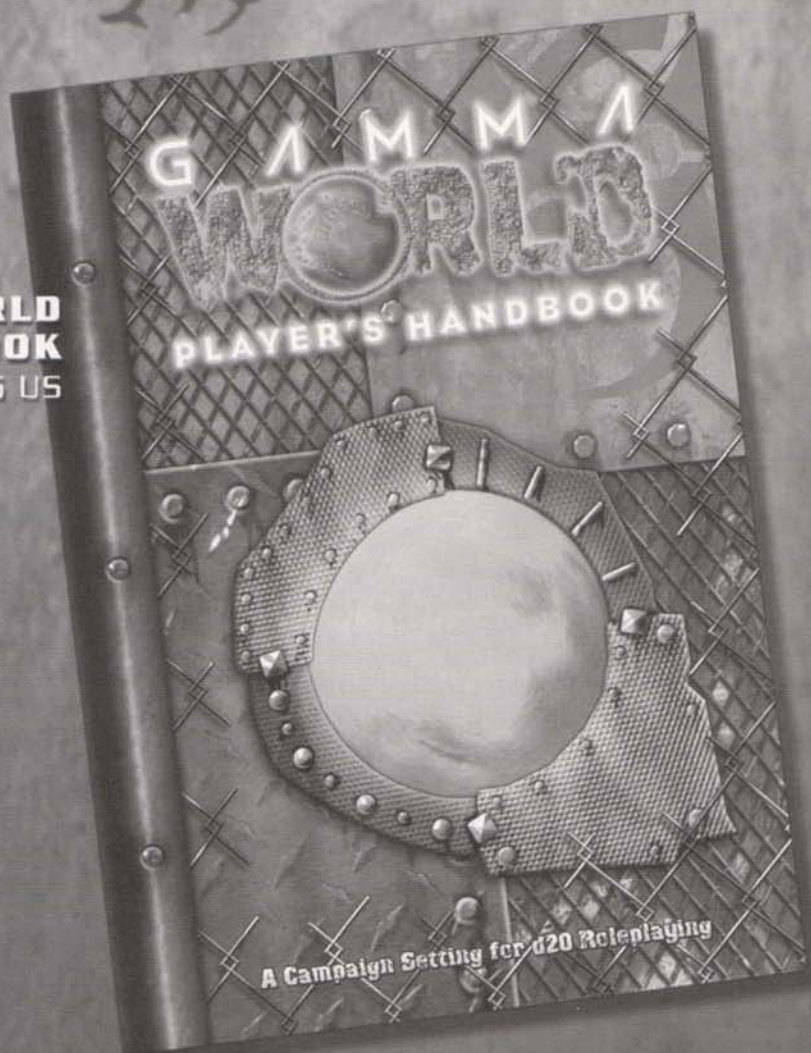
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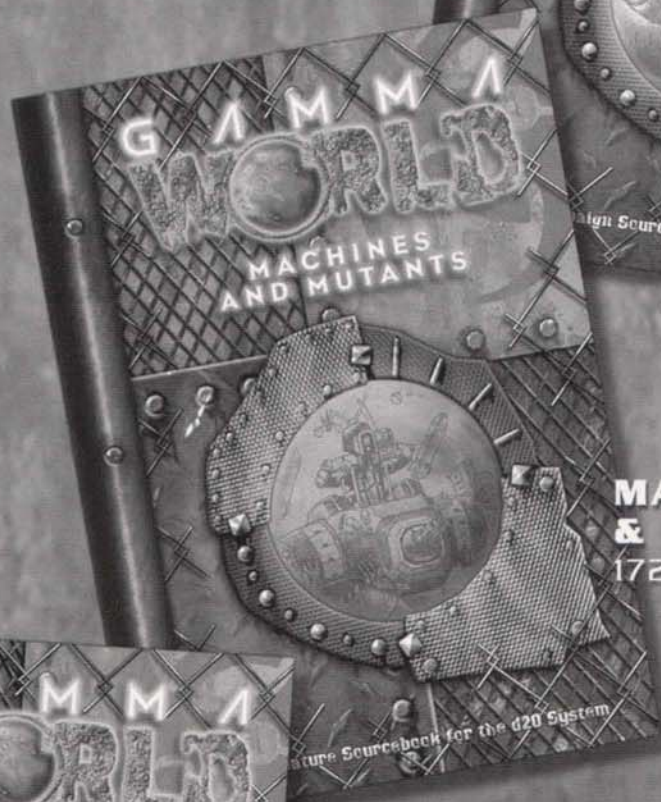
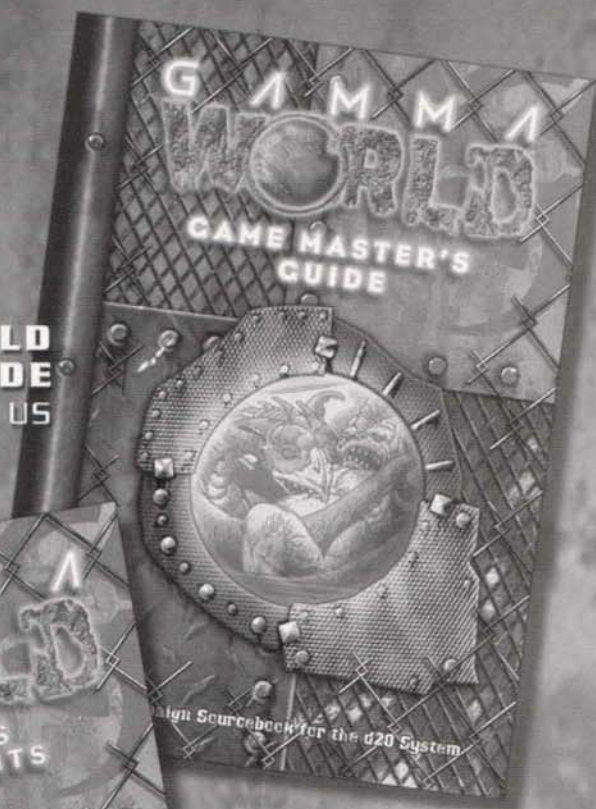
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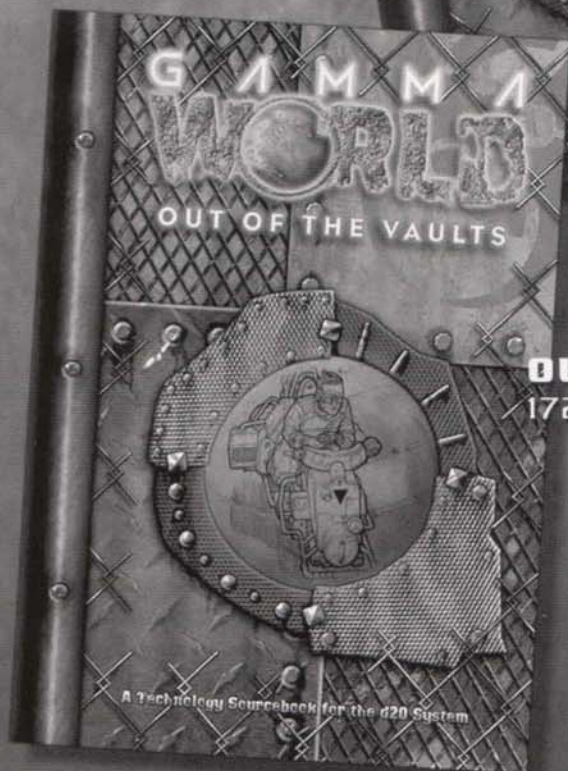
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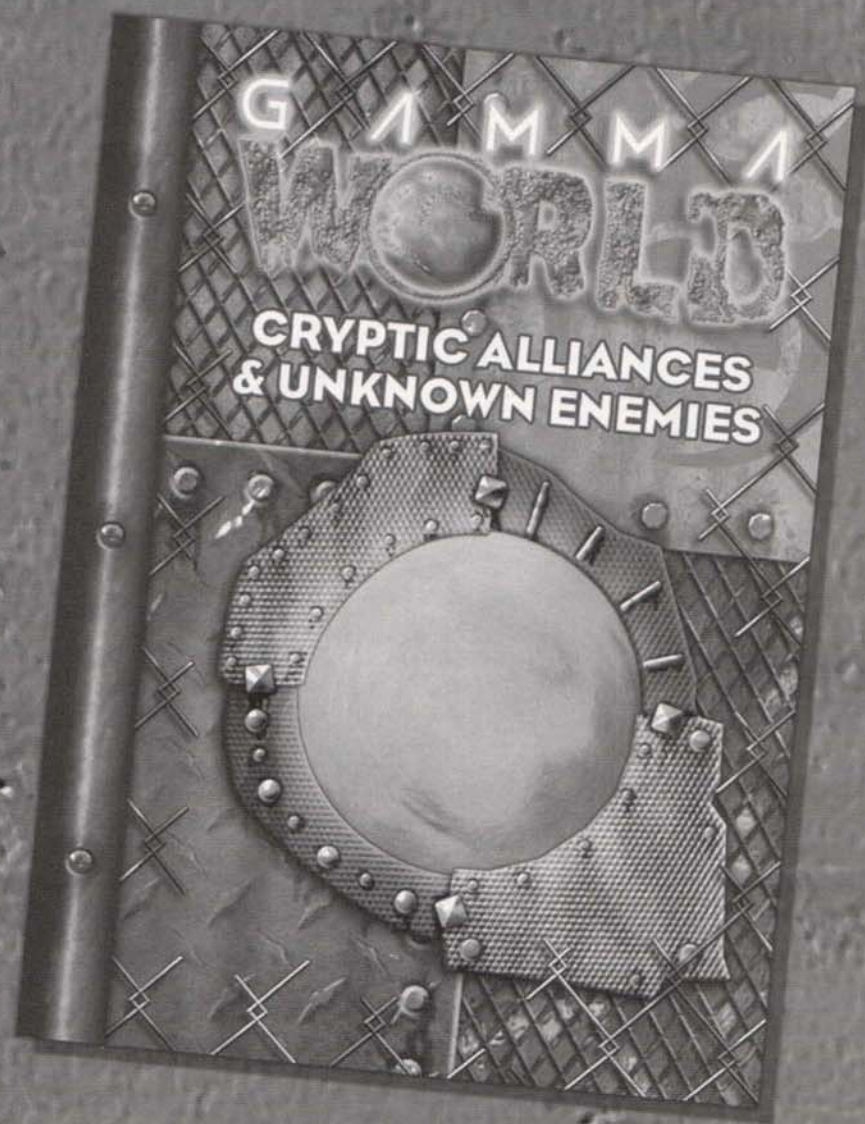


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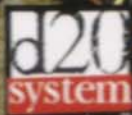
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